"Shackles would have been cheaper": The use of humour as a subjectification strategy on an assembly line

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Introduction

This paper explores how the introduction of a new technology of organizing work, an assembly line, can be understood as controlling and objectifying workers. We found that workers respond to this objectification by using humour to create "spaces of action" (Holmer-Nadesan 1996), where they can construct and reconstruct their subjectivity. A space of action is to be understood as a space that opens up for individual agency within a privileged discourse – a breathing space within an otherwise confining structure.

The controlling and disciplining aspect of technology has been much studied, and is well known (e.g. Edwards & Wajcman 2005, Collinson 1992, Cockburn 1985). Classical studies of work within a Marxist tradition have been conducted by, for example, Michael Burawoy and Harry Braverman (for an extensive exposition of their respective contributions, see for example Clegg et al 2006, or du Gay 1996). In these kinds of studies, what is distinctive about being an employee is that one is presumed, in return for some income, to be obedient. In order to make work efficient, technologies are used as management tools. One of the first theorists in this area was Frederick Winslow Taylor, who mounted a disciplinary apparatus to achieve efficient organizational outcome; and by this is known as the founder of the idea of the assembly line (Clegg et al 2006). This led to a view of the individual worker as not a creature of habit, tradition or craft, but an object of scientific knowledge and a subject produced by the application of that knowledge. The controlling and disciplining aspect of technology is something that is inscribed in the system of scientific management, which Taylor introduced. It is a way of controlling output in a panoptical manner, by the use of standards, instead of direct surveillance. Many of the ideas Taylor brought about are still alive in contemporary

organizations, especially through the use of technologies with roots in scientific management, such as the assembly line. Maybe it is of even more current interest today, than twenty years ago, since it is known that a lot of manufacturing organizations in the car industry (at least in Sweden), previously organized by the means of self-governing teams, now have abandoned this technology in favour of the assembly line! (http://www.socialistiskapartiet.se)

Whereas technology can be seen as controlling and objectifying workers, there are also strong forces of subjectification – as will soon be illustrated with examples from an empirical study of a newly introduced assembly line – forming a dialectic relationship where the two processes mutually constitute each other. This leads to the understanding of power as a relation, not something that some people have and others don't (see also Clegg 2006, Jackson & Carter 2000, Knights & Willmott 1989). For example, the preservation of a hierarchic power relation is dependent on the participation of both superordinated and subordinated. This means that the "powerful" superordinated are always dependent on their "powerless" subordinates – without them they would not be "powerful". And both superordinated and subordinated take part in the reconstruction of their power relation. This standpoint means a focus on how power is used in particular situations, rather than on structural or formal power relations. It also accommodates the potential for a reversal of formal hierarchical power, in the sense that the person over whom power is exercised may, in other circumstances, be much more powerful than the other. The power of secretary over boss is a pertinent example; choosing whom to let through by the phone, or deciding upon whom is allowed to make an appointment with the boss, or not.

The process of objectification/subjectification can also be understood fundamentally as an identity construction process. In this, as well as regarding the construction of power, our basic assumption is that identity is something that people co-construct in social interactions (see also Noon & Blyton 2002, Aurell 2001, Hogg & Terry 2000, Knights & Willmott 1999, Alvesson 1996, Kondo 1990). It is not the essential integrated core of a person, but unfixed, always with a potential to change, and differentiated in the light of different perceived roles. Identity can be comprehended as a sense of belonging, about what you have in common with some people and what differentiates you from others. The groups you belong to may also vary, depending on the situation or question at hand. For example; the assemblers in our study sometimes acted as a unified group, and at other times made difference between themselves, e.g. in being categorized as either a "good" or a "bad" assembler.

Thus, power or identity are never static, never given. They are under constant construction and reconstruction in the social relations of the organization; between management and workers, between levels of management, between individual workers, and so on. In every relation all parties are subjects/agents (see also Bergström & Knights 2006, Aurell 2001, Collinson 1992). Wenger (1998) uses the term "negotiation process" to describe the same thing. This dialectic, relational perspective is central in our study, and leads to the understanding of situations characterized less by domination and

resistance than by dynamic relation between different groups with different strategies engaging in particular forms of self-presentation.

The creation of spaces of action

In every organization some discourses are privileged, especially managerial ones (Holmer-Nadesan 1996). These discourses attempt to regulate the enactment of organization by regulating formal or legitimate practice and discourse, and by constraining the space for self-determined action. However, every managerial discourse is subverted by what is marginalized along the borders, peripheral – to use Wenger's (1998) vocabulary; and this is where we can find spaces of action (Holmer-Nadesan 1996). Spaces of action are constructed by individuals or groups who do not accept or conform to the managerial discourse, but resist and create small pockets of independence, within the larger structure. The spaces of action can be seen as expressions of the individual's striving for freedom, for autonomy and for personal interest.

Our empirical study shows situations where the workers do not accept, and hence resist, the identity as easily replaceable objects dictated by management through the use of a more efficient technology than before (at least considered more efficient by management, according to the assemblers). Instead, the workers find ways to, within the rigid structures of the assembly line, create small, but important, spaces of action, where they can resist and use strategies of subjectification. In our study, one way to create such space is through the use of humour. From this perspective, acts of humour can be seen as acts of identity construction, in which people construct their situated sense of social identity. This occurs through a process of social regulation whereby the members of a work setting use humour to establish group norms and perpetuate the group's existing dominant values. Humour thereby reinforces the existing social structure and is performing as a boundary function by protecting the group from outsiders. This clearly implies that power is an important dimension in this process. Collinson (1992) shows, for example, how apprentices were subjected to initiations which ranged from embarrassing to the degrading of them.

The use of humour to create a space of action could also be seen as a strategy of not having to confront management directly; but of inventing methods of coping that lie outside the formal influence of management (Noon & Blyton 2002). Within this, and other spaces of action, it is possible to construct identity in relation to what has been dictated – identities that are more consistent with what one wants to be (subject), as opposed to what management has dictated (object). Holmer-Nadesan (1996) has developed a conceptual model for addressing the different relations between dominant and alternative discourses:

- *Identification* occurs when individuals accept the identities dictated by the dominant discourse.
- *Counter-identification* signifies rejection of formal designations of identity.
- *Dis-identification* occurs as individuals eschew managerial definitions of organization, identity and practice in favour of alternative designations.

Identification and counter-identification both require that the individual relates to the dominant discourse, by accepting or rejecting it. Dis-identification means that the individual does not relate to the dominant discourse, but to other discourses outside the situation in focus.

In a similar vein, but at a more general level than the abovementioned author, Noon & Blyton (2002) distinguish between different strategies underlying the use of humour:

- *Joking that maintains social order and releases tensions*: humour as a form of safety valve, allowing an individual to let off steam, without challenging the power structures and equalities that have led to the frustration in the first place. (Noon & Blyton (2002) refer to Spradley & Mann (1975), who show how bartenders and waitresses use joking as one means by which any conflict caused by the power imbalance was mediated. The bartenders would use humour to assert their status, cover their own mistakes and to reprimand a waitress. On the other hand, the waitresses employed humour to assert themselves, particularly as a response to feelings of unfairness and powerlessness.)
- *Joking that challenges authority*: humour as a subversive activity. (For example; Westwood (1984) – again referred to by Noon & Blyton (2002) – cites a ´prank´ that resulted in the end-of-day buzzer being set off ten minutes early and the woman fleeing the building with glee, fully aware that it was not the official leaving time.)
- *Joking that forges group identities*: humour as one of a range of cultural devices to establish group norms and perpetuate the group's existing dominant values. (For example; Collinson (1988, in Noon & Blyton, 2002) reveals how the supervisors and white-collar staff became the butt of jokes for the engineers: jokes which explicitly denigrated them as being stupid, manipulative and effeminate, and hence different from the hardworking, proudly masculine ´fellas´ on the shopfloor.)
- *Joking that alleviates monotony and makes work tolerable*: humour as obscuring the monotony of the work process; a means of coping with the boredom and the hard work. (For example; Roy (1960), Banana time)

Holmes & Marra (2002), in turn, distinguish between "reinforcing" and "subversive" humour. The former reinforces existing power or solidarity relationships, whereas the latter challenges existing power relationships. Reinforcement is the dialectic other of organizational control, whereas subversion destabilizes the dominant system. In this perspective, the interdependence between humour and power becomes an important aspect. However, our study shows that this interdependence is a bit more complex than indicated by Holmes & Marra (2002). We will argue that subversive humour does not necessarily destabilize the dominant system. It can, just as well, be used to reinforce existing power relations between individuals and groups; or be seen as subversive against one part in a relation of three, and reinforcing in comparison to the other.

A note on methodology

This paper is built upon a social constructionist foundation. This means that we look upon power and identity as socially constructed phenomena; as something that is constructed and re-constructed in social relations. Inherent in this view is an always present possibility for change, but at the same time the constructed and re-constructed structures acts as boundaries, limiting what we are actually able to achieve.

How, then, is it possible to attain knowledge about social realities? Obviously, in our view there is no reality "out there" lending itself to be objectively studied. What can be studied, though, is how a social reality is created, understood and acted upon by the individuals living in it (Parton 2003).

In line with this, the empirical part of the study has been conducted in a manufacturing organization during a period of participant observation. The study is still ongoing and for the aim of this paper, we have chosen to focus on a few situations to show how the use of humour can be understood as a tool when creating spaces of action in which the assemblers can resist objectification, and at the same time construct and reconstruct their subjective identities. The larger study has a broader focus on relations of identity and change, where humour will be one of several aspects. For this broader purpose we will use data from, apart from the participant observations on the assembly line, interviews with assemblers and managers on different levels.

The return of the assembly line

Until recently, assembly of the products within the studied organization was organized in a way that meant that teams of assembler worked on the same product, from start to finish. Now, an assembly line with twelve stations has been introduced, which has caused great turmoil on the shopfloor. The assemblers and the union have openly resisted the assembly line, but still it has been introduced, as management states that it is necessary if the company is to survive in the international competition. To begin with, management designed for the assemblers to build only a small part of the whole product. However, this has radically changed due to high absence and quality problems, from standing still at one station to move between, at first, three stations, then six, and eventually along all of them. So, once again, every assembler is building complete products. What has changed compared to when they worked in teams, though, is that their time spent at each station is now fixed. Also, the ways that the assembly is done is becoming more regulated, partly with the purpose that workers should be more easily replaceable, thus making the assembly process less vulnerable.

What took us by surprise already on our first day of observation, was the way humour was used among the assemblers. It ranged over a whole spectrum; from verbal joking, ironic remarks, direct bodily attacks, and silent smiling, to the use of music and images. We also found out that much of the joking dealt with the assemblers' disapproval of having to work on an assembly line. The clearest way this is expressed in humorous terms (and otherwise), is ridicule of management. Since management have chosen to

implement the line, clearly they must lack all understanding of what assembly is about. The following situation is an example of this:

> "Tony and Gunnar tell us about the new machine they produce. The assembly of this machine was one of the main arguments for starting up line assembly in the first place. The problem, though, according to Gunnar and Tony, is that this product is much more intricate to assemble, and more time consuming than any of the other ones. 'How come?' we ask. 'Well, this is what I think happened; they did their calculations with an old abacus, but the wood became worm-eaten and suddenly some marbles were gone. This is the result!'."
> (Excerpt from field notes.)

Here, one of the assemblers expresses an idea of how important it is to not separate hands and minds (a separation known as the "Cartesian dualism", see for example Watson 2002) – it is not enough to dwell in the theories to be able to calculate the best way of assembling, it requires practical experience, too. How, then, can such a remark, and other similar situations, be understood as creating a space of action to resist objectification, and at the same time provide room for the construction and reconstruction of the assemblers subjective identity? This will be the focus of the rest of the paper.

Entering the management discourse

We find it interesting that the assemblers have adopted the management discourse in a way, arguing against the assembly line mainly in terms of efficiency and productivity. It seems to be common knowledge how much money has been spent on different parts of the process, of building the actual line, of re-building the pre-assembly area to increase its capacity, of hiring consultants to make everything work, of offering all assemblers to talk to a psychologist about their work situation (a response to the assemblers' initial resistance to the line) and so on. The amounts of money spent on all this are considered quite ridiculous. As one of the assemblers sarcastically noted:

> "It's all about controlling us anyway. Shackles would have been cheaper!"
> (Excerpt from field notes.)

The assemblers claim that assembly has actually become slower since the line was introduced. They also take every opportunity, when something goes wrong, for instance when material is missing, to make a point about the line. When material is missing at one station, the whole line stops. A situation like that inevitably leads to several ironic remarks made by the assemblers, like:

> "Yeah, this is the true benefit of the line – when one station comes to a halt, no one can go on working!"
> (Excerpt from field notes.)

This latter type of comment is used frequently and very openly, and is well in line with the management discourse. The former comment, about the shackles, has a connection to this as well, but mainly points to management's desire to control the workers. We have found that the controlling and objectifying aspect of the line is fundamental to the assemblers' resistance to it. One of the reasons for introducing the line was that it, in management's opinion, takes much too long for a new assembler to learn the job. As a consequence work content for each assembler must be reduced. However, by focusing on being controlled and objectified – easily replaceable cogs in a big wheel – the assemblers would reproduce themselves as subordinated. Instead, arguments against the line are made according to the management discourse, with references to efficiency and so on. This can be understood as a subjectification strategy on behalf of the assemblers. By focusing on efficiency, they create a space of action, where control is less of an issue. Instead they speak the language of management and define their interests as similar, i.e. efficiency. This enables an identity construction process, where the assembler is not a victim, not merely a controlled object, but a subject who actively participates in defining the meaning of the situation at the assembly line – counter-identification in Holmer-Nadesan's (1996) terms. The identity dictated by the management discourse implies being an easily replaceable cog in a big wheel (corresponding to the Taylorist metaphor "give me your hands", and also connected to the above mentioned Cartesian dualism of hands and minds). By entering the management discourse, the assemblers resist this, and construct an identity that includes thinking (corresponding to the post-Taylorist metaphor "give me your head"). So, although the line clearly has to do with control, the assemblers have found a subjectification strategy that, at least partly, relieves this aspect. And in this strategy, especially irony is an important tool.

Hiding behind irony – conforming to existing power relations

The assemblers' joking relates to power in different ways. The most common is a form of humoristic (often ironic) resistance. The assemblers make fun of management and of the line, in a very sarcastic manner. But these situations do not necessarily challenge existing power relations. By using humour, the resistance loses much of its effect, and if a manager were to confront an assembler, the assembler could easily defend himself by referring to "only joking" (Mulder & Nijholt 2002).

One such situation has to do with the assemblers' wages. They are set rather strictly according to age and number of years in the company, but there is also a possibility to get what could be described as a commitment supplement, i.e. for behaving responsibly in accordance with the company's goals etc. Among the assemblers, this is referred to as "ass-kissing-money". The assemblers obviously do not mind the extra money, but no one would ever admit to arguing in front of management that they should receive the supplement, since that would be to admit to ass-kissing. So, how is this seeming paradox solved? It turns out that the use of humour comes in handy here:

> "The foreman turns up on the assembly line, which Niklas sees. He takes the opportunity to tell Peter that next week Niklas and Tom will do the pre-assembly, instead of Peter, who usually works there. The foreman asks

Niklas if the reason for this change is to catch up some of the lagging production, and Niklas nods. Peter shouts "No!" from his position in the pre-assembly and Niklas immediately responds in a very firm, almost theatrical, voice: "You can't refuse, then you'll be fired!". "That's right, Niklas" says the foreman and leaves the assembly line. Niklas smiles cunningly at his colleagues."
(Excerpt from field notes.)

This situation shows the dynamics of power and humour. Niklas behaves in relation to the foreman in a way that could help him get the supplement, but at the same time he emphasizes to his colleagues that the "ass-kissing" was done with irony, and hence not quite for real. This situation also clearly illustrates that power relations exist not only between assemblers and management, but also within the group of assemblers. Niklas defines himself, in front of his foreman, as an assembler worthy of the wage supplement, at the expense of Peter, whom he pictures as less committed to the production goals and, as a consequence, not worthy of the supplement.

Niklas has found a strategy of dealing with the seeming paradox: to try to get the supplement, without being defined as an ass-kisser. He has, by using humour, created a space of action that enables this. This strategy may well serve its purpose for him as an individual (i.e. get him the supplement), but, it also means that the power relation between the collective of assemblers and management is not really challenged at all. The resistance displayed in the situation, is shown only to other assemblers, not to the foreman. This is even part of the game; showing the other assemblers that you dare to make fun of management the second the foreman has turned his back. Also, the risk-taking is not that high, since irony is the main technique used. If the foreman, or another manager, were to overhear the remarks made, the assembler could rather easily hide behind the irony - "only joking!".

The situation presented above also opens up for a different interpretation of Holmes & Marra's (2002) division between reinforcing and subversive humour. Here it becomes clear that, if more than two individuals or groups are involved in a negotiation process, the very same humorous expression can be seen as subversive against one of the participants, and reinforcing in comparison to the other. In this case, there is no subversive tendency aiming at challenging the existing power relation between Niklas and management, rather reinforcing it. On the other hand the actions can be interpreted as subversive in relation to Niklas' colleague, in purpose to position him as a less competent assembler in the eyes of management – which brings us to a discussion that concentrates more specifically on issues of identity construction.

Preservation of power relations – change of identities?
Although the type of humour discussed above does not really challenge existing power relations, it does play an important role in identity construction processes. Similarity and difference are central concepts in identity construction contexts. In the example of the ass-kissing money, where Niklas wants to define himself as a committed worker, he puts

himself in a situation where he is compared to Peter, and emphasizes in front of the foreman that there is a difference between them: Niklas is the committed assembler, Peter is not.

From an identity perspective, Niklas' action is highly significant, in several ways. Apart from constructing difference between individual assemblers, Niklas' final cunning smile at his colleagues as the foreman turned away – as if saying "Ha, fooled him!" – emphasizes difference between the collective of assemblers and management, and strengthens the assemblers' identities. Using Holmer-Nadesan's (1996) vocabulary, this could be termed counter-identification, as there is an element of resistance in it. However, since the resistance is only shown within the group of assemblers, it does not directly challenge the power relations between assemblers and management. Still, it can be seen as a strategy of subjectification, as Niklas is showing management that there are indeed differences among the assemblers, thus resisting the view of them as a homogeneous group of easily replaceable objects.

Joking and other expressions of humour are quite significant in defining what being an assembler is all about – particularly in defining what being a "good" assembler is all about. As has been briefly discussed in previous sections, similarity and difference are key concepts in this process. So, in deciding what a good assembler is, deciding what a not so good assembler is, is equally important. Among the assemblers, everybody knows who belongs to each category. This knowledge is even used as entertainment:

> "It's time for another team of assemblers to start their machine to drive it out of the building. 'Let's go and have a look. There's always trouble with them.' says Henrik."
> (Excerpt from field notes.)

The differences in skills between different assemblers are not entirely "natural", however, but to some extent deliberately constructed by the assemblers themselves. Practical jokes in the shape of sabotage are used, perhaps partly just aiming at having a laugh and reducing the boredom at the line, but they also often play an important part in defining who is good, and who is not. The following is a situation where a cable had loosened from the engine, resulting in an oil leak. Mats was one of the assemblers who had worked with that machine.

> "Mats tell me that this was probably sabotage. I ask him what he means – do they really sabotage each other's work? 'Yeah, there is a lot of horseplay going on here', he says. He turns to his colleague and together they show me how you can loosen a cable in the start engine and put a piece of tape at the end. After putting it back, there will be no contact, and the engine won't start. 'You can look forever without finding the problem', says Mats."
> (Excerpt from field notes.)

Sabotage is used against both those who are considered to be a little too "good", and who need to be put in their place, and against those who are not so good, and fun to watch as

they try to find the problem. By making the ones that are too good appear as making mistakes, and hence not being that good after all, the differences between them and the other assemblers will seem smaller.

In relation to management the same situation can be interpreted as a subjectification strategy used by the assemblers in order to demonstrate the differences between them, in the same way as was suggested with the ass-kissing money. After the assembly of each product, the goods are sent to be tested. It soon becomes quite obvious to the foreman who is having plenty of remarks, and who is not, and hence who is a good assembler, and who is not. However, the act of sabotage can also be interpreted as an indirect challenge of authority; for example by slowing down the production rate; or by assembling faulty and therefore not sellable products. If interpreted this way, the sabotage also has potential consequences for the whole collective of assemblers. When management sees that there is sabotage, this may well have implications for how they perceive the assemblers as a group. Assemblers who sabotage, need more rules, regulations, supervision and control. This way, the power relation in which the assemblers are constructed as subordinated, controlled objects, is, again, reinforced. This example shows that the same actions can be interpreted in different ways and on different levels; as subversive, but at the same time reinforcing; affecting individuals in different ways, but at the same time having consequences of a similar kind for the whole collective.

In the next section we will move on to view the assemblers more openly displayed attempts to challenge the power relations between management and assemblers.

Humour out in the open – challenging existing power relations

There is also humour which is openly displayed to management, and hence has more potential of really challenging power relations. One such example of how humour can be used as a subjectification strategy, and where there is more of an open challenge of power relations, is a situation when the assembly was stopped for a day, in order for the assemblers to clean up the line. Apart from clearing the line from litter and cleaning the palettes, the assemblers must also label all their tools and other equipment, which they keep on a trolley. The cleaning project is presented by management as very important, for several reasons. It has to do with the assemblers' working environment, obviously, but it might also affect the company's business, since potential customers are sometimes given a tour of the plant, and a customer may actually decide not to follow through with a deal, if he finds the plant untidy and unorganized.

> "Henrik and Anders have printed the labels for their tools already days ago, but they have hidden them in a jar on the bottom shelf of their trolley. They are waiting to see what reactions they will get to the label they have put at the top of their trolley: "All sorts of tools". There is also another label, which says "Fuck work!". Henrik and Anders seem full of expectation. Many of their colleagues are also inspired by their idea, and start printing labels like "clock" for the clock, "soft drink" for an empty soft drink bottle, and so on. Not surprisingly, Henrik's and Anders' labels are not approved

by management upon inspection, so the labels in the jar are still used in the end. The label saying "Fuck work!" finds other uses on the assembly line, after it has been removed from the trolley. The labels are self-adhesive and this one ends up on different unknowing assemblers' backs during the rest of the day, to everyone's amusement."
(Excerpt from field notes.)

We think that the cleaning and, specifically, the labelling project can be understood as an objectification process from management. It is not left to the individual assemblers to decide if and how they want to label their tools, but this is strictly regulated and the assemblers are expected to conform. Henrik's and Anders actions, on the other hand, can be understood as a subjectification strategy. With their initial way of labelling their trolley, Henrik and Anders indicate what they think of the labelling project – a pointless waste of time. The assemblers can see good reasons for clearing the line from litter, but the labelling is a different story. Management's reason for ordering the labelling can be understood as another indication of their view of the assemblers as easily replaceable. If the tools are clearly labelled, it will be easier for someone else to come in and take over the job. But the assemblers know the names of their tools and where they keep them, and do not think that they, as individuals, will be more easily replaceable with labelled tools. What makes them difficult to replace is not a lack of labels, but the skills that are in their heads and in their hands.

Henrik and Anders display their protest quite openly in front of management, and not only in relation to the other assemblers, as was the case in the example of the ass-kissing money. In the end, they still conform (as they knew they would, since they had already printed the "correct" labels), but they have managed to make their point. Their point is about both power and identity construction. They counter-identify, in relation to what management has prescribed for them – obedient objects that do not question anything, but follow every detailed instruction. This counter-identification happens in the space of action created by their little game with the labels. The game also constructs identity on behalf of management. In this situation, management is constructed as being focused on the wrong things, as labelling tools whose names and location everyone still knows. Management is also constructed as viewing the assemblers as incapable of organizing their own work, and as needing very detailed instructions. Henrik's and Anders' response is clearly a protest against this view of them.

Again, here is a point to be made regarding Holmes & Marra's (2002) division between reinforcing and subversive humour. The assemblers are walking a thin line – the use of subversive humour against management can be interpreted as accepting the role of the subordinated, that is, as a troublemaker; which may well reinforce the existing power relation, and direct management to strengthening their objectification strategy even further, since the workers obviously need to be restrained! The case of actions of sabotage as discussed in the previous section can also be understood in the same way – if it is considered by management as a challenge to authority, the result might be the same, i.e. a strengthening of control.

We have shown examples of where the assemblers have ridiculed management. In the example of the ass-kissing money, the ridicule was not shown openly to management, but only within the group of assemblers. In the example of the labelling project, it was openly displayed. Noon & Blyton (2002) have distinguished between joking that maintains social order and joking that challenges authority. In our study, we have seen that a very large majority of the joking (and other humorous acts) is in some way or another aimed at management – management is used as the "object" of the joking – and could therefore at first sight be seen as a challenge of authority. However, in many cases, the joking is kept within the group of assemblers, and hence does not really challenge power relations at all. We see the existing power relation as an important prerequisite of the joking. If there were no power relation, in which management was superordinated, there would not be this much joking about them, and the joking would not have the same potential in creating spaces of action where subjectification strategies can be developed and used. So the joking has a clear connection to power, but in the cases where it is kept within the groups of assemblers, the power relation between assemblers and management is really reproduced and reinforced, rather than challenged, even though management is the target of the joking. It becomes a form of joking that maintains social order, in Noon & Blyton's (2002) terminology, or reinforcement, in Holmes & Marra's (2002).

Challenging power relations – what happens to identities?

As was previously discussed, even acts of humour that are kept strictly within the group of assemblers do have implications on both power relations and on identity construction processes. Power relations between individual assemblers are negotiated this way, and power relations between the collective of assemblers and management can be reinforced, as was discussed above. In this section, focus has been on humorous acts that are openly displayed in front of management, and hence have a greater potential of actually challenging power relations. What, then, happens in terms of identity construction?

In the example of the labelling project, where the assemblers openly showed their resistance against the whole idea of labelling, identity is a central aspect. It is a clear case of counter-identification, forming a space of action where alternative identities can be constructed (Holmer-Nadesan 1996). The objectified assembler identity inscribed in the assembly line would be further accentuated by the labelling project, making the individual assembler an even more easily replaceable cog in the big wheel. The assemblers do not accept this identity, but resist by openly ridiculing the whole project. In this case it is also clear that the actions taken by Henrik and Anders do not serve the purpose of constructing difference between them and other assemblers. Instead, their actions become representative for the whole collective of assemblers, as everyone at the line becomes involved, in different ways. Some start printing similar nonsense labels for their own trolleys and others hang around to see what the managers will say about Henrik's and Anders' labels. The nonsense labels hence become a tool for constructing similarity between assemblers, and for making a joint protest against the objectification inherent in the labelling project.

We have defined this as a counter-identification process, just as we did in the case of the joking that was kept within the group of assemblers, and therefore did not challenge the power relations between assemblers and management. We think that it is helpful to see different degrees of counter-identification. When humour is used only among the assemblers, hid from the eyes and ears of management, it is a case of counter-identification, but since it does not openly address the dominant management discourse, it is rather a peripheral kind of counter-identification. (Wenger, 1998, uses the term peripheral participation in a similar way.) However, when humour is used to openly display resistance in front of management, it is counter-identification placed more at the core of the dominant management discourse, farther away from dis-identification, and a disregard of the dominant discourse, than in the previous case.

Identities are constructed in similar ways in both cases. Individuals are categorized as belonging to one group or another based upon similarity/difference. The main difference, in our study at least, is to be found in the ways power relations are negotiated. In this section, where openly displayed subjectification processes have been discussed, power relations between assemblers and management are challenged in a much clearer way than in cases where the processes are kept within the group of assemblers. In the former case, management is forced to react upon the resistance shown by the assemblers. The outcomes may vary; some may result in a strengthening of control mechanisms to put the unruly assemblers in their place, but some may actually take into account (and this has indeed happened) the criticism against the line. Anyhow, our purpose has been to understand and conceptualize the workings of power and identity, and the role of humour in this process, not to evaluate the concrete implications of this process. Possibly, though, this could be the topic of a future study.

Humour as a means of subjectification – a final discussion

This paper has explored how humour is used to create subjectification strategies to cope with the experience of being controlled. Salient in this understanding is the importance of contextualisation, especially in order for us to be able to claim trustworthiness. The history of the assemblers' being forced, against their will, to change their way of assembling the products, is in other words important for the understanding of why, and how, the use of humour is interpreted as it is, in this particular workplace. At another place, and at another time, other interpretations would perhaps have been more fruitful than the one made in this paper. But, our main contribution is not to say something about how empirically significant our specific results are. Instead, we would like to contribute to an analytical frame for understanding the use of humour, power and identity as different forms of subjectification strategies in order to resist objectification. If it is of any use, in terms of understanding what happens at other workplaces, is up to the reader to decide.

So, what are the specific outcomes of our study? The overall point to be made is that our study shows that humour is a useful tool for creating spaces of action, where different subjectification strategies can be developed to resist objectification.

- *Firstly*, resistance is produced mainly by entering the management discourse. The assemblers have found that they have to be part of a discourse to be able to influence it. Arguments based on effeciency – "it is much more expensive to assemble now than before" – are more likely to be heard by management. If the assemblers had focused their arguments on being controlled, they would have reproduced themselves as being subordinated. By focusing on efficiency, they create a space of action, where control is less of an issue. In this strategy humour (especially irony) is an important tool.
- *Secondly*, resistance can be either hidden or shown openly to management. In the case of hidden resistance, power relations are not really challenged at all. But, when shown openly to management, as in the case of the labelling project, there is a potential of change in the power structures.
- *Thirdly*, resistance can be produced by showing management that there are indeed differences between the individual assemblers – they are not easily replaceable objects. If they were easily replaceable, they would all be the same. If, instead, an assembler is considered to be "good", production will indeed suffer if he is replaced by someone not as "good".

We have also found that Holmer-Nadesan's (1996) conceptual model for addressing the different relations between dominant and alternative discourses can be elaborated upon. Holmer-Nadesan (1996) makes a distinction between identification, counter-identification (both of which require partaking in the dominant discourse) and dis-identification (which requires a disregard of the dominant discourse). As a result of this study, we think that the distinction between counter-identification – where the assembler is part in the dominant discourse – and dis-identification – where he is not – needs to be seen as a scale rather than an clear-cut division between two separate entities. That is, when power is not openly challenged it can be seen as a more peripheral kind of counter-identification; when power is openly challenged it becomes counter-identification at the very core of the dominant discourse.

Another result of our study is the different uses of Holmes & Marra's (2002) distinction between reinforcing and subversive humour. We found that what is often called subversive humour can also act as reinforcement of power relations, if subversive action is what to be expected. If, for example, management expects the assemblers to be troublesome, subversive actions can act as reinforcing the already existing power relations between management and assemblers. Also, when there are more than two individuals involved in the same situation, one of the participants can interpret the same humorous expression as subversive, and the other as reinforcing. This will be the case when, for example, one assembler tries to represent him-/herself as more competent than another assembler, in front of management. In that way humour can be seen as subversive against the colleague, and reinforcing in comparison to management, showing the acting individual as aligning with management's wish to meet the production goals.

In our analysis, we have shown that by focusing on specific situations, where several ways of understanding the same situation are possible, polarisation becomes impossible.

The assemblers in our study are both objects and subjects – objectified by the new technology of organizing work, and subjectified by the different strategies discussed in this paper. They both resist and align. They are both exposed to power, and exercise power. This implies a dialectic, rather than dualistic, understanding of the individual in the organization. Consequently, what is interesting is not to decide whether the assemblers are in fact subjects or objects, but to emphasize the interplay and the tensions between the two poles. With such an approach, the complexity of organizational life can be taken into account.

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