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# 'You just gotta be careful with your banter': The functions, risks and boundaries of humour on prison wings in England and Ireland

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## Abstract

Humour is evident in many accounts of prison life and research; however, little dedicated attention has been given to its functions or the challenges it presents within this environment. Drawing on research with men imprisoned in England and the Republic of Ireland, where humour was a theme in participants' discussions of community in prison, this article explores the roles of humour in prison on an individual, relational and collective level. It is argued that humour not only serves as a resource for adaptation, navigating relationships and cultivating community, but can also have significant consequences, with the power disparities of imprisonment making humour risky and potentially damaging for those involved in, or the subject of, humorous exchanges.

## Keywords

Prison, humour, laughter, emotion

Humour has attracted interest across various disciplines, with scholarship examining both its nature and multi-faceted functions, particularly in high-pressure contexts (Charman, 2013; Fogarty and Elliott, 2020). Despite prison being widely acknowledged as a stressful, volatile and damaging environment, little attention has been dedicated to understanding the significance of humour in day-to-day incarceration experiences. Rather, most consideration of humour in prison has focused on its role in occupational culture, as a tool for navigating interactions and managing the emotional toll of prison work (Crawley, 2004; Nielsen, 2011). This article explores the risky business of humour in men's negotiation of prison life, demonstrating that the significance of humour goes

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far beyond light-hearted amusement, playing an important role in participants' experiences, both in its positive functions and potential negative consequences. The article begins by discussing literature on humour beyond and within prison, before exploring experiences of humour during imprisonment from the perspectives of men imprisoned in England and the Republic of Ireland, drawing on data from a comparative, qualitative study of lived citizenship during incarceration, during which humour emerged as an unanticipated theme in discussions of community. Focused on this theme, the article explores the significance and associated risks of humour during imprisonment across three levels identified from the data: individual, focused on coping or management of identity; relational, concerned with interactions between individuals; and collective, relating to a sense of community or group identification. Finally, the article considers the nature of the accepted 'joke-book' or culturally shared humour (Charman, 2013: 157) amongst imprisoned men, and the policing of its boundaries, to further understanding of the nature of humour in prison. Often depicted as a 'positive emotion' (Laws, 2016: 3), humour can, in fact, be a 'double-edged tool' carrying risks and potential for negative consequences, particularly within a total institution (Bjerke and Rones, 2017: 21). By drawing on critical humour studies to explore the less-considered 'edge' of humour – its negatives and risks (Bjerke and Rones, 2017) – this article furthers existing understanding of humour in imprisoned men's experiences. In line with its 'paradoxical nature' (Billig, 2005: 212), it will be argued that although humour *can* serve important functions in adaptation to, and survival of, incarceration, it constitutes a risky business when situated within the power-suffused and volatile prison environment, with potential for significant negative consequences.

Despite humour being 'ubiquitous' in prisons (Arnold, 2016: 277), few prison studies have focused explicitly on humour, reflecting broader neglect of affective experience in prisons scholarship (Umamaheswar, 2021). This article contributes to the growing literature complicating depictions of prison as 'emotionally solid' and exploring the 'textured and emotionally differentiated' nature of prison life (Laws and Lieber, 2022: 470). Considering humour in interactions *between* imprisoned men, the discussion contributes to addressing what Crewe (2014: 396) has argued is 'one of the most significant absences in prison sociology' – consideration of 'homosocial relations' and the 'emotional flow' between those incarcerated together in the masculine prison environment. By looking beyond surface-level appearances of humour, and considering their significance as affective practices (Franzen and Jonsson, 2024) with serious risks, this article complicates the distinction between negative features of incarceration and the presence of oft assumed 'positive' emotions, furthering understanding of the 'textures' of emotion in prison (Laws and Lieber, 2022), the complexity of its emotional landscape (Crewe et al., 2014) and humour's role(s) and consequences within this, some serious and/or negative, in line with critical humour studies (Lockyer and Pickering, 2008).

## The significance of humour, and humour in prison

Three core theoretical approaches have sought to explain the philosophical significance of humour: superiority theory, where laughter expresses superiority over others or one's former self (Scruton, 1987); relief theory, where laughter serves as a release of nervous energy (Freud, 2003); and – most dominant in contemporary literature – incongruity theory, where humour comes from perception of something as incongruous, going against one's expectations (Clark, 1970). Largely influenced by these approaches, scholarship has highlighted humour's multi-faceted nature and varied functions, including therapeutic benefits (Agarwal, 2014) and positive perceptions of health (Kuiper and Nicholl, 2004). Kuipers (2008: 361) argues, however, that humour is a 'quintessentially social

phenomenon', with scholars noting its social functions in building cohesive groups through smoothing interaction (Fine and De Soucey, 2005: 6) and exercising autonomy through resistance (McGovern, 2012). Studies demonstrate the prevalence of humour within stressful, high-pressure environments, serving to help individuals cope with challenging situations (McCreddie and Wiggins, 2008) and aid marginalised individuals in adapting to their circumstances and managing self-presentation (McGovern, 2012).

In response to the significant emphasis of existing scholarship on the positive, critical humour studies emerged, questioning assumptions of humour as 'an absolute good' (Lockyer and Pickering, 2008: 808), and centring power relations involved in its use. In a key contribution to this area, Billig (2005: 212) takes the view of humour as 'paradoxical', entailing not only positive benefits focused on in much research – and accentuated in traditional theories – but also having potential for negativity in its communication to exclude, marginalise or 'discipline' and reinforce social order through 'ridicule'. This 'ridicule', underpinned by aggression, is, in Billig's (2005) view, central to humour's universality. Such critical developments have influenced discussions of humour's role in maintaining or furthering unequal power relations in various contexts, highlighting its seriousness as an area for inquiry. This existing literature illuminates the value of humour for exploring the underlying realities – positive and negative – of affective experience, presentation of self, interactions and relationships beyond surface-level appearances (Terry, 1997), particularly for those experiencing social exclusion or challenging environments. Given the marginalisation of prisoners and the volatile, power-suffused environment that prison poses for those who live or work there, existing literature demonstrates that further exploration of humour within prisons is valuable.

The few studies considering humour in prison, specifically, have predominantly focused on humour amongst staff, in staff-prisoner interactions, or in formal programme settings. In particular, scholars have highlighted the occupational value of humour for prison staff (Crawley, 2004; Nielsen, 2011; Tait, 2011). Crawley's (2004) exploration of prison officers' 'emotion-work' found humour key to coping with challenges of work, serving a 'palliative' function, and helping maintain unification within the officer collective. These findings have been echoed subsequently (Nielsen, 2011) and align with the significance of humour identified in other criminal justice professions, including policing (Charman, 2013) and probation (Westaby et al., 2020). As Charman (2013) found in her study of police and ambulance staff, humour can help define an occupation's cultural boundaries, reinforcing collective identity. This boundary-making role is also seen in prisons, where Garrihy (2020) found humour used to ridicule those who deviated from expected occupational culture. Further research has highlighted the use of humour in managing staff-prisoner relationships, with Nielsen (2011: 502) noting its 'transformative potential' in social positioning of these groups. Nielsen highlights how humour enables communication between staff in ways deviating from the loyalty expected within the occupational culture, while simultaneously being used for collective reflection on the officer role and establishing a solidary 'us' in opposition to prisoners – 'them'. Additionally, Nielsen (2011) found humour used to play with, or distance oneself from, formal positions, enabling more positive and 'equal' staff-prisoner interactions while enabling denial of crossing professional boundaries. Consequently, humour is considered a valued occupational tool developed through experience, while scholars have also argued its importance for therapeutic or 'healthy' prison environments (Williams and Winship, 2018). Further, Franzén and Jonsson (2024) note the significance of 'banal' humour in maintaining positive relations and reproducing social order in staff and incarcerated boys' interactions. Less well explored, however, are the negative sides to what is widely considered to be a 'positive' emotion (Laws and Lieber, 2022). In an exception, Manolchev et al. (2023) posit the significance of 'abject humour' in the

prison working environment, with this ambiguous humour between staff creating liminal spaces 'in-between' accepted norms. They argue this creates a situation where negativity underpinning humour may be difficult to detect or regulate, and consequently uncomfortable and difficult to escape, demonstrating the need to consider the negatives of humour for prison staff. More recently, Pandeli et al. (2025) studying prison workshops in a UK private prison, and Jonsson and Franzén (2025) researching youth detention in Sweden, have also explored negative consequences of humour, particularly where responses entail the absence of laughter; this article forms part of this broader shift towards acknowledging the negatives of humour, and the value of critical humour studies, for exploring carceral experiences.

Despite such insights, limited attention has been given to the perspectives of imprisoned people on humour – they too are active participants in humorous exchanges, not only with staff but also with each other. Some notable exceptions demonstrate the significance of exploring prisoners' use of humour. In his small study in a USA county jail, Terry (1997) found humour used as a 'secondary adjustment', 'instrumental' in managing the gap between 'convict' and 'normal' identities, for surviving pains of imprisonment, and in defining moral boundaries of the inmate code. Greer (2002) also highlighted humour as a tool for coping with the pains of incarceration amongst female prisoners in the USA. More recently, Laursen (2016) has posited that humour can be used to push back against the 'soft power' (Crewe, 2011) involved in prison cognitive behaviour programmes, through 'soft resistance'. Although humour was perceived by programme instructors as confirmation of cognitive distortions, Laursen (2016: 14) emphasises the social nature of humour, noting its use in the provision of a jovial 'meta-commentary', challenging normative assumptions underpinning programme goals. Humour, Laursen (2016) argues, served as 'frictional' behaviour, ridiculing programme content, disrupting sessions, and enabling momentary 'escape' from intended cognitive change. However, there is extremely limited consideration of humour in English prisons, where the prevalence of soft power is evident in the 'tightness' of the regime (Crewe, 2011), and in Ireland, where incentivised regimes have also enhanced responsabilisation. Additionally, much existing research analyses observation of humorous exchanges, or staff perceptions, resulting in little consideration of humorous exchanges between prisoners, or their perceptions of humour, including the feelings it evokes, their conscious engagement of this adaptation strategy, or the concerns and risks accompanying its use. The small existing body of literature demonstrates the value of exploring humour in prison, to further understanding of its functions, particularly in other jurisdictions or areas of the prison, from imprisoned people's own perspectives, but also, crucially, to illuminate the less positive dimensions of humour in this environment. Building on existing work on the form, function and challenges of humour within prison programmes or workshops (Laursen, 2016; Pandeli et al., 2025) and emotions during imprisonment, this article aims to further understanding of humour in a key site of emotional life in prisons in England and Ireland – the prison wing – and explore the paradoxical and risky nature of humour for those living in this space. Considering both 'sides' of humour, as understood and experienced by imprisoned men, this discussion responds to the need to further understanding of how individuals navigate humour, which Manolchev et al. (2023: 87) describe as 'an urgent task for researchers because joking may be funny, but humour can hurt'.

## **The study**

This article draws on qualitative data from a comparative study exploring men's perspectives on citizenship during imprisonment in the Republic of Ireland and England. These jurisdictions were chosen for comparison due to their differing positions on prisoner enfranchisement, enabling

analysis of whether such legal positions reflected the subjective citizenship experiences of individuals imprisoned there, albeit this comparison is less central to this specific article's purpose. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 32 men at a committal prison in Ireland and a Category B local prison in England<sup>1</sup> (Total = 64). Participants' sentences ranged from two months to life, while some were on remand. Approval was secured from the National Offender Management Service, the Irish Prison Service and the University of Sheffield. Where possible, interviews took place one-on-one, in locations agreed with staff (e.g. classrooms); however, sometimes these were in spaces others passed through intermittently, and by nature of the environment, few interviews were without interruption. Information sheets were provided, and the research was explained, before participants gave written informed consent. Interviews were transcribed and anonymised before analysis and coding using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) and adaptive theory, enabling iterative drawing of connections between issues raised in responses and existing theory (Layder, 1998). Humour emerged as a theme in participants' accounts of prison life, and the pervasiveness of joking and laughter was also noted in fieldwork reflections. Although the prevalence of humour witnessed during fieldwork may have been impacted by my positionality as a woman in a highly masculine space, as other female scholars have highlighted (Laursen, 2016), participants' reflections demonstrated humour played a serious role in life on the wings and, particularly significant for this study's focus on citizenship, in the dynamics of 'community' inside. It is these serious reflections on humour, during interviews, rather than observational joke or humour data, on which the following analysis is based. The exact content and form of 'humour' is ill-defined in literature, it being considered a 'fuzzy-edged phenomenon' (Laursen, 2016: 1340). However, in line with other studies (Watson, 2015; Laursen, 2016), humour is used as 'an umbrella term to cover all categories of the funny' (Lippitt, 1994: 147) encompassing consideration of joking, sarcasm, banter, witty remarks or insults, play, and responses to events or interactions perceived as, or intended to be, humorous (whether or not received as such). This enables consideration of any behaviour identified as intended to be, or received as humorous, by participants themselves.

For participants, humour served important functions in negotiation and ultimate survival of prison life at an individual, relational and collective level: as a tool to cope with the difficulties of imprisonment and manage identity; as a 'social lubricant' (Garrihy, 2020: 139) in navigating relationships; and as a means of cultivating community within a largely atomised environment. The functions of humour on each of these levels will now be explored, demonstrating how the significance of humour goes far beyond light-hearted fun or amusement within the prison. The dangers and harms of humour are also examined, contributing to the argument that – as in other total institutions (Bjerke and Rones, 2017) – humour is a risky business, fraught with challenges if not used, or responded to, in a way consistent with the collective 'joke-book' (Charman, 2013: 157) or 'emotional map' (Crawley, 2004: 414) of the institution, and from which serious consequences can flow in its potentially disciplinary or exclusionary effects (Billig, 2005).

## **Individual coping, masculinity and identity**

As a 'total institution', prison strips individuals of 'outside' identities (Goffman, 1961), while also being a place of harm, presenting various challenges in adaptation to, navigation and survival of the institution. Characterised by deprivation, imprisonment entails the removal of meaningful aspects of individuals' lives (Sykes, 1958). Connections to support networks and coping mechanisms can be lost or weakened, resulting in the need to develop alternative coping strategies. Participants described using humour as a tool for regulating emotion, to suppress negative emotions through escapism and provide a legitimate form of emotional release where demonstrations of weakness

or vulnerability are off-limits. The significance of humour for emotion management was demonstrated in men's juxtaposition of humour with its perceived alternative – depreciated mental health and reliance on medical intervention:

I noticed you said that one of the things that made it like a community is the banter – is that important?

*Aww. It's a big, big, big thing for getting you through day-to-day life in prison. If you don't have banter or humour then you won't have any friends – you'll be depressed, on meds ... I can't imagine what's going through their heads with people walking around the yard on their own. (Hugh, Ireland)*

This indicated apprehension, for some, of mental health deterioration and being unable to 'extricate themselves from that emotional quagmire' (Greer, 2002: 133). As Greer (2002) found with incarcerated women, these legitimate fears were kept somewhat at bay by humour, valued for resisting a spiral into depression. Scholars have acknowledged the prevalence of humour and its use to prevent or disrupt escalation of negative emotions as a 'direct pragmatic stance against the challenges of imprisonment' (Laws, 2016: 35). This was echoed, with humour viewed as preventing deterioration of mental wellbeing, reflecting the therapeutic benefits identified in wider literature (Agarwal, 2014; Kuiper and Nichol, 2004). The challenge of coping with imprisonment is exemplified nowhere more starkly than in the prevalence of self-harm and suicide, and, for some, consciousness of this reality influenced the significance attached to humour for averting severe downturns in depression:

And does a lot of that [banter] go on in here?

*Oh yeah!*

Why do you think that is?

*It just breaks up the day. Breaks up the day, the week and the year. If you didn't have that you'd just be more depressed, sad and upset. There'd be a lot more deaths in custody and all sorts.*

Lewis' (England) comment demonstrates the 'intensified death consciousness' in prison, individuals 'haunted' by the possibility and reality of corporeal death (Scott, 2018: 264), heightening the perceived necessity of 'banter' to minimise potential for further self-inflicted deaths. One reason given for this necessity of humour was the paucity of alternative means for expressing emotion in prison; humour was viewed as one of the only ways to hold back sadness, indicated in the use of the well-known adage, '*If you don't laugh you cry, don't you?*' (Callum, England). The prominence of humour in response to the negativity of imprisonment has been linked to normative expectations of masculinity underpinning accepted behaviour in carceral settings (Franzén and Jonsson, 2024; Laws, 2016; Terry, 1997). Exploring the significance of emotion to everyday experiences of incarceration, Laws (2016) posits 'fronting' and 'masking' as strategies by which prisoners generate new emotions and suppress others, respectively, to manage everyday emotion in the masculinised environment. Importantly, Laws notes 'masking' of emotions must be counteracted by an alternative release if negative effects on wellbeing are to be minimised. Participants' comments highlight how humour may contribute to emotion regulation by facilitating 'masking'; laughter provides an alternative release for negative emotions, without demonstrating vulnerability or contravening the stoicism expected of, or employed as an adaptation strategy by imprisoned men (Ricciardelli, 2015) through crying. Consequently, humour in prison can be linked to presentations of

masculinity, with previous research finding joking and banter – particularly about female staff – formed part of masculine performances to establish one's position within the prison hierarchy (Jewkes, 2005).

While some participants acknowledged apprehension about the deleterious impact of imprisonment on mental wellbeing, and the necessity of humour for release of their *own* negative emotions, others reflected on how *others* struggle to cope, or shared stories of those who had taken their own lives inside. This collective awareness of the depressive state prison could lead to, or worsen, resulted in the use of humour not just for personal emotion-management, but to help others resist such deterioration. For some, this impacted their self-identity, with jovial behaviour providing a 'role' in prison. For example, Jack (Ireland) and Rhys (England) described themselves as wing 'clown' and 'joker', respectively:

*Tell you, I'd be the wing clown ... yeah [smiles]*

The wing clown?

*Just making everybody laugh [laughs]*

[Laughs] Yeah. Do you think that's important?

*Oh yeah, yeah. You need to have a sense of humour. I think if you don't have a sense of humour like, your days [are numbered (inaudible)] ... Somebody walk past you and like ... everybody does it – they just take the piss out of each other! So ... if you didn't have a sense of humour like, you'd be in more arguments than you'd be getting dinner ... you know what I mean? [laughs]*

While Jack viewed his role as necessary to improve others' situations, his use of humour was also central to cultivating a sense of fulfilment. Through helping others by bringing laughter to the mundanity of imprisonment, he was also able to improve his own situation by finding purpose, which can make imprisonment more bearable, meaningful and help individuals to survive (Liebling, 2011). Consequently, use of humour to assist adaptation to, and individual coping with, imprisonment is two-fold: it helps individuals re-frame their own negative predicament, and express this without compromising masculine identity, and can provide a sense of purpose when used to help others. Rhys described how his reputation as the wing 'joker' led to a job on the wing. When asked why he took on his role, supporting with enquiries at the wing's prisoner information desk (PID), he explained how his sense of humour impacted his perceived suitability by those who nominated him:

I think it's 'cause I was the joker, you know, on the ... on the wing. I would go and wind them up and have a laugh, and I'd get on with everyone else on the wing, so I think maybe that's what it was, you know?

This suggested others' perceptions of one's humour had the potential to lead to trusted positions and greater responsibility, when received as appropriate within the prison. However, whilst the role of 'wing joker' provided ample opportunity for engagement in humorous exchanges to distract from the mundanity of prison life, this also presented difficulties when crossing the prison boundary and seeking to maintain serious, non-jovial relationships with loved ones. Rhys highlighted the challenge of maintaining a private telephone conversation while carrying this reputation of 'wing joker':

Cause my girlfriend ... whenever I go on the phone everybody comes over and starts messing with me, cause I'm the joker ... so she gets very frustrated ... whenever I need my personal space it doesn't happen.



Goffman (1959), in his dramaturgical theory, distinguishes one's 'frontstage' self, involving purposeful presentation for others' observation, from one's 'backstage', where individuals relax, shed their frontstage character, and reflect their true self. On the wing, Rhys's front-stage 'joker' identity and associated expectations of ongoing involvement in banter presented a challenge when seeking to engage meaningfully with those he wished to share his backstage self with. Opportunities for private interactions with loved ones are limited in prison, yet phone calls may function as a 'liminal space' where crossing of the prison boundary occurs (Turner, 2016). Rhys' experience highlights the tensions where such boundary crossings occur in view of others on the wing. His frontstage 'joker' persona carried expectations of his behaviour, and willingness to take 'messing' without offence, which complicated sharing one's serious backstage self with a partner; both identities may be difficult to maintain simultaneously. As such, humour – and its centrality to the prison identities of those adopting a 'joker' persona – may present challenges in maintaining meaningful relationships for imprisoned people themselves, and their loved ones, where the 'fronting' for which humour might be used (Laws, 2016) serves as a barrier to revealing underlying emotions. Thus, humour can contribute to navigation of prisoner identities (Terry, 1997), serving adaptation and emotion management functions, while simultaneously complicating the boundaries of self-presentation where separation between inside and outside interaction becomes blurred.

## Humour in navigating relationships

A sense of humour and ability to 'have a laugh' was identified by participants as crucial to navigating relationships and interactions in prison. Prison wings are spaces marked with tensions; individuals live in close quarters with little privacy or respite, and limited opportunities to blow off steam. Combined with the deprivation of security (Sykes, 1958), this creates a volatile environment where the possible threat of violence is ever-present. In such an environment, humour may serve as an alternative to fighting, when facing conflict or responding to others 'taking the piss':

A lot of the fellas on this wing, whenever I first come in and heard my accent, they...excuse my french, they took the piss out of me! ... And you can either take it two ways. You can try and laugh with 'em, or you can end up fighting with' em, you know what I mean? (Rhys, England)

Relationships are fundamental to incarceration experiences, having the potential to soften, or compound, the pains of imprisonment (Liebling, 2011). Supporting research on the use of humour by prison staff, participants' narratives suggest humour plays a fundamental role in managing relationships. Humour functions in several ways to manage the distance between individuals, where this helps with adaptation to, and negotiation of, the regime, and through facilitating de-escalation of tensions during interactions between prisoners, and with staff. Radcliffe-Brown (1940) argued that a 'joking relationship' is key to ordering relationships entailing both conjunction and disjunction. In prisoner-staff relationships, there is an intrinsic division – or disjunction – in the power disparity between the two, encapsulated in the 'us and them' division in inmate culture (Nielsen, 2011). However, positive staff-prisoner relationships are needed for a smooth-running regime, and consequently an element of conjunction is required; relationships entailing only disjunction may result in complete avoidance or conflict (Radcliffe-Brown, 1940), neither of which is desirable given reliance on staff to meet basic needs, and staff reliance on prisoners to maintain order (Nielsen, 2011). Consistent with previous research (Crawley, 2004; Arnold et al., 2007; Tait, 2011), humour was identified as necessary for good communication with staff:

So you were talking about banter – is that just between you and other prisoners?

*No – all of them: Governors, with chiefs and ACOs [Assistant Chief Officers<sup>2</sup>] too. If you didn't, tension would be on a knife edge and you'd be waiting for something to kick off. It just wouldn't be right. You need to have good communication between staff and prisoners.* (Hugh, Ireland)

Highlighting the ability of a 'joking relationship' to prevent conflict, much existing literature focuses on humour – on the part of captor or captive – as reducing tension and de-escalating potentially volatile situations. Nielsen's (2011) study in a Danish prison illustrates how humour can enable both staff and prisoners to distance themselves from official positions and reveal aspects of their human personality, moving from 'what they are' to 'who they are', reducing the power disparity between them. In these moments, Nielsen (2011) argues that the two parties meet as equals, humour working in both parties' interests to ensure day-to-day life runs smoothly. The significance of humour to prisoner-staff relationships was evident in participants' discussions of officers they did (not) get on with, and highlighted the importance of joking in softening tensions between 'us and them', facilitating greater trust:

Yeah. Why is having a laugh and a joke with them [staff] so important do you think?

*Because it builds up a bond and ... it shows that I'm relaxed around them, and they're relaxed around me, so you create a relaxed environment. Instead of the anxieties that this prisoner's gonna do this, or this officer's gonna do that.* (Lewis, England)

These findings echo Franzén and Jonsson's (2024) conclusions that 'banal' humour can create a more relaxed or positive atmosphere, however humorous interactions with staff were also viewed as complex and potentially hazardous, carrying substantial risk if not used or received correctly, suggesting potential for both social and anti-social dynamics of humour in this space (Billig, 2005). There was a limit to how far humour could mitigate the power disparity between the groups, particularly where power to determine the dynamic of conversation was felt to lie solely with staff, who could revert to a serious mode of enforcement at any time. Explaining how banter was different with officers, Cameron (England) highlighted such risks:

I'm having banter with her [prison officer], but she could nick me here ... She could write me up for saying summit wrong, even though I'm only kidding.

This demonstrates the fragility of 'joking relationships' between staff and prisoners, where the power imbalance ensures those imprisoned are always conscious that what appear to be friendly exchanges could be followed by punitive sanctions. The unequal terms on which such exchanges take place cannot be ignored, and participants were aware that this power imbalance could have negative consequences if officers decided to switch back to official roles, of 'what' rather than 'who' (Nielsen, 2011), reinstating the distance between them and the prisoner despite a perceived shared understanding. The potential for this shift illustrates how humorous exchanges could ultimately be experienced as 'disciplinary' rather than socially inclusive (Billig, 2005) due to these power dynamics, echoing Pandeli et al. (2025). In particular, the potential invisibility of negative consequences highlights how the 'power of the pen' (Crewe, 2011: 465) may shape how humorous exchanges are experienced. Cameron highlighted how this threat of punishment was posed not only by the officer involved in the exchange, but also by those observing:

Well I have banter with everyone. Like there's female officers I have banter on the wing with. Like Miss, we just mess about with jokes ... She knows I'm only having a laugh. She'll give it back – it's a laugh! And then I'll have banter with a male officer ... and obviously, we messed about before and I called him summit and then he said summit back to me, but then another officer listened to me saying that to him and he come and tried telling me off.

If there was a sense of meeting as equals (Nielsen, 2011), or humour reducing distance between captor and captive, this was momentary, surface-level and fragile. As participants' reflections indicate, the risk and potential consequences attached to humour were not evenly weighted, rendering the interaction unequal too. Radcliffe-Brown (1940) notes that the development of joking relationships usually requires trust and assurance that some conjunction will be maintained through implicit agreement not to take offence. The lack of staff-prisoner trust hinders the extent to which an equal joking relationship can be established, thus changing the dynamic and making navigation of humorous exchanges more risky, without confidence that jovial comments will be responded to as just that, rather than through enforcement of rules. Billig (2005: 160) uses the term 'unlaughter' to describe the 'rhetorical opposite of laughter', constituting 'a display of not laughing when laughter might otherwise be expected, hoped for or demanded' (2005: 173) to demonstrate disapproval, and the significance of such responses by staff in carceral spaces has been noted in recent literature (Jonsson and Franzén, 2025; Pandeli et al., 2025). The potential for banter to be misinterpreted by staff – whether involved or overhearing – may result in 'unlaughter', disrupting any smoothing of staff-prisoner relationships, and be particularly disconcerting where the potential consequences of perceived inappropriate behaviour are substantial. Questioning the equality of interaction Nielsen (2011) argues is created through humour, these findings may also speak to broader differences between staff-prisoner relationships in England and Ireland, and Scandinavia, where research on humour in prison has predominantly originated, with low staff-prisoner ratios, greater social acceptance of prison work, and a culture of social egalitarianism all features of 'Scandinavian exceptionalism' (Pratt, 2008). Rather, in this study, it appeared humour could be used and experienced as a tool for expression of authority, with officers able to switch from engagement in jovial exchanges to enforcement without warning, requiring men to manage this risk in interactions due to potentially serious consequences for one's progression. While these concerns were most evident in England, Thomas highlighted potential ramifications of humour being responded to with enforcement in Ireland, noting how inappropriate use of humour could have significant implications for one's time inside:

I was thrown back [to the main prison from low-security prison] because of the nature of my jokes. They were brutal these jokes like, ruthless. That was really the reason I was sent back here.

Despite the centrality of 'sick', 'black', 'toilet' or 'gallows' humour' to officer interactions (Crawley, 2004: 419), Thomas' experience suggests acceptance of this macabre humour may not extend to use by prisoners, indicating a distinct accepted 'joke-book' – delineating the boundaries of acceptable humour – for those imprisoned; while 'banal' humour might be valued for its effect on the social environment (Franzén and Jonsson, 2024), less mild humour may be particularly risky. By taking dark humour too far, Thomas' comedic performance attracted a punitive response, disrupting his progression, demonstrating the risks joking entails if not received as intended and treated as problematic behaviour or – as Laursen (2016) found in cognitive behavioural programmes – evidence of 'cognitive distortions' when a particular sense of humour is not shared by those

receiving the jokes. The potential hazards of humour were also perceived by Cameron to be heightened when involving staff of the opposite sex:

To a female officer, you've got to be careful what you're saying. Oh obviously there's a female, I'm a prisoner, she's a prison officer. Obviously I know it does happen, but we're only having banter and then someone could get this in their head – the wrong thing! Just saying well 'she's talking to him like that!' Eventually, you know, she loses her job and I'm sacked. I'm off the wing. You know what I'm saying? You just gotta be careful with your banter.

While illuminating the risky nature of jovial exchanges with staff, Cameron's comments also reflect the risk surrounding the presence of female bodies within the masculine prison environment, and potential consequences of not treading the line between friendly, positive banter and interactions perceived as inappropriate, both for staff and prisoners. Prison staff are trained to maintain emotional distance due to concerns around 'conditioning' compromising security (Crawley, 2004), and demonstrations of familiarity through banter could be perceived as evidence of failure to maintain such distance, with potentially serious consequences, leading some to avoid such interactions (Pandeli et al., 2025). As Crawley (2004: 423) notes, 'there are costs [for prison officers] if the mask is seen to slip' when interacting with those in their custody, while prisoners may lose privileges, be removed from trusted roles, or be moved wings. In an environment where behaviour is under near-constant scrutiny, banter and its perception by others entails an ever-present risk of punishment. Consequently, while the right kind of humour, received as intended, can improve relationships, the other 'edge' of humour (Bjerke and Rones, 2017) makes the risks of getting this wrong substantial, whether interacting with staff or other imprisoned men, once again demonstrating the 'paradoxical' nature of humour in this setting (Billig, 2005).

### **Cultivating a community of laughter**

Understanding of humour for fostering solidarity and group identity is well-established, albeit often in the context of organisational culture. Humour also holds significance for those collectively imprisoned, and participants described humour as integral to cultivating community inside, providing a basis around which cohesion could be developed in an otherwise atomised environment. When asked whether there was 'community' in prison, some participants in Ireland highlighted banter as evidence of community spirit: 'You'll have a bit of banter on the landing ... a bit of craic ... It's a bit of a community here alright' (Neil). Some noted how banter helped create a sense of community through normalising interactions on wings, or enabling re-framing of interaction as 'normal' by making it feel comparable to socialising outside, '*just like a normal community*' (Hugh), particularly where external connections crossed over with the prison community:

What's the difference between being in jail on a wing, and having a laugh with a couple of your pals on the wing, than being out there going to a party or something and having a laugh with people out there? There's no difference is there!

For Callum (England), a young man incarcerated with friends, boundaries between communities were already blurred, and humour furthered this ambiguity, amplifying the sense of porosity in his incarceration. This normalising effect of humour highlights the importance of considering how features of 'normal' life are evident and utilised during imprisonment. Failure to do this, Sandberg and Tutenges (2019: 575) argue, 'exaggerates the differences between marginalized populations and the mainstream', when prison life is influenced by, and sometimes replicates,

the ‘mainstream’ outside world. This feeling was not, however, shared by all participants. For others, laughter with other prisoners replicated a sense of community that individuals without close relationships would seek outside, for example, by visiting a pub to find community through laughter, to ameliorate social isolation:

When people go into a pub, some people go by their sen [on their own] and that’s the only contact they have so it’s like a community there ... they have a laugh in the pub, and then they might fall outta the pub and go home, but ... there’s some ... you have a laugh, you have a joke.

For Noah (England), collective laughter provided a feeling of inclusion in a community where otherwise absent. Most interviewees considered prison a community in some respect, but overwhelmingly described an individualised environment; people were ‘having a laugh’ together, but ultimately doing their own time. Nevertheless, the comparisons drawn by Noah and Callum suggest this sharing of laughter was important for minimising the difference between life inside and out, and maximising a sense of normality.

As particular spaces were highlighted as fostering community through laughter outside, participants also noted how humorous exchanges were concentrated around specific locations inside, the wing – having limited space to congregate – not being conducive to ‘community’ gatherings. English participants, including Alex, highlighted the PID (prisoner information desk) – where they could seek peer-led support with applications – as a key space where humour was evident and providing evidence of ‘community’:

*you see that round that PID desk, certain people sat round there having a laugh and a chat ... And round that PID desk we’re all having a laugh and a joke and whatever, and other different lads, and sorta like everybody knows each other kinda thing ... There’s a very lot of people taking the piss out of each other.*

Why do you think that happens so much in that environment, by the PID desk there?

*I think it’s a place for people to congregate kinda thing, ain’t it? Cause you’ve got the meds thing, and then you’ve got the PID desk where people are sorta congregating like haven’t ya? It’s somewhere like to sit, kinda thing, isn’t it? Cause there’s no... If you look on that landing, where are the chairs for anybody to sit down on? There’s no chairs or owt [sic] is there? But there’s nowhere for people to sit, so you’re stood about all the time ... Yeah, so them lads then stand around there for summat to do. Spend a bit of time, have a laugh and a joke innit.*

The PIDs functioned as a hub on wings in multiple ways; they provided a site for addressing problems, through completing applications and venting frustrations, but also for sharing in humour. This juxtaposition highlights the significance of disjunctions to humour. Crewe et al. (2014) posit how space within prisons is emotionally differentiated, with certain areas associated with particular emotions and their expression. Participants’ discussion of PIDs as places for ‘having a laugh’ highlights how the use of humour may also be spatially differentiated inside, with some areas facilitating humour more than others through their physical characteristics or functions. While the location of the PID influences its position as a space for laughter, its role as a hub for enquiries – and, according to PID workers, often complaints or ‘moaning’ – may also explain the prevalence of humour here. Terry (1997: 31) found use of ‘jocular gripes’ (Coser, 1959: 176) helped to cultivate solidarity amongst prisoners, through humorous representation of complaints about their unpleasant

circumstances, highlighting the significance of humour in expressing frustrations frequently shared at PIDs.

Collective humour amongst the wing ‘community’ also featured heavily in participants’ narratives of passing time within the mundane prison regime: ‘Ah ... passes the time, that’s the main thing. Passes the time’ (Thomas, Ireland). This collective search for humour, or laughter, to alleviate boredom further highlights a relationship between humour and masculinity, with such connections not unique to prison; the use of humour to pass time has been identified as a feature of various spheres where young working-class boys – and later, men – perform masculinities, including schools (Kehily and Nayak, 1997) and workplaces (Willis, 1976). While not considering it wholly successful at defeating boredom in school, Willis (1976: 193) draws a parallel between humour as part of school and work culture, including ‘heavy and physical humour’ alongside ‘defeating boredom’ as key practices boys are familiarised with during schooling, in preparation for future workplaces; ‘having a laff’ thus formed a crucial feature of ‘the styles and rituals whereby young men “learn to labour”’ (Kehily and Nayak, 1997: 70) in mundane and repetitive work. Maguire (2021) has noted the synergies between these spaces and prison, amongst others, as spheres facilitating the performance of protest masculinities. Thus, it is perhaps unsurprising that use of humour to pass time spans these contexts, providing a means by which men, and boys, push back against the boredom of daily life, whether in school, work or on prison wings.

However, this desire for humour to distract from the tedium of prison life also carried substantial risks for those who became the subject of ridicule, with attempts to have a laugh sometimes going far beyond the ‘precarious line which separate[s] humour and bullying’ (Laws, 2016: 35). One problematic consequence of reliance on humour was the victimisation that sometimes occurred in search of shared laughter, involving the targeting of vulnerable individuals:

Do you think there’s community spirit here then?

*I suppose there is as well, but there’s also the bully side of that where ... you know, someone who needs help will get laughed at ... depending how he fits in ... There’s a lot of mental health in here! There’s an overspill of mental health, and it’s like the one instance – there’s a kid on there now, and he’s only about 25 ... a bit sort of backward, and they keep giving him these Spice joints, and lauding him, so he’s just ... you know, the staff keep having to take him back to his cell because he’s gone green really ... and it’s making a bit of a laugh out of him, you know?*

Yeah. Why do you think it is that they do that?

*It’s boredom I suppose. It makes a bit of a laugh doesn’t it, or so they see it like that. It takes ten minutes of that monotony out of their lives. (Lucas, England)*

Exploring humour and masculinity in school, Kehily and Nayak (1997: 76) contend that male violence can be ‘valorised through styles of humour which draw on verbal and physical game-play ... creating heterosexual hierarchies within male cultures where “macho” lads were seen as “proper” boys and other males were subordinated’. Finding laughter in the treatment of some resulted in a sense of inclusion at the expense of others’ exclusion. This humiliation can be particularly problematic in prison, where loss of power is heightened (Umamaheswar, 2021), hierarchies of masculinities are evident (Maguire, 2021), and drugs and violence are prevalent and can be utilised for amusement. Such physical victimisation is argued to be relatively uncommon, with mental bullying more commonplace, ‘particularly the cajoling, teasing and public ridicule of more vulnerable

prisoners', often viewed by those involved as 'harmless fun' (De Viggiani, 2016: 84), yet nevertheless highlights the potential for humour to be exclusionary, anti-social and reinforce existing hierarchies (Billig, 2005). Highlighting the complexity of involvement in seeking out shared laughter through victimisation, Lucas went on to explain how this behaviour was not perceived as acceptable or harmless, even by those involved:

And a lot of the guys that I talk to, on their own, they're not happy with what ... they might be with that crowd, and having a laugh, but when you pull 'em aside and say "that were out of order," they agree, you know ... they need to be with them, to laugh with them, just to be in that crowd. They're scared of being that person that is abused, sort of thing.

It was felt that many disagreed with the victimisation involved in this search for collective laughter, yet would nevertheless respond to incidents as humorous where enabling their inclusion, demonstrating the dangerous potential of relying on collective laughter for creating togetherness, individual feelings regarding the acceptability of behaviour subsumed by its ability to cultivate belonging. This illustrates how humour can be simultaneously 'social and anti-social', bringing some together at the exclusion of those who are its subject and 'ridicule' of those who do not fulfil expectations within the social order – here relating to masculine hierarchies – serving to ensure others align with such expectations (Billig, 2005: 159). While victimisation in search of collective laughter may have seen little upfront challenge, due to individuals' concerns about becoming targets, humour amongst imprisoned men *was* subject to restrictions based on shared conventions and normative ideas of what can(not) be joked about.

### **The boundaries of the prison 'joke-book'**

Billig (2005) notes that while humour is found everywhere, there is substantial variation in what is found 'funny' in different contexts – this universality and particularity being another way humour is 'paradoxical'. Utilising the framing of Charman (2013), participants' comments indicated the existence of a cultural 'joke-book' that imprisoned men were required to follow, indicating what was deemed acceptable or funny humour in prison, with contents adjusted based on who one was interacting with – fellow prisoners, or staff. While joking about 'the system', through 'jocular gripes' (Coser, 1959: 176) was acceptable amongst imprisoned men, due to its basis in shared experience and situational knowledge, appropriate humour diverged from that accepted in other spaces used to perform masculinities. Participants consistently noted the need to avoid jokes about family, however generic. Contrasting the prevalence of joking around mothers identified amongst boys in schools (Kehily and Nayak, 1997), there was a seemingly universal prohibition of banter about another prisoner's mother or children:

Where is the limit with that? Are there certain things you can't banter about?

*You can't talk about your mum. That's a given that one. And kids. You can't talk about your kids in here.* (Lewis, England)

This normative prohibition of jokes relating to family highlights the shared sense of humour ideology reflected in the cultural jokebook. Just as Billig (2005) notes the particularity of humour content, this normative idea of what is off limits indicates the specificity of humour ideology to the context of imprisonment, its boundaries influenced by the specific deprivations entailed. Conversely, there was clear normative acceptance of other humour topics – sports affiliations

were valuable banter material, while prison-related humour was considered particularly effective for cultivating community, drawing on common experience:

You'll have a bit of fun slagging their football team or, you know, if they do something wrong ... if someone gets caught with a phone that you're not meant to have and you walk by ... you'll go 'ah I'll give you a ring later!' [laughs]. (Barry, Ireland)

In contrast to the potential for problematic behaviour when seeking belonging through laughter, a prevalent theme in discussions of humour was the need to ensure jokes did not go 'too far', and the importance of treading the line between banter, which lubricated interaction, and 'taking the piss', provoking hostility. Lewis explained how this was policed, where those unfamiliar with the 'joke-book' overstepped:

If humour ever does get people in trouble like that, and they push the banter too far, how does that affect the dynamic?

*People will pull them to one side and say 'look, just calm down a bit' ... especially with newcomers. If they've never been in before and trying to be a part of it all straight away, instead of easing themselves in.*

Thus, as staff enforce prison rules against some humour, prisoners too enforced unwritten rules of the prison 'joke-book' where humour strayed from the innocent or 'banal' towards the more 'biting' (Franzén and Jonsson, 2024). The boundaries of acceptable humour were drawn through expressions of supportive rebuke to those who crossed the line early in their imprisonment, maintaining clear guidelines for the 'joke-book' from which prisoners can 'read'. However, where individuals were already familiar with imprisonment, joking about inappropriate topics or pushing the 'joke-book' boundaries could result in conflict. This was a precarious '*fine line*' to tread, as Jack (Ireland) described it, between '*humour and taking the piss the wrong way*', and to encourage community and make others laugh, without causing offence or damaging relations: '*Sometimes you can crack a wrong joke and it's like "what?!" You get a strike probably or you'd be kicked to a pulp anyway, depending on the nature of the joke like*' (Thomas). Consequently, the risk attached to joking, due to possible punitive staff responses, was also present in sharing of jokes amongst fellow prisoners; the deprivation of security (Sykes, 1958) was ever-present and a misjudged joke, responded to with 'unlaughter' (Billig, 2005), could not only sustain exclusion from the collective, dehumanize or embarrass individuals (Jonsson and Franzén, 2025; Pandeli et al., 2025), but also turn the potential of violence into reality.

## Conclusion: The risky business of humour in prison

This article has furthered understanding of humour as a multi-faceted social resource through analysing imprisoned men's perspectives on humour, shared in discussion of 'community' during interviews, previously given little attention in humour research. The men's experiences point strongly to humour as a significant feature of day-to-day prison life, holding both important functions and significant risks; humour serves important individual functions for coping with incarceration, and relationally in negotiating relationships, particularly when navigating interactions requiring presentation of a 'front', or contradictory and difficult circumstances. This builds on existing literature, demonstrating how these functions are relevant beyond the jurisdictional and spatial contexts where previously identified, and also highlighting how humour on wings is spatially



differentiated, connected to the performance of masculinities, and can complicate self-presentation in liminal spaces. Thus, this article highlights that management of multiple identities through humour is less straightforward than Terry's (1997) work might suggest. Humour is also important on a collective level – policed collectively on wings, while also used to cultivate a sense of community in an otherwise atomised environment, and to maintain a sense of 'normality' in seeking to find similarity in experience to life outside.

Most importantly, however, I have argued that humour carries significant risks for imprisoned people, even where well-versed in the institution's 'joke-book'. Thus, this article makes a significant contribution to literature – which has predominantly focused on the positives of humour in prison – furthering understanding of its risks in total institutions (Bjerke and Rones, 2017), and which demonstrates how its 'double-edged' nature plays out in this specific total institution – the prison. Specifically, this article demonstrates potential risks or negative consequences of humour on prison wings in the following ways: through use of exclusionary 'ridicule' victimizing others to reinforce hierarchies and establish belonging, in the challenges to presentation of true self in the liminal space of family interaction, and in how staff interpretation of, and response to, humorous exchanges has significant implications and potentially negative consequences for the imprisoned men involved. While research has predominantly focused on positive relationship-smoothing functions of humour in staff-prisoner interactions (Crawley, 2004; Nielsen, 2011), this article demonstrates its 'paradoxical' nature (Billig, 2005) – it can also be potentially dangerous, exclusionary or disruptive of relationships – and that staff-prisoner humorous exchanges can be experienced as punitive where responses are changeable, unpredictable and could 'switch' to enforcement unexpectedly. I would thus argue that, rather than creating (even momentary) equal exchanges, as others have posited (Nielsen, 2011), humour provides a temporary veil for the power disparity underpinning interaction, enabling sharing of frustrations in a way that is palatable to authority. However, the 'freedom' to pull back this veil without warning is not equal; while staff may joke in ways which frustrate or anger prisoners, they are unable to switch back and take comments seriously without consequence, while officers may pull back the veil, respond with 'unlaughter' (Billig, 2005) and switch to enforcement. This article highlights a subtle way this power disparity permeates even the most jovial – and seemingly friendly – interactions, particularly where use of or response to humour is inconsistent, as found in other recent research (Pandeli et al., 2025), and extends this discussion to interactions with prison officers on wings. How humour functions in the operation of social power is a key concern of critical humour studies, and this article has demonstrated – in line with Pandeli et al. (2025) – how power disparities within prison might not be removed but ultimately reinforced through humour (Billig, 2005), while the privilege to feel that disparity is (however briefly) reduced is less evident for prisoners than staff. Thus, as argued by Bjerke and Rones (2017), the context of the 'total institution' impacts the experience of humour to make it risky and 'double-edged' in its functioning. It is argued, however, that this risk is further heightened in the punitive context of imprisonment, where enforcement of rules has implications for progression and liberty, and where power operates less visibly (Crewe, 2011). Here, humour is another communication tool that can be coopted for the exercise of power. Consequently, humour cannot be seen simply as a feature of a 'healthy' prison, without considering how it is used and responded to, or prisoners' own perspectives on how it benefits or complicates time inside.

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## Notes

1. Committal prisons (Ireland) and Category B Local prisons (England) serve similar functions, as closed institutions holding individuals sent to prison directly from court, including those serving various sentence lengths, and those on remand or awaiting transfer to other institutions following sentencing.
2. Assistant Chief Officers are the first line of management in the Irish Prison Service officer structure, having supervisory/oversight duties (Office of the Inspector of Prisons, 2015: 60).

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