

# Over the edge? Subversive humor between colleagues and friends<sup>1</sup>

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## *Abstract*

*Humor is used for a variety of functions in everyday social interaction. It frequently serves as means of expressing friendliness, solidarity or 'positive politeness' (Brown and Levinson 1987), but it may also function less positively, especially when used between people of different power or status. While the powerful may use humor to maintain control, it is also available to the less powerful as a socially acceptable means of challenging or subverting authority.*

*This paper examines some of the ways in which humor is used subversively between colleagues in two New Zealand organizations. The distribution of humor in meetings in these workplaces is compared with the frequency of humor in informal interactions between friends and apparent equals. The analysis suggests that while humor is much more frequent in informal contexts, subversive humor is proportionately much more frequent in workplace meetings. The analysis also demonstrates that subversive humor tends to be conveyed through discourse strategies which create social distance, and emphasize social boundaries between the speaker and the target of the humor. Potential social implications of these patterns are discussed.*

## **Introduction<sup>2</sup>**

Humor serves a very wide range of functions in social interactions (see, for example, Graham et al. 1992, Martineau 1972, Collinson 1988, Hay 1995). Perhaps the most obvious is its function as a means of expressing friendliness, solidarity or 'positive politeness' (Brown and Levinson 1987).