Ironic Humor and the Social Construction of Contradiction in the Humor of a Management Team

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This is an unusual paper reporting on ironic humor in a management team. The social construction perspective reveals how both contradiction and humor are co-constructed through discourse between managers. The construct of irony and the practice of discourse are unpacked and related to the way managers represent some of their cognitive and emotional experiences through oppositional forms. The paper serves to remind of the paradoxical nature of organizations by introducing a contradiction-centered view of organizations.

Arie Y. Lewin

Abstract
The thesis I explore in this essay is that organizational members use humorous remarks to discursively construct and organize their cognitive and emotional experiences in and of their organizations. My assumptions are that: (1) organizations are socially constructed through discourse about them (especially managerial discourse), (2) humorous discourse provides a contradiction-centered construction of organizations that operates in the domains of both cognition and emotion, and (3) interpretation of the text of ironic remarks will suggest the processes by which contradictions and their cultural and emotional contexts are socially constructed through discourse. In this essay I use a form of analysis that I developed in relation to humor theory (Mulkay 1988), theories of irony (Brown 1977, Weick and Browning 1986) and Rorty’s (1989) concept of the ironic disposition to interpret spontaneous humorous exchanges observed during the regular meetings of a group of middle managers. My interpretations of ironically humorous remarks indicate that the managers in my study constructed at least some of their cognitive and emotional experiences in contradictory ways including: possible/impossible, great/horrible, comic-serious, and up-to-date/unprepared. The interpretations also suggest how, in constructing contradiction, the managers reflexively constructed themselves in relation to their organization. The analysis points to a paradoxical understanding of organizational stability and change and informs a contradiction-centered view of organizations.

(Ironic Humor; Social Construction Processes; Organizational Contradictions; Emotion in Organizations; The Aesthetics of Organizing; Discourse Analysis; Reflexivity)

The study reported on in this article arose out of my desire to examine the twin aspects of organizational uncertainty—complexity and change—using a social constructionist perspective and an ethnographic approach. The empirical material I selected for the study was managerial discourse, owing in part to the influence of postmodernism and its emphasis on language, and in part to my good fortune in being granted access to the staff meetings of a group of managers for the purpose of studying and analyzing what they talked about together. This article examines a segment of the data collected during that study, and focuses on ironic humor in the group. I settled on this focus because humor and irony, being theoretically linked to contradiction, promised access to some of the complexities of organizations and organizing processes, and because, as I explored these links through analysis of my data, I became aware of their implications for a paradoxical understanding of change and stability. Through this article I hope to place contradiction in a more central position, theoretically speaking, as a move to complex-

There is a rich literature on organizational humor within sociology, although little of this work has been recognized by organization theorists. Of the work that has received attention, almost all is focused on shopfloor humor (e.g., Roy 1958, Boland and Hoffman 1983, Linstead 1985, Collinson 1988) or other situations involving non-managerial employees or clients of an organization (Bradney 1957, Coser 1959, Emerson 1969). Managerial humor has seldom been studied, and an emphasis on irony is equally rare. Thus, this essay, which focuses on ironic humor in a management team, helps to fill a gap in organizational humor studies while drawing the attention of organization theorists to irony and contradiction. The work to be presented here, however, differs considerably from previous studies involving humor in organizations. While most previous studies attempted to explain what functions humor served, this study explores what managerial humor can tell us about the relationship between contradiction and organizing. I hope to demonstrate that a contradiction-centered view of organizations via the study of managerial humor leads to a better grasp of organizational complexity and a more complex understanding of change.

The epistemological position from which I make my analysis is derivative of poststructuralist and postmodern philosophies that position language and discourse as means by which humans constitute and order their social realities (e.g., Foucault 1972, 1973; Rorty 1989). These constitutive views take language as data (Agar 1990) and use interpretation to expose the ways in which realities are socially constructed through discourse. Because organizations are social realities, and because ironic humor is a form of discourse built on contradiction, this perspective suggests that organizational discourse involving ironic humor provides an empirical domain within which to explore the contradictory aspects of organizing and to thereby contribute to a contradiction-centered view of organizations.

It has not been uncommon to objectify organizational contradiction and locate it in an external reality, that is, a reality conceived as separate from those who experience and express it. This view is based in the belief that language is representational. Thus, for example, many researchers and organizational actors would agree with the assertion that contradictory language points to some underlying contradictory state in the organization. The representational view is challenged by constitutive theorists whose perspectives are rooted in Saussurian linguistics. Saussure (1959) proposed that words do not derive their meaning from objects in, or objective properties of, the real world to which they refer and which they represent (as was commonly assumed before Saussure), rather words form a system of relationships among themselves and these relationships constitute meaning. Constitutive theorists further propose that the relationships between words arise out of discourse; thus meaning and reality, which are products of our use of language, are socially constructed.

In the constitutive framework, representational and constitutive views are logically incompatible because, once language is assumed to construct reality, the idea of discursively representing something outside the domain of language is difficult to support. Of course, some linguistic theories claim that language itself is contradictory. For instance, Greimas' (1966) semiotic square presents a technique for exposing the oppositional and contradictory structures of thought that underlie speech (Fiol 1991 offers an excellent example of this approach in her study of the semiotics of leader power in texts written by Henry Ford and Lee Iacocca). However, I am less interested in the contradictory structures of language, than in the ways in which language is used by organizational members to construct contradictory experiences of their work world. Thus, I take an interpretive, constructivist perspective on what Saussure called parole (the use of a language) as opposed to langue (the structure of a language).

Several organizational researchers before me have adopted an interpretive, constructivist perspective in their studies of organizational contradiction. For example, Ford and Backoff (1988) made a strong case for locating organizational contradiction in the constructions of organizational members, but made their argument in relation to paradox rather than contradiction. Benson (1977) and Putnam (1985) both considered contradiction as a way of acknowledging incongruent relations within the constructed social order of organizations, but neither considered the use of contradictory language as part of the social construction process itself. Most relevant to the study reported here, Filby and Willmott (1988) described contradictions in a social service organization as socially constructed. Their
work indicated the importance of humor in that their interpretation of the contradictions in their case rested heavily on a photocopied cartoon posted throughout the department and on the interpretations department members gave to this humorous cultural artifact.

In this essay I present interpretive (textual) readings of both the cognitive and emotional aspects of managerial humor grounded in the sociology of humor and theories of irony. In the pages of my text I will introduce you to another text, that of the managers I observed. Their text offers embedded interpretations of their experience (e.g., humorous remarks) that my text will attempt to reveal and make comment upon. You should be aware that my interpretations of their interpretations are always going to be subject to embellishment or undermining by other interpretations that will follow and play off of them (including your reading of my reading, and even my own future readings). Some may claim that this instability of meaning invalidates the entire project of interpretive scholarship. I argue that the instability of meaning does not eliminate the value of interpretive study. For me, the contribution of interpretive analysis is not to find a "right and final" interpretation, or even to reveal in the multiplicity of interpretations made (although this can also be useful), but rather to enable us to understand interpretation processes and the role they play in the social construction of organizations. Thus, my interpretations of the managers' humorous exchanges are intended to indicate the sort of interpretive work implicit in the use of humor and thus to open social construction processes to empirical scrutiny.

To open language use, interpretation, and social construction processes to empirical scrutiny requires reflexivity. After introducing the theoretical foundations of my interpretive method and providing examples and interpretations of managerial humor as illustration, I will turn my attention to the subject of reflexivity and its special relationship with irony. Following this, a section on contradiction in relation to organizational stability and change presents some implications of my study. I conclude by discussing the social construction of organizational contradiction as a move toward a contradiction-centered view of organizations.

**Irony and the Cognitive Construction of Organizational Contradiction**

From the cognitive point of view, the use of ironic humor is contradictory in several respects. First, irony is created and shared when the words spoken by an ironist are intended and/or understood to mean the opposite of what is literally stated. For instance, Schopenhauer (cited by Davis 1993, p. 333) defined irony as deliberately subsuming something "directly under the concept of its opposite." Weick and Browning (1986) argue that to appreciate irony one must simultaneously acknowledge what the ironist meant as well as what he or she actually said. They claim that this is done by mentally or vocally contradicting the ironic statement, and offer the example of a passenger who says "smooth move" to a reckless driver. The meaning of the remark is found in its contradiction: "That was not a smooth move."

The construction of contradiction accomplished by an ironically humorous remark, however, depends on more than the simple reversal of textual meaning, and appreciating irony involves more than mental or vocal contradiction of a statement. Both also require contextual reversal. As Brown (1977, p. 172) argues, "to render something ironic is to take it from its conventional context and place it in an opposite one." Brown claims that this reversal enhances awareness of the conventional context, which he defines as "a widespread, complacently held belief." Weick and Browning (1986, p. 253) argue similarly that: "Ironic strategy includes foregrounding shared norms to show agreement as a precursor to taking exception to what was shared and applying it to the ironist’s position." Thus, negation of a shared and recognized convention provides context both for creating and for interpreting an ironic remark. It also entails a twist or moment of surprise that reframes the text in the context of interpretation by drawing from the unexpected.

In the reckless driving example, the conventional context required to formulate and understand the irony holds that good drivers avoid needless risk. The irony foregrounds this cultural standard of good driving, while the ironist takes exception to the shared norm by calling the driver’s reckless maneuver a “smooth move.” Thus, the contradiction that appears as the text/subtext of an ironic statement, also refers to its context. Using the phrase “smooth move” in the situation of reckless driving reframes the text, transforming it from a gesture of approval, as it is normally taken to be, into a gesture of disapproval. This unexpected use of the phrase constitutes the moment of surprise that makes irony recognizable as such. (Of course, when this usage of “smooth move” becomes a common expression in such situations, much of the ironic edge is lost because it no longer surprises anyone.)

Brown claims that, viewed from the perspective of contextual reversal, the opposition between what is
said and what is meant juxtaposes incongruent images, characteristics, frameworks or events. In other words, ironic remarks taken in context allow us to pinpoint aspects of experience that are constructed as contradictory by those producing or responding to the remark. In the driving example, opposition lies in the implicit comparison of smooth and reckless "moves" contextualized by cultural norms and values concerning driving behavior. Smoothness and recklessness are opposed as characteristics of driving behavior, but are combined by the ironic "smooth move." As Weick and Browning (1986, p. 253) explain, the passenger "simultaneously treats the driver like someone who shares the standards for good driving and someone who does not." Such remarks reveal the way in which experience is constructed as contradictory by the implicit comparison of images, characteristics, frameworks or events in a way that makes them appear to be oppositional. When the opposition is held in tension by the ironist and his or her appreciative audience, contradiction is experienced.

Guided by the considerations introduced above, an example of ironic humor from my study of a middle management team illustrates the way in which analysis of ironic humor can lead the researcher to an appreciation of organizational contradictions and how they are cognitively constructed in interpretation. The team I studied and the unit it headed ("CP," a fictitious acronym for "computer parts") were responsible for purchasing, testing, and distributing electronic parts for the United States manufacturing facilities of a major mainframe computer company. Key activities included negotiating and administering contracts with suppliers, and ordering, receiving, testing, re-engineering, storing, and shipping parts to manufacturing facilities. During the early days of the industry's economic crisis in the late 1980s, I observed CP's routine senior staff meetings for a period of 18 months. At the time, the company was planning to implement a just-in-time (JIT) system, thus CP, whose primary task involved inventory management, would be the site of major changes.

The study focused on a series of routine staff meetings held by the senior managers. The results reported here are based on data from 22 meetings observed between January 1989 and March 1990. Early in the observation period I established a focus on humor because, in preliminary interviews, several managers mentioned humor as an important characteristic of their group, and because my observations during the initial weeks of the study confirmed their belief. I made all observations during staff meetings, documenting as much of the managers' actual discussion as was possible using handwritten notes. All comments were manually recorded verbatim (or as close to verbatim as possible, paraphrasing was not employed) with points at which laughter occurred noted in the text (other nonverbal behaviors were not recorded). I took particular care to record segments of discussion involving and surrounding the use of humor and it is these data from which my examples of irony were drawn. The primary data were supplemented by a plant tour, published information about the company, casual conversations with the managers before and after meetings, and two sets of unstructured interviews with individual members of the team (one round of interviews was conducted at the beginning and the other at the end of the period of observation).

The management team consisted of a general manager and eight functional managers, all of them male, who met on Friday mornings for around three hours. The meetings were also attended by a project manager (male) in charge of implementing a new management information system, and the GM's secretary (female). One member retired during the observation period at which time the project manager became a permanent team member. All meetings were held in the executive conference room where the managers sat around a large oval conference table. I did my best to be inconspicuous, sitting to the side of the conference table, against a wall, much of the time with my head down, furiously scribbling my notes. The GM always took the same seat at one end of the table. The other end of the table was left open in case one of the managers wanted to use the screen at that end of the room to project an overhead slide. The GM opened each meeting with his report of the preceding week's activities and any issues he anticipated would be important to the group. Then the managers, who seated themselves along the sides of the table (but not always in the same position), each took a turn presenting their issues. Discussions were informal and fast-paced. Although the managers interacted freely, much of the serious discussion was oriented around exchanges with the GM. Humor, indicated by laughter from most or all of the group, occurred on 217 occasions during the course of my study; nine of these remarks can be considered ironic on the basis that the humorist clearly contradicted his meaning with his words. While all nine remarks were analyzed using the method developed in this study, only four will be discussed here in the interests of conserving space.

For the purposes of this study, humor was defined as any remark followed by laughter. Although humor may
not always be followed by laughter, my interest in exploring discursive and emotional aspects of humor in relation to social construction processes makes these instances uninteresting. This is because the absence of laughter indicates a lack of group involvement in the production of the humor. A more difficult interpretive problem with my approach, as LaFrance (1983) points out, is that some people may have laughed at remarks they did not find funny. For example, the GM may have made a remark after which staff members laughed, not because they found the remark humorous, but because they did not want to risk insulting their boss. If the group laughed at remarks they did not find funny, then I could have cases of nonhumor in the data. I cannot completely overcome this danger, but can report that: (1) as a participant-observer, I too found the remarks funny, (2) the managers laughed a second time at their humorous remarks during a presentation I made to them at the conclusion of the study, and (3) the managers neither voiced any objection to, nor evidenced any confusion by, my use of the humor label to describe these remarks.

Near to the beginning of my study, CP implemented a computer system for tracking part orders and shipments. Because one of CP's primary responsibilities was to see that ordered parts arrived at manufacturing plants when they were needed, and CP's reputation depended on limiting or avoiding overdue orders, the new information system made critical performance data readily accessible. At a meeting following the startup of the new system, the managers spent a few minutes admiring an overhead slide showing some of its first output. The particular slide we were viewing showed data on order due dates that had been transferred from the old system to the new, "real time," version. One entry displayed on the screen was dated 1987. It was January 1989 at the time (thus the order was 2 years overdue), and the entry drew laughter. Someone then pointed to another overdue order, this one dated November 1988 (only 2 months late), in response to which the Purchasing Manager quipped:

(1) **PUR: That one we probably can do! [laughter]**

This remark is ironic in the sense that it is impossible to fill an overdue order on time. The irony can be more clearly seen by contrasting the remark with the rather commonplace hyperbolic assertion heard within many corporations that "we will accomplish the impossible for our customers." Here the Purchasing Manager goes beyond mere hyperbole to achieve irony by playfully adopting the responses of an actor who actually thinks he can accomplish the impossible. Thus, "That one we probably can do!" both refers to and negates the conventional definition of possibility by calling into question established definitions of what can and cannot be done. An ironic reading of the remark holds the opposition between possible and impossible in tension.

To know the remark as ironic (i.e., to construct or read it as irony) requires contextual knowledge. The most obvious contextual knowledge needed to interpret this remark as irony is its timing (the remark would not have been ironic if made two months earlier). Notice in this regard how the order that was two years overdue acted as a foil in the Purchasing Manager's remark. Acknowledging the impossibility of filling an order two years overdue provided stark contrast to the possibility claimed for filling an order only two months behind schedule. Further contextual knowledge adds even more to the ironic interpretation. For instance, at the time of the study top management in CP's company was extremely concerned about customer service, as were the CP managers whose performance was in part judged by measures such as on-time deliveries to customers (customers in this case were the company's manufacturing facilities). If this contextual knowledge is invoked, the Purchasing Manager's extraordinary claim about what CP can do to be responsive to customer orders can be read as ironizing both the corporate value for customer service and CP's ability to serve its customers.

Notice how, by invoking this context, the norms and values espoused by top management, the organizational reward system, and the relationships between CP, its customers and top management, can all be cognitively organized as relevant contextual knowledge for interpreting the remark. When this contextual knowledge is invoked and ordered for interpretation, the organization is (re)constructed. I claim that when the managers used language ironically and humorously, they cognitively constructed their organization and in this instance did so in the contradictory terms of possibility and impossibility. Furthermore, if the managers assumed that the contradiction formed by their language represented contradiction existing in CP, then they reified this contradiction as an aspect of their organization.

The interpretation of the Purchasing Manager's remark undertaken above, and the further interpretations offered below, are ponderous. What the managers communicated to each other with a single remark takes pages of interpretive explanation during which all traces of humor and enjoyment are crushed under the weight of analytical scrutiny. For me, the value of the
dissection process lies in exposing the amount and type of knowledge required to interpret spontaneous humor in organizations. If we need this much information to appreciate what is funny about somebody else's humor, then the managers probably used similar knowledge in their interpretation processes. Thus the analysis of the first remark suggests that, at a minimum, historical knowledge (e.g., memories of past events such as the ways customers have related to CP) and cultural knowledge (e.g., of organizational norms and values such as the value for customer service) are involved in the interpretation of irony and thereby in the social construction of organizational contradiction.

The managers' use of their knowledge is far more efficient than ours. Their understanding of their ironic remarks comes in a flash. Their cognitive construction of irony and contradiction undoubtedly involves a reshuffling of, or reorientation to, knowledge that is highly accessible to them (otherwise they could not respond with such immediacy). Ironic humor does not create contradiction out of thin air; it is part of a larger discourse and a long history of interpretive activity among the managers and throughout the organization at large. However, there is more to this story than is revealed by a cognitive analysis; humor also involves emotion.

Humor and the Emotional Construction of Organizational Contradiction

Kant (1793/1951, p. 177) described laughter as "an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing." According to Davis (1993, p. 12), this small comment inspired incongruity theory (e.g., Koestler 1964, see also Mulkay 1988) in which humor is explained as arising from the simultaneous occurrence of contradictory thoughts (a view implicit in the theories of irony described above). But Kant's insight also points to important connections between the cognitive aspect of humorous remarks and emotion. "Laughter," Kant asserted, "is an affection."

As explained above, the irony of the remark, "That one we probably can do," constructs as contradictory the organizational value for customer service and CP's limited ability to fill customer orders on time. This situation was complicated by customers who sometimes pressured CP to accept orders with impossibly short lead times. The ideal was to push the inventory handling system to maximum performance, but there were also cases of exploitation of the system (and of CP) by customers who, CP believed, misrepresented the urgency of their needs. However, regardless of the circumstances surrounding the origin of an order (which did not appear on the table displayed at the front of the room in the first example), CP's reputation and rewards for high performance were at risk whenever an order was overdue. This ironic remark juxtaposed images of the customers' seemingly unlimited demands against CP's limited ability to satisfy them. It also juxtaposed CP's frustration and feelings of antagonism toward their customers with the bravado of the stance taken in the humorous remark. Not only were thoughts constructed in a contradictory manner via the use of humor, emotions were also counterposed. Together, the cognitive and emotional aspects of humor produced the experience of contradiction that found social expression in shared laughter.

Another example of irony from my study, that explicitly addresses the subject of the managers' feelings, may shed further light on the issue of emotion in humorous remarks. This example refers to a critical meeting top management held with CP's GM and Finance Manager concerning inventory. During this meeting top management assigned CP an extremely challenging inventory reduction target as part of the recently announced corporate push toward zero inventory. In the following passage, the GM described the higher level meeting to his management team with the "help" of two of his managers:

(2) GM: The second issue is inventory.
FIN: It's only a $32 million drop in sixty days.
GM: PUR has to reschedule 12 million parts.
PLN: ... and our customers can't cancel any orders.
GM: Right, other than that, everything went great! [laughter]

Among the managers of this company, stating everything in positive terms was a normative expectation since "positive thinking" was generally believed to improve working conditions and increase the chances of corporate success. CP managers were observed on several occasions reminding one another to "put that [negative statement] in positive terms." Thus, saying that the meeting with top management went great, rather than horribly, could simply be interpreted as conformity to the norm for positive thinking. However, the cynical interjections by the Finance and Planning Managers, the sarcastic tone in which the GM delivered the last comment and the laughter that followed,
indicate that although the meeting was spoken of in positive terms, at least some of the CP managers interpreted it as a negative experience. Thus, “great” appears to me to have been used and understood ironically.

This second example constructs a contrast between the positive attitude expected within the organization, and the group’s negative feelings about the outcome of the inventory meeting. “Great”—ness in this instance refers to feelings aroused by the threatening implications of the inventory reduction program for CP. In the immediate future, the zero inventory initiative means upheaval in CP’s normal work procedures and relationships; in the long run it threatens the unit’s very existence. This threat can most clearly be seen in relation to the unstated question of JIT implementation: What sort of inventory management unit will the company need when there is no more inventory to manage? To say that “everything [else] went great” at the inventory reduction meeting is to ironically minimize the enormous implications of the inventory reduction program for CP.

Appreciating this second ironic remark involves experiencing at least the potential for negative emotion, thus the contrast between positive and negative emotions can be claimed to be constructed by sharing in the humor of this ironic comment. Emotionally, describing the meeting as “great” allowed the managers to remark upon the horrible implications of the inventory reduction program without succumbing to fear or despair because naming the meeting “great” called on emotions that contradicted the managers negative feelings about this and impending events. By setting up emotions in contradictory ways, the managers neutralized dominant emotional reactions that enabled them to confront the contradictory cognitions constructed by their humorous remark. In this way laughter made irony possible by clearing a path through potential emotion-based denial.

Although it might be tempting to do so, it is probably inappropriate to try to pinpoint a causal relationship between cognition and emotion (see Zajone 1980). For instance, the social nature of humor makes it possible that, on any particular occasion, different participants experienced humor differently. In some of the examples of humor I observed, some of the managers may not have bothered to think about the humorous remark at all, but merely joined in the laughter of the group for fun, or because they had been socialized to do so. However, some must have cognitively participated in order to have categorized the remark as humor and thus to have interpreted it as an appropriate place to laugh. The rest then may have participated emotionally by laughing along, and only later considered the cognitive aspects, if they engaged cognitively with the humor at all. Thus, the cognitive and emotional experiences of humor can be distributed in a group, with as few as one full participant (one member of the audience who categorizes the remark as funny and starts laughing—jokers do not need to recognize their own humor) and the rest acting as emotional free riders.

This is an important point in studying social construction processes, because one should assume neither total and uniform participation, nor interpretive consensus, when dealing in interpretive events. The study of humor makes clear how much ambiguity and multiplicity humor allows and suggests the fragile side of socially constructed realities. At the same time it emphasizes the important role emotion (e.g., laughter) plays in contributing to a sense of sharing. One must also remember, however, that instances of social construction sustaining an organization are numerous. I believe that an organization’s stability arises out of this plurality of instances, its changeability lies in the fragility of particular instances. Because of its orientation toward contradiction, I further believe that ironic humor is particularly well-situated to explain organizations as both stable and changing. But, before we consider the implications of the social construction of contradiction for interpreting organizational stability and change, one more aspect of ironic humor needs to be addressed: reflexivity.

**Ironic Humor and Reflexivity**

All potential ironies can be read in nonironic ways. Thus, irony is strictly dependent upon interpretation and therefore on its interpreters. This draws attention to the subject who interprets ironically. When irony is regarded as a property of the subject, it points to a split in the ironist’s communicating self (Kierkegaard 1968), or to what Rorty called the ironic disposition. According to Rorty (1989, p. 74), ironists are people who:

> … realize that anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed, and their renunciation of the attempt to formulate criteria of choice … puts them in the position which Sartre called “meta-stable”: never quite able to take themselves seriously because always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change.

The ironic disposition is achieved through willingness to let go of conventional ways of viewing experience, to try on new vocabularies and interpretive rou-
times. This capacity to play with the terms of one’s own existence/identity suggests that the use of ironic humor in organizational settings indicates much more than willingness to construct organizations in contradictory ways, it may involve self-construction through reflexivity.

The examples of ironic humor in my study all lend themselves to interpretation as reflexive events in the sense that they show the managers commenting upon themselves and managing their own thoughts and feelings. A third example from my study illustrates this reflexivity in relation to the issue of humor itself. In this example, one of the Engineering Manager’s subordinates made a presentation to the management team during which he displayed a table showing performance data. The table contained the entry “51% of quality,” in response to which the GM commented:

(3) GM: Fifty-one percent? That’s Engineering. What would we do without Engineering? We wouldn’t have any comedy! [laughter]

The GM’s remark in this example rendered ironic the engineering department’s well-known enthusiasm for precision. The context within which this irony operated was the belief that engineering is a serious undertaking involving high levels of mathematical and statistical precision. Because quality is typically a nonprecise judgment, the precise estimate displayed in the table was seen as inappropriate. Here, the engineering department’s misapplication of precision provided something for the managers to laugh about. This remark contrasted the corporate value for precise engineering solutions with the limitations of an “engineering mentality” for implementing a program of quality management and thus constructed a contradiction between seriousness and comedy. Emotionally, this remark neutralized irritation or impatience with the young engineer’s naivete via the playful expression of affection for the individual and the engineering department he represented. The emotional path cleared by laughter allowed at least some of the managers the simultaneous appreciation of seriousness and humor which (re)constructed CP as both serious and humorous.

In my interviews with them, the CP managers emphasized the importance and distinctiveness of their humor. They clearly enjoyed this element of their work and several of them attributed it to the GM’s own appreciation for humor, which he openly shared when he joined the group (the managers told me that the previous GM had not allowed humor to develop within the group). This remark can thus be interpreted as contributing to the socialization of a potential manager to the value for humor and also as a reaffirmation and reconstruction of the value among the management team. The opposition between comedy and seriousness constructed by the GM’s remark indicates reflexivity in relation to both the identity of CP as an organization with a sense of humor, and the difficulty of continuously maintaining the serious mode of discourse normally expected of managers. Through the remark, the GM consciously defined the boundary between humorous and serious discourse, and pointed out that the managers must also be conscious of the difference lest they cross the line unwittingly, as the young engineer did. Thus, the ironic remark not only demonstrated the GM’s reflexivity (with respect to maintaining a humorous identity as well as the boundary between seriousness and humor), it called for this same reflexivity on the part of the other management team members. Meanwhile, the managers’ shared laughter served as an emotional channel through which shared support for the value for humor was provided.

Reflexivity can also be seen in the two examples of ironic humor presented earlier. In “That one we probably can do,” the Purchasing Manager demonstrated reflexive awareness of how the organization had been constructed in ways that interfered with its capacity to provide itself service. Thus, this particular instance of self-commentary not only constructed the CP team as mired in the contradiction between possibility and impossibility, it also reflexively constructed the larger company in the contradictory terms of espousing customer service while its units practiced self-service. In creating and responding to “Right, other than that, everything went great,” the managers again showed reflexivity, this time in their ability to comment critically upon themselves at the same time that they were experiencing a crisis. The double awareness, that they face a crisis and that they must manage themselves in the face of this crisis, comes through the ironic interpretation of this humorous remark in which the managers redefined a horrible situation as great and thereby (re)organized their emotions.

The reflexiveness of ironic humor implicates the consciousness of the ironicist(s) in studies of social construction processes involving contradiction. This step in the analysis is important because it serves to remind the researcher that contradiction is not a property of reality, but a construction of it. Reflexivity locates contradiction and irony in the thoughts and feelings of conscious actors, an especially important consideration when it comes to the implications of studying ironic
humor for the question of organizational stability and change, to which we now turn.

The Social Construction of Contradiction through Ironic Humor and Its Implications for Organizational Stability and Change

Rorty (1989) argued that ironists rely heavily on the method of redescriptions. He characterized redescriptions as “skill at producing surprising gestalt switches by making smooth, rapid transitions from one terminology to another.” In my view, Rorty’s notion of redescription as it is afforded by an ironic disposition links the social construction of contradiction with the topics of organizational stability and change. Insofar as organizations are socially constructed realities, the use of ironic humor will constitute contradictory realities and encourage switching between them. If irony can constitute contradictory emotional and mental states, then it can support stability and change as contradictory realities and may even help us to understand the paradoxical relationship between them that has been commented upon by other researchers (e.g., Quinn and Cameron 1988, Van de Ven and Poole 1988). The key, according to my reading of Rorty’s theory, lies in seeing redescription at work. Rorty’s theory suggests that we should find evidence of redescription in the use of ironic humor, so now I will interpret the CP data with a view toward analyzing its potential for redescription in relation to stability and change.

An example of redescription occurred during a meeting devoted to discussion of the future. At a previous meeting, the GM had asked team members to prepare a short presentation describing their vision for their area of responsibility. About halfway through the Futures Day meeting, as they called it, the Planning Manager noticed the Engineering Manager scribbling furiously on an acetate slide and announced to the group:

(4) PLN: ENG’s going to give us an up-to-date presentation here. [laughter]

Careful advanced preparation was a long-standing expectation in CP’s company. For example, the management team routinely spent substantial amounts of time preparing for quarterly budget reviews, prior to which they assembled reports, made tables and graphs, and created colorful acetate slides to show to top management. This activity was followed by a “trial run” during which the presenter was offered detailed critique and suggestions for improvement.

When the Planning Manager referred to the Engineering Manager’s unprepared presentation as up-to-date, he did two things. First, he underscored the longstanding norm for preparation in the organization and highlighted the Engineering Manager’s violation of this norm, thus pressuring him to conform to the traditional expectation. But, through his choice to redescribe the unprepared as up-to-date (rather than, say, merely inappropriate), his remark also connected the managers’ discourse to new ways of thinking within the company. For instance, at a meeting devoted to the GM’s report on a corporate leadership conference, the GM recounted a speaker who stated: “When choosing between quality and speed, take speed!” Upon hearing this, the Engineering Manager sarcastically interjected: “Don’t plan. When you build a house, start with the roof and work your way down.” This incident suggests that at least the Engineering Manager constructed top management’s emphasis on speed as contradictory to its established planning orientation.

The corporate emphasis on speed challenged existing norms for careful advanced preparation because, if observed, such norms leave a manager unprepared with respect to the latest information. In an environment of constant and rapid change, norms demanding advanced preparation slow the organization down. In this interpretative context, the Planning Manager’s use of irony called into question the conventional belief in doing advanced preparation, at the same time that it supported the preparation norm via pressure on the Engineering Manager to conform to it. This double interpretation is made even more pointed by acknowledging the Planning Manager’s symbolic role; it was as a symbol of organizational planning that he ironized organizational planning.

The change from a conservative planning orientation to a risk-taking speed orientation was constructed as contradictory by the ironic contrast of unprepared and up-to-date presentations. Calling what the Engineering Manager presented up-to-date humorously captured the reversal of meaning espoused by top management. The irony of the remark, while acknowledging the tension between what has been and what is desired, offered the managers an opportunity to practice the new form of understanding in which old terms took on opposing or contradictory meanings. Thus, I believe that this remark illustrates the connection between ironic humor and redescription. Even if the managers themselves did not consciously interpret their irony in this manner, they must have practiced redescription by
making a Gestalt switch between old and new ways of thinking (unprepared) and speaking (up-to-date) in order to have interpreted the remark as humorous, which their laughter indicated that at least some of them did.

Redescription can also be seen in the three examples of ironic humor introduced earlier. In “That one we probably can do,” the managers’ appreciation of their irony allowed the group to switch between two vocabularies of possibility. That is, the Purchasing Manager’s suggestion that CP probably can fill an overdue order on time, ironically constructed CP as capable of accomplishing the impossible. For CP, JIT involved doing a previously unthinkable thing—supplying parts without holding any inventory. Previously, holding inventory was standard practice and zero inventory was unthinkable because it would be disastrous for the system. With JIT, zero inventory is standard practice and holding inventory is problematic. The irony of “That one we probably can do,” involved redescribing the impossible as possible and thus allowed the managers to switch between old and new ways to think, talk and feel and thereby construct their organization as contradictory.

“Right, other than that everything went great!” suggests that the managers were able to cognitively and emotionally redescribe their seemingly negative position in the organization in positive terms. While accepting top management’s argument that inventory reduction was essential to corporate survival, the CP managers placed this vision in juxtaposition to their identity as inventory handlers and thereby constructed the meeting as both great and horrible—great in its potential for introducing the latest inventory practices to the company (i.e., JIT), and horrible in the consequences this change was likely to bring to CP. What is more, the managers seemed to realize that keeping up the culturally mandated appearance of a positive attitude contrasted starkly with the emotions evoked by confronting their own position in this situation. Nonetheless, their best hope for survival was to find the route to reinventing inventory management for an organization that aspired to hold no inventory; seeing the situation as possible and having positive feelings about it was likely to be the first step in this direction. Thus the managers’ ironic redescription in this instance involved confronting the choice to be positive or negative in the face of the contradiction between great and horrible in which they took part.

The third example of ironic humor is especially interesting in that it shows redescription being used to construct a subordinate’s participation in (re)constructing CP as humorous. In “What would we do without Engineering?,” the GM’s rhetorical question and answer redescribed the young engineer’s precise estimate as comedy and thus involved switching between its description as comedy and as seriousness. It thereby reconstructed CP’s current identity as an organization with humor and demonstrated this aspect of CP to a potential future manager. Irony not only presented the young engineer with the contrast between what were for him old and new ways of thinking, it also gave him an initiation into the ironic disposition valued by group members.

Rorty’s concept of redescription links irony to the paradox of change/stability because using or appreciating irony requires acknowledging both. The contradictions that lie at the heart of ironic statements demand of ironists that they hold both sides of an opposition in tension (or, following Rorty, that they switch rapidly between them) which produces a state that is simultaneously different and the same (i.e., changing and stable). This tension is experienced emotionally and cognitively, as was explained above, but when it is experienced with reflexivity, contradiction itself becomes central. That is, humor in organizations creates the capacity for contradiction that permits participants to construct their organizations as both stable and changing, while irony allows this to be done in discursive consciousness: they can talk about it, share their contradictory constructions, and thereby discursively construct both stability and change.

In the examples described above, the CP managers connected new ways of thinking about the organization and its purposes to old ways via the contradictory constructions embedded in their ironic humor. They constructed stability (or perceived coherence) through the link set up between past and future at the same instant that they constructed change as the contrast between old and new. In “What would we do without Engineering?” the GM redescribed a serious statement as funny and thereby maintained a cherished aspect of organizational identity (CP’s humor) even as he sought to use that humor to alter an ongoing interaction that was part of constituting the CP organization (i.e., changing the making of a falsely precise estimate into a humorous act). Similarly, the Purchasing Manager changed CP’s vocabulary from the impossible to the possible with respect to an overdue order and thereby stabilized CP’s view of themselves as high performers in a way that helped them transition to a new customer focus. In “Other than that, everything went great,” the GM changed the vocabulary of horror to that of greatness, helping the team to maintain a desired positive attitude through shared laughter about a situation of
momentous and (very likely) painful change. And in “Engineering’s going to give us an up-to-date presentation,” the Planning Manager gave continuity to existing cultural norms even as the meaning of one of these norms shifted under his cultural feet. In all four examples, change and stability were engaged in a subtle interplay of interpretations such that, in the process of implementing change, the managers repeatedly reconstructed themselves as stable points of reference (i.e., as regarded their humor, their image as high performers, their positive attitude and their cultural norm for being prepared) against which both old and new meaning was made.

Toward a Contradiction-centered View of Organizations

As explained in the introduction, my initial interest in the topics explored in this essay was stimulated by my desire to better understand the complexities of uncertainty in organizations and I have certainly ended up with a more complex view. However, by placing myself in the process, as my interpretive method indicated I must do, I have been complicated by the process. Along with the descriptions and interpretations of managerial discourse discussed above, came redescriptions of myself in relation to my theorizing practices as I was forced to acknowledge the irony of my own position as a researcher of irony. This reflexivity was inspired by my attempts to write about the contradictions of meaning entertained by ironic humor. My struggles to write about irony sensitized me to interpretive processes and to acts of social construction. It is this more nuanced understanding that I have attempted to convey in this article which I now see as a discursive vehicle to transport us to a different way to theorize and engage in organizing processes: a contradiction-centered way. But before we turn to the contradiction-centered view, let me reflect a moment on the irony of writing about irony.

Writing and rewriting this essay forced me to confront issues of representation: my own in relation to my research and this essay, and the managers’ whose discussion I analyzed in relation to irony and contradiction (see Hatch, 1996 for more on representation and writing in organization theory). In struggling to write about this complexity with reflexivity, I began to appreciate the objectivizing voice of the third person narrator because, ironically, using this voice gives you (the reader) some access to my subjective experience of being an observer. That is, subjects create objects when they socially construct reality using language. This is what the managers did when they spoke, and what I, in pursuit of their processes, have also done. The latter act I reconstruct when I describe the managers’ talk in the objectivizing voice of the third person. What is key here is that, with a little irony, we both can be conscious of these processes and thereby bring them into clearer focus. However, achieving this ironic stance required shifting out of the third person voice with which I translated to you my role in the research process. Thus, I frequently inserted myself (and sometimes you) into the text through liberal use of the first, and occasional use of the second, person. I wrote “I” as a marker for my presence and occasionally used “you” to mark yours. This shifting about reminded us both not to forget our roles as co-constructors of the constructions of others. But no matter how far I back away from the problems of representation, I cannot escape your interpretations of my text, except perhaps to write so obscurely as to cause you to resist in your act of reading and disengage from a dialogue that threatens never to end, as this one is starting to do.

The point is that, even though meaning is unstable (see Derrida 1978), interpretation goes on and is intimately involved in our social constructions of reality. If we are to produce knowledge about social construction processes, then interpretive multiplicity (and instability) will be part of that knowledge. Thus, this essay is not only a vehicle for reflexivity and self-(de)construction. It also explores an alternative to mainstream approaches to organization theory, an alternative that accepts contradiction as an organizer of experience in and of organizations. This contradiction-centered view starts from different premises (social constructionism, humor, irony) and resolves into different discussions (emotion, reflexivity, paradox, ambiguity) compared with noncontradictory views of organizations such as constitute most of the current discourse of organization theory.

What is a contradiction-centered view of organizations and what does it contribute to organization theory and management? A contradiction-centered view begins with the oppositions organizational members socially construct as their organizational realities, evidence for which can be sought in their situated discourse about the organization as I have demonstrated in this essay with my focus on humor and irony. Such an approach depends upon your acceptance of several key assumptions. First, that organizations are socially constructed through discourse about them (especially managerial discourse). Second, that humorous discourse provides a contradiction-centered construction of organizations that operates in the domains of both
cognition and emotion. Third, that interpretation of the text of ironic remarks will suggest the processes by which contradictions and their cultural and emotional contexts are socially constructed through discourse.

That the managers used language to create humor and irony, and through shared laughter emotionally engaged with this activity, suggests that contradiction was part of their constructed reality. Analysis of the content and context of their ironic remarks permitted vicarious access to some of this experience, allowing me to identify issues that the managers constructed as contradictory and to suggest ways in which cognition, emotion, and reflexivity were probably involved in the managers' construction processes. Interpretive analysis permitted me to suggest the kinds of contextual information upon which humor depends which indicated specific aspects of the organization involved in the construction of contradiction. Thus, a contradiction-centered view is both context-sensitive and process-focused. While this may not be the only view about which such claims can be made, these are certainly important aspects of a contradiction-centered view.

I am unable to say precisely why the CP managers socially constructed their work experiences as contradictory, but observe that the complexity and rapid change about which the managers regularly spoke offered plenty of material for their humorous enterprises. Whether humor increases in times of uncertainty (or whether uncertainty increases in times of humor!) is a question for other researchers to address, but one implication of my study is that, when humor does occur, it offers insight into the complexity of organizations and into the dynamics of stability/change that underpin organizing as we currently conceptualize it. Thus, the study of spontaneous humor in situ should permit the monitoring of organizational change processes in a way that reveals much more of their dynamism and complexity than do studies of organizational change that ignore humorous interactions. I offer my study along with that of Filby and Willmott (1988) as evidence for this claim.

The value of an ironic approach in general, and a contradiction-centered view in particular, is that it begins to draw upon emotional and aesthetic as well as intellectual understandings of organizations. As shown in this essay, interpreting ironic humor engages emotion (laughter) and aesthetic capacities (reflexivity), thus complexifying and enriching our views of organizing processes. In proposing a contradiction-centered view, I claimed in the introduction to stand beside those who have studied paradox and ambiguity in an effort to achieve more complex appreciations of organiza-

ization and organizing processes. This similarity of purpose suggests further exploration of the contingencies of irony, contradiction, paradox, and ambiguity.

Quinn and Cameron (1988, p. 2) linked paradox and contradiction when they claimed that, “The key characteristics of paradox is the simultaneous presence of contradictory, even mutually exclusive, elements.” Poole and Van de Ven (1989, Van de Ven and Poole 1988) even described stability-instability as a recurring organizational paradox. Such treatments taken in conjunction with my study suggest exploring paradox in relation to irony as well as contradiction, because my study of the contradictions of ironic humor pointed to stability-change, which is very close in meaning to stability-instability, and this association is probably worth pursuing. In this regard I would say at this point that paradox is similar to irony in that both depend on contradiction for their definition and both inspire and are constituted by reflexivity. The main difference is that paradox is generally posed as a question of logic, whereas irony is more typically an aesthetic or poetic construction. The implication of this difference lies in where we seek theoretical frameworks for our research—science or the arts and humanities—and suggests that there may be great value in cross-disciplinary approaches to the study of organizational contradiction.

In relation to ambiguity, Eisenberg (1984) has argued that organizational members create ambiguity strategically in order to promote unified diversity. If we consider irony to be a mode of constructing ambiguity as well as contradiction (i.e., through the multiplicity of meaning), then the CP managers' humorous remarks could be interpreted as having been used strategically to unify individuals with divergent goals and purposes without losing the power of their diversity. This approach suggests exploring the political and rhetorical purposes of the construction of contradiction, which would be another interpretive approach to the material presented here or to other similar types of data. My hunch is that the question of political and rhetorical purpose would be powerfully (re)framed by the social construction position and the combination of ambiguity, irony and contradiction, especially if such a framing leads to inclusion of emotional and aesthetic considerations.

Conclusion

I began this essay with the claim that, because organizations are discursively organized social realities, and because ironic humor is a form of discourse built on contradiction, the study of organizational discourse...
involving ironic humor provides a means to explore the 
contradictory aspects of organizing and to thereby con-
tribute to a contradiction-centered view of organiza-
tions. My interpretive exploration examined how hu-
morous discourse constructs contradictory thoughts and 
organizes the emotional lifeworld of everyday organiza-
tional experience in contradictory ways. Theories of 
humor and irony in combination with interpretations of 
instances of ironic humor in a management team 
formed the basis of the exploration.

Interpretations of ironically humorous remarks indi-
cated that the managers in my study constructed at 
least some of their cognitive and emotional experiences 
in contradictory ways during their everyday interac-
tions as a management team (possible/impossible, 
great/horrible, comedy/seriousness, up-to-date/un-
prepared). These interpretations further suggested that 
contradictory emotions neutralized emotional denial so 
that contradictory cognitions could be confronted in 
a less-threatening, more-playful fashion. Consideration 
of the reflexivity inherent in the ironic disposition 
revealed that the managers also constructed them-
theselves in their ironic humor by commenting on their 
organizational roles as individuals and as a unit of the 
organization. Consideration of the ironic disposition 
implicated Rorty’s notion of redescription and revealed 
the paradox of change and stability as intertwined 
realities constructed in the humor of the management 
team that I studied. While we cannot conclude that 
irony is necessary for the social construction of an 
an organization (it may not occur in all organizations, 
or at all times in any organization), I believe that this 
exploratory study of irony brings us one step closer to 
understanding social construction processes, and to 
appreciating how cognition, emotion, and aesthetics 
are implicated in these processes.

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