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# Humour as a Boundary-Breaker in Social Work Practice

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**ABSTRACT**

Professional boundaries are an important aspect of social work theory and praxis – yet it is an underexplored topic within the research literature. Research often explores specific types of professional boundary issue rather than exploring social workers' boundary stories or boundary narratives. In contrast, this qualitative study explored UK social workers' broader understanding and experience of professional boundaries. This paper will examine one of the research themes – *Humour as a boundary breaker*. By using humour, social workers were able to break down the boundaries that often impede effective practice. Participants also used humour to build connections with service users, colleagues and other professionals. Nonetheless, there were various aspects of this practice that raised serious issues related to power, prejudice and discrimination. This theme is important to explore because of how relevant it was for participants' practice and because humour is also an underexplored topic within the social work literature.

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## Professional boundaries in social work

Professional boundaries are a central concept in social work (Reamer 2019). A common understanding of professional boundaries is that they specify the ethical and technical standards for professional practice through guidelines, expectations and rules (Cooper 2012); however, there are many different conceptualisations of what professional boundaries are, and even more ideas about how they should be ethically used and interacted with, from a practitioner's viewpoint (e.g. Bates, Lymbery, and Emerson 2013; Cooper 2012; Davidson 2005; Doel et al. 2010; Reamer 2019). Discussions within the literature often indicate a tension between distance-based and relationship-based boundary practice (Blundell in press; Reamer 2019). There is often a failure to sufficiently illuminate the complex and multifaceted nature of professional boundaries within social work praxis (Bates, Lymbery, and Emerson 2013; Davidson 2005), particularly the pragmatic decisions that social workers often need to make when solutions to ethical issues are unclear, or within 'grey areas' (Bates, Lymbery, and Emerson 2013; Clapton 2013; Doel et al. 2010;

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Reamer 2003). When it comes to professional boundaries, social work has seen a turn towards more relationship-based practice in recent times (Bates, Lymbery, and Emerson 2013; Davidson 2005; Eketone 2021; Green, Gregory, and Mason 2006; Kapelj 2022; Reamer 2019) as have other associated helping professions (e.g. Austin et al. 2006; Blundell, Oakley, and Kinmond 2022; Finlay 2019; Hamilton and Bacon 2022; Speight 2011).

It is important, then, to research the boundary experiences of social workers even when they may be difficult to understand or decipher because they can be particularly useful for understanding the real-world ethical dilemmas that social workers, and other helping professionals, can face in their practice (Blundell, Oakley, and Kinmond 2022; Blundell in press). These experiences can be labelled professionals' 'boundary stories' or 'boundary narratives' (Hamilton and Bacon 2022) (i.e. an individual's understanding and experience of boundaries).

## Humour in social work

'The construct of humour, does not readily lend itself to a single, generalized definition' (Cooper 2008, 1089). Humour can be 'the amusement at incongruity, … the expression of anxiety, frustration and hostility that is cruel and interferes with service provision, frustration and hostility that leads to tension relief and creative problem solving, and simple expressions of admiration and liking' (Gilgun and Sharma 2012, 566). Whilst humour is reported to be 'prevalent in social services, discussions of humour are rare in social work journals' (Gilgun and Sharma 2012, 560). Humour has, generally, been considered a challenging subject to research (e.g. Cooper 2008; Witkin 1999). The aspects of humour that can make this difficult, such as an individual's motivations for using humour or finding it funny, or the complex social processes that can be at play when humour is shared (Cooper 2008) are compounded when researchers endeavour to explore it within social work practice (Witkin 1999). There are texts that do explore the relationship between humour and practice (e.g. Jordan 2019); however, by and large, these explorations are minimal in comparison to the reported prevalence of humour as an aspect of practice, effectively 'humour remains somewhat hidden in many social work curricula and research on social work practice' (Moran and Hughes 2006, 502).

## Researching humour in social work

Whilst there remains a paucity of research studies that focus specifically on humour in social work, some studies do exist. Humour has been identified as a form of self-care for social workers. Eltaiba (2016) found social workers in Qatar used humour (along with other strategies) as a form of self-care and to help build up resilience when faced with stressful or ethical challenges. Sullivan (2000) found two-thirds of social workers, who responded to a study exploring social workers' use of gallows humour, used it as a spontaneous form of stress release. In these examples, humour was used to translate 'unacceptable' thoughts into expressions that were more socially acceptable. This, according to Sullivan, could have helped social workers to cover up the incongruence between their derogatory thoughts and their professional values. In an ethnographic study of a social service programme in the USA, Gilgun and Sharma (2012) found humour could be used as a way of expressing (and dealing with) frustration, anger, and anxiety when social workers and managers

were faced with extreme cases of children being abused and neglected. Jokes often centred around service users and extended family and were shared between team members rather than with service users. Humour was also used to indicate fondness or liking of service users, as well as a tool to shift perspectives and move discussions forward within the team. The authors of this paper argue that, ultimately, humour was often being used as a form of emotional regulation for social workers in these examples.

Other studies have identified a more intricate relationship between humour and social work practice. Morriss's (2015) study into the development of social work identity, for Approved Mental Health Professionals (AMHP) who were seconded to alternative trusts, found examples of 'gallows' or 'bleak' humour and ironic banter were often important for forming those new identities and relationships. However, this could also lead to an othering of service users or other people. Similarly, Mik-Meyer (2007) examined moments of laughter and humour between staff and service users within two social care organisations in Denmark. This study found many contradictions within these examples, for example, social workers tried to use humour to seek informality and equality for their service users, but, often, these goals were in direct contradiction of the organisation's aims which required assessment and evaluation of service users.

In his PhD thesis, Jordan (2017) investigated the relationship between jokes, humour and social work by interviewing a variety of social workers from both adult and children services. He found that humour was a key component of social work practice, particularly for building and sustaining a variety of relationships. The participants also believed that humour (when used appropriately) could help to humanise social workers to service users by offering a more personable side, and that sometimes this could be used purposefully by social workers to build better relationships.

Fogarty and Elliot (2020) explored the role of humour by six social care workers (which included social workers). This phenomenological study identified four superordinate themes: The theme of *Humour as a catharsis* where participants linked their use of humour to a release of emotional stress. Similarly, the theme of *Humour as a coping mechanism* indicated the ways participants used humour to reframe experiences or create an alternative to feeling 'negative' emotions. For example, to avoid cynicism or to help colleagues avoid stress. The theme of *Humour as a way of bringing a sense of normality and perspective* was reported as participants using humour to remind each other that there was a world outside that of work. Finally, *Humour as a strategy* indicated how humour was used in a planned rather than impulsive or instinctive way, to engage service users or improve services. For example, making spaces more comfortable or approaching difficult conversations.

Humour has also been identified as an important part of social and academic learning at a variety of different stages of education (e.g. Moran and Hughes 2006; Rowe 2022). However, there is little research that has been undertaken to explore its role within educational settings for social workers. In an Australian study, Moran and Hughes (2006) explored the relationship between student social workers' sense of humour and their experiences of stress. This study found that the social use of humour amongst students, was positively correlated with reduced stress levels. The authors argued that the social support that was garnered, by students using humour with peers, was more important for reducing stress than the humour itself.

## Researching social workers' lived experience of professional boundaries

The research method used in this study was interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009). While acknowledging the interpretive lens of the researcher, IPA aims to get as close to the lived experiences of participants as possible (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009). IPA is idiographic in nature, but it also allows researchers to generate theoretical statements across accounts, although cautiously (Smith and Nizza 2022). The researcher's input into the data analysis is acknowledged and valued because they bring different disciplinary and experiential lenses to the process (Oakley, Fenge, and Taylor 2022). Therefore, to understand any nuances within participants' experiences, especially those related to praxis, an insider researcher perspective was beneficial (Finlay 2006; Finlay and Evans 2009). Participants were qualified social workers who were living and working in the UK at the time of the research, and they self-selected for this study after replying to a recruitment poster that was sent to the researcher's professional networks. Participants in this study were interviewed using semi-structured interviews and were interviewed once, for approximately sixty to ninety minutes per interview. To ensure anonymity, each participant is represented by a pseudonym. Whilst the main findings from this study have been reported elsewhere (Blundell in press), this paper reports on the theme of *Humour as a boundary breaker* – that was only relevant to three (out of seven) participants. This paper uses original pseudonyms (i.e. Bill, Fred and Helen) to report these specific findings rather than repeat the pseudonyms used in other reports of this research – this is to add an additional layer of confidentiality for participants.

In this study, participants were asked to detail *their* understanding and experience of professional boundaries which meant that participants ultimately defined what they meant by that term. This exploratory approach meant participants' boundary stories were rich with unique professional boundary examples, ranging from appropriate/inappropriate workplace behaviour through to details of their professional relationships with service users.

There is insufficient space within this paper to reiterate all the themes resulting from this study; however, it is important to consider this paper within the context of the broader study findings. Participants' understanding of, and approach to, boundaries was heavily influenced by the organisation and system within which they worked. These workplaces were often centred around neoliberal principles and values that, ultimately, limited participants' agency when making professional boundary decisions. For a more detailed exploration of this context, see Blundell (in press).

## Positionality

Here, I will outline my positionality at the start of the research process; however, this is expanded on later in the paper to avoid creating a positionality statement that is 'static and hollow' (Folkes 2022, 3). I was in the process of completing my social work training at the start of this study. My experiences during training led me to an interest in professional boundaries, in particular hearing fellow professionals and students refer to boundaries in a variety of ways that indicated inconsistencies across different aspects of practice. I began to explore the social work literature on boundaries and found

some recent work which motivated me to undertake a small qualitative study into professional boundaries as understood and experienced by social workers.

Humour was not the original focus of this study, and so initially I had given little thought into my positionality relating to this topic and how it connects with social work practice. At this point in my career, humour is not something that I had considered as an element of social work practice. I could certainly think of examples of inappropriate humour within the workplace but struggled to recall any positive uses of humour (although I am certain that there will have been some, just that I could not recall them). In previous roles (before training as a social worker) I had been subject to 'humour' that I would consider homophobic, as a gay man I have had occasions when I felt able to challenge this type of humour and other times when I have felt unable to. In contrast, I had greater confidence, even when I was a student social worker, to challenge other people's use of humour, especially when it was used to target groups or individuals. These themes will be explored further within the reflexivity section.

## Findings: humour as a boundary breaker

This study explored the concept of professional boundaries as understood and experienced by social workers in the UK. IPA identified four themes across the participants' accounts (see Blundell in press). However, an additional theme – *Humour as a Boundary Breaker* – was identified by three participants (Bill, Fred and Helen) as an important aspect of their experience of professional boundaries. I found no evidence within the transcripts as to why this theme was important for these participants and not others. The relevance of this theme to participants was only realised after the initial analysis had been completed, and this made it impossible to go back to participants to ask further questions. The theme is split into three subthemes: *Building Relationships, Stress Relief,* and *Where's the boundary?* – these themes are represented in Figure 1.

## Theme 1: building relationships

Humour was cited by participants as an important aspect of their social work practice. Humour helped participants overcome boundaries that could impede effective practice by developing better relationships with service users or colleagues. Central to this aspect of practice was the use of humour to build, develop and shape better connections with service users and their families.

> Sometimes with humour. As I say you use yourself, you use your own skills. I can quite easily communicate with many types of different people, and I can communicate in different ways.

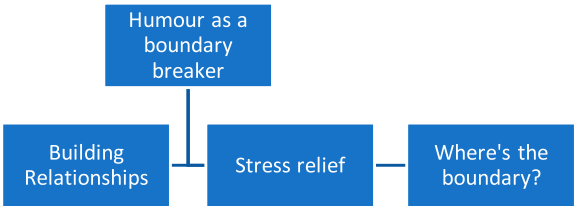


**Figure 1.** Humour as a boundary breaker.

> If someone is coming across as very stern, I can then be very stern and keep that boundary between us on an equal footing. And there again, sometimes you have to use humour in a situation like that I'd say, 'you are asking me to tell you things that I just can't tell you!' and he would see the funny side of the expression in my voice and the words I was using. But he knew that he wasn't going to get any further. (Helen)

However, using humour to foster more effective relationships was not limited to participants' relationships with service users. Participants also identified improved relationships with colleagues and within teams. Fred says, 'it was all really good banter. One of the best teams I have worked for'. For Fred, being the subject of a joke told by his teammates or colleagues meant he felt accepted within the team irrespective of whether those jokes may be viewed as unprofessional from others. In one example, Fred talked about a gift he was given from colleagues that had a picture of him on it that was sexually suggestive. Fred knew this item would be perceived by others as unprofessional and so it remained hidden, but despite hiding it, the item still meant a lot to him (the item and content are redacted for confidentiality reasons).

> But even things like … where I last worked, I have now got a [item] that is a photograph of me at [place] and to me that means a lot but it aint professional. They were saying 'would I take it into … ' and I was like 'well I can't can I'. A [item] with me … it was like 'how inappropriate is this?'. That is so inappropriate and to have that and a [item] and the number of people [name] called [swear word] but it was a like a term of endearment. But if a member of the public or a professional … yes, I could have got pulled for it, yes, I would have had to hold my hands up and it would have come back. (Fred)

Humour was just one way that participants broke or crossed boundaries to build better relationships with colleagues and service users.

## Theme 2: stress relief

Participants identified humour as a means of relieving tension and stress (Fogarty and Elliot 2020; Gilgun and Sharma 2012; Moran and Hughes 2006; Sullivan 2000). As Bill says, 'I think it is like the galley humour' which I understood to refer to the concept of 'gallows humour' (Sullivan 2000). Bill described how he, and other colleagues, were able to release tension through humour, even if this meant service users sometimes being the subject of the joke. Bill acknowledged the inappropriateness of using this type of humour as a social worker and refused to tell me the specifics of any of the jokes that were made. However, some of his comments give an indication of the humour being shared.

> I can actually think of an example, but I am too embarrassed to repeat it, that we were all laughing about. I am talking about men, women, dead inappropriate and we were all laughing our heads off and it is about a case of neglect. And we are not saying that we think that is funny, that that child has been neglected. I think it is just that this job is insane, and we need to blow off a little bit of steam . (Bill)

Using gallows humour, social workers highlight the difference between themselves and service users in terms of status, sanity, intelligence and knowledge (Sullivan 2000) which ultimately is a form of othering (Morriss 2015). Bill assured me that these types of examples would not impact on his work with the service users but were explained away as a form of stress release. Whilst Bill did not make a connection between his use

of humour within the team and burnout within his role, there were other aspects of his interview which indicated that this could have been on his mind. He says,

> … and I went 'this job can make anyone snap'. I have known colleagues who have had breakdowns, Peter, because the pressure is like no other. I haven't had a break for ages, for ages because I am [an] agency [worker] and I live on my own and I have got debt. So, unless I have got something planned, I won't let myself take time off and I am. Because I feel myself about to snap and in this type of job you are dangerous . (Bill)

In this example, Bill indicates the immense level of stress and strain that he and his colleagues were under within their role. All participants in this study highlighted the pressure of neoliberal systems on their management of professional boundaries, for example, understaffing, limited access to resources and services, were all contributory factors to social worker stress (Blundell in press). I am also mindful that 'using humour socially is not always a sign of good coping' (Moran and Hughes 2006, 513). The metaphor of a boiling kettle came to mind when considering each of these interlinking themes. The kettle represents Bill's social work practice and the water inside the available resources to complete his role. However, the pressure of the neoliberal system upon Bill's practice (represented by heat underneath the kettle) kept increasing and therefore continually reducing the resources available for his practice. This required 'letting off steam' to ensure his practice (the kettle) could continue to function and was constantly topped up. Conceptualised in this way, Bill's humour can be seen as an outcome of neoliberal pressures upon his practice, and this helped me to better understand Bill's perspective when using humour. Nevertheless, Bill's use of gallows humour referred to service users and/or his experiences with colleagues and so raises important questions over where the boundary line is drawn when humour is involved; including acknowledgement of the imbalance of power between social workers and their clients, the impact of unaddressed bias and prejudice, and a commitment to anti-oppressive practice – all of which are key social work values (Clifford and Burke 2009).

## Theme 3: where's the boundary?

Bill and Fred both grappled with how they could use humour and remain professional. Participants were willing to use humour as a boundary breaker, however, it was important for them to understand where the boundary line was. This was a challenge for participants and required the evaluation of many different factors. Like social workers in Mik-Meyer's (2007) study, Bill and Fred sometimes gave contradictory reasoning.

> I think it is. But you have got to be very careful because you have people with different views and some people are extremely politically correct. Don't get me wrong, when it comes to racism, it is not acceptable, full stop. Or being homophobic. It is just not acceptable. But having a bit of a laid-back laugh and a joke, I don't have a problem with that. (Bill)

Jordan (2019) explores the relationship between humour and political correctness in social work arguing that 'social work has correctly been concerned with doing the least harmful thing and being sensitive to language' (76). In this regard, Bill reports that he does not subscribe to what he sees as an *extreme* form of political correctness; unfortunately, what Bill means by 'extreme' is not fully explored within the interview. Bill advises that racism and homophobia are unacceptable but says that 'a laid-back laugh

and a joke' is acceptable. If we are to determine where the boundary line is for Bill, with regards to the type of humour he finds acceptable (and what isn't), then we are still left with a vague sense of what that could look like in practice. For Bill, this seems to depend on whether he views the interaction as a joke or whether it has crossed the line into something more serious – this indicates that the boundary line (for Bill) is humour itself (i.e. if what is shared is said for humorous effect then it is acceptable but if it has a more sinister aim then it is not).

Bill could give examples of when he thought colleagues *were* being discriminatory rather than humorous.

> I have worked with people who was clearly a total fascist and a bigot, and nothing got said to her cause she had been there years. And I was like 'take her to another environment and they would sack her on the spot'. That is not ok with me. (Bill)

The concept of political correctness also appears in Fred's interview. He acknowledged that he has often used humour that others would find politically incorrect. 'Totally non pc and again, your professionalism, how un pc are you going to allow it to be. Are you going to tell a black joke, a gay joke, a sexist joke? To me I wouldn't tell a black joke' – Fred. Within his use of 'politically incorrect' humour Fred indicates that a 'black joke' (meaning a joke about race) would be something that would be going too far. In this respect, it is unclear what guiding lines Fred is using to make his decisions about where the boundary lines lie when using humour in the workplace. Part of his process is made clearer in another extract.

> We had a girl who is a lesbian and there was always little jokes about her. There was another lesbian on the team who used to make her own jokes. So, it was like everyone is comfy with that level of joke, but if somebody else heard it … you have got to take into account your audience. And to be honest I would probably let anyone say anything they wanted to me if it was in a joke. (Fred)

Here, Fred indicates various reasonings behind the use of humour within his team. Initially, he refers to the 'little jokes' of one colleague which appears to be acceptable to him because they are considered 'little' which could mean they were used sporadically within the team. In the example that followed, Fred outlines how a colleague would make fun of herself which seemed to offer another layer of acceptability to him (although not completely as he was aware of potential disapproval from others possibly outside of the team). Finally, Fred outlines what he would find acceptable if he was the focus of a joke, and indicates that nothing is really off the table, if it was all said in jest. Fred's examples indicate a process of intuitive evaluation and assessment, by him, to establish, in his mind, the appropriateness of the humour being shared within a specific setting – or the boundaries of those interactions. This process is influenced by his own level of comfort, the person telling the joke and/or the subject's comfort, and the comfort of any observers.

A similar process is echoed in Bill's transcript, as he reflects on the factors that influence his decision around where the boundary lines are.

> I worked with a lot of fellas in the past and it was quite sexually related humour. And I got used to it. I wasn't offended. There was nothing disgusting. I think you have got to fit in. If someone is really pushing it, that is different . (Bill)

Bill's reference to being able to 'fit in' indicates a shifting boundary line that is influenced by the social context within which the humour is being shared.

The idea of a limit or someone 'pushing it' came up repeatedly, an indicator of humour going too far and potentially violating a boundary. Fred indicates what he would do if that line had been crossed – 'So long as it was clear that it was a joke. If it was said nasty then I wouldn't go to a manager, I would just tell them to f off'. Fred's avoidance of any complaints process or system may indicate a preference to deal with any uncomfortable feelings interpersonally rather than organisationally.

## Discussion – humour and professional boundaries

If, as Cooper states, 'humour affects and is affected by power relations' (Cooper 2008, 1091) then humour could play a key role in disrupting the hegemonic notion of professional boundaries (Jordan 2017). It is interesting, then, that there are limited links made between boundaries and humour within the research literature.

Gilgun and Sharma (2012) argue that 'humour [should] be evaluated in terms of the ethical imperative of doing no harm' (560). However, this may be more difficult to evaluate in practice. The examples reported by Gilgun and Sharma in their paper are reported to have caused no harm – but there may be occasions when humour leads to more covert discriminatory practices within teams or with service users. If humour is about the formation of collective identities (Gilgun and Sharma 2011; Mik-Meyer 2007), then it may help build connections, or it may create a process of othering (Cooper 2008; Morriss 2015). If we consider the phenomenology of a joke as described by Critchley (2002), we can understand how this othering process may take place.

> … joking is a specific and meaningful practice that the audience and the joke-teller recognize as such. There is a tacit social contract at work here, namely some agreement about the social world in which we find ourselves as the implicit background to the joke. There has to be a sort of consensus or implicit shared understanding as to what constitutes joking 'for us', as to which linguistic or visual routines are recognized as joking. That is, in order for the incongruity of the joke to be seen as such, there has to be a congruence between joke structure and social structure – no social congruity, no comic incongruity. When this implicit congruence or tacit contract is missing, then laughter will probably not result.

For Critchley (2002) the social contract needs to be in place for a joke to be found humorous between people. Within the dynamic of service user and social worker roles, this social contract is disrupted by the inherent power imbalance within those relationships. For example, Mik-Meyer (2007) argues that when service users do not laugh at jokes made by social workers there is a real risk, within that interaction, that they could be perceived as rejecting the social worker's role in trying to establish a safe and supportive space. This sets those people up as a separate group – they are unwilling to conform – an 'us' and a 'them'. However, the process of othering is just as likely to occur *between* social workers when humour moves beyond any shared social contracts, such as jokes about the social worker role, and moves into more sensitive areas such as jokes about personal characteristics. As Gilgun and Sharma argue, in practice, the viewpoint of those hearing a joke must be fully considered or else rather than cause amusement it could quite easily be viewed as derogatory. Jordan (2017) argues that using humour (especially with service users) is about whether the risk (of offending them) outweighs the benefits (such as building

better relationships). It appears from this research that the assessment of risk from social workers when using humour often comes intuitively rather than through any formal process of evaluation.

According to Longo (2010) 'humour is a critical mode of tacit knowledge making and dissemination that has been relegated to the margins of rational Western scientific inquiry' (113), yet, despite this marginalisation 'humour can be a catalyst for creating knowledge and relaying social meaning, in both hegemonic and transformative ways' (113). Humour, then, could be one of the ways that social workers could move towards a more relationship-based practice when it comes to professional boundary issues (Jordan 2017). This indicates that humour could be a powerful force for social change, especially when 'humour and social work practice share a preoccupation with amplifying those human experiences that occur at the margins' (Longo 2010, 113). However, to harness that potential, humour, and its relationship to social work practice, particularly the impact on professional boundaries, needs more detailed research.

## *Reflexivity*

As a qualitative researcher I want 'to engage continuously with [my] changing positionality and to ensure these observations are weaved into [my] theoretical, methodological and analytical writing' (Folkes 2022, 3). This has been a challenging process. Whilst thinking about writing this paper, I discussed some of the challenges with colleagues – these were informal, supportive spaces that I came to see as a form of 'kitchen table reflexivity' as described by Kohl and McCutcheon (2015). Kitchen table reflexivity 'builds on trends in critical qualitative research in which researchers critically examine positionality, taking into account the situated nature of knowledge and their identities in relation to their research participants' (Kohl and McCutcheon 2015, 751). It is through these discussions that the following points came into focus.

***Preparedness:*** Research preparedness can be an important factor for the success of research undertaken by students (e.g. Shaw, Holbrook, and Bourke 2013). Personally, I found navigating the research process for this study particularly challenging because I felt unprepared to listen to the examples of humour referred to by some participants (Fenge et al. 2019). Initially, I had believed I *was* prepared, at least emotionally, for carrying out this research, I was already an experienced counsellor, as well as some previous (albeit brief) experiences of undertaking qualitative research. However, feelings of unpreparedness were sparked when participants shared some of the examples of humour that they had used within their teams. For example, jokes about fellow staff members who were LGBTQ+, or women of colour, jokes about child neglect, and 'put down' humour about multiple service user groups. I was often conflicted in the moment between my role as researcher (i.e. understanding the participant's lived experience), the values of my social worker role (i.e. challenging or questioning the potential impact of these examples of humour on others), and my own personal wellbeing (e.g. memories of my own experiences of homophobia being triggered).

***Positionality:*** 'Positionality … involves negotiation of insider–outsider perspectives linked to the researchers' relationship to the specific topic or community and where they locate themselves on this continuum' (Fenge et al. 2019, 5). This can be a challenging endeavour and can be further complicated when the research topic (in this case

professional boundaries) and/or the community (i.e. qualified and practising social workers) are connected to service user groups that require researcher sensitivity. In this study, I was mindful that through my role as a researcher, who interprets and represents data, that I need to consider which voices are being represented and heard (Fenge et al. 2019). This issue arose in different ways, for example, the topic of child neglect as a topic of humour within a child protection team cannot, in my view, be considered 'neutrally'.

This study was approached phenomenologically which means it was important to capture lived experiences as it is directly experienced by the person experiencing it (Finlay 2011). However, this study was also interpretative and therefore my positionality as an insider researcher (because I am also a social worker) is important to recognise and acknowledge as an influence on the interpretation of the data analysis (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009). Some authors have drawn comparison between researchers and social workers when trying to develop an approach to reflexivity that also includes aspects of social justice (Fenge et al. 2019; Nash 2011). Whilst much can be learnt from the way that social workers (and indeed other professions such as counsellors/psychotherapists) use reflexivity to inform decision-making (Clifford and Burke 2009) there are also challenges to approaching researcher reflexivity in this way, such as being able to honestly reflect the participant's voice within the research process (Silvario, Wilkinson, and Wilkinson 2021). Ultimately, positionality is about identity, therefore, researchers, who are also professionals, such as social workers or therapists, also need to consider the personal and professional aspects of their identity that could impact on their research and the research process. For me, understanding my positionality as an insider and an outsider researcher (Fenge et al. 2019) was particularly challenging because those roles and identities were interconnected and intersectional (Clifford and Burke 2009; Silvario, Wilkinson, and Wilkinson 2021).

There was an emotional impact on me that was complicated by my intersectional insider/outsider status in relation to the examples of humour being shared (i.e. whether I shared characteristics of the person or group who was the subject of the joke). As an outsider (for example when there were references to racist or misogynistic humour), I felt guilty for not challenging participants who had used them. Listening to those experiences without challenging them often felt like I was complicit in those events, even though I also knew I was there as a researcher to try and understand the participants' perspective. This inaction conflicted with how I would usually respond in a social work scenario where I would often challenge prejudicial or discriminatory language. In contrast, as an insider (i.e. someone who has experienced homophobia through 'humour'), I would have memories of my own experience of homophobia triggered and be required to manage and process these experiences. The moments when I felt most uncomfortable during the research process was listening to examples of humour that were a result of mocking the personal characteristics of others. I was taken back by the level of honesty shared within the interviews. Often, these insider/outsider perspectives were happening simultaneously within a specific moment or interaction with a participant, whilst I was also trying to manage the interview process.

***Social justice:*** My intersectional insider/outsider status in relation to the theme of humour meant I was often confronted with ethical decisions about how to respond to the examples of humour being shared. In other scenarios (even as a student social

worker), I have been able to challenge and 'call out' prejudiced behaviour. As a student social worker, I had regularly challenged others over any potentially discriminatory language or behaviour. This was often advocating on behalf of another person or group: I wonder whether in some ways that this made it easier. I could see it as part of my job role and important for supporting service users who may be more vulnerable than I. It came as a surprise to me, then, to feel paralysed when faced with examples of discriminatory humour within social work teams.

McDermott (1996) describes one of the key principles of social work research as an activity that leads to social change. In this regard, I wondered about where social change could happen because of this research. By challenging the participant there may have been an opportunity for them to change their behaviour within their practice. Alternatively, I wondered if challenging participants would have shut down other aspects of the research interview or lost some of the depth of what was being shared. Ultimately, I hope social change is more likely to happen on a bigger scale, if we can instead use the research process to examine these issues of prejudice and discrimination. Therefore, this paper could contribute to broader social change through the reporting of participants' experiences and placing it within a broader theoretical context, including my reflections and reactions to it. Oakley, Fenge, and Taylor (2022) argue that a risk with socially sensitive research is that researchers may feel the need to be 'heroes' when specific issues of power and privilege arise, rather than be able to reflect honestly about their experiences. For me, this tension to do the 'right thing' has had an emotional impact: at the time of the interviews, during transcribing the interviews, writing up the research and even when I have revisited this research to write up this paper.

## Summary

This paper has reported on a qualitative study that explored how UK social workers understand and experience professional boundaries within their practice. A single theme – Humour as a boundary breaker – has been explored in detail. Three participants (Bill, Fred and Helen) identified humour as an important aspect of their practice when navigating professional boundary issues, including using humour to break boundaries and to foster better relationships between social workers and service users, and between social workers and colleagues. Humour was also used as a form of stress release for some participants when navigating neoliberal organisations and systems. Identifying the parameters of when humour was socially and professionally acceptable in the workplace was difficult for participants, and most approached this endeavour intuitively. Humour, and its relationship with professional boundaries, is an under researched aspect of social work practice, and this paper recommends further research into social workers' and service users' boundary stories and narratives to further understand this phenomenon. Future research could also examine why some social workers employ humour as part of their practice and others do not.

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