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The functions of collegial humour in male-only sporting interactions

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Abstract

This article examines the functions of collegial humour in male-only interactions in a suburban Dublin sports club. The analysis highlights how humour is a central part of the social glue of the club, the solidarity invoked in humour helps to keep teams working together in a friendly way. Despite all speakers coming from similar backgrounds and engaging in shared enterprises together, members regularly engage in status and hierarchy work. While jovial face threatening acts, or 'slags', are often performed in a mischievous way to create a bit of fun and express solidarity, other purposes include hierarchy-maintenance and one-upmanship. Members value the inventiveness involved in sharing and collaborating on humour. Speakers in this context are quick to perform the "real man" persona in training in order to command respect and communicate important messages. This type of humour is an important politeness strategy to mitigate the face threatening nature of the constructive criticism that leaders of the club teams employ. Spending time at the club is a release for the members and an expression of solidarity amongst male peers, closeness in homosocial settings but also a performance of normative masculinity that is not generally appropriate in other contexts such as the workplace.

Keywords

Collegial humour, language and gender, normative masculinity, solidarity, sociopragmatics, sport

1 Introduction

While social and emotional skills are critical for development in society (e.g. OECD, 2021), how relationships are cultivated in home, school, work and community contexts, amongst others, may differ greatly. Similar to stereotypes present in other parts of the world, Irish masculinities have been largely and traditionally been represented as normative or cisgender (Holohan & Tracy, 2014), with indexes to assertive behaviour (Negra, 2014). This paper examines collegial, solidarity-based humour used in male-only interactions in a suburban Dublin sports club. Discourse analysis-informed interpretations of interactions examine how men express closeness in homosocial settings. This article illustrates how using particular types of humour are one way to "do" masculinity in both Irish society and homosocial settings.

This article is based on an ethnography conducted in a suburban Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) club, and examines how interactional identities are performed in male-only settings, through participant observation in a variety of contexts, semi-guided interviews and recordings of selected

interactions. The analysis interprets how actions were accomplished to implicate certain identities in talk, before summarising the possible functions of humour in interaction. I first overview humour in sporting contexts. Section three presents and interprets collegial humour data from Club Fingal (a pseudonym), leading into a final discussion regarding how such humour is a central interactional strategy in such settings.

2 The functions of humour in sports settings

This section situates the study by exploring the functions of humour and how they relate to both normative masculinity and sporting discourse.

2.1 *Functions of humour*

Humour can take on the function of identity display and relational identity development (Boxer, 2002; Tsakona & Chovanec, 2008). For example, Holmes & Marra (2002a) show how young Māori speakers can linguistically signal ethnic solidarity and identity ('well that's *hoohaa*: paperwork eh') by making fun of bureaucracy in New Zealand, with the choice of the very Māori term *hoohaa* ('boring, pesky'). The study of humour can deal with issues such as how speakers can linguistically signal solidarity, or why a certain type language is more or less acceptable. Different groups of people develop different ways of doing humour (Schnurr & Chan, 2009, p. 151): not only the amount of humour differs, but also the ways in which humour is used. Similarities and differences in humour are thought to derive from the setting and society in which the communication and humour is performed (Richards, 2006, pp. 95–6). By foregrounding certain stances and attitudes, humour can indirectly align or disassociate an individual to/from a specific social group (i.e. the tactics of distinction and authentication, see Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 586).

Hay (2000) lists other possible functions of humour in daily conversations: to create solidarity (to share, to highlight similarities or shared experiences, to clarify and maintain boundaries, and to tease); to maintain or create power (fostering conflict, controlling, teasing and creating boundaries), and to achieve psychological functions (includes to defend and to cope with a problem). While humour can express solidarity, it may also involve constructing a position of respect and status within a group (*ibid*, p.716). Vaughan (2008, p. 96) notes that humour builds, maintains, and more specifically, highlights relationships.

Men have traditionally been considered to be more aggressive in their speech mannerisms. This is displayed in more confrontational linguistic strategies that foster conflict rather than consensus (Cameron, 1992). In Ireland, this confrontational manner is combined with an indirect tendency. It is necessary to read between the lines, in order to interpret the underlying message being delivered in speech. While indirectness is characteristic of Irish English, the level of face threat will often differ, depending on the context. In mixed company men will tend to be more reserved, in comparison to male-only settings (e.g. dressing rooms) where speech will tend to be cruder, more direct (e.g. Lampert & Ervin-Tripp, 2006) and more status-oriented.

Authority may be asserted in different ways by different groups. It has been claimed that people of perceived superior status tell jokes 'down' to their inferiors, while the members of lower status in hierarchical organizations refrain from telling jokes 'up' (Fine, 1990). Joking is often considered a salient feature of male language, while polite language, and avoidance of overt aggression, is more often attributed to women (Kothoff, 2006). A study of joking communication by male youths in sports clubs found that American 'lower-middle class' boys regularly indulged in obscene and aggressive humour. For example, boys were ridiculed for having a relationship with a girl the group leader found unattractive (Fine, 1990). The boys' jokes reproduced the vertical

hierarchical structure of the group. The young big shots rudely amused themselves at the expense of the 'low men' in the group hierarchy.

Kuiper (1991) challenged the idea that that polite strategies for the creation of solidarity are essentially female, detailing the nature of the solidarity created by joke insults. His proposition that male solidarity created in this way has no dark side is still open for discussion. Jocular mockery and abuse possibly reflect values of "not taking yourself too seriously" (Haugh & Bousfield, 2012, p. 1112), and can fulfil the function of strengthening and confirming the social bonds of friendship. Plester's investigation of workplaces (2016) found such edgy humour can contain connotations of domination and control, with "safer" options generally preferred over risqué humour.

One of the great advantages of joking, as opposed to being serious, is the ability to communicate implicit meanings (Boxer, 2002). The adolescents studied by Fine (1990), for example, signaled familiarity and a certain sense of belonging through humour, even in their aggressiveness towards out-groups. Societal stereotypes suggest a male, aggressive type of humour continues after youth: this research examines this in Irish or male-only contexts. An important issue is to examine how certain groups and individuals assert authority etc. through language. This requires a nuanced data collection and analytical framework. Personal notes and small corpora, which make up the majority of the data above, are no substitute for the in-depth ethnographic analysis needed in order to understand the complex relationships that unite discourse, language and culture in doing politeness work in Ireland (Kallen, 2005a, p. 142). This is part of the reason why I investigated a male-only setting, a setting where I felt more sociolinguistic work is required, particularly in terms of gender and humour.

2.2 *Sporting studies and normative masculinity*

There is room for more research on the specific linguistic strategies normative males deploy in order to construct their identities as tough (or otherwise), or how language conveys these indexical meanings (e.g. Kiesling, 2001; Lawson, 2013). In this context, verbal abuse does indeed provide males with a more developed sense of "linguistic power" over others, used as a weapon for the defence of masculine identity (*ibid*, p.370). Language – and specifically humour – is often a central part of this process. Humour is used in Club Fingal to communicate implicit meanings, with direct claims to hierarchical relationships. Such issues, although salient in popular consciousness, have received little attention in the linguistic literature. Humour is central to the negotiation of masculine identities in this sports club context. Nuanced analysis of the powerful, multifunctional pragmatic resource of humour creates a better understanding of the social and interactional functions of linguistic variation. Friendly arguments exemplify the layered complexity of interactional strategies: beyond the mock chest-thumping there are creative and fun elements which must be appreciated. Such face-threatening behaviour is only really attempted if the speakers know each other well: this type of humour signals closeness or familiarity. These types of insights can be identified by detailed discourse analysis: I suggest and highlight the future possibilities of ethnographically-informed analysis in other corpora. Furthermore, the sociolinguistics of sport (e.g. Caldwell, Walsh, Vine & Jureidini, 2017; Wilson & File, 2018) is a fertile area for further studies exploring identity construction through language.

Masculine toughness – "take-charge behaviour" – has always been evident in society throughout history but is open to change and serves particular functions in society (Toerien & Durrheim, 2001, p. 42). Sports settings provide a homosocial environment, where males have a reason to get together and engage with each other (Hartmann, 2003). In such an environment, masculine values – learning to be "a man", male bonding, male authority and the like – appear normal and natural. Without seeming to be doing anything more than kicking a ball or watching a Sunday afternoon game, men are engaging with these values and male identities. Males are attracted to sports

that require physical strength. McGuirk (2014) argues that 'standing up like a man' is seen as part of 'who we are and how we are made'. Possible functions of sport include defining and reinforcing traditional conceptions of masculinity (e.g. aggression, competitiveness, emotional restraint, toughness, physical dominance), establishing status among other males, and providing a context for male bonding (Griffin, 1993).

Modern sports can be construed as a celebrated version of masculinity, and thereby possibly serving as sites for the construction of gender difference (Theberge, 2000). Gender studies suggest many men may yearn to perform and validate their masculinity through aggressive, dominant and emotionally repressed behaviour (Whitehead & Barrett, 2001, p. 6), but this behaviour is stigmatized with widespread social and cultural disapproval of traditional displays of masculinity in modern times. Meinhof & Johnson (1997, p. 1) highlight contradictions: behaviour characterised as male (sexual and physical assertiveness, competitiveness, aggression) and internalized notions of idealized media images of heroic men do not match lived practices and men's hidden feelings of fear, insecurity, and uncertainty, for example. Masculine power is often exercised through a process of identity work, one consequence of which is to validate ways of being male or masculine in particular cultural settings (Whitehead & Barrett, 2001, pp. 7, 17). Traditional masculinities (laddish culture) and associated values prevail in many cultural settings (e.g. Cameron, 1997). As stereotypical "macho man" behaviour is not sanctioned in many modern contexts like modern families and workplaces, research into settings like male-only sport teams can shine a light on one of the final bastions of masculinity.

This article seeks to understand how aggressive, competitive status moves are used in the club. This counteracts to the claim that hierarchical moves are often avoided in Ireland (Kallen, 2005b), with confrontation not welcomed in work and home life. Members of the club all share very similar social backgrounds: the evidence presented here finds that these sociopragmatic strategies index the performance of a tough interactional identity. The club – the context of male-only team activities in particular – is maybe one of the only places where members can perform an aggressively challenging type of normative masculinity without causing major offence. It is critical, however, to take into account the several functions that are evident in instances of humour. The shared activity of sports provides a homosocial space to provide instructive examples of how men manage interactional familiarity and closeness (Migliaccio, 2009, p. 226; Oliffe & Thorne, 2007, p. 150; Cleary, 2012; Darcy, 2018; Wilson, 2018). This sociolinguistic study of a sporting context illustrates the complex nature of social practices and linguistic variation. Many performances of a normative type of masculinity in Club Fingal feature one-upmanship and contestation of power or authority, while also simultaneously being open to other interpretations. Solidarity-related functions are an important part of the social "glue" of the club; humour is a pragmatic strategy (Holmes & King, 2017, p. 134) employed to create and maintain good collegial relations.

3 Collecting data in Club Fingal

Club Fingal is part of the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), a nationwide organization built around local community networks, which primarily focus on the playing of Gaelic Football and Hurling. The club is a major social institution in the local area, foregrounding community involvement through the playing of games and activities in its social centre. The adult members who participated in this study are members of one of the 65 club teams. The loyalties and friendship groupings formed through involvement with the club are a large part of the attraction of the GAA and the club in question (see O'Dwyer, 2020, chapter 2, for more details), creating a sense of community and identity for many in Dublin.

During my fieldwork, I interacted with club members in different capacities: as a friend, a player, a parent of a player, a spectator, and a general club member socialising during club activities

(e.g. watching a game or enjoying a casual drink in the club bar). I 'blended in' (i.e. did what other members generally did before, during and after training) with club practices and observed. The principal form of observation was participating in training sessions with two club teams over the course of four years. These training sessions typically lasted for 90 minutes of drills and practice matches, with fifteen to thirty players.

Other observations include observing training sessions and matches of teams in the club grounds, as well as travelling to, attending and observing club matches in other locations. These games generally involved the teams I trained with, with some games of other club teams. I often accompanied the team members when they socialized together after the games or training sessions in the club bar or in nearby pubs. At all times during, before and after these matches and training sessions I engaged socially with members of the teams, in a relatively natural way. Our relationship was that of a team- or club-mate. In this way, these informal interactions allowed me to develop rapport with participants. This was often a case of redeveloping rapport, as I knew the members from previous interactions. This long-term participant observation—doing things that everyone else does, while trying to stay aware of what is going on (Malinowski, 1961 [1922]; Milroy & Gordon, 2003, p. 75)—made it possible to develop a deep understanding of interactions that might otherwise be inaccessible to outsiders (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 1995). Language identity issues were explored in Club Fingal through participant observation in a variety of contexts (training sessions, matches, social activities in the club bar etc.), and approximately 10 hours of recordings (= free recording data) of interactions during games and social occasions.

Initial stages of the ethnography involved creating extensive field notes on interactions, with background and interpretative information focussing on communication strategies adopted, and types of humour employed. I made these notes on my phone as soon as possible after interactions, and transferring to more detailed notes and transcriptions (from memory, by adding to phone notes) on a computer on returning home. The principal reason for adopting this strategy was that I felt that the players would not have engaged in such humour if the interaction was being recorded. However, to address possible concerns, I also recorded interactions where salient humour was likely to be employed. Free recording data is analyzed in this chapter alongside transcriptions and ethnographic fieldnotes: interpretations of interactions from memory made while conducting participant observation in the clubⁱ. Excerpts 1, 2 and 3 below feature such data. While the transcriptions of the interactions may not be as reliable as transcriptions made from recorded data, I am confident that the interactional and pragmatic content of the speech is a realistic and authentic presentation of the communications observed. Excerpt 4 features recorded data of interactions during a game. All the interactions analyzed below were selected as they were representative of sociopragmatics strategies and humour typically employed in Club Fingal. While these examples have been analysed in detail elsewhere (O'Dwyer, 2020, chapter 5), the following analysis overviews the interactions before focusing on the central issues of this chapter (i.e. humour contributing to the social cohesiveness in the club).

4 Collegial humour in Club Fingal

The analytical framework employed in this article first characterizes the actions in an interaction, and how speakers perform communicative actions (such as the direction, orientation and organization of jokes: Richards, 2006, pp. 95–6), aiming to highlight the nature of joking (e.g. 'biting', 'nipping', 'bonding': Boxer & Cortés-Conde, 1997, pp. 276, 279), and face concerns in terms of politeness strategies (Brown & Levinson, 1978). Analysis then interprets how actions were accomplished to implicate interactional identities (Van Dijk, 1997, p. 71; Richards, 2006, pp. 95–6), and other roles, relationships etc., before highlighting the functions of humour in this context. I present and interpret five representative examples of the humour below.

4.1 *Ice bucket challenge*

The first example I analyze (Excerpt 1 below) occurred after a football training session in August 2014, with the "lads" enjoying a bit of "craic" (an Irish word for fun, enjoyment, general banter and good times: Dolan, 2006, p. 64) after the serious endeavour of training. I was in the dressing room about to change, when Drag skips in after training, "come out Ferg and have a bit of a laugh". I stepped out toward the end of the four-metre-wide outdoor corridor that is formed by a perimeter fence surrounding the terrace viewing area and all-weather pitch, and the external wall of the sports complex that features entrance to six dressing rooms. Dragⁱⁱ (who is senior player), his older brother Lucky (who is a manager, and well-established in the club), Free (a long-term manager, who is highest in perceived hierarchy), and Ice (a player who has recently returned from being abroad) are sitting on chairs with a large bucket of ice and several smaller buckets of ice alongside, waiting to face the Ice Bucket challengeⁱⁱⁱ. Lucky, Free and Ice are jovially arguing who should go first.

Excerpt 1 – The footballers are preparing for the 'ice bucket challenge'^{iv}

1 Lucky: No no Free youre the main man here so you should have
 2 the right to go first
 3 Free: Age before beauty
 4 Lucky: Age or beauty has nothing to do with it
 5 Its seniority
 6 Ice: Yeah plus youre a lot bigger than us
 7 You need more ice
 8 Free: That means I should go last cos we want to make sure
 9 there is enough ice left for you lads
 10 I dont want be too greedy
 11 {Gap in interaction where the ice bucket challenge takes place}
 12 Free: Now didnt I tell you it was a good idea for ye to go
 13 first
 14 Lucky: I think Ice made the biggest impression in all
 15 fairness
 16 Drag: How come it was I who had the balls to go first
 17 Lucky: You were only a warm-up act=
 18 Free: =Yeah meself and Ice were the main actors
 19 Did you not see how the bigger crowd gathered toward
 20 the end
 21 Lucky: I think that was to watch Ice trying to swim over to
 22 the all-weather pitch
 23 Drag: Maybe he was trying to swim down to Limerick=
 24 Lucky: =Or Korea
 25 Free: Sure he might as well as swim there, as he wasnt
 26 doing much good training on it this evening
 27 Ice: I scored a couple of goals out there
 28 Lucky: I am sure you did (2.0) and that they let you away
 29 with a few things

It is not possible to provide coherent transcriptions of the chaotic and lengthy interactions that followed, but the following ethnographic fieldnotes explains events that occurred after line 29.

Fieldnote 1

The negotiations went on for a good time before Drag agreed to go (i.e. throw the ice over his head) first, commenting "there is nothing straightforward around here is there?". The ice bucket challenge started with the participant thanking the person who challenged them, and then challenging three of their friends. All four had been challenged by members of the team directly above them in the hierarchy of the club (i.e., mentors of a team nominated a player of their team). It was noticeable that they then, in turn, all nominated, for the most part, either members of the team they were involved with, or members of other teams who were also their close friends. When nominating other teammates, they threw in a slight dig or bite. For example, Lucky nominated Neutral, adding "This is in return for all the messing and skiving off you have been doing at training"; Drag nominated a teammate adding "the ice might make you move faster than any time we've seen you running on the pitch!".

The usual and expected yelps and cries greeted the reception of the iced water (the reason for the challenge itself was to raise awareness by emphasizing the reaction of those who suffer from motor neuron disease). Ice was the last to take a challenge, and quite a crowd had gathered to watch. A large puddle of iced water had gathered in a shallow valley of the uneven car park. After receiving the water, he hopped down into the puddle and started making swimming motions while realizing a ridiculous "aaaagghh" noise. I interpreted this as an indication to that audience that this was a time to release a bit of pressure. It can also be considered as a sign of manliness, and staunchness that Ice was well able to take physical punishment and withstand extreme conditions. Ice then proudly declares: "I can take it all, I am a demon for punishment!". "Go on the Ice!" several of the audience remarked as an encouraging acknowledgement. After tidying up, we all went into shower, and engaged in more banter. During the next 10 minutes, there was a relatively high level of tension and humour in the dressing room. There were several threads running through the banter, threads going back to wise cracks, slagging and reactions during the ice bucket challenge (see lines 12–29).

These interactions are a microcosm of the social life of the club. Members link up to each other via the ice bucket challenge, which reaffirms the social network connections. Humour is an important part of the connections, and how they are created. Rather than expressing clear emotions (e.g. "I appreciate you and want to challenge you to the ice bucket challenge"), members often use humour to put forward the challenge (e.g. "the ice might make you move faster than any time we've seen you running on the pitch!"). Considering the indirect nature of much of discourse in Ireland, the great advantage of joking is the ability to communicate implicit meanings (Boxer, 2002). This excerpt also exemplifies one-way males' express closeness in homosocial settings: often through light-hearted joking.

One underlying communicative purpose is to release tension: to 'act the maggot', (=behave in a foolishly playful way) and to have a bit of fun with teammates. Participation in such activities enhances solidarity amongst club members. It is also important to note how those in perceived authority (Drag, Lucky, Free) were quick to establish their position by slagging Ice (lines 21–26), a player rather than one involved in managing teams, after the event. Though Ice was quick to respond (line 28), the humour replicates the perceived hierarchy. The speakers in positions of authority align with traditional masculine identity through performances of aggression, and competitiveness to establish status among other males (Griffin, 1993). It must be noted that this is one of the several functions that humour simultaneously fulfilled in this excerpt: alongside power moves by managers there are elements of expressing solidarity, and also "having the craic": see O'Dwyer (2020, chapter 5) for more discussion of the multifunctionality of humour in this case. Analysis must be attentive to the various functions to be interpreted in any interaction. While jovial face threatening acts, or 'slags',

are often performed in a mischievous way to create a bit of fun and express solidarity, other purposes include hierarchy–maintenance and one–upmanship.

4.2 "Ye turned up!"

Excerpt 2 is another example of how two club members – Box and Lucky – enjoy the craic together, but also manage to illuminate hierarchical relationships. Lucky first provided guidance to the players, and gently encouraging them to follow his guidance (Excerpt 2, lines 1–4). His position is that of a serious leader, who expects players to be cognisant of their performance while training. Constructive criticism is encouraged and valued. This is the last of the contributions from the management team for this session: it is customary to finish the training session with some sort of comment, for example an assessment of the training performance, advice about what to improve, or simply signposting of future activities. As is common when this serious comment is finished, somebody will inject humour into proceedings, in order to break the ice or tension, and also to segue toward the time after training – i.e. it is a type of conversational boundary marker, see Aijmer (2002, p. 42) and Holmes & Marra (2002b) – where people can release some 'steam' or tension by casually chatting, engaging in banter, or talk about something that is on their mind with their team mates.

Fieldnote 2

These two characters have been playing with the club since childhood, and together on teams for over 10 years. They are very familiar with each other, and this is evident from the jovial slagging, but competitive dynamic found in this extract. From observation of the training sessions this season (2014), it was customary for these two to engage in slagging, often in an effort to create a good atmosphere by enjoying a bit of fun.

Lucky is a mentor of the team and leads a lot of the drills in training sessions. He expects a serious attitude, commitment and earnest effort during training. If his expectations are not being met, he is quick to admonish players both individually and as a group. This is a very good example of how Lucky is wary of not being overbearing and brings a fun element into the equation by introducing humour into proceedings (line 6, and then continuing on in line 8–9).

Excerpt 2 – Lucky is wrapping up a football training session

1 Lucky: Lads I have been saying it and will keep saying it
 2 Be thinking when you train
 3 After every training you have to think of one thing
 4 you done well and one thing you need to improve that
 5 youre not doing so well
 6 Box what did you do well?=
 7 Box: =I turned up=
 8 Lucky: =Ye turned up good man
 9 And what did you do not so well
 10 Ye turned up
 11 {Laughter from players}
 12 Player A: This is like an ongoing lovers tiff

Excerpt 2 is a good example of the use of humour as a conversational boundary marker to transition from serious training issues to less serious topics. In this case Lucky was the one who signals the transition of speech activity by starting banter with Box. In line 6 "what did you do

well?", the other teammates can tell by the pitch (slightly raised) and intonation (raised at end of "do well") that slagging had started. Box was quick to reply, within milliseconds, with his humorous and self-deprecating reply "I turned up!" (line 7). Not to be outdone, Lucky was quick to first acknowledge the humour, and turn it back with the next question "And what did you do not so well?" (line 9). Lucky did not give his friend and teammate time to reply but replied for him with the ironic mock "Ye turned up!" (line 10). On face value, this parallelistic mocking comment infers that it was a mistake for Box to turn up, as he does not contribute anything to the enterprise. This type of nimble wit is something that is expected of players in the team and club. The reason I chose to analyse this particular interaction was that I feel it is a representative example of male-only interactions in Club Fingal, and many other similar contexts in Irish society. It is a display of a "real man" who does not take insults lightly, or easily gives in to people. Furthermore, this type of banter, is generally considered by club members to be "harmless" and without malice and part of the enjoyment for players involved in the team. These two individuals regularly engaged in such interactions, the interjection by another player "This is like an ongoing lovers tiff!" (line 11) acknowledges this, by stating that as the two engage in slagging matches habitually, they are very similar to two lovers nipping at each other. The main purposes here are to have a laugh, release tension and distract from the seriousness of training. There are also other important considerations.

Lucky is very authoritative while taking the training session, encouraging lads to be thinking while playing. To counter this sense of serious engagement, there is also an encouragement to have a sense of fun while training. On a general level, the use of humour about players reflecting on their performance mitigates criticism and admitting wrong, which are serious face-threatening acts (FTAs) in Irish society. These two leaders signal in admonishments when training performance expectations are, or are not, being met. But they also signal when such concerns can be forgotten, and players can let their guard down, to have a "bit of craic". This term, "bit of craic", is often produced by interviewees in relation to why they continue to engage with the club; or when reminiscing on their cherished memories of the club. Many mentioned that if it wasn't possible to "have the craic", participation on the team would not be worthwhile. Furthermore, players in conversation with the researcher have mentioned these two individuals by name as "lads" who created a good atmosphere in the club and teams, and the reason why the players enjoy the club activities. To exemplify I paraphrase one comment from a player who was 'audience' to Excerpt 2: "It is lads like these who create the good atmosphere in teams, and the reason why a lot of the lads feel comfortable in the teams and continue to play".

After the serious business of training is done, Lucky and Box engaged in a bit of slagging, and the team as a whole continue back home, with the message in their head – I should think about a few things (things done well, things to improve) – but also a positive atmosphere indexed to training as a result of such interactions. The two main characters, Box and Lucky, were quick to perform the "real man" persona in training in order to command respect and communicate important messages, but often use humour to mitigate the face-threatening nature of these messages.

Another point to note is that the direction of the humour (the leader Lucky mocking Box, who is lower in the perceived hierarchy) reproduces the hierarchy within the team. Box is not afraid to challenge this hierarchy but is often happy to let such slights go in order to have the craic. Lucky would probably accept such a mocking if it was in the other direction (and reply, giving as good as he got), but in the four years observing interactions in the club, I can say that such mocking of mentors is rare, at least in direct communication (they may tease absent others). The humour in this interaction is representative of a lot of humour found in the club: reproducing perceived hierarchies, with mocking talk downward-directed and hierarchy-maintaining. This type of interaction is labelled "harmless" in Irish society, there are nevertheless underlying messages which speakers indicate. Furthermore, where a player interjects about the "ongoing lovers tiff" in line 11, this comment emphasizes the familiarity and solidarity of being involved with the team. Participation in the joint exercise has led to development of such slagging relationships as part of the social glue

that keeps teams coherently working together in a friendly and constructive way. In addition, this interaction further shows how wittiness is expected in such contexts.

4.3 *Mother's Day*

While the solidarity-building role is important, there is also the related identity work of clarifying and maintaining boundaries (Hay, 2000, pp. 719–20) between club members and others, for example. I now outline an example of how “lads” adopt a collegial, solidarity-based interactional identity by positioning club members in an in-group. I began talking to some lads while showering and changing after training in March 2014: we generally found it easy to connect when we find a good topic. The chatting in the dressing room led to casual joking about Mother's Day, which was to fall on the following Sunday. The Dublin team were also playing a hurling match in Waterford that day. The following comments were made in quick succession:

Player 1: "Just thinking now the plans for the mother on Sunday, it goes like this: I'll bring you down to Waterford"

Player 2: "Buy you a blah [a type of bread, which is a Waterford speciality]

Player 3: "and a cup of soup"

Player 1: "that will go down well".

We went quiet after enjoying the laugh together, and we moved out. All present are contributing to the joke (i.e. a collaborative style of humour, see Holmes, 2014), highlighting their solidarity, and ease with each other to create a laugh out of nothing. From observations and answers to my questions regarding this matter, it is considered natural for lads in the club to fall into a joking relationship, and just casually joke about upcoming life events, thereby finding common ground. Here you can see how they position themselves as GAA people, who are more interested in going to support Dublin hurlers all the way down in Waterford than treating their own mother to a Mother's Day treat (that she really wants, as opposed to something the sons want!). "Mammy" is an important authority figure in Irish imagination (Sweeney, 2017). Collaboratively challenging this authority creates solidarity amongst the “lads”, and also is a performance of a tough guy persona: prioritizing their own interest above that of others. Ultimately the humour employed forms a central part of the social glue of the club that keeps teams working together in a friendly way, with members valuing the inventiveness involved in sharing and collaborating on humour.

4.4 *"I'll take the two of youse on in a snowball fight!"*

Excerpt 3 below is another example of how spending time "down" at the club can be a release for the members. Fieldnote 3 below sets the scene and provides background to the interaction found in excerpt 3.

Fieldnote 3

Combination and I are walking along the four-metre-wide outdoor corridor, having just exited a dressing room, after casually chatting with Free and Jaysus while showering and changing after a training session. There is no one else present, all that can be seen is a thick blanket of snow that has started falling on the ground, which was covered with a 6-centimetre layer of snow that morning, and various shapes of snowmen that had been built by young club members earlier that day. The serenity of the scene is broken by a sharp roar, as Free bursts out of the dressing room completely naked: "Come on yez

bastards, I'll take the two of youse on in a snowball fight!". The distance of ten metres allowed a good flurry of snowballs amid yelps and screams. Jaysus didn't bother coming out as he considered it was too cold. After a minute or so, Combination enquires "Are you right in the head?", to which Free begins to howl at the moon. We start off for the car, and Free quickly enters the dressing room. We get in the car and chat first about Free. Combination said "He is a bit mad, but he has been playing down the club for years, and is always a good man to chat with, or just generally have the craic with. He has helped out a lot with adult teams and does still a good lot with the nursery and juvenile teams." He went on to recount some tales of trips away, tricks Free has played on people, and also some memorable slags. Combination then goes on to detail how Club Fingal "is a great club. It kept me going while I was unemployed...it was something to look forward to during the day. I'd be down an hour before training starts and spend an hour after chatting with the lads or whatever. I would have been lost without that."

I went back to Japan (where I was living at the time) the next day, with my next visit over four months later. After the first training session in the summer, I find myself in the dressing room with Free and Jaysus. A lull in the casual conversation is broken by Jaysus.

Excerpt 3 – Some of the hurlers gather in dressing room after training

- 1Jaysus: Jaysus the last time I was talking to you ye must
 2 have been when Free was howling at the moon in the
 3 snow
 4FOD: Yeah I was thinking about that we should have lulled
 5 Free further away from the dressing room so you had
 6 time to fully lock him out of the dressing room
 7Jaysus: Yeah I was thinking that myself
 8Free: If you were that smart you would have been talking
 9 about it
 10 Im too quick for ye lot
 11Jaysus: Ye mean youre too mad for us ye mean
 12Free: Mad quick its all the same
 13Jaysus: How is it the same
 14Free: If you were any way clever you could work it out
 15 yourself

This interaction was broken up by the team manager asking for some help after line 15. This excerpt exemplifies how the club, after the relatively serious business of training is over, is a place to release pressure from the stress of everyday life for members of the club, with humour and play acting fulfilling an important role. Engaging in snowball fights while naked, and later howling at the moon, is an extreme example but it clearly shows how concerns of everyday life and respectability can be dropped, amongst people who you trust. The performance of a "tough" man persona can cause unhelpful conflict in many other contexts like domestic settings and the workplace. The dressing room in the club is one of the few contexts where naked snowball fighting is generally acceptable behavior! This excerpt also exemplifies the interactional functions of creating common ground through banter, and in my case acknowledging I have been absent, and creating belonging despite being away.

It is humorous instances like these (naked snowball fights) that members of the club, when socialising, refer back to again and again. From observation, I can say that this incident alone has been referred to over ten times in the one year since the incident, even by people who were not there at the time. It becomes a running joke, and when people are reminiscing about the year they have just enjoyed with the team, it is times like these they refer to. When there is a lull in conversation it is

often that they refer to these times to fill the gaps. These running jokes, conversation and shared experiences are the means by which members of the teams can express and reify their solidarity.

As I finished chatting talking to Combination, I tied up the conversation by asking him what the "that" was when he said, "I would have been lost without that". He answered: "it's a combination of being with people you enjoy the company of, having the craic, but above all it's the humour, and just being able to drop your guard and be a little boy messing around with the lads cracking jokes, whether they are really funny or not is not so important: it's just letting things go and having a laugh that is the most important thing for me at the end of the day." Unemployment means a loss of status: the club provides a space to create or (re)gain status outside of the employment world. An important element in this extract is by challenging others to snowball fights and howling at the moon etc., club members release tensions in their life and confirm their status in the club and beyond through such interactions. It is important to highlight again that such sociopragmatic strategies are not generally appreciated in contexts outside of male only dressing room interaction.

4.5 *Oh Jesus watch your ankle*

Excerpt 4 is extracted from a free recording of a "Single versus Married" friendly match between club members played on December 26th, 2012.

Fieldnote 4

This was an informal, unofficial game played between club members during the Christmas break. The teams are split by marital status (single versus married), with no referee meaning decisions have to be decided between teams, often after negotiations. This interaction contains prominent performances of the tough interactional identity, with players aggressively attempting to advance the position of their team. There are also elements of bald-on-record face-threats and mocking to establish status. At the beginning of the game, Lucky injured his ankle, and played in goal for the rest of the match. Over the next hour, the ankle injury joke thread is rehashed and reworked in several ways. While this light-hearted humour is at the expense of Lucky, it shows the pleasure the lads gain from recycling threads of jokes, in order to keep themselves amused. This has been found constantly in observational and free recording data in the club.

The context of the game and the situation where the transcription starts is as follows (based on my field notes and notes made while listening to the recording of the game): as the Single (S) team attack the ball hits Derby, a member of the Married (M) team, then deflects off Shop (S team member) before going wide. Some of the S team claim it was a corner and others claim it was a handball and penalty (line 2). Shop refused to go with teammates making questionable claims for penalties or corners, claiming the higher moral ground by being honest. The beginning part of the excerpt is the continuation of two interactional threads running throughout the game: questioning many decisions (as mentioned there is no referee, so teams must decide together) in lines 1–5, and the mocking of Lucky, who has injured his ankle and is playing in goal (lines 9–11).

Text which is in all capital letters (e.g. lines 20, 42–45) indicates this is done in a shouting voice (= large difference in intensity and decibels in contrast to surrounding talk). I place an S (Singles team) or an M (Married team) before the player pseudonym to indicate which team they belong to.

Excerpt 4 – The "Single versus Married" friendly match

1{Time in recording: 01:12:50}
2S Drag: It was a corner if not a penalty
3M Pass: It was impossible to tell=
4S Drag: =Ah the sun
5M Pass: Well go back on the recordings later
6S Shop: Were ahead but we want to win it right
7S Drag: He gave in too easy there
8{Lucky brings the ball out to start an attack}
9M Call: Oh jesus watch your ankle
10M Derby: Oh jesus
11S Drag: Bandyankles get back in the goals
12 Whats the score here lads
13M Unless: 8-6 up to 10
14S Drag: 8-6 lets go lets put this home
15M Unless: First to ten unless its you
16{Time in recording: 01:18:12- As M are attacking the ball seems to
17strike the hand of a S player, close to the penalty area (=penalty
18kick)}
19Voices of several M team players, including Call, Derby and Unless:
20 HANDBALL PENO AH REFEREE
21S Drag: NO WAY
22{Two teams shout over each other for 5 seconds}
23M Derby: That has to be
24M Call: Blatant handball
25 Blatant handball come on
26S Lucky: Play away
27S Drag: No way
28M Derby: You said yourself you want to win it fairly
29S Drag: Hold on a second I never got the one off Derby up above
30{Two teams shout over each other for 5 seconds}
31S Shop: Thats not right lads
32 Thats not right
33 Thats not right boys
34S Drag: No way
35M Call: No we called that one now
36S Drag: Push on
37 Oh well then allright allright
38 Ye called it
39 Ye called that one
40S Lucky: If the lads called it that just means
41 {Laughter}
42M Unless: IT WAS DEFINITELY A FUCKEN HANDBALL
43 IT WAS GOING [IN]
44S Drag: [Dibs]
45M Unless: [A BLEEDIN] TRENALTYPENALTY FOR FUCK [SAKE]
46A: [A trenalty]
47 {laughter}
48 Treble penalty
49{End of page 1}

50{Start of Page 2}
 51S Player: A throw in A hot ball (to M players) here will you go out
 52 Will you go out for fuck sake
 53M Derby: Wha Its a peno
 54M Call: Put it down there anywhere
 55S Drag: It was half way to your own goal
 56S Player: So that decisions been made yeah
 57 {Laughter}
 58S Shop: Thats not right lads=
 59M Unless: =Put it downput it down there
 60 [anywhere there]
 61M Call: [Put it down anywhere] there
 62S Lucky: [Its way back there]
 63M Call: [Thats the penalty spot there]
 64M Derby: [ah noononono]
 65 thats the penalty spot
 66S Shop: Count out the steps thats not 10 [steps]
 67M Unless: [Further out than] it
 68 normally is
 69S Shop: Right
 70{Derby, designated penalty kicker for club teams in his prime, tries to
 71take the ball to take the penalty}
 72S Shop: No No Unless has to take it
 73M Call: Thats on the 45
 74S Shop: Thats not right lads
 75M Derby: Dont injure yourself trying to save it
 76S Drag: Whos taking it=
 77M Unless: =Ill take it
 78 Outside the circle {order to players to give space}
 79S Drag: Unless is hitting it
 80 Unless is going to redeem himself
 81 Corner flag
 82{Unless shoots and scores, after ball deflected off the leg of Lucky,
 83the goalkeeper}
 84M Players: YEESS
 85M Unless: Off the ankle=
 86S Drag: =Off the ankle all right
 87 It went in off the brace
 88M Pass: It went in off the brace
 89M Derby: Are you taking penalties=
 90M Unless: =100% record=
 91S Drag: =100% record 50% of the time

One salient part of this excerpt is the unrelenting attempts by both sides to gain advantages over its opponents. Remember though that this is a friendly game between clubmates, and the main purpose of the game—and attempts to gain the upper hand— is to 'have a bit of craic'. There are smiles on the faces of players as they raise their anger. The M team begin these attempts by making forceful claims for the penalty (lines 20, 23–25), which members of the S team quickly refute (lines 21 and 27). Derby adopts, or indexes, a solicitor-like tone—i.e. presenting details in a compelling way that captures attention (Locke, 2011, p. 94)—by calling for fairness, and referring back to the claim of S team member Shop for the preference of fair play (line 28). Drag (line 29) and Shop (lines 31–33) are quick to call for fairness in their claim for a non-penalty. Drag does seem to concede the penalty (lines 36–39), only for his brother and teammate Lucky (line 40) continuing the defence with the question that if someone calls a penalty, does it make it so? This raises a laugh amongst all, with a similar joke cracked later in the interaction (line 56). Unless is quick to deflect the laughter with the

most forceful claim for the penalty (lines 41–46). In the excitement Unless does produce a slip of the tongue/a production error (TRENALTY, line 45), which Drag is quick to raise a laugh to deflect the claims. The defence by Team S continued with claims that the appropriate decision is a hot ball not a penalty (lines 50–52). Derby and Call though sense the momentum Unless has generated and move to announce the penalty decision (line 53), deciding where the penalty will be taken from (line 54). Downright competitiveness and aggression are couched in humour throughout these interactions, with constant sniping at the opponents. In a regular inter-club game this would not be allowed, as it would result in punitive retribution from the referee, opposition team or both. Likewise, such behaviour is not sanctioned in regular domestic or workplace communication in Ireland.

After the penalty has been decided, Drag engages in psychological games (lines 72–77) by challenging Unless, a defender who had missed an easy chance and a penalty earlier in the game, to take the penalty spot. Drag then goads Unless (lines 79–81) as he is preparing to take the penalty. While the penalty is successful, they (Drag, Pass and Unless) turn to entertaining themselves by mocking Lucky and his injury (lines 85–88), with the injury now morphing in their imagination to the point that he has to now wear a brace. The collaborative form of mocking is an exemplification of humorous exchanges that run throughout the match. My interpretation of this particular part of the interaction and type of humour is that the speakers ignore all face concerns and focus on 'having a laugh'. Some of the humorous elements of the joking thread is that they are being rude. Note also that Drag up to this point had been in confrontation with Unless as they are on separate teams regarding the penalty decision but collaborate to mock Lucky (who is Drag's brother, so there an element of sibling rivalry again). The main point to be extracted from the above analysis is the collaborative nature of the edgy humour, which is ultimately to be considered a bit of harmless fun that occurs when clubmates get together to enjoy the shared activity of "taking the piss" out of each other (see brace gag in line 87, for example) in between playing a friendly game and enjoying a few festive drinks together after the game.

5 Discussion

When Club Fingal members get together socially they often spontaneously tell stories about the actions and comments of team members before, during or after games and training sessions. These moments (e.g. howling at the moon naked, see Excerpt 3) are the bonds that hold the group of lads together. In more task-based club interactions, speakers in this context are quick to perform the "real man" persona in training in order to command respect and communicate important messages. Joking in my data often communicates implicit meanings with macho overtones, but also in- and out-group marking. Collegial humour creates and maintains solidarity amongst club members. It is also an important politeness strategy to mitigate the face-threatening nature of the constructive criticism that leaders of the club teams employ. Humour is central to the performance of masculinity in the club. Edgy humour is indexed to a tough interactional identity: the humour is biting in the sense that it contains a direct face-threat, with adoption of a superior position. This humour not only constructs positions of status within a group, but also often reflects the perceived hierarchy (Fine, 1990; Kothoff, 2006). Engaging in banter, responding quickly to insults, disrespecting your 'Mammy' for a joke, challenging others to snowball fights etc. are indeed ways to create team solidarity, but also ways to transmit and perform masculinity.

Despite all speakers coming from similar backgrounds and engaging in shared enterprises together, members regularly engage in status and hierarchy work. This is often done in a mischievous way to create a bit of fun, while at other times it is done to imply hierarchy-maintaining or -constructing messages. The analysis here has shown that people do identity moves in every context, with salient themes including hierarchy-maintenance, one-upmanship, brashness alongside expressing closeness and solidarity. Ultimately the humour employed forms a central part of the social

glue of the club, with members valuing the playfulness and inventiveness involved in sharing and collaborating on humour.

These gendered performances in such contexts can be related to hegemonic masculinities, not external hegemony – the institutionalization of men's dominance over women – but rather internal hegemony: the ascendancy of a man, or one group of men (Demetriou, 2001). In this case my feeling is that this hegemony relates to the foregrounding of the brash, brusque personae in this male-dominated sporting context: he who shouts the loudest and sharpest wins by being the most witty and entertaining. This article corroborates the idea of Kuiper (1991) males do indeed use politeness strategies to create solidarity, albeit in a more abrasive manner than prototypical female strategies. I will briefly discuss here the proposition that there are no dark sides in solidarity work created by joke insults. To begin, there are definitely elements of competitiveness and asserting status (see also Plester, 2016) meaning this type of humour is not typically sanctioned in many work and domestic contexts. Such challenging sociopragmatics behaviour (particularly in the "Single versus Married" data in excerpt 4) is only really attempted, in jest, if the speakers know each other well. I would argue that the principal purpose of such behaviour is to signal closeness or familiarity: it is understood that if such bald face-threatening behaviour was employed with someone who you did not know well it could easily start an argument. That it is not to say that it is possible to go too far (cf. pragmatic misfire: Sinkeviciute, 2014, p. 126), and friends may indicate if their mocker has done so. There is most definitely a dark side if you choose to call it out. Typically, and importantly though, these slags are delivered with smiles and accepted with laughter: it is expected to return insults in turn. This aligns with the idea that evaluations of jocular mockery and jocular abuse are open to evaluation as being impolite or non-impolite by different interactants (Haugh & Bousfield, 2012, p. 1111). In this context it could be argued that it would be impolite not to return/engage in mocking and abuse: the jocular insults are a central part of the fun element that the participants seek when joining this game. Herein lies the subtle interactional dynamics of the club, which emerges through such interactions. While purposes co-exist together in the evolving interactions, in the context of Club Fingal at the time of collecting data, it was accepted that playfully mocking other club members is acceptable for the purpose of creating a bit of fun in club interactions, in what appears to be generally perceived as harmless. I argue that part of the perceived humour, in this context, is found in challenging or flouting the understanding that being directly face-threatening behaviour is not a commonly accepted communicative style in Ireland (Kallen, 2013, p. 203; O'Dwyer, 2021). It is important to note that such edgy humour is not approved of in many other contexts in Irish society: employment of this type of humour fulfils a tension release mechanism, for males who would have become accustomed to such boisterous behaviour in their formative years, and enjoy spending time in the club where they can "drop their guard".

Masculinities appropriate, reconfigure and adapt to social change to ensure unequal power relationships are maintained in some fashion. Male friendships formed and performed in settings are influenced by gendered expectations. While stereotypically feminine performances of closeness are thought to involve self-disclosure or direct expression of emotion, normative masculine closeness is often expressed through shared activity. The examination of sporting activities in the homosocial space of Club Fingal provides examples of how men manage interactional familiarity and closeness. Furthermore, it can provide insights into how sociopragmatic strategies are used to assert and contest authority, hierarchy, power and other emergent identity work in interaction.

Notes

- ⁱ The study was subject to human ethics approval, with all participants giving informed consent.
- ⁱⁱ I use pseudonyms (e.g. Ice) for all speakers featured in the analysis, which were assigned randomly based on the content of interactions analysed (e.g. "you need more ice" in line 6 of Excerpt 1, in the case of Ice).
- ⁱⁱⁱ The Ice Bucket Challenge involves dumping a bucket of ice water on someone's head to promote awareness of the motor neurone disease. Participants donate money after taking the challenge (Motor Neurone Disease Association, 2014).
- ^{iv} The transcriptions followed a simple transcription convention (each line represents a clause or sentence of speech), with all utterances transcribed orthographically (i.e. spelling is normalized).

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