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Review

Friend or fiend? Disentangling upward humor's (De) stabilizing effects on hierarchies

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Abstract

Humor research in organizations focuses on leaders' humor, but we know far less about followers' humor. Here, we review and synthesize the scattered work on this "upward humor," offering a novel framing of it as a strategy for followers to deal with hierarchies. We propose a continuum of upward humor from stabilizing (i.e., a *friend* who uses upward humor to reinforce hierarchies, make hierarchies more bearable or stable) to destabilizing (i.e., a *fiend* who uses upward humor to question or reshape existing hierarchies) depending on perceived intent (i.e., from benevolent to malicious, respectively) and outline key factors that shape these interpretations. We close with novel questions and methods for future research such as power plays, multi-modal data, and human-robot interactions.

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Keywords

Follower humor, Followership, Behavioral humor, Ambivalence, Power, Status.

Humor makes many experiences in organizations more palatable: critical feedback seems less negative [1], high-stakes settings seem less stressful [2–4], and even unethical behavior seems more acceptable [5–7]. Because leaders have deep and lasting influence on employees and organizations—including feedback-giving, stress inducing and reducing, setting and shaping standards for behavior— it is unsurprising that when workplace humor research has included a hierarchical element, it focuses on how humor facilitates downward influence. This work shows that more humorous leaders are generally regarded as more effective, more accepted, and more influential (see [8] for a review).

But what about the opposite direction of influence? How do those lower in organizational hierarchies use humor to deal with those above them? And how is this humor perceived by others in the organization?

Here, we define humor as "an event in which at least one individual experiences amusement and appraises the event as funny." [9] Upward means originating from a lower position in the hierarchy towards an audience with more (in)formal status, power, or decision-making responsibility. So, by focusing on "upward humor," we refer to shared acts of humor (e.g., puns, funny stories, or jokes) initiated by humor user(s) lower in the organizational hierarchy towards recipient(s) higher in the organizational hierarchy. For simplicity, we use "follower" to refer to the former and "leader" to refer to the latter.[1]

Hierarchies are a rich and fruitful context for the study of humor because humans are wired to organize and rank ourselves and others across formal (e.g., job title) and informal (e.g., liking) dimensions [10]—even if the resultant status and resource differences are not always experienced as pleasant. Given this reality, we propose that humor can help employees to deal with the ambivalence of wanting (or even needing) hierarchy, while at the same time, also rejecting the inequalities and dependencies that often accompany it [11–14]. As such, upward humor can reinforce and stabilize or destabilize and reshape hierarchies. While these differences can be subtle and may require time for more tangible effects, they are often clearly felt for those who are present and affected by the humor and its consequences.

[1] We use these terms as concrete examples of actors to represent someone lower and higher in the hierarchy (respectively); this also reflects the common foci in existing upward humor research. While some scholars would argue that leaders must have followers and followers must actively follow, such a debate is out of scope here (see [18] for a particularly lucid review).

In summary, we integrate the scarce, scattered literature on upward humor. In doing so, we propose a comprehensive, parsimonious model of upward humor and its effects in organizations along a (perceived) intent spectrum (i.e., benign to threatening) which (de)stabilizes hierarchies (see Figure 1); we also outline the individual and contextual factors that shape humor's prevalence and interpretation. By structuring and synthesizing the existing research in this space, we are also better able to identify fruitful yet largely overlooked research opportunities (see Table 1).

Understanding upward humor

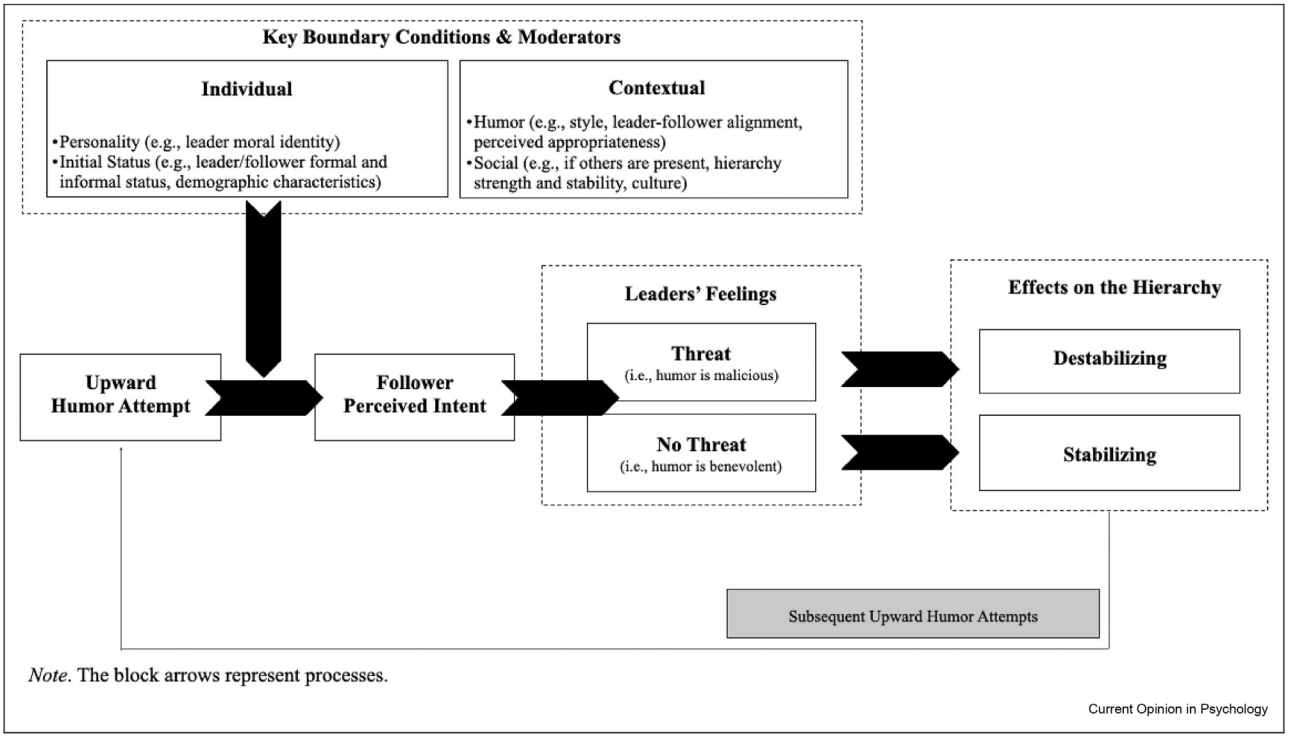
To understand humor and its effects on hierarchies, we must first understand what makes things funny. According to a prominent theoretical account (i.e., the benign-violation theory of humor [15]), funny content is the result of two concepts or ideas that are paired together in an unusual or surprising way ("norm-violating") and does not pose severe physical nor psychological harm ("benign"). To illustrate: during a coffee break, a follower jests to their leader, "working hard, or hardly working?" This act of upward humor could be considered norm-violating because it is a more critical, unexpected insinuation for followers to publicly communicate toward leaders. But it could also be considered benign because of the playful semantics—especially if it is also delivered with a laugh, paired with jesting non-verbal behaviors (e.g., with a wink or an elbow nudge), if aligned in humor style preferences or enacted against a history of benevolent, shared humor [16].

In a historical context, (formalized) upward humor dates to medieval "court jesters"—people who were appointed to cleverly entertain leaders with humor (e.g., kings [17]). Despite this long history, the upward direction of influence has been largely absent from modern humor research. Thus, building on recent momentum on followership—recognition that followers also play an active role in the process of leadership despite being overlooked in theory and research (e.g., see [18] for a review)—we propose that followers can also use humor towards leaders with meaningful consequences for dyads, groups, and organizations over time, depending on the perceived intent. After all, court jesters were first and foremost entertainers—but also punished with physical harm, exile, or even death for going "too far."

Upward humor use, interpretation, and effects

As for court jesters, using humor in organizations is inherently risky [19]—primarily because of the fine line between benevolent and malicious attribution. Humor

Figure 1



Graphical overview of upward humor research and its proposed effects on hierarchies.

Table 1

Key areas for future upward humor research.

Level/Type of Analysis	Questions
Dyadic Effects	Do followers need an initial level of status, legitimacy, or power before successfully enacting upward humor—perhaps especially women or minorities?
	Can upward humor lubricate more critical messages of employee voice, making it more effective?
	Can upward humor deflect direct questions from supervisors, thus facilitating knowledge hiding?
	Can we detect early destabilizing effects of upward humor using multi-modal forms of data (e.g., detect sarcasm or irony from speech signals to predict negative leader reactions or increasing follower influence)?
	Do power plays between leaders and followers manifest via humor (e.g., sarcasm to destabilize a hierarchy)?
Group Effects	What happens when there are different humor factions (i.e., in-/out-groups along "humor faultlines")?
	How do higher ranking bystanders affect the interpretation or effects of upward humor?
	Does humor make robots more (a) accepted at work by others and/or (b) reduce stress in others ("others" being humans at the same or higher levels in the hierarchy)?
Temporal Effects	Does upward humor dynamically affect followers' status/power gain—or loss—over time, perhaps especially for women or minorities?
	Do different humor styles evolve over time (in dyads or teams), anchored to followers' and/or leaders' humor?
	How do external events or shocks (e.g., global pandemics, economic downturns, societal mega threats, workplace automation) impact the nature or effects of upward humor in teams?

"fails" when others do not find it funny and do not laugh. And critically, humor is more likely to fail when it is perceived as malicious or threatening—an outcome which is more likely for followers (vs. leaders) due to their positions in hierarchies. Because leaders have more status and power (i.e., formal [e.g., job titles and organizational charts] and informal [e.g., having desired skills or characteristics]; see [10]), they are more likely to use—and be successful in using—humor (see [8] for a review). In contrast, upward humor is more unexpected and surprising because it goes against the grain of traditional, top-down information flows [20], making it more norm-violating regardless of its content. Thus, we propose a new framework to understand and synthesize prior literature on upward humor vis-à-vis its function within hierarchies: When perceived as benevolent, upward humor does not threaten hierarchies and can also reinforce them; but when perceived as malicious, upward humor can threaten and shift existing hierarchies.

Threatening upward humor can *destabilize and weaken* hierarchies. For example, sarcastic (vs. non-humorous or affiliatively humorous) followers make their leaders feel more accountable because leaders anticipate having to explain their decisions in the future [11]. Similarly, humorous followers can proactively reduce abusive supervision from their leaders by weakening the hierarchy (i.e., increasing socioemotional resources between leaders and followers [12]). Ingratiating humor can also increase social attraction (e.g., [2,21]).

While these effects pertain to leaders' direct reactions to upward humor, other outcomes can occur through upward humor's influence on others' views of the follower. After all, people like being around humorous people and view them as more confident, competent, and leader-like [19]. Exposure to humor can also increase temporary feelings of power [22]. So, followers can gain formal and informal power and status through humor.

Non-threatening upward humor can *stabilize and strengthen* hierarchies. This may be particularly likely to occur if the humor "fails." For example, if humor is perceived as inappropriate or offensive, people do not find it funny and will not laugh [19]; in such instances, leaders can easily ignore or brush off the upward humor attempts and the followers who made the attempts. Similarly, repeated efforts to make a leader laugh may be perceived as a manipulative strategy to please the leader, gain power or other benefits [21]. In these cases, the follower may not only be ignored but potentially penalized, too. Of course, it is also possible for non-threatening yet successful humor to transcend hierarchies by building relationships and fostering cohesion (e.g., [14,16,23])—essentially flattening the hierarchy.

Beyond these more general patterns, the perceived threat of upward humor attempts might depend on key features of leaders, followers, dyads, and groups. For example, leaders with high moral identity are less

appreciative of humor [24], while leaders with low moral identity are also more affected by humor—including from their followers [11]. Furthermore, ambitious women followers may seem more threatening—particularly for men leaders—due to their ostensible lack of communality or because they threaten "traditional," masculine hierarchies [25–27]. In contrast, ambitious women who "go along" with sexist, jovial behaviors in more masculine workplaces reinforce the existing hierarchies (but also, they gain status as individuals) because this humor does not challenge existing hierarchies [28].

Several aspects of the immediate context may also affect upward humor and its effects on hierarchies. For example, if others are present or if hierarchies are explicitly unstable, leaders are more likely to view the upward humor as threatening. But in settings where formalized hierarchies are less salient (e.g., start-ups or entrepreneurial teams) or where roles and authorities are more dynamic or less defined, the risk of perceived threat and destabilizing upward humor may be alleviated, because hierarchies are still malleable [29–31]. In these settings, followers may also be more willing and able to successfully enact upward humor—including upward humor styles that guard against dysfunctional behaviors and norms or keep leaders accountable for their actions (e.g., sarcasm; [11]). Moreover, virtual contexts are increasingly relevant for modern organizations, and people respond more positively to humor delivered by women (vs. men) in virtual settings—perhaps because they have already been granted status and legitimacy (e.g., as an expert; [32]). But without this initial status and legitimacy—or perhaps when paired with signals that call the humor user's status or legitimacy into question (e.g., self-deprecating humor questioning one's competence)—the opposite effect may occur [33]. While women are punished for using self-deprecating humor in typical professional contexts [33], women may also generate more advantage (vs. men) when using benign, affiliative humor in gender-salient contexts (e.g., organizations with recent gender discrimination or harassment issues; [2]). Finally, the broader cultural setting can also shape leaders' responses to upward humor as in the case of citizens' shoe-throwing towards political leaders in the United States versus China which triggered opposing effects based on the leaders' perceived threat: although the shoe-throwing incident was brushed off with a joke in the United States, a similar incident was condemned as a despicable behavior in China (humor vs. contempt, respectively; [34]).

In summary, our proposed model is useful to understand the unique nature and effects of upward humor (i.e., [de]stabilizing hierarchies). This new framework encourages further exploration of the hierarchy-relevant factors that might shape reactions to upward humor, such as leaders' perceptions of follower intent—which does not always align with the actual intent (see [35])—as well as individual and contextual factors (see Figure 1).

The future of upward humor research

Even though we explicitly focused on upward follower humor (vs. downward/leader humor), much of this research is still biased towards leaders (e.g., how upward humor affects leaders' feelings and behaviors; [11,12]). Thus, we first and foremost encourage future research to explore more of upward humor's consequences for followers (see Table 1).

Second, new frontiers for future upward humor research may include novel contexts such as human-robot interactions (e.g. [36,37]). Although robots are not necessarily positioned higher in the hierarchy than humans in general [38], in organizational contexts, robots have been given formal manager or leadership titles [39], imbuing them with relatively higher status and power; engineers have even developed artificial-intelligence-based machines with humor to accomplish specific leadership tasks more successfully (e.g., delivering negative feedback; see "irony bot" [36]). Robots are increasingly designed with the capacity to mimic basic human verbal abilities [40] and to be empathic and funny [41]. Thus, we foresee a fruitful line of research illuminating how upward humor may be an unexplored means to foster acceptance (and beyond—e.g., psychological enrichment; [42]) of autonomous technologies at work.

Finally, novel methods may open new frontiers in upward humor research by quantifying previously unquantifiable forms of humor (e.g., natural language processing) and integrating multi-modal data (e.g., combining words, speech signals, facial expressions, and/or gestures; see [43–45]). For example, sarcasm and irony are detectable via changes in a person's reduced speech rate and enhanced speech intensity [46,47]. In these ways, machine learning may empower us to overcome empirical challenges—moving beyond text data and incorporating prosodic features (i.e., human speech) or images (e.g., memes) to analyze richer, more dynamic patterns of upward humor and its effects on hierarchies over time.

Conclusion

Where a person is positioned in the hierarchy is a critical determinant of humor use and its effects in organizations. While humor can (de)stabilize hierarchies, its effects also depend on key aspects of the follower, the leader, and the context—all of which combine to predict the critical mediator of perceived intent (i.e., from benevolent to malicious). So, as alluded in our title, upwardly humorous employees can be viewed as friend—*or fiend*—generating more variable reactions and organizational consequences than humorous leaders.

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Jamie Gloor: Conceptualization, Project administration, Writing- Original draft preparation, Writing- Reviewing and Editing **Niels Van Quaquebeke:** Conceptualization, Writing- Reviewing and Editing. **Mihwa Seong, Petra C. Schmid, Christian Hildebrand:** Writing- Reviewing and Editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare no known conflicts of interest/have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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