

(No) Laughing Allowed – Humour and the Limits of Soft Power in Prison

Julie Laursen¹

University of Cambridge, UK

Abstract

Although humour in prison is a widespread phenomenon, its meaning and function has not been examined in any detail. This article seeks to address this gap by analysing humour in prison-based cognitive behavioural programmes. The empirical data from fieldwork in three different programme settings illuminates how the participants actively disrupt and twist the power hierarchies by providing a kind of humorous meta-commentary on the simplicity and class bias of the course content. This article suggests that humour could be seen as a tool that enables prisoners to fend off the psychological and rhetorical power of the cognitive behavioural programmes, even if only briefly. By developing the concept of ‘soft resistance’ and analysing humour as friction and code-switching, this article aims to illustrate and discuss the limits of soft power in prison-based therapeutic settings.

Keywords: humour, cognitive behavioural programmes, prisons, soft power, soft resistance

Introduction

Humour is a seemingly trouble-free, upbeat and positive concept, and, simultaneously, a fuzzy-edged phenomenon in terms of its content and form [1]. Previous research on humour often emphasizes the benevolent potentials of humour and laughter; humour can ‘defuse a potentially

Corresponding author:

University of Cambridge, Sidgwick Avenue, Cambridge, CB3 9DA, UK. E-mail: jl862@cam.ac.uk

tense situation' (Meyer 2000: 312), improve health and well-being (McCreddie and Wiggins 2008), help gain control over a difficult situation (Ashforth and Kreiner 2002: 224; Pogrebin and Poole 1991: 401), function as a mature or high adaptive behavioural response at times of crises (Wright, Crewe and Hulley 2016) and relieve stress (Berlyne 1972; Morreall 1983). However, previous studies have also shown that many jokes deal with tendentious topics such as sex, aggression, and ethnic insult (Davies 1990; Fry 1963), while humour within school settings has been analysed as a technique utilized for the regulation of masculinity and negotiation of gender-sexual hierarchies (Kehily and Nayak 1997: 70). Humour is, thus, a many-faceted concept with different uses and purposes; here, humour is interpreted as a tool to push back soft power in prison.

The objective of this article is to examine the meanings of humour within cognitive behavioural programmes in prisons while connecting the empirical data to a broader discussion of penal power. While identification of resistance has become a widespread means of demonstrating prisoners' agency (see Bosworth and Carrabine 2001; Ugelvik 2011) to a point where prisoners' '[...] capacity for/act of resistance is now synonymous with agency' (Rubin 2016: 4), this article suggests a different interpretive lens. Following Rubin's critique of coining every subversive action as resistance, this article argues that the term *friction* is useful to discuss how the participants' humorous behaviour is not necessarily resistance, but they are indeed frictional. Rubin suggests that we understand 'friction as individuals' actions that render power incomplete' (Rubin 2015: 27), while she highlights that many acts of fighting back towards power are about ameliorating one's own condition rather than undermining the prison regime. Similar to Rubin's point, the participants' jocular disruptions of the lessons are not necessarily politically inspired but, rather, they are small acts of creativity and subversion enacted as a response to being in a highly controlled environment while wishing to continue to live one's life as one sees fit. Humour, then, is essentially a way of

sidestepping the many demands of cognitive self-change without getting into serious trouble. Hence, frictional behaviour, such as humorous disruptions and mocking jokes, could be viewed as ‘windows of autonomous control’ (Rubin 2016: 3) that fend off soft power in prison. Importantly, prisoners’ frictional behaviour is located in the mismatch between their actions and the demands or expectations placed on them which means that ‘the prison regime *shapes* friction and resistance by forming the contours of the thing against which prisoners are reacting’ (Rubin 2016: 12). Scandinavian prison regimes are renowned for an emphasis on normalization, humane prison regimes and low incarceration rates relative to other Western countries (Pratt 2008). This penal field is particularly interesting because the relationships between staff and prisoners are often described as humane and positive, which carries important implications for the appearance, nature, reception, and the permitted humour. In general, Scandinavian prison practices seem to allow for larger amounts of explicit resistance or friction as long as it remains well meant, rational and eventually leads to compliance (Shammas 2014; Ugelvik 2011).

The power exercised in this penal field, and particularly in cognitive behavioural programmes, is a certain type of psychological or ‘soft power’ (Crewe 2011) which corresponds to Foucauldian ideas about the ambiguous nature of power. According to Foucault, power is not suppressing in itself, but is exercised through the individual and through the way the individual is subjectified (Foucault 1977). Furthermore, power produces resistance – in fact, discipline itself inspires insubordination (Fox 1999a: 94). However, Fox (1999a: 88) argues that prisoners’ resistance and objections are absorbed into and help sustain the cognitive behavioural programme’s discourse about criminality as essentially a choice and a result of faulty thought processes. Furthermore, she argues that the obligation to confess (and critically assess) one’s thoughts and actions are an important dimension of cognitive social control in cognitive behavioural programmes (Fox 1999a: 91).

Notwithstanding the value of the above analyses of power, this article calls into question whether we should assume that prisoners' resistance (or friction) is completely absorbed by the cognitive behavioural programme's rhetoric. I suggest that humour could be seen as a tool that enables prisoners to fend off the psychological and rhetorical power of the programmes, even if only briefly. Also, I propose that humour averts the confessional gaze and thus provides leeway for the prisoners to avoid having to confess their inner thoughts. This analytical lens allows for an analysis of the way soft power in the shape of prison-based cognitive behavioural programmes operates. My findings call for a more nuanced interpretation of power because the participants actively disrupt and twist the power hierarchies in the cognitive behavioural programmes by providing a kind of meta-commentary on the simplicity and class bias of the course content. In order to analyse the participants' distinct counter-attacks to new forms of penal power, I propose an analytical fusion of the concepts of 'resistance' and 'friction' into the concept of 'soft resistance' [2]. Soft resistance is a useful concept when we seek to understand behaviours that do not undermine the prison regime, but creatively and subtly disrupts its rehabilitative projects and intentions. Soft resistance is, precisely like new types of penal power themselves, difficult for those who are subject to it to handle precisely because its form is ambiguous, non-coercive and multi-faceted. The exact same characteristics could be applied to humour, hence the presence of frictional humour results in soft resistance.

The meanings of humour in general and in prison

In general, theories about humour fall into three broad categories: superiority, relief, and incongruity theory [3] (Watson 2015: 409). This article understands humour as meta-communicational processes (Rossel 1981: 196); thus, it revolves around the motivation that lies behind the use of humour and its social impact or function. Importantly, humour has the ability to

neutralize uncomfortable, but repeated experiences such as asymmetrical power relations and infantilizing situations. According to Billig, ‘whereas disciplinary humour mocks the powerless, rebellious humour can delight in taking the powerful as its target’ (Billig 2005: 208). Both disciplinary and rebellious humour should be understood in relation to social order. The social order is threatened or temporally overturned in Bakhtin’s (1981: 15) analysis of the carnival, which involved a temporary suspension of all social rules and etiquette. The ‘carnavalesque’ laughter is, therefore, a comic state of being that functions as a respite from official order and the everyday repression of the lower classes. Consequently, humour has the ability to turn hierarchies upside down and play with boundaries in a non-threatening manner. Douglas (1991: 104) argues that humour both connects and disorganizes, it attacks sense and hierarchies. This is in line with Bourdieu’s arguments about the quality of humour:

The joke [...] is the art of making fun without raising anger, by means of ritual mockery or insults which are neutralized by their very excess and which, presupposing a great familiarity, both in the knowledge they use and the freedom with which they use it, are in fact tokens of attention or affection, ways of building up while seeming to run down, of accepting while seeming to condemn ... (Bourdieu 1984: 183)

Following Bourdieu’s line of reasoning, humour can function as a safety valve, a sort of sanctuary where one is allowed to say almost anything as long as the statement is followed by a disclaimer; it was just a joke (Fine and De Soucey 2005: 3). Thus, a joke can be seen as an attack upon something formal and organized, by something vital, and energetic; in essence, a joke is an attack upon controls (Douglas 1991: 95).

Meanings of humour in prisons

A widespread use of humour has been observed in prisons (Crawley 2004; Goffman 1961; Kristoffersen 1986; Mathiesen 1965; Tracy et al. 2006), but there are only a few studies that explicitly focus on humour. These studies primarily show that humour is used to cope under difficult conditions in prison, both by staff members (Crawley 2004; Nylander et al. 2011), and prisoners (Geer 2002). Mathiesen (1965: 148) argues that humour is a crucial part of what he terms the ‘defences of the weak’ and may help to alleviate the pains of imprisonment. Thus, humour in prison may serve to release tensions, avoid aggression and to create an easier everyday life. Following Radcliffe-Brown (1952), Nielsen (2011) analyses the humorous interactions between prisoners and staff as ‘joking relationships’ and shows how officers and prisoners ‘play’ with power relations by way of switching roles and pretending that the prisoner rather than the officer is in charge. Furthermore, informal teasing, relaxed banter and ‘taking the mickey’ out of each other are seen as important tools for building better relationships between staff and prisoners. Indeed, cultivating relationships in which humour is used professionally is an imbedded aspect of ‘jailcraft’, which is developed over time and with experience (Liebling, Arnold and Straub 2011: 131). However, camaraderie and good-natured banter among staff does not always flow easily into staff–prisoner relationships (Liebling, Arnold and Straub 2011: 130). The above studies show how the intrinsic ambiguity of humour and teasing allows staff members to engage in temporary breaches of social order, while simultaneously enforcing local rules of conduct.

Cognitive behavioural programmes and soft power

New rehabilitative attempts corresponding to the ‘What Works’ era of neoliberal rehabilitation were implemented in Danish Prisons in 1994 (Smith 2006) following the Canadian forerunners (Ross, Fabiano and Ewles 1988). Currently, seven different cognitive behavioural programmes are

available across the Danish Prison and Probation service [4]. The programmes were implemented because of their promised ability to reduce recidivism and improve the participants' social and interpersonal skills. The Canadian programme developers (Ross, Fabiano and Ewles 1988) claim that 'offenders' are more likely to be impulsive, egocentric, rigid in their views, and poor at problem solving, perspective taking, and critical reasoning. The cognitive behavioural programmes focus on individual responsibility and expect participants to set their own standards for appropriate conduct through self-reflective analysis and assessment of the value of their own thoughts and behaviour (Sjöberg and Windfeldt 2008: 39). Activities in a session include role play, thinking games, dilemma puzzles and exercises in critical thinking (Ross and Fabiano 1988).

Participation in cognitive behavioural programmes in Danish prisons is, in principal, voluntary. However, this could be termed as a 'coerced voluntarism' (Peyrot 1985) or 'pressured rehabilitation' (Day, Tucker and Howells 2004) since prisoners are rewarded an early release if they demonstrate a special effort (such as engaging in said programmes or drug treatment) to start afresh without crime (Nielsen 2012: 139). This coerced voluntarism adds an extra dimension to the subordination that prisoners undergo. Goffman (1961) famously gave a sensitive account of the mortification of self that inmates in a 'total institution' has to endure as their privacy is invaded, they are re-defined as a number and their old selves are insulted. If we relate these characteristics of the total institution to newer rehabilitative efforts, Fox's work (1999a, 1999b) is beneficial. Fox examines the 'production of forced selves' in cognitive behavioural programmes in American prisons and the programme's rhetorical construction of prisoners as particular 'types' of beings with a particular 'criminal thinking'. Fox connects cognitive behavioural programmes to wider, neo-liberal governmental power (see Miller and Rose 1994; Rose 1998 in which responsibility, self-change and confession are important tools to create accountable and self-steering individuals. Fox (1999a: 97) shows how prisoners' 'sensibilities, decisions, feelings, and values' are interpreted

through a powerful psychological language and become targets for evaluation, confession, and correction in cognitive self-change.

Soft power

As laid out above, cognitive behavioural programmes rest on a certain type of psychological or soft power. For Foucault, the prisoner is not regulated by ‘an *exterior* relation of power ... but the individual is formed or, rather, formulated through his discursively constituted “identity” as prisoner’ (Butler 1997: 84). This type of capillary power reaches into individuals so deeply that it makes them who they are (Alford 2000: 125). This soft power in cognitive behavioural programmes rests upon a particular construction of abnormality, distorted thinking, and ‘antisocial’ behaviour and, thus, constitutes a ‘regime of truth’ (Foucault 1982). Crewe (2011: 522) has examined soft power in present-day prisons in England. He argues that punishment, which is characterized by ‘tightness’, operates in a manner that is ‘light’ but anonymous, and while it is not weighing down prisoners, it smothers them. This type of soft power is all-encompassing and invasive, because it promotes the self-regulation of all aspects of conduct. Such a power is prevalent in cognitive behavioural programmes, which assume the right to be highly intrusive and expect prisoners to expose their personal feelings and convictions in order to change these. The strive for cognitive self-change could be described as a ‘normative imperialism’ in which prisoners feel that the cognitive behavioural programmes are instructing them to be different kinds of persons – prototypes of responsible citizenship that could not survive the realities of life in the environments from which they are drawn (Crewe 2011). Crewe’s research does not focus on humour, but a statement from one of his informants links humour to soft power in prison: ‘I made a joke about sedating my girlfriend to take her on holiday [as part of a course scenario] – in the report they gave no context, said that my idea of getting someone on a plane was sedating them! I got knocked back, based on the psychologists’ reports’ (prisoner cited in Crewe 2011: 516). The example speaks volumes of the

difficulties in walking a tightrope between acceptable jokes and avoiding repercussions in the cognitive behavioural programmes. The example also illustrates the ‘tightness’ of psychological power; a seemingly innocent joke can affect prisoners prospects of release.

Notwithstanding the value of the above analysis, the particular context of Danish prison regimes results in different consequences of a joke in cognitive behavioural programmes. In this context, the prisoners have much more leeway and more space to humorously mock the programme content, the instructor or themselves without any consequences for their ‘report’ or ‘personal file’. Hence, the participants in cognitive behavioural programmes in Danish prisons are able to use humour as a tool to fend off soft power from the onset. This calls for a critical examination of whether capillary power in the shape of cognitive behavioural programmes does reach so ‘deeply’ into individuals as we might presume.

Data and methods

The data analysed in this article is derived from fieldwork, individual and focus group interviews, and informal conversations with many different actors in the Danish Prison and Probation Service. I conducted around 150 hours of semi-ethnographic fieldwork (Stevens 2012) and 11 open-ended, semi-structured interviews in three Danish prisons settings: two maximum-security and one minimum-security prison. As I mainly draw on observational material, I will not go into detail about the interview material (see Author 2015; 2016). Besides the observational data, I draw on a research workshop that I conducted in an annual meeting for the cognitive behavioural programme instructors in the Danish Prison Service. I presented my initial findings on humour and asked the 12 participating instructors to discuss the meanings of humour in small groups, and afterwards we discussed their findings in plenum. I recorded this discussion and transcribed it verbatim, as well as translated field notes and transcriptions from Danish into English. The prisons as well as all names of the participants and instructors have been anonymized to protect the identities of the individuals.

The fieldwork consisted of ‘moderate participation’ (Spradley 1980) in one *Cognitive Skills* programme and three different *Anger Management* programmes. The programmes consist of 38 lessons and eight lessons, respectively, in which the participants go through lectures, group work, role play and exercises in critical thinking (Sjöberg and Windfeldt 2008). The observed programmes were group-based and consisted of four to six participants. Out of 24 participants in total, 13 had non-Danish backgrounds. The participants were all male and between 18 and 50 years old with a skew towards younger participants (41% were between 18 and 25 years of age). The instructors were all prison officers who had taken a three-week training course plus one year of supervision before they were certified as cognitive behavioural instructors.

It is difficult to say whether the participants’ use of humour was exaggerated by my presence (as found in other studies; see Kehily and Nayak 1997: 78), but, in alignment with my impression, all of the instructors said that the participants seemed unaffected. Nevertheless, the presence of a relatively young, female researcher may have contributed to the jocular stories in the programmes. During the fieldwork, I often found myself struggling not to laugh when the participants cracked jokes or turned role play into comedy shows. Liebling (2001), following Becker (1967), argues that prison researchers must navigate the balance of ‘whose side to be on’, that is to say, staff or prisoners (or even between groups of prisoners). Ethnography entails deep enmeshment in the social realities of those studied, and a fine-tuned body and mind towards the social clues of the field (Hastrup 2004). Taking social clues means knowing or feeling when to laugh or not. I especially struggled to balance my loyalties towards the instructors and the participants whenever it felt inappropriate to laugh out of loyalty towards either party.

Findings

The analysis unfolds through three distinct analytical agendas wherein I analyse a) humour as a contested topic, b) humour in the shape of soft resistance and code-switching, and c) humour as frictional behaviour. The conclusion opens up a discussion of the limits of soft power in cognitive behavioural programmes as well as in prison more generally.

Humour as a contested topic

This article interprets the participants' humour as frictional behaviour and soft resistance. However, the instructors often describe the participants' use of humour as a result of their alleged 'cognitive distortions'. For example, the instructor Thomas explained that:

I think that you can observe the participants' lack of social skills and their missing ability to judge a situation imbedded in their use of humour. You've been asked to consider something that is painful or difficult and then you try to avoid it by using humour, being angry or trying to pinpoint a mistake in the programme curriculum.

The power dynamics in the programmes as well as the instructors' interpretation of humour as 'cognitive deficits' make it more difficult to get the humour 'right' between the two parties, which enhances the risk of jokes falling flat. The instructor interprets the participants' humour in psychological terms; as defence mechanisms or as attempts to avoid difficult topics whereas this article suggest that humour in the programmes is related to soft resistance and attempts to push back soft power. Nevertheless, the success of the instructors is very much dependent on the collaboration with the participants and tension arises whenever the instructor fails to accurately engage in humorous exchanges. The instructors are preoccupied with the complexities of balancing the use of

too much and too little humour. They seem to view humour as a social lubricant that creates flow in the social order in the groups and helps tackle difficult or unpleasant situations. I witnessed the playful interactions between the cognitive behavioural instructors and the participants on numerous occasions, as for instance on the first day of fieldwork in a maximum-security prison. When we arrived at the classroom, the instructor, Mohammad, experienced technical difficulties during the very first lesson. He was supposed to show the participants a video recording of their own role play, but the equipment failed. The participant, Kasper, then said mockingly 'it's fucked up that we can't see the video' and Mohammad replied 'yeah, I also think it's fucked up'. All of the participants teased Mohammad and one said: 'we have come well prepared, so you should be as well'. This insult did not lead to any repercussions, but on the contrary seemed to set a light tone in the group. Perhaps Mohammad's swearing and acknowledgments of his own failures helped to soften the otherwise hierarchical relationship between him and the prisoners. However, this example also highlights the potency of soft resistance in the shape of humour; the participants threw Mohammad off balance and 'forced' him to interact with them on their premises and in their mode language rather than the other way around.

Attempts to establish trust in prisons can be difficult as they are in general low-trust environments and prisoners oftentimes have a deep-seated mistrust of authority figures (Liebling 2004). This is also the case in cognitive behavioural programmes where a rejection was on display when the instructor, Sussie, was joking around and used different names such as 'sweetie' for the participant, Omar. This was seemingly an attempt to humorously build rapport and trust between the two, but Omar did not seem to appreciate this and replied angrily: 'what's my name'? Omar and the instructor had a troubled relationship from the outset of the programme and Sussie's humorous attempt to restore their relationship fell flat. My field notes also bear testament to the instructors'

attempts to build bridges between themselves and the participants with another ethnic background than Danish by joking about their ethnicity. However, the following example shows how instructors' attempts to bond with the participants can fall flat. The instructor in *Anger Management*, Mohammad, asked whether the participants had ever experienced peer pressure. Ahmad replied that he had indeed experienced the peer pressure of robbing a plumbing shop with toilets, sinks, etc. This story made the instructor Mohammad laugh out loud and exclaim:

This has to end! I am so tired of hearing foreigners talking about small-scale tricks, like robbing old people's homes or scamming a grocery store for petty things and then listening to ethnic Danes talking about their financial crime, large scale tax fraud and other white collar crimes!

The instructor was obviously joking, but the participants did not seem amused by this story. They seemed to understand the joke well enough, but they did not participate in the instructor's laughter and sat rather baffled and speechless. The participants rejected the invitation to create a 'we-ness' in this example by refusing to laugh at the instructor's joke. Since joking is temporally immediate and calls for audience involvement, the absence of a response becomes a judgment on the teller and/or the remark (Fine and De Soucey 2005: 3). Even though the instructor and some of the participants shared a non-Danish ethnic background in this particular group, the asymmetrical power relation between the instructor and the participants trumped the shared ethnicity and the bonding that could presumably spring from that. Joking is thus not a cure-all treatment for a group. After the joke was rejected and fell flat, the instructor tried to rerail the discussion by asking whether the participants could provide more examples of peer pressure and blackmailing. They responded that blackmailing had basically been their livelihood and one dramatic story of blackmailing others for money, goods

or power followed the other. These stories of fairly horrific blackmailing could be seen as the participants' attempts to fend off the discrediting joke on their behalf and thus as soft resistance without any repressive consequences from the instructor.

The next example shows how jokes about ethnicity can work well if they spring from the participants' own sense of humour rather than the instructor's as in the previous example. Often, humour is displayed as subtle disruptions or twisting of the instructors' original point with an exercise, which goes relatively unabated in the lesson – that is, the instructor does not have to stop or correct the participants in a harsh or strict manner. These disruptions could be understood as rebellious humour (Billig 2005) where jokes target the powerful, in this case, the cognitive behavioural instructors. The example below of a role-play gone wild shows how frictional behaviour plays out as soft resistance to the arbitrary and infantilizing exercise. It is difficult for the instructor to address this soft resistance as it is non-violent, non-offensive (to her at least) and fairly ambiguous:

The participants are asked to perform a role play based on a moral dilemma involving a gas station in a situation of gasoline scarcity as part of a 'critical thinking exercise'. The participants are assigned different roles and Imad is the filling station attendant. This role assignment makes Michael exclaim: 'they have a foreign worker [fremmedarbejder] running around and attending to the customers' needs!' This remark makes everyone laugh, including Imad who plays the part of a non-Danish speaking 'foreign worker' to perfection by displaying a heavy accent, thus pretending not to understand what the customers need. The atmosphere is very loose, full of laughter and jokes, and the participants are truly acting out there parts. In the process

of acting, the participants have psychically taken over the classroom; hence, the instructor and I are standing up against a wall in the back of the room. The instructor seems worried about the unruly situation and she doesn't seem to find it funny.

The instructor appears to be caught in a dilemma here – is she supposed to laugh when the joke is actually quite offensive and the role play has run loose way beyond her intentions? If she laughs, she could be seen as agreeing with racial stereotypes, but when she does not laugh, she is excluded from the sameness created by the participants. The instructor is outmanoeuvred both physically (backed up against the wall) and metaphorically by her inability to respond in an appropriate manner.

The failure of a shared sense of humour highlights a blur in the meta-communicational framing process that delineates the boundary between seriousness and play (Bateson 1952; Rossel 1981). This is seen in cognitive behavioural programmes when otherwise jocular stories are understood as underlying signs of 'criminal thinking', as in the following examples where thinking exercises are subtly ridiculed by the participants. The participants were asked to reflect upon how fast one is allowed to drive and who should decide that during a lesson in *Cognitive Skills*. Jonas argued that it is permissible to drive as fast as your own norms and duties dictate. The instructor challenged this and asked:

Instructor: What if there is a policeman on duty assigning speed tickets? Wouldn't you be obliged to slow down at that point?

Jonas: Well, then you have to slow down right before the police officer and then speed up again once you've passed him.

Instructor: You have obligations towards society don't you?

Jonas: Well, yeah some people think so ...

Ibrahim: This is why he is in prison! [All participants laugh while the instructor does not.]

The participants were then asked to write a short story based on a photograph of a man standing alone in a dark alley. The point of this exercise was to clarify how every participant (and person in general) has his own point of view and thus create different stories. A participant, Jonas, wrote a story about the man in the ally, who had just committed robbery in a convenience store and was now counting the profit: money and cigarettes. Michael also wrote a story in the 'true crime' genre, which encompassed an outlaw biker who was planning his next robbery. These stories amused the other participants, while the instructor suggested that Jonas and Michael had misunderstood the task at hand, but she did not prompt them to rewrite their stories. All three examples resulted in laughter from the surrounding participants, but left the instructor baffled. These stories or reports of rule-breaking behaviour do not necessarily reflect that the participants always make 'criminal choices' (as argued by the programme manuals; see Sjöberg and Windfeldt 2008; Scheel and Sjöberg 2005), but perhaps, rather, that the participants are familiar with the point of the exercise and have no difficulties in understanding that everyone has their own opinions. They live up the demands of the instructor and the programme by writing stories and discussing hypothetical dilemmas, but they do so in a manner that corresponds to their own values and experiences. Hence, they creatively, and softly, resist to the exercises in a humorous fashion, which serves to create friction, challenge the hierarchies and distort the social order, if only temporarily. These actions come to act as soft resistance which sometimes plays out in the manner of code-switching (Anderson 2009) as analysed below.

Humour in the shape of soft resistance and code-switching

The cognitive behavioural programmes are based upon a cognitive-psychological model of criminal conduct that has an explicit focus on thinking styles that control (or do not control) ‘criminal’ behaviour. This model seeks to replace what are considered to be rigid and erroneous thinking styles with cognitive skills that can increase pro-social behavioural choices. The model aims, in particular, to teach ‘criminals’ to reflect better instead of solely reacting, to show better foresight and to plan better in relation to future problems, and, in general, to teach them to be more flexible, open-minded, reasonable and thoughtful in their behaviour (DfK 2012:9). The embedded *normativity* in the programmes is visible, in the sense that the instructors are promoting certain modes of being, certain attitudes, and certain ways of thinking that are seen as superior (Laursen 2016). However, the instructors’ aim to stop ‘criminal thoughts’ and to guide the participants towards a more ‘proper’ or constructive way of thinking and reacting are often humorously subverted. The participants use of humour challenges the social and cultural order in the programmes when they display cultural and street capital against the ‘rationalized’ and ‘respectable’ version of the world which the instructors push forward.

My contention is that humour in these programmes can be understood as a meta-commentary on the course curriculum, content and assignments. This meta-commentary plays out in the shape of what Anderson (2009) calls ‘code-switching’. Anderson’s analytical separation of the residents in an impoverished neighbourhood of Philadelphia into two categories, ‘decent’ and ‘street’ families, is widely known. Despite the apparent rigidity of these categories, these residents *do* engage in ‘code-switching’, which means that one ‘[...] may behave according to either set of rules, depending on the situation’ (Anderson 2009). Likewise, the participants in cognitive behavioural programmes recognise – and are playing with – both the values of their social and ethnic origins and those to which they have to conform in order to satisfy the programme instructor, the

programme requirements and, in a larger scheme, the prison. The participants often draw upon a street-based, subcultural capital (Laursen & Laws 2016), which was also on display when one of the participants suggested that ‘you should drink a beer when you are upset’. This suggestion seemed sound enough, but another participant quickly answered ‘yeah, but then you end up getting arrested because you smashed someone in town’. This response seems to fit the script of a certain inner-city, subcultural expectation of night-life, which is estranging to the instructor who suggested that the participants should ‘just stay at home’ in order to avoid trouble.

One vernacular for humour and soft resistance in the cognitive behavioural programmes is jocular stories or enactments of ‘funny violence’ where the participants code-switch between the normative expectations of the programme and of their street-based subcultural experiences. The participants were often asked to ‘consider all alternatives’ when confronted with a possible tense or violent situation. This request to self-reflect and critically assess the value of one’s own thoughts would sometimes result in jokes. For example, one of the instructors asked what the participants could do instead of resorting to violence in a tense situation, and the participant Michael replied: ‘well, I wouldn’t want to kill him, just stomp on him a little bit’. This witty response could illustrate a normative game, in which Michael shows his awareness not only of different cultural codes, but also a sophisticated understanding of the dissonance between what might be ‘right’ in some contexts and what is acceptable in others. The participants continued to joke and said that ‘a sweaty hand and a slap go well together – then it says splash!’ which also resulted in laughter from the other participants. After these jocular remarks, the participants returned to the discussion and provided more ‘appropriate’ answers to conflict resolution, hence displaying the ability to code-switch between the ‘proper’ behaviour in different contexts.

The next example of an exercise in ‘considering all alternatives’ when faced with a potential conflict, illustrates several points of interest, namely the participant Ahmad’s subtle ridicule of the exercise and the gap between the worldviews of the instructor and the participants. The instructor Mohammad, asked the participants to list suggestions on how to calm down if they become angry. After a few suggestions such as ‘smoking cigarettes, being alone and working out’, the participant Ahmad exclaimed: ‘I put on a facial mask and listen to Tupac’. Everyone laughed at this point – according to the participants, no man would put on a facial mask in order to calm down! Ahmad toys with the instructor and the exercise by humorously suggesting that he would put on a facial mask (a ‘feminine’ recreational activity) while listening to Tupac (a ‘masculine’ or street-based appropriation of ‘proper’ relaxation). Listening to rap music is not deemed a proper or constructive relaxation activity by some of the cognitive behavioural instructors (see Laursen & Laws 2016), but Ahmad seems to recognize the instructors expectations (that he will choose a ‘wrong’ type of relaxation – listening to Tupac) while he simultaneously suggests a ‘decent’ relaxation activity. In an attempt to redirect the discussion, the instructor then said that he ‘reads a novel and listens to Frank Sinatra’ when he is upset. This made the whole group laugh hard and protest once again: no one is able to read when they are upset! Reading and listening to Frank Sinatra did not seem a viable solution. This disagreement can also highlight differences in the cultural capital and habitus of the instructors and participants, as it seemed completely unrealistic to listen to Frank Sinatra (the participants would often suggest listening to Tupac instead) while reading. The appreciation of, respectively, Tupac and Sinatra are obviously connected to taste and preferences, or put differently, cultural capital (Bourdieu 1990).

As also identified by other researchers (Fox 1999a: 93, 97, 1999b; Lacombe 2008), the cognitive behavioural programmes seem to produce particular ‘catch-22’ situations wherein programme

instructors, based on the programme ideology, expect a certain ‘anti-social’ behaviour (such as using violence; see Crewe 2011: 516). In order to divert or avoid these situations, the participants use humour as disruptions of role play and exercises which enables the participants to resist in subtle ways that do not call for reprimands. They exercise code-switching in order to accommodate the instructor’s need for the ‘right’ type of answers while they simultaneously manage to stay loyal to their own world-views. This was on display when the participants in *Cognitive Skills* acted out a role play wherein Irfaan played an angry customer in an auto shop. Irfaan negotiated with the mechanic and said that he would pay him extra money if he could have Irfaan’s car repaired by the morning, which made Jonas exclaim, ‘that’s bribery!’, while he laughed out loud. Irfaan said, ‘no, that’s not bribery, it is a social skill’. Here, Irfaan appears to be knowingly conjoining the norms and aims of the course (to acquire ‘social skills’) with a mode of subcultural codes (being ‘street smart’). He seems to be referring both seriously and jokingly to a mode of behaviour in which he might ordinarily engage. It could also be argued that Irfaan knows and toys with the course’s underlying assumptions about the participants’ ‘cognitive deficits’ and, thus, demonstrates the exact kind of behaviour that is assumed by the course ideology. Also, the participants use humour to transform a supposedly problematic being into an asset; in this case Irfaan portrays himself as socially skilled and competent instead of bribing and ‘criminal’. The participants manage to object to the embedded ‘cognitive deficit’ lens that their behaviour is understood through by humorously negotiating with the premises for identity construction. Jocular gripes and jocular stories of masculinity, violence and crime thus serve as soft resistance, which can remedy, or perhaps completely fend off, the otherwise ‘forced production of selves’ (Fox 1999: 111) in cognitive behavioural programmes.

There is a certain esoteric nature in the participants' shared humour in relation to the sociality and inner workings of the prison. This is visible in the following description where the participant Patrick displays knowledge of the programme's requirements while he refers to a shared knowledge of the subcultural values and norms of the prison sociality. Patrick told a story of a conflict between him and another prisoner where the other prisoner stole something from Patrick's cell and teased Patrick throughout the day. Patrick was furious in the end and wanted to hit the other prisoner. The instructor asks, 'what could you do to solve this in an assertive manner?' Patrick said, 'I guess I could have told the guards', which made all the participants laugh out loud. 'Snitching' in the shape of telling the guard is a well-known sin in prison, regardless of the fact that snitching is actually widespread (Copes, Brookman and Brown 2013). Patrick drew upon this subcultural knowledge in order to ridicule the exercise and display the absurdity of assertive communication in prison (for a similar account, see Fox 1999: 95). However, he also succeeds in displaying knowledge of the 'right' type of behaviour in accordance with the programme and instructors aim of teaching the participants to communicate assertively by suggesting that he should have solved the conflict in a non-violent manner. This type of frictional behaviour - where Patrick is joking with while simultaneously living up to the programme's expectations - and its relationship to soft power is discussed further below.

Humour as frictional behaviour

As suggested by Rubin (2016), prisoners' frictional behaviour grants a window of autonomy and creates leeway for small but significant acts of agency. Rubin's (2015: 2) contention is that we might theoretically and analytically use acts of friction to gain insight into the limitations of power and into the ways frictional behaviour may reverse power dynamics. In this context, frictional behaviour creates soft resistance and does, if not reverse, fend off soft power. The participants in

cognitive behavioural programmes engage in frictional behaviour, which serves to disrupt the lessons and twist the intentions of exercises to a point of near absurdity. This frictional behaviour is evident in the following example where the participants in *Cognitive Skills* were taught how commercials are designed to convince us to buy more:

One of the two groups works very seriously with the task and produces a commercial for football boots. The second group goes about the task in a humorous fashion and there is constant giggling and laughter from their end of the room. The second group finally presents the commercial: ‘Your Organic Smoking Shop’ targeted readers of ‘Gateway to Hope [5]’ and other Danish prisoner magazines. The group has developed a new environmentally conscious way of smuggling marihuana into the prison by way of a delivery cycle. The slogan for the commercial is ‘You call, we throw’ [hinting at the fact that sometimes marihuana is thrown over the prison fence]. To add credibility to their commercial, the group has added the testimony of a satisfied customer.

As seen in this example, the quixotic and oftentimes infantilizing role play in the programmes is ripe for producing jokes, silliness and stilted examples. However, as also found in Fox’s study (1999: 445), the participants’ disruptions and soft resistance actually most often revolve around the arbitrary format requirements of the programme, such as role play or thinking exercises – not the content as such. Nonetheless, the participants seem to keep psychological power and the demands for cognitive-self-change at bay by ridiculing the course content. Their soft resistance goes unpunished, precisely because it is so difficult for the instructor to identify and object to when the frictional behaviour can be explained away as ‘just a joke’.

The demand to critically assess the value of one's thoughts, actions and choices are prominent in the cognitive behavioural programmes. However, there is obviously a difference between a demand and obedience, which was clear in an exercise in critical thinking and how to handle defeats where the participant Jonas was interpreting the lesson in a humorous fashion. Jonas was supposed to think through all possibilities if he were to find it difficult to secure a livelihood upon his release. Jonas used a metaphor of his previous effort to open a safety box to get hold of the money inside: 'I'll just keep trying and use different tools. If it doesn't work with a cutting blowpipe, then I'll use a grinding machine – it will open at some point!' Bishar chimed in and said 'I sometimes feel defeated when I think about the crimes I am imprisoned for, but then again – there is a difference between the amount of crimes I've committed and the ones I am convicted for'. Both examples resulted in a roar of laughter from the other participants. The point of the exercise was obviously not to become a 'better criminal', but to find alternatives such as employment or applying for social security when the participants find themselves lacking money. However, Jonas seemed to find the exercise infantilizing and self-explanatory, so he made fun of it, albeit in a very subtle manner.

Another exercise in 'critical thinking' can further prove the point of understanding jokes as frictional humour and soft resistance against seemingly 'silly' exercises. The participants were asked to discuss an example of two parents arguing about their discovery of their daughter's habit of smoking cigarettes from, respectively, the daughter's and the parents' points of view. According to the instructor, the point of this exercise was to develop and practice 'critical thinking' and 'efficient decision-making'. Jonas said: 'don't worry, she just needs a little tobacco to mix with the marihuana', which made all the participants laugh. However, the instructor did not laugh and struggled to rerail the discussion; but the participants succeeded in their sabotage of the lesson and

the discussion soon died out. The participants were asked to alter their thinking and improve their decision-making, but they did not seem to find these purposes, or at least not the means of change, relevant for them. Hence, they made fun of the exercise and escaped, if only briefly, the intended cognitive self-change.

Another outlet for frictional humour among the participants is sexualized joking. The participants, especially younger prisoners, manage to steer many discussions in the direction of tendentious topics such as women and sex. During an exercise in critical thinking skills and self-containment in *Anger Management*, the participants were supposed to relate to an example of a football player who is about to take a penalty that will determine the outcome of the game. The football player is thinking ‘negative thoughts’ and he is sure that he will fail. The participants’ fidgeting, yawns, sideways glances and stretches served as signs of their difficulty in engaging in this particular exercise. Nevertheless, they began to answer the instructor’s questions about what topics the football player should replace his negative train of thoughts with:

Amin: Women.

Khazar: It depends on what kind of match it is.

Omar: I cannot really see how I am supposed to stand and think about this in a heated situation. I have to try it before I believe it.

Amin: Just say PEACE! [Everyone, besides the instructor, laughs. The discussion is derailed and the instructor changes the topic].

Instructor: Can anyone summarize today’s lesson?

Imad: It is normal to be angry and we are not crazy.

Omar: Don’t we have to do any homework?

Amin: You have to listen to that CD, you have to be completely naked while you do it and touch yourself all over your body [All participants laugh while the instructor seems frustrated.]

This exercise was effectively disrupted by the participants' humorous horseplay and the instructor was forced to move on to another subject after she had unsuccessfully prompted them to take the exercise seriously. The young participants pride themselves in having an assertive heterosexuality and a 'feel for the game' (Bourdieu 1990) with young women. The participants joke about their capacity for 'gangster-love' and how they aim to win female prisoners over with their charm and wit. Jokes, innuendos and comments about women or girls were frequently on display, but seemed to function as a group-consolidating mechanism and as frictional behaviour rather than actual sexist or misogynist intentions (for a different account, see Kehily and Nayak 1997). Tales of female conquests also highlight the numerous ways that the participants might seek redemption for their (potential) experiences of being emasculated and infantilized qua their imprisonment (Ugelvik 2011).

Adding to the above, I argue that expressing an active heterosexual identity and success in winning women over are important elements of such jocular identity work. Stereotypical or dominant images can be redeployed differently or disruptively (Munoz 1999), for instance through bodily resistance: tattoos, sexual experiences and physical prowess (Raby 2005: 154). In this vein, humour can potentially transform a problematic being into an asset. The remark by Imad ('it is normal to be angry and we are not crazy') also serves to illustrate a re-narration of a potentially negative self-image (being crazy) while pushing forward more positive self-images of being capable and skilled. The participants and the instructor in *Anger Management* went on to discuss how the participants

experienced the assignment of listening to a relaxation CD every night before they went to sleep. As evident in the example below, the participants were more preoccupied with girls than with relaxation:

Khazar: It was a bit difficult to listen to the CD because my cellmate was there as well. It was more relaxing when I chose the female voice-over ...

Imad: He can't relax because he doesn't have a mermaid! [Girlfriend]

Omar: Yes! He has tons of mermaids; he is an Iraqi player, an Iraqi 'John Travolta'!
[Everyone, besides the instructor, laughs.]

Besides showing a preoccupation with women, this example also shows how disruptive humour can be; the participants managed to derail the conversation completely and, thus, forced the instructor to change the subject. These types of frictional behaviour and soft resistance seem so prevalent in the empirical material that a discussion of the reach of soft power in cognitive behavioural programmes has merit.

Conclusion

Questioning the reach of soft power in prison-based cognitive behavioural programmes

In this article I have examined the meanings of humour within cognitive behavioural programmes in prisons. I have argued that humour in cognitive behavioural programmes can be understood as a meta-commentary on the course curriculum and assignments and as frictional behaviour. The analytical benefits of a fusion between the concepts of friction and resistance, has led me to suggest that we may understand the participants' behaviour as 'soft resistance'. My analysis of humour and soft power in prison-based cognitive behavioural programmes has shed light on new ways of

understanding the subordination that takes place in these programmes while, importantly, illuminating the numerous ways that the participants humorously create friction (Rubin 2015a) by resisting and transforming the programmatic goals.

This article also illustrates how different analytical lenses or understandings provide very different interpretations of humour. The instructors interpret humour through a ‘deficit’ lens much in accordance with their training (for a similar account, see Fox 1999: 93). This means that the participants’ use of humour is understood in psychological terms and as confirmations of their cognitive distortions. As a supplement to this understanding, this article advances a sociological analytical lens and, thus, a different understanding of humour. This perspective allows for an interpretation that pays attention to the social nature of humour, the context in which it plays out and its use in fending off soft power in prison. The jokes and comments made by the participants in cognitive behavioural programmes – however silly, puerile, or chaotic they may appear – could be understood as soft resistance in the symbolic struggle against soft power in prison.

This perspective enables an analysis of the ways power works and does not work, or at least is disrupted. These sentiments stand in contrast to a Foucauldian understanding of power, which implies that power always works – including in productive and positive ways. Humour seems to allow the participants in cognitive behavioural programmes to create friction (Rubin 2015) against the psychological power imbedded in this type of ‘treatment’, while avoiding serious repercussions. In a similar line, Rubin argues that ‘[...] prisoners manifest Levi-Strauss’s (1966) *bricoleur*, who uses whatever materials are at hand’ to create friction (Rubin 2016: 15); here, it is the cognitive behavioural programme’s requirements such as role-play and thinking exercises. The previous

empirical examples highlight the creativity of the group's frictional behaviours and the seemingly small, but yet significant, symbolic victories that the participants obtain by disrupting the lessons.

However, while the programmes aim at modifying prisoners' perspectives, the prisoners do not readily accept the characterizations assigned to them or the tacit questioning of their moral codes (Fox 1999a: 94). The participants do not readily accept the characteristics pushed forward by the programme manuals, such as the alleged tendencies to be impulsive, egocentric, rigid in their views, and poor at problem-solving, perspective-taking, and critical reasoning (Ross, Fabiano and Ewles 1988). On the contrary, they pride themselves on being 'street smart', and having sexual capacities, psychical prowess and understanding of how to manoeuvre in a tense prison setting. This does not necessarily imply that they do not internalize the programmatic characteristics at some point and thus strive to conduct themselves differently, but we should not readily accept the notion that power always works. Perhaps the participants pay lip service to the programmatic goals and go on to live their lives as they see fit once they pass the programmes. Humour is indeed an excellent tool against power, as seen in satirical cartoons meant to challenge oppressive regimes, jocular remarks directed at the powerful or in working class 'lads' humour, which works as a defence and counterattack against the school culture. These jocular disruptions of power may result in subversion eventually (as seen when the 'lads' end up reproducing working class selves; Willis 1978), but humour has merit and utility as an attempt to delegitimize stereotypes, categorizations and subordinating experiences.

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Notes

1. In line with many scholars, I use the expression ‘humour’ as ‘an umbrella term to cover all categories of the funny’ (Lippit 1994: 147). I understand and analyse humour in its broadest sense to include styles of jokes, insults, irony, funny remarks, play and storytelling.
2. I wish to thank one of the anonymous reviewers for pushing me to think about and suggest this concept.
3. 1) The superiority theory (we find humour in the misfortunes of others to the ridicule of something or someone), 2) the relief theory as pioneered by Freud (1950) (we laugh to release emotional or psychic tension) and 3) the incongruity theory where Kant (2008[1790]: 161) defines laughter as ‘an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation being reduced to nothing’.
4. In 2013 504 offenders participated in the seven different cognitive-behavioural programs offered by the Danish penal services. As approximately 4000 people were imprisoned and 8000 on probation/under surveillance this year (Annual Report 2013), this may not come across as a high number, but since most prisoners are imprisoned for too short sentences to engage in training programs, the coverage is actually quite high.
5. ‘Gateway of Hope’ [Håbets port] is a Danish magazine written by and for prisoners and distributed in all Danish prisons.

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Author biography

Julie Laursen is a Research Associate in the Prisons Research Centre at the Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge. She did her PhD research at the University of Aalborg, Denmark where she examined prison-based cognitive behavioural programs. She is currently working on a European Research Council comparative study of penal policymaking and prisoner experiences in England & Wales and Norway led by Dr. Ben Crewe.