

“She who laughs last...”

The meaning of humour, as described
by women in a creative arts process

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For Ben, Noah and Eva

Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative research paper is to explore women's experience of humour and the meanings derived from their experiences. In doing so, this study takes a feminist position, in contributing to the profile in arts therapy literature of women's subjective experience, whilst uncovering the phenomenon of humour, an experience that is often taken for granted. Within a phenomenological framework and drawing from the fields of heuristics, reflexivity, constructivism and from the MIECAT form of inquiry, four women were invited to engage in a creative arts process to explore their experience of humour and participate in two interviews each.

The research revealed a complexity of meanings that resisted reduction to a single essence. Making few references to gendered humour, the co-researchers of this study describe humour to be a playful means of communicating, connecting and bonding and of coping with difficult emotions or tension. Humour was also found to challenge 'common sense' and to expose alternate perspectives. Significantly, each of the co-researchers described ways in which humour is co-constructed and is a reflection of one's inter-relatedness with another.

Parallel to the research findings is a reflexive description of the research process and my journey of becoming a researcher. This is a sub-plot of the text that spans two tertiary institutions, eight years and reveals the woven intricacy of the research process in the way that we generate data as we are collecting data and are, in fact, also exploring humour in friendships between the co-researchers and myself. This work provides arts therapy practitioners with some insights into the complexities of women's experiences of humour and offers inroads to making sense through the non-sense of humour.

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Statement of Authorship

I declare that this is a true and accurate record of the research inquiry based on my own work, with my co-researchers, with acknowledged reference to sourced materials.

Signed:

P M Hellema

Date: 1st November 2011

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Journey Map 1

Chapter 1: Background to the Study

INTRODUCTION

This study is about women, the meaning of humour and creative arts process. It was prompted by a personal interest in the significance of humour, a professional interest in humour as a creative process and a political concern regarding the dynamics between humour, subjectivity and gender. These interests and concerns led me to construct the research question: *'What is the meaning of humour, as described by women in a creative arts process?'* The philosophical framework of phenomenology was selected for its focus on the exploration of meaning within experience. In particular, the phenomenological research methods defined by Merleau-Ponty (1962), Giorgi (1985) and van Manen were used to generate, gather and analyse meanings of humour. This first chapter describes the evolution of the research question, beginning with my interests in humour and creative process, followed by feminist perspectives on gendered humour (See Journey Map 1, p7). The significance of the study is then outlined, followed by a description of the structure of the thesis and the role of the Journey Maps.

INTERESTS THAT PROMPTED THIS STUDY

My personal interest rests in the significance I place on my sense of humour as a fundamental part of who I am. I have used humour as a means of coping with stress and discomfort, as a defence strategy and as a means of connecting with others. I consider my humour as belonging to my trickster archetype (Jung, 1981), as it has surfaced often during my creative arts therapy (CAT) education when confronted with the structure of the classroom. Due to the significance that humour has for me personally, I have sought to understand its meanings to others and to creative arts processes.

Throughout my professional education as a creative arts therapist, I have located a number of authors who view humour as influencing a person's sense of health and wellbeing in positive ways. Scott (2001), for example, suggests that spontaneous humour relates to feelings of joy and release, and creating alternate perspectives. Further, Freud (1927b, cited in Isaak, 1996) posits that humour has its origins in self-assertion. Processes of coping, communicating and constructing identities have also been attributed to humour (Kahn, 1989).

Some of the above meanings of humour connect with my understanding of the theory of creative process, as it is used in CAT.

A definition of play offers insight into my understanding of creative process. Playing with reality offers a child security during transition from ‘omnipotent infancy’ to adult reality. Children experience this developmental process through creative thought during the formative years of life. From birth, creativity, in the form of symbolic concepts and abstract thought, is used to distinguish the ‘me’ from the ‘not-me’, reconciling the relationship between the self and the external environment (Winnicott, 1971). This learning progression happens because the infant/child is able to cognitively and emotionally hold conflicting, or abstract, information via a transitional object, such as a stuffed toy, to which the child becomes attached. In the face of the shocking reality that the infant is not omnipotent, the infant infers upon the transitional object the illusion that s/he is still the centre of the universe and thereby regains security and comfort (Winnicott, 1971). Field (1957, p39) describes this dynamic as “*finding the familiar in the unfamiliar*”. The interplay of the subjective inner world and the objective outer world facilitates the acceptance of both illusion and disillusion through providing a space in which to mix together elements of reality with the imagination. “*This intermediate area of experience [transitional space] unchallenged in respect of its belonging to inner or external (shared) reality...throughout life is retained in the intense experiencing that belongs to the arts and to religion and to imaginative living*” (Winnicott, 1971, p14).

In adult life this developmental process is paralleled by creative process. To deal with anxiety, incongruities or feelings of being overwhelmed, adults may call on that same creative process, or ability to play, in order to negotiate a balance between reality and subjective thought (Winnicott, 1971).

To juggle elements into impossible juxtapositions, to shape wild hypotheses, to make the given problematic, to express the ridiculous, to translate from one form to another, to transform into improbable equivalents. It is from this spontaneous toying and exploration that there arises the hunch, the creative seeing of life in a new and significant way.
(Rogers, 1961, p355)

Through creative process, described by Rogers (1961) as making impossible juxtapositions and expressing the ridiculous, new information about the relationship between one’s beliefs and the reality of one’s environment can arise. Creative process offers a transitional space through which reality can be manipulated (Winnicott, 1971).

Rogers' (1961) description of creative process as making impossible juxtapositions and expressing the ridiculous connects, I think, with Freud's (1905, 1928) writings about 'joke work', which recognise a function of humour in the synthesis of incongruity, allowing the brain to unite two, otherwise contradictory, elements. This description of humour also echoes Winnicott's (1971) definition of creativity as facilitating illusion and disillusion at once.

As adults, our mistakes can be humorous due to the surprising connection of two contradictory elements. These "*impossible juxtapositions*" (Rogers, 1961, p355) are made possible by a cognitive ability to accept incongruity, also recognised as a function of humour. Perhaps humour may also function as a transitional space (Winnicott, 1971): a forum where illusion is entertained, enabling a sense of security in a situation of conflict. In searching for the absurd and looking for nonsense, I think humour is able to engage the imagination, invite creative process and suggest strange and new possibilities. The above associations suggest that humour may have some significance as a creative process.

Humour, I think, may have potential for women as a creative process in an arts therapy context. As a creative arts therapist interested in working with women, I want to understand the significance humour has for women. I have also come to recognise that some forms of humour have implications for me as a woman.

MY CONCERNS IN USING HUMOUR IN A CREATIVE PROCESS

The concerns that directed me to consider a study about women and humour relate to my feminist beliefs regarding the dynamics between humour, subjectivity and gender. As a woman, I sometimes feel excluded by some forms of humour. When confronted with sexist humour I experience a dilemma, which is to either quietly accept the joke or to appear to spoil the fun by pointing out the joke's meaning for me as a woman. My experience of this type of humour has been disempowering and suggests to me that humour can be used to maintain gendered power relations. While formulating a research question I sourced some feminist texts regarding humour and gendered power relations.

Artist Barbara Kruger (1987), who uses humour in her work to political ends, notes the use of humour to reinforce gendered power relations:

I remember watching Johnny Carson [American television show] one night 15 years ago. He was telling a joke and I was laughing along with Johnny. He finishes that joke

and suddenly he's telling another one – about broads. And I thought, Oh, that's me. So the jokes are never addressed to me, they're about me. I can't laugh about that. Because this is a triangulation in which we, as women, are spoken of but never addressed. We are never a subject, we are always an object. (Kruger, 1987, cited in Isaak, 1996, p44, her emphasis)

Kruger notes that through humour, Carson was placing her outside his audience in order to make a joke at her expense. A structure of authority is implied in this exclusion that places the male, comedian television presenter in a position of control, so asserting and maintaining gendered power relations.

In searching for a research question regarding women, humour and creative process, concerns arose for me about the implications of negative meanings of humour for women, including humour that is about women or generates limiting, or even demeaning, definitions of 'woman' and her abilities.

THE RESEARCH QUESTION

Because of my personal and professional interests and political concerns regarding humour, women and creative process, I decided to explore the following question: ***'What is the meaning of humour, as described by women in a creative arts process?'*** This question suggests that humour may have particular meanings for women. As the research is inclusive of all humour - spontaneous, gendered, political, satirical, black or otherwise - meaning that is particular to individual women is the focus of this study. The creative process, whilst not specifically therapeutic, is to simulate that which might be used in a therapeutic setting, which is as a mode of inquiry.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study has significance for me as a woman and as a creative arts therapist. It is an investigation of my suspicion that humour is a meaningful, creative process. My professional development as a creative arts therapist has been informed as a result of this research. Not only are the findings applicable to my arts therapy practice, but the process of inquiry, and the research journey, mirror elements of therapeutic inquiry.

The significance of this research to the field of CAT is the insights into the negative, positive or practical meanings that types of humour may have for women. In view of the potential use of

humour as a creative process with women clients, creative arts therapists would benefit from insights into the complexities of humour. These insights could inform the art-therapeutic process (Hogan, 1997), particularly for therapists interested in women's experience, working with women or who consciously employ feminist approaches to arts therapy. For example, this study may inform the creative arts process in addressing notions of 'humour' and 'humorous' in a therapeutic setting with women clients, validating a female client's experience of power constructs in a social context.

More broadly, this study has significance as it elevates the profile of women's experience. It is my hope that this study contributes to "*creating a female version of history, culture... [and to give] content to female subjectivity as a group*" (de Beauvoir, 1953, p58). In asking women to reflect upon '*being-in-the-world*' (Heidegger, 1960, cited in Betensky, 1996, p10), this study constituted a vehicle for addressing their experience.

The gap in the literature concerning these themes together both prompted this study and also contributes to its significance. While I have found a few texts concerned with humour and creative process, I have located no texts specifically concerned with women, the meaning of humour and creative arts processes. This study, I believe, has helped to fill that gap.

STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

The following chapter, Chapter 2, describes constructivist and feminist theories of knowledge, the philosophical framework of phenomenology and the Melbourne Institute for Experiential Creative Arts Therapy (MIECAT) as well as the philosophical links between CAT and phenomenology. It also outlines the specific methodologies of phenomenology, reflexivity and '*bricolage*' and then the specific method of inquiry. Chapter 3 presents the findings of the study, detailing my personal MIECAT inquiry. Chapter 4 discusses the findings as themes in the context of relevant literature and media regarding women, humour and CAT processes. In this way, a literature review is interwoven in the discussion as it relates to the findings of the study. In closing, Chapter 5 offers my reflections on the research experience, the issues I encountered and my journey of becoming a researcher.

Due to the expanse of time and the emergent research process, a result of a hiatus and of two creative arts therapy training institutes providing supervision, I have provided a Journey Map at various relevant points in the thesis. This map represents the personal geography (Harmon, 2004) (Klare & van Swaaij, 2000) of my research journey and periodically provides the reader with a sense of where the content sits within the research process in time. (See Journey Map 2, p14, for current location).

Periodically, some context is provided with the Journey Maps to bring the reader along on the journey through time.



Journey Map 2

Chapter 2: Epistemology, Research Paradigms, Methodology and Method

INTRODUCTION

This chapter describes the epistemology, or theory of knowledge, of constructivism and feminism, which provide the foundations of this inquiry. I will then summarise the research paradigms of phenomenology, intentionality, *'bricolage'*, MIECAT and multimodal experiencing. Phenomenology is outlined as both a philosophy and as a methodology, highlighting its links to creative arts process. This chapter then also describes the methodology of reflexivity. An outline of the method of inquiry adopted to generate and gather information follows, as well as the strategies used to address all ethical issues relating to this study.

Although reflected upon in the final chapter, the research journey is described, specifically the way that it has shaped the method of this inquiry. These adaptations in method were emergent in the research process in response to my co-researchers, to the emergent findings and to my process of learning how to be a researcher. Due to this evolution of method, the methodologies of reflexivity and MIECAT became salient, and the philosophy of *'bricolage'* (McLeod, 2001) was explored retrospectively. To conclude this chapter, some contextual background is offered, in which a Process Flow Chart is presented.

Epistemology

CONSTRUCTIONISM

A positivist research framework, used in the natural sciences, holds that *"things exist as meaningful entities independently of consciousness and experience"* (Crotty, 1998, p5). An undeniable objective 'truth' is sought, from which knowledge of meaning is then derived. When applied to the social sciences, the positivist model does not account for the subjectivity or meaning of experience (Hughes, 1990, p116-117). Constructionism is a theory of knowledge that arose from the belief that our understanding of reality encompasses various subjective constructions. Founded on the principle that there are multiple ways of knowing, and, therefore, multiple methods for research, constructionist epistemology posits that we construct knowledge and meaning out of our

interactions with others and our world in a context that is also constructed by prior experiences. *"We do not arrive at, or have, meaning and understanding until we take communicative action; that is, engage in some meaning-generating discourse or dialogue within the system for which the communication has relevance"* (Anderson and Goolishian, 1992, p27). Hence meaning and knowledge are not inherently located within an object, but rather emerge when consciousness engages with it. *"There is no meaning without a mind"* (Crotty, 1998, p8). Herein lie the precepts of phenomenology and intentionality (described p18), in which subject and object are always interconnected and inextricably linked (Crotty, 1998, p45). The phenomenological paradigm embraces intentionality, the various constructions of reality, and the inter-relational elements that shape experience, and was hence chosen to underpin the theory and methodology of this study. This research provides a window into meaning making, described by four women as they encounter humour with intentionality and consider their experience.

Adopting a constructionist lens for this study fits well with my belief that positivism is derived from a patriarchal worldview. Constructionism, however, creates a space for the subjectivity of women's experience to be presented.

FEMINISM

I will explain here my feminist position in relation to the study for clarity and transparency. Feminist theory is not homogenous and encompasses numerous ways of making sense of the world. Perhaps most feminists will agree that the world we live in is patriarchal, and is mediated by a male-dominated culture. While there are differing approaches to understanding the issues that women face in contemporary society, I agree with Young (1995) regarding the importance of addressing women as a group: *"Without conceptualising women as a group in some sense, it is not possible to conceptualise oppression as a systematic, structured, institutional process"* (p192, cited in Lupton, 1997, p3).

The construction (or co-construction) of humour is informed by many elements, including culture, society and economic position. Freud (1905b) noted, *"In peasant culture, the smut starts when the woman enters ... in more highly educated, and thus more repressed, society it starts when she leaves."* (p.100, cited in Isaak, 1996, p.45). Freud's comment refers to gender, humour and class. *"Discourses serve to shape representation and therefore experience, subjectivity and understandings of the world."* (Lupton, 1997, p3). Humour is a part of our visual and verbal cultural

discourse. As the initiating researcher, an impetus for this study included concerns about how humour can perpetuate negative and limiting ideas of women (see Chapter 1, p8).

As a female therapist and researcher, I strive to redress gender inequity and to support the development of selfhood, sexuality, ideas, occupation and choices that is not mediated by men. I work with the belief that an understanding of gendered meanings in contemporary culture is imperative for an arts therapist, and that an awareness of the meanings attributed to gender and difference contextualises the art-therapeutic process (Hogan, 1997). However, I do not assume that my feminist values are the same as those of my co-researchers. To do so would be limiting in the same way that the patriarchal and dominant discourse are limiting. Rather, the voices of the women in this study are encouraged to emerge through the process of exploring and expressing their lived experience. This research seeks a re-visioning of assumptions about humour and to “*Know [the man-made world] differently than we have known it before*” (Rich, 1990, p484).

Research Paradigms

PHENOMENOLOGY

The term ‘phenomenology’ was first used by leading phenomenologist Edmund Husserl to describe the belief that experience is the source of all knowledge (Betensky, 1995). In the early 20th century, the development of the philosophy of phenomenology was a move toward humanism and away from the reductionist, positivist science. Its aim was to understand the subjective meaning of everyday lived experience from the perspective of the individual. Husserl (1970a) described the discipline of phenomenology as “*Zu den Sachen*”, meaning both “*to the things themselves*” and “*let’s get down to what matters!*” (cited in van Manen, 1990, p184). For Merleau-Ponty, another pioneering phenomenologist, meaning equates to consciousness and existence is imbued with sense: “*As soon as there is consciousness, and in order that there may be consciousness, there must be something to be conscious of, an intentional object, and consciousness can move towards this object only ... if it is wholly in this reference to something, only if it is a pure meaning-giving act*”. (1962, p.139-140).

As a philosophy to underpin research, phenomenology investigates phenomena based on the principle that “*essential truths about reality are grounded in the lived experience*” (Streubert & Carpenter, 1995, p.35), and is an attempt to uncover internal meaning structures within the experience of one’s ‘life-world’ (Husserl, 1970a, cited in van Manen, 1990). The notion of ‘essence’

is key to phenomenological research, characterised by Merleau-Ponty as “*that which makes a something what it is*” (cited in Giorgi, 1985, p.44). To explore the essence of a phenomenon is to reveal meaning that is embedded in experience.

Phenomenological research aims to collaboratively attend to human experience from the standpoint of the person who is having the experience. The ‘subject’, or ‘participant’, is regarded as a co-researcher, with whom an understanding of her lived experience is explored.

Phenomenology provides this study with a methodology for researching the meaning structures of humour, described by women in a creative arts process. Being a CAT student, phenomenology was chosen as an appropriate research framework for its theoretical and philosophical links to creative process, as it is used in CAT as a tool for inquiry.

Phenomenology, Intentionality And Creative Arts Process

Creative arts process and phenomenology are interrelated in several ways. Underpinning phenomenological inquiry is an acknowledgment that the individual is interconnected with the world; she is approached as ‘*being-in-the-world*’, or ‘*Dasein*’ (Heidegger, 1960, cited in Betensky, 1996, p10). Central to the use of creative process within CAT practice is the belief that the individual, her experience and the world in which she lives are inextricable and are, therefore, regarded as a whole. This shared philosophy places the individual at the centre of meaning and knowledge.

Creative arts process, within CAT, and phenomenology also share a theory of ‘intentionality’. This theory is central to phenomenological research, as it is attentiveness to one’s experience of being in the world. ‘*Intentionality refers to consciousness, to the internal experience of being conscious of something.*’ (Moustakas, 1994, p28) ‘Intentionality’ signifies our relationship to the world through experience, made meaningful in consciousness (Crotty, 1998). van Manen writes: “*In this way we discover a person’s world or landscape*” (1990, p182). In relation to creative process, Betensky (1995) articulates ‘intentionality’ as the notion that one may experience emotion in relation to an object (or creative work). For the purposes of CAT, the drawing of objects may both express and reveal this phenomenon (Betensky, 1995). Using this notion of intentionality, both phenomenological inquiry and creative arts process, within CAT, share an endeavour to uncover insights regarding meaning within one’s experience.

In this study, the co-researchers used creative arts processes as research tools. This research process acknowledges the individual as central to meaning and knowledge, and endeavours to explore the meaning of humour for women through the dialogue of experiencing between subject and object.

MIECAT AND MULTIMODAL EXPERIENCING

In response to a constructionist, phenomenological framework, the Melbourne Institute for Experiential Creative Arts Therapy (MIECAT) provided this study with the conceptual foundations of multimodal and experiential inquiry. Phenomenology and the MIECAT approach to inquiry share the philosophy of experience being central to the search for meaning. The MIECAT procedure for inquiry is to use experience as an entry point into the ways we can know experience.

We experience the world using cognitive, imaginative, emotional and somatic processes simultaneously (Lett, 2003). A multimodal form of inquiry parallels the multiple forms of experiencing and can also reach various levels of knowing: *“The arts are uniquely beneficial in their capacity to access experience, thoughts, and feelings that do not depend exclusively on either verbal language or narrative discourse”* (Malchiodi, 2005, p187). By engaging in various forms of experiencing through creative sound, vision, movement and speech, one is able to understand, make sense of, and indeed make meaning (Lett, 2003). Heron (1992) calls this presentational knowledge founded on experiential knowledge. He says: *“... a person creates a pattern of perceptual elements – in movement, sound, colour, shape, line – to symbolize some deeper pattern that interconnects perceptual imagery of this world or other worlds. On this account of knowledge, art is a mode of knowledge. Presentational knowledge includes not only music and all the plastic arts, but dance, movement and mime. It also embraces all forms of myth, fable, allegory, story, and drama, all of which require the use of language, and all of which involve the telling of a story. There is one overall point about presentational knowledge, which is important for our understanding of the world. It reveals the underlying pattern of things”* (p165-168).

In a broad way, this study also borrows from the participatory paradigm, in the way that it cycles through the four forms of knowing through participation as outlined by Heron (1992, 1999): experiential, presentational, propositional and practical. The entry point for each researcher has been our experience of humour. We have formed our presentational knowledge of the significance of these experiences through discussion, writing, drawing, painting, drama, and sculpture. The propositional knowing of this study is expressed as a group of essence statements about our

experiences of humour in Chapter 4. Based on these essences, this study contributes to the practical knowing of Creative Arts Therapists who read it.

Using multimodal inquiry, MIECAT procedures engage in the phenomenological research methods of ‘phenomenological description’, ‘reduction to essences’ and ‘imaginative variation’ in a cyclic exploration (described below and in the process of analysis, Chapter 3, p33). As a participant of the study, I explore my personal experience of humour using the MIECAT procedures. These are described in detail in Chapter 3, *The Findings of the Study* (p33).

MIECAT’s constructivist and multimodal approach to research has helped to illuminate the co-construction of meanings between my co-inquirers and myself, which has been key to my reflexive process and to the emergent methodology of this study.

As mentioned above, this study was initiated six years ago. Under the supervision of RMIT lecturers, the (then so named) participant recruitment, data generation and gathering occurred within a research methodology that drew largely from phenomenology and particularly that of van Manen.

BRICOLAGE

John McCleod (2004) describes the postmodern approach of allowing method to be determined by the data as *bricolage*. He notes that contemporary social science research endeavours to do what is necessary in order to elicit, understand and describe the phenomenon being investigated. To this end “*Method needs to be adapted to circumstances, the method differs according to who uses it, the researcher needs to be flexible*” (McCleod, 2004, p119). McCleod’s views, retrospectively, aptly describe the process that I have followed in the combining of various research methods and my adaptation of method to the needs of the data, as he writes: “*the method emerges in response to the task of conducting a study*” (McCleod, 2004, p119). The initial interviews began with one broad question. There was a notion of inquiry, but rather than a confining structure there was an exchange and an interactive dialogue which built on itself. This became evident over time, but was, in fact, there from the start.

Similarly, as I came to regard ‘my participants’ as ‘co-inquirers’ and collaborators, McCleod identifies that the researcher-as-*bricoleur* does not work in isolation and that “*knowledge is intrinsically collective and relational*” (McCleod, 2004, p122). As such, creating knowledge is a co-constructed, cyclic, rather than linear, process that encompasses the ways in which human experience is known, such as the spiritual, emotional, relational and embodied.

Methodology

PHENOMENOLOGICAL METHODOLOGY

This study explores meaning embedded in lived experience, that is, the meaning of humour to women who are engaged in a creative arts process. Giorgi, drawing from Merleau-Ponty's method for phenomenological inquiry, describes four research characteristics to generate, gather and analyse information (cited in Giorgi, 1985, p43). These research activities are also modes of inquiry used by MIECAT and therefore fit well within the paradigms of phenomenology and MIECAT together. In relation to this study, these activities were not separate activities but, rather, interwoven and overlapping.

These activities involve:

Description

A phenomenological description of the experience is a naïve account in that the researcher avoids pre-emptive conceptualisation. The phenomena must remain embedded in experience, outside a theoretical standpoint or analysis (Giorgi, 1985, p47). Appendix 3 offers examples of naïve, experiential description within Em's interview transcript.

Reduction

Meaning structures, as they appear, are allowed to emerge by bracketing out pre-existing assumptions of the phenomena under study. *"Whatever presents itself to consciousness should be taken precisely with the meaning with which it presents itself, and one should refrain from affirming that it is what it presents itself to be"*(Giorgi, 1985, p48). This is to gather meanings as they surface, considering the context of the whole. Polkinghorne affirms *"The divisions are to be those that naturally cohere in the text rather than those imposed by the expectations of a researcher's theoretical position"* (1989, p94). This process of reduction is also used in the MIECAT method of inquiry, described p118, in which the phenomenological description is, without judgment, gleaned for keywords and phrases that are reflective of the general meaning. Appendix 4 offers an example of the process of reduction to keywords and phrases.

Essences

Essences are the unchangeable qualities of the phenomenon that emerge from the reduction process. These essences are contextualised by both the specific 'meaning units' and the general structure of

the co-researcher's description (Giorgi, 1985, p.50). Chapter 3, *The Findings of the Study*, provides a summary of the meaning units that emerged from the descriptions of each co-researcher. Chapter 4, *Discussion of Findings*, presents a search for shared essential aspects of the phenomenon, a reduction to essences, and a map of the inter-relatedness of the essences.

Intentionality

Intentionality, as described above, refers to the intentional act by which each person is related to their world, as consciousness is always consciousness of something. Each co-researcher attended to their experience of humour with intentionality, engaging with the subject and all its meaning structures. Similarly, the research process was reflected on with intentionality. As transcripts and summaries were returned to co-researchers, there emerged some reflections on what meanings the research process has, beyond the findings. An example of this is the significance of the five-year gap in the research during which I was unwell, had my first child and changed schools.

My evolving understanding of various research methodologies, the context of my relationship with each co-researcher, the orientation of various supervisors and events in my personal life became clear influences in the research process. My research journey is described in Chapter 5 (p176) but methodologically to attend to these emergent influences I sought an understanding of reflexive research.

REFLEXIVITY

A constructionist, phenomenological approach, therefore, requires careful attention to the various contexts that shape the descriptions of each co-researcher. My co-researchers were not simply telling me their experiences of humour, and what meaning these experiences had. In our conversations we were co-constructing the descriptions. Heron and Reason (1997) describe this co-creation as "*The emergent reality as the fruit of an interaction of the given cosmos and the way the mind engages with it*"(p279). In the endeavour of transparency, a reflexive approach to the inquiry sought to explicate my values, the context in which the data was generated and the various elements that shaped the research process. "*We co-produce the worlds of our research knowledge rather than discover something already there, outside of us. Our own assumptions and activities as researchers must become part of the inquiry within a process which stresses complex multiple realities informed by a belief that research and knowledge is personal, social and cultural in construction*" (Payne, 1993, p3-4).

A reflexive methodology is also a response to the feminist emphasis on equality within research relationships and a dedication to transparency by the initiating researcher and the research process. The researcher becomes known and visible in the process and takes ownership of their values and beliefs by using the first person pronoun 'I'. (Etherington, 2004)

My position in relation to the research topic is outlined in Chapter 1, and my experiences in relation to each co-researcher are described in Chapter 3 to disclose values, assumptions and context in the co-construction of the research. Returning transcripts and findings to each co-researcher also provided further reflexivity in the search for some common understandings of content and context.

Significant to the research process, and noteworthy in a reflexive inquiry, has been the evolution of myself as a researcher. Begun six years ago, this project began with a 'van Manian' approach to data gathering, which required a prescribed interview style, and assumes to be able to 'know' a participant's description of experience (1990). My supervisors at the time provided direction and correction in this method. I sensed an unnatural distance, in this approach, between the 'participants' and myself, the 'researcher', and this distance was felt to be obstructive to open and candid sharing of experience. In the context of relating with each 'participant' in the interviews, the prescribed role of interviewer felt artificial, and counter-intuitive to the process of exploration. I instinctively settled into a much more non-directive, conversational style of interview, encouraging discussion using my counseling skills. In this way the research procedure was scrutinised when it seemed to obscure these emerging contextual qualities. Hence, the research process intuitively moved from the interpretive paradigm of van Manen (1990) to a constructionist one. This has required a bridging of these two positions, and reflexivity provides some transparency as the various methodologies are drawn together.

Reflexive research also illuminates the collaborative process and therefore lends credibility to the data, making distinctions, where possible, between the various constructions and co-constructions of meaning as they emerged. In this way reflexivity provides this study with further rigor.

Method of Inquiry

Criteria for Participation

The criteria for participation in this study were women who:

- were over the age of 18 years
- had experienced humour
- were willing to engage in creative arts process and talk about their meanings of humour.
- were able to converse in English

The co-researchers were women living in the Melbourne metropolitan area. It was anticipated that three to six co-researchers would be required, the final number determined at the point of theoretical saturation (Streubert & Carpenter, 1995). Initially four participants were sought.

Co-researcher Recruitment

As a number of friends and colleagues had expressed an interest in participating in this study, professional and personal networking was the means of co-researcher recruitment. Hence the selection of co-researchers was not a random process, and, by virtue of being women that I know and who showed interest in the study, have similar cultural experiences, skills and dedication to the task. There are some shared qualities of relating that emerge and are discussed in Chapters 3 and 4. I contacted four women, three of whom accepted the invitation to participate. Each potential co-researcher was contacted by telephone, at which time a description of the study question, framework and process was provided with an invitation to participate. One response to my description of the study from one potential co-researcher was *“But I’m not very funny. I wouldn’t know what to say about humour.”* I reassured her that ‘being funny’ was not a prerequisite and that it was her experience of humour that was to be explored. Already the context of experience could be observed to shape the process. For each potential co-researcher I then described the time-frame (see ‘Data Gathering’, p25) within which each co-researcher may reflect upon, and begin to notice, her experiences of humour. Upon receiving my initial phone call, however, the process of reflection had already begun. Following this discussion, if the potential co-researcher expressed a continued interest in being part of the study, a full description of the study (via a plain language statement, or PLS, see Appendix 2) was sent to the potential co-researcher, outlining the co-researcher’s rights, the purpose and processes of the study. At this point one of the four women I contacted declined the invitation to participate due to her time commitments.

Separate meetings were arranged with each of the three co-researchers, at a mutually acceptable time and place, to discuss the study further. At these meetings I addressed their questions regarding the time frame of the study, anonymity, the role of the creative arts process and phenomenological research.

Once the potential co-researchers had indicated that they understood the requirements of the study and had expressed a continued interest in participation, an 'Informed Consent' form was mailed to each co-researcher, to be signed and returned to me. After signing the consent form, a first interview was arranged at a mutually acceptable time and place (three weeks hence) to begin the data gathering process.

Data Generation

To generate data, the co-researchers were asked to reflect on their experience of humour over a six-week period and engage in a creative arts process, to assist their experiential inquiry.

Co-researchers chose an arts modality, or modalities, to explore their experience of humour. Their choice depended on their preferred mode of expression. Es chose to make costumes and keep a visual diary, while Em decided to journal and incorporate her creative inquiry into her current writing project. Em and Es saw this study as a means of facilitating their own, much neglected, creative work, and appreciated the opportunity as a project for themselves. Ann, as a practicing artist, chose painting as her modality. Co-researchers were encouraged to keep written reflections relating to the process of their creative work (van Manen, 1990). Co-researchers were also offered various methods of securing any 'performance' based work (such as music, movement or dramatic expression) for example, via video or audiotape, for later reflection, if required. Each co-researcher chose the location for the production of this material.

Data Gathering

During the six weeks, information was gathered by meeting with each co-researcher twice to gather data using interviews, as articulated by van Manen (1990). The first interview occurred three weeks after recruitment and the second at the end of the six-week period. Co-researchers brought creative works and written reflections, resulting from their creative inquiry, to our interviews. These works, selected by the co-researcher, were requested for inclusion in the final thesis to further explicate meaning.

Interviewing, in phenomenology, is used for gathering and exploring experiential narrative material, in the form of stories, anecdotes and examples of experience, and is directed by recursive interview

questions (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell & Alexander, 1990). As the interviewer, I guided the interview as closely to experience as lived. In order to remain close to the study topic, the question used to initiate the interview discussion was 'Based on your experience, what are the meanings humour has for you?' As articulated in Chapter 3, *The Findings of the Study* (p33), some co-researchers struggled to answer this question, as they found it too broad and over-arching. In response, I modified the initial question according to what each co-researcher brought to the discussion, instead asking, for example, 'Can you describe an experience of humour that had significance for you?'

Further problems arose for me in the constrictions I felt that van Manen's approach placed on the emergent discussions. Due to my pre-existing connection with each co-researcher, the interview process initially felt awkward and superficial, like an imposing, formal structure constraining what would otherwise be an open discussion between co-researchers. I felt inclined to participate in the discussion, naturally offering my experiences as part of a relaxed, reciprocal conversation. With each successive interview, I settled into a more collaborative approach, becoming attuned to the story of the co-researcher, listening for her meanings relating to humour. In situ, I found myself relying on my listening skills and therapist training in order to be present with the co-researcher in discussion. My response was to question, clarify, validate, reflect back, paraphrase and compare experiences with each co-researcher as I veered away from concerns about my 'interview technique'. The emerging interview style, shaped by knowing the co-researchers, also led to an ease and openness as each interview progressed. This ease and openness often resulted in the generation of a shared experience of humour during the collection of data about the experience of humour. By orientating the research to include a reflexive approach, I have been able to elucidate these varying contexts and my evolving responses to the research data and process. An example of a co-researcher's interviews is provided in Appendix 3. Creative works by artists and writers were also referenced by co-researchers in relation to their experiences of humour. van Manen (1990) identifies biographies, literature, art and poetry as a rich source of lived experience descriptions.

Analysis

The interviews and creative works, regarded as the depictions and descriptions of the co-researchers, were the core data of this study. These were analysed using steps outlined by Giorgi (1985), which involved my immersion into each description to get a sense of the whole, reduction to meaning units, imaginative variation, balancing specific parts with general structure and reflection on the essential themes, which characterise the phenomena of the meanings of humour described. A more detailed

description of the analysis process follows in Chapter 3, *The Findings of the Study* (p33). A process of clarification followed the analysis of each interview towards a shared understanding of meanings.

Agreement of Understandings

Clarification of the resulting emergent meanings involved returning the tapes, transcripts and my analysis to the co-researchers to ensure the most authentic description of the phenomenon had been gained (Colaizzi, 1978, cited in Streubert & Carpenter, 1995). As mentioned, this occurred five years after the initial interviews, and is detailed in Chapter 3, *The Findings of the Study*, p35, in response to the co-researchers' reflections on the significance of this.

Throughout the processes of information gathering, analysis and Agreement of Understandings, the respective contexts were reflexively considered in their bearing on the data. These considerations appear in Chapter 3, outlined in boxes.

Ethical Considerations

The ethical issues relating to this study were informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity and level of risk. Each of these issues was carefully considered and processes were put in place to ensure that all potential risks associated with participation were minimised. Approval from the RMIT Faculty Subcommittee of the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) was sought and obtained for the study (Appendix 1).

Informed Consent

Each potential co-researcher was given a verbal and written description of the study (PLS) outlining the study's purpose, requirements, her rights as a co-researcher, and the researcher's responsibilities (Appendix 2). Some co-researchers had questions regarding the research approach, anonymity and the time-frame. As indicated earlier, to address these questions, I met with each potential co-researcher for a coffee (at a mutually acceptable time and place). Prior to participating in the study, each woman was asked to sign an RMIT consent form, which states that the co-researcher understands the purpose, methods and demands of the study, her right to withdraw from the study at any time, and that confidentiality and anonymity are assured.

Confidentiality

During the study, confidentiality involved securing all information under lock and key at my home at all times. Only my supervisor and I had access to the information. On completion of the study all

information will be secured at MIECAT for a period of up to five years, and will then be destroyed, in keeping with MIECAT policy.

Anonymity

Anonymity was maintained through the use of pseudonyms and through disguising identifying information. Maintaining anonymity also involved respecting a co-researcher's request for non-inclusion of work or information that they felt revealed their identity. One co-researcher had concerns about being recognised through her creative work. She was reassured that her requests for the non-inclusion of her work or information would be respected. The process of *Agreement of Understandings* (p35) was an opportunity for co-researchers to withdraw any information or work that they felt would identify them.

Level of Risk

The level of risk for co-researchers of this study was considered by the Faculty Subcommittee of the HREC of RMIT University to be minimal (Appendix 1). The potential risks were considered to be in the information gathering processes of interviewing and the possibility of video-taping, identified as a possible creative modality used by participants, due to the potential revelation of co-researcher identity. Strategies to ensure confidentiality and anonymity, as stated above, were put in place to minimise these potential risks.



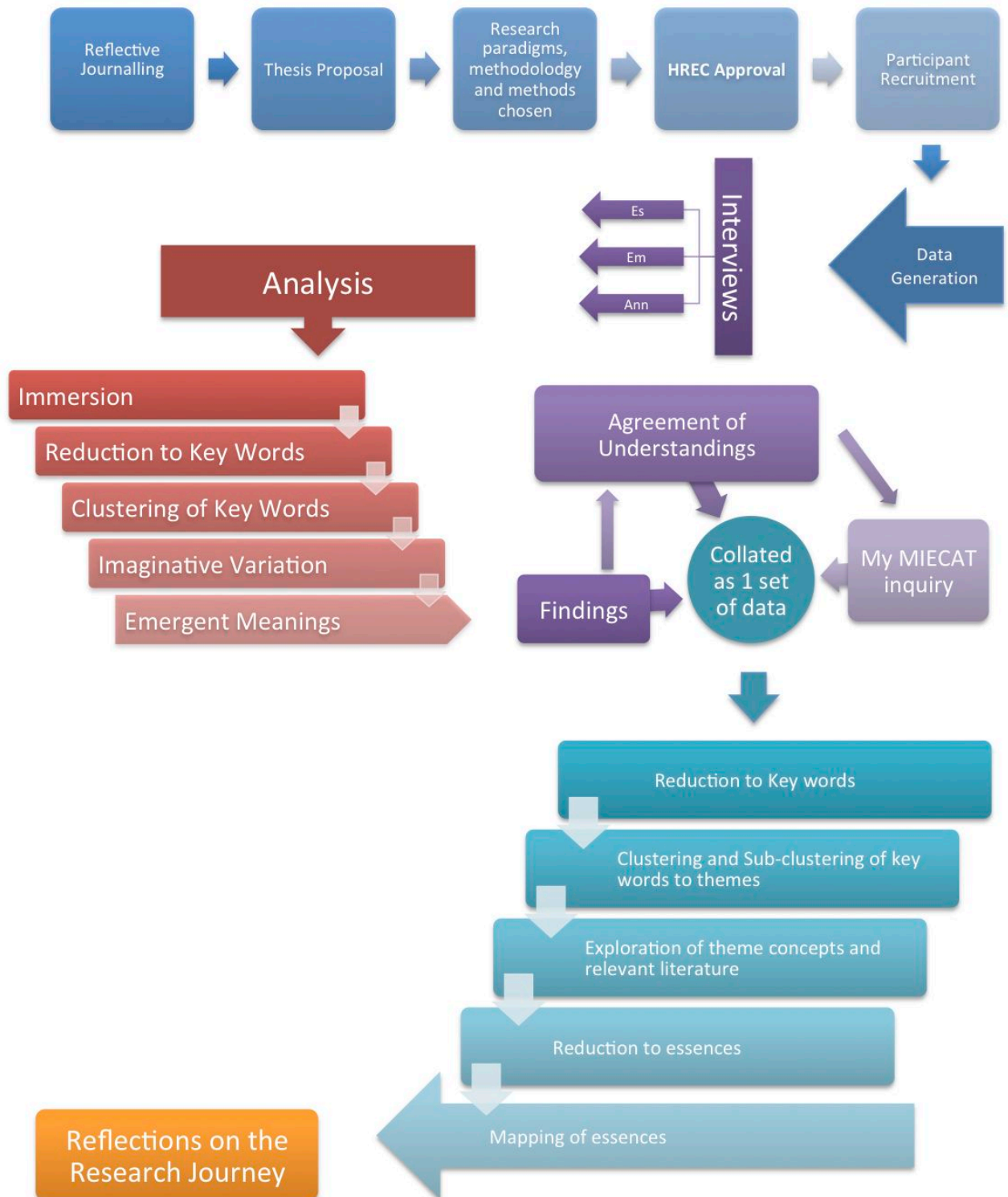
Journey Map 3

CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

After the data generation and gathering process, I needed to put the research down due to ill health in 2004 (see Journey Map 3, p29). I became pregnant soon after and had my first child. Several years after my son was born, the RMIT Creative Arts Therapy program closed. In 2009 I enrolled at the Melbourne Institute of Experiential and Creative Arts Therapy to complete the thesis. The thesis changed from a 15,000-word project as part of an MA by Coursework, to a 40,000-word thesis towards an MA by Research. Also significant to the research process was the MIECAT orientation to qualitative research. I felt an opening up through the discovery of reflexivity, collaborative inquiry and a postmodern approach to research. Hence the initial research procedures were conducted within a different framework, and with a different mindset, to the ‘analysis’ and discussion of emergent meanings. This gap in time also influenced the responses of the co-researchers during the *Agreement of Understandings* (described on p35) process.

For clarity, the following Process Flow Chart, on page 31, shows the process of consecutive research tasks, regardless of time.

Process Flow Chart





Journey Map 4

Chapter 3: Findings of the Study

INTRODUCTION

This Chapter presents the findings of the data, and a summary of the analysis process. A description of the analysis process is provided, followed by an explanation of the process titled ‘Agreement of Understandings’. The findings are presented as ‘emergent meanings’ for each co-researcher, including myself.

Each set of findings for each co-researcher is preceded by an introduction to the context of my connection with the co-researcher and of our data gathering. A brief summary of the findings precedes the Emergent Meanings, which is then followed by the Agreement of Understandings. The meanings to emerge from my personal data is presented, sans the ‘Agreement of Understandings’, and this chapter concludes with a detailed description of my MIECAT inquiry into my experience of humour with my Three year old son.

As mentioned at the end of Chapter Two (p30), it is important, at this stage, that the reader be aware there has been a gap of almost six years between beginning this research project and the ‘analysis’. In the initial phase, the research question was arrived at, the method of inquiry was chosen, ‘participants’ (as I referred to my co-researchers then) were recruited and data generated and collected. I will tell the story of my research journey in Chapter 5; however, this fact provides some context to this chapter, as at this point in my journey I have enrolled with MIECAT to complete the research (see Journey Map 4, p32). I embarked on the analysis of the data with a deeper understanding of constructionism, the co-construction of experience and of reflexivity. The analysis process has been responsive to this and to the emergent meanings within the data, not allowing method to constrain the emergence of meaning (McLeod, 2004). Gilligan et al. encapsulates an approach to analysis as a process of listening for the multiple layers that compose the voice of the co-researcher. This method offers “ *a pathway into relationship rather than a fixed framework for interpretation.*” (Brown & Gilligan, 1993, p22, cited in Gilligan et al. 2006, p254) Throughout this chapter I use the terms interview, discussion and conversation interchangeably.

ANALYSIS

The word ‘analysis’ belongs to a positivist paradigm, suggestive of an isolated expert determining the relevance and validity of the data. However, it is also used by Giorgi (1985) and other phenomenologists. My search for an alternative word was unfruitful. The co-researchers were

consulted and each felt that the term would suffice, so it will be used, despite my discomfort with it, and I hope the reader will embrace the spirit of collaboration with which it is used here.

I met with each co-researcher twice to discuss her experiences of humour. Each interview was recorded and, along with my personal journal reflections, the resulting transcripts provided the raw data for this study. Analysis of the descriptions followed Giorgi's process of analysis with a focus on reflexivity to illuminate the co-constructed meanings that emerged from the data gathering process.

Giorgi identifies four activities of analysis, which were adapted for this study:

Immersion

In order to get a sense of the whole, I immersed myself in each co-researcher's description. I sought to understand meaning in terms of the co-researcher's perspective, intentionality and language (Giorgi 1985, p11). In practice, this involved reading and re-reading an interview transcript, or description, whilst bracketing out my assumptions and conceptualisations about the topic. This process revealed each co-researcher's orientation to the phenomenon under study. For example, Em's approach, initiated through the lens of her creative writing, focused on how she used humour to engage and relate to others. My orientation focused on my development as a person. Ann, on the other hand, offered conceptualisations based on her experience of humour in differing spheres of her world, whilst Es focused on not only how humour can connect her to others, but also how she characterises herself.

Reduction to meaning units

Once I had a sense of the whole, I then searched for distinct descriptions, in terms of the whole meaning. These meanings emerged from a reduction to key words and phrases and a clustering into 'meaning units'. I have used the term 'emergent' as the process of clustering like words and phrases allowed the components of the whole to organically come into view. To ensure that the co-researcher's context was retained, I continually returned to the transcripts and tapes to test the emergent meanings against the description as a whole. Examples of the keyword clusters gleaned from discussions with Em are provided in Appendix 4.

Imaginative Variation

This was the process of transforming the keyword clusters into a consistent language, from which meanings could be addressed according to the research topic. Part of this step involved testing my language and notions against the co-researcher's description, stretching the boundaries as it were, in

order to understand more clearly what each emergent meaning both is and is not. I reflected on the different possibilities of meaning until I arrived at the essential meaning. By finding a consistent language for all emergent meanings, it is thought that the next process, the synthesis and discussion of found meanings, is more coherent whilst highlighting specific experiences. What resulted were initial summaries of each keyword cluster, which became the seed of each *Emergent Meaning* in this chapter. Examples of the Imaginative Variations follow their relative keyword clusters in Appendix 4.

Synthesis of the parts and the whole

I then sought to locate each particular *Emergent Meaning* within the general structure of the description. I returned to the transcripts to ensure that meanings were grounded in the experiences described by the co-researcher. The results of this process make up the content of this chapter.

AGREEMENT OF UNDERSTANDINGS

An Agreement of Understandings in which verification of analysis occurs to ensure the fidelity of meaning and experience follows each summary of emergent meanings. This involved returning the tapes, transcripts and my analysis to each co-researcher. After several weeks we then met to discuss the findings, make corrections and clarify meanings. This process aligns with reflexive practice in creating an open and critical discourse of shared understandings of the co-researchers' descriptions. The co-researchers took the opportunity to further explain meanings and address omissions and misunderstandings. This process provided the research with validity and coherence. At this point, I also pursued queries that had arisen for me during the analysis. During this review of the descriptions and analysis, the co-researchers shared new reflections on their experience of humour, supporting van Manen's (1990) notion that the description and understanding of experience is an evolving process. These new reflections and clarifications were included in the collation of findings for Chapter 4, *'Discussion of Findings'*.

The introductions and reflexive comments reflect some of my struggles in 'becoming' a researcher during the interviews and the progress of the study. Six years ago I felt a burden of responsibility for the validity of the interview content, and believed that adherence to one methodology was how one achieved this. I had also not yet fully embraced the concepts of reflexivity and co-inquiry, but this was emerging in the process. By the time I began the analyses I had enrolled in a different tertiary

institution, had a different supervisor, and was exposed to postmodern and collaborative research paradigms and methods.

REFLEXIVE REFLECTIONS

To assist the reader in understanding the co-construction of meanings as they arise in discussion, I reflect on the inter-subjective experience between each co-researcher and myself. Inter-subjectivity is defined by MIECAT as the inner responses that arise when one is engaged and present with another through focused and active listening (2008). This encompasses feelings and images drawn from one's own experiences as they intersect with those of another. What is significant to the search for meaning within the experience of humour is that we laughed together during the interviews, so we are generating data while we are collecting data. This experience confirms the co-construction of knowledge but also hints at a quality of humour that surfaced in the findings. I therefore reflexively explore my experience of this shared humour during the interview as it emerges. These will appear in boxes within the description of emergent meanings to connote this distinction. (see Journey Map 5, pg37.)



Journey Map 5

EM

Outside the context of my friendship with Em the role of the 'interviewer' feels unnatural and false. I thought that reflecting on the experience of humour with a friend would be easy, but it is made complex by the artificial process of 'data collection' and 'interview style'. I am in the position of wanting information from this friend, or 'participant', and this also feels awkward. My awkwardness is evident at the start of the interviews, I think, as I often pause, my comments are often floundering for the 'right' things to say and I often just start speaking because I think I should take the lead. I am conscious of avoiding imposing my views and perspectives, which I do anyway, and therefore I am not exactly responding to what Em is saying. Em is the one who sometimes keeps things on track. Towards the end of each interview, however, both Em and I become more relaxed and more personal, and begin to share more personal recollections and experiences. I have since come to understand that, in this way, we are co-constructing meanings.

The process of transcribing the taped conversation is illuminating. Capturing pauses and tone on a page is a challenge, and I notice how much information is lost in the transcription. For this reason I often returned to the audio recordings to remain close to Em's description of experience and to revisit my experience of the interviews. I now present the meaning units, or emergent meanings, offering a description of specific contexts and a summary of overall meaning structures.

Emergent Meanings

When asked to explore her experience of humour, Em chose the medium of writing through which to do so, as Em writes creatively for herself, friends and for a cycling magazine. Em's initial reflections centered on the way she uses humour as a communication tool when writing her column for the magazine. The source of this humour is often personal experiences of feeling stupid or looking like an idiot. Finding humour in these instances makes self-criticism and self-deprecation acceptable, requiring Em to reflect on the experience as an outsider. This enables Em to retrospectively make light of an experience. Em also related that what was significant about these experiences of humour is that they also sparked some creative writing. Other meanings that emerged through reflection on her general experience of humour included being able to relate, incongruity, the ludicrous and the absurd, humour as a part of one's personality, cultural references in humour, and shared humour. There is some overlap in the meanings as many of Em's statements often related to several meaning units, and some ideas seem to be subcategories of other broader ones.

'I'm Using It as a Communication Device'

'That's what it means to me, a communication device.' This was one of the first statements Em made during our second discussion. Em uses humour as a creative tool with which to communicate to readers of her column in a cycling magazine. By using humour in her writing, Em feels that a broad range of readers will be able to relate to her experience. Through humour, Em also hopes that the story becomes acceptable, memorable, understandable and enjoyable. *'The reason I'm using it as a communication device is because I would want to make something, you know, acceptable ... so that they can understand. So to do that it's humour, and grab their attention.'* From this role that humour has for Em stems her reflections on the way she relates through humour, uses cultural familiarity in humour and draws on self-deprecating experiences to generate humour that others can relate to.

'They Can Relate To That Experience'

'The essence of humour for me is the fact that you have to relate to something that people already understand and know or can build it up so that they can relate to that experience.'

In the context of her creative writing for the cycling magazine and communicating to her readers, Em uses humour to relate to her readers and feels that humour engenders understanding. It is through humour she feels readers will be able to relate to her story: *'they can relate to the isolated incident if I made it humorous'*. Em's column for the cycling magazine has a broad readership, therefore Em homogenises her humour to appeal to the mainstream, suggesting that it is accessible to the populace, saying *'it's a bit of a leveler'*. Em feels that knowing the subject matter is important to what she is expressing, and therefore draws on experience for the content of her writing. Choosing experiences to which readers can relate, Em often finds herself using self-deprecation to generate humour (see below): *'anyone who's ever been on a bike can relate to this'*. Making cultural references in humour is also a way of relating to readers, and encourages readers to relate to the story's context. This mostly happens spontaneously for Em, naturally drawing on her own cultural context.

Em feels that an element of relating through humour is a sense of relief that it is not oneself in the deprecating circumstance of the story: *'you're thankful you're not in that situation'*. Below is an excerpt from Em's creative writing for the cycling magazine in which she uses a humorous experience that she feels others will relate to:

'Being able to retrieve the remnants of ripe bananas and gooey chocolate bars from the recesses of sweaty, deep, tight jersey pockets, whilst keeping one hand on the handle bars and your eyes on the road, is a skill that needs to be mastered at home before trying it out on the road'.

We share a chuckle, recognising the humour of a cyclist finding squashed banana and chocolate in their jersey.

One can imagine the discomfort or embarrassment the subject is experiencing but, with distance, can appreciate the humour in the surprise, the mishap and the mess.

A general example Em gives of finding humour through relating is *'the experience of mistaking wasabi for avocado dip. See? You just have to mention it and everybody laughs because they know, they know, the pain.'*

I can imagine the horrified surprise of such a mistake and we immediately laugh out loud together. *'The ramifications!'* say I. It is the 'knowing' that we are sharing and recognition of having had similar experiences.

Recognising the quality of being able to relate to her readership through humour prompted Em to reflect on her personal experience of this. Em describes a more personal experience of being able to relate through humour, in her creative writing shared with a friend about a specific incident. As there were shared understandings about each other and the shared experience, this humour was of a more intimate and specific nature. Another personal example Em offers of relating through humour is her experience of laughing with her sister about the quirks of their mother, through which they share an understanding, perspective and a sense of dread.

To share humour is to relate to another. These personal examples of being able to relate through humour are also connected to the notion of shared humour, another emergent meaning explored below.

'It's Something Which You Attach To and Remember'

Em finds that relating through humour is also linked with memory. In her experience, humour has rendered certain incidents memorable, creating relevance to otherwise irrelevant ideas: *'its something which you attach to and remember'*. This prompted Em to consider the opposite experience. In this context, referring to high school geometry lessons, Em said: *'it had absolutely no relevance to my*

life. I couldn't hinge it on anything else. If the teacher had come in and done a song and dance and made it hilarious, I might have learnt some geometry. But... they didn't (Laughs and then we laugh together)'.

'I'm Depending On Their Familiarity with the Same Culture'

In her general experience of humour, Em notices that humorous situations can be found when cultures clash and expectations are challenged. Em senses that cultural references in humour can both include and exclude. Em's column writing reflects her culture and she hopes her audience can relate to this; e.g. that they know what a BMX bike is. These cultural references also help to set the scene, draw the audience in through familiarity and, thereby, create humour through being able to relate to those references. *'I'm depending on their familiarity with the same culture'*. The more culturally specific one becomes, it seems, the more people become excluded, the extreme example of which is an 'in joke'. There are some cultural references that will exclude large groups, in which case there can be a narrowing of one's audience.

'Making Light of the Self-Deprecation'

One minute into the first interview, and we both snigger as Em relates a humorous experience: the visual of *'looking like a little kid'* on her bike with her knees up around her ears because her bike seat has slipped down.

Em shared that she readily laughs in response to her foibles, mistakes and accidents. Her experience of laughter is often of laughing either with or at others. As she draws on these comic experiences, Em's writing encourages the reader to laugh with her and at her. *'My thought, which is a bit frightening, really, is self-deprecating humour.'*

Why is it frightening? What is frightening about it? I wish I had asked this question. But I didn't and this feels like a missed opportunity. I can only guess that Em feels concerned for the negativity that self-deprecation implies. (See *'Agreement of Understandings'* p41)

To create humour, Em draws from experiences that she feels others will be able to relate to, experiences which are often examples of personal foibles, wherein, on reflection, Em finds humour. To do this Em observes herself in the situation: *'like if I was an outsider, looking at this chick on a bike ... I would have absolutely pissed myself laughing watching her going down the street, because, really, the situation is ludicrous'*.

Em describes this as self-deprecation: *'I look bloody stupid ... I feel like an idiot'*. Em found this funny retrospectively and felt that finding humour helped her accept her mishap and get over her embarrassment. *'Humour is a way of making light of the self-deprecation ... being critical of myself and putting an easily acceptable slant on it.'* Such self-deprecation is lightened through humour and turned into being able to laugh at yourself and one's own fallibility. Em endeavours to describe her mishaps in a way that others will also find humorous. Em offered an example of her creative writing that uses self-deprecation for humour:

'Every cell in my body is screaming for sustenance. My legs are burning and I'm light-headed. I come to a wobbly stop. I shakily get off the bike and practically inhale the power-bar once my fumbling fingers manage to rip it open ... and that's only after the eight kilometer warm-up.'

We share a chuckle at Em's story, acknowledging the twist, the punch line.

I notice that, throughout the interview, Em often laughs at herself, quite naturally and readily. I sense that Em is always ready to make fun of herself, and Em articulates this in *'People Relate Humour, Smiling and Being in a Good Mood to Personality'* (p51). Em laughs at her messy pages of scribbled out notes, as she shares her process of writing, and I laugh with her. Em laughs at herself again, at the notion of just failing to be funny in her writing, and at the idea of laughing at herself, like the situations she describes in her stories.

Em offers another anecdote of misfortune:

Em *And I was riding this girl's bike and some kid pulled out in front of me and I slammed on the brakes and I just went straight over the handle bars, and did this amazing flip and landed flat on my back. Apparently that was hilarious to watch and, ah, I can imagine my friends standing there giving me a '9', '8.5' (we both laugh) holding up scorecards.*

Me *You just lost points for your landing.*

Em *Yeah, exactly. It was a helmet crash ... Yeah.*

Here Em relates an experience of falling off her bike and is self-deprecating in the service of humour. It could have been a frightening and painful experience, yet Em is laughing as she is describing the accident to me, and making light of looking stupid.

I find the idea of observing friends holding up scorecards for her spectacular fall really funny and we laugh a lot about this together. These anecdotes of mishaps and mistakes feel very human to me,

and they put me at ease with Em. I get a sense that if she can make light of her mistakes, then she will understand mine.

In the context of humour experienced with friends, Em recognises that she will often incite humour, because her laugh is quite contagious. This example indicates Em is happy to be laughed at. *'Then somebody will laugh at me because, for no apparent reason, I've just burst into spontaneous mirth (laughter) and they just go 'what is she laughing at?' 'I don't know but let's laugh at her laughing' and then they laugh.'* This is another example of Em laughing at herself, and of her self-deprecation.

I share this enjoyment with her because her laugh is so genuine and infectious. I then relate a story and I notice that, upon hearing back the tapes, I am not so quick to laugh at myself, and even find my voice is less bright in tone, more cynical in the telling of the tale.

'You Just Can't Contain Yourself'

Our discussion of humour often centered on Em's experience of laughter. Em laughs readily. She articulates this during reflection, and this is my experience of her during our interview. Em laughs at herself, at laughter, at others. The sound of laughter, especially carefree laughter, triggers her own. Em finds that she is often the one being laughed at, and her laughter initiates the laughter of others. *'I seem to be self-amusing (laughs) and everyone laughs at me (laughs more). I'm the seed (more laughing, together this time) and what I'm laughing at is something completely incongruous or something that's reminded me of something else, and I'll just get a giggle, and start giggling to myself.'*

Different kinds of laughter are generated from different experiences: uncontained laughter in response to a comedy show; nervous, defensive laughter in response to an uncomfortable yet impossible situation: *'if I don't laugh I will cry' sort of situation. I've been in that situation'*; spontaneous laughter in response to the surprise of seeing someone fall over: *'I'm normally completely concerned after I've stopped and picked myself up off the ground (laughs) and wiped away the tears, then I'll help and offer them first aid or whatever'*; laughter as a part of personality – a readiness to find humour and levity in anything: *'I just am always laughing at something'*; 'cracking up' laughter in response to the antics of others; infectious laughter (as described in Em's emergent meaning *'People Relate Humour, Smiling and Being in a Good Mood to Personality'*, p51) in response to the laughter of others: *'her laugh would set me off every time I'd hear it'*. The

enjoyment found in hearing the laughter of others, and some in particular, that evoke a sense of freedom, self-expression and dis-inhibition.

Em senses that a level of comfort is required in order to find something funny, and that laughter in response to discomfort is related to one's defenses: *'People have to feel comfortable to laugh at something, or its antithesis of that is that they have to feel discomfort to laugh at something, because that's more of a defense mechanism'*.

Em also describes laughing in response to the writing of others. *'Ben Elton, or Red Dwarf, or even Douglas Adams, all those kinds of books, they're not a laugh a minute but the whole thing is hilarious, the whole book, you know you've had a good cackle, you know, when you're cracking up on the tram on the way to work and people are looking at you sideways because you just can't contain yourself.'*

Sometimes laughter is generated out of a shared knowing, or a shared sense of dread: *'The Oh-god-help-us-if-we-turn-into-that-we're-dead, kind of laughter. The doom factor.'* This laughter seems to be an unspoken recognition of a shared feeling or idea (explored in relation to the emergent meaning *'He Knows He'll get A Response from Me'*, p47).

Em tells of the experience of laughing inappropriately at her mum: *'When I was a kid I used to get in trouble for laughing at situations in which I should have been crying. My mum would hit me for something, I'd be mucking around and she'd go, "I'm going to get you with the wooden spoon" or whatever, and I would just burst out laughing and it used to completely deflate her but man, she would be mad! (we both laugh)'*

I laugh at this as it puts me in mind of a similar experience, and we laugh together at the incongruity of Em's laughter not being the response Em's mum was looking for. Our conversation continues:

Me *It's not the response she was wanting from you?*

Em *No! And it's humour for me. And even to this day, even if someone's fallen over and broken their leg, I go 'oh my, god' and laugh (laughs), which is completely inappropriate, it's like a defence; it's just a reaction for me.*

Em here relates her incongruous response of laughter in these circumstances to a physical reaction and defence.

Em's laugh is so spontaneous and hearty, especially at this juncture, that it is infectious. What I am left with, after hearing the interviews several times during the immersion stage, is the spontaneity of

Em's laughter. In the context of 'The experience of laughter' I thought I would like to depict my experience of Em's laughter. Even after the fifth hearing I am chuckling to myself along with Em's recorded laughter. It breaks on you, like the crest of a wave just breaking and rumbling forward, propelled by its own will or innate urge, until it peters out and all that is left are the bubbles, and then it recedes into the sand and into the giant well it came from. Below is my depiction.



Figure 1. *Splash, spray, mirth and bubble. A burst of giggle, warm bubbles. A force of its own, it counters the calm, touches it, brings it warmth, it is even hot.*

'That Was Just Me Making Light of the Situation'

This may be connected to the meaning of self-deprecation and of being able to relate. Using creative writing for personal reflection, Em finds that humour has helped to make light of a difficult situation or experience. *'I've done some creative writing, like poetry, that's sometimes funny and that was just me making light of the situation around me.'*

'Evil Humour'

Em also, in talking about laughter at herself, spoke of evil humour: teasing and laughing at others' shortcomings in order to 'belong' or connect with peers. Em notices kids use this form of humour in order to be *'part of the crowd'*. Em stated that when on the receiving end of such humour *'it does nothing but deflate your self-esteem'*.

'Not all humour is funny and generous and is to make light of things, like teasing.' Em regards humour at the expense of others as 'evil humour'. She experiences this humour as not generous, cynical, and deflating. Socially it is annoying and immature and Em says it is *'just not funny.'*

Regarding a colleague who uses 'evil humour' Em says, *'his humour isn't funny because it's annoying and immature'*.

'The Situation's Ludicrous'

Another meaning that emerged was that of the absurd, the ludicrous, the idea of *'what if it did happen?'* These notions in humour emerge in the connecting of two incongruous ideas. Em shared several experiences of finding humour here.

We laugh together again as Em is describing the experience of her bike seat falling down, her feeling out of control. Some laughter creeps into our voices as Em describes how she would have laughed at herself had she witnessed it because, *'the situation's ludicrous'*. I imagine the scene with her and laugh, too.

Em imagines how she looked when her bike seat slipped down and sees incongruity, that it 'looks wrong', when an adult is sitting down low, flush with the cross-bar on a mountain bike: *'like looking at a little kid in mummy's high heels. It just looks wrong.'*

Em recalls, with laughter, the image of her boss break-dancing and moonwalking at her desk:

'Well my boss break-dances in front of me. He's a 60-year-old guy who's a grandfather, he runs around in his grandpa top, (laughs) break-dancing (laughs more). He moonwalks. (Does some mimicry and we both laugh) in front of my desk (laughs harder, almost unable to speak) its like 'what are you on?' The guy's a senior manager (we both continue laughing) in one of the top four accounting firms and he's break-dancing in front of my desk (still laughing). What do you do with that? Except laugh.'

As Em is relating this experience she almost cannot speak for laughing. What is hilarious to Em is the incongruity that the senior manager of a large corporate accounting firm would behave so frivolously and childishly.

Em's laughter here bursts forth like a crashing wave and I can't help but catch that wave with her.

'I'm cycling along and I get to the lights and I pull up against this guy who's, you know, who's in his little tight Lycra, who thinks he's hot shit, on his road bike which cost him five grand, more than my car (I laugh), you know, and he's there and he looks over at me and I practically drag him off at the lights. He had to do a double take, because I'm keeping pace with him and, I'm a chick, and I'm on a mountain bike, you know? (I laugh in appreciation) ... I find that hilarious, that guys get so offended, and then go steaming off up the hill, trying to out-pace me because it's like 'oh my god, it's a girl on a mountain bike, I'm not going to be outrun by her.'

This is another example of an experience of humour found in incongruity when she notices the male cyclist's surprise. Em senses an incongruity based on his expectation of gender as he appears offended when Em can keep pace, which Em says she finds hilarious.

I enjoy this story of incongruity and expectation, especially as part of the expectation is based on gender, and this validates similar experiences I have had. I like to think that this experience bolstered Em's sense of place as a female cyclist out on the roads.

'He Knows That He'll Get a Response from Me.'

From the 'get go' in the second interview I am parodying a 'listening' interviewer and Em and I share a laugh about the facade of this:

Me I'll be in an interviewer's mode, because my lecturer told me 'you've got to do this, this and this'. So I'll be going (parody of a serious interviewer:) 'Hmmmmm ... interesting' (Em laughs) 'tell me about that ... hmmm ... so what (garbled talk)' (Em laughs again). So ahm, so while you were doing your creative process, what meanings did humour have for you?

Distinct from Em's reflections on her use of humour in her column writing for the cycling magazine, Em describes many examples of sharing a laugh or a joke with friends, family and colleagues.

In Em's experience of her boss break-dancing at her desk, described above, Em recognises the subjective dynamic between her boss and herself that is conducive to humour: *'he doesn't do it to other people ... 'cause he knows that he'll get a response from me if he does it ... and he feels comfortable that he can do it.'* Em's boss behaves in a way that he knows will make Em laugh and there seems a tacit understanding and a confidence that this behaviour is appreciated as humorous.

Em relays an experience of expecting English licorice and tasting Dutch licorice instead. In retrospect Em finds the experience funny and shares it with me: *'I went to a party and I thought 'oh, okay, I'll have some licorice.' And the next thing, you know, I'm looking for somewhere discretely to spit it out so that the hostess doesn't see me, right? And you can relate to that because you've tried salty, yucky licorice.'* This experience informs several meanings that have emerged from our interview: the cultural, the notion of expectation, and being able to relate.

We laugh together as Em describes eating Dutch licorice assuming it to be sweet licorice. I actually laugh when Em describes having to discretely spit it out somewhere. The surprise Em experienced is funny, but the awkwardness of needing to spit in a social setting is, I think, even funnier. It flies in the face of social etiquette, but is a very human and physical experience, and sharing this with me I am able to relate to it. Em knows I am from a Dutch family and am therefore familiar with the particular taste Dutch licorice has. Here Em and I are making a connection with each other, sharing an understanding, a knowing, and I understand her expectation and subsequent surprise. (I, however, love Dutch licorice and would not be spitting it out, but perhaps that predilection is genetic.) Although there are multiple meanings in this shared humour, it is co-constructed, none-the-less.

A difficult experience Em had during her time spent in Amsterdam sparked some creative writing in correspondence with her fellow traveler at the time:

'When I was living in Amsterdam, and I was friends with this girl, and ahm, I'd just gone on this special diet where I couldn't have any sugar, I couldn't have any dairy, it was a strict diet, and I'm

writing about how it was just driving me crazy ... you know, here's this sugar-deprived girl ... and the evil sugar fairy came along and tempted her with (Em laughs) with panecooke, and ah, olebollen (I laugh too) and all those things, and you're laughing because you know it because your Dutch, but anyone else will go "what the hell?"

Em shared this experience with a friend, the experience being particular to their shared nationality and traveling together. Em reflected on that with her friend by '*pulling references of things that I see that only she would understand and only she would find funny*'. Em made light of the difficult experience, knowing only her friend could relate, generating humour between them about their shared knowledge and understandings.

Em makes a connection with me again, in the second interview this time, around our shared knowledge of Dutch culture. This is an understanding of these cultural foods, as Em spent some time living in Amsterdam, and my family is Dutch. These foods are definitely tempting and I can totally connect to Em's creative description and I have always thought that Holland's national food could be anything so long as it was fried or deep-fried.

At one point I ask a direct question about a specific type of shared humour that I have experienced, which I share with my sister, which leads Em to relate a significant experience of humour that is particular to her relationship with her sister:

Me *I don't know if she (my sister) realised what I was laughing at. Mum and Dad were getting aggravated, but that just made us laugh even more. (we laugh together) The whole situation was absurd anyway. Do you find that with family, that you share a similar sense of humour?*

Em *Yeah, my sister and I just generally laugh at my mum (laughs loudly and then I laugh too). Actually we do. We would just look at each other and go 'oh, God' and just laugh. Actually we do. That's not such a nice laughter, though. Sometimes it is, sometimes it's laughing at quirkiness, or sometimes it's like the Oh-god-help-us-if-we-turn-into-that-we're-dead, kind of laughter. The doom factor.'*

Me *But that's relating again? Like 'that's her and that's very close to me' (we both bubble with laughter again).*

As mentioned earlier in the emergent meaning '*They Can Relate To That Experience*' (p39), Em and her sister share an understanding about their mum, and they find humour in relating their shared knowledge of her and fears about turning into their mum. Their implicit knowledge of their mum becomes the basis of some shared humour, which is unique to their relationship as sisters.

Here I feel we are sharing something about being sisters and having mothers. In our laughter together I feel we are connecting around a shared experience of bonding with our sisters and around our fear of turning into our parents. And I think here we are making light of that fear in order to get distance from it.

Me It's like kids with their knock-knock jokes and they just make them up.

Em (bursts with laughter) Yeah.

Me They just put something on the end of the knock-knock and that's a joke.

Here I have made the joke. The way Em laughs so spontaneously is very gratifying, as I can be confident that she has seen the humour in the same thing I have, that she 'gets it'.

Em compares her expression of humour in her column writing with the humour she uses in her personal creative writing, and notices that what she is sharing depends on who she is sharing it with. Humour that Em would use naturally may not be acceptable for a mainstream audience. For example, her experience of being a '*chick on a mountain bike*' out-pacing a guy on a racer (mentioned above, '*The Situation's Ludicrous*' p33), although Em finds it '*hilarious*', is not an appropriate humorous anecdote for a broad audience, as it risks excluding the male readers. '*I can't say things like that, even though I find them funny. I find that hilarious, that guys get so offended, and then go steaming off up the hill, trying to out-pace me because it's like "oh my god, it's a girl on a mountain bike, I'm not going to be outrun by her".*' The humour is serving the purpose of communication, and so it limits Em's expression, '*I'm not really just being my natural, cheeky self*', in order to make the humour palatable and to avoid offending anyone. '*I can't be as funny as I want, or it's a real craft to be as funny as I can be within those parameters. So [I can't say] some of the things I would love to say, (I start to laugh).*' I begin to laugh because I can only imagine some of the inappropriate things that could be said – imagining such incongruity.

But of the freedom of expression Em experiences in her personal writing she says: '*oh, yeah (laughs). Ooh, the sky's the limit (laughing still and I laugh too). Watch out boys (we laugh together again). I mean its not malicious or vindictive at all, but its ahm, yeah I just say what I feel like, yeah, and if that's what, you know, occurs to me, then that's what I'm going to say.*' So the humour that Em uses is informed by whom her audience is. Her audience mediates her column writing and Em feels the constraint of self-censorship because of the broad readership.

Em starts to giggle cheekily, and we laugh as women together. It's another thing we have in common, and Em says this knowing I will appreciate her humour.

I think that Em's experiences of shared humour with friends, family and colleagues relates to the idea that when humour is present there is also the presence of shared meanings, often assumed. When her boss break-dances in front of her desk, there is an understanding between them that this is acceptable and will likely be found as humorous.

As mentioned earlier in the section about relating through humour, Em and her sister share an understanding about their mum, and they find humour in relating their shared knowledge and fears about turning into their mum. This is another example of the co-construction of humour. Perhaps this example is also about trying to gain distance and objectivity from the 'close', and frightening, subject of becoming one's parent.

Em made light of a difficult shared experience with a friend, knowing only her friend could relate. Another audience may not relate to the same humour, as it has been co-constructed and is particular to the shared experience between Em and her friend.

'People Relate Humour, Smiling and Being in a Good Mood to Personality.'

Em laughs readily and often laughs at incongruity: *'I absolutely lost it. I was cracking up. I'm treating my senior manager like he's just anybody'*, at human nature, especially her own: *'I laugh at people, as in not making fun of them, little interactions that people do or I just watch them and laugh'*, and at the unexpected. Em notices that others relate humour to smiling and being happy-go-lucky: *'It's interesting though that people relate humour and smiling and being in a good mood to personality ... People ask, "Are you okay? You don't seem your normal happy self".'* Em then continues to describe feedback from colleagues about how much she laughs at work, how it identifies her in her workplace. Em feels that her laugh is something that characterises her for others, particularly in her workplace, and Em feels this is an extension of her personality. I also notice that laughter is something Em does a lot.

The first thing my boss said to me when I moved into the department was, "Em, the only thing I know about you is you're loud" (laughs and I laugh with her). And I thought 'okay, then'. (laughs louder) And he meant my laughing; they can hear me giggling down the corridor. I'm at my desk in the middle of this, you know, corporate environment, couldn't be more corporate if they tried, and

I'm absolutely cracking up all day. It's not as if I'm not doing my work, because I do. But, I just am always laughing at something.

As Em is describing herself as someone who laughs readily, she is laughing readily and I laugh along with her, mostly at the burst and bubble that is her laughter.

Em feels her sense of humour is expressed in her workspace: *'I need to have something bright and cheerful and homey around me'* and this is how she identifies herself as different in a sterile and conforming environment: *'Not that I hate conforming but sometimes they're such sterile environments'*, and *'I don't fit the normal, little boxed in partitioned stereotype'*. Em describes how she thinks her desk space might look to someone who doesn't know her: *'They might think (in parody voice) "Okay, this is a creative person that sits here" (laughs) or "She spends way to much time here" (we laugh together)'*. Again Em is laughing at herself, as she imagines what her desk looks like to others.

In reflecting upon her own laughter, Em recalls fond memories of a friend's distinctive laugh, which she characterises as *'just one of those carefree "hello world this is me I'm just gonna let rip" laughs'*, suggesting that even one's laughter is expressive of personality and can conjure qualities of dis-inhibition and being *'carefree'*.

When writing for herself or friends, Em feels there is more freedom of expression and so the humour expressed here can be much more personal. *'It's nice to know that I can if I want to and go there, I can be naughty. And that's the thing as well, there's the naughtiness or the cheekiness aspect of me. Like, I can be really crude sometimes, as a form of humour.'* There is an element of expressing the naughty, cheeky side of one's self when given freedom, and there is an element of playfulness with expression that is unconcerned with the result.

'The Art of Making Something, Which Isn't Funny, Funny'

In the context of writing for the cycling magazine column, Em described at length the process of engaging people's imagination and the art of creating humour. Em feels that in her column writing, humour serves the purpose of creating lightness, making something enjoyable, and that enjoyment, and relating through humour, is linked to memory. Em noticed several techniques she uses to develop humour in her writing. Some are instinctive and some are consciously crafted.

To create humour Em says: *'I write from my experience.'* Em would recall experiences that, in hindsight, amused her, looked funny, which she could make fun of and be self-deprecating (another

emergent meaning in Em's experience). Em found humour in the ludicrous and in self-deprecation, and set the scene for this using fabrication.

Em sought to build up visual imagery, asking her readers to *'imagine that!'* Em would *'set the scene'*, therein creating expectation, to juxtapose the twist or surprise. *'That's how you build the humour. Is frame expectation of normality then you twist it, somehow. It's like, 'oh, okay.'* The art of writing humour involves setting the scene in preparation for the hook, which relates back to previously mentioned ideas; this tying back in is where the humour is – connecting two seemingly contradictory elements.

Em also noticed fabrication is part of the craft of humour. Fabrication makes the story *'larger than life'* and is central to the development of the story around the humorous situation. This includes providing the reader with context and background.

Em compared written humour to her experience of visual humour, noting that it sometimes doesn't require such a framework or background development, and that slapstick humour, for example, is instantaneous. *'Visual humour is a lot easier to do without a framework, without a background, but written humour, I think you need to have that construct, the, you know, the fabrication around it, if you have no background, no framework at all then you're just left with, as I said, that punch line just hanging in the air and it doesn't mean anything.'* But with written and oral humour, you need to paint the picture for the audience. *'Because the thing about humour as well is, if you use it to build, to draw a picture, to build a picture and situation around a picture.'* In the development of the story, Em feels you need to be clear in your descriptions in order to give the reader *'something to latch onto'*.

Em describes this process as creative that it sometimes just flows and it sometimes has to be cobbled out. Time and space are conducive to the development of humour in a story, as is having time to play and think and craft the rhythm and timing of the story. *'What makes something funny are rhythm and timing and the meter of the words.'* There is a greater challenge in crafting humour within a small story intended for a broad audience, with a deadline, as Em is required to do for the cycling magazine. Having a particular objective seems to thwart the flow. But when Em writes humorous stories for herself without constraint based on experience, then she can be cheeky and naughty, expressing her personal 'sense of humour'. *'I'm a lot less, ahm, restrained. Like I don't feel someone's going to edit me ... but it's nice to know that I can if I want to and go there, I can be naughty.'*

As a quality measure, I sought authentication of findings from the data from Em, at which point corrections, changes or additions were made. Below is a description of that process.

Agreement of Understandings

After analysing the descriptions offered by Em and gleaning the emergent meanings, I returned the transcripts, with the recordings of our interviews, to Em for verification against her understandings of the data. After she had listened to the interviews and read the findings we met to discuss the work.

At the start of our discussion Em said to me, *'This has been a gift to be able to reflect on that time in my life and who I was then and compare it to who I am now'*. Em found the process of revisiting the research, conducted over five years ago, a welcome, creative and interesting endeavour. She said it provided a revelation as to her current sense of hibernation and curtailed creativity. She said the *'effect of this experience may be far reaching, beyond the here and now'*. The taped interviews are a window into Em's life at that time, and since then she feels she has been corralled into a particular, less creative, way of living. This process has reminded Em of aspects of her life and herself that she used to enjoy, such as cycling. It called into focus her life at that time, and led Em to question why some things have fallen away from her life, such as her creative writing. Em also noticed that she no longer laughs as spontaneously as she did at the time of the interviews (a meaning that emerged from the data and from my experience of Em), and wonders why that is, and became determined to regain that quality. I was not planning to record this discussion, but Em was eager to, in order to revisit the discussion in another five years, and enjoy the reflection process again.

Em said that not only did listening to the tapes potently remind her of where she was at the time in her life, but it also reminded her of her (then recent) travels to Europe (hence our 'Dutch' connection). She said that those remembrances were *'quite precious to get back as well'*.

Em expressed that she also appreciated having someone else's reflections (my reflexive comments in boxes) on the shared experience, including my experience of her. From this developed a discussion about the subjectivity of experience. We recognised the different perceptions that others reflect back to us, which is also feedback about how an 'other' experiences us.

I asked Em how she felt about her pseudonym and Em was happy with what I had chosen.

In regard to the description of emergent meanings gleaned from our taped interviews, Em said the descriptions *'felt right'* and *'spot on'* in the context of what was discussed.

Re: 'They can relate to that experience'

Em confirmed that the essence of humour for her is either a feeling of comfort or discomfort, and that these feelings are intrinsically human. She reflected that riding a bike is quite a general experience and that, therefore, most people would relate to the humour inherent in her mishap on her bike, of *'feeling stupid'*. Em added that humour requires some prior experience of what is normal or expected in order to find something incongruous, and therefore funny. This comes back to being able to relate, she said, as you are relating present experience to past experience.

Em supported the finding that the art of humour is about timing, and also talked more about how feeling comfortable was a prerequisite for finding something funny.

In relation to feeling comfortable and humour, we then discussed the experience of *'warming up'* over the course of a comedy show, to the point where we laugh readily. Em feels this is related to *'mob mentality'*, to being part of a collective and part of the synergy of the group. This laughter then feeds on itself and is exponential. I related my experience of stand-up comedian Stephen K Amos, whom Em had also seen. We had each experienced 'warming up', so that by end of a show we were ready to laugh at almost anything.

Re: 'You just can't contain yourself'

Em reviewed the idea of laughter as emotional discharge and the releasing energy that comes from other emotions such as fear or anger. In her experience, laughing can ground her in the face of such emotions and can calm her down. I also connect the idea of laughter as a defense mechanism with a response to discomfort.

Re: 'He knows that he'll get a response from me'

We discussed jokes we had heard made about the incest and abuse case in Austria of Josef Fritzl (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fritzl_case) and wondered at how it is possible Stephen K Amos can make people laugh about this terrible, gruesome story. I then related the part of the show where Stephen K Amos checked in with the audience about which topics were okay to joke about and which weren't. This raised the question of whether there is anything you can't make a joke about. We discussed the recent ABC TV comedy show 'The Chaser's War on Everything' and their sketch called 'Make a Realistic Wish Foundation'. The public outrage over this sketch resulted in the sacking of the head of

ABC TV comedy programming. Em thought this idea is related to the censorship that she experienced when writing for her magazine column and the way that she intuitively exercised a natural level of censorship in her humour when addressing a broad audience.

Re: ' Making light of the self-deprecation '

I checked in with Em regarding her comment that she found self-deprecating humour a bit frightening. I asked what was frightening about it. Em said this was referring to her sense of self-confidence and self-esteem at that time, and relates to her reflections on good humour and evil humour, as Em felt that self-deprecation fell into the category of evil humour. She was concerned that she defaulted to self-deprecation, and being negative about herself, to generate humour. Em felt she ought to be able to find humour without putting someone down, including herself.

Em wanted to share other reflections that have emerged from the process of revising our initial conversations. She felt that there were gaps in her data and noticed what she hadn't discussed, such as humour for its own sake and things that are intrinsically funny. Em relayed an experience where she was trying to prove her age to someone, which she found humorous. There was humour in the absurdity of feeling foiled in proving the truth, but there was no derision or set-up; it was funny in and of itself.

Em also mentioned playful humour like the way a child will laugh spontaneously at an untied balloon being let go and flying around the room. In relation to what children laugh at, I described what my son finds funny. We recognised that this humour is sans audience, and, Em states, humour here seems to be an expression of joy.

The idea of our earliest experiences of humour interests me, and is an idea I haven't thought about ... yet. Other ideas stem from this such as the origin of humour, and humour that is primal. I wonder if, in fact, one's first experience of humour relates to joy and surprise and is largely a physiological response.

Regarding these new reflections, Em acknowledged that this is now and that was then (the 'data collection' stage), and we both felt sad to have to end the data generating/collecting process.

I consulted with Em about some possible themes for discussion in the next chapter that have arisen from our interviews together, such as the notion of distancing, and how humour might facilitate this. Em feels that the distancing is present in most situations of humour: that in the moment one reacts and goes into survival mode, but that through humour one can be reflective.

As Em laughed at her mistakes readily, I felt that Em would be accepting of mine. I asked Em about the importance of the idea that laughter at our mishaps is very human, as it felt important to me in my experience of Em during the interview. For me it is connected to the notion that when we laugh at another's mishap, we are connecting to our own human fallibility. Em agreed that it is significant, and she also supported this idea, describing a similar feeling when laughing with friends.

The time that has passed has shaped the co-researcher's experience of this part of the process. Em's interest and enjoyment of this process of verification of the data has been a lovely surprise for me. Em took away a renewed motivation toward creativity, an unintended gift of the research journey, and this is very gratifying. The agreement of understandings process has honed in on some great questions for further exploration such as: 'Is, in fact, one's first experience of humour related to joy and surprise or is it just responding?', 'When we laugh at another's mishap, are we connecting to our own human fallibility?' and 'Is there anything you can't make a joke about?' The research is opening up and out and the subject of humour is proving full of complexity.



Journey Map 6

Es

Es was the second co-researcher interviewed. In response to my experience interviewing Em, from which derived a richness and complexity of data, I sought to evoke a more natural discussion style of interview with Es, still recursive in returning to humour in lived experience, but offering clarifying questions and inter-subjective responses. During these interviews I embraced the fact that, as I am being present to Es and listening actively, we are shaping the interaction together.

What is interesting about this second analysis process is that my perceptions are sensitised to the meanings that emerged from previous data. The meanings emergent from Em's interviews now leap out at me. I feel at risk of making assumptions and, calling on my skills as a therapist, I bracket out cumulative understandings, as described by Giorgi (1985). In this way I remain immersed in the descriptions before me and search for the emergence of meanings particular to Es.

I found myself, with the first round of analyses, counting the number of references to each finding, as a way of somehow quantitatively being able to point to the most significant meanings. What I am realising, more and more, is just how intertwined the meanings are, and how difficult (and artificial) the categorisation process is. Several of Es' stories contained multiple meanings. Therefore, several meanings often emerged from one story.

The fact that I have a close connection with Es also puts me at ease and I am confident Es will 'tell it like it is'. Es and I have a comfortable way of relating so I am much more relaxed and feel less anxious about steering the data. I sense that Es understands my 'role' as interviewer and understands my research aims and I feel confident our friendship can accommodate the dynamic of interviewer and interviewee and of being co-researchers (see Journey Map 6, p58).

Again, as with the analysis of Em's findings, I will explore in my inter-subjective experience of the interview and of humour as it emerged between Es and I, and my reflections will appear in boxes, to distinguish them.

Emergent Meanings

I am beginning to notice the different understandings each participant has of the research question. Often the thesis question as a starting point for the interview is too broad and, therefore, overwhelming. It took a few questions and some initial discussion before Es got on a roll about her experience, so to speak.

Es chose to make handbags, as props for characters, in order to explore aspects of herself and her experience of humour. Identifying that she has an absurdist and black sense of humour, Es recalled many experiences throughout her life that illustrated her absurdist leanings. On reflection Es identified that humour was a coping mechanism in many of her experiences, and that she now uses humour to cope with stress in her work as a Dual Disability Support Worker. Humour also bonded her with certain people at different times in her life. Es is also a Creative Arts Therapist, and spoke of the role of humour between her and her clients and in groups.

'I'm Reasonably Absurdist'

In researching her experience of humour, Es explored her personal sense of humour, what she finds funny and why and how she uses humour in different circumstances. As a method of inquiry Es was drawn to make handbags, through which she could play with ideas of motivation, secrets and how one presents to society. The journaling process of her research revealed to Es qualities that come naturally to her: *'articulating things that seem so true and seem as though they are just there organically but I've never put it into words before.'*

Throughout our conversation Es shares her reflections on some of these aspects of her character, how these are expressed through humour, and she noticed that her early experiences of humour are linked to her current work. *'I think because of my sense of humour I would find things hilarious just for the fact that they're kind of absurd, whereas others find it quite irritating and quite scary. And I can allow myself, through humour, to distance myself from it.'* Es reflected that others do not always share her 'black' and 'absurdist' sense of humour. Noticing incongruity between behaviour and context is both a natural inclination for Es and a mechanism for accepting the behaviour. Recognising the absurd allows Es to distance herself from situations that others find annoying or frightening.

Es noted that finding absurdity in the every-day is a rather unique capacity, and recalled an experience of laughing at absurdity in response to a performance that wasn't intended to be funny:

'I think that would be a little tableau of my life (laughs while speaking) at the moment because it reminds me of my daily experience of finding things hilarious when most of the world looks on horrified ... I just thought that was an interesting moment for me, which showed my own sort of leanings (laughs) in terms of humour.' Es mentioned this distinction several times, and felt that this quality is *'about the sort of person I am'*.

In discussion, Es also described herself as someone who is quick to run with an idea, and as such finds herself in absurd situations. She is also able to recognise her own absurdity, whilst experiencing the moment, which *'makes it even funnier'*. Es offered examples of where she experiences herself in an absurd situation and feels the embarrassment while also appreciating the humour. *'There's moments when I'll recognise a weakness or an absurdity of my own (laughs), an idiosyncratic moment when I'm completely out of place, and finding it hilarious, in context, and still experiencing the moment.'* Es seems to have a particular skill in observing herself in real time whilst experiencing.

Throughout our discussion Es mentioned finding humour in the absurd and in incongruity. At the end of the first interview, when I asked Es if there are any other experiences of humour that she wanted to share, she said just this one, *'because it keeps coming up'*. Es recalled witnessing her dad, who was otherwise *'a powerful character'*, in a vulnerable moment, standing barefoot on an earring:

'I have this vision of these very white, chicken legs wearing shorts, which was probably the only time in my entire life I've seen him not wear jeans, and in bare feet, it was such a vulnerable moment as well, and that was hilarious enough in itself, without him actually ... ahm ... without the universe attacking that little moment of vulnerability that he showed in it. So yeah, I think that moment of humour showed me some vulnerability in his character.'

He responded with anger but Es found the incongruity of witnessing vulnerability in an authoritative man hilarious. *'But I think it was only funny because he was a powerful character in our lives. If he were a real loser and things like that happened to him all the time, it wouldn't be funny, because he was such a big, brave, man, capable of smashing things, to have him cry like a baby over getting an earring in his foot (laughs) was just so funny.'*

Es feels that her absurdist sense of humour suits her work as a dual disability support worker. She describes her day-to-day experience of appreciating the absurdity of the behaviours of her Autistic clients. In social contexts observing the reactions of the public to her clients, Es notices that the public often isn't appreciating the absurdity of the situation.

'And [finding the absurd] helps me to work with these people because I don't think a lot of people can see it as funny, and see it as being their choice. I suppose they would just see that as wrong, as a wrong way to be and that's not the way one should think in that situation, that's not the priority. And I suppose in hearing myself I feel like I'm saying that I would laugh, I'm laughing at people, in

seeing situations as humorous, but I'm hoping that I'm not that condescending or that patronising when I do that, but I guess it just becomes absurd.'

Es experiences humour as a point from which to appreciate another person's priorities. When others regard the obsessive tendencies of people with Autism as 'wrong', Es feels they are not only unable to see the humour, they are also not seeing the individual's point of view. I imagine that appreciating the humour is a step toward accepting difference in that circumstance, as it is not getting upset at some transgression of social rules but rather focusing on behaviour as just different.

On reflection, Es felt there were elements of the absurd and the incongruous in the handbags she was making, as part of her creative process. There seems to be an element of the absurd in the idea of preserving nature so that it can be wiped clean. Es describes the handbags, also, as frivolous and that this carries an element of the absurd in the way that the ephemeral and beautiful is being preserved for the purposes of something purely practical.

During our subsequent conversation Es reflected further on the absurdity of social conventions and referred to an absurdist play that highlights this idea. *'[The characters will] ask one another things that people ask one another at a dinner party but they don't link. So there's no actual conversation and to me, observing a lot of people is like watching a play like that, and I just find it funny because it doesn't really necessarily make any sense, from my reality, and yet, ahm, obviously, fits into, you know, that person's reality, and it's an important thing to them.'* Es associates the experience of observing people, including her clients, with watching an absurdist play, as she sees absurdity in behaviour that serves to maintain social conventions. Es discussed this idea further and it is described in the next Emergent Meaning *'Those sort of social appropriateness problems'* p63.

Considering her work as a drama teacher with clients with an intellectual disability, Es feels that absurdist humour often springs from wearing a costume piece or carrying a prop that is inappropriate to the scene being played out – the incongruity is humorous. *'Just in someone wearing or carrying something, which is so inappropriate to the scene they're playing in just brings humour.'* Humour also arises from players misunderstanding directions. Es then spoke of improvisations *'just going so badly'* and chaos ensuing as the actors veer far from the intention of the exercise. Es says she always enjoys this chaos as she can see something inspiring within the chaos: *'Because often it will make perfect sense in a really chaotic sort of way. There will be quite a brilliance about it.'*

Seeing someone 'act' as a character and noticing where their personality is in the character. *'Often humour just comes from seeing someone act in a dramatic piece in a way that isn't like something*

you've seen that person do.' An incongruity is being experienced, something unexpected in the context of the person you know.

'Those Sort Of Social Appropriateness Problems'

This is a meaning that emerged particularly out of the second interview/discussion. Following on from our discussion about humour as a coping mechanism (p64), Es notes that often absurdity/incongruity will arise because of a contravention of social etiquette.

'I think that for me a lot of humour naturally comes from ... things that just pop up inappropriately and I've talked previously about my clients and the humour which comes from being with them because they're so completely unaware of the nuances, the social nuances, which are important (laughs)'. Against the background of particular contexts, such as social outings with clients, Es finds humour arises naturally from 'those sort of social appropriateness problems'. But, these humorous behaviours also expose the relativity of social conventions, to which Es alludes when she facetiously calls them important.

Es also experiences these humorous situations when her pets behave inappropriately in certain contexts. Es finds that such events highlight the silliness of social pretence, as animals are always just themselves and don't know how to be any other way. *'They just behave so badly, so inappropriately that you just, you're just reminded of how silly the social convention of being very ahm, civilised and ahm, remaining so above natural urges'. Es spoke at length about several examples where her animals provide humour for her. Her cat pissing on her visual diary, rather than a folder next to it that is no longer in use, or rubbing his bottom on the carpet when they have company, serve to remind Es that social convention is exactly that, a convention. 'When you see like the queen walking her corgis, and they just do a big shit in front of the photographers and stuff (I laugh), like I've always loved those moments that are just really awful but just remind us that we're just all natural beings and animals aren't aware of television and correct behaviour.'* This reminder is not only humorous to Es, but also brings her *'back down to earth'* in the display of animals being themselves and acting naturally. *'Well it reminds you that the experience that you're going through or the social convention that you're playing into is just that.'* Es also experiences this with her clients, who are always just being themselves and yet their behaviours confront others by ignoring social etiquette.

Regarding social conventions, Es relates the story of *The Emperor's New Clothes* (Hans Christian Andersen, 1837) to the convention of fashion, (mentioned in relation to creating handbags for

various characters). This allegory demonstrates how the conventions of fashion can fuel vanity and can blind one to the context of the natural world. It is really an overinflated value placed on something, quite literally, material. Again, the joke is on those bound by the convention, and there is humour when the convention is exposed for what it is. Es felt that her handbags expressed this idea and this is discussed further in the Emergent Meaning *'I Wanted To Make Handbags and I Wasn't Sure Why'* (p71).

'It's A Really Important Coping Mechanism'

Es notes that through humour she is able to cope with difficult and stressful situations. Humour becomes her focus, affords her distance and becomes protective from the intensity of the experience: *'... but it really can be a useful functional tool. For so many reasons, for stress relief and for coping and for managing situations and team building, and for so many things.'*

Having an absurdist sense of humour, Es feels, helps her to deal with the daily stress at work. *'That idea of people behaving in a certain way which they believe to be completely appropriate in an environment which is completely inappropriate, and that is what I deal with day-to-day at work and so I tend to look at it as being hilarious when in actual fact it's probably not (laughs while speaking) to the rest of the world. That's the way I tend to try to view it and do naturally just view it because I guess it's partially just me but it's also quite useful to have that as a mechanism of dealing with it.'*

Es seems to laugh here at the difference she feels between her and *'the rest of the world'*. Her laughter seems to embrace her idiosyncrasies, which I also see as a strength. And her laughter almost advocates for the reality of her clients when pitted against the reality of the world.

In reflecting on her ability to distance herself during intense situations, Es describes using humour as a useful tool in her childhood, and links this humour to storytelling. *'I realise that that's probably a coping mechanism for me, but I think that it's a really important coping mechanism.'* By finding humour in difficult situations Es noticed she was *'not entering into situations and not give in to it emotionally'*. As a child, humour afforded her some emotional distance in the absence of agency: *'they were very much situations that I had no control over and so that was my way of controlling the situation, by me not buying into it.'* There is a parallel between this early experience of humour as a coping mechanism for Es and her experience of using humour in this way in her present work situation. *'In terms of the work I'm doing at the moment anyway, humour becomes useful. And it*

also shows that, you know, nothing's really that important, which is quite a stress reliever, as well.' Humour reduces intensity, calls into question the values assumed and re-organises priorities.

Coincidentally, just after beginning this research project, Es explained that she attended an in-service through her workplace that addressed the use of humour, including black humour, in her particular occupation as a dual-disability support worker. This facilitated further reflections and revealed just how present humour is in her daily work. Es came to regard humour as necessary for coping with the stress associated with caring for people with behavioural challenges. *'I didn't realise quite how important it was or how much of my time I spend finding things humorous at work, because it is quite a stressful environment but I think it's one of those things that because of the stress humour comes.'* This comment from Es suggests that until she had cause to reflect upon her experience, coping through the use of humour has been a pre-reflective process.

During this discussion, Es' dog lets out a short sharp bark, causing Es to laugh in surprise, but she talks on, and keeps her train of thought. This brief moment seems to exemplify the experience of laughing as a release of tension, and I am reminded of the way babies laugh in peek-a-boo games.

In the context of using humour in the workplace with co-workers, Es explained how colleagues also use humour to discuss sensitive issues and to debrief and release stress. *'It's quite difficult to debrief about certain incidents which occur often, and so often burn out and the general experience of being there in a state of stress is relieved in the workplace by humour a lot.'* This is where Es uses black humour. Where Es once felt this was unprofessional behaviour, she now accepts it as an important coping mechanism. It unites staff members within the team, and is a way of sharing their stressful experiences, which, I imagine, creates some much-needed support.

The fact that Es has attended an in-service for disability support workers regarding the use of black humour in the workplace suggests that humour is a recognised strategy for coping with difficult situations. *'I think that we become quite light-hearted about certain incidents. We become flippant about incidents which are both dangerous (laughs) and quite enormous to the general public and created a reality in which we magnify small incidents which are important to the clients because we recognise that that is the client's reality, so we speak in that sort of context.'* Here Es speaks of using humour at work to both relieve stress and to acknowledge another reality, as though humour brings together two different realities.

The way Es laughs when describing a dangerous or violent event I feel demonstrates her absurdist sense of humour, and seems to imbue the experience she is describing with a sense of being 'whacky' or 'out there'.

'Humour Allows Me to See It from That Point Of View'

Es finds humour in the socially inappropriate behaviour of her clients, which enables her to appreciate their reality. It seems that two worlds collide in these moments and Es feels the experience of such humour reveals an alternate perspective. This perspective creates an openness to accepting their behaviour, and through humour Es feels she is acknowledging that she can't change someone, *'... rather than want to change it I would accept the behaviour ... and see it as a pleasurable and an interesting experience. And humour allows me to see it from that point of view.'*

Es observes that others don't see the intense experience as funny, and notices that they are *'completely in the moment and are so worked up about being in the moment that they're completely unaware that there's a humorous moment there'*. Es regards her skills as an observer intrinsic to her ability to find humour in experience. This enables her to see herself from outside a situation. What Es finds funny, however, is observing others who are unable to do this, and are so self-absorbed that they are unaware of how they appear. *'The whole idea of being so self-absorbed and seeing something as so important is humorous to me.'*

Es also uses humour intentionally at work to actively manage the challenging behaviour of clients. She describes, in particular, a client with complex needs. In her workplace humour has been formally written into the management plan for staff working with this individual client, as it has been found to avert risk as well as develop rapport. *'She will declare she is going to kill herself, you know, whatever and I can, through humour, quickly turn that around to the point where she recognises that I'm ignoring her behaviour but still continuing to reach out to her as a person, and I think it's a really useful tool.'* Es explained that by using humour she was able to maintain some rapport with this client without revealing any felt emotion, which this client is known to sense and then use against staff. In the face of risk, humour keeps the situation light and offers another focus. *'So she is taking her focus elsewhere, so I think it's a really useful tool. I don't know what anybody would do without it.'*

The distance that comes through observing and finding humour is a coping mechanism for Es: *'that's a way of dealing with the situation and not becoming too involved in the situation and not*

allowing my emotions to I guess dominate ... Which means you can kind of have a bit of distance.' In this way Es finds relief from stress, as it confirms that *'nothing's really that important'*, offering an alternate perspective.

When considering how she and her partner use humour in their relationship, Es also noted her partner's use of humour to distance himself when under pressure. Through humour he makes light of a situation, which seems to expose where the situation sits next to other priorities. Es feels that she has also acquired this skill: *'because he can distance himself in that way, so that's taught me a lot about dealing with pressure as well'*.

Es often refers to a distancing role of humour in relation to her clients at work, which helps her accept frustrating or unusual behaviour. So it seems that one of the elements that is useful about humour, for the purposes of coping with difficult situations and challenging behaviours, is the fact that it affords one some emotional distance from which to appreciate that person's perspective. Es also discovered that humour functioned in this way when she was a child when she would re-contextualise difficult experiences as a funny story.

'As Though We Were Watching a Play'

Throughout our interviews Es describes distance as a key quality of her experiencing. Appreciating absurdity Es felt *'I can allow myself, through humour, to distance myself from it'*.

Es describes herself as an observer of human behaviour; she is fascinated by it, and as an observer she often notices humour in everyday life. *'I used to watch a lot and was quite a specialist in human behaviour from a very young age, I think, and needed to be ...'* Even while experiencing, Es is able to appreciate how she might appear to an observer. Es offers an example of when she experienced an embarrassing moment whilst simultaneously observing the absurdity of the situation: *'It will be like "Es' adventure to Academia" (laughs) and it will be remembered by a moment when I'm talking seriously to a lecturer about taking on a Masters project and I go to blow my nose and there's only a tiny bit of a corner of a tissue in my bag, so I use that (we both laugh) but its attached, unfortunately, to a hair tie with a big blob of hair on it, so I proceed to blow my nose on that and deliciously watch my lecturer's face as I do that, that's sort of like ... my moment, I see it as my adventure into that world.'* Es contextualises the experience as a funny story, in which she is a character, which provides Es with emotional distance during the intense experience of embarrassment.

Es tries to contain her laughter, as she describes her ability to remain within an experience while observing her absurdity. As she describes the above anecdote our laughter gathers, as I know the lecturer she is referring to, and I can imagine the expression on her face. The tape, unfortunately, stops here, while our laughter is in full swing.

Through the research process Es noticed that humour afforded her distance in difficult situations during her childhood. Regarding the experience of witnessing her dad step on a earring (described in *'It's a Really Important Coping Mechanism'* p64) and laughing at this, Es relates the distancing and humour in this context to creating a character: *'As kids when you're in that sort of situation you do use humour to distance yourself and create that ahm ... create a character rather than see that person.'* By seeing her father as a character, Es was able to gain distance and therefore cope with his intimidating power. Es shared the humour of these experiences with her brother and they would use humour to debrief: *'[my brother and I] were always able to discuss situations which were really quite sad and (laughs) quite, ahm, terrifying, in a humorous way because we could distance ourselves and describe events as though we were watching a play ... And I think it is almost like storytelling, too. I know when certain incidents have happened in my life it's like I will see it as a funny story.'*

Similarly, Es distanced herself from her sister's challenging behaviour through humour by observing the experience as a funny story. *'I was able, in my mind, to see her as a character in a story, in a very funny story, somehow. And not feel like I was part of it, somehow. I think that it provided the context that it occurs in is inappropriate, it sort of highlights it, or contrasts it ...'* Es re-contextualised her experience of her sister as a funny story to be told to others, and was therefore able to feel removed from the action. In this way, Es reframes her sister's inappropriate behaviour, illuminating it as absurd.

'I remember her coming into my bedroom and she threw a chair at me (laughs) and I would just go 'Okay then!' you know, and for some reason I was able to see that as being hilarious. Like, I was able to see it as a really funny story to tell my friends or to tell my brother. Even at the time as it occurred I was able to see that as just hilarious. Whereas I don't think that a lot of people would necessarily (laughs as she speaks) see that as being quite so funny.' I asked Es how she thinks she is able to see absurdity rather than be absorbed in the moment. Es sees this ability as particular to her personality. It is a quality that others have also noticed about her, in other contexts where she has been able to be *'completely calm in situations of crisis'*, which Es suggests could be a coping mechanism developed out of early experiences of conflict. This ability to remain calm during

conflict is expressed through humour and Es notices that while others respond in fear or irritation, she can appreciate the absurdity of the situation and find humour.

Es laughs as she retells her experience of her sister throwing a chair at her and laughs again as she reflects that this is not what most people would find funny. This again exemplifies her absurdist sense of humour as she realises the incongruity again in the telling of the story. I feel like she is telling me: I think I'm pretty different.

I ask Es if these realisations have emerged through this research process, and I then immediately feel a bit egotistical, as I realise I want to feel I had a role in Es making discoveries. Es explains she does feel that the research process has helped her to tease out some of these experiences and to articulate how she felt about these experiences.

I raised the notion of humour and distance in the context of inter-generational family relationships. We each shared our observations of our parents' inability to laugh at their parents' eccentricities or rigid ideas, and we both felt that this was due to the closeness of that relationship. It is as though they see themselves in their parent and a sense of protection disallows any fun to be made, or lightness to be found. *'I understand what you mean, and how you have that distance, because almost with your parents there's too close a bond. I know certainly with my mum when she does things that other people find funny, I'm very hurt by that, I can't bear somebody to laugh at her'*. We both felt the presence of humour within family intergenerational relationships was related to familial distance or closeness.

Es described an experience of humour at a costume party where she didn't know very many people (also described below in the section *'We absolutely bonded at that moment'* p76). She had dressed as a bridesmaid, but wasn't quite satirical enough as she received earnest compliments about her outfit, *'I think I'd done it too convincingly'*. Rather than feel embarrassed, Es instead regarded it as a funny story: *'So maybe the choice is to be incredibly embarrassed by that, or to find it absolutely hilarious. I find myself as the protagonist in my story.'* There was distance in that Es could appreciate how she appeared to an observer, but Es considered that others might have regarded this type of humour as self-defeatist.

'We Were Powerful Because We Were Laughing At Him'

During our discussion, the notion of power through laughter arose. In reference to her experience of her father stepping barefoot on an earring and crying like a baby, Es says *'we were powerful*

because we were laughing at him. And we had to hide that power.' Es suggests that the distance gained through humour offers the observer some power, that being removed from the immediate experience provides objectivity, and therefore a sense of control: *'if you distance yourself so much that you don't see them as having anything to do with you and you see yourself and maybe living a fish bowl, or, no, as being outside a fishbowl, watching them, as a fishbowl, then that creates power.'*

Es refers to humour as being a 'leveller' in the client-therapist relationship, and sees the sharing of humour as an equal exchange. *'Often working with a therapist, or working with a facilitator, there seems to be a power difference, between a client and a worker, or a therapist, and I like to use humour to kind of cancel out that power difference. And humour can do that because if they're laughing and you're laughing that's an equaliser, but also, if you're doing something silly and they're laughing at you then that gives them a little bit of power, too.'* By inviting a client to laugh not only with but also at you redresses any client/therapist power imbalance as, Es feels, you are then *'providing a vulnerable face to them as a therapist. And that therefore they have power in that relationship. And I think that that's a valuable thing to include in the client-therapist relationship.'*

'Feeling That a Laugh Needs To Come Out'

Es noticed that humour arises during times of stress, where tension has been building and *'needs to be released'*, and she felt that laughter in those situations offers a release of tension. She feels that this is probably a coping mechanism, but a physiological one, compared to an emotional one. At times she is able to seek out this type of tension release when she knows it will be important to do so, and she will seek out opportunities to have fun and laugh. *'[Tension] needs to be released in a way that may be crying, or it may be screaming, you know, whatever sort of manifestation but I think humour for me comes a lot in that situation, and it's probably a nervous tension.'*

Es noticed that this quality of humour, or laughter, is very present at her workplace, which is a stressful environment, and that humour almost seems to be a trade-off for the stress. Laughter can be a physiological need, too. In the drama classes she teaches, Es notices humour flow on from simply being physical, becoming familiar with one's body in space, that sometimes it is just *'feeling that a laugh needs to come out'*.

‘I Wanted To Make Handbags and I Wasn’t Sure Why’

Reflecting on the research process, Es found humour a tricky thing to explore intentionally through her art medium, as she felt that humour is found spontaneously, so to craft humour into her handbags would come across as *‘sad and pathetic’*.

She, therefore, followed her intrigue through the process, exploring aspects of herself, and then reflected on any humorous aspects to the process or the work retrospectively.

The idea to make handbags for this research project occurred to Es quite early on in her reflections on humour: *‘... Even when I was speaking to you initially about the project it just occurred to me that I wanted to make handbags and I really wasn’t sure why.’* The link to her experience of humour unfolded as her exploration progressed and the idea evolved over the course of the research. Es certainly expressed enjoyment and playfulness in describing her creative process.

Es noted that she found the idea of expressing humour through her creativity a challenge, and so she defaulted to a creative process that she enjoys: designing and making props and costumes. Sensing that humour was often a spontaneous experience, Es decided to allow humour to reveal itself spontaneously through the creative process.

This process links with Es’ training in drama and also her love of making things. On further reflection, in the context of regarding herself as a character in a funny story, Es considered that the creation of handbags is a way of exploring that character, created as a prop for different characteristics of herself. *‘One way that I use humour is to think about myself as a character in a really funny story when something quite intense is happening to me and so I guess I thought that handbags tell a lot about a character. As an actor, you often begin with a prop to create a character and I think that something like a handbag tells so much.’*

Es found herself reflecting on herself as a woman, in response to characterising a nanna through the creation of her handbag. *‘Particularly this nanna one really made me think about my own sense of womanhood ... In terms of being a female archetype, in terms of being a crone, a wise, nurturing, sort of woman, so I wonder whether these handbags were maybe different facets of me.’* The ‘Nanna’s handbag’, in particular, initiated much reflection for Es.

In exploring her motivation to make a ‘Nanna’s handbag’, Es reflected on her grandparents, particularly her grandmother. *‘Well, they were very strict and would refer to us as ‘the child’ and never felt that there was any room for a relationship.’*

Es describes negative experiences of her grandmother with humour. Es recalls a joke her brother had made about their 'M'ma': *'My mum will always defensively say "Oh my mother was fine" (makes a twittering noise) and she said one day "oh, my mother was ... a good person, she was very affectionate" and my brother said "Yeah, as affectionate as a house brick!" (we laugh together). That was the perfect description of my grandmother.'*

Es describes in her journal her M'ma's handbag and notices, significantly, that *'it was so different to this in every way ... I'll read you this. (Excerpt from Es' visual diary) 'I never had a 'nanna'; I had a 'M'ma' who had a very elegant black leather Mary Jane bag that closed with a snap! Keeping out sticky, inquiring fingers (we both laugh) she said, in her very proper Victorian accent, "I should put a dob of honey on your nose, you sticky beak" (more laughter together). If I had had a 'nanna' I imagine she would have had an earthy coloured tapestry bag filled with secrets revealed when necessary.'*

Es developed a handbag for the nanna she would have liked to have, and the nanna she would like to be one day. This is a nurturing nanna with whom to bond and share secrets, described in an excerpt from Es' visual diary:

'Nanna's tapestry carpetbag: very thick, textured, earthy colours. A winter bag, in which to store barley sugars and treasures to entertain oneself on a journey. It smells like cough lollies and lavender and it has neatly pressed handkerchiefs in it (I giggle). It must bulge because it hides secret pleasures (I giggle). I've only drawn it very briefly but I have in my head a very specific way that it looks. The more we discuss this the more it makes sense that it's about a woman who's reliable and very clever ...' (Figure 2a, p73).

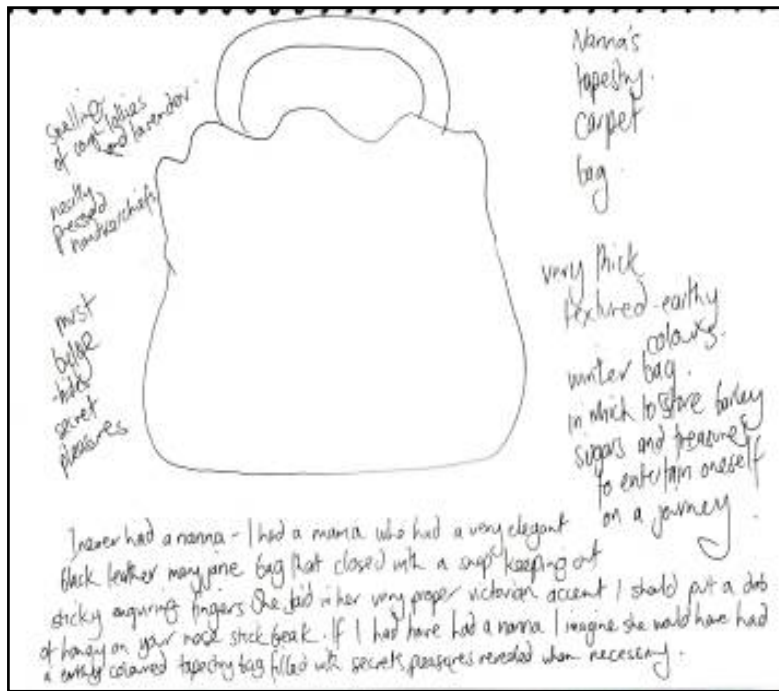


Figure 2a Nanna's Tapestry Carpet Bag

In discussing the character of a 'nanna', we shared humour in Es' description of her Nanna, who was very different to the nanna character that owned the handbag.

Through the creative process, Es discovered another association that the handbags had to humour, that being the contrast between the practical and the frivolous. One handbag was to be made of resin and have preserved wildflowers inside the resin. *'I like that kitschy sort of 50s idea of preserving nature so that it can be wiped clean.'* Es enjoyed the humorous incongruity between the practical function of a bag in which to carry your car keys and its embellishment with beautiful, delicate flowers, such as orchids, that would otherwise wither and die if not for the resin (Figure 2b, 2c and 2d, p74-75). Es feels that the frivolity of using flowers in this way is humorous because it is decadent.

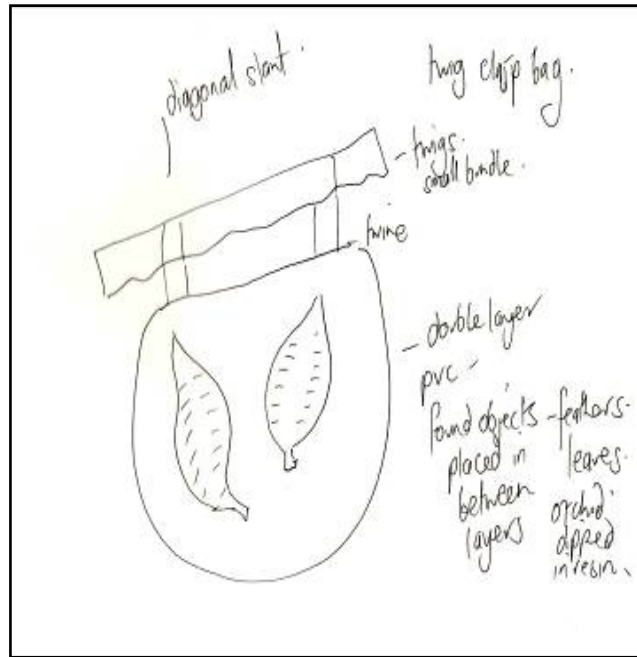


Figure 2b Twig Clip Bag

The more Es reflected on her handbags the more Es discovered about their meaning. Further to the notion of characterising herself in a funny story, Es also felt a link to the idea of fashion, saying ‘*I find the whole idea of fashion really funny as well ... I really like that whole idea of fashion being a little bit like 'The Emperor's New Clothes' and the silliness of social norms in that way.*’



Figure 2c Orchid Bag

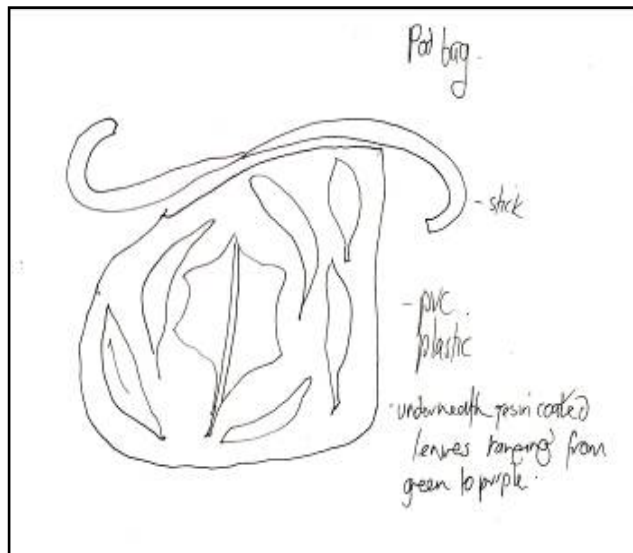


Figure 2d Pod Bag

Es also saw a relationship between the frivolous yet practical handbag and the seemingly frivolous yet practical use of humour (explored further in *'A lot of humour just springs because of frivolity'*, below). There is the sense that socially, humour, laughter and fun are not important or necessary, and yet Es has experienced humour as a *'useful functional tool'* and something that is light yet *'necessary'*.

'A Lot of Humour Just Springs Because of Frivolity'

Es discovered a sense of frivolity when researching the meanings reflected in her handbag designs. I looked up the meaning of the word frivolity and it means tomfoolery, undue levity and an indulgence. I think this definition is the meaning Es is giving the word frivolity. One of the designs was to be made of resin and to preserve wildflowers within the resin. About this Es said *'[flowers are] something so beautiful, such a beautiful gift from nature, and so frivolous, and yet I suppose so important as well. So I suppose handbags, I don't know, have all of those aspects. And I suppose there's a whole spectrum, too, from, you know, purely practical to something which is so absurdly frivolous and yet you can still carry your lipstick in it.'* There seems an incongruity in the frivolous beauty of a flower being used for a practical purpose.

This link between frivolity and humour raised an interesting discussion about how humour is regarded socially. While initially what is frivolous seems unimportant, frivolity actually plays an important role in life. Es feels that humour can also be discounted as unnecessary. *'And I think humour is one of those things that it seems like an added on extra, or something, but it really can be*

a useful functional tool. For so many reasons, for stress relief and for coping and for managing situations and team building, for so many things. And yet it is seen really as, in the same way that art is, as something all very nice but not very practical and not very necessary.'

Here Es describes the role of the court jester as one who is not taken very seriously. I then negate her and recall that Shakespeare used the court jester to expose some truths, but I have only a vague memory of this, so I taper off and then say *'I'll shut up now'*, as I feel I have detracted from what Es is saying with something I know little about.

Just as humour is perhaps considered unimportant, Es has encountered others with a similar disregard for the arts: that it is easy and fun and therefore not taken very seriously. Es feels that this is culturally informed by one's work ethic and says: *'I was brought up with a work ethic that when you work, work is work. Play is play ... you don't play for a living ... you don't have fun when you're at work.'* Es recalled a conversation with her father which echoed the notion that the arts are not considered real work: *'and I sort of said, "Well don't you think there's any skill in acting and that there's any work involved?" And he said, "Of course there isn't. It's great fun.'* Humour is similarly dismissed because it is fun and playful.

Es also experienced humour arising from frivolity in her drama teaching. *'We will go on to use mime and do improvisation and that sort of thing so from there a lot of humour just springs because of frivolity, a lot of the time, because often I'll bring different types of props and different types of costumes, that sort of thing, and it seems that everyone, its human nature to be drawn to wearing a beret, no matter what sort of character they're playing (we laugh a bit together).'* Exploring the experience of frivolity further in discussion, Es mentions she has noticed other feelings intermingled with humour. *'Just feeling surprised and delighted in someone can often feel like humour as well.'* Es also associated joy and pride with humour, which she experienced when watching another person's creative process. *'I mean it's difficult to decide whether or not that is actually humour, because it's an interesting feeling, yeah, it's joy I guess, and it's mingled with pride, but there's certainly humour in there.'* There was humour experienced in surprise at the unexpected creativity of another.

'We Absolutely Bonded at That Moment'

Es mentions the quality humour has of bonding and connecting her with people. This occurred in different contexts, too, as Es has experienced this privately, with friends and family, and

professionally with work colleagues. *'It is useful for creating a team bond, and creating like a private joke.'*

Being able to share humour has bonded Es to individuals, as it set them apart from others in finding the same thing funny. *'Certain moments when I know that experiencing that moment with that person was so special because we absolutely bonded at that moment; to recognise that that moment was hilarious and everyone else around us didn't ... So there was that absolute moment of connection, so that memory for me is about the humour but also the connection.'*

In the anecdote about her father stepping on an earring, (referred to in *'As Though We Were Watching a Play'*, p67) Es regards the humour shared with her brother as a bonding experience. Es notes that she has since discussed the experience with her brother and they still laugh about it together. *'I remember my brother was drinking a drink and snorting it everywhere because he was just laughing so much, and we had to try not to laugh in front of him but it was such a bonding moment. He and I have both spoken about it since and still it will just make us cry with laughter, because it was just so funny.'* Es mentions feeling close to her brother in the context of creating humour out of sad and terrifying situations.

Es refers to an experience we shared as students, and a connection she made with me through a joke I had made. *'You said that you felt that it was well done and that you actually wanted to hold up a sign saying 9 and a half out of 10 or something. But to me that was just (laughing) I connected with you because I thought of that exact moment, and I found it hilarious as well.'* It seems that my joke also expressed something of what she had been feeling in response to a musical recital performed by a fellow student.

Again, Es describes making a connection with me through shared humour; we both find the same thing funny.

'P I remember that. I do remember her performance and I remember thinking we just need Bernard King here.'

Es (laughing) yeah! Which I think you said as well. No, I don't know if you did but I imagined him as you were saying it.'

In discussion, Es describes her experience of jokes I made in class during our first semester of studying together, prior to getting to know me, and how she appreciated my humour in the context of the niceness of a group in its 'forming' stage. Es referred to an exercise of sharing representations of our 'selves'. I had made a self-portrait, in oil bar, on photographic paper,

scratched into with an etching tool. Another student praised the aesthetic content of my work, which I wasn't expecting. I explained to the group that, actually, my mother didn't recognise me in it and mum had said it was a very good drawing of an Aboriginal person.

'I always really felt you were quite intuitive of group dynamics and that you would kind of go "No, let's move on a bit" ... And I thought it really brave and there was courage in that because not only were you being politically a little bit incorrect, but you were being really playful, and being self-deprecating because I think you were showing 'even my mum doesn't recognize it's me'. And I think it really changed the energy, for me, because until then everyone was being really precious and being really in that time when everyone's being really nice to each other... And I remember one other student had said to me 'Oh, that one's really good, isn't it?' about yours and I really kind of thought 'Fuck, that's not what it's about. That's so not what it's about.' And then you saying that just showed courage and I made a connection with you because you didn't give a shit about what people going 'oh, even her mum doesn't recognize it as her'. It seemed to kind of pooh, pooh all of that'.

Es and I both felt that some of our fellow students were behaving 'nicely' and in that moment of making a joke Es felt my sentiments connected with hers. We shared a sense of the dynamic of the group, and I alluded to this dynamic through my humour. This was a bonding moment for us and only here do we articulate just how well we were connecting at the time. *'So I suppose they are examples of two humorous moments that I remember that showed me about you and about how I felt and about the group, and all that sort of stuff.'*

At this point in the conversation I say that my cheeks hurt from laughing so much.

Because we became friends through studying together, Es recalled her experience of my sense of humour, prior to getting to know me, and this feels rich with possibilities, as I shared the experience and can respond inter-subjectively. I feel suddenly closer to Es, as the process of researching humour together is offering us a unique opportunity to speak about Es' particular experience of my humour. I am aware of the co-construction of humour between us in the moment.

Es refers to a recent experience where she had read the instructions to a fancy dress party slightly differently to most of the other party guests (also referred to in the section *'As Though We Were Watching a Play'*, p67). Not knowing many others there, Es realised she had chosen *'the hideous path'*. One of the few people Es did know had also dressed up, and Es describes connecting through humour over the absurdity of their costumes. *'It kind of provided an opportunity for people to chat*

to me and sadly not a lot of them actually recognised that I was trying to look really hideous (we both laugh). A lot of them tried to say, 'oh, well it didn't work, 'cause you look lovely', and all that sort of stuff, which was hilarious.' This experience describes connecting with strangers through humour as Es used the absurdity of the situation as an opportunity to talk to others; however, she felt at the time that she also needed to explain her outfit to those that didn't know her and, therefore, understand her sense of humour. 'Because I didn't know a lot of these people and they had no prior knowledge of me, and therefore were taking things on the surface, without understanding the context of me and my motivation.' Es notes it perhaps seemed self-defeatist to others who observed her laughing at herself.

This reminds me of the self-deprecating humour that Em spoke of in the context of connecting with people she doesn't know.

We laugh a lot together as Es describes her experience of the costume party and we continue to share humorous experiences of 'the bridesmaid' stereotype. I really enjoy Es' characterisation, as it paints such a clear picture for me. I can relate to the character of 'the bridesmaid', having been a bridesmaid several times and been to countless weddings. We are connecting and relating through humour.

Es also observed humour as a means of connection amongst the participants of her drama class. 'Sharing a group joke is an incredible thing and an incredible feeling for a group'. She notices that humour is a means of forming friendships in a natural, unstructured way. 'It creates a relationship between the group [members] and creates friendships, which is, for the client group I work with, rare, actually.' Here Es differentiates the experience of connecting through humour from an experience of connecting through more formal means.

'Within Our Relationship it's Almost a Way of Being'

Es also notices how others use humour, particularly her partner, and, through journaling, she reflected on humour in the context of their relationship. Es felt that humour has a key role in most of her relationships. 'Private humour and private jokes, and just in general, within communication is just a really important part of a relationship.'

Es says her sense of humour is very similar to her partner's, and feels that this is a very important feature of their relationship, a characteristic that has drawn them together. 'I think within our relationship it's almost a way of being, for us. I can barely imagine us having a conversation

without humour coming up. And I think that that's what has always attracted us to each other.' Humour is a part of their daily communication.

Humour also serves to relieve tension between them during stressful times. It seems to be able to remind her of her priorities by highlighting her seriousness, and it seems to be a factor of how well she and her partner know one another. *'We almost have this whole range of private jokes around that and he only needs to bring up one of those, you know, a nickname, or an incident or, ahm, a previous moment to kind of make me recognise what I'm doing, and to bring me back to what's important.'*

'Making an Environment Humorous Creates an Invitation for Participation'

Es facilitates creative arts therapy groups and explored her experience of humour in this context through journaling. She noticed that it can engage people in an accessible and non-threatening way. It can help the self-esteem and communication skills of clients with a disability, and can help to build a relationship with someone long-term.

Es teaches a weekly drama class to adults who have an intellectual disability. An *'amazing sort of phenomenon emerges'*, Es notes, when humour creates a light, playful environment during the warm-up stage of the session. *'And that sort of magic happens all the time when, I think, it's a light environment. And I think humour created that ... he [a participant] was able to be who he wanted to be and therefore didn't need to rebel, because he was empowered enough to, ah, have fun and do what he wanted to do.'* Es observes the participants relaxing to the point where they feel comfortable with improvisation and then begin to contribute to the playfulness with their own humour. The lightness of humour brings a freedom to be spontaneous.

As a therapist, Es finds that, when asking the client to laugh with you, you are creating an exchange. Es sees this as an important transaction with particular client groups, such as those experiencing homelessness, who may be subject to *'learned helplessness'*, because not only is humour an invitation to participate, but it is something to which everyone can contribute. *'Because you're asking them to laugh with you and that's something that they can give you, which I think it is an important transaction.'* Humour, in this way, Es explained, creates expectation and can build self-esteem, just as the arts can in creative arts therapy.

In a group therapy session, Es feels that humour can help people to bond together. By using humour for team building, the bonding is being generated by the group, rather than being directed by the

facilitator, and Es feels that this is empowering, as participants *'take an active part, rather than a passive part in that process is really important and humour allows that.'*

In groups, Es experiences sharing jokes as *'a powerful feeling'*, as described in *'We Absolutely Bonded At That Moment'* (p76), and sees this contributing to the forming of friendships in a natural way. This is a rare opportunity for Es' clients who have mostly formalised friendships and are taught social skills in a structured way.

In conversation following on from her shared journal reflections, Es explained that using humour for engagement is more accessible for most people, where sometimes the arts are not. When working with clients with disabilities, Es observes that the arts are sometimes regarded as an exclusive practice, only for *'the gifted ones'*, not themselves. Humour, however, is more accessible because it is playful and less intimidating. *'It's a tool as well that can be more accessible, because art still has those sort of connotations around it, I guess, that it's a special sort of talent... I think that humour is a little bit different from that because everyone can laugh.'*

Es associates the inviting quality of humour with play in the way that one can be silly and frivolous, and that, like play, humour can encourage a sense of exploration through fun. *'I think that's a really important part of humour and also why I like drama so much, is that it's playful.'* When the emphasis of a group activity is on having fun in the process of an achievable goal, humour ensues, and Es then has observed group cohesion and team building. *'I think that in making an environment humorous, or making an activity fun, it creates an invitation for participation in play and in learning and in drama and in experiencing all the benefits that can be achieved through participating in the group.'*

For her clients who have a disability, often accompanied by a low self-esteem, humour allows them to participate in a learning process in a way that is inclusive, non-authoritarian and non-threatening. *'I think that humour allows them to participate without feeling intimidated'*. Es sees this as important when she considers that her clients are often patronised in learning environments, and have been for much of their lives. Her clients usually enter learning environments with some defensiveness, but Es sees that humour is able to circumvent this.

Although humour can be a useful way of engaging her clients in the drama class she facilitates, Es feels there is also a fine line between encouraging fun and humour and acting the 'fool'. The latter can make people uncomfortable, and feel childish and silly, while the former is an invitation that respects individual expression. *'It's almost like describing the difference between laughing with someone and laughing at them.'* To avoid any confusion between the two, Es discusses group

expectations with the participants, sets achievable enjoyable goals and, as the facilitator, stays in tune with the group dynamics.

'Let's Break the Ice'

There is a quality, Es notes, in humour that lightens sombre or serious situations, which Es became attuned to over the six weeks in several areas of her life. She uses humour in this way with her clients to invite play and improvisation, as described above.

In conversation, Es describes humour as an icebreaker when meeting people for the first time, to *'maintain a casualness'*. Even superficially, humour seems to provide an informal way of connecting. *'I met some people today and I was conscious of that fact that humour is a really good icebreaker. It was a really nice way of revealing a little bit about who you are without it being very formulaic.'* She feels humour is more casual, less awkward and therefore is preferable to the tedium of 'small talk', that humour somehow is more expressive of one's self as *'small talk'* can feel a bit impersonal. Socially, Es also uses humour to avoid contention or conflict with regard to people who spout political ideology, feeling that humour keeps the conversation light. *'I prefer to start off with keeping things a bit lighter, because I've often had arguments in that sort of situation when it's meant to be a light casual party situation.'*

Reading from her journal reflections, Es again refers to her experience of my use of humour during the first few months of classes together, used to shift the 'tension' with a group of people who don't know each other. *'I remember you would crack quite (laughs) facetious remarks as a very obvious "Let's break the ice".'*

'You would lighten the energy of the room.' Es felt the light quality of humour contrasted with the seriousness of the group at the time, and that it shifted the dynamic of the group, loosened us up. This is also my experience of what happened. *'And I think it really changed the energy, for me, because until then everyone was being really precious and being really in that time when everyone's being really nice to each other.'* Another example of Es' experience of me that shifts a dynamic away from being *'precious'* and *'nice'* (discussed in the Emergent Meaning *'We Absolutely Bonded At That Moment'* p76).

In the context of her relationships with friends and family, Es states that humour and laughter help one *'see the lighter side of life ... can be grounded in it and realise that things aren't quite so important. It sort of brings you back to the moment and brings you back to the present.'* Feeling

grounded, present and in the moment are ideas, which I ask Es more about, as these qualities are, I think, profound. Es expands on this, saying she feels her partner is able to bring levity to a stressful situation and that this helps her to reassess her priorities in the situation. *'He'll just dissect the situation and say, 'Okay, well what actually is happening here?'' and makes light of it using humour, and it allows me to examine the situation.'*

The analogy of breaking ice is an interesting one, as ice is not only hard, it is also cold. The notion that Es also feels that this lightness can be grounding seems contradictory to me. These ideas conjure up some imagery for me and might be a springboard for some creative exploration and responding.

'Now I'm Quite Confident to Be Myself and to Joke With Someone'

In discussion I share the fact that I use humour to express confidence, and Es reflects on her experience of this, and recalls: *'You didn't give a shit about what people [thought]...I thought "Wow, how can she be so comfortable that she's making really silly jokes"'*. Es experiences humour in others to be an indication of confidence, and feels that she also requires confidence in order to reveal her true sense of humour. Es considered this in the context of her workplace and felt that, once she had gained confidence in her role and felt valued, she was comfortable enough to be herself and share a joke with others. *'I think it depends on how confident you are, too, how established you are in that environment.'*

In general Es notices that humour helps others to feel comfortable in your company as it shows indifference to what others think of you. Es thinks it also communicates to others that you are enjoying yourself and that they may also enjoy themselves in your company. Es suggests that the opposite of this is awkwardness and that *'awkwardness breeds awkwardness'*. She continues to describe an experience, at work when she was new to the job, of feeling awkward and unable to lighten the mood with humour, whereas she feels: *'Now I'm quite confident to be myself and to joke with someone'*.

About formal work functions, Es remarked, *'It's not appropriate for you to, unless you know someone a little bit, to joke about anything,'* although if the context is clearly absurd to most people, then she felt she would highlight that. It is as though if you're unsure of what is expected or allowed, it is 'unsafe' to make light of the circumstance.

Es feels humour is a way of demonstrating that she is confident and at ease with herself when working with a violent and manipulative client, who capitalises on weakness if she notices it. Humour can maintain a calm exterior that can belie the seriousness of a situation, whilst also maintaining a personal boundary: *'You need to be completely at ease with yourself and at ease with her [a client], which is quite difficult when she presents with violent behaviour. So, humour to me is the only thing that can keep the situation light enough and superficial enough.'*

P Yeah. Well, it's been fantastic reflecting with you thank you for sharing these experiences.

Es Thank you. Yeah, it's been amazing for me to articulate it all. I feel like I should pay you \$85 for the hour. (We both laugh) Is that the going rate?

The fact that Es enjoyed the process and appreciated the opportunity to explore this aspect of herself and her life feels very gratifying, as I am conscious of the fact that Es is doing this for my benefit. I then self-deprecatingly refer to how I might have seemed to Es:

P I was thinking that with all my nodding I must look like one of those toy dogs on the parcel shelf of a car, you know (we laugh)?

Es No, not at all.

P and my listening and reflecting might be a bit like a psychotherapist's behaviour, like 'hmmm, tell me more. Hmmm, your father. Hmmm earrings. (We both laugh again). These jokes at the end of the interview, I feel, kind of released some tension and shifted the dynamic away from the formality of the interview. It signalled the end.

Agreement of Understandings

In conjunction with meeting for research purposes, we also met at Es' to catch up and to see her new house. Our children are friends, too, so, after we had lunch together, our partners and children played while Es and I disappeared for an hour. In the background of the recording there are occasional shouts and crashing sounds that call our attention away from our work, but we ignore it, making the most of the time we allowed ourselves.

Es felt that, in general, the *'emergent meanings'* of our conversations were well rounded, and had captured what she was talking about at the time. There were a few small details I had misunderstood, such as her anecdote about an interview with a lecturer. I thought she was referring

to a lecturer we both knew but it was someone else associated with a different course. Overall, however, Es said my reflections *'rang true'*.

Re: 'I'm reasonably absurdist'

During the interview Es described being able to appreciate her absurdity as an observer whilst experiencing the moment. On reflection Es wasn't sure that this was necessarily unique, but that she does notice others who are unable to do this. As an observer and someone who is quite analytical, Es feels that she learns by watching behaviour rather than engaging with it. Es observes others approaching situations with a notion of right and wrong, while she appreciates other perspectives and other realities.

I checked in with Es about the humour she found in the chaos that ensues as a result of drama class participants misunderstanding directions, and I asked what she meant by seeing a 'brilliance' in it. In response, Es explained that by allowing the chaos she begins to observe an internal logic, beyond the expected, linear narrative. To this end she tries to avoid over-directing, to allow the participants' stories and authentic expression to emerge. So even though the participants' choices are inappropriate for the task, Es finds humour in this and she follows the chaos, as moments of brilliance and an authentic story telling often emerge.

Re: 'A lot of humour just springs because of frivolity'

In relation to the incongruity of witnessing someone you know behave in a way that you've never seen before, Es said she currently experiences this as a mother. She has an understanding of her children and their capabilities and often finds humour when she sees a sudden expression of new skill or knowledge. She finds humour in this but also feels joy, surprise and wonder. I also shared my experience of that with my son.

Re: 'It's a really important coping mechanism'

I asked Es if she could expand on her use of black humour with work colleagues to debrief and to recognise a client's reality. I suggested that perhaps humour translates between two different realities, and Es suggested that humour, rather, communicates and bridges the two different realities.

Re: 'We were powerful because we were laughing at him'

Es also highlighted that humour invites the client into the joke, thereby giving them some agency and *self-direction*, as an antidote to being patronised. Es said this is perhaps the difference between laughing at and laughing with.

This raised a parallel I have noticed among the meanings of Es' stories. Two of the main meanings that have emerged are 'distancing', as Es' experience of witnessing her dad step on an earring, and 'bonding', described in the experience of laughing about the incident with her brother. After reading the emergent meanings, Es said bonding and distancing were the two most important findings. I asked Es if the difference between distancing and bonding is 'laughing at' and 'laughing with' and, in realisation, Es agreed.

Re: 'I find myself as the protagonist in my story'

Regarding her experience of laughing when her sister threw a chair at her, I asked Es if the laughter was an effort to deflect the gravity of intensity of the violence. Es explained that this laughter was very different to witnessing her dad step barefoot on an earring, which was about the incongruity of seeing her dad as vulnerable, whereas her laughter at her sister was about coping. Es said the only way she could manage the experience was to view her sister as a character in a story and, thereby, remove herself from the situation. *'The laughter provided the distance.'* This was not so much a 'laughing at', but more a release of nervous tension in response to the frightening situation.

The idea of distance and closeness reminded Es of her inability to accept others laughing at her mum, as she feels her mum would be unable to laugh at herself and Es feels protective of her. Similarly, Es feels protective over her son, who she describes as a sensitive person and would be hurt if he was laughed at, whereas she feels her daughter has a much more robust sense of self and would care less in the same circumstance.

Re: 'I wanted to make handbags and I really wasn't sure why'

On the subject of her 'nanna's handbag', I asked Es if she felt a relationship between humour and secrets in the way the two can be intimate collusions and they both are invitations to share something. Es said both are quite hidden, and that she enjoys discovering someone's secret, wicked sense of humour. She compared this to people she observes playing the role of the 'fool', which she sees as an attention-seeking thing. Es finds a sense of humour that is hidden more engaging. Regarding secrets Es also enjoys searching for the secret brilliance of her clients with disabilities, and engagement with these clients is so rewarding. The character intended for the 'nanna's

handbag' kept secret treasures in the bag, hidden but prepared for any game a child may suggest, *'secrets revealed when necessary'*. Rather than directing an activity, this nanna would be able to respond to a child's intrigue. Es compared this to her M'ma, who was quite a cold person and very conscious of social standing, whereas the nanna character is a very warm and engaging nanna, interested in connection and relationship.

Re: 'Let's break the ice'

I raised our shared experience of the seriousness of the classroom, when we first began studying together. The seriousness was shifted through humour. I asked Es if she felt that humour can communicate something indirectly and rhetorically. Es agreed, suggesting that this is, again, a bridging quality, and said humour can allow you to say things indirectly that would otherwise be far more confrontational, so humour, again, provides some distance. Es also felt that this was a quality particular to an Australian sense of humour. You can say anything you want as long as you say *'only jokin' mate'*. It is a common form of communication where a topic is discussed at *'arms length'* and yet, in the usual exchange when someone makes a joke, you laugh in response, rather than address the content of what has been communicated.

Another idea I asked Es to expand on was the way humour can help her feel grounded and, particularly her partner's humour, bring her *'back to the present'*. Es explained that in those circumstances humour reminds her that she is playing into an emotion that might be unhelpful at the time, as it helps her to question *'what does it really matter?'* She points out that only her partner can make a joke about this because it comes with unconditional love.

Re: 'In making an environment humorous, it creates an invitation for participation'

I then asked Es whether humour shared between client and therapist can build trust. Es agreed, and recognised how her past experience of using humour in this way with clients who have a disability has equipped her for her current role. When attending planning meetings for her current work role, Es will be self-deprecating in order to put others at ease, to offer others a way of engaging with her in a more human and authentic way. Self-deprecating humour can strip away self-consciousness and encourage others to *'just be themselves'*.

Regarding her experience of revisiting this material five years later, Es said she enjoyed it but had mixed emotions. She said it reminded her of where she was then, how she managed her work role at the time, her enjoyment of that work, and noticed similarities and differences compared to her life now. We discussed the fact that since the interviews we have each had children. Significantly, Es

said she felt a sense of closure regarding the nanna she wanted a relationship with. Five years ago she had projected she would like a warm and engaging nanna for her own children, and she now sees her children have this relationship with her partner's mum.

Map of Emergent Meanings and their Connectedness

Many of the meanings that emerged from Es' descriptions felt interconnected. As mentioned at the beginning of this section, compartmentalising this data seemed quite artificial due to the layering and interconnectedness of the content. To gain a sense of which meanings are most core, I asked Es to underline keywords in the analysis. From this list of keywords we developed clusters, or families, of words. We then mapped them and noticed which belong together and which stand-alone. Figure 2e, p89. depicts two main emergent meanings, *It's a really important coping mechanism* and *We absolutely bonded at that moment*, from which other experiences stem. *I'm reasonably absurdist* seems to be a quality that fits with both Es' coping and bonding experiences, and so appears alongside each group.

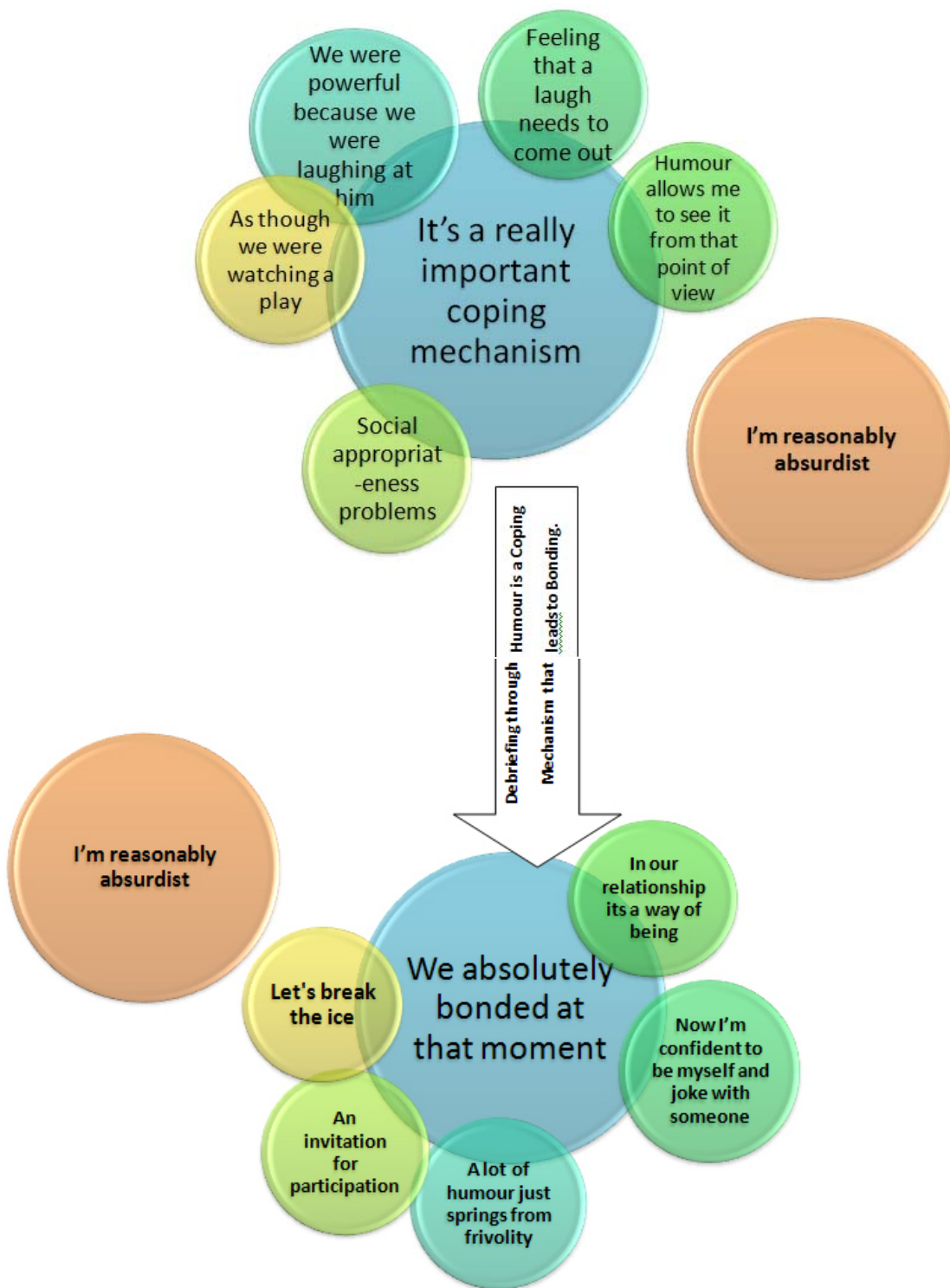


Figure 2e. Es' Mapped Emergent Meanings

ANN

Ann and I have known each other since art school and shared a house together during this time. We met at her place and began our discussion over a cup of tea. Ann has a relaxed and calm manner and she is comfortable with silence, which I find, sometimes, uncomfortable. I worked hard to sit with the silences and focus on the content of the discussion during our interviews.

As Ann is the third co-researcher to be interviewed, I am more confident in the role of 'interviewer'. I have a better understanding of the recursive questioning required, whilst also aware that offering my experiences in the discussion can help to both clarify by comparison and create a sharing, relaxed dynamic. However, there was a formality to the discussion between Ann and I, more interview-like than those with the other co-researchers. I fumbled at the start of the interview and asked a broad and general question '*Based on your experience, what are some of the meanings humour has for you?*' Ann immediately had difficulties responding to this and so I reworded it, suggesting instead '*perhaps start with an experience you can recall*'. Once Ann understood that I wanted to ask an open question and initiate discussion about experience, Ann then launched into what she had been reflecting on since initially becoming a co-researcher. Ann tended to describe her conceptualisations, and it occurred to me that this may be due to my initial, fumbled, question. In response, I asked Ann for specific examples of experience, to which Ann responded with further conceptualisations. This gave me the impression that she had given the subject a lot of thought during the six weeks.

Whilst this was a concern when I was studying at RMIT (Ann was the last co-researcher to be interviewed before I ceased work due to illness), I have since come to recognise that Ann's conceptualisations are grounded in her experience. Also, in comparison with the methodology in which the data was generated and gathered, I have since discovered the lens of constructionism. The method of analysis regards the data as co-constructed (see Journey Map 6, p58).

During analysis, lots of associations with the first two co-researchers are firing in my mind. For this reason it is harder to remain immersed in the data and bracket out the emergent meanings of the previous participants' data.

As before, the boxed reflections connote my reflexive responses and instances of humour generated during the data gathering process.

Emergent Meanings

Ann spoke of humour in a very direct and succinct way. This meant that, within the discussion, each emergent meaning was described, expanded on and explored, and then we moved on, and there was very little overlap across the meanings. The transitions from meaning to meaning were quite natural which provided a natural structure to the collation and analysis of emergent meanings. Being a painter, Ann chose painting as her medium for creative process.

'It's a Positive Engagement'

In considering different levels of interaction and relationship in which she experiences humour, one of Ann's first reflections was that humour is *'a very warm thing, because it's a very sharing thing'*. Many other words Ann used supported the idea of warmth and sharing, such as *connection, positive engagement, appreciating, understanding, relaxing* and *strengthening*. Some of these ideas are also explored in the next section, *'It always lightens something up'* p93.

At an initial stage, Ann explained, she has felt engaged when she has experienced humour, and this engagement was warm, positive and immediate. *'Whether it comes from you or someone else or something else. It's an engagement. And I think that's warm, because it's a positive engagement.'* Ann related this positive engagement to sharing humour with another, whether that other is a friend, a stranger or an artist through their art. *'...or you may get it from a cartoon, it's something you see and there's no other person involved, well there is a person involved because someone has created it, and it's a warm engagement, because you're sharing humour and appreciating a humour that somebody's trying to convey.'* Ann articulated that even if the creator of the humour is not present, one is still sharing humour with another person. In this instance, Ann referred to her experience of reading cartoons and therefore, sharing in the humour of cartoonists, which points to the meaning of humour as a form of connecting.

Expanding on this engagement, Ann described that *'there are so many different levels'* at which one can connect with others through humour. One level is an intellectual one through satire: *'(It) can be a good connection, and a kind of reassuring thing that somebody else is seeing something incredibly serious in a black way.'* Ann experiences irony and satire about a serious issue as a release, as reassuring, and, significantly, as a good connection. She also feels validated when irony or satire makes comment on, or exposes, a perspective that she shares.

I know for myself that I experience a sense of release when satire or irony lightens a serious issue, but this response is also relief that someone else is thinking about the issue and has brought it into conversation in a new way.

Ann described another level of humour, the *banal*, which she feels can connect one to others: *‘Or it may be something incredibly simple and dumb like a really tacky, dirty joke or a fart joke...which I’m not personally (we both begin to laugh) a big fan of’.*

As we laugh at this idea, there is more behind our laughter than just the statement. Because of our friendship and our experience of each other, I know Ann’s comment is an understatement. She hates toilet humour. Immediately, I am reminded of a postcard Ann had sent me. Ann and I used to share a house together. As a smoker, Ann was very careful to minimise the smell from her cigarettes. I used to be thoroughly embarrassed by farts. While on holidays, Ann sent me a postcard of a man and a woman in a café together, and as the man lights a cigarette he asks, ‘Mind if I smoke?’ and the woman replies, ‘No. Mind if I fart?’ Given our home environment, it encapsulated the dynamic beautifully. The co-construction of our humour here draws from the history of our shared experiences and knowledge of each other.

I expressed uncertainty at this type of humour as it tends to turn me away from others, and Ann also expressed some repulsion at this, but she explained: *‘Say there was a person you didn’t necessarily warm to and they may just laugh at the situation or tell a joke that may be really silly humour, or tell a really silly joke, which is really quite base, but for some reason you find it incredibly amusing and there’ll be a connection with the person just because you can share the humour.’* The significance Ann identifies is that she has experienced a connection with people she wasn’t otherwise drawn to through humour. I asked Ann to talk a bit more about this and Ann described *‘a shared understanding of something’* and *‘a shared sense of humour’*. It is as though humour communicates more than just a joke, that there is something familiar that develops. Ann goes so far as to say that shared humour can reduce a sense of isolation. *‘And it’s a connection with another person which makes you feel some sort of sense of understanding or not being alone...that’s probably more with a serious joke than (starts to laugh) with a silly joke.’*

Upon reading this quote in the transcript I notice some irony in Ann’s choice of words: *‘a serious joke’*.

Further to making a connection with people she doesn’t immediately connect with, Ann referred to humour as finding something in common: *‘even if it’s someone that you don’t really warm to in*

general and even you might have met over a number of occasions and you don't share the same ideas or anything like that but if you have some shared joke it can maybe make you realise that the other person is human as well. And maybe make you realise that you do have some sort of connection.' Ann also experienced realising the humanness of another through a shared joke. Humour facilitates a coming together on common ground, the common ground being the shared humour and laughter.

I then asked Ann if this results in feeling closer to that person. Ann explained the experience of warmth and connecting through humour is informed by the initial level of friendship: *'I guess that depends on how well you know the person to start with. You might have met them several times and never had a connection with them and then suddenly you have this shared humour that can be a very positive feeling or you may have a good connection with a person continually and have your shared sense of humour reaffirmed, that can be really nice.'* Ann described the positive feelings of shared humour with someone with whom she had a good connection, leading to a sense of affirmation and validation. Expanding on the experience of sharing humour with friends, Ann feels that humour reinforces both the friendship and the individuals involved: *'With somebody that you have some kind of relationship or friendship with anyway and you share a sense of humour it can, not only strengthen the friendship itself, it can strengthen each person'*. So, whether it is through a cartoon, with an acquaintance or with a friend, Ann finds shared humour to be a connecting and warm experience that can reaffirm friendship.

'It Always Lightens Something Up'

Reporting on her findings, Ann said she also notices a physiological shift that occurs when she laughs. Ann senses that humour and laughter is a release. *'Most importantly, I think that it's something that is a release... It makes you laugh and the act of laughing or smiling is a positive and relaxing thing.'*

As she expanded on this notion Ann described feelings of affirmation, relaxation, warmth (explored in *'It's A Positive Engagement'*, p91) and also levity. A primary function of humour seems to be, for Ann, this aspect of levity, where, in her experience, humour has an intrinsic effect of lightening a mood or dynamic. *'It has levity about it. It might be about something that is completely serious but it always lightens something up, just for the pure fact that it's humour.'* The experience of humour lightening a sober issue is not only a release but also supportive as Ann feels she is sharing

someone's point of view, too. *'If it's something that's a very serious issue that maybe involves some kind of irony or satire, which can definitely be a release.'*

Interpersonally, Ann experiences this levity in humour to be conducive to removing defensive barriers in herself and others and offered this conceptualisation: *'Humour can just be an ice-breaker...When people are perhaps a little bit cold to each other, it can just lighten a situation and maybe takes away some of the facades and the structures people put in front of themselves, you know, they may be afraid or shy.'* Humour seems to help one feel more comfortable around others and personally engaged, and I asked if this is linked to the idea that humour connects people through their shared humanness and Ann agreed. So humour brings levity that can remove barriers and make Ann feel engaged and relaxed.

Based on what other co-researchers had described about levity, I asked Ann if levity can be related to distance, which therefore offers an alternate perspective. Ann agreed, and suggested that there can be a bit of a process towards gaining a new perspective: *'I think laughing at a situation always gives you some distance. And, I guess, yeah, sometimes, if you're lucky it can give you a different perspective as well.'*

'I Like Discovering It'

Further to finding a connection with someone through humour, Ann reflected on the various forms of humour that she is drawn to and, significantly, the way in which she is drawn to the humour. One example of humour Ann enjoys is the cartoons of Judy Horacek and Victoria Roberts. Ann enjoys the eccentricity in the humour of these cartoonists. There is another element that engages her: an intellectual level of communication that is addressing a more serious issue: *'Say something like a Victoria Roberts or a Judy Horacek cartoon, which I find really funny, very witty, very smart, and I think I really enjoy their cartoons because I think they address, you know, issues that are relevant to women in sometimes a serious way, sometimes in a very day-to-day kind of way, and in a very quirky kind of way.'*

In reference to the work of Victoria Roberts (Figure 3a, p95, Source: <http://www.cartoonbank.com/>) and Judy Horacek (Figure 3b, p95, Source: <http://horacek.com.au/topic-of-the-month/tofeb11/>), Ann imagines the enjoyment and pleasure these women have when they are creating the work: *'Often, when I think of women comedians, I think how much fun they must be having and they seem*

to be having so much fun when they're doing it. I think sometimes these cartoonists must be having so much fun when they're creating the cartoon.'



Figure 3a. V. Roberts *"I feel like tearing off all your clothes and putting them in the washing machine."*



Figure 3b. J. Horacek, 09-Kandinsky, fresh-insky

In relation to cartoons, I asked Ann if she experiences humour in the creative work of others, and Ann described a similar appreciation of creative work when she feels engaged on several levels. Whilst Ann doesn't seek humour in artwork, she enjoys chancing upon it, secondary to what has initially drawn her to the work. *'I like discovering it. And I don't necessarily go looking for it; I just might find an artist and find humour in their work.'* This feels like *'a connection below the surface'*, which refers to several levels of communication. What initially attracts her to an artwork is an intellectual quality and humour emerges from her exploration of that work. *'I really like work that has some serious purpose, that's the initial reason or those are the initial reasons, that there's humour maybe in its form, or somehow woven into it, but what actually draws you to it is not the humour but it is part of the enjoyment afterwards. But what actually draws you to it to start with is something intellectually, or something ahm...yeah, it's just something visual about it or sensory in some other way, that the humour comes about while you're enjoying the work the more you look at it...'* Ann observed that humour can be *woven* into it, and that this discovery can be very satisfying. It seems that the humour is part of the process of experiencing an artwork.

Ann sought an example of this experience, in an artist whom we both knew, who incorporates humour as a secondary discovery. There were several artists whose work intentionally engages through humour, which Ann described as *'very manufactured, and blatant'*. I then suggested the photographs of Cindy Sherman, and Ann agreed that her work is a good example of being engaging

initially for aesthetic reasons and discovering humour afterwards. *'Well, yeah. There's definitely humour in her work and, okay, think of her body of work that were film stills in the 50s and 60s film style stills and aesthetically, I guess, you'd be drawn to them if you're interested in films like that. And then there's the fact that intellectually she has something to say about female roles and the way females were portrayed at that time. But usually there's some kind of twist, something slightly exaggerated or slightly out of place or, especially because in her works everything looks meticulously perfect she seems to put something slightly out of place, or askew. And that's part of mocking, I think. I like that, although I'm aware that that's intended. Yeah, it's not something you go to because it's humorous. It's not the first thing about the work that [draws you in].'* Cindy Sherman's film stills engage Ann initially because they are aesthetically interesting and comment on female representation of the time, but when considered further, reveal something a little awry. Figure 3c, below, is an example of Cindy Sherman's film stills series (source: <http://alexhilderman.blogspot.com/2010/08/photographer-cindy-sherman.html>.)



Figure 3c. Untitled Film Still #3, Cindy Sherman, 1977

Ann enjoys watching women humourists on comedy programs and gets the impression that they are really enjoying themselves, but then imagines that there must be some effort and work involved in preparation. *'All those women who do "Kath and Kim" and "Fast Forward", whenever I watch their shows and their sketch comedy, they always look like they're having such a great time. I'm sure it's very hard to write the script and go through the whole process, but they seem to have such a great time doing the performance.'* We shared some examples from these programs, particularly some of Magda Szubanski's characters, which we find funny. As we imagine what the life of a female humourist might be like, Ann jokes: *'But I'm sure it's not all fun. Sometimes people might*

get to work and not feel like being funny that day. (we both laugh)...Although I'm sure their day gets better as it goes along... (we laugh again).'

We are laughing together a lot at this point, and sharing a joke is very relaxing indeed. (I have wondered about this problem for humourists, getting to work in a low or flat mood, and I have heard several comedy duos talk about developing their work by trying to make each other laugh.) Ann and I are both big fans of Magda Szubanski's and we have watched and enjoyed her work together numerous times. Our shared laughter now feels reminiscent of previous experiences during our house-sharing relationship.

'It Can Just Appear'

Ann is a visual artist. I asked her about her experience of humour in her art making. Ann said she has found the experience is difficult to put into words. However, as the discussion progressed Ann seemed to be reflecting on it further, and articulating these insights in the moment. *'It's strange how it can appear. In the creative process you can not be thinking about humour or anything funny at all and you[can] just be going about doing something, or making something, and it can just appear, and it can just lighten the whole creative thing.'* Intrigued, I asked Ann to tell me more about humour appearing during the creative process. She described being surprised, as humour will sometimes appear unintentionally during her creative process: *'Sometimes it can just be in the form that can just appear, and it can be something you find amusing, some kind of irony...or you can just do something, make some a mark or draw something or write something that you read over and think 'That's actually quite funny' and it's come from somewhere else, I guess, and you're laughing at yourself really.'* There seems to be an element of gestural chance, a 'happy accident' perhaps, that appears satirical. I wonder if this is related to laughing at one's mistakes and this is a missed question I must save for our *Agreement of Understandings* meeting. On reflection Ann wondered where this humour came from and compared it to dreaming: *'It's like having a dream and then thinking about it. It's come from something that's come from your subconscious, and you're laughing at what you're saying to yourself or what's going on while you're sleeping. Which can be incredibly satisfying, especially if you're stressed, or if you're stressed about something, that there can be this humorous side going on without you consciously knowing about it, this humorous interpretation.'* Through the creative process, Ann's pre-reflective mind is communicating to her through humour.

I then asked Ann what this felt like when this happens. *'[It's] satisfying because it is part of you. It's all yours. It might be something that you're really worried about and feel really serious about and there's another part of you that is just completely lightening-up about it. And to realise that and engage with it is really, yeah, very satisfying. It makes you feel, ahm...I think it's very rich...I think that because it has come from yourself is the rich part of it. That you've created the humour yourself out of something that you didn't or weren't consciously thinking was humorous and you're seeing the funny side of it yourself. So you solve the problem, or not necessarily solve the problem, but you've certainly made yourself feel a lot better by doing something.'* By engaging in creative work, or *doing* something, Ann feels she has resolved some tension through a creative process that has involved, and revealed, humour.

I asked Ann further questions about this, as it seemed to be a rich source of experience relating to both creativity and humour. I asked about the particular elements within the work that can take her by surprise. Below is an excerpt from the first interview, in which I encourage Ann to expand on her experience:

A 'It can happen in the content of the work, but it can happen in the form of the work, too. You can find humour in the way that the form lends itself to humour, you can find yourself doing things and find that quite amusing.'

P So humour can be in making a mark?

A 'Yeah. The way you make a mark. You might [be] just freely trying to draw something without... or you might be trying to do one thing and then look at what you've done and see something completely different and it's actually something really funny and it's something that helps you understand something that you're worried about or you see the humorous side...'

P I can relate to that experience. Would you say that the process gives you distance on the issue that was concerning you?

A Yeah. I think laughing at a situation always gives you some distance. And, I guess, yeah sometimes if you're lucky, it can give you a different perspective as well.

P I'm interested in that idea of your subconscious revealing a humorous side through the work. Are you saying that that process is satisfying because you had the answer with you? Answer isn't the word...

A A broader vision? Yeah. And it can sometimes explain why you've been feeling frustrated about something that somehow is closed off. It's there but it's closed off.

P And it's revealed itself through the work?

A yeah.

Humour is meaningful for Ann in the context of the creative process. As well as lightening the creative experience, Ann described finding a new perspective, or interpretation, through the unexpected, humorous mark. This could relate to an issue she had been concerned about, and bring about understanding. By providing a broader perspective and some distance, the humour reveals a new interpretation. The humour, having come from the self, seems to be a form of self-amusement, as well as a realisation from 'out of the blue'.

This last finding, I think, describes one of the fundamental processes of creative arts therapy – the process by which the pre-reflective mind communicates to the reflective mind through creativity. Ann's reflections suggest to me that perhaps humour belongs in the category of creative expression also - *'it can just appear'*.

In summary, Ann's descriptions conjure humour as something warm and light, yet strengthening and engaging. Humour is particularly meaningful to her when in communication with others, as it can remove barriers and facilitate a connection with another that highlights common ground, namely being human. Ann also describes being able to communicate with herself through humour in her creative work.

When each interview with Ann ended, (usually when I ran out of tape), our conversation about humour and creativity stopped also.

Agreement of Understandings

Ann was the third and final co-researcher that I met with to consider our shared understandings of the interviews all that time ago. It was wonderful to catch up with Ann again, as we had not seen each other in quite a while. I felt a little guilty for not having kept in more regular contact, and whilst the research work facilitated our re-connection, it also felt a utilitarian means over which to meet after a year of not seeing each other. However, we quickly found our comfortable way of relating over a cup of tea and first spent some time catching up and chatting.

I asked Ann about the pseudonym chosen for her, and she was happy with it.

Ann said she initially struggled to remember the interviews clearly, but, once received, enjoyed listening to the tapes and giving the topic of humour some more thought, mostly in relation to the warmth that is generated when humour is shared.

Re: 'It's a positive engagement'

Ann reinforced the notion that it brings ease to relating to someone when the dynamic is frosty. On this subject, I expressed interest in her comment that humour is '*a connection with another person which makes you feel some sort of sense of understanding or not being alone*', and in a similar comment, '*it can maybe make you realise that the other person is human as well*'. I explained to Ann that this meaning seems to be emerging from several co-researchers. Ann felt that this aspect of humour is probably the most significant of the ideas discussed during the interviews and added that it can be quite an intimate experience.

Re: 'It can just appear'

I enquired as to whether she could say anything more about the discovery of humour in the process of painting, explaining that, because of my training as a creative arts therapist, I was very interested how the pre-reflective mind communicates to the reflective mind through creativity. Ann said she could appreciate my perspective and that she has often experienced this process through her creativity. She believes that one can access new parts of the brain in creative work, and enjoys when this happens to her, not just when humour arises from the process, but other material also. I raised the notion of gestural chance and the 'happy accident', to which Ann suggested that it is not accidental at all. I also queried if the laughter in response to humour found in creative process is related to laughing at one's mistakes. Ann said it can be but not always, and that the humour discovered in her creative work is more revelatory than that and seems to have something to communicate. I wondered out loud if this could be one's muse at work. Ann agreed.

Re: 'It always lightens something up'

When reading my analysis regarding the levity of humour, Ann said it put her in mind of the way humour can be used to maintain distance, like encountering blatant, manufactured humour in art work, when people '*over-use humour, it can push you away*'. I asked if this use of humour felt, then, to be less about making a connection, and more about something else. Ann replied that '*it seems to come with an ulterior motive, which I'm sure can be varied, that doesn't involve you*'. So while the experience of laughter and humour can bring a sense of release, hence levity, Ann also felt it can create distance and detachment.

Re: 'I like discovering it'

Together, Ann and I searched the web for art works by Horacek, Roberts and Sherman to be used as examples of the types of humour Ann is drawn to. For each artist Ann selected one that was felt to highlight what she enjoys about him or her. These have been included in the body of the findings.

I asked Ann if she felt in the analysis needed to be corrected or meanings clarified. Ann felt her thoughts and ideas had been summarised accurately. As mentioned in the introduction, this was not difficult given Ann's succinct style and thought-flow.

Given the time that has passed since the interviews, Ann said she reminisced about her life then, as the tape recordings brought back a lot of memories of that time. She expressed that there was a potency in hearing our voices, and also remarked on the time lapse in our contact since we last spoke. In some ways, the recording was reminiscent of our friendship at the time, which for me was pre-maternity. We discussed this in terms of the stages of our friendship over the years we have known each other, acknowledging a natural evolution.

ME

As the fourth participant I will now present the emergent meanings of my experience of humour. My collation and analysis of my own data is placed here, at this point in the findings, because it occurred chronologically after the collation and analyses of that of my co-researchers.

Tesch (1990) identifies 'reflexive phenomenology' as a research methodology in which the researcher contributes personally to the data (p65). As a co-researcher I followed a similar procedure of inquiry to that of my fellow participants, reflecting on experience through creative processes, specifically journaling, story writing and psychodrama. Particular to my experience, however, was my exploration of humour with my three-year-old son, a creative process that was specifically informed by MIECAT procedures, described in detail on p118.

As the instigating researcher, a heuristic research methodology, as defined by Moustakas (1990), initially informed my personal inquiry:

When I consider an issue, problem, or question, I enter into it fully...I am personally involved. I may be entranced by visions, images, and dreams that connect me to my quest. I may come into touch with new regions of myself, and discover revealing connections with others (p.11).

Moustakas describes six phases of heuristic research process, which are initial engagement, immersion, incubation, illumination, explication and creative synthesis or communication. As this research has been a collaborative endeavour over the course of six years, these phases have overlapped. I have presented the findings of my data in the first person. As such they read as reflections, rather than a synthesis of many phenomenological descriptions. This differs from the findings of my co-researchers as my personal data has not been through the process of an interview and is, therefore, more immediately reflective of experience.

I have been looking forward to this stage of the research, as I have been attuned to the subject for quite some time and feel I have a wealth of personal data to draw on. I now have the opportunity to explore more deeply my experience of humour. This will also give the reader a greater insight into the impetus for this project. I have had the luxury of time to gather my own data and also reflect on the data generated between my co-researchers and myself. I have felt like a gleaner, keeping my ears pricked and my eyes peeled for information and clues. I returned to my journals from the last six years and gleaned. My experience with the co-researchers informed further my creative inquiry. After discussion with Es, I began to reflect on how I use humour in groups and on the significance

of the story *The Emperor's New Clothes* (Andersen, 1837). After discussion with Em I began to think about one's earliest experiences of humour. My discussions with Ann and Em raised questions about how humour connects us to our humanness. So each co-researcher has somewhat steered my personal inquiry.

To organise all this data I followed a process similar to that used with the data of my co-researchers. That is, a reduction to keywords, then clustering of keywords, phrases and sections into families of meanings. These emergent meanings were collated and I then used the methods of experiential inquiry identified in the MIECAT procedures to search more deeply into a specific experience of humour that piqued my curiosity.

Emergent Meanings

In researching humour I initially began to seek out comedians who I like and notice what forms of humour I am drawn to. People like Rod Quantoc, Dawn French, Stephen K Amos, Eddie Izzard, Miriam Margoyles and Magda Szubanski. I admire their bravery, as they seem to put their vulnerabilities into the punch line, laugh at themselves and invite the audience to laugh along. Eddie Izzard uses his cross-dressing, Dawn French uses her love of chocolate, and Rod Quantoc uses his lankiness, all to provoke laughter. They make a connection with their audience in this way. They are self-effacing yet do so with such skill, wit and intelligence. I am fascinated by how Eddie Izzard's mind works, making so many consecutive leaps. Miriam Margoyles, in particular, struck me as an unafraid, imaginative, fun-poking and irreverent woman.

From noticing the qualities I admire in these comedians, I discovered something else about my own sense of humour; particularly the role humour seems to have in voicing an 'other' opinion, perspectives of the idiosyncratic and the marginalised.

As noted in *'The Interests That Prompted This Study'* (p8) I regard my sense of humour as a significant part of who I am. I have used humour as a means of coping with stress and discomfort, as a defense strategy and as a means of connecting with others. I was intrigued by this aspect of myself, and therefore used my 'sense of humour' and the nature of my earliest experiences of humour as a starting point for my own inquiry. What I have discovered is that humour has been central to my life, and who I am, from an early age, so the start seemed like a logical place to start.

'Here I am'

I was a pretty funny kid and I think Mum and Dad were very entertained by my antics. I find a lot of humour in anecdotes about me as a child, some of which I have only a vague memory of, but the stories seem larger than life, almost legendary. Here is one example from my 2004 journal:

I was about three years old and still toilet training. I was with my mum and dad and grandparents in McEwen's, a hardware store of the time, shopping for a security door. I needed to 'go' but Mum asked me to wait, as they were almost finished. My intrepid nature sought a solution anyway. When I returned to my parents, they said, "We were just about to come and look for you. Let's go find a toilet." To which I replied, "Its okay, I found one." "Where?" my dad asked. And I said, "Oh, there are lots of them over there."

Similar anecdotes involve falling out of a tree and then hiding my injuries because I'd disobeyed my parents by climbing the tree in the first place, or visiting my neighbours at 6am in my bikini and gumboots, asking to use their pool. They are funny because I imagine an intrepid child, focused only on her immediate curiosities, challenging the logic of the adults around her. It is the colliding of two different realities and this is a meaning that emerged from my reflections (see '*A Clash of Ideas*' p98). Perhaps my intrepid curiosity set up a dynamic whereby I would end up in these absurd (to my parents) situations, they would laugh at me, and I enjoyed this positive attention, reinforcing my shadow/trickster side, (see '*The More Serious, the Better*' p93). I would happily play the fool for a laugh, and I came to embrace the inner dag in me. I can see how this dynamic is nurtured between parent and child with my son, as he also enjoys making me laugh (see '*Noah*' p100).

During my childhood nothing was sacred in the pursuit of fun and laughter. I have recognised that the development of my sense of humour served to ensure my social acceptability during adolescence, despite, what I felt, were serious shortcomings. During adolescence, however, I noticed that humour became a way of being heard. At home I felt somewhat invisible, that 'I am never right' and 'what I think and feel doesn't count'. My assertiveness at home was discouraged, and I think this motivated me to find other ways of expressing myself. Humour felt to be a safe way of expressing opinions and having a voice. My disempowerment at home was countered through humour. This humour wasn't used at home, except with my sister perhaps, but was used elsewhere, at school, church, with friends, and was a safe way of having a voice and no longer being 'invisible'. Humour facilitated my need to be seen and heard. Through humour I was stating, "*Here I am*".

There is also a link between my jovial persona at high school – always telling jokes – and not showing other aspects of my self for fear of rejection. I thought if people saw who I really am they wouldn't like me. Stemming from my need to be accepted, I believed that if people laughed in my company, they were having a good time, and would therefore like being around me. As a 'class clown' I could mingle and joke with each social group, yet telling jokes was a way of hiding my vulnerabilities. I can see now how this could have become a maladaptive defence strategy, as it would draw people to me while keeping them at a certain distance. Through humour I was expressing confidence, covering my need for acceptance by making fun of myself. My humour acted as an effective mask.

With further exploration I discovered the multiplicity of layered meanings that humour has for me. While humour functioned as a mask to disguise my fear of rejection, I have also used it to genuinely connect with others, to generate warmth, and to put others at ease. As an adult humour is an effective tool for breaking the ice with people I have just met. Es noticed this quality when reflecting on her experience of my humour when we began studying together. Our shared humour was a precursor to the friendship we were to develop, *'I connected with you because I thought of that exact moment, and I found it hilarious as well'*. Es recalled that, at the time, she thought *'How can she be so comfortable that she's making really silly jokes,'* and that my humour seemed to say *'It's okay; we're all really cool here'*. Es felt this was a quality of leadership, describing me as the alpha female, and said my jokes would sort of signal that the class has started: *'I always really admired your Leo, sunny quality. You seemed very much to be someone who was just completely present, like 'right, let's go'. I guess you seem to be able to be completely immersed in the action but still keep quite a wry eye on the action.'* Es' comment suggests that my humour succeeded in expressing confidence and a sense of ease.

I've discovered a seeming contradiction in the meanings humour has for me: that I have used humour to state my presence, to draw people to me and put them at ease, yet also to mask my insecurities and vulnerabilities.

'When My Sister and I Laugh Together'

I especially enjoy sharing humour with my sister. Being silly, and making each other laugh feels like having both an audience and co-conspirator in one person. I have always enjoyed creating a private joke with my sister, and this seems funniest when we joke about other family members, particularly our parents, as only we share this depth of knowledge and experience. It is almost like

we have a private dialect, making obscure references that only we will understand. I really love that intimacy that comes with sharing a language of humour. I first experienced that with my sister. We used to be in fits of laughter together and be able to communicate through it, while our parents looked on in bewilderment with no idea about what we were saying. It was so special, and we still share a humour that is unique to our relationship.

One experience of this I depict in my journal from 2009:

Mum, Rachel (my sister) and I trekked from Melbourne to Kununurra, WA, for my brother's wedding. We spent a day exploring and had gone off-road to a billabong that sustained a vast number of bird-life. Feeling adventurous, we set off down a single-lane track as our hand-drawn map indicated that the track led back to the main road near a café. The track was sometimes in such bad condition that it was safer to drive around it to avoid the ditches and pothole. I think we were each feeling quite daring but safe in our air-conditioned, 4X4 hire-car. After about 10 minutes of this rugged and deserted terrain we began wondering how accurate our hand-drawn map was. The grass became high and seemed to close in around us and a few kilometres further we hit a patch of soft sand that stopped us in our tracks. Shit! I could feel my stress levels rise as I tried to move forward and the wheels sunk further into the sand. I thought, 'If we get bogged here, we are screwed', because there was no mobile phone reception. I mean, this is really out the back of the outback. I put the car into 4-wheel drive and was able to reverse out of the sand, thank goodness. Phew! We regrouped and figured we should have met the main road by now, so we decided it was time to turn around and go back the way we came. But how to turn around! We were still enclosed by tall grasses and driving blind into the grass could puncture a tyre. I had lost confidence and gave Rach the driver's seat. She artfully made a six-point turn and we were on our way again, following our tracks back out of the scrub. Out of relief we began cracking jokes and chuckling together, laughing at our mild attempt at an outback, off-road adventure. Mum said she had imagined having to make humpies out of branches for us to sleep in for the night and having to share our one apple and two chocolate bars for lunch and dinner. I countered, "Wouldn't we have just slept in the car?" to which Mum replied, "Oh no, the car is tipped on its side". Rach and I smiled at each other, silently acknowledging this was a part of mum's imaginings she neglected to share. Mum asked to stop and take some footage of the landscape and the car, so we stopped where it was particularly flat, backed up and then started forward as Mum began filming. I

suggested to Rach, jokingly, “Just keep driving,” so that’s what Rach did! It was great playing this trick on Mum in the middle of nowhere, because of Mum’s earlier fears of being stranded for the night. We watched Mum as we were driving away, waiting for her to realise, but she just kept filming. This sent us into hysterics, as Mum loves her camera, and she is a bit slow off the mark some times. Once she put the camera down and started to walk towards us, Rach stopped and backed up, laughing all the way. It was great fun, laughing with my sister like this. Later, when we watched Mum’s footage, we enjoyed it all over again, because Mum had taken panoramic footage 360 degrees, then when the track comes into view again, the car is out of sight and Mum says in realisation, “I think they’ve left me behind,” and the film cuts.

My sister and I laughed together, sharing our knowledge of our mum. Anyone else would not appreciate the subtleties, such as the silent acknowledgement shared in a smile. Only my sister and I can enjoy playing a trick like this on our mum. I can recall many experiences like this where only we got the joke. We would end up in hysterics. It is a kinship that we share, of course, but when we share humour like this, I feel this kinship is reinforced. I feel that when we share humour like this we are connecting deeply.

Moments like these affirm a shared sense of humour and our shared experiences. In addition to connecting, when I laugh with my sister, I feel I can really let myself go.

'The More Serious, the Better'

This study encouraged some exploration of my ‘sense of humour’ and the circumstances in which my humour surfaces. Until now, these circumstances have been hidden from me, as my humour arises so instantaneously that it seems to come from my pre-reflective thought-life. I collected from my journal several experiences in which I have made a joke and used these as entry points for indwelling. Moustakas (1990) defines indwelling as *“The process of turning inward to seek a deeper, more extended comprehension of the nature or meaning of a quality or theme of human experience”* (p.24) In this way I sought to understand the conditions that evoke my humour and the circumstances connected to it. What I discovered is that I tend to make jokes when there is a serious dynamic.

During the early days of arts therapy training at the beginning of our weekend intensives there was usually some initial apprehension in the room. We were unsure of what to expect and unsure of

each other. Everyone was being careful with one another, full of compliments and niceness. It began to feel like a 'Mutual Appreciation Society'. I was a bit over this preciousness and needed to break it up. I remember for homework we had all made a representation of the 'self' and I was presenting mine, which was a round, string sphere with found objects woven into it. In response someone had said, *"It looks like a very beautiful and precious object and it looks very fragile, too"*. It was on the floor at my feet and I spontaneously kicked it, saying, *"Not really"*. The group laughed in surprise, and others began to play along, kicking it across the circle to one another. This humour immediately dissolved the seriousness and earnestness while giving others permission to relax and play. What characterised this experience of humour for me was that I spontaneously grabbed the opportunity to cut through the earnestness. There was not much thought processing involved, just an instinctual gesture and comment. I know I wanted to feel more relaxed in the group and to clear the air, so to speak. On a similar occasion Es recalled: *'I think it really changed the energy, for me, because until then everyone was being really precious and being really in that time when everyone's being really nice to each other...'* So, in the circumstance of seriousness and apprehension, my spontaneous humour shifted the dynamic toward a more relaxed and playful atmosphere.

As a result of my personal exploration, I now use humour much more intentionally. The following is an example of this and is an excerpt from my journal from 2009, in which I articulate a dynamic that motivates an intentional use of humour. I was in Kununurra, WA, for my brother's wedding.

We went to a BBQ on the Thursday before the wedding to meet, and get to know, Mark's in-laws, a strict Baptist family who seemed very frosty (I initially thought they were either too inhibited or not interested in getting to know us). I saw their austerity as a challenge, like a red-flag-to-a-bull, and set out to push past the stoicism and try to prod and provoke, to find their sense of humour. I thought, 'It has to be in there somewhere'. So I sat beside Mark's father-in-law to be, Russell, and made conversation with him. I invited others into the conversation and the topic turned to travel. Siobhan, one of Rachel's bridesmaids, related an experience she had had, where a young African man had proposed to her, whom she suspected was simply in need of a visa. Pete, Mark's best man, then said, "Yeah, I get that all the time". And I asked, "What? African men proposing to you?" and the entire group laughed out loud, including Russell. I found it! I was pretty proud of myself.

Russell's seriousness was ripe for messing with. This seriousness, and lack of humour, appeared to be a part of Russell's family culture and on reflection I wonder why this family didn't express their

sense of humour, whether they repressed it in some way. In contrast to their austerity, I see my sense of humour as a form of self-expression. In this instance, I was aware of feeling challenged by the sobriety and absence of humour and actively sought to break it up.

Another circumstance in which my humour surfaces readily is the morning handover meetings at the hospital where I work. The seriousness and tension of these meetings are ripe for disruption. A quick quip will crack the ice-like energy. I have felt the humour shift the hierarchy, as after a laugh the hierarchy feels a little levelled off. In this circumstance I look for opportunities to shift the dynamic.

In summary, something I understand about my sense of humour is that tension and seriousness can be a playground. My humour surfaces in a serious environment because it enables me to both shift a dynamic while expressing myself. I noticed that my humour in this context usually arises spontaneously, in response to a restrictive dynamic. To better comprehend the nature of the serious dynamic I returned to these experiences for further indwelling. Another sense grabbed my attention: these experiences involved a dynamic, which I felt was restrictive and limiting. They were connected to my irritation in response to social expectations of compliance and conformity. In a restrictive context, by making a joke, perhaps I am resisting the limitation by essentially still saying *'Here I am'*.

'To Expose the Unspoken'

Whilst shifting the dynamic and stating my presence, I also enjoy challenging social expectations. Another felt sense, common to these experiences, was that I find them tantalising, *'like a red-flag-to-a-bull'*. Such circumstances present a challenge and then the joker in me comes out to play. These social expectations are often assumed, and I discovered that what I enjoy is that humour that exposes, and even challenges, these assumptions.

For example, as mentioned above, my humour surfaces during the serious morning meetings at work. Contributing to the seriousness, the hierarchy of the morning handover meeting is palpable. Only the doctors seem permitted to speak freely. As I am the 'lowly' arts therapist, I sense that when I make a joke and others laugh, the laughter disputes the tensions and anxieties of those who play into the hierarchy (what's going to happen? The sky isn't going to fall if you speak up in a meeting. The hierarchy is the pink elephant in the room that no one wants to mention).

Also mentioned above is my experience of using humour to shift the seriousness of my fellow students. This example also demonstrates how humour challenged the dynamic of chronic niceness in class. The fellow student's comment, "*It looks like a very beautiful and precious object and it looks very fragile, too*", summarised unspoken status quo for me, providing grist for my mill, something I could push against. In this context, not only did my humour shift the dynamic, but, by contrasting the genteel atmosphere with something sudden, it also exposed it. So, as well as shifting the dynamic through laughter, humour enables me to expose the status quo.

I observed an example of how humour can expose an unspoken dynamic when watching ABC TV's 'Spicks and Specks' (20th May, 2009). I found it so funny I almost wet myself with laughter at the TV. Myf Warhurst's team included singer Chris Bailey, from punk/rock band, The Saints, and comedian Dave O'Neil. Chris Bailey was aloof throughout the episode, looking uncomfortable and embarrassed by the silliness of the humour. I noted that Chris Bailey was being rather unsporting, refusing to really participate, let alone join in the fun. In answer to a question, Dave O'Neil sang '*You Can't Stop the Music*' by the Village People, but turned to Chris Bailey and said, "Oh, you probably could". It was brilliant. Everyone laughed, including me. Dave O'Neil spontaneously and indirectly exposed what others had been observing about Chris Bailey and his discomfort: the fact that he was not amused throughout the show, despite the numerous gags and quips and was not entering into the spirit of the show. Dave O'Neil's joke revealed an unspoken dynamic. It was pleasurable because it included me by way of articulating my observation of what was happening beneath the dialogue. The audience also laughed in affirmation of Dave O'Neil's witty observation.

Through humour I can expose the unspoken by piercing it with contrast. In these experiences humour effectively exposed an unspoken dynamic, whether it was a hierarchy, the status quo or one person's seriousness. It was brave of Dave O'Neil to make fun of the dour guy sitting next to him, as he couldn't be guaranteed that others had made similar, subjective observations, but he could be sure that Chris Bailey would not be amused.

But hey, everything's up for grabs when it comes to having a laugh. After all, it was *only* a joke.

'Only a Joke'

Humour is an essential part of who I am. My sense of humour is attuned to circumstances in which a serious dynamic can be shifted, in which I can state my presence, and in which unspoken conventions or assumptions can be exposed. These revelations led me to ask: how does humour do

this? I noticed some similarities amongst the comedians that I enjoy and explored my experience of their humour. At once, I recognised their use of humour as a vehicle to expose, challenge and poke fun.

Rod Quantoc uses humour to express his opinions and expose corporate and political stupidity. Somehow the seriousness of his point is received despite the fact that he is making a joke. I enjoy his political mockeries and I share his political sensibilities. His latest show is called *'Bugger the Polar Bears, This is Serious – an uplifting show about global warming and how everybody's going to die'*. He states in his show that there are voices which are amplified by money and political power and that dominate the airwaves. Then there are little voices in the back streets, like his, suggesting it could be different, the dominant voices could be wrong. Rod Quantoc appears to be unafraid and very connected to people. He holds comments made by politicians up to the light of common sense, and this really appeals to my sense social justice. Challenging dominant discourse through humour seems to gently prod people with ideas that they may not consider if the message was delivered with anger or angst. Humour is an effective tool for this, as it can be subtle, light and, seemingly, harmless. It's all for fun, and so the message can't be that serious. Is everything up for grabs for the sake of a joke?

I do think there is a line and that a joke can go too far. I reflected on a 'friendship' in which I was often made fun of. When I tried to address the hurtful fun making I was told to 'relax' and that 'it was *only* a joke'. Did this friend mean that one could say anything in the guise of a joke, without accepting responsibility for how it is received? Perhaps people assume that jokes are meaningless, but this didn't help my experience of the humour and I wasn't able to 'relax'. In other situations I recall being made fun of and laughing along, feeling hurt none-the-less and left feeling powerless to do or saying anything about my feelings.

'A Clash of Ideas'

This meaning emerged from many experiences described over the six years. I have always enjoyed being in the presence of children. I think this is largely because of the humour they offer by virtue of being new to the world. I notice that children's behaviour in the context of adult constructs often seems like two realities colliding. I enjoy observing this with my son (described in *'Noah'* p114), but below is an excerpt from my journal that exemplifies this sweet humour:

Whilst facilitating a music and movement therapy session, four-year-old Clare was sitting diagonally opposite the circle to me with her father and sister. I was wearing a skirt and in my seated position on the floor one of my knees was showing. Clare sprung up from her spot, trotted over to me, and 'fixed' my skirt, pulling it down so it would cover my knee. She trotted back to her place in the circle with satisfaction, as though she had just been of great assistance. I said 'Thank you, Clare', while trying to contain a laugh. Some other parents in the circle laughed too. What I found humorous was the concept of a four year old adhering to an outmoded social convention, and this felt like a clash of ideas. It also felt a little uncomfortable. A four-year-old had chastised me and this conflicted with my beliefs about the freedoms that women have now, as opposed to 50 years ago. But perhaps Clare just thought my skirt needed to be straightened.

During my interview with Em, I noticed that using Dutch cultural references would make us laugh. In addition to being able to relate, this seems to be about the idiosyncratic nature of these references to a particular culture that feels at odds with the culture we are in. I often find inserting cultural references gets a laugh. Like, when I use Yiddish in the presence of my partner's family they find it hilarious, because it is unexpected and is a clash between my culture and theirs.

I was watching comedian Russell Brand, on his Chanel 7 TV program 'Ponderland' (10th March, 2009). He was screening footage from a 1970s documentary on the subject of class. It revealed a wealthy, upper-class man, with no hint of sarcasm or irony in his tone or expression, saying "*women shouldn't vote, and the working class just get confused by voting. It should really be left up to me and a few of my friends*". Russell mused over how the filmmakers got that footage, suggesting they encouraged the man by saying "*That rich asshole thing you've got going, that's great. Can you give us more of that?*" This is a clash of ideas between class, and outside the context of his class, this man's ideas are absurd. This demonstrates the need for shared cultural understandings in order for humour to emerge. The same man is filmed preparing for a hunting trip, saying, "*birds enjoy being shot, as a retriever enjoys retrieving*". As he is saying this, his butler is packing his suitcase for him, carefully folding in pyjamas bearing a Rupert Bear cartoon print! The paradox is gold! Not only does this man present as wealthy, ignorant, and chauvinist but he appears to have been cosseted within his class all his life with no hope of being challenged. The gulf between this old-world, upper class man and most other people on the planet becomes comical because of its size: I laugh because we are worlds apart and this man's ideas clash with mine.

'Invites Play'

A recurrent meaning to emerge for me has been the playfulness I find in humour. I feel it is an invitation, of sorts, to play with ideas.

In relation to Es' observation, *'you seem to be able to be completely immersed in the action but still keep quite a wry eye on the action, which I think is a very good quality'*, I think my commitment to being present is related to my interest in play. This is a skill I used to take for granted, which I now have honed and use in group therapy facilitation. This kind of immersion in the action is playfulness and an openness that also is looking for patterns and threads that can inform the play. An example of this playful humour (described in *'The More Serious, the Better'* p107) where, in class, I wanted to break the dynamic of chronic niceness, to find some gristle, which I did in a playful way by kicking my 'self' sphere. Such improvisation reminds me of playing Theatre Sports, where the players needed to be 'in' the play yet watchful of the others play, ready to take up their 'offers'. I recall a lot of humour being generated by this. I feel a close correlation to this and how I am with clients in arts therapy. That is, while I am in the moment, I am also observing in order to tune in to the client's 'offers'.

I noticed that throughout the interviews with Em, she readily laughed at herself often, and I experienced this quality as playful and fun. As described in the thematic findings of Em's interviews, I found Em's laughter very engaging, and her readiness to laugh at herself suggested to me she would also take my faults and mistakes in good humour. This leads me to the next emergent meaning...

'Being Human'

Em's self-deprecating humour made me feel at ease. This feels similar to my own humour in the service of putting others at ease with me. I want to express 'if I can laugh at my mistakes, I am not about to get upset at the mistakes of others'. There is, however, a fine line between not taking one's self too seriously and constantly being the punch line. I can imagine that, just as humour can become a maladaptive mask, constant self-deprecating humour can function as a social skill for someone with very low self-esteem. Em noted this concern for herself, during our *Agreement of Understandings*.

There are moments when I feel that what I am laughing at is the human capacity to screw up. Even when I laugh at another's mishap, the immediate, reactionary laughter, rather than the schadenfreude laughter, I am laughing at my own fallibility.

As mentioned in *The More Serious, the Better* (p107), a class of disparate people seemed to connect in the sharing of a joke. These moments of humour are often a great leveller. I feel that when I create humour with a group of strangers I am saying, ' apart from any pretence, the roles we have or the reason we are here, we are all human, people who all can laugh at the same thing'. Stephen K Amos said as much, in his show called 'Find the Funny'. Once the audience was 'warmed up', I think we were prepared to laugh at anything and 'find the funny' anywhere. Amos noted that, although the audience represented various ages, cultures, backgrounds, education, here we were laughing at the same thing. Amos said that this is an important and very human phenomenon.

I enjoy creating humour in performance and I have noticed it certainly puts an audience at ease. When our band performs and we use humour on stage, I sense that it closes the gap between the audience and us and people stop staring with that look of expectation and start relaxing.

I experienced this relating when Em described her awkwardness when needing to spit in a social setting. I could imagine the threat of social embarrassment and I felt I was connecting to the human experience of embarrassment.

'Noah'

Why is it so funny when kids get things wrong? My inquiry led me to explore my experience of humour with my three-year-old son. I have always been fascinated by the giggles that can be induced by a game of peek-a-boo with a baby. I know from study that a baby believes something completely disappears when it leaves her field of vision, and the giggle is a response to the surprise of its reappearance. But there is something joyous in the laughter of a child, and I sought to understand this more deeply.

Some of my experiences of humour both at and with Noah seem to involve the juxtaposition of his instinctive literalness and the constructs of an adult world. Sometimes, Noah's laughter seems to be simply mirroring mine. Here is an example of this, from when Noah was two years old:

We were eating ice creams together and I asked Noah for a lick and he proceeded to lean forward and stick out his tongue, about to lick me! Ben (my husband) and I laughed heartily and Noah mimicked us by laughing as well and this made it all the funnier.

I have lots of these journal entries but these are just a few of my favourites. The next entry is when Noah was about eighteen months old:

Noah did some funny things today. In his highchair, at dinner, he did an enormous fart. At the same time, our neighbour's dog barked. I commented on the fart, while laughing, but Noah just kept saying, "Bo, Bo" (dog), as though trying to change the subject – this made me laugh out loud even more, because it appeared that he was blaming the dog. Noah then laughed in sympathy, giving a wind-down sound at the end – causing me to laugh all the more. Noah seemed to enjoy this laughter and so continued his laughter to encourage mine.

This shared laughter was a sweet and fun moment of connection. It was as though, already, at eighteen months old, he felt my laughter was a positive experience and wanted it to continue. When he was just a baby, he smiled a lot. These experiences cause me to wonder at the seemingly innate pleasure of smiling and laughter. It seems to be more than just physiological, as it usually involves interaction with another person or animal.

Noah especially likes physical games. They make him laugh and laugh with a giggle that seems to come from his boots. His laughter is so contagious. When I tickle Noah he says, through his laughter, "Stop, stop". Then when I stop he asks, "More?" Recently, we were on holidays and the house we were staying at had a trampoline. We jumped on it together and when he began to bounce out of control, Noah laughed uncontrollably. We held hands and I tried to bounce in alternation with him. He would laugh when this fell out of rhythm and he got double-bounced. I would then laugh at him laughing.

I wonder whether Noah is laughing at the sense of 'being out of control', laughing at the 'surprise' that is the result of being caught off guard. I feel it is linked to the way laughter can be a need for physical release. Noah really seems to let go. There is something raw and essential, perhaps primal, about his laughter in these situations. This kind of uncontrollable laughter where his shoulders drop and his head falls back a bit is so satisfying to hear.

A while ago he laughed like this in response to the word 'Poof!' said with emphasis during a story in which something magically appears. For the next couple of hours all I needed to say was this word spontaneously and Noah would laugh and giggle uncontrollably. This felt very honest and authentic, and again seemed to be in response to being taken by surprise.

An example of laughing at Noah, rather than with, was during another game of hide-and-seek.

I was hiding under the bed and Noah called out, “Mum, you in here?” and I replied, “No, I’m not here, I’ve gone to the shops”, to which Noah responded with genuine disappointment: “Oh. Oh well,” as though that was the end of the game. I was pissing myself laughing under the bed and Ben had to explain to him that if he can hear Mum talking and laughing, then she must be here.

Such innocence and blind belief in what his parents tell him. I used this idea of blind belief later and played a bit of a trick on him. I convinced Noah that I could make my book disappear if he turned around in circles and I said magic words. All I did was put it up my shirt, but he simply could not see it. To a child, seeing really is believing, and perhaps life is a gradual process of that idea inverting. I love playing on this, I am not sure why, and perhaps it is because it feels like two different perspectives colliding. It is a bit about having a secret, and knowing something Noah doesn’t know.

My enjoyment of Noah’s laughter felt it had more energy, as the joy is a bodily sense, almost a primal feeling. To explore more deeply this phenomenon of joy in relation to humour, I decided that my felt experience of humour with Noah and of his laughter would be perfect entry point for a creative arts process, using the MIECAT procedures (see Journey Map 7, 117).



Journey Map 7

My Creative Arts Inquiry Using the MIECAT Procedures

In exploring the thesis question ‘*What is the meaning of humour, as described by women in a creative arts process?*’ my inquiry has led me to several phenomena, particular to my experience of humour. Thus far the emergent meaning of humour in relationships has been significant to me. I am intrigued by the nature of this in my relationship with my son, Noah, which is a close relationship, yet like no other I have experienced before. I sense joy in the humour we share, but this joy is not something I can conceptualise.

The MIECAT mode of inquiry is based on the premise that knowledge is grounded in experience. I sought a deeper understanding of my experience of humour with my son through experiential creative inquiry. This involved being present with the experience, allowing responses to emerge and to intuitively follow the bodily senses, thoughts and feelings throughout the process, thus creating cycles of amplification and reduction of data (Lett, 2004). To initiate data generation I made an audio recording of Noah and I sharing humour together, which included lots of giggling, laughter and fun making, which we call 'mucking'.

- **Indwelling:** Using the recording of the humour generated with Noah as a point of entry, I played this recording back and immersed myself in the experience, calling into awareness feelings, energies and senses that called attention.
- **Multi-modal Representation:** I explored my experience through prose, drawing and collage.
- **Description:** Avoiding interpretation, the image was described.
- **Data Reduction:** From all forms of representation came a reduction to keywords.
- **Clustering of keywords:** These keywords were then grouped into clusters, creating families of words that were felt to share some related meaning or quality.
- **Amplification of clusters:** Each family of key words was treated as an essence of the experience, bracketing in that particular aspect of experience and becoming attuned to connected events, felt senses and further emergent imagery.
- **New Possibilities and depiction:** Some themes evoked new multi-modal responses and depictions, in the form of anecdote, prose and imagery, helping me to know more deeply

that particular theme in my life. This was a choice to stay with the current emergent meaning in the search for new valued knowing. This was also connected to re-experiencing.

- **Reduction to themes:** Each meaning was then reduced to one or two succinct sentences, representing a theme.

Below are my written and pictorial representations, the keywords of which are highlighted in green.

An initial written response

Make me laugh
I love it
stop. go!
joy yes joy
wild laughter
surprise
stop. go!
Anticipation
“got you!”
release all else
let go of the day's calling
stop. go!
we are completely here
the game you love to lose
just us
me and you
sharing now
stop. go!
enjoying joy
chase, jump, bounce
all manner of ways
in which to laugh together

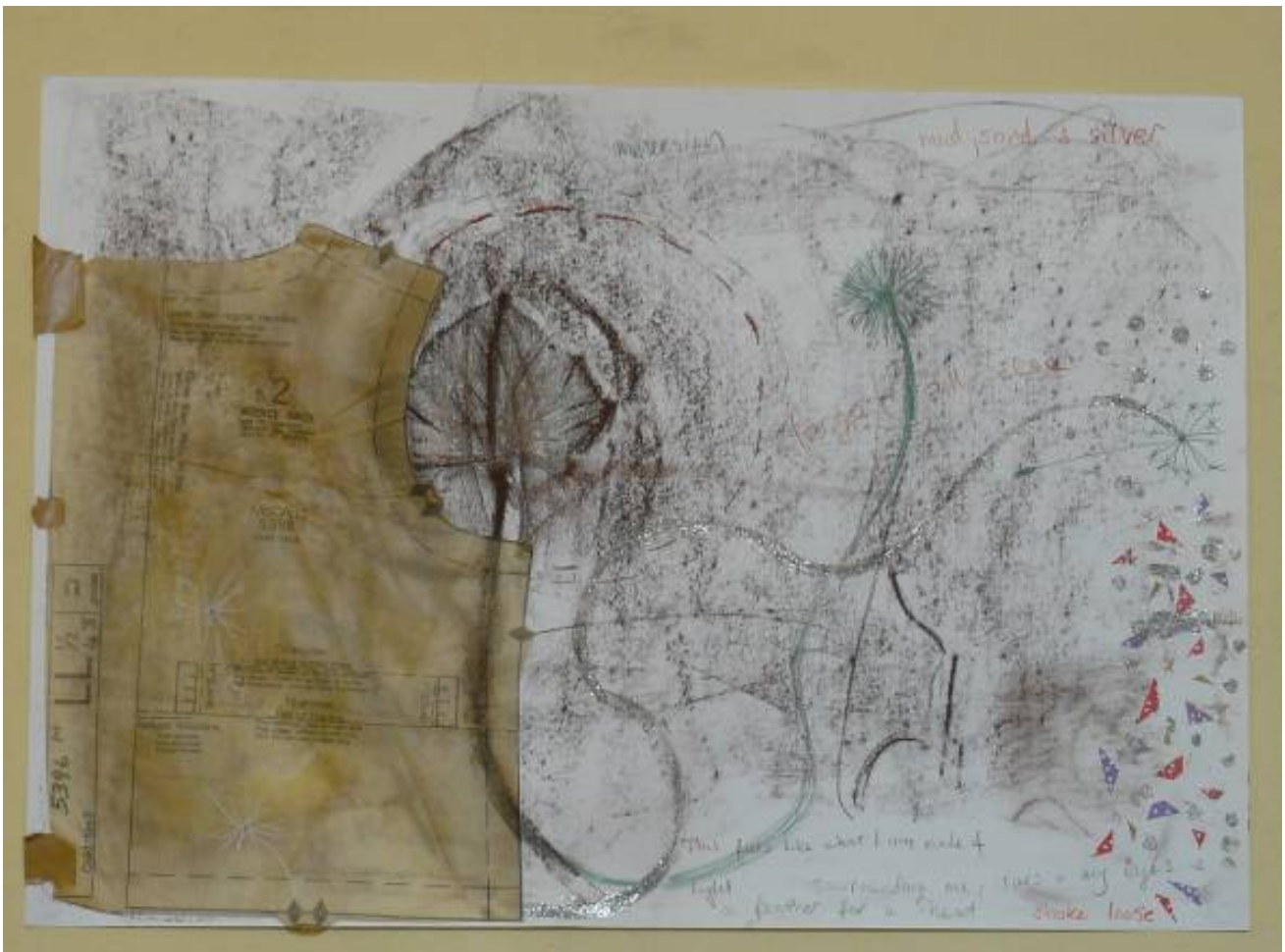


Figure 4a. Forget all else: Dry pastel, silver glitter, brown tape, child's clothing pattern, origami paper on cartridge.

Figure 4b. Forget all else: Dry pastel, silver glitter, brown tape, child's clothing pattern, origami paper on cartridge.



Pam Hellema, MA research thesis, *'She who laughs last'*, MIECAT, 2011

Word content of above pictorial representation

Immersion

This feels like **what I am made of**

light

mud, sand and silver

surrounding me, stars in my eyes and a feather for a heart

forget all else

shake it **loose**

Description of pictorial representation

The page (Figures 4a and 4b) is **covered** in a **ground** of dark brown, roughly drawn and picking up the raised bumps from under the paper, leaving incidental marks and lines of dark brown. The ground looks **organic**, natural. A rough white border is left.

A pattern to a child's size three vest overlays the lower left corner of the page. It is light brown and somewhat translucent, offering a hint of what is **underneath**. On the pattern are black markings, lines, dotted lines and symbols, including the words 'child size 3'. It is hinged onto the page at left with 3 scraps of brown tape. Drawn on top are two white dandelion seed heads and the stem of the leaf. There is a chalk rubbing of a leaf, the left tip of which is under the pattern, but mostly **showing**, next to the sleeve. The outline of the leaf is dark brown and **contains** green and white. Following the dotted line on the sleeve of the pattern is a drawn, brown dotted line that **completes** a circle around the leaf. Surrounding this brown line is another dotted line, but in green. These circles and the leaf make up the **centre** of the image. The green and brown stem of the leaf **flows over** the pattern and onto the paper and wends its way to the right of the page, becoming the stem of a green dandelion seed cluster.

From under the pattern, at the bottom centre of the page, **bursts** a silver trail. It has emerged from under the pattern and its **emergence** has left yellow and pink **ripples** that **emanate out**. The silver trail **surges forth**, right, out from under the pattern, crossing over the green line that **connects** the leaf and dandelion, and ending in one of the dandelion's seed stems, which is also green. The green

line and the silver line are of similar lengths and connect to similar things: the green connects to the dandelion and the silver connects to the seed stem of the dandelion. Around the head of the dandelion's seed stem burst silver spots and in a column below the dandelion's seed stem are slivers of red and purple paper with white stars printed on, as well as **splashes** of silver, **sparkling** in between.

Above the leaf is written 'immersion' in green. To the above right of the dandelion is written 'mud, sand and silver' in vermilion. Across the stem of the dandelion is written '**forget all else**' in vermilion. Along the bottom middle-right is written 'This feels like what I am made of ' and 'light' in brown. Then 'Surrounding me, stars in my eyes and a feather for a heart' in green. Then 'Shake loose' in vermilion, next to that.

Some preliminary reflections:

I guess Noah is my seed stem, and made from my pattern. He is my child and is 3, coincidentally. It is as though his laughter **reaches in** and **draws me out** of myself. The pattern is both 'what I'm made of' and 'my mature, organised, planned, prepared' self, who is 'in control'. The experience of laughter with Noah reaches beneath this to **a bodily sense** of humour. It is **primal**, organic and at my base.

The dandelion seed heads are light, playful, and children are drawn to blowing them for this reason. This feels to me like humour, also: light and playful, and something I am drawn to.

I am reminded of being tickled as a child: loving it but pleading the tickler to stop, as it was almost unbearable. It was **wonderfully unbearable**.

From the above multimodal representations, that is the prose, collage and description, the first form of data reduction followed in the gathering of keywords, those words or phrases that carried meaning according to my experiencing.

KEYWORDS

Some words in response

love
joy
wild
release
let go
completely
us
Sharing now
together

Word content of pictorial representation

Immersion
what I am made of
light
surrounding
stars in my eyes
a feather for a heart
loose

Phenomenological description

covered
ground
organic
underneath
showing
contains
completes
centre
flows over
bursts
ripples
emanate
surges
connects
splashes
sparkling
forget all else
reaches in
draws me out
a bodily sense
primal
wonderfully unbearable
emergence

I gathered the above keywords together on individual pieces of paper and spread them out in no particular order. I then sought those words that seemed connected in meaning. For example, 'stars in my eyes' felt strongly connected to 'love' and 'joy', and in this way clusters of keywords were formed. Based on the shared meaning of the clustered keywords, I gave each cluster a title. The process gave me some insights to different aspects to my experience of humour with my son. Bracketing in the subject of my thesis, I then called into focus any further senses, memories or creative energy I had about each aspect, creating another cycle of experiencing. From this came further depictions and then, in summary, an essence, captured in a thematic statement.

CLUSTERED KEYWORDS & CLUSTER TITLES

<i>wholly connected</i>	<i>wild abandon</i>	<i>laughter surrounds me</i>	<i>a light being at my core</i>
love	wild	surrounding	what I am made of
joy	loose	let go	a feather for a heart
us	bursts	loose	ground
light	primal	flows over	reaches in
completes	a bodily sense	covered	centre
connects		contains	draws me out
sharing now		forget all else	organic
together		ripples	underneath
stars in my eyes		emanate	showing
wonderfully unbearable		surges	sparkling
		completely	splashes
		Immersion	release
			emergence

Keyword cluster:

Love, joy, us, sharing now, together, stars in my eyes, completes, connects, wonderfully unbearable, light

Cluster title: *Wholly Connected*

Depiction:

Sharing this kind of laughter and joy feels like being in love, wholly connected to another in an embrace. In my reflections I am brought into a memory of being tickled by my dad as a child. The memory was of loving the complete and utter release. I felt safe and, therefore, able to immerse myself in the experience, which was wonderfully unbearable. This was not a conscious knowledge at the time, but through this inquiry into my experience with my son, I sense the presence of this feeling in connection with my experience as a child.

Another memory that this connects me to is one of lying prone, on the grass, on my back, in the sun, with my best friend, enjoying watching the clouds float by above us. I am very relaxed and happy to just be in the moment, when a dog startles us by suddenly appearing above our faces, sniffing at us. We both began to laugh, and laugh and laugh. It was uncontrollable. Mixed in with this was a felt, shared, knowing, this was an early experience in our friendship but connected us together for a long time afterward. Enjoying each other's laughter, we often spoke of that experience as almost a phenomenon that was difficult to describe with words.

As an adult there seems to be an element of trust in the abandonment of care, enabling such laughter as this, the trust between parent and child.

Theme:

The pleasure and connection associated with uncontrolled, shared laughter feels to me like the love and trust that is usually present in close personal relationships, particularly that between parent and child.

Keyword cluster:

Wild, loose, bursts, a bodily sense, primal

Cluster title: *A Wild Abandon*

Depiction:

The wild abandon I experience in uncontrollable laughter with Noah feels to have no boundaries, and feels a little dangerous. He seems vulnerable in this state and I am aware of my responsibility as his caregiver to protect him. I recall during drama therapy exploring my archetypes. My trickster self was revealed to be part of my sense of humour, playing tricks on people. I explored a pose for each of my archetypes, and then created a tableau of these together. What this revealed was that my trickster self had almost a predatory approach to my child self, sneaking up on the child unawares (Figure 4c, below). The trickster seemed to have intentions that were not entirely benign.



Figure 4c. Innocence and Experience: Digital photographic image

Theme: *There can be an element of both innocence and experience in humour and the meeting of both is sometimes present.*

Keyword cluster:

contains, Immersion, flows over, let go , loose, forget all else, ripples, emanate, surges, surrounding

Cluster title: *Laughter Surrounds Me*

Depiction:

This relates to the abandonment of care and self-consciousness but more closely feels like the commitment to the moment that adults envy in children. Noah gives himself entirely to experience. I connect with this when I laugh uncontrollably with him. I let go of my adult concerns, lose myself, and my mind becomes singularly focused on the pleasure of our shared humour, of his laughter and of laughing with him. There is a movement that flows from this, the laughter that ripples and spills out, surges forward, continuing to flow over us together, surrounding us, binding us together, containing us and holding us firm. This complete immersion and focus on the here and now liberates me from extraneous concerns. I feel immersed in it as his laughter surrounds me completely.

I have reflected on how I use humour for exactly this purpose, an example of which was referred to by Es and her experience of my humour in class. Es commented that my humour seemed to signal that the class had started. I would use humour to become present in the room, with the group, to create cohesion among us.

Theme:

The feeling of complete immersion in uncontrollable laughter can help me become present, connect me to being in the moment, to let concerns fall away and allow me to attend to the here and now.

Keyword cluster:

what I am made of, a feather for a heart, ground, reaches in, draws me out, release, centre, organic, underneath, showing, splashes, sparkling, emergence.

Cluster title: *A Light Being at My Core*

Depiction:

This adds a sense of process to the abandonment of care and self-consciousness: the laughter reaches in, gets under my defences and lifts my carefree-self up and out. This is a bodily experience that connects with a light being at my core, lifting up my effervescent child-self from under the experience of adulthood. This child-self who can give herself over to the laughter is at my centre, an ancient made up of very early experiences of pleasure, who remembers what it means to let go. She has a feather for a heart, as she is not yet burdened by experience. She reveals her sparkling self and I see her as a sage who is quick to laugh. Noah helps me find her again. I enjoy the seeming contradiction in my innocent child-self represented as an ancient and a sage. She is an ancient, as she was born long ago and has been around for a long time.

I can see this wisdom in my son, and particularly in his mark making. How I wish I could make marks like he does, such freedom in unselfconsciousness that communicates an immediacy and presence.

Theme:

Experiencing uncontrollable laughter with my son evokes my child-like spirit of abandonment from beneath grown-up defences, revealing her memory and knowledge of what it means to be free.

This aspect of experience felt not entirely known to me and seemed to have more creative energy behind it, as new images suggested themselves to me. The revelation of my child-like spirit intrigued me and I wanted to explore her a little more. To understand this theme more fully I explored new possibilities by giving my child-like spirit form. She quickly claimed the name 'My Ancient Child' (Figure 4d, p129).



Figure 4d. My Ancient Child: DAS paper clay with imitation silver leaf.

Bogged down, she is coming up from out of the mire, ready to embrace me, surround me. She is somewhat of a fossil, made of a feather. She is a soft place to fall. My ancient child is keeper of a knowledge long forgotten, the knowledge of being in the moment.

Summary of Themes

Theme: The pleasure and connection associated with uncontrolled, shared laughter feels to me like the love and trust that is usually present in close personal relationships.

Theme: There can be an element of both innocence and experience in humour and the meeting of both is sometimes present.

Theme: The feeling of complete immersion in uncontrollable laughter can help me become present, connect me to being in the moment, to let concerns fall away and allow me to attend to the here and now.

Theme: Experiencing uncontrollable laughter with my son evokes my child-like spirit of abandonment from beneath grown-up defences, revealing her memory and knowledge of what it means to be free.

What do I think I know now?

There seems to be a particular role that the sharing of humour and laughter plays in my life, which began when I was a child, in my close relationships with those whom I felt safe with. The security of those relationships contributed to the closeness and to a feeling of joy and pleasure, as the shared humour and laughter was an extension of that relationship. I feel I am the provider of this security with Noah, my son, when I share humour and laughter with him. Humour, from a very early age, can extend relationships into a greater closeness, highlighting the sense of security that is often present between parent and child. I have also experienced this with good friends in my adult life and the humour and laughter that is shared seems to belie the deep connection experienced.

The particular role humour plays in my adult life is to bring me into the moment, becoming completely immersed in the playfulness, and the in the sharing of openness. I connected with an aspect of myself, which is my ancient child, gave her form and deepened my awareness of her. I can see that she has a very important role in my life, as I tend to be an ambitious person, who likes to be in control, and my ancient child is an antidote to this. That she should reveal herself through my experiential inquiry into sharing humour with my son is a lovely, felicitous coincidence. You see, I came to realise just how 'in control' I wanted to be when I developed Post Natal Depression soon after Noah was born. I am moved by the permission to let go that my ancient child brings me. She

seems to ask me to give in to joy. I have a deeper understanding of the quality of focusing on the present that humour has. It draws me into the here and now.

My early experience of humour, re-experienced through shared humour with my son, has qualities of innocence. In thinking about this quality I also found that my adult sense of humour bears qualities of experience and both are often present for me. I am reminded of William Blake's songs of innocence and songs of experience, which posits the two states of being at polar opposites. There is a dichotomy present in my experience of humour with Noah, suggested in the title of 'My Ancient Child', between releasing my ancient child and the security I provide him as his mother, particularly in the vulnerable state of uncontrollable laughter.



Journey Map 8

Chapter 4: Discussion of Findings

INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides an overview of the findings and some exploration of literature and media relevant to the findings (see Journey Map 8, p132). In keeping with Giorgi's final step in phenomenological data analysis, the general structure statement, I endeavour to describe what all the findings have in common, or themes, and search for essential aspects of the phenomenon of humour (Giorgi, 1985, p.19-20). In order to retain a strong orientation to the data, it was important to bracket in the intentionality of each of the co-researchers' experiences, thereby ensuring that specific, contextual meanings were not assumed by the shared meanings found. Therefore, both differences and similarities are noted.

For this process, I gathered keywords from the findings as a whole and treated it as one set of data (including new reflections and clarifications identified during the '*Agreement of Understandings*' and my MIECAT inquiry, see Process Flow Chart, p 31), and then, as in the MIECAT process, clustered like words to allow meanings to emerge. The themes that emerged from this process illuminated new details, and so keywords within one cluster were gathered into sub-clusters, which are grouped in boxes and given a title. These nuances within the themes provided intriguing insights, explicating differences and similarities in meaning among co-researchers' descriptions.

By continually returning to the transcripts and '*Agreements of Understandings*', I sought an authentic account of each co-researcher's described meaning. This was also strived for by reflexively addressing my position in relation to the data.

Where similarities were found and emergent meanings had general relevance to each co-researcher, the ideas of academics, humourists and theorists were brought into the discussion, and conceptualisations of emergent meanings were explored in this way. Grounded in the findings, the examples provided in discussion are used to offer context, rather than a definitive view. From a constructionist standpoint, by locating the emergent meanings in the collective knowledge of art, literature, the media, philosophy, politics and psychology, the broader social milieu that informs experience is acknowledged. As the data gathering process acknowledges the inter-subjectivity between co-researchers, this discussion acknowledges the myriad influences on experience: "*The collectivity of different voices that compose the voice of any given person...is always embodied, in culture, and in relationship with oneself and with others.*" (Gilligan, et al., p253)

DISCUSSION OF EMERGENT MEANING '*CONTRADICTING IDEAS*'

Sub-cluster title: *Worlds Collide*

<i>two different realities colliding</i> <i>connecting two contradictory elements</i>	<i>contradicting ideas</i> <i>two worlds collide</i>
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Each co-researcher described experiencing humour when two seemingly contradictory elements were connected. Em experienced this when her bike seat slipped and she could visualise that she, a grown woman, must look like a little kid, and therefore 'wrong'. She found that sharing humour relied on a shared expectation of reality (explored in '*Relating Through Humour*' p145). In describing the craft of humour in her writing, Em said that to create humour she needs to '*frame expectation of normality, then you twist it somehow.*' Ann enjoys discovering something slightly 'askew' or out of place in art and the quirkiness of particular cartoons. Es feels her sense of humour is attuned to noticing the absurd, noting various examples of absurdity in her life. I experience the incongruity of children's behaviours in an adult context as a constant source of humour. Each of our experiences involves the clash of two realities. However, there were several other, understated meanings that emerged from within this broader meaning. The sub-clusters of keywords within this emergent meaning explore what this experience of humour feels like, the contexts in which it emerges and the shared expectations that are required for humour to be communicated to another, which points to the co-construction of humour (also explored in '*Relating Through Humour*' p145).

Sub-cluster title: *Absurdity, Incongruity and the Ludicrous*

<i>absurd</i> <i>absurdity in the every-day</i> <i>incongruity</i> <i>the situation is ludicrous</i> <i>it just looks wrong</i> <i>ridiculous</i>	<i>appreciating absurdity</i> <i>absurd behaviour</i> <i>incongruity is humorous</i> <i>slightly out of place, or askew</i> <i>part of mocking</i> <i>idiosyncratic</i>
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Words such as 'absurdity', 'incongruity' and 'ludicrous' were used often. Other words used were 'idiosyncratic', 'inappropriate', 'unexpected', 'wrong', 'quirky' and 'askew'. I initially thought to explore the various words that emerged to describe a clash of realities. Several words seem to relate to the circumstance required in order for the other descriptions to emerge. If an incongruity is present, the unexpected is experienced and then regarded as absurd, or ludicrous. In seeking a broader understanding of the language we each used, I considered the dictionary meanings of some of the more commonly used words, and found overlap across their definitions and meanings

described by co-researchers. Some of the words that overlap with definitions and described experiential meanings are highlighted in blue.

LUDICROUS: causing laughter because of **absurdity**; provoking or deserving derision; **ridiculous**; laughable: a ludicrous lack of efficiency.

Em described the scene of her on a bike with a slipped seat, described feeling like a **fool** and imagined it must have looked 'ludicrous'. She also found the **frivolous, incongruous** behaviour of her boss a particular source of humour: *'The guy's a senior manager in one of the top four accounting firms and he's break-dancing in front of my desk. What do you do with that? Except laugh.'*

ABSURD: utterly or obviously senseless, illogical, or untrue; contrary to all reason or common sense; laughably **foolish** or false: an absurd explanation.

I imagined that the situations I got into as a child must have seemed **absurd** to my parents. I also noted the absurdity of one man's ideas in the context of a different class. Es also reflected that she finds herself absurdist, and often in **absurd** situations because she is quick to take an idea and run with it. Many of Es' experiences described as absurd involved some sort of contradiction: her powerful father 'crying like a baby' because he had stepped on an earring; the interests of her clients with Autism challenging social expectations; and the notion of **absurdity** emerged in the design of resin handbags that allowed nature to then be wiped clean.

INCONGRUOUS: 1. **out of keeping or place; inappropriate**; unbecoming: an incongruous effect; incongruous behaviour. 2. not harmonious in character; inconsonant; lacking harmony of parts. 3. inconsistent: actions that were incongruous with their professed principles.

Em reflected that she laughs often in response to something **incongruous**. I constantly find humour in the **incongruity** of children using an adult stance and mannerism.

QUIRKY: a peculiarity of action, behaviour, or personality; mannerism: He is full of strange quirks.

ASKEW: to one side; **out of place**; in a crooked position; awry. a shift, subterfuge, or evasion; quibble; a sudden **twist** or turn.

Ann used the words '**askew**' and '**quirky**' when reflecting on where she finds humour, whether it is in the work of artists or comedians.

Each co-researcher described finding humour in various ways, yet there is some overlap within the dictionary meanings of these words. The different words used by each individual, however, seem to be describing their sense of humour, and how they experience themselves. Es specifically described herself as '*reasonably absurdist*', while Em experienced '*feeling like a fool*' in a moment of incongruity.

Sub-cluster title: *What is Normal?*

<i>it's a contextual thing requires some prior experience of what is normal</i>

The research process revealed that the experience of humour in incongruity is predicated on expectations in a given context. Em noted that her written humour requires some prior experience of what is 'normal'. She would count on her magazine readers having an understanding, or prior experience, of riding a bicycle, so that the expectation of this experience could then be juxtaposed. Es described her experience of the absurdity of the behaviours of her Autistic clients in the context of social expectations. The reactions of others to her clients suggested to Es that others often aren't appreciating the absurdity of the situation. This meaning, also, is linked to the co-construction of humour (explored in '*Relating Through Humour*' p145).

Sub-cluster title: *What Can Clash?*

<i>cultures clash expectation is based on gender contrasts the heroic with the banal</i>	<i>misunderstanding absurdity in the every-day collide with social expectations clash of ideas between class</i>
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There were several contexts that co-researchers referred to in which such a collision occurred. As mentioned above, behaviours collided with social expectations when Es accompanied clients in public. Ann really enjoyed humour in the work of cartoonists, which offer a quirky perspective on the every-day. In particular, Ann referred to cartoonists that address issues that are relevant to women. In these cartoons there is often a contrast between the grand and the domestic, the heroic and the banal. In the context of gender, Em experiences humour when she drags off a lycra-clad

male cyclist at the lights, and notices his surprise. Em describes the cyclist's surprise as based on the contradiction between his gender expectations and experience. *'I find that hilarious, that guys get so offended, and then go steaming off up the hill, trying to out-pace me because it's like 'oh my god, it's a girl on a mountain bike, I'm not going to be outrun by her.'* This incident for Em was partly informed by her experience of difference amongst men and women cyclists, and is therefore contextualised by culture and politics. I like to think that this experience has bolstered Em's sense of place on the roads. I discovered that political humour appeals to me, which often posits a clash between political ideation and ordinary experience. In her workplace, Es often experienced that humour arose out of the collision of her clients' behaviour with social expectations.

In summary, these findings point to some similarities in the experiences of the co-researchers, in that what we found funny often involved two contradicting ideas. There were, however, various contexts in which this was experienced, and varying ways of describing these experiences. Em and Es felt that this experience was also an extension of how they are in the world: Em found that humour in incongruity enabled her to accept her mishaps and self-deprecation, and Es described herself as *'reasonably absurdist'*. Inherent in the experience of humour within contradicting ideas is a shared expectation of what is normal. Hence there were several constructs in which such contradictions were experienced, such as social, political, cultural and gender-based expectations. These emergent meanings flow into several other emergent meanings, also discussed in this chapter. What it means to *'Feel Like a Fool'* is explored further in *'Distance'* (p163), and *'What is Normal?'* is discussed in *'Relating Through Humour'* (p145) as it relates to the recognition of shared expectations.

DISCUSSION OF EMERGENT MEANING *'TO EXPOSE AND REVEAL'*

Each of the co-researchers described this particular emergent meaning: the capacity that humour has to reveal and expose something, in varying ways, as they experienced it. This emergent meaning had been experienced both spontaneously and as an intentional use of humour, and is closely linked to another emergent meaning, *'Contradicting Ideas'* (p134). From the data it emerged that, often within the experience of contradicting ideas, humour can expose assumptions, expectations and reveal new perspectives. I enjoyed the way a joke, observed on ABC TV's *'Spicks and Specks'* revealed a particular unspoken, shared experience. Ann described discovering a new perspective through humour during a creative process, and Es described experiencing humour in the socially

inconvenient behaviour of pets. A closer exploration of this emergent meaning led to the discovery of several aspects to this quality. Through humour the revelation of an alternate perspective led Es to appreciate another's point of view. It also emerged that humour reveals alternate perspectives indirectly, and that this quality of humour can be used to raise contention without confrontation.

Sub-cluster title: *A New Point of View*

<i>showing</i> <i>allows me to examine</i> <i>illuminate the subjective</i> <i>see something completely different</i> <i>seeing the funny side of it yourself</i> <i>bring me back to what's important</i> <i>offered new perspectives</i>	<i>two different realities</i> <i>illuminating it as absurd</i> <i>revealing</i> <i>broader perspective</i> <i>suggesting it could be different</i> <i>humour allows me to see it from that point of view</i>
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Each co-researcher found that humour can reveal something quite unexpected. Through her creative process, Ann noticed the discovery of humour in her work, in the form or composition, and that she could then see something completely different. Es in particular discovered much humour in the *'social appropriateness problems'* that arise when pets, children or even adults ignore social etiquette. For example, when one of the queen's corgis defecates on the ground in front of the media, the heightened sense of etiquette is exposed, revealing those who are upset by the incident, and this is funny for those who aren't bothered. This experience of humour reveals the value placed on social etiquette by others, or their investment in the custom. Es observed that some people in these situations are *'remaining so above natural urges'* that they fail to see the humour, and this contrasts with the dogs just being themselves. I discovered through my research process that my sense of humour often emerges when there is some seriousness or gravity present. In particular, I discovered that the seriousness of authority can be a playground. I noticed that humour can expose authority as a social construction by lightly offering a contradicting idea. Co-researchers described many other experiences in which humour revealed a different point of view.

A classic example in literature of humour exposing a social construct, raised in discussion with Es, is the allegorical tale of *The Emperor's New Clothes* (Andersen, 1837). This story demonstrates how social pretense can blind one to reality, as everyone plays along with the belief that the emperor is wearing new clothes, not daring to speak the truth of what they see for fear of being thought ignorant. Humour in this story reveals the power of the dominant discourse. The joke literally exposes the emperor and those bound by the pretense, and there is humour when a child exposes the pretense. The child's lack of pretense enabled an alternate perspective to be expressed.

Further research revealed that Hans Christian Andersen changed the ending of the story at the last minute, from the emperor's subjects praising his invisible suit to that of the child's exclamation. It is widely thought that this change was a comment on his experience of the Danish bourgeoisie. *The Emperor's New Clothes* became his expose of the hypocrisy and snobbery that he found when he finally gained admission to the Danish bourgeoisie, in whose company Andersen regarded himself as the precocious child (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Emperor's_New_Clothes, last modified on 18 March 2010).

Artist Barbara Kruger (cited in Chapter 1) uses humour to question meaning in the media. By playing with words in the marketplace and by using the familiarity of the billboard poster and commercial photography, Kruger plays on the visual and linguistic assumptions of her audience. Against these familiar mediums, Kruger pastes blatant consumer advertising colloquialisms such as 'Buy me, I'll Change your life' and 'I shop therefore I am'. In the context of the marketplace, amongst other advertising billboards, the absurdity of Kruger's works challenge the 'sense' in the neighbouring advertising messages that may otherwise be taken for granted. The effect of Kruger's work is to weaken the authority that advertisers claim. Humour, as language that is experimental, can challenge the conventions in communication that are symbolic of hegemony through 'non-sense' (Isaak, 1996, p15).

Co-researchers described being able to take in a '*broader perspective*' through humour. Some co-researchers found that they could then re-order their priorities and even appreciate the priorities of others, as Es discovered regarding her clients. These discoveries illuminate the colloquial phrase '*seeing the funny side*', referred to by Ann in the context of painting, which evokes the image of a problem being a three-dimensional object, and suggests that humour is experienced from an alternate position from which to view a situation. It seems that if one is aware that humour can offer a possible alternate perspective, perhaps one can become attuned to finding it.

Sub-cluster title: *A Step Towards Acceptance*

<i>magnify small incidents</i> <i>accept frustrating or unusual behaviour</i> <i>accept their challenging behaviours</i> <i>visualise a different context</i> <i>humorous interpretation</i>	<i>acknowledge another reality</i> <i>enables her to respect and appreciate their outlook on life</i> <i>a step toward accepting difference</i>
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Humour is often found when two differing realities clash. The notion that humour can also assist one to acknowledge and appreciate another viewpoint suggests that humour can bridge juxtaposing

perspectives. The experience of finding a new perspective through humour is to acknowledge the subjectivity of reality.

Ann discovered humour in her art making, offering '*a humorous interpretation*' of something she had been worried about. She described this as seeing a humorous side to a problem, and said '*you're laughing at yourself really*'. Similarly, Es made a link between finding something funny and being able to appreciate another person's priorities: '*humour allows me to see it from that point of view*'. Humour seems to illuminate the presence of distinct points of view, such as one person's behaviour in sharp contrast to expectation, or ideas of 'normality'. As a result of humour exposing another's point of view, Es felt humour enabled her to '*accept frustrating or unusual behaviour*'. Exploring this experience further, Es found that humour also revealed that those who judge the Autistic behaviour of her clients as 'wrong' are not only unable to see the humour, they are also not seeing the individual's point of view. Es also reflected that this is a choice for her, to either be embarrassed or annoyed or to appreciate the humour.

Es says that through humour she can '*visualise a different context*' for the behaviour, and therefore acknowledge their priorities and '*another reality*'. The notion that humour can also assist one to acknowledge and appreciate another viewpoint suggests that humour can bridge juxtaposing perspectives. If humour acts as a conduit presenting for differing perspectives, this finding adds to my hypothesis that humour could be used as a creative medium. Humanist psychologist Carl Rogers (1961) offers a succinct definition of creativity, which correlates with some of these findings about humour:

To juggle elements into impossible juxtapositions, to shape wild hypotheses, to make the given problematic, to express the ridiculous, to translate from one form to another, to transform into improbable equivalents. It is from this spontaneous toying and exploration that there arises the hunch, the creative seeing of life in a new and significant way. (Rogers, 1961, p355)

It seems possible that humour can be employed in therapy in order to '*find the funny*', see the funny side of a situation, which can lead one to appreciate a circumstance in a '*new and significant way*'.

Sub-cluster title: *Indirectly Exposes*

<p><i>challenge the unspoken dynamic beneath the dialogue</i> <i>unspoken recognition of a shared feeling</i></p>	<p><i>indirectly exposes</i> <i>communicates indirectly</i></p>
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When humour exposes and reveals a different point of view, it does so indirectly. When sharing laughter with her sister, Em noted that the laughter was in recognition of an unspoken, yet shared feeling about their mother. Es and I recalled how my use of humour, during our early university days, challenged an unspoken dynamic in the classroom. At the time I sensed a chronic niceness amongst the class members and I would undermine this indirectly through humour. Rather than raise my perception of 'chronic niceness' in earnest, I exposed it by offering an alternate, contrasting perspective, within humour. In another incident, I felt uncomfortable with the aesthetic praise of my 'self' representation, a drawn self-portrait. I felt the praise was inappropriate, and challenged this by stating that when I showed my mum, she thought it was a portrait of an aboriginal person. My use of humour in this situation was to challenge the importance placed on aesthetics and illuminate the subjective, without direct criticism or contention. Es stated that at the time my sentiment, communicated through humour, echoed her own thoughts about the dynamic. Humour can point to something without spelling it out, as the 'message' is primarily in the service of a joke. To address the point being made through humour would be to extinguish the humour with seriousness, and so communicating indirectly through humour can expose without offering others recourse. H.C. Andersen used a humorous story to indirectly comment on the snobbery of the Danish bourgeoisie. Humour seems to operate beneath dialogue. The fact that humour communicates indirectly makes humour especially useful when the message being communicated carries some contention.

I experienced this when watching an episode of *'Spicks and Specs'*, in which a comedian made a joke revealing the seriousness of another person. The fact that the joke provoked a lot of laughter suggested to me that others understood the message contained within the joke and agreed with it. The person who was the subject of the joke seemed unable to respond, partly because of his seriousness, but also because to address the point made would be to disagree with the majority of the audience.

Sub-cluster title: *It's Only a Joke*

<i>makes the message a little easier to deliver</i> <i>is there anything you can't joke about?</i> <i>only a joke</i> <i>addressing a more serious issue</i>	<i>humour softens any criticism</i> <i>a safe way of expressing opinions</i> <i>address issues that are relevant to women</i> <i>assert the boundary</i>
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The indirectness of humour lends itself to the delivery of an otherwise serious or critical message. Some co-researchers appreciated forms of humour used intentionally to reveal alternate perspectives. Ann reflected that she enjoys the wit and humour of cartoonists, such as Judy Horacek

and Victoria Roberts, who are addressing serious issues in a quirky way. Ann appreciates humour that is more than for its own sake. There is an indirect comment on issues that are relevant to women. There are many comedians, whom I admire for their skill and bravery, such as Rod Quantock, who present critical perspectives on serious issues. In exploration of my experience of humour, I could recall many examples of humorous expositions, which challenge a dominant discourse. Humour seems to make a more serious meaning a little easier to deliver, as it doesn't carry with it the criticism, sternness, judgment or gravitas of a direct, serious message. Humour manages this through its indirectness, levity and subjectivity. In my research of conceptualisations of humour, I noted cartoonist Michael Leunig's description of humour in his work, when being interviewed by George Negus (ABC, '*George Negus Tonight*', 5th June, 2004). He said that when you reduce an image of a person to a simple, naive dopey thing, then people are no longer threatened by it. His use of ducks and dogs, he describes, expose political obsession because they are dismissed from politics as insignificant, and thereby remind us of the lyrical and the musical, by contrast. Leunig also felt that the function of the cartoonist was similar to that of the court jester. That is, to say out loud what is being whispered. Humour can say out loud issues of contentions because it is only a joke.

Interestingly, the role of the 'fool' in *King Lear* arose in discussion with Es. The 'fool' of *King Lear* formalises a role for humour in delivering unwanted advice. The fool is the only one brave and quick enough to respond to the king. The fool constantly observes and mirrors and warns Kent of danger, differing openly with the king. In this text, humour affords personal and emotional distance and, therefore, bravery and a new perspective.

Humour offers ways of safely challenging dominant discourses, of expressing alternate opinions and individuality. My experience of using humour at work, where there is a clear hierarchy within a medical model, exemplifies an assertion of individuality and challenges the assumed authority of the medical model. Scott's (2000) heuristic exploration of spontaneous humour describes an iconoclastic and exposing quality of humour, and observes that spontaneous humour creates shifts in power structures. She notes that the tradition of therapy within institutions may be confronted by humour as clients express challenges to the structure of institution. In this way spontaneous humour has the potential to expose real and internalised inhibitors (p.74). This leads me to wonder whether humour could be employed in a therapeutic setting to explore ideas of conformity and non-conformity, and to redress social inequalities.

Humour seems to invite others to step back from the action and look at the issue in a different, and light, way. In being considered humorous, the message also may not be taken seriously and therefore be considered rhetorical. An idea may be conveyed but does not invite recourse, because it is 'only a joke'.

Here I am reminded of a song lyric: '*Sweetness Sweetness, I was only joking when I said I'd like to smash every tooth in your head*' (Morrissey, 1986, Rough Trade Records). This lyric demonstrates, and plays on, the masking of meaning within a joke. But what of the negative experience of such humour, in which one is on the receiving end of a hurtful joke and left little or no recourse because it is 'only a joke'? My experience of this with a particularly insensitive friend left my feelings minimised and the problem unaddressed. In this way, humour can be used to reinforce a dominant discourse, while also bear the element of untouchability.

Exploring various conceptualisations about women and humour, I read feminist texts concerning the theme of humour, which validated my experience of sexist humour found in popular culture and the media. The use of highly sexualised caricatures of women in the media is one type of humour that I regard as limiting and demeaning to women. Yet, the proliferation of sexist caricature in advertising is justified through sarcasm, as it is intended as a joke, is insincere and is, therefore, not to be taken seriously (Whelehan, 2000). "*We [women] are supposed to find it [the image] humorous and playful or be accused of not knowing the 'joke'*" (Whelehan, 2000, p3). The message in the media is that women are responsible for the way they receive a message, and that "*as long as the message is intended as a joke no one can touch you for it*" (Whelehan, 2000, p69). My personal response to this dilemma is to reply in kind, and fight humour with humour. An example of this, which has stayed in my memory, is a send-up of a poster ad for Chivas Regal scotch whiskey, from 2000. The original ad was a photograph of a scantily clad woman getting out of car. The caption read, "Yes. God is a Man". The send-up depicted a muscular, shirtless man in the same context and composition, with a caption that read, "Yes. God is Gay". Dominant discourse exposed with 'only' a joke. Touché.

Comedian Stephen K Amos believes that everything can be turned into a joke, that nothing is sacred. He tested this out on his audience by making a joke about the, then recent, Black Friday bush fires, but the audience didn't laugh at all (in fact there were a few grumbles) and Stephen said in realisation, "Ok, so that's too soon. We won't go *there* then." He exposed an audience's threshold of what was 'okay' to laugh at. Society seems to assert the boundary when comedians 'go too far', as laughter can indicate a lack of sympathy. Two recent examples that received media attention

come to mind in the context of when children were used in jokes. One is of The Chasers team and their ABC TV sketch called 'The Make a Realistic Wish Foundation'. There was social uproar in response, and the result was the sacking of the Comedy Dept. head at the ABC. The other example is Kyle Sandilands' radio interview with a minor, compelling her to disclose her sexual experiences for the amusement of his listeners. Sandilands lost two jobs as a result of what he thought the public considered humorous. These examples suggest that there is a limit to what can be made fun of, and that humour can expose what is socially accepted as humorous.

To summarise, all co-researchers experienced the discovery of new interpretations, or a different way of seeing, through humour, which could then lead to the appreciation of another's point of view. Humour can be an indirect way of revealing an alternate perspective or delivering a contentious, or serious, message. Characterised as 'only a joke', humour has a quality of untouchability. Whilst useful, this quality also seems to extinguish any objection to the content or meaning of the joke, as it is not intended to be taken seriously. Some humourists employ this quality to expose and reveal more serious issues. To the co-researchers, and also to some humourists, humour means the revelation of a different perspective in a light and rhetorical way, and can provide relative safety when communicating controversial ideas.

When considering the emergent meanings '*To Expose and Reveal*' and '*Contradicting Ideas*' this image (Figure 5a, p145) occurred to me. It depicts the findings that highlight the discovery of new perspectives when humour is caused by a clash of ideas.



Figure 5a. ‘When worlds collide ... cultural exchange becomes easier.’

DISCUSSION OF EMERGENT MEANING ‘RELATING THROUGH HUMOUR’

Initially there were a host of keywords, gleaned from the data that referred to relating with others through humour. Through another clustering process, other categories of this meaning emerged. These were ‘*Closes the Gap*’, ‘*Being With*’ and ‘*We Absolutely Bonded*’. The experiences described, regarding relating through humour, encompassed varying levels of relating, from superficial engagements to being an important part of intimate relationships. These emerged through the clustering process, as the keywords, within the essence ‘*relating through humour*’, formed families, which describe a movement towards more intimate levels of connecting through humour.

The Emergent Meaning ‘*Relating Through Humour*’ includes an initial engagement, where humour communicates an invitation. Some co-researchers described this as sharing, and that once this sharing has occurred, understanding and familiarity follows.

Sub-cluster title: *Humour Communicates*

<i>a form of communication communicates</i>	<i>a communication tool</i>
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Em, in particular, sensed that by using humour in her creative writing for a cycling magazine, she was attempting to communicate to her readers with something they could relate to: *'they can relate to the isolated incident if I made it humorous'*. By drawing from personal experience and then creating a humorous story from this, Em expected that this would communicate familiarity and help the reader of that story relate. Em also found that cultural references in humour are a way of relating to her audience. For a broad audience she is expecting that, in our shared culture, most readers have experienced riding a bike, and so therefore can relate to the humorous anecdotes of her cycling experiences.

In her personal creative writing, Em endeavoured to relate to friends using humour. Em made light of a difficult shared experience with a friend, knowing only her friend could relate, generating laughter between them by 'taking the piss'. Another audience may not relate to the same humour, as it has been co-constructed and is particular to the shared experience between Em and her friend. When comparing writing for different audiences, it seems the degree to which Em could personalise the humour depended on to whom she was communicating. The more personal the communication, the more freedom of expression there was. I wonder about the role of trust in this co-construction (explored further in *'Being With'* p153.) The closer the relationship the more freedom there is in the expression of humour.

Sub-cluster title: *Shared Humour Invites an Exchange*

<i>creating an exchange</i> <i>an invitation</i>	<i>an important transaction</i>
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In her experience as a creative arts therapist, Es noticed that when used as a tool in therapy, humour can engage people in an accessible and non-threatening way. When inviting the client to laugh with you, you are creating an exchange. Es sees this as an important transaction with client groups that, through institutionalisation and extensive dealings with paternalistic health services, have what Es referred to as *'learned helplessness'*. In this dynamic, not only is humour an invitation to participate, but it is something to which everyone can contribute. *'I think that in making an environment humorous, or making an activity fun, it creates an invitation for participation'*. This meaning of humour also relates to that of humour creating comfort (discussed in *'It Closes the Gap'* p147); however this notion signifies the experience of humour as an 'offer', to use a theatre term. That is, the expression of humour is a bid to relate to another in a positive way.

Sub-cluster title: *Humour Engenders Understanding*

<i>humour engenders understanding something familiar that develops a way of sharing</i>	<i>appreciating a humour that somebody's trying to convey laughing with</i>
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Within the exchange of humour, something familiar develops: a knowing, as people 'get' the joke. Ann felt that there was an appreciation for what someone is trying to express. When Em's boss break-dances in front of her desk, there is an understanding that this is likely to be found humorous. During the research process, I experienced many examples of this as laughter was shared with co-researchers. Em and I made several particular connections with each other. Through humour we were sharing an understanding, knowledge of each other as we shared our experience of Dutch culture, of being sisters and having mothers, and we laughed also together as women. Em expressed humour, confident that I would appreciate her humour. I reflected at the time that Em's laughter in response to my jokes gave me confidence that she has seen the humour in the same thing I have. Similarly, Es and I shared an understanding through our laughter together about an experience of bridesmaids. Given our previous house-sharing relationship, Ann and I shared a laugh in our understanding and knowledge of each other when she understates her dislike for fart jokes.

The sharing that occurs when people relate to one another through humour is linked to the co-construction of humour. There were many experiences shared by co-researchers that involved some shared meaning when relating through humour. Ann reflected that this can occur on many different levels, and these levels have emerged from the data. As referred to above, Em had an emotional connection with the humour she shared with friends, whereas the humour she used for her magazine column was filtered for a broader audience. This attests to the inter-subjectivity of humour and to the co-construction of meanings being shared when relating through humour, and these meanings are explored further in '*Closes the Gap*', below, and '*Being With*', p153.

DISCUSSION OF EMERGENT MEANING '*IT CLOSES THE GAP*'

This emergent meaning describes humour as generating cohesion within a group, as co-researchers spoke not only of humour as a way of relating, but also as creating comfort, focus and unity amongst a group of people. It can draw us together.

Sub-cluster title: *Comfortable*

<i>a powerful feeling feel relaxed around others</i>	<i>comfortable changed the energy</i>
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Several co-researchers spoke of experiencing humour as creating a sense of comfort in a group. Es, in particular, felt humour was, in her group therapy work, a tool for shifting tension to a more relaxed dynamic. As individual participants share laughter in the warm-up stage of a group therapy session, the ice breaks and they begin to feel relaxed with each other, thereby engendering comfort (also explored in *'Being With'*, p153). Es described sharing jokes as a powerful feeling, stating: *'Sharing a group joke is an incredible thing and an incredible feeling for a group'*. Es observed the effect of humour was that participants relaxed to the point where they could begin to express themselves through their sense of humour. *'And that sort of magic happens all the time when it's a light environment'*. This phenomenon reminded me of a similar dynamic described by drama therapist Bernie Warren. Warren shares his experience of engaging a group through humour as a vehicle for engaging other emotions:

'I place a strong emphasis on humour as a vehicle for engaging other emotions. I place great store on gaining my group's trust and confidence through humour, laughter and enjoyment...I feel that without an element of fun, enjoyment and spontaneity many of the other benefits will not be reached. Engaging the interest of individuals in the group precedes gaining their confidence. Without their confidence and trust, no matter how much training and experience you have, they will be extremely reticent to share their world – with all its hopes, fears and emotions – with you.' (1993, p 113-114).

Em, however, felt that a sense of comfort preceded the experience of humour. She described comfort as being conducive to finding something funny, and that laughter in response to discomfort is a defence. So it seems that not only does humour generate comfort, but that a comfortable dynamic contributes to the presence of humour.

When I attended his stand-up show, comedian Stephen K Amos noted that once an audience is 'warmed up' they reach a point where they would laugh at almost anything. This suggests that, in a group, humour breeds humour, and that the relaxation increases with more laughter. Em, who attended the same show, described this as being a part of the synergy of the group, and found that this laughter then *feeds on itself* and *is exponential*. Another example of this phenomenon commonly experienced is finding a comedic movie funnier when watched in the company of others, compared to when watched alone. The laughter of others can be infectious, and increase one's comfort level and readiness to laugh. This experience was also described by Em, in relation to

hearing the laughter of others, which evokes for her a sense of freedom, self-expression and disinhibition. This reminds me of another idea: that humour breeds humour, as discussed with Es, and puts me in mind, also, of the laughter groups that have emerged over the last few decades. It seems that as a group sustains laughter, humour continues to change the energy and generate comfort and more laughter, and what the group are laughing at has become the laughter itself.

I personally reflected on how, as a teenager, I was conscious of the way humour encouraged others to feel relaxed and comfortable. I felt a secondary gain to generating humour amongst my peers, which was to be liked. But ever since adolescence I have been keenly aware of the power that humour has to dispel discomfort.

I used humour to this end when confronted with the tension in our first creative arts therapy classes. We were unsure of each other and of what was to come. As laughter followed my jokes, the shift in dynamic was palpable. The tension was released. Es' reflections of her experience of my humour at this time were that it signalled that the class had started. Es recalled that, at the time, she wondered '*How can she be so comfortable that she's making really silly jokes,*' and that my humour seemed to say '*It's okay; we're all really cool here*'. Our experience of humour at this time was 'clearing the air' and it provided a way of being together.

This meaning of humour, as generating comfort and relaxation, emerges from this in-depth look at several experiences, described by co-researchers. Whilst the humour described by co-researchers is often instantaneous, by looking closely one can map the way humour is injected into a moment in time and, as though in slow motion replay, then ripples out amongst the members of a group through laughter. The ripples of laughter reach everyone present; everyone is affected, sometimes infected. Discomfort is dissolved and tension is washed away in the wake of the laughter. The group is present, together and focused.

Sub-cluster title: *A Leveller*

<i>leveller</i> <i>it closes the gap between us</i> <i>contains</i> <i>an ice-breaker</i> <i>a universal language</i> <i>provides focus</i> <i>inclusive</i>	<i>removing defensive barriers (bridging a gap)</i> <i>takes away some of the facades / structures</i> <i>an equaliser</i> <i>accessible</i> <i>can engage people</i> <i>invitation</i> <i>connection with people not otherwise drawn to</i>
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These keywords felt very energetic to me, as they contain a lot of movement: *removing* barriers and facades, *breaking*, *levelling*, *closing* gaps and *containing*. Almost like an old building being demolished in preparation for a new and different type of structure. This sub-cluster of keywords suggests that, in the experiences of the co-researchers, when humour is shared there is a removal of unseen walls, a drawing together and some recognition of sameness. This is, conceivably, a restructure of group dynamics.

In my experience of using humour to induce relaxation and comfort at the beginning of a class, I felt I was also communicating that although as individuals we may have more differences than similarities, we can, at least, meet on this plane.

Em crafted humour in her writing for the express purpose of engaging readers. In the context of using humour in groups as a creative arts therapist, Es described humour as *'like a universal language'*, that it can engage people in an accessible way, because *'everyone can laugh'*. There is a statement here about the common experience of humour as an engaging agent. It is such an ordinary and common part of everyone's experience that it is a useful meeting place. Such bold and absolute statements, however, provoke scrutiny. What happens when someone in the group feels unable to laugh? What if someone doesn't find the particular humour offered funny? These issues are explored in the Emergent Meaning titled *'Distance'*, p163.

Both Em and Es described humour as a leveller when experienced within a group, that it brings some equity to all members. Es felt that humour could be enjoyed by each group member, thereby encouraging participation and inclusion: *'I think that humour allows them to participate without feeling intimidated'*. So the relaxation induced by humour also invites participation. She felt that humour also countered the perceived power imbalance between a group and its facilitator, as the act of laughing together can redress this imbalance when the group generates humour. Those laughing together share something equally. I also reflected on the way humour can close the gap between me and my audience when performing music on stage. Some co-researchers described humour as removing defensive barriers and facades. Ann experienced this when fear or shyness is a barrier to relating to others: *'(It) takes away some of the facades and the structures people put in front of themselves, you know they may be afraid or shy.'* In each of these experiences humour seems to relax a group by illuminating common ground.

Em and I discussed our experience of Stephen K Amos' stand-up show. In particular his reflections on how, although as an audience we represented an array of demographics, we were all laughing at

the same thing. He stated that this was the impetus for the title of his show, 'Find the Funny'. He believes that in the present age of religious, social and cultural division, it is important to 'find the funny' if we are to find common ground.

Scott (2001, p29) also experienced shared laughter as a recognition of common ground, but went further to describe that laughter from others felt like support, as it suggested the universality of her experience. There is a sense here, in the shared perspective, of belonging to a collective.

This emergent meaning reveals the experience of humour to engage, bring together and share something in common, as it seems to bridge differences in class, religion, gender and culture. In my readings of conceptualisations of humour, Philosopher Simon Critchley (2002) explores various philosophies on humour through the ages, citing ideas similar to the experiences of the co-researchers of this study. In 1709 Anthony, Earl of Shaftesbury, wrote *Sensus communis. An Essay of the Freedom of Wit and Humour*. *Sensus communis* referred to the sociableness of humour (p.84). Critchley points out that “*humour is a shared, inter-subjective practice that requires the assent of others*” (p.80); hence the shared laughter in response to a joke is an implicit agreement amongst those laughing. In this way humour has “*social reach*” (p.80). Critchley also cites Alfred Schutz, who surmised that jokes are acts of abstraction, provide transcendence from ordinary life, and therefore reveal the shared structures of a common life-world (p.80). Humour illuminates the common ground that we share. (These experiences of humour are explored further in ‘*Distance*’ p163.) Another philosopher, Cioffi, referred to by Critchley, echoes my experience of humour as providing focus and a way of 'being together'. Cioffi describes humour as “*an experiential sense of 'thereness' for everyone*” (p.86). A drawing together after the removal of barriers and tensions has been common to the experiences of humour described in this study, and this emergent meaning of '*closing the gap*' through humour occurs precisely because it is shared and illuminates common ground.

Sub-cluster title: *Part of the Crowd*

<i>laughing at others in order to connect with peers part of the crowd</i>	<i>being part of a collective</i>
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As mentioned earlier, I generated humour not only to connect with my peers, but also to be liked. As an adolescent, being liked and accepted by others was very important to me (with maturity I have gradually cared less and less about being liked), and humour was a means of belonging, and being part of the crowd. Em shared her experience of what she described as 'evil humour', in which

individuals laugh at others *'in order to connect with their peers'*. This humour is often noticed amongst adolescents, and seems to be about the power of a collective generated through the exclusion of others. Humour here is used to point out difference, thereby excluding others from their group, whilst inferring culturally referenced standards of 'normality' and acceptance on the group members. However, such humour still seems to have the effect of creating unity, as Em described, just amongst a select group requiring an 'other', or 'others', to remain disconnected and isolated.

Sub-cluster title: *Unites a Group*

<i>team building to debrief</i>	<i>unites staff members creates a relationship between the group</i>
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Es valued the humour that she shared with her work colleagues, as it functioned not only as a tool for debriefing (explored below in discussion of *'Distance'*, p163), but also to unify the team in their shared experiences of the work. Also meaningful to Es was the unity developed through humour amongst participants of a drama class. When a joke was shared amongst adults with intellectual disabilities, humour facilitated a natural mode of connecting to one another. This was significant in the context of a life lived in institutions where social skills are taught in formalised and structured lessons. *'It creates a relationship between the group [members] and creates friendships, which is, for the client group I work with, rare, actually.'* Shared laughter is not only a universal language amongst a group, but also has the potential to build relationship through self-expression, the discovery of common ground and the development of unity.

Creative Arts Therapist Judy Scott's (2001) experience of spontaneous humour, shared with a group, revealed feelings of support and encouragement in the face of challenge. By laughing together she shared her inner world and vented feelings, thereby experienced collaboration and bonding (p35). She found that this could be imagined in solitude, in absence of the group, to summon feelings of support (p76). The supportive laughter of the group remained present with her well after the experience. This experience led Scott to value spontaneous humour interactions in groups and involve spontaneous humour in creative therapeutic processes with clients.

Referred to in *'Contradicting Ideas'* (p134), shared humour is predicated on common expectations. Humour reveals this common ground within any given collective, by communicating an incongruity that contrasts with the shared reality. Here, this meaning emerges again in relation to humour *closing the gap*, with an emphasis on the act of sharing humour and laughter. The power of this act

is to bring together individuals in a form of collaboration or implicit agreement. Several of these emergent meanings are specifically relevant to the practice of creative arts therapy in groups, and suggest that it is possible to use humour in groups to create comfort, engage and provide a common focus for a group in a therapeutic context. I wonder whether any other studies have been conducted regarding the use of humour in group therapy. This emergent meaning, however, has also begun to uncover the potential for humour to isolate and distance.

DISCUSSION OF EMERGENT MEANING ‘*BEING WITH*’

There is a sense, in the levity that humour brings, that barriers are removed and people are drawn together. I want to explore this more, as there is a feeling of movement in this description, of moving up, as a dynamic lightens, and towards, as one connects to another.

This cluster of keywords reveals an emerging meaning of intimacy through humour. Further to being able to relate to another and creating group cohesion, this experience of humour facilitates connections at a deeper level of relationship. In this context, co-researchers spoke of the humour experienced with friends and family, and what this felt like, as well as new connections made with acquaintances. Some of these meanings overlap with the next emergent meaning ‘*We absolutely bonded*’, as a continuum of ever-increasing intimacy of shared humour appears in the co-researchers’ descriptions.

Sub-cluster title: *Connection*

<p><i>precursor to the friendship</i> <i>I connected with you</i> <i>a means of connection</i> <i>experiencing that moment with that person</i></p>	<p><i>finding something in common</i> <i>absolute moment of connection</i> <i>a way of being ‘with’</i></p>
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The very act of sharing humour can create some commonality between people where previously none was found. Each co-researcher felt that in sharing humour one could connect with another. Ann, in particular, spoke of her experience of sharing humour as making a connection. This connection can be made with someone she doesn’t immediately warm to, but through humour has found something in common.

Es noted that her memory of humorous moments is also related to specific people with whom the humour was shared: ‘*To recognise that that moment was that hilarious and everyone else around us*

didn't ... So there was that absolute moment of connection, so that memory for me is about the humour but also the connection.' In this example, the moment of humour Es shares with another sets them apart from those around them. It signifies an appreciation that is different to the group. Es noticed this quality when reflecting on her experience of my humour when we began studying together. This shared humour heralded the friendship we were to develop, *'I connected with you because I thought of that exact moment, and I found it hilarious as well'*. My joke articulated what Es was thinking at that time, validating her experience, while also connecting us in our shared experience of the moment.

As Es described a humorous anecdote, I imagined her in the experience, and I felt imaginatively engaged. I sense that sharing a laugh is a way of being 'with' someone, especially if they are describing an experience they found funny. I feel my laughter, in response, is really saying 'I am imagining that with you and I can understand, and therefore share, your perspective'. I actually felt closer to Es, as a result of laughing together (we laughed so much together during the discussions that I had sore cheeks by the end of each). Akin to this notion is my experience of laughter with my three-year-old son, as I sensed the sharing of a moment, or series of moments. As mentioned above, theorists have recognised humour to bring about a sense of *'thereness'* (Cioffi, cited in Critchley, 2002, p86) in the illumination of common ground, but in the experience of each co-researcher, shared humour carries with it an intimacy, a pleasurable knowing, with an other. When these experiences are explored, humour is revealed to be a way of being present, or 'with', and of connecting in a personal, yet sometimes subtle, way.

The recollection of the above shared experience of humour with Es also raises the fact that, by drawing research participants from my circle of friends and colleagues, I am going to find similarities in our experience of humour, as sharing humour seems to be intrinsic to forming friendships and in the development of connections. During the data collection, as co-researchers and friends, we also generate data, revealing the experience of shared humour between us.

Sub-cluster title: *A Shared Understanding, too*

<i>sharing someone's point of view</i> <i>connecting to the other's ideas</i> <i>appreciating</i> <i>a tacit understanding</i> <i>share secrets</i>	<i>a shared understanding</i> <i>sharing something about being sisters & having mothers</i> <i>we laugh as women together</i> <i>a connection below the surface</i>
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There is more being shared than humour, as Ann also described understanding someone's point of view through humour, particularly in relation to humour that is about a serious issue. One appreciates the point of the humour, or the ideas expressed within. Several co-researchers described experiences where the connection made through humour is tacitly understood. Es recalled feeling a connection with me when we not only found the same thing funny, but my joke suggested an idea she had been thinking at the time, which I think echoes Ann's sense of sharing a joke whilst also sharing an understanding.

As described above, there were many moments of connecting through humour that I experienced throughout the research process, which revealed shared understandings. In our discussion about the humour we each share with our respective sisters, Em and I shared a laugh about being sisters and having mothers, in recognition of some similar experiences. In our laughter there is an appreciation of a shared experience, more than just finding the same thing funny. There was also a moment when we laughed together as women, when Em describes out-pacing a male cyclist at the lights. There was also some shared humour between us in recognition of our experiences of Dutch culture. Beneath the laughter I felt there to be some recognition of what these experiences meant, saying 'I understand'.

There appears to be a link between the tacit understanding shared through humour and secrets. Es felt that the secrets, contained within the handbags, were about understanding motivation, from an acting viewpoint, whilst also being a symbol of hidden treasure, through which to explore her experience. After some thought, I sensed, in Es' experience of her grandmother (M'ma) and the nanna she wished for, the connection is in relationship. Just as secrets invite you into an intimate collusion, humour can also do this. During our discussion of our *'Agreement of Understandings'*, (p84), I asked about the possibility of a link between humour and secrets in the way the two can be intimate collusions and invitations to share something. Es responded in saying both are quite hidden, and that she enjoys discovering someone's secret sense of humour. It can be an exclusive understanding between two people. *'... whether or not it's a secret or ... just hidden information that bubbles away ... reveals itself if you shake it (laughs) ... if you turn it upside down, it might come out (Es sounds playful here) ... But for me it was a sadness that I didn't get that opportunity to bond with somebody. And that she never revealed those secrets to me.'* There is a sense that hidden inside Es' 'Nanna Handbag' is her desire to bond with a 'Nanna' figure through the sharing of secrets. Es also referred to feeling connected to her colleagues and to her partner through private

jokes, which also links humour to secret collusions and this is explored further in the next section '*We Absolutely Bonded*' (p157).

When Ann chanced upon humour in the creative work of others, she described it as '*a connection below the surface*'. In defining types of humour that she does not gravitate to, Ann said she regards creative work that is intentionally humorous as '*very manufactured, and blatant*'. This meaning is analogous to Es' reflection that she appreciates the hidden sense of humour that people reveal quietly, as compared to those that exhibit a jester quality up front.

Sub-cluster title: *How it Feels to Connect*

<i>reassuring</i> <i>positive engagement</i> <i>a sweet and fun moment of connection</i> <i>strengthening</i> <i>felt closer</i> <i>made me feel at ease</i> <i>satisfying</i>	<i>generate warmth</i> <i>very gratifying</i> <i>affirmation</i> <i>validation</i> <i>a reassuring thing</i> <i>spontaneous laughter is very gratifying</i>
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Being more than what it seems, shared humour can sub-textually carry a sense of validation for ideas and perspectives, and gratifies a shared knowledge. All this through a positive, warm and easy interaction. When humour becomes shared continually, Ann said you can '*have your shared sense of humour reaffirmed that can be really nice.*' As one's sense of humour is associated with one's identity, Ann's comment suggests that a part of her 'self' is being affirmed. In the context of friendship, Ann described sharing humour as strengthening the friendship as well as each individual. Shared humour with a friend becomes a form of unity and growth.

The idea of humour as strengthening a friendship relates to Es' reference to humour in her relationship with her partner as '*a way of being*' (discussed in '*We Absolutely Bonded*', p157). Humour is, perhaps, a key element in many people's long-term relationships, because it is able to create connection and warmth, and strengthen bonds. This is perhaps another research project, investigating the experience of humour in close personal relationships.

When I experienced Em's ready and spontaneous laughter I felt at ease, as it gave me confidence that we were together and connected. I also found her laughter very gratifying, as I felt supported in my ideas, expressed through humour. It is a form of flattery, and the spontaneity of Em's laughter felt authentic, too. In addition, Em's self-deprecating anecdotes put me at ease with her, as I sensed that if she can make light of her mistakes, she will understand mine. In our *Agreement of Understandings*, Em agreed this was also significant to her experience of humour.

When appreciating black humour or satire, Ann said she felt ‘*reassured*’ that another person can express their opinion about a serious issue, and she described this as a ‘*good connection*’. It seems that not only are one’s own opinions being validated, or supported, but the connection is reassuring as it brings some levity. In response to Ann’s experience, I also felt reassured that the issue is being addressed from a new perspective, perhaps a way that can be talked about, where previously, in earnest, it could not.

Sub-cluster title: *Not Being Alone*

<i>not being alone can reduce a sense of isolation</i>	<i>see that the other person is human as well</i>
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This sub-cluster flows on from the above group of keywords, as it describes what follows from the feelings associated with connecting through humour. The meaning that humour can reduce one’s sense of isolation and make one feel less alone seems to be a powerful one, and links with Em’s notion of being able to relate, and Es’ experience of finding something hilarious with one other in a group. While the notion of bonding through humour has appeared consistently during the research process, no one described it quite like Ann.

Ann suggested that in sharing humour you begin to see the other as a person. This meaning is linked with humour as a means of relating to another, as by sharing humour one is relating with and connecting to the other's ideas or notions. As a result of sharing an understanding, expressed through humour, Ann said this ‘*makes you feel some sort of sense of understanding or not being alone*’. So there can be a very basic humanness to connecting through humour, affirming our inter-relatedness as people, illuminating the common ground. I have a hunch that humour is the closest tool available that can attend to the isolation of the ‘human condition’ in an existentialist sense.

DISCUSSION OF EMERGENT MEANING ‘*WE ABSOLUTELY BONDED*’

For each researcher, humour is meaningful in our close personal relationships. As mentioned in ‘*Relating Through Humour*’ (p145), Em and her sister share laughter about their mum, finding humour in their shared understandings and fears. I also found humour is a meaningful part of my relationship with my sister and my son, and both Es and Ann described their experiences of humour in friendships and intimate relationships. There were some potent words and phrases used, and this essence of humour feels very rich. Qualities of this essence that were described included intimacy, relationship, trust, acceptance and strengthening.

This essence describes the co-construction of humour at a very personal level; however, in my readings of texts and literature, I struggled to find references to the close and personal understanding and familiarity experienced in humour. It is an emergent meaning that has a richness and depth because the data is born out of the personal experiences of each researcher, in contrast to their observations or conceptualisations.

Sub-cluster title: *An Incredible Feeling*

<i>love</i> <i>joy</i> <i>stars in my eyes</i>	<i>an incredible feeling</i> <i>love and trust</i> <i>wholly connected</i>
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This sub-cluster largely refers to my exploration of my experience of humour with my son. The joy of our humour together felt like being in love, which was a revelation to me. The pleasure and connection associated with uncontrolled, shared laughter felt like the love and trust of a close personal relationship. The shared, loving moment in the here and now is made possible through humour and laughter. Ann described sharing humour with a close personal friend as ‘*an incredible feeling*’. Es felt joy when pleasantly surprised by her clients in improvisation.

Sub-cluster title: *Strengthening*

<i>creates friendships</i> <i>strengthen the friendship</i> <i>strengthen each person</i> <i>strengthening</i> <i>we absolutely bonded</i> <i>just us</i>	<i>surrounding us, binding us together</i> <i>a kinship</i> <i>kinship is reinforced</i> <i>a bonding moment</i> <i>brings us closer</i>
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Humour also has the quality of creating and binding friendships. Es observed that humour can create friendships, and that it has been core to her bonding with friends and siblings. ‘*Certain moments when I know that experiencing that moment with that person was so special because we absolutely bonded at that moment; to recognise that that moment was that hilarious and everyone else around us didn’t ... So there was that absolute moment of connection, so that memory for me is about the humour but also the connection.*’ Ann especially articulated a feeling of increasing closeness and strength through the sharing of humour with a friend, suggesting that humour can also strengthen each individual.

Psychologist Joseph Newirth (2006), in his article *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious: Humour as a Fundamental Emotional Experience*, describes the experience of sharing a joke as “*being connected in a deeply emotional experience ... in which separate people become coupled*

and two or more individuals become joined in a single affective moment” (p570), and suggests that they play an important role in the development of intimate relationships. Although in his article, Newirth is exploring the role of humour in the relationship between analyst and patient, his observations echo the experiences described by the co-researchers of this study: “*A pleasurable moment of mutual identification ... creating deeper emotional meanings that are based on subjective experiences and personal insights*” (p568).

Sub-cluster title: *Relationship*

<p><i>is unique to our relationship</i> <i>important part of a relationship</i> <i>a way of being(in relationship)</i> <i>has drawn them together</i></p>	<p><i>humour and laughter was an extension of that relationship</i> <i>attracted us to each other</i> <i>he also enjoys making me laugh</i></p>
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This sub-cluster seems to expand on the above. Es relayed that humour had a role in attracting her and her partner to one another, and that the use of humour is *a way of being* in their relationship. Humour is central to the way they relate to each other and to who they are as a couple. Es reflected on how humour relieves tension, lightens their mood together and is a large element of their connection: ‘*I can barely imagine us having a conversation without humour coming up. And I think that that's what has always attracted us to each other.*’ I got the impression that if their relationship was a person it had its own sense of humour, the alchemy resulting from their union.

Similarly, my experience of humour with my son is an important part of how we relate to one another. However, in this relationship, between parent and child, I sense humour has a key role in developing my child’s trust in me, as we are abandoning our cares, letting down our defences and being vulnerable with each other. Noah seems to enjoy this vulnerability together and often tries to make me laugh. I also feel we are expressing our enjoyment of each other by engaging in this way.

The discussion of the role of humour in relationship mushrooms at this point, as it is becoming clear that, as with all communication, humour is co-constructed and is therefore informed by triadic relationships between the ‘comic’, the audience and their context. In the context of close relationships, the co-researchers experienced great freedom of expression, articulated by Em when her self-expression through humour with her readership was compared with that with friends and family. It seems that humour flows when there is a history of shared experiences to draw from. And if the quality of the shared experience is negative, the humour can serve as a coping mechanism. In intimate relationships, sharing a ‘sense’ of humour also seems to be a reflection on a couple’s compatibility with one another. One just has to read the content of some online relationship-seeking

profiles on RSVP.com, ‘*must have GSH*’, to understand that a sense of humour is a highly valued trait in a partner.

Sub-cluster title: *Trust and Acceptance*

<i>if my sister laughs at me I can accept it acceptance within relationship creates safety reaches in and draws me out love and trust</i>	<i>an element of trust build trust gets under my defences</i>
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This sub-cluster points to the notion that humour tends to lower resistance and implies trust. When one abandons themselves to uncontrolled laughter one’s guard is lowered, as it feels uncontrollable. These ideas suggest that humour is enjoyed within trusting relationships whilst also building trust within relationships. But this raises a ‘chicken or egg’ question: does trust develop out of humour, or does humour arise easily when trust is present? I suspect both are correct.

Only those whom you trust can laugh at your failings because their laughter comes with acceptance. Es experienced this with her partner, and I experience a feeling of trust when my sister laughs at me. I know my sister has no mal-intent, and this can help me to laugh at myself. But humour also has a role in building this trust. This was my discovery when exploring shared humour with my son as his abandon called on my inner child, and I became aware of the trust we were sharing. In relation to this, I realised that as a child, a feeling of safety and trust allowed me to become immersed in the humour and laughter with my dad. Perhaps our early experiences of humour and laughter establish associations of pleasure and bonding with humour that characterise the adult enjoyment of humour in relationships later in life.

Sub-cluster title: *An Intimate Collusion*

<i>he knows that he’ll get a response from me private jokes private humour an intimate collusion secrets revealed when necessary both an audience and co-conspirator</i>	<i>intimacy that comes with sharing a language of humour creating a private joke with my sister hides secret pleasures a private dialect</i>
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There is an intimacy created through humour in the implicit agreement. Unspoken, those who ‘get’ the joke and laugh together are in collusion to the exclusion of those who don’t ‘get it’, or laugh. Em described just such an experience of co-constructed humour when recalling her boss break-dancing at her desk, acknowledging that ‘*he knows that he’ll get a response from me*’. What is contained in the dynamic between Em and her boss is a shared knowledge of each other based on

past experience. This example also suggests the idea of family humour, and this idea resonates with me as I have experienced a connection through humour with my sister. A repertoire of humorous expressions and responses has been developed.

Es relayed feeling close to her brother through humour, and described being able to still evoke laughter through the reminiscence of childhood experiences, particularly because they shared a child's perspective of their menacing father. They laughed at him together in secrecy. Es also explored the idea of secrets in connection to humour, suggesting that keeping a secret is like sharing a private joke. A secret can be a little bit cheeky and very intimate, just as a joke can be risqué and reliant on a tacit understanding between a select few. This intimacy can be shared privately whilst in public. I experienced this with my sister, when our shared humour became like another language between us: *'It is almost like we have a private dialect, making obscure references that only we will understand. I really love that intimacy that comes with sharing a language of humour.'* We were each other's audience and co-conspirator and we would collude together against our parents, playing tricks on them. As mentioned earlier in the section about relating through humour, Em and her sister share an understanding about their mum, and they find humour in relating their shared knowledge and fears about turning into their mum. This is yet another example of the co-construction of humour.

This level of intimacy in humour seems prevalent in family relationships. Humour is a means of coping with difficulty and hardship in a family, as experienced by Es with her brother. As co-researchers describe this bonding happening with siblings, it suggests that humour shared as children in play may develop sibling connections and familiar modes of relating through humour.

The phenomenon of humour used in families to cope with hardship is explored in Elisa Everts' (2003) study of family interaction through humour, *Identifying a particular family humour style: A sociolinguistic discourse analysis*; Humour 16-4 (2003), 369 – 412. Everts notes that even hostile, insulting jokes can serve to develop rapport, and this can be observed in play amongst children and in the tradition of the Jewish argument, which can function as sociability. Such humour still has connection as its intention, and in the context of a family, Everts observes humour can build a sense of solidarity and identification with the family unit. These observations parallel the experiences of myself, Em and Es. We have each felt a unique identification with our siblings through humour. Certainly the jokes my sister makes at my expense are felt to be, essentially, a reinforcement of our familiarity.

The intimacy generated through humour, as described here, brings the pleasure and joy of being in love, having one's connection with another strengthened and reinforced. This private bond also involves elements of trust and acceptance, and therefore can encompass some forms of negative humour. This is the co-researchers' experience of humour in close, personal relationships where a vocabulary of humour has developed and, in some cases, serves as a *way of being*.

The emergent meanings '*Relating Through Humour*', '*It Closes the Gap*', '*Being With*' and '*We Absolutely Bonded*' are interconnected. I therefore experimented with some imagery to help map them out (Figure 5b, below). The symbol of a tree signifies aspects of the co-construction of humour. At the roots some of the sources, or correlates, are represented, such as family, friends, culture and colleagues. These combine together into the trunk and co-construct to shape various forms of humour, '*Relating Through Humour*', '*It Closes the Gap*', '*Being With*' and '*We Absolutely Bonded*' which are depicted as branches.

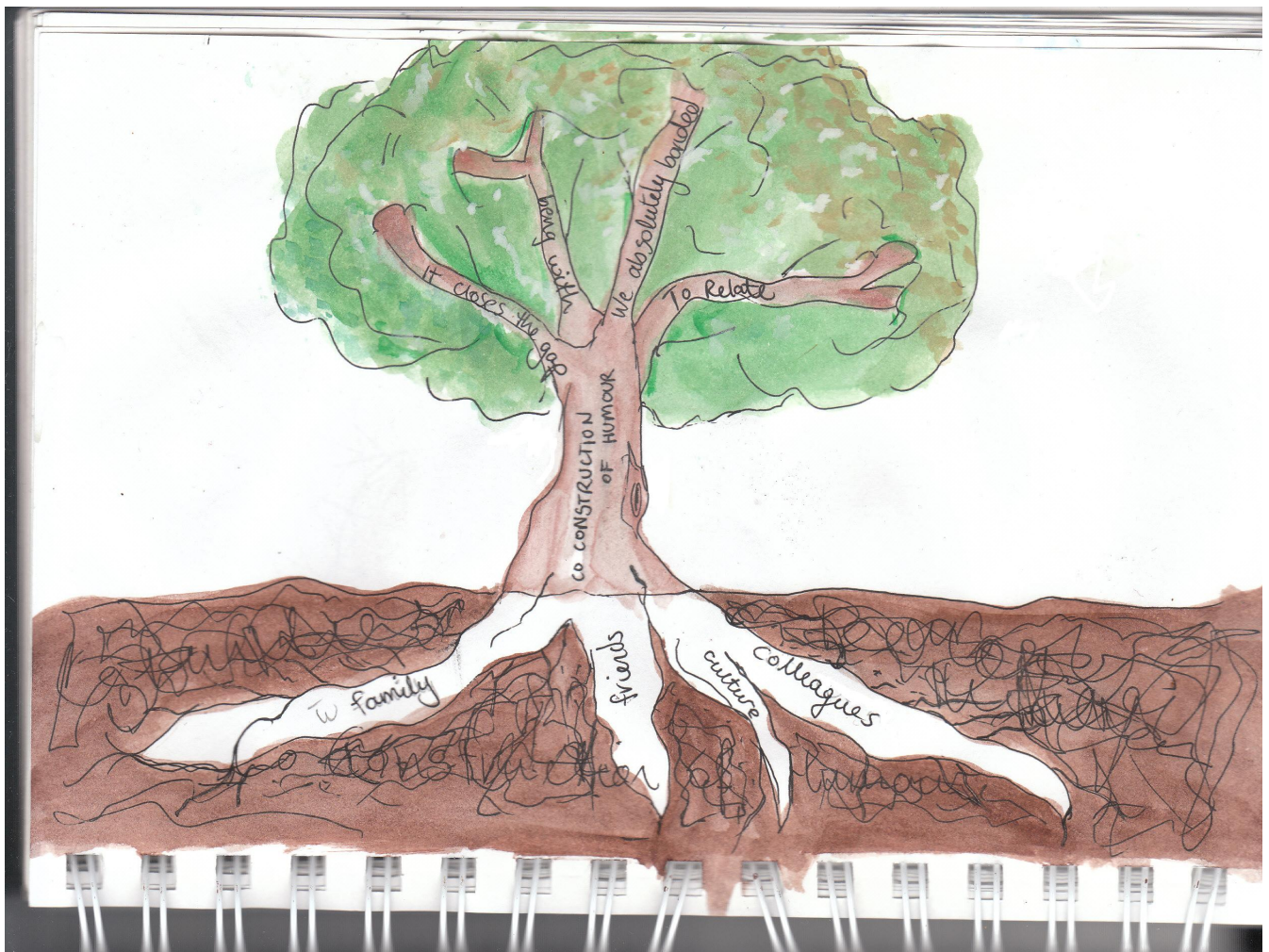


Figure 5b. Map of grouped emergent meanings

DISCUSSION OF EMERGENT MEANING ‘*DISTANCE*’

Several co-researchers reflected on the quality that humour has to provide distance from an experience. The distance can lessen anxiety or just reduce the emotional intensity of a moment. It can provide some objectivity that can then lead on to seeing a new perspective. In this way, humour is regarded as a coping mechanism, and Es discovered that she reconceptualises difficult situations as a funny story.

Sub-cluster title: *Remaining Grounded Whilst Levitating*

<i>distance through observing</i> <i>reflect on experience as an outsider</i> <i>a shift from subjective to objective</i> <i>gain distance and objectivity</i> <i>maintaining a personal boundary</i> <i>provides objectivity</i> <i>levitating away</i> <i>nothing's really that important</i>	<i>feel removed from the action</i> <i>see herself as outside a situation</i> <i>not entering into</i> <i>controlling the situation</i> <i>maintain superficiality</i> <i>I can distance myself</i> <i>an idiosyncratic moment</i> <i>laughing at a situation gives you distance</i>
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Em and Es described finding humour in feeling foolish simultaneous to the experience of a mishap. Es' description of an '*idiosyncratic moment*' described being able to appreciate her own absurdity whilst experiencing the moment: '*When I'm completely out of place, and finding it hilarious, in context, and still experiencing the moment*'. Em also described a similar experience, of observing herself in a situation '*like if I was an outsider*'. It suggests an experiencing of a moment on two levels: feeling foolish in making a mistake, as well as an appreciation for an external observation of self in context. This experience of self in absurdity seems to involve the imagination operating self-conscious to the experiencing. I think that this ability, or multi-level experiencing, allows one to laugh at oneself and is distancing while experiencing the moment. In his work on Role Theory, Landy (2008) alludes to a similar notion when he suggests that an aim of drama therapy is '*to provide an aesthetic distance, where both feeling and thinking are available*' (p102). Perhaps humour also functions in this way, as Em and Es describe being able to experience the mishap whilst appreciating the visual of self in context.

Es described gaining '*objectivity*', '*control[ling] the situation*' and '*maintain a personal boundary*' through humour with her challenging clients. I noted that comedians do this when redressing criticism; e.g. Steven K Amos joking about the ignorance of people who unwittingly comment on

his skin colour. By creating humour out of a racial slur, Steven K Amos moves the focus away from any defensiveness he might feel, and objectivity is maintained.

The idea of being removed from the immediate experience through humour is interesting, as I wonder whether humour can be utilised in a therapeutic context in this way. It occurs to me that the art object can be used in therapy to gain distance from intense emotions. Humour seems to offer more than just distance. It is also associated with coping with stress and embarrassment *in the moment*, providing an immediate sense of relief. If viewed as a process, humour initially enables distance, the effect of which, as Es suggests, *'allows me to examine'*.

Sub-cluster title: *How Embarrassing*

<i>feeling stupid</i>	<i>social embarrassment</i>
<i>looking like an idiot</i>	<i>a feeling of discomfort</i>
<i>laughing at yourself</i>	<i>horrified surprise</i>
<i>feeling like a fool</i>	<i>being caught off guard</i>
<i>pop up inappropriately</i>	<i>unexpected</i>

The findings revealed that the experience of humour in incongruity evoked a sense of motion and emotion. Motion was expressed in keywords such as 'pop', 'twist' and 'caught', while emotion was described through the words 'discomfort', 'horrified' and 'fool(ish)'. Several feelings were described. Em felt discomfort in conjunction with incongruity and being taken by surprise. For example, the surprise Em experienced tasting Dutch liquorice when she expected English liquorice was uncomfortable, as was the awkwardness of needing to spit it out at a social gathering. I empathised in horrified surprise at the idea of mistaking wasabi for avocado dip. These experiences involve the unexpected, and Es said these situations *'just pop up inappropriately'*.

When there was an experience of the self in absurdity, this was described as feeling foolish. There is a quality here of being caught off-guard and unawares and that the humour lies in the element of surprise. This points to a fundamental experience, originating in infancy, in which a game of peek-a-boo evokes laughter. It seems that in adulthood, however, the surprise is often accompanied by feelings of awkwardness or discomfort within an adult context. The independence we gather with development and age offers us a sense of competence, which we become accustomed to. When this competency is challenged by mishap, awkwardness follows. I think there is an aspect of this humour that endeavours to cope with the feelings of discomfort or foolishness and to regain control, as Em reflected, *'Humour is a way of making light of the self-deprecation ... being critical of myself and putting a easily acceptable slant on it'*.

The intense emotions felt when one is embarrassed or makes a mistake are somewhat relieved when experienced as funny. By laughing at yourself you are aligning yourself with the viewpoint of others and accepting fallibility. *It's like a defence* – in defence of your vulnerability when feeling silly, stupid or embarrassed. Perhaps being able to laugh at oneself is an important, protective skill.

Sub-cluster title: *A Powerful, Protective Mask*

<i>it's like a defence</i> <i>a mechanism of dealing with it</i> <i>cope with difficult and stressful situations</i> <i>protective from intensity of experience</i> <i>necessary</i> <i>a sense of control</i>	<i>cope with his intimidating power</i> <i>distance in difficult situations</i> <i>humour functioned as a mask</i> <i>powerful because we were laughing at him</i> <i>draw people to me while keeping them at a distance</i> <i>not becoming too involved</i>
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The distancing quality of humour is linked to using humour as a coping mechanism. Es spoke at length about *'not becoming too involved'* in stressful situations by using humour as a focus away from intense emotion. The focus of humour enables Es some protection too: *'If you're seeing things as humorous then you're not really being sucked up into that moment and you're not as vulnerable'*.

One of the elements that is useful about humour, for the purposes of coping with difficult situations, is the fact that it affords one some emotional distance. And this dynamic seems to go both ways: with distance Es can find humour, and Es notices that where she finds humour there is usually some distance from the immediate action.

It seems that distancing through humour also facilitates a shift in the power dynamic. Es describes feeling as though she had regained some power through laughter at her father: *'we were powerful because we were laughing at him'*. In my readings of various conceptualisations of humour I found reference to this notion, which suggested humour has its origins in self-assertion: *"Humour...is not resigned; it is rebellious. It signifies not only the triumph of the ego but also of the pleasure principle, which is able here to assert itself against the unkindness of the real circumstance"* (Freud, 1927, p.163, cited in Isaak, 1996, p.14). Scott (2000) also refers to experiencing self-assertion through humour, discovering that spontaneous humour, in particular, can be a voice, a creative self-assertion, against structure and real and internalised bullies. In defence of one's integrity or against intimidation, humour has the quality of reclaiming joy in the face of adversity. This suggests to me that humour could, if used sensitively, be explored in a therapeutic process for the purposes of self-assertion and ego strengthening.

Sub-cluster title: *Like Watching a Play*

<i>as though watching a play a character in a funny story I find myself as the protagonist in my story like storytelling</i>	<i>seeing herself as a character distancing and storytelling distancing while experiencing the moment create a character rather than see that person</i>
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I wonder whether Es, when laughing at her sister's violent behaviour, was trying to deflect the gravity or intensity of the violent experience. Es in particular discovered humour to be a valuable tool during intense experiences, and relates experiencing humour in this way to drama. This association of humour with the theatre and distance again brings to mind the theory of distancing described by drama therapist Robert Landy (1996). He states that, in drama therapy, the use of props, such as masks and puppets, involve a projection of the self, and thus can be used as a form of intrapersonal and interpersonal distancing. By projecting onto a prop, intense emotions can be expressed and explored safely. Humour seems to be able to function in this way also, as described by Es who notes that humour is 'protective', and relates humour to storytelling. Humour affords her distance enough to feel personally removed.

So, the distance that humour affords can generate objectivity, enabling a different perspective. This suggests that humour operates in a similar way to creativity, as described by Rogers (1961). Finding humour in difficult circumstances also provides emotional distance, which can protect one from intense embarrassment, discomfort and even stress, suggesting a connection to the self-assertion of humour and to Freud's (1927) 'pleasure principle'. The distance-while-experiencing-the-moment, articulated by Em and Es, describes humour as a similar process to the '*aesthetic distance*' of Landy's (2008) role theory of drama therapy. In the section that follows I explore the correlations between the findings and humour as a creative and a therapeutic process.

DISCUSSION OF EMERGENT MEANING ‘*HUMOUR IS PLAYFUL, CREATIVE AND EVEN THERAPEUTIC*’

This section addresses the significance of this study and the ways in which this study contributes to the body of knowledge available for creative arts practitioners. The interests that prompted this study was an intuition that humour has links with play, creativity and, therefore, therapeutic process. Winnicott’s (1971) theories of play and potential space, in particular, inform my understanding of therapeutic creativity and some parallels have emerged between these theories and our findings. Several other findings about the experience of humour also relate to therapeutic creativity. Es’ notion of ‘*being with*’ and ‘*being present*’ in humour relate to the therapeutic relationship. Ann’s description of humour coming from another part of you and helping you understand something you’ve been worried about relates strongly to Jung’s active imagination and creative therapeutic process. Es spoke specifically of using humour in group work to encourage improvisation and self-expression. Co-researchers have described using humour to create distance and alternate perspectives, which has enabled them to cope with difficult circumstances. Each of these emergent meanings of humour connects with aspects of creativity and the therapeutic encounter.

Sub-cluster title: *Humour is Playful*

<i>an element of playfulness</i> <i>play with ideas</i> <i>engaging people's imagination</i> <i>exploration through fun</i> <i>imaginative</i> <i>an openness</i>	<i>silly</i> <i>a playful way</i> <i>light</i> <i>seriousness of authority is a playground</i> <i>improvisation</i> <i>playing tricks</i>
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Several co-researchers related humour to play, which ties in with my stated rationale for exploring humour: that humour can be considered as a form of play, and as such a means of testing and coping with reality. Em felt there was an element of playfulness when she expressed humour in her personal creative writing, in which she enjoys freedom of expression. I found that humour is a means with which to play with ideas and with which to invite others to play along; Further, just as when I kicked my art work across the room in class, the humour incited others to join in the fun. I also consider humour to be a medium with which to play with words, ideas and images. Es described humour as playful when reflecting on the role humour has for her in the facilitation of drama classes, suggesting that humour is engaging *because* it is playful. Playfulness and frivolity

give way to laughter, and this seems to be the transition from fun to funny. There appears to be a close connection between humour and play.

Sub-cluster title: *A Childlike Quality*

<i>early experiences of pleasure</i> <i>something joyous in the laughter of a child</i> <i>joy and surprise</i> <i>my ancient child-sage</i> <i>a sage who is quick to laugh</i>	<i>effervescent child self</i> <i>childish</i> <i>innocence and blind belief</i> <i>wisdom</i>
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Further to the playfulness of humour, there was a childlike quality that emerged, particularly from my exploration of humour shared with my son. I wondered about early experiences of humour, such as laughter in a peek-a-boo game, and through my MIECAT inquiry I discovered my ‘*ancient child-sage*’, an archetype ‘*who is quick to laugh*’. Winnicott (1971) writes that it is through a progressive transition that the infant learns that he/she is not omnipotent and the object of all existence. These childlike qualities further establish the playfulness of humour, which links with Winnicott’s concept of play as a process by which children move away from blind belief and gradually incorporate reality into their experience of themselves and the world. The play of children is void of pressure to ‘get it right’ (Winnicott, 1971). In fact, play often involves ‘getting it wrong’ in order to test reality against one’s beliefs and perceptions. Through play, children challenge the sense of their world through non-sense. My discovery that my humour surfaces in the presence of authority and seriousness suggests that I am, in a way, testing boundaries in such circumstances. The distortion of reality in play, where action bears no real consequence, allows for the expression of emotions and ideas otherwise censured in real life. Similarly, humour is of no real consequence; it is a distortion of reality that serves the purposes of playing with boundaries. Rogers' (1961) definition of elements conducive to creativity, a “*lack of rigidity and permeability of boundaries in concepts, beliefs, perceptions and hypotheses ... a tolerance for ambiguity where ambiguity exists ... the ability to receive much conflicting information without forcing closure upon the situation ...*” (p154), also relates to playing and humour.

Playing with toys, or object relating and object usage, is a form of testing, and sometimes the purpose of the object is perverted, but this adds to experience that can then be called upon to relate to new experiences. The humour of a joke or situation often lies in the perversion of an original meaning or expectation. Play, creativity and humour are interrelated in their impermanence and self and it is possible, I think, to consider humour, play and creativity as similar processes with similar functions.

Sub-cluster title: *It Can Just Appear*

<i>see something completely different</i> <i>something really funny</i> <i>helps you understand what you're worried about</i> <i>unintentionally in the form</i> <i>humorous interpretation</i> <i>incredibly satisfying</i> <i>you've made yourself feel a lot better</i> <i>it's come from your subconscious</i> <i>imagine that!</i>	<i>can explain why you've been feeling frustrated</i> <i>satisfying because it is part of you</i> <i>it's all yours</i> <i>another part of you</i> <i>it's very rich</i> <i>seeing the funny side of it</i> <i>it's like having a dream and then thinking about it</i> <i>what if it did happen?</i>
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These qualities emerged from Ann's research when describing her experience of humour when painting. While listening to her descriptions, it occurred to me that there was some creative processing inherent in the experience of humour, such as seeing something in a new way, which then brings a new perspective and understanding. These are descriptions that I think would also fit with a creative, therapeutic process. Ann describes making a discovery through humour, causing her to engage in introspection. *'It's like having a dream and then thinking about it. It's come from something that's come from your subconscious.'* Some theories of mind posit that creativity and humour originate in pre-reflective, undifferentiated thought. Jung's (1964) concept of accessing pre-reflective thoughts through active imagination seems related to Ann's experience of humour in her artwork in the way that humour and creativity has made available to her subconscious information illuminating a problem and its explanation. I think the fact that Ann found it a rich and satisfying experience because *'it's all yours'* and *'it is part of you'* also parallels the empowerment of using the arts in therapy.

Em also described humour as something creative, as her experience of humour included the consideration of new possibilities and the notion *'what if it did happen?'* In relation to the process of crafting humour in her writing, Em noted she creates a ludicrous situation and invites her readers to *'imagine that'*.

Freud (1905) suggested joke-work is parallel to dream-work, in which perceptions are processed subconsciously and expressed as moments of dis-inhibition and pleasure. Since Freud, several other theorists (Klein, Lacan and Matte-Blanco) have conceptualised humour within a bi-logical theory of mind. A bi-logical theory of mind describes two, inter-related ways of experiencing the world: asymmetrical logic in which objective differences are perceived, categorised and organised and symmetrical logic in which experience is undifferentiated and perceived subjectively (Newirth, 2006). Humour is considered as belonging to symmetrical mental processes. This means that

humour is similar to creativity and dreams as it is non-linear, non-rational, undifferentiated and can often seem unbidden. This idea relates to Ann and Em's experiences of humour, in that humour was part of the creative process and seemed unbidden, from the pre-reflective, or 'subconscious' mind. Professor of Psychology Joseph Newirth explores the bi-logical theory of mind to explicate a psychological understanding of jokes and humour and their use in the therapeutic relationship. In the interweaving of 'symmetrical' and 'asymmetrical' thought processes, jokes represent a synthesis of the two through symbolisation and the metaphoric process of substitution. Jokes can be considered as the expression of an awareness of another occurrence in which similar affects, or feeling states, have been experienced. The surprise of finding the familiar in this new way is like the experience Ann referred to when she saw '*something completely different*' and a '*humorous interpretation*' that she felt was '*something that's come from your subconscious*'.

Sub-cluster title: *Frivolity Brings Openness and Freedom*

<i>magic happens when it's a light environment</i> <i>see something inspiring within the chaos</i> <i>freedom to be spontaneous</i> <i>my cheeky self</i> <i>permission to play</i> <i>here and now</i>	<i>ready to take up their 'offers'</i> <i>light-hearted</i> <i>permission to let go</i> <i>complete and utter release</i> <i>commitment to the moment</i>
--	---

This sub-cluster refers to the freedom that humour can bring, as described by Es, Em and myself, and to the creativity that this can bring. Es experienced '*magic*' and '*something inspiring within the chaos*' when humour generated a light and playful environment in her drama class. Em felt that when she writes without a particular audience she can express her cheekiness. Es also noticed drama class participants finding the '*freedom to be spontaneous*' through humour, suggesting humour encourages self-expression. Humour opened up the group of students, giving '*permission to play*' when I suddenly kicked my sculpture across the classroom. These findings suggest to me that humour may be a means of engaging with clients in a creative arts context. For example, upon a client's first consultation, shared humour may be an effective way to release tension and to focus on '*the here and now*'. It may also be a form of engagement into creativity and playfulness with materials.

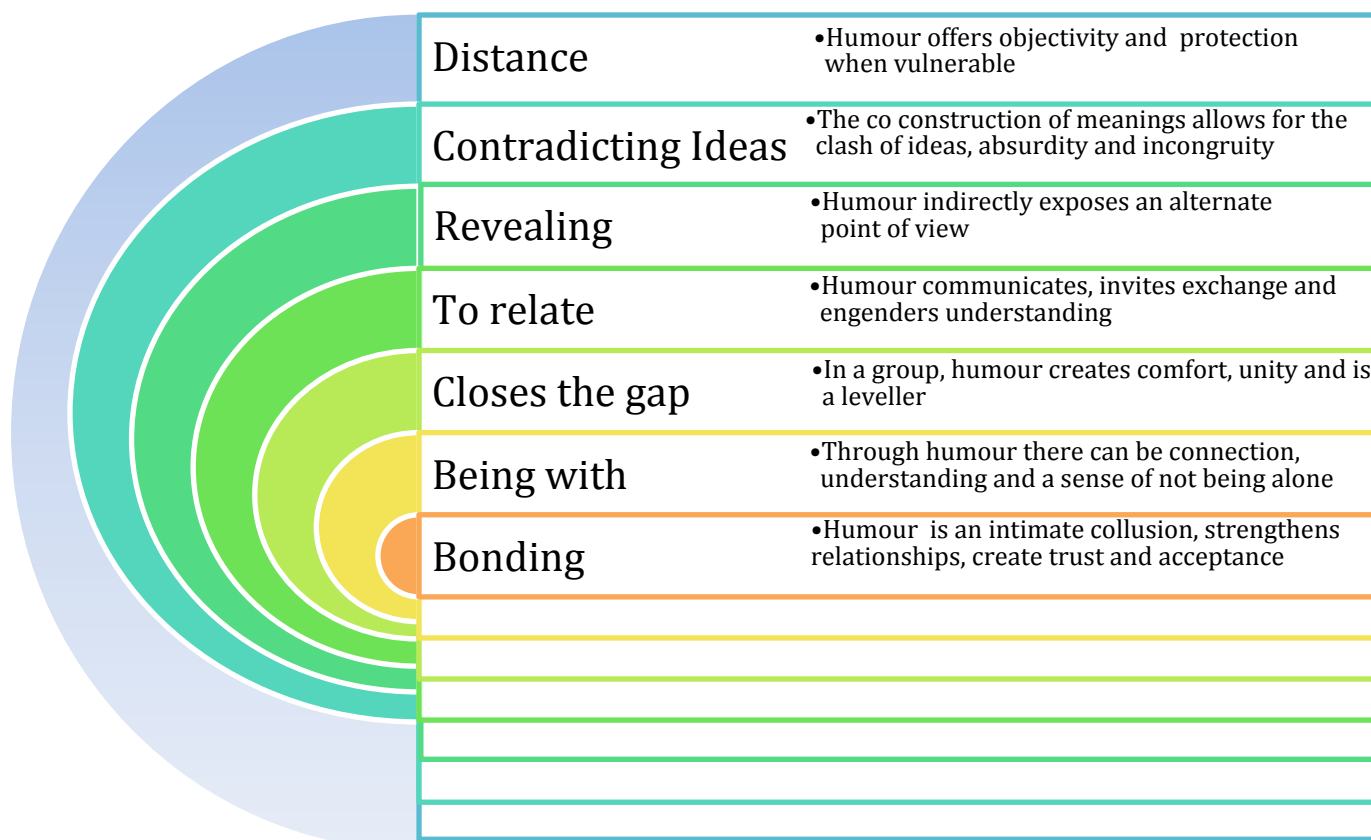
REDUCTION TO ESSENCES

To conclude the discussion, I will revisit my interests that prompted this study and compare them to the research findings. I will also explore some of the implications the findings have for creative arts therapy practice, particularly mine. Firstly, however, I attempt to reduce the emergent meanings to essences.

After immersing myself in the data, living with the emergent meanings and steeping myself in the specific qualities of humour described, I now draw back to get some distance from the phenomenon, to see how these meanings are connected. Each meaning explored in the discussion was reduced to one or two succinct sentences, representing an essence of humour as described by the researchers. The meanings that have emerged also called for some further mapping, to get a sense of their interconnectedness. By stepping back from the data and observing the cluster titles, there is a sense that all of the emergent meanings belong on a continuum of human relating. This Map of Essences is presented in Figure 5c, p172.

There seems to be various depths of relating through humour, described by the women researchers of this study. The concentric circles of the map represent these levels. On the outer of the continuum is the use of humour to *Distance* oneself from unkindness. This essence is treated with a cool blue that is washed out, suggesting the emotional coolness that humour can bring in a time of intensity. The experience of humour in *Contradicting Ideas* is predicated on an expectation, which is co-constructed. From the experience of co-constructing humour, alternate perspectives are revealed. This emergent meaning, and the next two, *To Relate* and *Closes the Gap*, is coloured green, as they are engaging experiences, verdant, momentary and rich as they contain meaning and understanding. As the continuum moves inward, there is a sense of *Being With* through humour, and of feeling connected. The yellow here represents the rays of the sun, offering some warmth, as well as a deeper understanding and the sense of presence that humour can facilitate. At the core of the continuum, at an intimate level, humour is a primary means of *Bonding* and strengthening close, personal relationships. This is treated with orange to connote the warmth of the earth's core. Surrounding these levels of experiencing, are Play, Spontaneity, Freedom and Creativity, as these emergent meanings are the conditions that are conducive to humour surfacing. These qualities are usually present when humour is experienced.

Play Spontaneity



Freedom Creativity

Figure 5c. Map of Essences

Several findings are of particular significance to creative arts therapy practice. Specifically, humour can unify and focus a group, which assists group cohesion. The revelation of an alternate perspective through humour suggests a potential use for addressing rigidity or finding creative resolution for tension. By inviting laughter into a creative arts therapy session, humour may encourage the absurd and promote the ridiculous, leading to the creation of alternate perspectives. The notions of distancing and creating alternate perspectives, in particular, point to an iconoclastic function of humour. In my personal experience, I felt that humour challenged the status quo of the classroom and the hierarchy of the hospital handover meeting. Es also felt that her absurdist sense of humour assisted her to recognise artificial conventions, like social etiquette. For women in a therapeutic context, perhaps humour could be an opportunity to question ‘common sense’?

As a creative arts therapist I am interested in working with women, and I consciously employ feminist approaches in my practice. In the context of the therapeutic relationship, I support and encourage a female client toward reaching her full potential as an individual. Hence this inquiry was positioned within a feminist perspective. Interestingly, co-researchers made few references to gendered humour. Em reflected on a humorous experience that revealed another cyclist’s assumptions about gender: *‘I find that hilarious, that guys get so offended, and then go steaming off up the hill, trying to out-pace me because it’s like ‘oh my god, it’s a girl on a mountain bike, I’m not going to be outrun by her.’* This example was a positive experience, in which Em enjoyed challenging expectations based on gender. Even my personal exploration did not highlight gendered humour as specifically meaningful in my day-to-day experience. During our discussion, Em and I share a laugh as women together, in recognition of what it means to be a woman. Ann noted that she enjoys the humour of cartoonists Horacek and Roberts, who often comment on women’s issues in a quirky way. So it seems that we identified and connected with women through humour over the experiences of being women.

Significantly each of the women co-researchers described humour to be a means of connecting and bonding and of coping with difficulty or tension through distancing. Es found that laughter made her feel powerful in the face of intimidation. Here, humour has the potential to shield one against the ‘unkindness’ of individual circumstance. Em and Es discovered that humour functions in this way when experiencing an embarrassing or *‘idiosyncratic’* moment.

Determining subjective responses and placing them beside assumptions about objectivity exposes incongruities between experience and perceived notions of ‘common sense’ (Isaak, 1996, p44). As this study has revealed, humour can call into question those notions that are taken for granted. If a

client experiences these notions as limiting, humour could be used to deflate them and remove their power.

The inquiry into how I experience humour and what humour means to me has revealed insights and new understandings. In addition to the ways in which humour could be used meaningfully in the arts therapy session, the exploration of humour in and of itself may prove therapeutic. Just as each co-researcher explored their experience of humour for meaning, the therapist and the client could embark on their own inquiry. There is potential for the therapist to open their awareness to using humour in therapy. There is also potential for the client to bring humour further into their awareness and to incorporate this into their life.



Journey Map 9

Chapter 5: The Research Journey

INTRODUCTION

This final chapter synthesises further, along with the reflexive process, the researcher, the research journey and the research. This is where I describe in more detail my experience of embarking upon, putting down and then resuming a research project (see Journey Map 9, p175).

The experience of the research process has been a labyrinth of philosophy, methodology and procedure. Via the reflexive insights offered, some of the journey has been expressed throughout the text. Significant to the process, and the findings, has been the six-year hiatus. The work took a personal toll, all those years ago, which led me to put the thesis away for a while, and this is a story I feel needs telling. How I feel about the research process has influenced the work, of course, and below is an excerpt of from my 2009 journal that reflexively captures my shifting relationship with the work.

I really enjoy the windows of time when Noah is at Kinder or in bed, where I can follow my intrigue around this particular subject. It is almost like meditation, and I think it is linked to reflection. Reflection is a rare opportunity when parenting a young child. It is wonderful to sit and be with my thoughts, here and now. My thought life, otherwise, usually lives in the near future, planning what is needed for the day/week, pre-empting the needs of my toddler and making sure I am organised enough to match his energy when I need to whilst also meeting his physical, social and developmental needs. It is the reflection that is lovely and feels nurturing, and when this research journey began I had no idea that I would be continuing it as a parent and then relishing the opportunity.

Significantly, as I write this, I am expecting my second child.

That was then...

In 2003, after much deliberation and negotiation, I had arrived at my research question: *'What is the meaning of women's experience of humour'*. Without repeating myself, I will explain that I struggled to continue the research within the particular paradigms offered by RMIT. I heeded initial advice and chose a question that would sustain my interest. I also followed advice in my choice of supervisor, having been told that this close, working relationship will influence the work. In the end

I worked with two different supervisors for their respective areas of expertise. At the time we weren't informed about reflexive research methods, and, whilst transparency was regarded as important, we were encouraged to remain true to the research methodology originally chosen. Needless to say, I was learning about the methodology as I was conducting the research. Several times I was re-directed back to the 'chosen' methodology, by my supervisors. The word 'chosen' is in inverted commas because choice is predicated on the knowledge you have at the time. Trying to find my way within the methodology caused some anxiety for me, as I felt I was wandering blindly through the process, and this undermined my confidence in what I was doing. At one stage I found myself in the middle of some discrepancies between a lecturer and a supervisor. The fact that one supervisor was unresponsive to my calls or emails compounded my stress and anxiety. Then when I tried to address the supervisor's unavailability via appropriate channels, the behaviour was justified and rationalised as due to workload problems. With no direction and little support, issues about my relationship with authority arose, and I felt stuck in an impossible situation. Of course, I know now, research is never a process isolated from events in the life of the researcher(s), as, at this time, I was also struggling with a stressful work environment and chronic pain. All these factors led to my requiring time off and, ultimately, a withdrawal from the research project. A year and a half later I became pregnant and the research project became the furthest thing from my mind. Adjusting to motherhood was a steep and long learning curve, however when Noah turned three I felt ready to take on the project again. Unfortunately, the Creative Arts Therapy program at RMIT had since closed. I then approached MIECAT with my work thus far, and I was accepted and enrolled in the MA by research program.

This is now...

As I am writing these final chapters my second child is 8 weeks old and asleep in her sling, nestled against my body. I could cry for joy at this fact, as it attests to my ability to be a researcher and a mum simultaneously, without feelings of guilt or compromise. And so this research has been about much more than women's experience of humour or my process of becoming a researcher. There are several sub-plots about growth, friendships, the self and about how inextricably entwined research is with the researcher's life.

MIECAT helped me to breathe new life into the research, as I was introduced to a postmodern approach to methodology. There were distinct philosophical differences between the paradigm in which the research was begun and the paradigm it was developed and finished in. This took some adjustment for me, still steeped in a narrow loyalty to one particular theorist, van Manen.

McCleod's concept embraces the research as a process of learning. The process of research and of my learning illuminated the co-construction of humour between friends. I initially assumed that one could approach acquaintances and friends and inquire into their experience of humour and allow those descriptions to provide a sense of this. What the process provided, significantly, was a sense of the co-construction of humour during the activity of research. This notion not only emerged from the data but also emerged as a result of the inquiry.

The paradigms and methods of phenomenology, heuristics, linguistics, reflexivity, constructivism, intentionality, psychology and MIECAT were all employed in the service of an inquiry into the meaning of four women's experience of humour. This was somewhat of a revelation for me, and the process of becoming a researcher also illuminated aspects of the therapeutic process of inquiry. This is probably best illustrated by my MIECAT inquiry into my experience of humour with my son. This research journey has demanded that I engage authentically with the discovery process, and I think I came somewhat unstuck when I attempted to force the production of knowledge through method. I lost sight of the phenomenon of my inquiry; I lost my sense of humour. Becoming a researcher-as-*bricoleur* provided the building blocks with which to respond to the data in a way that felt transparent and honest and that was informed by a broad theoretical and interdisciplinary perspective. This is, after all, how as a therapist I meet my collaborators (previously known as clients).



Journey Map 10

'Laughter is a protest scream against death.'

Mel Brooks

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APPENDIX 1: HREC APPROVAL LETTER

14th May 2003

Pam Hellema
51 Gardner Street
Richmond
Vic 3121

Dear Pam

FLSAPP 12 – 03 HELLEMA “*She who laughs last.....*” The meaning of the lived experience of humour as described by women in a creative arts process

Thank you for submitting your application for consideration by the Faculty Subcommittee of the Human Research Ethics Committee of RMIT University.

Your application was considered at the meeting **04 – 03 on Wednesday 7th May 2003** and an extract of the minutes are attached for your information.

4.1.2 FLSAPP 12 - 03 HELLEMA “*She who laughs last.....*” The meaning of the lived experience of humour as described by women in a creative arts process

The Committee considers this to be **Minimal Risk** proposal and that it is appropriate to be approved for a period of **6 Months** to **November 2003**.

Yours sincerely,



**Barbara Polus,
Chair, Faculty of Life Sciences
Faculty Sub-committee of the HREC**

APPENDIX 2: PLAIN LANGUAGE STATEMENT

RMIT letterhead

**Faculty of Life Sciences, in conjunction with the
Faculty of Education, Language & Community Services
and the
Faculty of Art, Design & Communication**

Dear _____,

I would like to invite you to participate in a research project, which explores the question: '***What is the meaning of humour, as described by women in a creative arts process?***' This study addresses the meaning that humour has for women in a creative arts process.

I, Pam Hellema, will be the principal investigator. This research will contribute to a minor thesis, undertaken as part of a Master of Creative Arts Therapy at RMIT University. My supervisor will be Dr. Nina Bruni.

In the field of Creative Arts Therapy (CAT) humour has been linked to enabling people to develop new perspective in a difficult situation and to alleviate anxiety. Humour, therefore, may have significance as a CAT tool.

The research approach is termed hermeneutic phenomenology. This approach is concerned with understanding someone's experience of a phenomenon, in this case, the meaning of humour.

Participants in this study will be women who are engaged in a creative arts process. As a participant you will be asked to reflect upon the meanings humour has for you, using personal experience as a starting point. Throughout June and July 2003, you will be invited to choose an arts modality and/or modalities that best enable you to explore your meanings of humour. You may choose written, 2D and/or 3D visual artwork, music, movement, drama, stories or poetry for this exploration. I will meet with you twice between June and July 2003, to discuss, and record on audiotape, your reflections. Each interview will be 30 minutes to 1 hour in length and will be conducted at a time and place that is mutually convenient. I encourage you to accompany your movement, musical and dramatic work with some written reflections. You may decide to audio or

videotape music, movement or dramatic expression to capture this activity. You will be required to work independently in these activities over a 6-week period.

Information will be analysed according to the chosen research approach. This method involves identifying common themes related to women, humour and creative arts processes. A third meeting with you will be requested in August 2003, to review and confirm my analysis of your interview transcript.

The information provided by you is confidential during, and after completion of, the study. Confidentiality of recorded and written information will be maintained by: securing all information under lock and key at my home when in use; keeping information under lock and key at the University when not in use; only my supervisor and myself having access to the information; using information only for the purposes of analysis. Information will be secured for five years after completion of the study, as required by RMIT University. After this five-year period, information on hardcopy, tape or disc will be destroyed and computer files will be deleted. If you wish to withdraw any information, you may do so at any stage of the project. If you wish to withdraw from the study you may do so at any stage.

To protect your anonymity you will be allocated a pseudonym and all identifying information will be disguised. The study findings may be published after analysis. Some information, in the form of 2D and/or 3D artworks may be requested for publication with the final report. A report of the findings will be available to you through RMIT university library.

Your involvement in this research project is voluntary. Before accepting my invitation please consider that you will be required to commit time to the project during June, July and August, 2003, to engage in creative process and be involved in interviews. If you accept my invitation you will be required to sign an RMIT consent form confirming that you understand the requirements and process of participation in this research project. Should you have any concerns and/or complaints please contact the research supervisor, Dr. Nina Bruni, on 9898 2803, or the secretary to the Faculty of Life Sciences, Human Research Ethics Sub-Committee, Julie Barnett on 9225 7218.

Yours sincerely,

Pam Hellema BA, Grad.Dip.CAT

APPENDIX 3: EM – TRANSCRIPTS FROM FIRST AND SECOND INTERVIEWS

Keywords and phrases are underlined

Em's First Interview

P Did you have a place that you thought you might want to start? Or did you...

EM Ahhm, if you want to start, you can.... Did you want to ask questions, or do you just want me to...

P Well, I've got an initial question, aahhmm, but it can, sometimes it might not be appropriate. Ahm... Can you give me an example of an experience of humour that you felt was significant?

EM To the creative process, when I was writing? Or just in my life?

P Just in general, yeah.

EM Oh, ok. I'm thinking about stuff that...because of the direction of what you asked me to do was all around the creative process, that's what my thoughts are about, the writing that I've been doing, and it has been 'funny' so the process that I can think about that was funny was when I was cycling and my seat fell down and I was sitting there, and you know, my knees were up around my elbows (I laugh) and I'm going down the street and I just sort of think of that, like the visual image of that, looking like a little kid. So that is significant, not in my life, I mean I've looked like a fool before and probably will again, but it was more because that's what sparked some creative writing.

P Oh, ok.

EM So that's what was significant about it. So, yeah, I mean the humour of the situation is that you're sitting there and you're out of control, and as an adult it's incongruous. (I laugh) So you're in a situation where you're going 'ok, I should be up here and really, I'm down here, (we both laugh) and I look bloody stupid. I feel like an idiot. And look, I'm turning, I'm turning my body and my hands are here and I'm turning my body and my seat's going with me and it's not meant to do that!' So ahm, yeah so that was significant. So, the thoughts...I jotted down things as I was writing, more about humour as, not so much what it means to me but how I find humour, or like, ah, how do I express this...it's like what is humour? How do people define it? Or what makes something funny? I guess was the question in my head, what makes something funny and I came up with a few bullet points about things and... My first thought, which is a bit frightening really, is self-depreciating humour. And, in that instance, in order for me to make it sound funny to others when I was writing, it was an element of self-depreciation, like I had to put myself down in order to make a joke of something. And I don't know where that comes from, I could go off and do all this stuff, but that was my first thought, that the thing that makes something funny is that you have to either knock somebody else, like you know those ahm, so it's either self depreciating or it's putting other people down. You know the whole 'Irish joke' or the cultural jokes, the sexist jokes or the blonde jokes, or whatever. People find them funny because they're laughing at other people, but they're laughing at other people in a way that they go 'thank god, that's not me'.

P Yeah. Yeah.

EM So, it's like 'ha, ha, how stupid, I would never do that', but then on the quiet they're going 'oh, thank god.' you know what I mean? Instead of blonde/Irish/Jewish, whatever. Insert whatever culture it is that relates to.

P So your experience on the bike was a way of turning the situation into, I guess, a story for you? And...because there's laughing at others and there's laughing at yourself.

EM Yeah, in this case it was self-depreciating. Like, okay, it could have been 'ha, ha, she's...' like if I was an outsider, looking at this chick on a bike

P You would have laughed at you? (We both smile)

EM I would have absolutely pissed myself laughing watching her going down the street, because, really, the situation it ludicrous. Like you're sitting there...It's like looking at a little kid in mummy's high heels, because, you know, it just looks wrong. And that's what it felt like. I was sitting there, I had my knees up around here (indicates to her elbows), and I was trying to peddle and I kept turning round (we both laugh) bumping into parked cars going 'shit, shit, shit' and so it looked stupid. But why is someone looking stupid humorous? And so I thought well because it is self depreciating or it's laughing at others. So, I think there are 2 types of humour: humour for good and humour for evil (laughs). (We laugh together)

P yep, yep.

(Outside a horn sounds, distracting us. WE both stop to listen)

EM I have no idea what that is.

P Sounds like a car...

EM Oh, it's someone outside? Oh, okay (laughs at her own misconception) I thought it was coming from in here... aahhm, yeah, so, self depreciating humour... ahm, but, yeah and then coming under that is being cynical and making puns, as well, as forms of humour. I wondered 'how do you put someone down?' well you're cynical or, you know, why are puns a form of humour? Why do people use puns? Because they want to, ahm, they want to actually get at somebody or put them down, but they use it under the guise of the pun to do it. So, not all humour is funny and generous and is to make light of things.

P Have you experienced that yourself, like have you experienced being on the other end..?

EM Yeah, it's kind of like teasing. They find it hilarious, but if you're on the receiving end of it, it does nothing but deflate your self-esteem. You kind of go well what's really 'funny' and is it funny for everybody? You know, when kids make fun of people with disabilities or, ahm, you know, that sort of stuff, teasing, they think it's hilarious, because it makes them part of the crowd and their peer group, and all the rest of it associated with that. But the fact is that the words that come out of their mouths which are directed to their buddies but at the butt of that joke is somebody else, so that kind of humour. But anyway, that's not what was going on in my mind while I was writing my story; they're just thoughts about humour, and where it all came to. So that's the evil humour (laughs) but the good humour, what it relies on as well, which I realised through my writing, and any sort of joke telling... I'm shocking at telling jokes or making up things on the spot, but when I can sit down and I've got time to think about it and I can play with the words and stuff I realise what makes something funny when I read it back to myself is rhythm and timing, so it's, and the meter of the words. Ahm, like... I've got something here which I've ahm... alright... so I'll read you something that I wrote. I've got here: *'every cell in my body is screaming for sustenance. My legs are burning and I'm light headed. I come to a wobbly stop. I shakily get off the bike and practically inhale the power bar once my fumbling fingers manage to rip it open...and that's only after the eight kilometre warm up'*.

P (I start to laugh)

EM See? Now why is that funny? Because it's setting you up and it's setting the scene. And it's like, because there's expectation, that from the way that I'm writing it, that I've been on that bike for hours. And then suddenly it's 'no I haven't! That was only the 8km warm up!' So, it's like, that's the self-depreciating humour that I mean. That's exactly what I mean. So it's setting yourself up, and whatever, so...

P So at the time that it happened, did you find it funny? Or was it only after?

EM Oh, no. It's retrospective. I'm pulling in situations and I'm putting a humorous twist on the situation. At the time I was thinking 'oh, my god, I am so unfit, I can't even get to the point where we even start the ride, which is the 8kms to Port Melbourne from here, and not feel the effects of food debt. It's like 'what the hell?!' so, humour is a way of making light of the self-depreciation, as well. So it's being critical of myself and putting a easily acceptable slant on it,

P Uh huh, yep, yep.

EM so, ahm, yeah, that's kind of one thing... (Thinks and reads her writings)...so, ahm...yeah...ahhh...what else was I going to say... hang on a second, sorry about that, let me just find it... Oh ok. Another one was *'being able to retrieve the remnants of ripe bananas and gooey chocolate bars from the recesses of sweaty, deep, tight jersey pockets, whilst keeping one hand on the handle bars and your eyes on the road, is a skill that needs to be mastered at home before trying it out on the road'*. What I realise as well about humour is building visual imagery, for me anyway, it's all about visual imagery. It's about setting the scene of someone reaching back into their pocket after been cycling, pulling out, 'cause the article was all about food and how you should be eating on the bike and sustaining yourself, and so your cycling along and you go 'alright, I need food', you reach back and what you get is sweaty, (I laugh in recognition) mushed up bananas, and disgustingly gooey chocolate that is all the way down the bottom of your cycle jersey deep pockets. That's the kind of visual imagery that I wanted to get across. And so, why is that funny? And it's like, because it's yuk!

P Yeah, yeah. Well, it's an uncomfortable experience on the bike, I bet.

EM Oh, well it's an uncomfortable situation at any stage to reach back and feel something mushy, and gooey and yuk between your fingers. And so it's like, but what makes it funny? That was the question I was trying to ask myself. Why am I having that? Because this whole article that I'm writing is supposed to be light-hearted and humorous and informative, and all the rest of the brief that I got. So what makes it funny that something's tactile, or yukky, or? Again it came back to the thought of you're thankful that you're not in that situation.

P Yeah. But do you think that there needs to be an element of being able to relate?

EM Yes! Definitely.

P Yeah, so...

EM Definitely. That's why you're thankful you're not in that situation, because you can relate to it. You go 'Oohh, been there.' (Laughs) 'Sooo glad I'm not there again'. (We both laugh). Exactly, because people know what, you know, gooey food feels like, and how yucky it is. If they haven't had any experience of coming out with sticky, yucky fingers then they wouldn't find it funny. It's like when you have cross-cultural experiences and someone's trying to explain the first time they eat 'drop', you know, salty liquorice, and they're going, like, I can tell you this story where I went to a party and I thought 'oh, okay I'll have some liquorice.' And the next thing, you know, I like, you know, I'm looking for

somewhere discretely to spit it out so that the hostess doesn't see me, right? And you can relate to that because you've tried salty, yucky liquorice.

P What I've found funny...because I've done that with, ahm, Nutrigrain.

EM Oh?

P Because Nutrigrain comes in Nuts and Bolts as well, and that's a savoury version. I love Nutrigrain and I just reached into this bowl of Nutrigrain thinking this is going to be the breakfast cereal, and it was savoury! And I got such a shock. It was just, ahm, there was an element of surprise because I had this expectation. And I guess with liquorice you have this expectation that it's going to be sweet. And, yeah, you know it's that being taken aback like that.

EM But it's also...anyone can tell you their first experience of mistaking wasabi for avocado dip.

(We both laugh)

EM See? You just have to mention it and everybody laughs because they know, they know the pain...

(Laughing)

P And the ramifications are huge!

EM Exactly. People know it. They know 'oh, my God. This isn't what I expected it to be' or even if they haven't done it themselves they know what wasabi it they know how hot it is and they know 'oh, my God, don't do that' so all those movies on TV like 'American Pie' which everyone cringes at, and yet they laugh at. It's that relating to it and not wanting to relate to it. (I laugh) So, yeah. That was one of the things I came up with. Ahm, but, yeah, timing is very important in humour. I'm sure it's more important for stand up comics that it is for me and my writing because I can play with it and I can shorten words or make them longer or I can look at the sentence structure and that's important to me, to see if it flows, and go 'ok, there's a bit of staccato happening there', and it's like, that's important for me. And ludicrous situations: unbelievable or cringe worthy situations that you're glad you aren't in yourself. That's what I was just talking about then. And then it's relief or disbelief, so: 'oh, Thank God it's not me.' Or 'There's no way that would happen, but how hilarious would it be if it did happen?' So, the actual absurd, the ludicrous, people laugh at as well. So, ahm, yeah, ahm, and... yep. And then there's the visual imagery. So, those were the main things that, when I was writing this, in my creative process, which is what I think you asked me to focus on, ahm those were the thoughts going around in my head that were actually came up about humour.

P So, as you're writing, ahm, tell me about what it feels like when, ahm, you think you get the timing right, or, you know, when you read it back to yourself and you think, 'ah, ha' that's it' you know. Can you describe that process? If you can.

EM Well, when I write, as you can see (laughs as she shows me her scribbled out drafts) Well, its funny because sometimes it just, it just flows and sometimes, if I have a particular objective in my head, then its pages of scribbled out (turns pages) yep, one, two, four, five, three, you know, all over the page, and if I read something back, and it just sits well, or it makes me smile each time I read it back. Like, I'm not going to laugh out loud each time I read it, but if it makes me smile then I go 'yep'. Then I know that's ok and then I'm done. Or sometimes I'll write, and especially with these articles, because I've got a deadline, I'll think about the topic and think 'what is it I know that I can talk about relating to this topic?' and then once I know the subject matter, how can I make it funny? And how can I distil it down the essence of what makes it funny? Like getting rid of all the superfluous stuff. That's something as well about humour that is, you can't have a five hour joke with a one second punch line because you'll lose people. Well, sometimes you can, but, you know, that's rare. But, generally, humour is, is there in an instant. Oh, it's hard to say. There are some comedians who can keep you entertained for a whole evening with this whole long spiel and at the end they'll have one thing which makes the whole evening hilarious because it ties it all back. It relates everything. So, if you're going to have a long spiel, then you have to do that. But in something where you've got 300 words and four different messages you're trying to get across each thing has to have, each paragraph has to have its own bit of humour embedded in it. I find. This is all purely my own, you know, ideas but,

P But it seems to me that's perhaps the difference between writing and speaking to an audience?

EM Oh, absolutely.

P Like is it harder to keep people engaged in a written format?

EM I don't know. It depends on the writer. But, if you look at the funny books on my bookshelf, like Ben Elton, or Red Dwarf, or even Douglas Adams, all those kinds of books they're not a laugh a minute but the whole thing is hilarious, the whole book, you know you've had a good cackle, you know, when you're cracking up on the tram on the way to work and people are looking at you sideways because you just can't contain yourself, and it's usually not because of the whole book, the whole plot line but it's built up to it and then you get one little thing just cinches it for you.

P Yep, yep.

EM So there's that kind of humour, but in an article this short I didn't have the time to do that so for me I was looking at each paragraph and each sentence and trying to make it as concise and as funny as possible. So stripping away all the superfluous stuff that was just descriptive or just fluff... so... I'm trying to relate this back to what you asked me...

P Oh, about the timing of the written piece. You want to keep it short and sharp?

EM Yeah, I do. But you were asking me how I know when it's done. So, I go through and edit it in my head and I think alright is there's anything else I need to still say in order to get my message across, but also in order to make it funny, are there any other ways I can reword it, are there any other bits of peripheral event (laughs) that I can pull into that situation to make it funnier, and that's when I start thinking, that's when the self depreciation part comes in or the ludicrous or the whatever things come in. How can I make an ordinary event seem funny? And a lot of the time it's fabrication and a lot of the time it's not funny (laughs) you know, I'm not always sitting there laughing to myself when I'm on the bike (laughs again). Oh, well, I do sometimes, but not all the time. So it's the art of making something, which isn't funny, funny. And I don't think I'm particularly good at it. ahm, I do ok, in that it's slightly humorous, but it's not hilarious. No one's ever going to read my article and have a sore side from laughing so much. I when out to see 'Certified Male' a play with Glynn Nicholas and Peter Rowthorne and it was hilarious, absolutely hilarious. You got that sore gut and aching cheeks, and, you know, hilarious stuff. And my articles are not like that, but then I'm not a comic. So the best I can hope to achieve, as just an average writer is that people can relate to it, that people like it, laugh at it and enjoy it.

P Yep. Ok. So would it be right to say that the creative process is about engaging people through enjoyment?

EM Yeah, yeah, it is. I want people to read it and, ah, well the whole point of it, the brief that I got, is to inform people, so if they're reading it because they enjoy it and they happen to be learning something along the way, fantastic, because they don't know they're learning something along the way. They're getting it because it's, hopefully, well written and it's entertaining.

P And they can relate to it?

EM And they can relate to it. Exactly.

P I imagine that, if they can relate to the situation that is being told that the message in the story about that situation will be more effective.

EM Yes. Yeah. Because if you are totally switched off, I remember back in school, they're teaching you year 10 history which has absolutely no relevance to what you felt at the time, or to your life and, I don't know about you, but when I was sitting I class and there's something which, you know at that stage there were so many other things on my mind...oh, geometry. I hated geometry because I thought it had absolutely no relevance to my life. I couldn't hinge it on anything else. If the teacher had come in and done a song and dance and made it hilarious, I might have learnt some geometry. But... they didn't. (Laughs and then we laugh together) Surprisingly enough. So why didn't they entertain me and tell me about sine, cos, tan and theta or whatever it was. Ahm...I don't know. (laughs again)

P Yep. They might have gotten more into kid's heads if they'd done that.

EM But that's why things like the Wiggles and things like Sesame Street are so popular, because they use mixed entertainment methods, some of its humour some of it's not, but I digress... ahm, yeah, so...

P I don't think that's a digression at all. Like I think ahm... sometimes, I mean I find a lot of humour in anecdotes about me as a child like using the display toilet at McEwens, that sort of thing, and so do a lot of other people find humour in that story, as if it's their story to be told! Ahm, and I think that anecdotes like that can be, are funny, juxtaposed against...they're absurd, and that's what I think Sesame Street play on. They set up absurd things like 'Super Grover' - this skinny tiny puppet that's obsessed with being heroic and whose cape gets caught all the time, and, yeah.

EM Yep. So it's situational. When I try to distil down the essence of humour for me it's the fact that you have to relate to something else that people already understand and know or you can build it up so that they can relate to that experience. So you have to describe it to them and you have to draw them in. Otherwise people, people have to feel comfortable to laugh at something, or its antithesis of that is that they have to feel discomfort to laugh at something, because that's more of a defence mechanism. But to really belly laugh, the real enjoyment laugh, not just the 'ha, ha' nervous laugh (gives an example of a nervous laugh) kind of laugh (we laugh at that together)...

P Sometimes people force that to make a situation humorous like because they know is not humorous. They go (fake, forced laugh) it's like 'oh, no, I wish I could laugh at it'.

EM Like 'if I don't laugh I will cry' sort of situation. I've been in that situation. When I was a kid I used to get in trouble for laughing at situations in which I should have been crying. My mum would hit me for something, I'd be mucking around and she'd go 'I'm going to get you with the wooden spoon' or whatever, and I would just burst out laughing and it used to completely deflate her but man, she would be mad! (we both laugh)

P It's not the response she was wanting from you?

EM No! And its humour for me. And even to this day, even if someone's fallen over and broken their leg, I go 'oh my, god' and laugh (laughs) which is completely inappropriate, it's like a defence; it's just a reaction for me. I'm normally completely concerned after I've stopped and picked myself up off the ground (laughs) and wiped away the tears, then I'll help and offer them first aid or whatever...but, ahm, yes (still laughing)

P I suppose with all of your bike riding, have you ever like seen someone fall off their bike, and laughed?

EM No, no I haven't. 'cause I'm sure it'd be me that does it (laughs).

P Yep. This isn't my experience, but my brother fell off his bike and, ahm, took a big face plant, it was a serious accident, he didn't break his nose but he almost did, and he was with my cousin and my cousin, like, you know, he had

a bit of a giggle first, and then he saw Mark's face and then he realised the seriousness of the situation. But it must have been funny to watch because; you know the forks that meet the wheel?

EM yeah.

P That came away from the handlebars. So when Mark put his weight on the handlebars again, there was nothing underneath and his face met with the road.

EM Oh my God!

P And yeah, Josh, who was watching it, said it was funny.

EM I was doing this fundraising thing for the Scouts at the time where you'd cycle around and around this velodrome thing, or running track, whatever it was, and you got sponsored per lap and it was like an all night thing. People were doing hundreds and hundreds of laps and you'd take turns. And I was riding this girl's bike and some kid pulled out in front of me and I slammed on the brakes and I just went straight over the handle bars, and did this amazing flip and landed flat on my back. Apparently that was hilarious to watch and, ah, I can imagine my friends standing there giving me a '9', '8.5' (we both laugh) holding up score cards

P You just lost points for your landing

EM Yeah, exactly. It was a helmet crash.... Yeah.

P Did you hurt yourself?

EM No, thank God. But they did leave me in first aid for a while to make sure that I was ok. But you know, yeah, its one of those things. But, it's interesting though that people relate humour, and smiling and being in a good mood to personality. Like, for me, when I'm not smiling constantly at work people ask 'Are you ok?' and I say 'I'm fine, I'm just focused, I'm just doing my work, why?' 'Oh, you're not smiling. You don't seem your normal happy self'. The first thing my boss said to me when I moved into the department was 'Em, the only thing I know about you is you're loud' (laughs and I laugh with her). And I thought 'ok, then'. (laughs louder) And he meant my laughing; they can hear me giggling down the corridor. I'm at my desk in the middle of this, you know, corporate environment, couldn't be more corporate if they tried, and I'm absolutely cracking up all day. It's not as if I'm not doing my work, because I do. But, I just am always laughing at something. And there's another girl as well who does that. And it's great to hear. It's like how often, its like, during the working day people just don't laugh anymore.

P Hmmm.

EM Yeah, it's such a shame.

P Can you describe what its like to find something funny? Even if it's the smallest thing.

EM As in physical? or an emotional...

P Maybe give an example of at work that might have caused you to laugh.

EM ah, well my boss break dances in front of me. He's a 60 year old guy who's a grandfather, he runs around in his grandpa top, (laughs) break-dancing (laughs more) He moon walks. (Does some mimicry and we both laugh) in front of my desk (laughs harder, almost unable to speak) it's like 'what are you on?' The guy's a senior manager (we both continue laughing) in one of the top four accounting firms and he's break-dancing in front of my desk (still laughing). What do you do with that? except laugh.

P Very funny.

EM Yeah. So that's one of the things I laugh at. The other thing as well is that, I was busy one time and I said to him 'Brian, can you chuck those people out of the meeting room, get them out of the meeting room because we're supposed to be in there' (starts to laugh) you know, and he says 'you're starting to sound like my wife...can you put the dog out? Can you get the rubbish bins...?' (laughing still) I come to work to escape that' and I go 'oh, my God!' and it was a reality check I mean I absolutely lost it. I was cracking up. I'm treating my senior manager like he's just anybody.

P Like he's a work experience student.

EM Yeah. (laughs more)

P And was that the same guy that'll break dance in front of your desk?

EM Yeah.

P Right.

EM Well, you know, exactly. Yes. (laughs again) So...little things like that at work. But just people, like, I laugh at people, as in not making fun of them, but little interactions that people do or I just watch them and I just laugh at them. You know, ahm, yeah, just stuff. Or else I'll get an email from a friend that'll make me laugh, or something.

P Hmmm. Yeah. Ahm, do you think that the senior manager does that to make you laugh?

EM Absolutely. Absolutely. And he doesn't do it to other people. At least not that I know of.

P Yeah?

EM But, ah, yeah (laughs) I think it's 'cause he knows that he'll get a response from me that he does it. And he feels comfortable that he can do it. But, ahm, yeah, that's funny. Or else sometimes I'll, ahm, like I'll just laugh at people, like I'll get those soft, stressful things and I'll just lob one across he desk or the partition, its because, it's not that I hate conforming but sometimes they're such sterile environments, these workplaces. Like, my desk, you can tell my desk a mile away because I've got these fake poppies, red and orange poppies and I've got photos all around the place and it's

like, you look at it and go (in parody voice) ‘ok, this is a creative person that sits here’ (laughs) or ‘she spends way too much time here’ (we laugh together) it’s made like a little home. So, I don’t fit the normal, little, boxed-in, partitioned stereotype, I need to have something bright and cheerful and homey around me. So, yeah.

P Hmm. And what about the opposite experience where someone has thought that something they are doing or saying is funny, or has been trying to make you laugh and you just haven’t found it funny.

EM Oh yeah. There’s a guy at work who is a complete prat. And his humour isn’t funny because it’s annoying and immature. It’s just... Yeah, it’s just annoying. You just go ‘give it up’. Because, the point of his humour, like the essence of his humour, is teasing and annoying. It’s not coming from... as I said, there’s good and evil humour. And, so his is evil humour and it’s just the basis of it. I just get completely turned off ‘cause he’s just not funny. So yeah, and that happens. But I actually don’t have very much to do with him now, so it’s not really an issue. But ahm, Yeah, there are people who go (actually yawns) not funny.

P (I laugh) yeah, yeah. That also reminds me of situations where someone thinks they’re a really good joke teller.

EM Hmm. And they’re so not (laughs)

P Yeah, and that it itself is funny but you’re not laughing with them

EM yes, you’re laughing at them, yeah

P it’s like kids with their knock knock jokes and they just make them up.

EM (bursts with laughter) yeah.

P They just put something on the end of the knock knock and that’s a joke. You know. I guess there are other experiences, for me there are experiences where humour has bred humour. Like, so... laughter, I mean it might not just be a joke or a funny situation but just someone starting to laugh and that breeds more laughter

EM Oh, yeah.

P and then that situation in itself because you’re laughing at nothing, becomes funny.

EM Oh yeah, that happens more, not so much at work, but with my friends. Ahm...

P Can you remember and experience like that?

EM Of people just laughing..?

P Of just starting to laugh.

EM Oh, Not lately, at least not without drugs, or something, or alcohol. But, I can definitely remember situations would arise, I mean usually it’s me because I seem to be self amusing (laughs) and everyone laughs at me (laughs more). I’m the seed (more laughing, together this time) and what I’m laughing at is something completely incongruous or something that’s reminded me of something else, and I’ll just get a giggle, and start giggling to myself and then somebody will laugh at me because, for no apparent reason, I’ve just burst into spontaneous mirth (laughter) and they just go ‘what is she laughing at?’ ‘I don’t know but let’s laugh at her laughing’ and then they laugh. So it just feeds in on itself. Ahm, so that happens. Ahm, yeah, but not so much lately and not so much at work. I mean because everyone’s been too busy lately. You just generally say ‘so what’s so funny?’ And you ask them, but yeah. And I love people’s laughs. (yawns) You know the different sounds of people’s laughs. My friend, ok I can think of a situation, I have this friend Ruth who I used to share a flat with and her laugh would set me off every time I’d hear it. Oh my God. It’s just one of those carefree-just hello-world-this is me-I’m just gonna let rip-laughs. And I would just laugh at it and get into hysterics listening to her laugh at something else. That’s great that, isn’t it?

P Yeah, I’ve had a couple of experiences like that. One time with my family we were travelling, we’d broken down, and we ended up having to get an onsite van at the nearest caravan park. And ahm, we were, the whole family, in this caravan, sort of, sleeping in the same space, and it had been a long, long night, having to get the car looked at, then towed, having to get to the nearest town. And, ah, we finally rest, you know, we finally all bed down at the same time and rest and I just started pissing myself (Em laughs) thinking this is so funny, like this is, you know, that there’s this long arduous process of sitting around doing nothing, really, waiting for RACV, waiting for, you know, to get back to where we could find a place to sleep, and I just started pissing myself, and then my sister started pissing herself because I was. I don’t know if she realised what I was laughing at. Mum and dad were getting aggravated, but that just made us laugh even more. (we laugh together) The whole situation was absurd anyway. Yeah. So that was sort of a bonding thing between Rach and I. Do you find that with family, that you share a sense of humour?

EM Yeah, my sister and I just generally laugh at my mum (laughs loudly and then I laugh too). Actually we do. We would just look at each other and go ‘oh, God’ and just laugh. Actually we do. That’s not such a nice laughter, though. Sometimes it is, sometimes it’s laughing at quirkiness, or sometimes it’s like ‘Oh, god help us if we turn into that we’re dead’ kind of laughter, the doom factor. Ahm...

P And that’s relating’ again? Like ‘that’s her and that’s very close to me’ (we both bubble with laughter again).

EM Yes. Yep. Yeah we do actually.

P Fantastic. Well, is there anything else? We can wind up if you like.

EM Yeah, no. I think most of the stuff I’ve said... it’s just those points; I keep coming back to those. And, ah, it’s been really fascinating for me to actually think about humour in this way. It really has been. Ahm. But, no, I think that’s about it. If I have any more thoughts I’ll jot them down.

P Yep. For the next one.

EM yep.

End Tape

Em's Second Interview

P I'll be in an interviewer's mode, because my lecturer told me 'you've got to do this, this and this'. So I'll be going (parody :) 'Hmmmmm...interesting' (Em laughs) 'tell me about that...hmmm...so what (garbled talk)' (Em laughs again). So ahm, so while you were doing your creative process, what meanings does humour have for you?

Em okay. Ahm, I found it was a way of finding a common ground in expression, in that if I'm, if I'm detouring into something deep and meaningful, generally that's only something that relates to me, whereas humour, most people can relate to. So it's a bit of a leveller. Ahm, it draws people to, when I'm thinking about the creative process, and I'm thinking about the things I can express through the creative process if I use humour as a medium then I know that it will be more readily acceptable to the mainstream.

P I know in our last discussion, you were talking about engaging people through humour, it makes your creative writing more enjoyable...

Em it makes it more enjoyable for me but also it makes it more enjoyable for the reader, yeah, but, yeah, and I was thinking about this and I was thinking 'why would I use humour as a device?' and the reason I would use humour, 'cause I'm not, I don't set out to write something witty, it's not as if I'm writing a stand up comic routine, it's the reason I'm using it as a communication device is because I would want to make something, ahm, you know, acceptable so that everybody, so that they can understand, so to do that it's humour, and grab their attention.

P Hmmm, yep. Yep.

Em So, yeah, so that's what it means to me, a communication device.

P yep. And is there a sense that the opposite of that, like injecting something meaningful or personal in your work, is you sense of that the opposite? That that doesn't necessarily engage people so readily as humour does?

Em No, no necessarily that that's the opposite it's just that ah if I'm venturing into the deep and dramatic ahm, I don't think using pathos would work as well as humour, its just its just, if you, if you are trying to get somebody on a, ahh, on a level...what am I trying to say...if I'm talking about something which is of major significance to me and I want to say how, through the cycling, for example, the creative writing that I do on a regular basis, if I'm talking about that and I don't relate just how important it is to me and how well I think I've done and all the rest of it, using it in straight terms I don't think I would I would get as many people who would empathise with it,

P hmmm,

Em whereas using humour I think I would get a wider range and all ages, and because everyone has had the some sort of experiences, but not everyone comes into it with the some background as what I do, so they may not be able to relate on that level, but they can relate to the isolated incident if I made it humorous.

P yep. Yep. And I'm reminded of what you said about the ahm building up- the story, and ahm, I can't remember the exact words you used, but it was in reference to the food in the back pocket.

Em Pocket, yeah?

P yeah, and it being mushy,

Em see and you remember it too.

P yeah.

Em you remember it. Because the thing about humour as well is if you use it to build, to draw a picture, to build a picture and situation around a picture then it gives people something to latch onto. And everyone remembers jokes. That's the thing, if you went 'oh, you know, there's this guy I know' now, I don't about you, but, ahm, it's the kind of thing where if somebody asks me to tell a joke, I'll go 'I don't know any'. But as soon as I hear somebody tell a one, I already, like I know what the punch line is because I've heard it before, and its familiar, and yeah, oh, you know '2 Irishmen, or what ever, walk into a bar'

P yeah

Em And its like 'oh, here we go, here's another one of those', so its something which you attach to and remember. So that's yeah, humour for me in creative writing is ahm means of expression to the general populace.

P hmmm, yep. I must say, when I was, ah, driving the other day I saw a couple of cyclists beside me with these, with their pockets stuffed full of things, and I immediately thought (Em laughs) that visual of someone reaching in and getting, you know, their fingers stuck in mushed banana.

Em (giggling) yep. See, and it makes you chuckle, even though you haven't done it yourself...

P Oh, I have in my school bag,

Em Ahhh, Ahhhhh (laughs) ok. But you know, its like, oh, yeah, bit of a chuckle and you think about it, whereas, I think if I had just gone on it straight terms and just tried to describe you know fingers getting stuck in mushy banana as a really yucky sensation, people would go 'errgh' and get turned off by it. But humour makes it light, humour makes it palatable, for any situation I think, ahm, and yeah, so therefore people remember it and find it acceptable....

P yeah....., hmmm, yes..... certainly that idea of things being light is ...

Em Oh, you could have dark humour. But the way that the actual brief that I got for this column was to make it light, and the only way I could think of to make it light is to inject humour into it.

P hmmm. Yep. Yep. So would you say its, that you use it as a tool? For that.

Em Hmm. Absolutely. Yep.

P Hmmm....I know that in our last interview you mentioned, ah, ahm, that there's an element of fabrication.

Em Hmmm.

P So the experience might be real, but you know, you just might give it, ahmm, yeah, that interested me, like, do you have any other thoughts about...

Em About fabrication...ahm, I guess it has to be fabricated, because in order to make it light and fluffy and humorous, it almost has to be larger than life in a lot of ways, so just to say a simple little fact, isolated in itself, isn't always humorous, you have to give some framework to it.

P yeah.

Em And that framework may or may not be true. But that's where that fabrication comes in, and I think that's where ahm, you know, a comedian's skill comes in, is that he's seen something, looks at the kernel of something which makes him grin or smile or something and he goes how can I work that into a story? And then he fabricates around that, ahm, so yeah, its like, yeah, so he has a little kernel of a smile and he builds a construct around it to make it a story which everyone will laugh at, you know, or even, you know if somebody else smiles at all, then, at what I write, then that's, mission successful and achieved.

P yeah.

Em yeah.

P that's what you're looking for..

Em yeah, but the other thing about fabrication is ahm, you know, even things that amuse me they might be funny to me, but ahm, unless people know the context and the background, its not funny to them either. So, therefore, the fabrication is about setting that, even if it is within the confines of the 400 words, ahm, story, you know, column, its setting the construct.

P yep. Yep. And is that a creative aspect to the work as well?

Em oh, absolutely, because,

P fabricating the context...

Em absolutely, and that's where the creative aspect comes in, because like 'how do I set this up so that the punch line comes off?' that's what it is. So, if you, if you dissect humour, I mean that's my experience anyway, I don't know other people's take on it, but it all leads up to a punch line, doesn't it. you can't just leave a punch line hanging there, its not funny. It's like: What does that mean? It's just a throw away line. Unless you happen to be incredibly gifted and the way you string two words together or three words together (I start to laugh) in a sentence is hilarious which most people find very hard to do. So its all about the framework with the punch line sitting at the apex, you know. And then its 'oh, I get that'.

P yeah, yep.. yeah cause I noticed...that reminds me of, of ahm...you know, being set up, you know what I mean, with practical jokes..

Em oh, oh right, yes.

P I guess it might...I don't know, can, well this is my idea, but ahm, setting up and building up a scene, can that be related to setting up a practical joke?

Em yeah it could be...but I think if you think about the slap stick comedies and the black and white comedies, Charlie Chaplin, or whoever he is, yeah, the thing is, a lot of it is immediate. Like visual humour is a lot easier to do without a framework, without a background, but written humour, I think you need to have that construct, the, you know, the fabrication around it. Because visual gags you know you can trip someone as they're walking past, you can poke someone in the eye, you know, you can do the 3 Stooges thing, ahm, and that's funny because you can see it, but if you have no background, no framework at all then you're just left with, as it said, that punch line just hanging in the air and it doesn't mean anything. So..

P So in terms of creative writing you need to, you need to work at

Em you need to set the scene...

P yeah. And ahm, and I guess that's, well, I know last time you were relating humour being found in the timing and the rhythm of the piece,

Em yep,

P and I imagine, yeah, that that's part of the creative process as well, yeah not only to the fabricated construct around, but then addressing its flow,

Em yeah, yeah, exactly, its like, well, you might have the background. And, but the thing is you don't want to have a story set something up so long and so laboriously that by the time you get to the punch line you've lost the context because the journey was so long that you forgot where you started. And there's nothing to hook it back into where you started it from. Ahym, so there is a lot to do in the rhythm, the timing, the delivery,

P Yeah.

Em and that's like it is for written as it is for, you know, oral. Yeah.

P So there's two words that keep coming back to me: The idea of it being immediate, and also the idea of, the idea of the hook. I guess, so I'll, do you want to talk a bit more about the idea of it, the humour, being immediate? Is that just specific about visual humour? Or ...well you were saying, I think you were talking about slapstick humour and you were saying that the humour is quite immediate.

Em it can be. It can be but then visual humour is the same as, ahm, written humour in that, the hook, or whatever, the punch line is because something's repetitive, or it can be situational, its like you know somebody throws down a, ahm, banana skin and that in itself doesn't mean anything but later on when they've got the chase scene and they come across the banana skin and they skid and they go 'whoops!' here we go, and they fall on their back, that's when it hooks into the previous scene. So, you know, that's something, like, you know, and in writing its exactly the same you set the scene, you throw down the banana skin and 5 minutes later you trip on it. So, it's that's again timing and delivery, but it's also hooking things back into something, which makes it funny. Because the two separate incidents don't actually mean anything, in isolation, it's only when they're related to each other that you actually get the humour out of it.

P Yep. Hmm... And I find, well, I mean that reminds me of your other piece that did that you mentioned last time, about going for a warm up ride, and then, but you don't know it's a warm up ride, you know and so you sort of get hooked at the end because you realise that was only the 8km warm up. (Em laughs)

Em Yeah. Exactly so its like you're setting the scene and then you tie it back in, But again that's more that's not quite, yeah, it is, it isn't, that kind of device of humour is more again, self depreciation humour, and just the fact that someone can relate to it, so there's not there's no hook there, that's just immediate, ahm, it all comes down to expectation, what people's expectation of the norm is. But you lead them along the path and then suddenly 'Whoops!' you've totally derailed, or you've fallen off the track, or yep you do the unexpected, that's what makes it funny, because people are merrily being led along and then suddenly it's 'oh, hang on a minute!'

P so part of fabricating the set up is creating expectation then?

Em yes. Yes. That's how you build the humour. Is frame expectation of normality then you twist it, somehow. It's like, 'oh, ok.'

P yeah, yeah, yeah. I think ahm, that's certainly been my enjoyment of humour.

Em yep. I think written humour is harder, because, I find anyway, ahm, well, written or spoken humour is harder than visual humour because you've got to give a lot more clues, and cues, I guess, but you have to be so much more descriptive about what it is because somebody might be visualising this and they just don't get it. But you have to be really clear and you have to use, ahm, things which they can relate to, as I was saying before, but if I'm talking about, ahm, yeah, instead of it being a chocolate bar, or a banana, in the back of their pockets, which everyone knows automatically that it's going to be mushy or the chocolate's going to melt, if I were to make some reference to something, some sort of power bar or something which they have no idea what it is, then they don't get it, the humour's completely lost. That's what you also get, like, cultural differences coming in, where you just, you wouldn't get the humour, like visual or, like one time I was describing when my seat post kept going down and I was riding down the street looking like a 9 year old on their BMX, with my knees around my ears, right? Unless you know the BMX is a type of a bike and that kids ride them you wouldn't get that humour, so again its cultural and its also setting the scene, like I talked about the fact that my seat was all the way down, flush with the frame, and all this sort of stuff, so people were getting an idea of where I'm going with it, but they still, to make it really funny, to actually complete that humour, they need to have the reference point.

P yep. So would you say...yeah.

Em so I'm actually setting an ex, I'm depending on their, ahm, familiarity with the same culture...with my text. That's what I'm depending on to make it funny. As well, that's a big part of it.

P so in the process of building in

Em the fabrication and the context I'm also depending on culture.

P yep.

Em so that means that my, my writing can only be funny to a specific audience, in a lot of ways. I mean it fine, I mean, anyone who's ever been on a bike can relate to this, but even if you've never been on a bike, it's not like I'm writing about nuclear physics. Where only people who understand atomic theory could understand and find it funny.

P yeah. So when you're, when you're in the creative process do you try and draw on a broad frame of reference to do that? To build in the references that you think people can relate to?

Em well, yeah, I do, but I do it unwittingly, like

P okay

Em because that's basically just, ahm, how I write. I am a product of my culture the same as anyone else who's reading the things would be.

P Yeah.

Em so, ahm, yeah, so I don't have to necessarily, ahm,.....(I am fiddling with the recorder, distracting Em from her train of thought)...I've forgotten what I was going to say now...

P you are a product of your

Em yeah, I'm a product of my culture as much as anyone else who's reading it, so I write from my experience, I don't research anything when I'm writing this stuff, because it is supposed to be about experiential, and its supposed to be first person when I'm writing this.

P yep. Hmmm.

(Long pause here)

P so that broad frame of reference comes naturally?

Em yeah.

P and you don't think about it too much?

Em yep.

(another long pause)

P hmmm. And so in the past, you know your previous creative process, ahm, how do you choose, oh, you've usually got a context or you're given a brief, so the brief says you have to...follow this particular subject matter? Is that right

Em like when I'm writing the columns? Ah, not necessarily. Like I can choose what I want to write about.

P oh, ok

Em ahm, I mean that's not there in the creative writing I've done, ahm. I've done some creative writing, like poetry, that's sometimes funny, or I remember once I wrote, when I was living in Amsterdam, and I was friends with this girl, and ahm, I'd just gone on this special diet where I couldn't have any sugar, I couldn't have any dairy I couldn't, you know, it was a strict diet, and I'm writing about how ahm, I mean it was just driving me crazy and I was just writing about how I was sucking the rind of, ahm, you know, salty licorice, and people who were, you know, ahm, you know here's this sugar-deprived girl who was roaming the Aldeheinz stores, which is the supermarkets there, all this sort of stuff, and the evil sugar fairy came along and tempted her with her, with (Em laughs) with panecooke, and ah, olebollen (I laugh to) and all those things, and you're laughing because you know it because your Dutch, but anyone else will go 'what the hell?'

P mmm, yep, yep

Em and that's the thing, again its cultural.

P yep.

Em and that was just me making light of the situation around me. Ahm, you know and pulling references of things that I see that only she would understand and only she would find funny. 'Cause look at 'in jokes'. You can't afford to have 'in jokes' when you're writing to a larger populace, a larger audience, 'cause they just don't work.

P yep. Yep. But that specific creative writing was just for yourself?

Em yeah, it was just an email to her. We were just, ahm, we were just, ahm, just having a bit of a laugh, you know, and, ahm, just two Australians stuck in Amsterdam not understanding, you know, the cultural shock and all the rest of it, and ah, you know, just taking the piss out of the place we were in really. (Em chuckles) it's not very nice really. But yeah, and that's what we would do.

P yeah. And so can you, I mean, what would be some of the differences between the creative writing you do in a column and the creative writing you do say with friends? Would you say that one difference is that you have 'in jokes' on the one hand,

Em And I'm a lot less, ahm, restrained. Like I don't feel someone's going to edit me. And I don't have a word limit, which makes it really hard as well. Ok the other thing about humour is that sometimes you need the space to develop it, like to set that construct and the humour. Whereas if you know you've got a 300 word limit, and a deadline you can't be, I couldn't, I can't be as funny as I want, or it's a real craft to be as funny as I can be within

P those parameters

Em exactly, within those parameters. Whereas when I'm writing for myself it's just like, 'oh, yeah, let's set this up properly, lets, you know, flow it back, let's weave it all around a bit, and then eventually I can massage it into something that's funny.

P yeah. So would you say then, there's, there's a bit of freedom involved in, or freedom helps the process of...

Em Oh, absolutely. Of course it does. But if you're a stand up comedian and you have to be politically correct, even though you find it hilarious, you're not allowed to say it. There's censorship. You know, and the ahm, the, I find in the

way I phrase things within the column if I know it is going to be read by little kids (m starts laughing) I mean I actually got, I actually got a letter back from one of the readers, which is really nice to know that someone's actually reading it, but they were complaining about the fact that I said 'man, what a bitch of a head wind'. They were complaining about that. So I've been so careful, about the way that I construct my sentences, what I say, my expressions. Because sometimes, sometimes just natural colloquialisms would help to set that construct, or to be funny, but I can't do that, I can't go there because of censorship, so I find that in my humour it has to be very mainstream humour, as well, very, you know, nicely nicely.

P can you talk a bit more about that? You know, how that feels for you?

Em well, what it means is that I'm trying to be funny, but I'm trying to serve a purpose in the funniness, and I'm not really just being my natural, cheeky self. So, anything that appeals to me in that regard I really have to go 'alright, well here's the kernel of what I have to say, now let's make it palatable'.

P hmmm.

Em more homogenised.

P okay. Yeah.

Em so that it can, it can be acceptable for the mainstream and not offend anybody. Not that I'm out to offend anyone, but things that I find funny generally are, but, ahm, the other thing about the column as well is that its supposed to encourage women, but not offend men. So some of the things I would love so say... (I start to laugh) some of things I would love to say is how, you know, I'm cycling along and I get to the lights and I pull up against this guy who's, you know, who's in his little tight lycra, who thinks he's hot shit, on his, you know, road bike which cost him five grand, more than my car (I laugh), you know, and he's there and he looks over at me and you know I practically drag him off at the lights, you know, he had to do a double take, because, you know, I'm keeping pace with him and, I'm a chick, and I'm on a mountain bike, you know? (I laugh in appreciation) and it's like, I can't say things like that, even though I find them funny. I find that hilarious, that guys get so offended, and then go steaming off up the hill, trying to out-pace me because it's like 'oh my god, it's a girl on a mountain bike, I'm not going to be outrun by her' so its those little things which, you know, my, like the things that I find funny is human nature. And I can't go there in the column because its not socially acceptable to do that, or that's not the purpose of the column, so I'm finding that a bit of self censorship creeps into it, as well. So even though something's funny I can't express it, so I have to find a way of making it nice.

P yep. Yep. So you're saying in those parameters you don't want to, ahm, exclude anybody

Em no, or offend anybody, or alienate anybody. So yeah.

P and with your personal creative writing...

Em oh, yeah (laughs). Ooh, the sky's the limit (laughing still and I laugh too). Watch out boys (we laugh together again). I mean its not malicious or vindictive at all, but its ahm, yeah I just say what I feel like, yeah, and if that's what, you know, occurs to me, then that's what I'm going to say.

P so, yeah, I mean, your audience is much, would you say your audience is much more specific then and you trust your audience a bit more whether it be a friend or yourself, or..

Em exactly, when I'm doing my own creative writing.

P yeah, yeah.

Em anythingopen slather.

P and, ahm, it there more, ahm silly question, is there more enjoyment...

Em ahm, its, yeah its, I enjoy the ? of the challenge. I ? ? those boundaries. So there's that enjoyment, but yeah, I , of course no one wants to be curtailed in their expressions, so the fact that I can just make fun of somebody without you know, I mean I sound like I do that all the time, I don't. I really don't, even if I'm writing for my own, you know, whatever, but it's nice to know that I can if I want to and go there, I can be naughty. And that's the thing as well, there's the naughtiness or the cheekiness aspect of me. Like I can be really crude sometimes, as a form of humour, that's another form of humour, but I certainly don't do that in the column. But for the creative process that's ah, yeah, cool, do it, like there's no holding back. But something that, if I something like 'ohhh, yeah, ok, let's be naughty, let's be cheeky', then just go for it from there.

P talk a bit more about that. You know that process of, ahhm,

Em being cheeky?

P yeah, something fiery, and something, you know, when you have it there...

Em (sighs) ahm, well, its, its, sort of like, things that spark my mind, to write it down, its either gonna come from some sort of stimulus, like I can sit down a just write, if I'm given a topic or if I'm given you know, a project or something, I sit down and write. But the things that I enjoy writing is, not so much stream of consciousness stuff, but its things where something's happened, it's a situation that's happened that I want to relate, or I want to record, and in those situations the things that will spark it off are usually funny, and sometimes they're sad, or they're, you know, angst ridden, or whatever, then I write poetry, but if it's something funny then I want to be able to record it in writing and not have any restrictions.

P yeah. Yep. Yep. And then...(tape runs out)

APPENDIX 4: CLUSTERING OF KEYWORDS AND PHRASES AND IMAGINATIVE VARIATIONS BASED ON DISCUSSIONS WITH EM

Cluster title: *I'm using it as a communication device*

Whereas humour, most people can relate to. So it's a bit of a leveller.

It draws people to

The things I can express through the creative process if I use humour as a medium then I know that it will be more readily acceptable to the mainstream.

Makes it more enjoyable for me but also it makes it more enjoyable for the reader, the reason I'm using it as a communication device is because I would want to make something, ahm, you know, acceptable so that everybody, so that they can understand, so to do that it's humour, and grab their attention.

That's what it means to me, a communication device.

Whereas using humour I think I would get a wider range and all ages,

But they can relate to the isolated incident if I made it humorous.

Humour for me in creative writing is ahm means of expression to the general populace,

Humour makes it light; humour makes it palatable, for any situation

So therefore people remember it and find it acceptable....

P: would you say that you use it as a tool? EM: Hmm. Absolutely. Yep.

If somebody else smiles at all, then, at what I write, then that's, mission successful and achieved.

It's entertaining

That kind of device of humour is more again, self depreciation humour, and just the fact that someone can relate to it

I'm a product of my culture as much as anyone else who's reading it, so I write from my experience

I find in the way I phrase things within the column if I know it is going to be read by little kids

What it means is that I'm trying to be funny, but I'm trying to serve a purpose in the funniness, and I'm not really just being my natural, cheeky self. So, anything that appeals to me in that regard I really have to go 'alright, well here's the kernel of what I have to say, now let's make it palatable'

But things that I find funny generally are, but, ahm, the other thing about the column as well is that it's supposed to encourage women, but not offend men.

Imaginative Variation

Em uses humour as a tool, a device with which to communicate to readers. By injecting humour into her writing Em feels others will be able to relate to her experience. Through humour Em also hopes that the story becomes acceptable, memorable, understandable and enjoyable.



Cluster title: *They can relate to that experience*

relating to it and not wanting to relate to it.

glad you aren't in yourself.

it's relief or disbelief

Thank God it's not me

because it ties it all back

It relates everything

people can relate to it

getting it

And they can relate to it

a way of finding a common ground in expression

whereas humour, most people can relate to. So it's a bit of a leveler.

using it in straight terms I don't think I would I would get as many people who would empathise with it,

but they can relate to the isolated incident if I made it humorous.

it makes you chuckle, even though you haven't done it yourself...

QUOTE: distill down the essence of humour for me it's the fact that you have to relate to something that people already understand and know or can build it up so that they can relate to that experience.

QUOTE: I'm depending on their, ahm, familiarity with the same culture

even things that amuse me they might be funny to me, but ahm, unless people know the context and the background, its not funny to them... the fabrication is about setting that

two separate incidents don't actually mean anything, in isolation, it's only when they're related to each other that you actually get the humour out of it

that kind of device of humour is more again, self depreciation humour, and just the fact that someone can relate to it

you have to be really clear and you have to use, ahm, things which they can relate to

If I'm talking about...something which they have no idea what it is, then they don't get it, the humour's completely lost

that means that my, my writing can only be funny to a specific audience

anyone who's ever been on a bike can relate to this

it's not like I'm writing about nuclear physics. Where only people who understand atomic theory could understand and find it funny

it is supposed to be about experiential

look at 'in jokes'. You can't afford to have 'in jokes' when you're writing to a larger populace, a larger audience, 'cause they just don't work

laughing at other people in a way that says 'thank god, that's not me'

'oh, thank god.'

Because it's yuk!

you're thankful you're not in that situation

can relate to it

'Oohh, been there.' (laughs) 'Sooo glad I'm not there again'.

You can relate

experience of mistaking wasabi for avocado dip.

*See? You just have to mention it and everybody laughs because they **know**, they **know** the pain.*

People know it

'this isn't what I expected it to be'

'oh, my God, don't do that'

you're thankful you're not in that situation

everyone cringes at, and yet they laugh at

QUOTE: distill down the essence of humour for me it's the fact that you have to relate to something that people already understand and know or can build it up so that they can relate to that experience.

people have to feel comfortable to laugh at something, or its antithesis of that is that they have to feel discomfort to laugh at something, because that's more of a defence mechanism.

something that's reminded me of something else

my sister and I just generally laugh at my mum (laughs loudly and then I laugh too). Actually we do. We would just look at each other and go 'oh, God' and just laugh. Actually we do.

or sometimes it's like 'Oh, god help us if we turn into that we're dead, kind of laughter' the doom factor.

Imaginative Variation

Relating to others through H, Em is making a connection, using H to engender empathy. Getting others to laugh with her **and** at her, requires her to seek out experiences she feels others will be able to relate to. These experiences are often examples of her own fallibility, humanness, where as an observer Em has found H and suspects that when her fallibility is described from the observer's viewpoint, others will also find H.

Sometimes the relating happens through cultural references that Em expects others to share.

and the shared experience of having ridden a bike

An element of relating is a sense of relief that it is not oneself. The objectivity of the observer, not the subject, provides distance, affording one some appreciation for one's own human fallibility.

One can imagine pain and discomfort but with distance can appreciate the humour in the surprise, the mishap, the mistake, the disjunction.

I think there is an element of incredulity here leading onto another theme of Em's. But there is also the idea of engaging people's imagination – 'imagine that!'

Relating through humour somehow links in with memory for Em. Perhaps the connection through H makes something meaningful and relevant, that once you relate to something it is meaningful and relevant, but this is perhaps another research project: What does it mean to relate to something?

An example of relating: sisters relating with one another about the quirkiness of their mother, this shared understanding or perspective or point of view.



Cluster title: *It's something which you attach to and remember*

see and you remember it too.

you remember it.

And everyone remembers jokes.

*I know what the punch line is because I've heard it before, and its familiar,
its something which you attach to and remember.*

so therefore people remember it and find it acceptable....

absolutely no relevance to what you felt at the time

I hated geometry

it had absolutely no relevance to my life. I couldn't hinge it on anything else.

made it hilarious, I might have learnt some geometry



Cluster title: *I'm depending on their familiarity with the same culture*

cultural differences coming in, where you just, you wouldn't get the humour

Unless you know a BMX is a type of a bike and that kids ride them you wouldn't get that humour

Cross-cultural experiences

its cultural and its also setting the scene

to make it really funny, to actually complete that humour, they need to have the reference point

I'm depending on their, ahm, familiarity with the same culture

the fabrication and the context I'm also depending on culture

that means that my, my writing can only be funny to a specific audience

*it's not like I'm writing about nuclear physics. Where only people who understand atomic theory
could understand and find it funny*

I do, but I (build in cultural references) unwittingly

*I am a product of my culture the same as anyone else who's reading the thingos would be
I'm a product of my culture as much as anyone else who's reading it, so I write from my experience
and you're laughing because you know it because your dutch, but anyone else will go 'what the
hell?
and that's the thing, again its cultural
he had to do a double take, because, you know, I'm keeping pace with him and, I'm a chick, and I'm
on a mountain bike, you know
I can't say things like that, even though I find them funny. I find that hilarious, that guys get so
offended, and then go steaming off up the hill, trying to out-pace me because it's like 'oh my god,
it's a girl on a mountain bike, I'm not going to be outrun by her'
I can't go there in the column because its not socially acceptable to do that ... [I don't want to]
offend anybody, or alienate anybody.*

Imaginative Variation

Using cultural references in H can include and can exclude. Em's writing reflects her culture and she hopes her audience can relate to this i.e. that they know what a BMX is.

These cultural references also help to set the scene, draw the audience in through familiarity and create humour through being able to relate to those references.

There are some cultural references that will exclude large groups, there can be a narrowing of an audience, the more culturally specific one becomes, the extreme example of which is an 'in joke'.



Cluster title: Humour is a way of making light of the self-depreciation

looking like a little kid.

*I've looked like a fool before and probably will again
out of control, and as an adult it's incongruous*

I look bloody stupid.

I feel like an idiot

*My first thought, which is a bit frightening really, is self-depreciating humour
self-depreciation*

I had to put myself down

it's self depreciating or it's putting other people down

it's like 'ha, ha, how stupid, I would never do that'

self-depreciating

absolutely pissed myself laughing watching her

it looked stupid

is someone looking stupid humorous
it is self depreciating or
self depreciating humour
that's the self-depreciating humour that I mean
That's exactly what I mean. Setting yourself up.
putting a humorous twist on the situation
Humour is a way of making light of the self-depreciation
being critical of myself and putting a easily acceptable slant on it
self depreciation comes in
Because I'm sure it'd be me that (falls of my bike) (laughs).
amazing flip... hilarious to watch and I can imagine my friends standing there giving me a '9', '8.5'
(we both laugh) holding up score cards
I seem to be self amusing (laughs) and everyone laughs at me (laughs more) I'm the seed
somebody will laugh at me because for no apparent reason I've just burst into spontaneous mirth

Imaginative Variation

Feeling like a fool, an idiot, looking stupid, like a little kid. Em found this funny retrospectively and used the experience to provide humour for others. Such self depreciation is lightened through humour and turned into being able to laugh at yourself and one's own fallibility.



Cluster title: He knows he'll get a response from me

The guy's a senior manager (we both continue laughing) in one of the top four accounting firms and he's break-dancing in front of my desk (still laughing). What do you do with that? except laugh.
people ask 'Are you ok?' You don't seem your normal happy self'
'cause he knows that he'll get a response from me if he does it
And he feels comfortable that he can do it.
I'll just get a giggle and start giggling to myself somebody will laugh at me because for no apparent reason I've just burst into spontaneous mirth her laugh would set me off every time I'd hear it.
then they laugh . so it just feeds in on itself
my sister and I just generally laugh at my mum (laughs loudly and then I laugh too). Actually we do. We would just look at each other and go 'oh, God' and just laugh. Actually we do. That's not such a nice laughter, though. Sometimes it is, sometimes it's laughing at quirkiness, or sometimes it's like 'Oh, god help us if we turn into that we're dead, kind of laughter' the doom factor.
and you're laughing because you know it because your Dutch, but anyone else will go 'what the hell?
and pulling references of things that I see that only she would understand and only she would find funny

we were just, ahm, just having a bit of a laugh

just two Australians stuck in Amsterdam not understanding, you know, the cultural shock

just taking the piss out of the place we were in

P you trust your audience a bit more whether it be a friend or yourself, or?.. Em exactly, when I'm doing my own creative writing

P you don't want to, ahm, exclude anybody? Em no, or offend anybody, or alienate anybody. So yeah

P and with your personal creative writing? ...Em oh, yeah (laughs). Ooh, the sky's the limit (laughing still and I laugh too). Watch out boys (we laugh together again). I mean its not malicious or vindictive at all, but its ahm, yeah I just say what I feel like, yeah, and if that's what, you know, occurs to me, then that's what I'm going to say

a way of finding a common ground in expression

look at 'in jokes'. You can't afford to have 'in jokes' when you're writing to a larger populace, a larger audience, 'cause they just don't work

I can't be as funny as I want, or it's a real craft to be as funny as I can be within those parameters what it means is that I'm trying to be funny, but I'm trying to serve a purpose in the funniness, and I'm not really just being my natural, cheeky self. So, anything that appeals to me in that regard I really have to go 'alright, well here's the kernel of what I have to say, now let's make it palatable' but things that I find funny generally are, but, ahm, the other thing about the column as well is that its supposed to encourage women, but not offend men

Imaginative Variation

Em recognises the subjective dynamic between her boss and herself that is conducive to humour: He behaves in a way that he knows will make Em laugh. There is also a 'comfortable'ness and familiarity, and knowing and a confidence that this behaviour is acceptable between them.

Laughter prompts laughter in others and/or in Em

Em and her sister share a knowing or an understanding about their mum, and they find humour in relating their shared fears about turning into their mum. Is this about trying to gain some distance?

Em tells of an experience of expecting English licorice and tasting Dutch licorice instead. Em knows I understand what a surprise this would be because I am from a Dutch family and know what a particular taste Dutch Licorice has. Here Em and I are sharing an understanding, a knowing, and I understand her expectation.

Em shared an experience with a friend which was particular to their nationality and circumstance, and in reflecting on that with her, Em made light of the experience, knowing only she could relate, generating laughter between them by 'taking the piss'. Another audience may not relate to the same humour, as it has been co-constructed and is particular to Em and her friend. Em is creating humour with another, based on the knowledge of their shared experience.

Humour here is co-constructed and informed by relationship, politics and culture. The closer the relationship the more freedom there is in expression of humour. Em can be cheeky and naughty.



Cluster title: *Evil Humour*

*Not all humour is funny and generous and is to make light of things
like teasing*

knock somebody else

it's self depreciating or it's putting other people down

laughing at other people in a way that says 'thank god, that's not me'

it's like 'ha, ha, how stupid, I would never do that'

is someone looking stupid humorous

it's laughing at others

humour for good and humour for evil (laughs). (We laugh together)

being cynical and making puns as forms of humour

Because they want to get at somebody or put them down

They use it under the guise of the pun to do it

Not all humour is funny and generous and is to make light of things

like teasing

They find it hilarious on the receiving end it deflates your self-esteem

what's really 'funny' and is it funny for everybody?

kids make fun of people with disabilities

teasing

they think it's hilarious because it makes them part of the crowd and their peer group

the butt of that joke is somebody else

that's the evil humour (laughs)

his humour isn't funny because it's annoying and immature.

it's just annoying

the point of his humour, like the essence of his humour, is teasing and annoying.

it's just annoying

the point of his humour, like the essence of his humour, is teasing and annoying.

there's good and evil humour. His is evil humour.

I just get completely turned off 'cause he's just not funny.

Imaginative Variation

Em expresses humour at the expense of others as 'evil humour'. She experiences this humour as not generous, cynical, and deflating. Em notices kids use this form of humour in order to be 'part of the crowd'. Socially it is annoying and immature and Em says it is 'just not funny'.

Em expresses humour at the expense of others as 'evil humour'. She experiences this humour as not generous, cynical, and deflating. Em notices kids use this form of humour in order to be 'part of the crowd'. Socially it is annoying and immature and Em says it is 'just not funny'.