DOES THE USE OF HUMOR AS A COPING STRATEGY AFFECT STRESSES ASSOCIATED WITH EMERGENCY WORK?

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The increased concern over the well-being of emergency workers has been demonstrated at an organizational level by the implementation of formal critical incident stress debriefing programs in recent years. As well as recognizing the need for an organizational response to stress management, it is also important to recognize that individuals will have their own patterns of coping strategies that may or may not fit in with organizational expectations. In the emergency context there is relatively little documentation on the nature or effectiveness of these strategies. The present paper examines one coping strategy, humor, which is frequently mentioned by emergency workers and researchers as a common and presumably helpful strategy, but one for which there is very little systematic data. Interviews with emergency workers revealed a common belief that humor helps mitigate stress, but there was no association between quantitative measures of humor and stress in the present data. Emergency organizations may be uncomfortable with the overt acknowledgement of humor in the emergency context, but this paper suggests that it is generally used sensitively and within the emergency group only. It is possible that an alternative research approach is needed to further understand positive coping strategies such as humor.

In recent years there has been an increase in the concern for the welfare of disaster and emergency workers (e.g., Mitchell 1988; Raphael 1986). At the organizational level this concern is manifested by the introduction of mitigating programs, wherein the personal reactions to the trauma of stressful, “critical” incidents are ventilated with the aim of preventing the development of longer term stress reactions. The willingness of organizations to introduce
these programs is laudable, especially given our current lack of knowledge about the extent of the problem of debilitating stress reactions. But alleviation of symptoms of emergency worker stress, as well as being humane, is also practical in terms of human service resource allocation and the legal and practical aspects of rehabilitation.

Estimates of “disorder” in emergency workers following exposure to trauma, or critical incidents, can vary considerably, with extreme estimates varying from virtually none to virtually all affected. Some more moderate examples follow. Gersons (1989) recently estimated that 46% of police officers demonstrated symptoms satisfying criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after shooting incidents, with another 46% demonstrating some of these symptoms. Duckworth (1986) reported that 35% of police officers satisfied criteria for PTSD one month after involvement in the 1985 Bradford Stadium fire in England. In this specific example, all but one of those who presented for counselling appear to have been asymptomatic at nine months. Unfortunately however, no follow-up evidence is presented. As these studies are not strictly longitudinal, it could be argued that symptomatology predated or was independent of exposure to trauma, and there is some tentative evidence that this could be the case (McFarlane 1988). Against this, Pendleton and associates (1989) have reported that, using measurement in non-traumatic epochs, both US police and US firefighters demonstrated fewer signs of strain than municipal council workers (Pendleton et al. 1989). There is the possibility that police and firefighters are “hardier” than most, as they choose to be involved in their work in the knowledge that they may encounter critical incidents. This last assumption remains speculative at this stage.

Estimates of disability following critical incidents cannot be based solely on references to traumatic stress disorders and related criteria, as these disorders represent only one type of response to stressors. Depression, for example, is another type of response. There is suggestive evidence that individual factors such as coping style will determine reactions to stressors, even traumatic ones (e.g., Gibbs 1989; James 1988). This is a complex issue, and needs to be treated sensitively as referral to individual characteristics may be associated with personal “blame” for breakdown in coping. Again, there are legal and practical implications if individual
characteristics are seen as determinants in the development of stress disorders. That is, the organization no longer "owns" the problem; the individual does. The most likely model for the effects of critical incidents is one which acknowledges that the more severe the stressor, the less important individual characteristics will be in determining who is affected.

Given the variety of occupational stressors faced by emergency service workers, it is relevant to consider responses to a range of stressors and not only the more severe ones. Indeed, mild stressors may be just as debilitating as severe ones if there is poor self-esteem and little emotional support (DeLongis et al. 1988). In the organizational context, while there is growing official support for individuals exposed to severe stressors there appears to be little documented support for the more regular, but less severe stressors. One way this support could occur is by recognizing the importance of coping strategies as a means of mitigating the effects of stress and introducing some formal mechanisms for training and developing these strategies, independently of any specific traumatic incidents.

EVALUATING HUMOR AS A COPING STRATEGY

Humor is one of many coping strategies which represents an important way of mastering or dealing with stress. It continues to be regarded as one of the highest forms of coping (Freud 1905; Vaillant 1977; Andrews et al. 1989), and recent studies suggest that it moderates the relationship between stressful events and psychological distress (e.g., Martin and Lescourt 1983; Nezu et al. 1988). Given the concern over the development of stress disorders in emergency service workers, it is appropriate to investigate this important coping strategy. Another compelling reason to examine humor further, but one which is less well documented, is that humor is a common worker response in the rescue or emergency context. Durham and colleagues have provided results indicating that humor was frequently cited as a common coping strategy when embedded in a long checklist of other strategies (Durham et al. 1985; McCammon et al. 1988). Many studies on coping strategies ignore humor altogether, or mention it in passing without offering any data. Despite this, there is a common belief that humor helps. In both formal and informal conversations with emergency service workers the author has noted that humor is nearly always men-
tioned as a way of coping in the emergency context. But despite even formal references to humor in rescue and emergency research (e.g., Durham et al. 1985; Shepherd 1989), there is virtually no systematic information on the effectiveness of humor in mitigating the effects of exposure to stress and trauma.

The issues being investigated in the present paper are therefore:

1. What coping styles do emergency workers use in general activity and is the use of humor associated with a particular coping style?

2. To what extent do emergency workers report the use of humor specifically in or after an emergency event, and is this use of humor associated with the level of stress resulting from emergency work?

It is normally appropriate to provide at least an operational definition of the main concept to be examined in research, but there is no truly satisfactory definition of humor. Indeed, the phenomenon is so complex that no single definition could suffice and a full investigation of the definitional problem is far beyond the scope of the present paper. The term "humor" can describe various types of stimuli or responses (e.g., jokes, cartoons, witticisms, laughter). In general terms however, humor can be regarded as a process "initiated by a humor stimulus, such as a joke or cartoon, and terminating with some response indicative of pleasure, such as laughter" (Godkewitsch 1976, p. 117). A detailed consideration of the theories of humor is also beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, it is appropriate to establish a theoretical rationale for examining the use of humor in the emergency context. Examination of the range of theories of humor (e.g., Haig 1988; Holland 1982; Koestler 1964) reveals two recurring assumptions that are of special interest for the purpose of the present paper:

1. Humor provides some form of tension release.

2. Humor allows a re-interpretation of a given situation or event.

As these assumptions indicate, humor has both physical and cognitive components. It seems reasonable to expect that if humor has an effect on stress, this effect will occur at both a physiological and a psychological level. Of course, both physiological and psychological functioning are relevant to any investigation of stress
responses, but they are additionally important in the often highly charged atmosphere of emergency work. In this frame work, the effects of humor may be predicted in terms of points one and two above.

**Prediction**: In a rescue or emergency context, humor could provide a reduction in potentially debilitating physiological arousal as well as help the worker cognitively manage (or "re-frame") any overwhelming thoughts associated with the situation.

In this way, humor could provide conditions which facilitate performance at the emergency scene. It is also likely that reduction in arousal and cognitive reframing are important in the aftermath phases, as many of the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder or critical incidence stress can be classified as either physical or cognitively based. Theoretically at least, there is considerable scope for humor to function as a "healthy" coping strategy.

A problem which can arise, however, is that humor may induce feelings of guilt in some people. The extent of this would depend on individual differences, and also on the nature of the humor and how sensitively it was employed. Another important factor would relate to group norms, and in emergency work the socialization of the group to accept humor as appropriate in the emergency context would be especially relevant. The organizational attitude to humor would also be important, if it could be made explicit. As it stands, this attitude is probably passed on informally through various aspects of the organizational structure, training programs, established protocols and the like, and may depend on the personalities of those involved. The general lack of information on humor as a positive coping strategy, and the lack of open discussion about the role of humor may also contribute to feelings of guilt. Furthermore, humor may be used to conceal anxiety rather than cope with it. In such cases, the use of humor would be associated with poorer coping skills and higher stress levels associated with emergency work, rather than the opposite.

Just as defining humor has remained difficult, the measurement of humor has long been a psychometric problem. Some researchers attempt to measure the laughter generated by humor stimuli. But even defining laughter can be difficult, and laughter does not always accompany humor. Physiological indices have been monitored in humorous and non-humorous conditions (Haig 1988;
Godkewitsch (1976), but there is no evidence as to which are most appropriate indices. Holland (1982) has recommended that humor is best understood by using qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews. This approach avoids the artificial constraints engendered by quantitative approaches, but it is more time-consuming. Wilson (1979) has argued that self-report is generally more valid than behavioural or physiological data, and that overt responses to humor are especially influenced by social-contextual factors. Of course, self-report data may also be influenced by several factors. As humor is obviously a multidimensional phenomenon, all forms and measurement strategies may prove important. For the present paper data in Study 1 were obtained from subjective scales and open-ended questionnaires, together with a number of informal interviews. Data in study 2 were obtained through formal, unstructured group interviews, and pertains to a study in progress.

**STUDY 1**

**Method**

Twenty-nine volunteer members of the New South Wales State Emergency Services (SES) participated in the study. There were 25 males and 4 females in the study. The mean age was 48 years (13 s.d.) and the mean length of experience in rescue work was 13 years (10 s.d.). Subjects completed three questionnaires:

1. **The Defensive Style Questionnaire (DSQ)** which measures general coping styles using DSM-IIIR nomenclature (Andrews et al. 1989). Four variables or factor scores were derived from responses on the DSQ: “mature,” “immature,” “neurotic” factor scores and a “humor” score. The first three labels have been provided by the designers of the DSQ; for a fuller description and justification of these labels see Andrews et al. (1989). The “humor” score measures the tendency to laugh at oneself or one’s plight in stressful situations and normally would be part of the “mature” factor score. For the purposes of the present study “humor” items made up a separate variable. All variables are measured on a 9-point scale, and the higher the final score the greater the tendency to use that type of coping or defensive style.

2. **A Rescue Work Questionnaire** designed for the present study, which asked fixed-choice and open-ended questions on humor and stresses associated with rescue and emergency work.
Rescue work stress was assessed on three 10-point rating scales for psychological, physical and family stress respectively, with 1 representing "none" and 10 representing "severe" stress. Humor frequency was measured on a 4-point scale, where 1 represented "never" and 4 represented "often."

3. The Coping Behaviour Checklist as modified by Durham and associates, for specific use with rescue and emergency workers (Durham et al. 1985).

4. There were also six informal individual interviews and relevant information obtained from these is presented below, together with the responses to the open-ended items from the Rescue Work Questionnaire.

A report on the general findings of this study has been released (Moran 1989). The present paper presents the specific responses to the humor items and associated information which were not a focus of that report.

Results

1. Defensive Style Questionnaire. Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations and intercorrelations among the four coping styles of the DSQ. Subjects scored highest on the humor score, the lowest on the "immature" factor score. The correlations between the humor score and the other three factors indicate that there is no meaningful association between the use of humor and other coping or defensive styles as measured by the DSQ. This result holds even for the "mature" defenses of which humor is normally a subset. Thus, those who are likely to use humor are not more or less likely to demonstrate mature, immature, or neurotic general defensive styles.

2. Rescue Work Questionnaire. In response to yes-no questions, 27 of 28 subjects (there was 1 missing response) reported using humor in the rescue situation, and all but one of these indicated that this "helped." Table 2 presents the mean response to the scale measuring frequency of humor in rescue situations, and the self-ratings of physical, psychological and family stress. The correlations between frequency of humor and rescue related stress are also presented. Although the direction of the correlation suggests increased use of humor is associated with lower stress scores, the correlations are so low as to be of no practical value.
Table 1  
Means, standard deviations and intercorrelations of DSQ factor scores and humor score

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Humor</th>
<th>Mature*</th>
<th>Immature</th>
<th>Neurotic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>6.21</td>
<td>5.64</td>
<td>3.19</td>
<td>4.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard deviation</td>
<td>2.19</td>
<td>1.20</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>1.04</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Intercorrelations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Humor</th>
<th>Mature*</th>
<th>Immature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Humor</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mature*</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immature</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Humor items have been removed from the set contributing to the mature factor score.

Table 2  
Means, standard deviations and intercorrelations of humor frequency and stress responses on Rescue Work questionnaire

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Humor freq.</th>
<th>Phys. stress</th>
<th>Psych. stress</th>
<th>Family stress</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>3.62</td>
<td>3.76</td>
<td>3.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard deviation</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>1.74</td>
<td>1.64</td>
<td>2.85</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Intercorrelations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Humor freq.</th>
<th>Phys. stress</th>
<th>Psych. stress</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Humor freq.</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phys. stress</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is possible that humor in the rescue context is too specific and potentially idiosyncratic to show systematic association with stress levels. That is, perhaps a general disposition to use humor (i.e., as measured by the DSQ) is more likely to be associated with reduced rescue related stress rather than use in the rescue situation per se. Table 3 presents the correlations between the DSQ scores and the stress scores. There was no association between the humor scores and the rescue related stress scores. Indeed, the immature and
Table 3
Correlations between DSQ factor and humor scores and stress responses on Rescue Work Questionnaire.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DSQ:</th>
<th>Physical stress</th>
<th>Psychol. stress</th>
<th>Family stress</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Humor</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mature*</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immature</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>0.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neurotic</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>0.35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Humor items have been removed from the set contributing to the mature factor score.

neurotic coping factors showed the strongest correlations with stress scores.

3. Coping Behaviour Checklist. The second measure of humor in the rescue or emergency context was obtained from the following item on the coping behaviour checklist: “In order to cope with the rescue work do you ... think about humorous parts of event?” Eighteen of the 29 subjects indicated they used this coping behaviour. Note that fewer subjects responded to this item which was embedded in a long list of other behaviours than responded to the yes-no humor item of the previous questionnaire. The group was divided on the basis of the humor checklist responses, and stress scores compared. The results are presented in Table 4. There were no systematic differences in the subgroups’ stress responses which could be associated with use of humor as a coping behaviour.

4. Open-ended and Interview Responses on Use of Humor. As one of the current difficulties in humor research is knowing the right questions to ask, there is a considerable scope for open-ended questionnaire items and unstructured interviews. All subjects were given the option to respond in writing to open-ended questions. The first question asked for examples of humor in a rescue context. Fifteen subjects completed this item, but only five provided any detailed descriptions. In most cases the scenarios described indicated something funny occurring rather than humor
being deliberately evoked. For example, there were references to rescue workers' appearances, with descriptions of singed hair and surprised expressions. Only one respondent described an incident in which humor was deliberately evoked to mitigate the stressfulness of the situation. The second open-ended question asked for "further information" relating to subjects' views on coping in the rescue context. Eight subjects completed this item. Four respondents referred to the positive effects of debriefing (either formal or informal), and the remainder indicated philosophical approaches that helped them cope.

The information obtained in the unstructured interviews paralleled the above. That is, subjects described very few instances of deliberate use of humor, although they generally acknowledged that humor was being used to cope with the situation. Many comments were familiar phrases such as "If you didn't laugh you'd cry." When pressed to elaborate, subjects indicated that they were sensitive to negative aspects of the situation, but their job was to help, not ponder on the situation. All these subjects indicated sensitivity and compassion while discussing humor.

Table 4
Breakdown of Stress item data across subjects who do and do not use humor in the rescue context according to Checklist responses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Subgroup 1</th>
<th>Subgroup 2</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Use humor</td>
<td>Do not use</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(N=18)</td>
<td>(N=11)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phys. stress</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mean</td>
<td>3.94</td>
<td>3.09</td>
<td>.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>s.d.</td>
<td>1.70</td>
<td>1.76</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psych. stress</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mean</td>
<td>3.72</td>
<td>3.82</td>
<td>.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>s.d.</td>
<td>1.27</td>
<td>2.18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family stress</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mean</td>
<td>3.83</td>
<td>4.18</td>
<td>.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>s.d.</td>
<td>2.88</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
STUDY 2

Method

In this study which is still continuing, 34 members of the New South Wales Fire Brigade were interviewed in a pilot survey to determine their attitudes to stressors and coping, with reference to their firefighting and associated duties. Apart from attendance at fires, Fire Brigade duties may include attendance at motor vehicle accidents and other rescue work. Most members who participated in the present interviews had participated in recent major emergencies (bus crash with 32 fatalities, building fire with 7 fatalities) as well as individual incidents.

As the purpose of the interviews was to obtain information on the perceived nature of stress and the use of particular coping methods of firefighters, it was necessary for the interviewer to remain as detached from the interview discussion as possible. Accordingly, only introductory remarks were made and occasional prompts given to direct discussion towards stress and coping. That is, as much as was possible no leading questions were asked. Accordingly, responses given are based on recall of stressors and strategies, rather than recognition of stressors and strategies provided by the investigator (as would occur, for instance, by prompting or providing a checklist or questionnaire). Interviews were conducted in six small groups.

Results

Although the issues are complex, three main strategies have been noted in this pilot data, based upon the frequent independent repetition of these strategies across interview groups. The first two refer to strategies for coping in the emergency context. The first of these strategies can be summarised as "task focussing," which refers to the common statement that "getting on with the job we were trained to do" provides a way of shutting out any unpleasantness or stress associated with the current incident. The second strategy is "humor." In these cases humor varied from witticisms, appreciation of humorous scenes or scenarios and other attempts at seeing the "lighter side." In all cases participants were able to indicate sympathy for victims and an apparently genuine concern and sensitivity for those involved in the incident. Thus, humor in
this context was never at anyone's expense. Similarly, respondents made sure that humor was only used with colleagues and out of range of hearing of others. Perhaps the most direct question asked by the interviewer (the author) occurred after humor was mentioned by one of the firefighters and discussed by the rest of the group: "Does this humor help?" In all cases participants acknowledged that it did. The third coping strategy frequently mentioned occurred after an incident when intrusive thoughts or other reminders of an incident occurred, and this was suppression. This strategy refers to the deliberate attempt to put an idea or feeling out of one's mind while acknowledging the existence of that idea or feeling. Like humor, it is considered a mature coping strategy (e.g., Vaillant 1977).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results of Study 1 provided no support for a consistent relationship between humor and other coping styles. There was also no support for any relationship between the reported use of humor and stress levels associated with rescue or emergency work. These results appear to go against the popular idea that "humor helps." The question then arises: Does humor affect stress and coping but the relationships are not being detected here, or is the well-being associated with humor merely an epiphenomenon which has no longer term impact on stress and coping behaviour? Informally, subjects supported the popular idea that humor helped in coping with rescue work. It is possible that the study failed to find other evidence for this because of a relatively small sample size combined with a small real effect size. That is, the relationship between humor and functioning may be a real but small one. Other factors may be more salient in the development of stress symptoms and coping strategies (e.g., identification with victim, nature of the social crisis occasion, previous stressors). The average level of stress was reasonably low in this group at the time of measurement. Longitudinal data may reveal changes in stress levels due to increased exposure to stressors, thus providing a more sensitive test of the differential effectiveness of humor and other coping behaviours.

Alternatively, there may be a strong relationship between humor and coping but the measurement or observation of humor is highly dependent on the immediacy of the event. That is, humor
may need to be observed at the time it occurs, rather than reported some time later. It is often noted that humor is an ephemeral phenomenon, which would prevent it from being readily transferred to a formal assessment situation. It is important, therefore, that future studies of humor examine behaviour in the rescue or emergency situation if this is at all possible. The same argument holds for observing the stressfulness of the situation. By observing humor in situ, several variables which are not readily delineated on paper may be noted (e.g., appropriateness of humor, group involvement, concomitant signs of coping).

It is also possible, of course, that the popular conception of humor as an effective, mature coping strategy is simply wrong. Given that humor is complex and multidimensional, it seems likely that humor will not always be a mature response to a stressful situation. Similarly, not all would agree that humor is "healthy." Kubie (1971) has suggested that humor prevents the individual dealing with anxiety, and it is more important to face the anxiety than suppress it with humor. Indeed, the deliberate evocation of humor in therapy is considered an indulgence. In the emergency context, Mitchell has referred to the "excessive use of humor" as a "tell-tale sign of distress" (Mitchell 1988, p. 45). Given the problems in defining humor, it might be more fruitful to try to categorise humor subtypes. It certainly seems reasonable to assume that there will be various types of humor in the emergency context, and that some may represent more mature or healthy ways of dealing with the situation than others. To some extent these views have been echoed in a recent debate on humor and emergency work. In an article entitled "Why do Police Officers Laugh at Death?" a police sergeant and psychologist argued that humor arose from a need to hide one's feeling from colleagues (Joyce 1989). That is, humor was seen as a way of "saving face," and thus represented a response to the social demands of the crisis event. In a subsequent issue, an ambulance worker countered that humor was not used in this way, but as a means of preventing intense negative reactions overwhelming the worker and disrupting effective functioning: "We love doing our job ... and crying does not seem to help us do it better, whereas laughing does" (Steele 1989, p. 488). To that writer, humor was a healthy and practical coping strategy. A third contributor, a mother of a police officer, highlighted the negative consequences of humor, arguing that it provides such an effective
defense against the anxiety produced by police and emergency work that many individuals deny the need for assistance or counselling following stressful encounters (Kingswood 1989). According to this last view, humor suppresses normal reactions and must be considered an unhealthy coping strategy. The above exchange of views indicates that humor in the emergency context cannot be regarded as unequivocally good or bad. More information on the way humor is used and the level of functioning of those who use it is required.

Data from the second study support the notion that humor is a common coping strategy in the emergency context and that it is not associated with an insensitive or uncaring attitude. It is used as a means of coping with current stressors, and in this way it allows rescue and emergency workers to perform tasks that might at times otherwise overwhelm them. At least this is the view of those who report that humor helps. But many factors remain unanswered about the nature and use of humor in stressful and potentially horrific circumstances. Until these are answered emergency organizations may choose to remain silent on the use of humor by their workers. Organizations may be threatened by the use of humor, as it might generalize from emergency sites to humor aimed at the organizational structure, organizational culture, and other internal administrative practices. It is quite likely that this occurs already.

Masten (cited in Martin 1989) has noted that children from high stress families were more competent if they scored high on humor use. A similar effect might occur within organizations. Thus, if the organization is already stressed, humor may actually help individuals function within that organization. Humor may also provide a way of challenging official guidelines without attacking the organization (Mulkay 1988, p. 83). Furthermore, institutionalized joking may enable participants to engage in collaborative activities which are critical for the existing structure (Mulkay 1988, p. 153). That is, humor may go beyond individual coping and help the group (or organization) cope. Obviously, these claims would need to be examined in the specific emergency organization context, but at first glance it would seem that organizations need not assume that humor would be a negative influence on structure and authority.

A final point should be made here. It is often the case that emergency work has the potential to be dangerous, threatening
and traumatic. But it is not always so, and even when individuals are placed in dangerous or stressful environments it cannot be assumed that they will be anxious or upset (Idzikowski and Baddeley 1983). Furthermore, the emphasis on the effects of negative events is often at the expense of research into positive events. It may be the case that humor among emergency workers comprises a positive event, and that it exerts its effect this way. That is, humor may not mitigate the effects of negative events but introduce a positive event into the lives of these workers. Reich and Zautra (1988) have commented on the scarcity of research on the effect of positive events on stress, distress and other indices of coping. After reviewing the available literature, they conclude that the study of positive events is “ripe with the possibility of understanding peoples lives” and that positive events “should be moved to the center of current and future theory, research, and practice” (Reich and Zautra 1988, p. 175). This certainly presents a challenge to researchers who have focussed on negative events in the past. It also presents a challenge to emergency organizations to acknowledge the importance of positive factors such as humor in the training, development, and well being of their workers.

REFERENCES


