

Banter and beyond: The role of humor in addressing gendered organizational tensions and belonging within the UK Fire and Rescue Service

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Abstract

This article explores the role of humor, specifically banter, in addressing gendered organizational tensions within the UK Fire and Rescue Service during a period of modernizing change. Such tensions reflect who holds authority and who is deemed to belong, and we explore how banter is used to both contest and confirm authority associated with the formal rank system and the informal, masculinist ideal-typical worker in this context. We discuss banter's various roles as a cohering mode of humorous workplace communication, one that can reduce tension and consolidate authority and belonging, as well as its boundary setting, testing, and crossing capacities. In terms of the latter, we ask whether banter can genuinely trouble masculinist organizational norms. We conclude that specific humorous episodes that go "beyond banter" create particular ambivalence, but their impact is significantly limited by widespread discursive acceptance of banter as a central and permissible communication mode in the Service's culture.

KEYWORDS

banter, discourse, Fire and Rescue Service, gender, humor

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1 | INTRODUCTION

In the context of widespread legislation and organizational policies mandating equality, diversity, and inclusion, research has increasingly focused on the “informal,” context-specific, often micro-level factors that continue to characterize workplace inequality, homogeneity, segregation, and exclusion (Acker, 2006; Ward & Winstanley, 2006; Watts, 2007; Wright, 2016). In traditional male-dominated settings, it has been argued that such “informal gendered practices have particular power to significantly affect the day-to-day experience of women who are in a minority” (Wright, 2016, p. 348), as well as members of other under-represented minoritized groups (Baigent, 2001; Monaghan, 2002). Two organizational features have been noted as characteristic of informal practices producing negative experiences and outcomes for women. First, the presence of a strong, informal ideal-typical worker that displays key features of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005; Monaghan, 2002; Perrott, 2019), and second, the (often co-located) presence of a strong regime of homosocial bonding behaviors that is both a cause and effect of masculine power (Gregory, 2009; Monaghan, 2002); most notable here are particular bonding activities related to workplace humor generally, and banter specifically.

In many traditional working-class masculinist organizations (Monaghan, 2002, p. 509), the ideal-typical worker provides a hegemonic masculine standard that is marked by core characteristics, including physical activity, fitness and power, risk-taking, courage, stoicism, and comparative emotional control (Acker, 2006; Connell, 2005). The presence of a strong ideal-typical worker and the role it plays in securing occupational identity for a workplace's traditional incumbents, while excluding nontraditional incumbents, has been highlighted in several male-dominated sectors, including security (Monaghan, 2002), construction (Hanna et al., 2020; Wright, 2016), transport (Wright, 2016) and, the focus of this article, the Fire and Rescue Service (Baigent, 2001; Eriksen, 2019; Perrott, 2019; Tyler et al., 2019; Ward & Winstanley, 2006). Within masculinist occupations, both working-class and beyond, it is commonly understood that workers who do not align to the ideal-type experience exclusion by dint of the over-arching presence of the ideal, and the associated behaviors that police the boundaries between those who fit, and therefore “belong,” and those who do not.

In this article, we explore the ostensibly lighter and more playful side of such behaviors, which can encompass verbal humor, most notably verbal banter, nonverbal humor and banter such as horseplay, including comic violence (Baigent, 2001; Butler, 2015; Monaghan, 2002; Ward & Winstanley, 2006). Specifically, we explore banter as a typically unscripted form of humor that involves a back and forth exchange of “jocular insults” (Plester, 2016, p. 158) along a common theme, “primarily aimed at mutual entertainment” (Norrick, 1993, p. 29). The literature has explored the functional, cohering, and affiliative roles of humor generally and banter specifically (Dynel, 2008; Martin, 2007; Plester, 2016), as well as noting some of the exclusionary, maladaptive, and potentially harmful effects in reinforcing difference (Foley et al., 2022; Gregory, 2009; Lowe et al., 2021; Martin et al., 2003). It has been suggested that banter is always asymmetrical insofar as there is a claim to superiority between banterers (Gruner, 1997), but questions are begged as to the degree to which this can be detrimental, and whether the back and forth masks negative impacts (Martin, 2007; Morreall, 2009; Plester & Sayers, 2007). Hence, the more ambivalent role of banter (Leech, 1983; see also Grugulis, 2002), remains somewhat under-explored. Questions further remain about the role of banter in gendered organizations, including its power to challenge hegemonic ideals and invoke genuine change, especially in reflecting and addressing formal and informal tensions that are principally related to the persistence of an ideal-typical masculine worker, and how organizational responses to bantering behavior harness or dampen its potential. We address these questions through analysis of interviews with men and women working within the UK Fire and Rescue Service (FRS). We show that, while ways of speaking about banter may indicate a cohering, affiliative function, there remains an ever-present potential for these expressions of workplace humor to move “beyond banter” and transgress the norms of inclusive behavior. Thus, banter can confirm belonging but also target the vulnerability of those seeking to belong by promoting and masking actively exclusionary and discriminatory behaviors. We therefore find that the discursive framing of banter—delineating ways of speaking *within* banter and ways of speaking *about*

banter—represents the muting of minority voices by a dominant organizational discourse that accepts a “banter defense” (Afzal, 2022, p. 27).

2 | THE UK FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE

Firefighting remains “one of the most male-dominated occupations in industrialized countries” (Perrott, 2019, p. 1398), including the UK: over 90% of firefighters are men (Home Office, 2022). Most FRS personnel (79%) are “operational,” that is, firefighters, with the remaining minority (21%) working in “nonoperational,” “support” roles (Home Office, 2022); for instance, in emergency call processing and risk management roles. Originally modeled on the Royal Navy, the UK FRS retains associated militaristic features, including uniforms and a distinct chain of command. All firefighters wear uniforms on duty, while most nonoperational staff do not.

Firefighters typically are attached to “watches,” close teams that work both day and night shifts together, meaning they train, eat, sleep, and respond to emergencies as one. Levels of interaction between operational and nonoperational staff are high, but the core working context of the “watch” relates to firefighters, and there is a manifest hierarchy and asymmetry between operational and nonoperational staff (Baigent, 2001; Woodfield, 2016). The Service has been noted as traditionally marked by a masculinist ideal-type worker of the firefighter that sustains a strong informal authority that rivals formal authority structures and hierarchies, and by a strong informal culture of homosocial bonding, including the use of humor to both cohere and exclude (Afzal, 2022; Baigent, 2001; Home Office, 1999).

Despite the Service proactively pursuing a substantial modernization and diversification agenda over the last 2 decades, research suggests that the prevalence of its informal, ideal-typical worker persists. Here, the firefighter occupies a powerful intersection of class, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity, being a white, blue-collar, heterosexual, masculine man. Baigent's (2001) work refers to the occupational gender profile as “firefighters' masculinity” (p. 21), a complex mix of attitudes, characteristics, and behaviors dovetailing with a context-specific evolution of the hegemonic masculine archetype (Acker, 2006; Connell, 2005), and exemplifying physicality, self-discipline, asceticism, altruism, invulnerability, and (often sexualized) heroism, as well as traditional risk-taking and validating behavior, highly exclusionary impulses and practices, and extreme resistance to change (Baigent, 2001; Perrott, 2019; Woodfield, 2007, 2016).

The Service's working environment and culture have also been identified as more amenable for those aligning to this worker archetype and excluding to those remaining less well-aligned. The 1999 Thematic Review into equality and fairness in the Service formed part of an extensive policy evaluation period. It concluded that the Service needed to make “rapid and fundamental changes” to its workplace culture (Home Office, 1999, p. 68). Key objectives included diversifying its personnel and addressing organizational issues preventing it from becoming a “well balanced, modern working environment” (p. 22). As well as recommending the loosening of physical requirements to address the restrictive dominant occupational profile, the review also highlighted the “outdated, authoritative” management style, the role of uniforms in reinforcing “hierarchical differences or elitism” (p. 22), and the difficulty of new and nontraditional entrants “fitting in” with the dominant culture, marked by a prevailing “us” and “them” mentality (Home Office, 1999, p. 21). Nonetheless, over 2 decades later, an assessment of the Service (HMICFRS, 2020) reiterated that “significant reform is needed to modernize the sector” (p. 23), citing the persisting “toxic culture” (p. 36) in many areas. More recently still, an independent culture review of *London Fire Brigade* (Afzal, 2022) described a culture with “alarming levels of prejudice,” “pickled in aspic, clinging to social mores from the twentieth century and this manifested itself in a workplace where offensive ‘banter’—particularly that characterized by extreme sexism—was commonplace” (p. 6).

Against the background of the FRS's modernization project and the resulting tensions relating to who holds authority and who belongs, we explore how organizational members engaged in and experienced banter, and the potential impacts of this widely accepted mode of communication within the FRS.

3 | WORKPLACE HUMOR AND BANTER

3.1 | Workplace humor

We focus on humor as “a multifaceted and fluid discursive practice that gives rise to amusement” and that allows people to make sense of and contest meanings in various situations (Holmes, 2000; Huber, 2022, p. 535). It is broadly agreed that “one of the most basic social functions” of humor is to create and maintain solidarity and foster a sense of belonging (Holmes, 2000, p. 159), and thereby it “contributes to hierarchy and social order” (Norrick, 2010, p. 263). Humor is, however, acknowledged to be a complex and unstable phenomenon that is inherently ambiguous, and at times contradictory in purpose, function, and meaning. It can therefore be interpreted in several different ways, by different audiences, within the same context and time or across different contexts and times (Butler, 2015; Holmes, 2000).

Most notably, humor can be affiliative in the sense that engaging in joking behaviors amuses others and has a broadly positive, cohering function. Martin et al. (2003) describe this mode of joking behavior as an “essentially nonhostile, tolerant use of humor that is affirming of self and others” (p. 53). Studies commonly highlight how such humor can improve group affiliation and cohesion, reduce the burden of out-group or minority status (Hay, 2000; Holmes, 2000; Plester & Sayers, 2007), as well as harmonize relations for both managers and employees (Robert & Wilbanks, 2012). Hence, humor is often seen as providing a “synergy and functioning” in workplace settings that can help maintain organizational stability (Plester & Sayers, 2007, p. 158). Research has further highlighted how humor can help workers make sense of paradoxes and ambiguities (Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017), and distract from monotony and release tension (Roy, 1959). Gallows humor, in particular, has been shown to reduce the emotional burden of work and offer relief from high-stress occupations such as policing, emergency care, and firefighting (Scott, 2007; Vivona, 2014; Ward & Winstanley, 2006).

However, humor can also be hostile and maladaptive (Martin et al., 2003), critical of others, involve sarcasm, excessive teasing, and ridicule, and be aimed at enhancing the self at the expense of others (Gruner, 1997; Morreall, 2009). Such humor may draw attention to the shortcomings or defects of others, or one's past self, or be used for social good to modify suboptimal or errant behaviors (Plester, 2016). This kind of humor can express a sense of contempt and at times antagonism to others which, when framed as a joke, becomes permissible (Morreall, 2009). Humor, therefore, presents a discursive ambiguity that enables interaction outwith the “real” or accepted rules governing communication (Grugulis, 2002, p. 388). The permitted disrespect (Radcliffe-Brown, 1952) of humorous interactions provides workers with the freedom to express their feelings and articulate both individual and institutional criticism in ways that do not cause offense or recrimination (Grugulis, 2002). Hence, while it has been recognized that humor adds levity to employment contexts, it has also been theorized as integral to complex and ambivalent sides of organizational life as a means of not only reclaiming one's authentic self and resisting management control, but also to contest and affirm superior status (Butler, 2015; Collinson, 1998; Fincham, 2016; Roy, 1959). This suggests that even the most playful humor can be a “double-edged sword,” utilized to positive and negative effect (Butler, 2015; Holmes, 2000; Rogerson-Revell, 2007), both breaking down and heightening boundaries between groups.

3.2 | Banter

Banter is a specific kind of humorous expression that frequently surfaces in everyday talk (Norrick, 2010), is prevalent in organizations, and embodies the ambiguous and contradictory nature of joking behaviors generally (Plester, 2016; Plester & Sayers, 2007). These exchanges can be both supportive and contestive in nature (Dynel, 2008), as bantering participants either strive to cooperate to build on and emphasize one another's points or subvert and outwit one another (Holmes, 2006). This means banter has the capacity to function as a central communication practice in determining a sense of belonging in that it can “forge culture,” socialize workers, express group membership (Plester

& Sayers, 2007, p. 159), support identity construction (Schnurr, 2009), and create a sense of solidarity (Haugh & Bousfield, 2012).

Banter then shares many of the cohesive qualities of workplace humor more broadly conceived. However, banter's more sharply dichotomous—and at times passive-aggressive or even explicitly hostile—nature means that its teasing can also be more transgressive and threatening (Dynel, 2008; Plester, 2016). This is because banter sits outside of topical talk (Norrick, 1993), tending to focus on specific “traits, habits or characteristics of the recipient” (Plester, 2016, p. 43) and consequently, has been described as veiled cruelty (Gruner, 1997), that can be “remarkably hurtful” (Plester & Sayers, 2007, p. 159). Banter, here, is a form of humor that signifies a victory over the target, its competitive to and fro culminating in establishing or displaying superiority or deflating “someone else's ego to bring them to the same level as others” (Gruner, 1997; Plester & Sayers, 2007, p. 158). Norrick notes that, in these cases, bantering more fiercely seeks to “poke fun at” and “exclude” those that are othered (1993, p. 31). More contemporary views go further to describe banter as crossing a threshold into “a form of psychological emotional abuse” that is “normalized as workplace putdown humor” (Hickey & Roderick, 2022, p. 2), and as a “universal excuse to legitimize sexism, racism, bullying and verbal offense at large” (Jorbert & Sorlin, 2018, p. 10). Hence, banter can cut across and shore up hierarchy, creating not only concord and closeness but also tension and distance between interlocutors (Grainger, 2004). Given that the interpretation of most workplace humor is highly context-dependent (Holmes, 2000), banter can be both entertaining yet subversive, and inclusionary yet exclusionary at one and the same time (Plester, 2016; Plester & Sayers, 2007).

The complexities of humor generally and banter in particular are apparent within studies exploring gendered aspects of organizations, where humor provides “a gendered discourse resource on which both men and women regularly draw when negotiating their professional and their gender identities” (Norrick, 2010, p. 267). For example, banter's dual potential to resist and confirm established power coalesces around both formal gender hierarchies as well as informal hierarchies, typically organized around hegemonic masculine and ideal-typical workers (Norrick, 2010; Watts, 2007). Here, banter forms part of homosocial behavior, forging belonging and solidarity in male-dominated work environments (Gregory, 2009; Hay, 1994; Monaghan, 2002). Banter in a sporting context, for example, has been conceptualized as a traditionally masculine form of insulting, functioning as an organizational “policing tool” to “sustain masculine identities” (Nichols, 2018, p. 74). A collective tolerance of robust bantering in male-dominated occupations (Foley et al., 2022) can lead to a culture “united in a shared masculinity” (Collinson, 1998, p. 194), with expectations of “aggressive, critical and disrespectful” behavior (p. 187). Foley et al. (2022) show how, in such contexts, a barrage of teasing and humorous put-downs signal to women their interloper status and challenges their professional competence. Therefore, despite its interactional bonding potential (Dynel, 2008), banter is used to “other” workers not deemed to align to the ideal-type, while gender and sexuality are weaponized to “ridicule and compete with the less well placed” (Gregory, 2009, p. 340), notably women and minoritized men (Lawless & Magrath, 2021; Monaghan, 2002; Ward & Winstanley, 2006).

Notwithstanding the noted asymmetry between the banterers identified in masculinist occupations, it has long been intimated that marginalized women in these cultures can also utilize banter to overcome the “othering” they experience and build a sense of belonging. Kanter (1977) noted that minorities, or “tokens,” “find themselves colluding with dominants through shared laughter,” however inappropriate the jokes (p. 979). Watts' (2007) study of women managers in construction showed them erasing their “typical” womanhood and seniority to become “a good bloke” (p. 261), while nonetheless maintaining and reinforcing the “discursive normativity of masculinity” (p. 264). Eriksen (2019), writing on humor and teasing among Australian wildfire firefighters has further suggested, however, that women can equally utilize humor as a more nuanced counter-challenge to the informal culture of firefighter bonding and banter, by engaging in reverse sexism and joking to unmask the underlying organizational masculine norms. By exposing inconsistencies between workplace culture and policies, she claims, humor can therefore “trouble” asymmetrical gender relations (p. 144).

3.3 | The role of humor and banter in the FRS

FRS “watches” have been repeatedly identified as sites for the cultural reproduction of its hegemonically masculine culture, and a central communication style marked by macho teasing and banter (Baigent, 2001; Hall et al., 2007; Thurnell-Read & Parker, 2008; Ward & Winstanley, 2006). Consistent with other emergency service work (Scott, 2007; Vivona, 2014), banter has been described as “part of the [firefighter’s] job and necessary to allow people to let of steam” (Afzal, 2022, p. 6). While recognizing its positive function, watch culture has also been identified as suffused with “inappropriate language and behavior” (HMICFRS, 2020, p. 119), where the term “banter” is frequently used to defend and “justify gratuitous abuse” and “othering” (Afzal, 2022, p. 6). Further, although watches create a sense of familial belonging and support, this closeness is also identified as producing additional pressure to “fit in,” along with a reluctance to challenge peers’ inappropriate conduct (HMICFRS, 2020, p. 119). Banter therefore has been confirmed “as a considerable ‘force’ behind firefighters’ informal hierarchy” (Baigent, 2001, p. 70; Ward & Winstanley, 2006), functioning to test who “belongs.” Those that fail the “test” of banter are seen as having “failed a test of their (masculine) reliability” and demonstrated themselves as “weak and irrational (feminine)” (Baigent, 2001, p. 70).

The informal culture of watches produces challenges to the formal rank structure, as well as to nonoperational staff; it valorizes firefighters’ masculinity over white-collar work, non-uniformed staff, and management, who are frequently positioned as academic and feminized (Baigent, 2001, p. 101), and women and other minority members (Baigent, 2001; Afzal, 2022; Woodfield, 2007, 2016). Thomas (2016, p. 5), in his *Independent Review* of the FRS noted the use of banter in resisting both established authority and modernizing change:

The one thing that perhaps struck hardest...was the language being used to describe the relationship between staff and various layers of management (and indeed government). Often “fruity,” it went **beyond banter** [our emphasis] to, in some places, vitriolic comments about the management, leadership and direction of the service.

This identification of “beyond banter” communication is of particular interest here as it clearly identifies a mode of humor that goes beyond the cohering and tension-reducing function characteristic of much banter (Dynel, 2008; Haugh & Bousfield, 2012; Plester, 2016; Roy, 1959) and beyond even the challenging, ambivalent expressions of “friendliness and antagonism” (Grugulis, 2002, p. 388). This again suggests that banter can cross a threshold into bullying, harassment and exclusion (Lawless & Magrath, 2021; Newman et al., 2022, p. 7; Ward & Winstanley, 2006) or, more positively, into genuine challenge to traditional authority (Collinson, 2002; Eriksen, 2019).

This literature begs questions of the role of banter in organizations generally, but particularly in the FRS. Here, we explore the extent to which FRS banter operates as an informal and interactional mode of communication serving to cohere, looking at who is included and excluded in the culture of bantering, and where bantering becomes maladaptive (Gregory, 2009; Jorbert & Sorlin, 2018). We further explore whether banter ultimately simply solidifies existing authority, including the informal power of the masculinist ideal-typical worker, or operates as a phenomenon with greater organizational potency, e.g., when it is taken up by women. Following Thomas (2016), we identify “beyond banter” episodes in our data that we argue clearly cross a threshold and go beyond accepted understandings of bonding workplace humor, however broadly conceived. We again explore whether these episodes ultimately confirm masculinist authority and norms, or are more challenging and troubling to them.

4 | MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research project underpinning this article was focused on the collection of interview data, and findings are drawn from 40 interviews with FRS operational and nonoperational participants: 20 men (10 operational and 10 nonoperational) and 20 women (10 operational and 10 nonoperational). Working with this initial research design quota, interviewees were selected through participant referrals, until saturation was achieved. The project centered

on assessing the extent to which equalities initiatives, ushered in as part of the FRS modernization project, had been successfully embedded in the organization's culture. Authors' research histories include a long-standing interest in women's experiences of male-dominated workplaces in general, and of the FRS in particular, and in the experience of belonging to organizational contexts.

Interviews were approximately 70 min in length, were recorded, transcribed, and inductively coded and analyzed within NVivo. Humor emerged as a strong theme in the data, in terms of interview content and in the ways of speaking within the commentary. Paralinguistic features of participants' speech were noted in the data, most notably for our purposes here, where humor was being deployed and indicated by tone and laughter. The subsequent aim of our analysis here was the understanding and function of banter in the FRS context. This was accessed through the identification of recurring motifs, images, and ways of speaking about salient themes shaping participants' contributions, and where banter emerged as a key theme and core way of speaking about authority, belonging, and organizational change.

Using a context-sensitive approach (Wodak, 1997), discursive strategies and practices within speech were analyzed to reveal underlying content and modes of explanation. The term "discursive practices" is used here to denote systematic and consistent ways of speaking about phenomena that characterize and delimit them, and assumes that ways of talking are not independent of issues external to linguistic interchange. Instead, they are determinations of non-linguistic practices, such as organizational power and processes (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). Analysis of language as discourse in a specific historical and organizational context can expose how organizational members make sense of their lived experience, reproduce local worlds and identities, grapple with power relations, as well as identify emerging resistance to traditional authority structures and practices (Ward & Winstanley, 2006; Wodak & Meyer, 2016).

Within our data, discussion of banter itself formed a distinct discourse and way of speaking about organizational ideals, challenges, authority, and status. Our sample of an equal number of men and women, and of operational and nonoperational staff, permitted us to identify how banter functioned across informal and formal authority structures, and to ensure that we captured the voices of under-represented groups, as well as the dominant groups. The discourse of what constituted banter that emerged identified it as both excluding and sometimes unsettling, as well as cohering, functional, and supportive. We explored the extent to which ways of speaking about workplace humor were constrained within the parameters of this banter discourse and what this meant for "humorous" episodes that were more transgressive. This included episodes that ostensibly seemed to possess more potency to challenge and disrupt organizational norms and power bases, or verbal interchange and behavior that shaded across a threshold and into the territory of bullying and harassment.

We highlight two contrasting indicative vignettes to illuminate our theoretical conceptualization of the more troubling "beyond banter" category. The vignettes are composed of long form verbatim quotes. Vignettes have been cited as a "powerful tool" in qualitative analysis that gives readers a sense of "being there" (Finch, 1987; Jenkins et al., 2021, p. 977), accessing participants' lived reality. Our vignettes were selected because of their ability to crystallize key themes emerging from participants' discussions of "beyond banter" episodes, including the relationship between banter, belonging, and authority. They were also selected because they allowed us to explore some of the similarities and differences in relation to how the banter discourse was experienced by men and women in the FRS; the first is reported by a woman about a man, and the second is reported by a man about women.

In what follows, verbatim quotations are assigned an identifier that stipulates gender (M = Man and W = Woman), firefighter (F) or nonoperational (NO), alongside a participant number indicating 1–20 for men and 1–20 for women.

5 | FINDINGS

5.1 | “Good Banter”

Banter was generally understood as an expected and core part of communication in the Service, but especially within watches. The “time and place” for laughter and joking was clearly articulated as away from call-outs and critical incidents, where formal authority and chains of command had to remain unchallenged: “We have two cultures, on the station and on the fireground. Fun is a big part of the culture on station, life's short” (M11_F). Banter was otherwise confirmed as a central and forceful communication mode in relation to authority and establishing who belongs (Baigent, 2001; Ward & Winstanley, 2006).

The discursive understanding of banter in participants' commentary reflected the ambivalent nature of workplace humor noted in the literature (Grugulis, 2002; Holmes, 2000; Plester, 2016; Plester & Sayers, 2007; Rogerson-Revell, 2007). It gave primary focus to the accepted positive, cohering, and supportive inflections of banter (Dynel, 2008; Haugh & Bousfield, 2012; Schnurr, 2009), although the shared understanding also allowed for it to be edgier and even exclusionary. Banter's core positive role was widely accepted as a force for supporting and interacting with colleagues through teasing, which enhanced a sense of belonging. It broke down interpersonal barriers and was typically discussed as familial and friendly in tone. Banter could also be very dark and feature “black” forms of humor, normalizing stressful situations, releasing tension, and addressing the potential risk and trauma of emergency call-outs (Scott, 2007; Vivona, 2014):

It is all about teamwork, you come to work, you have a laugh, there's a serious side to it, don't get me wrong. But you've got your black humour...sometimes you've got to have that. We just all get on and we help each other out, you know? You don't just let someone drown and bury themselves.

(W18_F)

Engaging with banter was recognized to be part of socialization into FRS culture, again, especially within watches, and this was frequently revealed as homosocial in character and as part of a process of identifying who aligned to the ideal-worker and who belonged:

You were the probationary, the new boy...it was almost a case of seeing what sort of man you are, where your sense of humour finishes and you start to get edgy or upset...in the same way a rugby team would jostle with each other. It was fun because you do have a lot of down time.

(M11_F)

Unsurprisingly, women more frequently commented on the “dysfunctional” character of banter in watch culture (W12_NO), and experienced its strongly homosocial nature as positioning them with the options of engaging with its masculine register or risking their sense of belonging. This often meant accepting or overlooking potentially exclusionary banter (Foley et al., 2022; Gregory, 2009):

I have never been a girly girl. I've got quite a ribald sense of humour...but you do have to adapt. The office doesn't adapt for you. This is either the environment for you or not...don't mind a bit of banter, it's fine. But for people of a more sensitive disposition, it can be quite full on, quite raucous...It comes from knowing we get ourselves in the most dangerous situations, a gallows humour, but also like going on a team building exercise. You always come away from it closer as a team.

(W6_F)

There are some very old-school sort of, die hard firefighters...and the sexism things...you know, you still get that contingency...I can take the banter, the trouble is I can give more than they can handle, and I can be incredibly explicit and very rude and could make even the nastiest ones blush.

(W8_NO)

Banter's policing role (Nichols, 2018), determining who had authority and who belonged, was clearly identified and widely accepted. It was recognized as frequently emphasizing physical and emotional misalignment with the ideal-typical worker. It could "be a bit personal" (W20_F), "really harsh" (W18_F), mercilessly targeting "personal" and "physical defects" (M19_F) and could be "no holds barred" (M20_F) in nature. The broad discursive understanding of banter permitted these individualized and cutting forms of humor to be accepted under this umbrella understanding of "good banter":

I haven't really got any funny quirks about me. You will be picked on because it's a weakness...an element of, I would say, **good banter** [our emphasis]. There wasn't any bullying as such, but people work with people for a length of time and knew their foibles and weren't backward in sharing their opinions.

(M18_F)

Participants further actively utilized policing banter, frequently outlining any misalignment with the firefighter ideal, including targeting firefighter men deemed to have "let themselves go" (W8_NO):

If I stand in my pants and look at myself in the mirror, is this what people would expect a fireman to look like?...There's one or two who would let themselves go, smoke themselves to death, eat themselves to death...really you are letting the team down...as long as everyone is trying their best to stay fit and well, no-one is expecting you turn into Sylvester Stallone.

(M16_F)

Participants also utilized banter in their discussions of the Service's modernization and diversification agenda, where it was notably boisterous (Thomas, 2016) and oppositional to the established authority (Collinson, 2002). They employed banter to challenge formal authority, referring to senior uniform insignia as "scrambled egg" (M2_F), and Service Headquarters as the "Deathstar" or "Ivory Tower" (M15_NO). Firefighters also made use of banter in talk about nonoperational colleagues to underscore their misalignment with the ideal-type: "he's the paper clip man...no-one knows what they do, so there is that divide" (M8_F). These banter-esque descriptions extended to the no-longer-operational "desk jockey" (M7_F), promoted firefighters, also calling into question their legitimacy, competence, and right to belong (Foley et al., 2022). The associated loosening of physical entrance requirements was satirically presented as an inevitable part of a process of FRS sanctioned degradation from both the ideal-typical worker and optimal Service delivery:

We've moved our physical standards, not just for women. There have been massive problems with a guy who's got dyslexia. I wouldn't say they have moved the goalposts, I would say they have moved the whole rigorous standards...Whereas before it was only very strong firefighters who would get through...you can get in now and not be as fit, not be as clever, not be as perfect physically. You can have glasses, or a slight hearing defect, colour blindness or whatever...what next?

(M11_F)

In this context, banter was part of an interview format and was typically monologic rather than forming an interactional bonding game (Dynel, 2008). The imagined interlocutors were often othered individuals and groups less closely aligned to the ideal-typical worker (Foley et al., 2022; Gregory, 2009; Lawless & Magrath, 2021). Frequently

the prevailing direction of most reported banter was therefore unidirectional, with minimal accounts of retort. Participants spoke about individuals being “silenced” (M2_F), “dumbstruck” (W4_F) by verbal volleys, and within the interview format, the voice of targeted individuals remained under-represented.

Bantering was more often described by women from the perspective of the muted party. They highlighted how men used banter to deride the modernization of the Service in ways that transgressed the “official” program aims and to question women’s belonging, but, again, with minimal reference to recounted bantering responses; instead imagined, pertinent retorts were reported in the interview:

There are gay and lesbian people in the service, people who don't say anything because, for example, there was a woman who has just started working at a particular station and she was told “well, we were very disappointed to get you.” Well, welcome to your new borough, thank you very much. “Oh, and by the way, we do have women’s facilities here.” Well of course you bloody do because it would be against the sodding law if you didn't. I just heard about this...and I'm thinking where did this attitude come from, have you just been kicked off the ark? And I was quite cross...because this woman was really quite upset.

(W8_F)

The range of expressions that was encompassed within “good banter,” therefore, not only included those that facilitated a sense of belonging, but also opened space for (primarily male) firefighters to transgress and subvert the organizational change program and air frustrations arising from their own unsettled sense of fitting in. Despite banter’s acknowledged ambivalent role, there was an evident pressure in participants’ commentary to utilize the dominant discursive practice of defining “banter” as primarily affiliative (Dynel, 2008; Martin, 2007; Plester, 2016), and as supportively policing of how well FRS staff were aligning to the ideal-typical worker. This was most clear at points where participants struggled to name communication and behaviors that might reasonably be characterized as “beyond banter” (Foley et al., 2022; Thomas, 2016, p. 6), to which we now turn.

5.2 | “Beyond Banter”

Notwithstanding the confirmation of banter’s role in the creation and sustaining of intense levels of camaraderie, it was also clear that some reported and manifest communication practices saw banter as frequently becoming coarser, harsher, and more challenging to community coherence. Although still discursively linking such practices to the dominant discourse of “banter,” participants highlighted the blurred threshold here between inclusionary and exclusionary communication: “A lot of mickey taking [*but*]...when is it mickey taking and when does it turn into bullying? When is it too much or too little?” (M11_F). Participants maintained the discourse of “banter” to speak about episodes that were ostensibly wholly negative, neutralizing potentially harmful, maladaptive effects of what they were describing (Afzal, 2022; Lowe et al., 2021; Martin et al., 2003). Watch interactions were sometimes described as “cruel” (W14_F), “ridiculing” (W18_F), and “destructive” (W16_F), and station culture as “like a cat house,” “bitchy” (W10_F), a “slaughterhouse” (W18_F), while remaining discursively linked to positive discussions of banter’s role in community-building. Here, the specific examples of “humor” described were manifestly not a prelude to “belonging” for all workers, but the repeated reinscribing of a firm boundary between those aligned to the masculinist firefighter ideal, and the misaligned outgroup who struggled to experience true belonging. Again, experience of this type of “banter” was reported most often by women firefighters and when firefighter men were the interlocutors:

So, when this whole station had to be changed to incorporate female facilities “Oh, changing the fire station for you?” and I said “no, not for us, for any woman who comes into the station” and they just

didn't see it. And when someone came down to fit us with female kit they were like "why are you getting new kit?" and I was "well do you want to walk around in female clothes?"...Then I had to ask for sanitary bins, there was nothing, it was like they had never had a female member of staff ever. And it just got to the point where it was ridiculous. And...they put a hairdryer in the girls' changing rooms which is needed...and it's "why are you getting a hair dryer?" And, "it's because I've got hair and most of you haven't got hair," and so they had to fit a hairdryer in the men's room as well. That's how it is... it's quite petty...very child-like.

(W18_F)

Participants drew upon the discourse of banter to report episodes that went further still, involving physical assaults, as the following two vignettes demonstrate. Both were narrated as part of discussions of general workplace culture and humor specifically. The first reports an incident where a firefighter man targeted a nonoperational woman, a representative of "central management," thus reinforcing firefighters' masculinity, authority, and the "old-regime" (W3_NO):

Vignette 1

I had an issue with a male colleague that came in here and assaulted me, physically assaulted me...I had a bit of a history with him, he had a...whole history of these sort of things...he didn't like something... he was annoyed about something, he ended up...throwing me on to the floor, which I made a formal complaint about, and I was strongly encouraged to let it go and not do anything about it. I don't know if that comes down to being female or not. I was really persuaded not to because they said he wasn't very well and it wasn't his fault and if I made a complaint it might make him worse than he already was...this person has done this to so many people, men and women, but mostly women, he's mostly very aggressive towards women...But I did feel it at the time it was a bit, "keep quiet...little girl and get over it, he was only having a laugh with you." But it didn't make me laugh or anyone who witnessed it, but it did feel a little bit that way.

(W3_NO)

The thrust of organizational response to this episode was experienced as seeking to contain the reported behavior within the parameters of acceptable organizational banter. Moreover, participants' ways of speaking about such episodes were perceived as mandated by the dominant organizational discourse of banter. Although this participant reports feeling silenced by the introduction of workplace humor as a framing for discussing the nature of, or motivation for, the incident, she struggles to differently identify what has taken place outside of the dominant discourse, and its role in relation to authority and belonging. Within the dominant discourse, banter is seen as an integral, acceptable, and necessary part of the Service's culture, and this discourse is seemingly deployed here to actively suppress discussion of this and similar events as something more than jocular or horseplay (Monaghan, 2002), even when events have clearly crossed a threshold into hostile and maladaptive behavior. Hence, there is strong evidence of the organization drawing on the "banter defense" (Afzal, 2022, p. 27), to excuse sub-optimal behaviors, as well as to deny or minimize the intention of the malefactor (Lowe et al., 2021). In the absence of more serious consideration, and although this particular firefighter (as described) fails to exemplify many of the characteristics of the ideal-typical worker, including selflessness and composure, it is clear that he is successful in asserting his authority over others with relative impunity, and thus his right to belong is unassailable.

Our second reported vignette, conversely, sees women targeting formal authority, as well as the informal authority of the masculine firefighter ideal-type:

Vignette 2

We had a particular woman, very nice she was, within the organization. I could be having a meeting, she walks straight in...even though I am talking, she would come and kiss me on the mouth, say "hello darling" and squeeze me into her bosom. Don't do it, I don't like it, it's not appropriate, I don't want it done in front of my personnel. If I came into your office or into a middle of a meeting you were having, and just swanned in and whatever, pushed my groin into you, that's just not acceptable and it seems we don't do anything about that. It's OK to be a male within the organization and you get embarrassed because someone is trying to squeeze your arms or make suggestive comments to you but, if it's the other way round, wouldn't have a leg to stand on. I remember [*an event*]...lots and lots of [FRS] women...one...said, "Will you come up and dance?"...Went on the floor...I got stripped...and I'm stood there, deep around me there...[*were*] women...they'd ripped off my t-shirt, ripped off my shoes, my shorts were ripped to pieces. I was stood there with my legs wide apart thinking "what am I going to do?" And they were...clawing...and [*when I got back*] I asked them [*management*], "What's been done about that? Because, what happens if it was a female instructor that gets pulled on and we have men stood three deep in that crowd and we rip off her clothing? What would happen to us? We'd be out of a job," but it's been allowed, it's just been accepted...[*I said*] "That's just not acceptable, is anything going to be done about it?" [*They said*] "Well, we'll make sure we lessen the alcohol"...so, you hear laughy, jokey bits that, yeah, once, or twice might have been near the knuckle that have been dealt with, but I've actually seen the other side of it.

(M10_F)

The significant challenge to the integrity of firefighter's hegemonic masculinity (Baigent, 2001; Connell, 2005; Woodfield, 2007) and associated symbolism—clothing, body, authority, and equanimity—is clear here. This firefighter man recounts this challenge as one that is testing the threshold of acceptable organizational behavior in the context of a generalized tolerance of banter and testing his sense of authority and belonging in the context of the Service's modernizing agenda. Once again, we see the reported organizational response as seeking containment within the discursive parameters of banter-esque workplace humor, and the participant indicating his struggle to speak about the behaviors outside of this discourse. A significant potential challenge to formal authority, as well as the informal authority of firefighters' masculinity, is therefore neutralized and the organizational tensions between the players remains under-analyzed and unresolved.

6 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

We have explored the deployment of banter and the gendered nature of humor in shaping workplace hierarchies and belonging within a masculinized organization. Bantering was confirmed as endemic in FRS culture and integral to a variety of cohering practices, between colleagues, managers and reportees, men and women (Baigent, 2001), and as part of informal cultural behaviors that continue to characterize workplace inequality, homogeneity, segregation, and exclusion (Acker, 2006; Ward & Winstanley, 2006; Watts, 2007; Wright, 2016). We identify two modes of bantering sitting underneath the dominant organizational discourse of "banter," both of which are used to differing effects to negotiate asymmetric power relations.

First, episodes identified here as "good banter" confirm the double-edged character of humor and specifically banter in organizational settings (Butler, 2015; Plester & Sayers, 2007; Rogerson-Revell, 2007). They confirmed the affiliative nature of banter and how it was used to create group cohesion, socialize workers, and maintain positive organizational stability (Dynel, 2008; Foley et al., 2022; Gregory, 2009; Martin, 2007; Monaghan, 2002; Plester, 2016; Plester & Sayers, 2007), as well as bring levity and relief to high-stress—often life and death—situations (Scott, 2007; Vivona, 2014; Ward & Winstanley, 2006). We also confirm banter's policing function (Nichols, 2018),

reinforcing ideal worker identities and in-group and out-group status in relation to the ideal-type (Baigent, 2001). Our analysis revealed that within “good banter” there remained space for transgressions that erred toward maladaptive humor (Martin et al., 2003), primarily from firefighter men. These transgressions arose from their own unsettled sense of belonging. “Good banter,” therefore, also comprised part of a clearly articulated challenge to formal, hierarchical power and specifically to the diversification of the Service, its mission, and personnel associated with the modernization project. Banter was deployed in these instances to expose potential contradictions of the change program, and for expressing the threat this posed to the hegemonic firefighter identity. Equally, banter was utilized by those representing and supporting diversification to expose the contradictions in the traditional Service authority figures—including the informal authority of the firefighter ideal-type—and in the Service’s attempts to include minority members. We therefore concur with Eriksen (2019, p. 144) when she concludes that humor holds the potential to “disclose the inconsistencies and absurdities of social norms and inequities” giving “voice to the unspoken...question[ing] the taken-for-granted...and mak[ing] the invisible visible in everyday life.” On these terms, we contend that humor’s relationship to organizational challenge (Collinson, 2002; Morreall, 2009) can be a positive force in helping men and women alike question asymmetrical power relations.

Prior research has also shown how banter can transgress the threshold of what is deemed acceptable and spill over into more overtly exclusionary and hostile behaviors (Hickey & Roderick, 2022; Lawless & Magrath, 2021; Martin et al., 2003; Morreall, 2009; Newman et al., 2022). Our findings show how, even when the bantering is perceived by some participants to have positive, affiliative effects and to be “good banter,” the potential remains for it to highlight and reinforce difference, exclude, and shore up superiority (Gruner, 1997; Martin, 2007; Morreall, 2009). In line with Foley et al. (2022) and Gregory (2009), we show how such banter was frequently asymmetrically and unidirectionally deployed to specifically signal the superiority of firefighters’ masculinity over those colleagues perceived as non-traditional and nonoperational, and sometimes to mock and usurp them on this basis; this challenges the assumption that bantering is dialogic, interactional, and affiliative (Dynel, 2008; Grugulis, 2002; Norrick, 1993; Plester & Sayers, 2007). Some of the exchanges described within the discourse of “good banter” were experienced as particularly problematic for women seeking to affiliate (Gregory, 2009; Lawless & Magrath, 2021; Monaghan, 2002; Ward & Winstanley, 2006). It is again clear from this finding that the impact of banter on participating individuals is highly context-dependent (Butler, 2015; Holmes, 2000), and that its function and reception is gendered in our masculinized organization.

We identified a second mode of bantering involving more extreme expressions that went “beyond banter,” were more clearly maladaptive (Martin et al., 2003), and that both bolstered and undermined the ideal-typical worker. As with “good banter,” “beyond banter” communication was double-edged. On the one hand, it formed a potent, unruly, and scathing challenge to formal authority, diversification, and modernization generally, and on behalf of the informal authority of “firefighters’ masculinity” (Baigent, 2001; Thomas, 2016). On the other hand, it was deployed to challenge the ideal-typical masculinist worker and to expose contradictions within and between traditional hierarchies and the alternate power base of firefighters’ masculinity (Eriksen, 2019). Neither “beyond banter” vignette sits comfortably within the definition of banter as “mock impoliteness” (Leech, 1983) “jocular abuse” (Plester & Sayers, 2007), or even “veiled cruelty” (Gruner, 1997). While these incidents were notably reported as events that crossed a threshold, and that clearly stood out for participants as laying at the outer boundaries of acceptable workplace humor, they nonetheless remained part of, and linked to, the discourse of workplace banter and joking (Hickey & Roderick, 2022; Jorbert & Sorlin, 2018). In each case, it would be hard to argue that what is described does not constitute assault, bullying or harassment (Jorbert & Sorlin, 2018). Yet the prevailing discourses of both positive banter and of the dominant ideal-worker—hegemonically masculine, altruistic and heroic, both sexualized and here impervious to sexual assault—suppresses clear identification and articulation of events in these terms.

The dominant discourse of banter, evident here in both the individual commentary and the reported organizational response, significantly contributed to a widespread acceptance and tolerance of banter, as well as a lack of available ways of speaking about more serious incidents in a sober and impactful organizational register. Furthermore, as our second vignette indicates, the discursive inclusion of a broad spectrum of communication and behaviors

as “banter” meant that challenges to existing masculinist modes of being and belonging were largely confined to the self-same masculinist register and its norms (Kanter, 1977; Watts, 2007). In sum, we conclude that workplace humor in our study, regardless of the form and protagonists, failed to genuinely trouble (Eriksen, 2019) gendered organizational norms in the FRS, including those associated with traditional authority and the authority of firefighters’ masculinity (Baigent, 2001). This underscores the persistence of problematic and divisive elements to FRS culture (Afzal, 2022; HMICFRS, 2020), as well as previously noted levels of change resistance within the FRS (Baigent, 2001; Perrott, 2019; Woodfield, 2007, 2016).

Our findings therefore support claims that the discursive ambiguity of workplace humor enables interaction outside of the accepted rules governing communication because humor is outside of real conversation (Grugulis, 2002, p. 388). Our findings further add to the growing evidence that such ambiguity can be used to neutralize the harm of banter (Afzal, 2022; Jorbert & Sorlin, 2018; Lowe et al., 2021), and diminish our ability to name, define, or condemn exclusionary behaviors (Foley et al., 2022). We are struck by the ease with which “beyond banter” episodes were dismissed as “just a joke” by senior managers. We suggest that this discursive dismissal effectively muted conversations about authority, gender relations, exclusion, and bullying and harassment. In sum, although banter may permit “problematic topics” including “individual” and “institutional” criticism to be raised “with less fear of rejection of recrimination” (Grugulis, 2002, p. 388), in our context, it also served to suppress challenge and discussion of these critically important, distinct parts of organizational culture.

We conclude that the salient organizational discourse of “banter” therefore can ultimately silence minority voices and mask unacceptable and sub-optimal behaviors in the workplace (Wodak, 1997), and does so in our specific context. In turn, the “banter defense” (Afzal, 2022) is used as an “exit strategy” to downplay and even disappear harassment and exclusionary behavior (Eriksen, 2019, p. 144). Notwithstanding their potency, it is our contention that “beyond banter” episodes, and their re-telling, remained ineffective in their expression and outcome, both contesting but finally confirming the Service’s more traditional cultural elements and authority bases (Eriksen, 2019; Grugulis, 2002; Watts, 2007). These findings demonstrate the critical importance of considering asymmetrical power relations within specific workplace contexts to fully understand what role banter is playing.

Our findings are particularly notable, considering the recent high-profile cases of transgressive and belittling behaviors occurring in masculinist professions, such as the UK FRS, that are suppressed through the “banter defense” (Afzal, 2022, p. 27). Our findings reach beyond the FRS, most obviously to other male-dominated contexts or contexts where a masculine ideal-type marginalizes minority groups, and where humor is inextricably intertwined with homosocial bonding behaviors, or where humor is detected as underpinning work culture. We highlight the importance of taking seriously and opening room for the discursive naming of exclusionary behavior that is frequently masked by the banter defense. Further research could explore the nuances of what is seen to constitute banter in particular contexts, how it emerges and is experienced, and to what effect; this would be of interest in relation to female-dominated workplaces as well as male-dominated and mixed gender contexts. We also provide the provocation to consider the true complexity of banter in contesting and confirming organizational tensions.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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