

No laughing matter: Laughter can play key role in group dynamics

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Laughter can play key roles in group communication and group dynamics - even when there's nothing funny going on. That's according to new research from North Carolina State University that examined the role of laughter in jury deliberations during a capital murder case.

The researchers were given access to the full transcript of jury deliberations in the 2004 Ohio trial of Mark Ducic, a white male charged with two murders and 30 additional counts, largely related to drug violations. "This was a rare opportunity to gain insight into the jury's deliberative process," says Dr. Joann Keyton, a professor of communication at NC State and co-author of the study. "As far as we know, this is the only jury transcript available for study from a death penalty case."

Looking at the transcript, Keyton and her co-author - Dr. Stephenson Beck of North Dakota State University - were struck by the amount of [laughter](#). "This was intriguing," Keyton says. "We're interested in how people communicate within a group in order to accomplish a task, and we saw this as an opportunity to explore the role of laughter in how people signal support - or lack of support - for other people's positions within a group." Keyton notes that there is very little research on the role of laughter in communication, particularly when divorced from humor.

The researchers learned that laughter could be used as a tool, intentionally and strategically, to control communication and affect group dynamics. For example, one juror was very vocal and made it

clear early in the case that she was opposed to the death penalty. In one instance, when that juror agreed with other jury members, one of the other members said "She's so smart," resulting in laughter from other members of the group. "That had the effect of further distancing her from the rest of the jury," Keyton says.

"When juries form, they don't know each other," Keyton says. "So part of the jury process is to create relationships within the group - for example, figuring out who thinks like me, who will have the same position I have. There are power dynamics at play."

The researchers also found that "laughter matters, even when it is a serious group task," Keyton says. "Laughter is natural, but we try to suppress it in formal settings. So, when it happens, it's worth closer examination."

For example, at one point the jury was unclear on whether a sentence related to one of the charges was for 30 days or 30 years. This confusion led to widespread laughter. "The laughter allowed the jurors to release some tension, while also allowing them to acknowledge they had made an error - so they could move forward with that error corrected," Keyton says.

"Laughter is one way of dealing with ambiguity and tension in situations where a group is attempting to make consequential decisions and informal power dynamics are in play," Keyton says. "There are very few opportunities to see group decision making, with major consequences, in a public setting," Keyton explains. "It is usually done in private, such as in corporate board meetings or judicial proceedings. But laughter is something that occurs frequently, and not only because something is funny. Nobody in the jury was laughing at jokes."

More information: The article, "Examining Laughter Functionality in

Jury Deliberations," is published in a special issue of *Small Group Dynamics*, in which every paper focuses on a different aspect of the Ducic jury deliberations.

Provided by North Carolina State University

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