Social Work, Structured Fun and the Jokes of Social Structure: The role of laughter

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By Nanna Mik-Meyer

The topic of social work does not normally inspire laughter. So it is perhaps not surprising that research into the culture of social work rarely pursues its humorous aspect—the role of irony and laughter, for example. But if Michael Mulkay (1988) is right in suggesting that the domain of humor allows contradictory worlds to coexist, then this topic warrants a closer look. After all, no one would deny that social work involves a measure of contradiction.

During my fieldwork in two rehabilitation organizations I was struck by how often social workers laugh. Perhaps more importantly, I was struck by the fact that clients persistently refrain from laughing when a social worker tells a joke or offers a humorous remark. The social workers' giggling and the clients' silence in situations that "demanded" joint laughter indicated a genuine puzzle. Laughter seemed to divide the staff (who laughed) from the clients (who didn't). Although I expected conflicting interest between social workers and clients, I did not expect that the opposing interest would materialize in relation to who laughed, with whom, and how much. I decided to approach the problem like any other empirical mystery (Alvesson & Kärreman 2005); that is, I would focus my attention on situations involving laughter while reviewing past research into humor and irony.

While humor is widely discussed in philosophy, literary studies and psychology, it remains overlooked in sociology (Mulkay 1988) and organization studies (Johansson & Woodilla 2005). In psychology, which relates directly to social work, the literature deals with "therapeutic humor", i.e., how humor, and the laughter

that results, can function within a treatment strategy (e.g. Klein 1989, Robinson 1991, Metcalf & Felible 1992, Dossey 1996, Salameh & Fry 2001). The dominant idea here is that humor and laughter will support the positive development of a person with problems, whether these are of a psychological or physical nature (for a critique of this literature see Martin 2001, 2002; Kuiper & Nicholl 2004). In the case of social work, however, humor seemed to have a different function. There is a widely held view in the literature that humor and laughter is closely connected to social conditions like formality, inequality and contradiction (Adelswärd 1989; Coser 1959, 1960; Douglas 1968, 1999; Haakana 2001; and Mulkay 1988). My empirical material supports this thesis, showing that laughter is often connected with contradiction and paradox. Laughter also seems to relate to sociological categories such as group affiliation and ambiguity in a telling way. For example, if one laughs at a joke then this counts as an endorsement of the present speech community. Laughter, then, whether by its absence or its presence, can reveal potential, competing group affiliations. In this case, it gives the researcher knowledge about organizational features of the interaction between social workers and clients. One can argue that the absence of laughter may be owed to the fact that the speech community is comprised of people with different cultural backgrounds (Everts 2003). On this view, the reason that clients don't laugh with social workers is that they are novices in the organization and therefore don't understand the humorous remarks. I, however, shall draw on Coser's early work (1959) arguing that the absence of laughter in a joking environment is more likely to reflect how a person connects to the existing structure of status than to reflect different cultural background of the participating persons. Simply put, the listener understands the joke but doesn't think it very funny. Laughter should therefore not be straightforwardly equated with joy, happiness or fun

(emotional well-being). As I will show, laughter tends to occur in situations that can be very stressful, awkward and tense for the participants, indicating that it is a response to the situation's often uncomfortable ambiguities.

Even though some of these sociological studies proceed empirically from interactions between clients and social workers (like my own material), none of their analyses concentrate on whether these "fun" activities help the clients or not. Nor does mine. This article thus develops the virtually unexplored relation between laughter and social work and views laughter as a material manifestation through which it is possible to observe a series of different interactions. In the interests of an interactionist's perspective, however, this must be done *without* linking laughter to the inner psychological states of individuals, as is too often done in the area of social work and psychology.

The focus on laughter brings the many ironic and sarcastic statements among social workers into sharp relief. In the sociological and organizational literature there has been a debate about how irony relates to humor; is irony, e.g., a subgroup of humor or is it the other way around? (Cf. Mulkay 1988, Johansson & Woodilla 2005) But "humor" is not the central term in the present study, nor is "irony" or "sarcasm". The focus here, instead, is the empirical manifestation that often (but not always) accompanies humor, irony and sarcasm, i.e., laughter.

The empirical material

The empirical material presented in this article derives from fieldwork in two Danish rehabilitation organizations[i] (corresponding more or less to the area of occupational therapy, cf. Townsend 1998). The organizations are situated in fourteen

administrative districts in Denmark, serving between five and thirty-two municipalities each. The goal of Danish rehabilitation organizations is to assist clients whose status is ambiguous. Their ambiguous status results from not fitting into the habitual organizational categories of the welfare state, often because there is a discrepancy between their medical assessments and their wish to work. In many cases, clients complain of considerable pains that make them unable to work while their official diagnosis provides insufficient grounds to grant them a social pension. Conversely, there are cases of people who would like to work but are unable to imagine a job they can handle when taking their present capabilities into consideration. A central aim of the social workers in these organizations is therefore to produce an accurate evaluation of the situation their clients are in. Are they really sick, and if so, how does their illness prevent them from participating on the labor market? In order to perform this task it is crucial that clients are trustworthy and cooperative in the evaluation process, as has been shown elsewhere (Hasenfeld 1983; Loseke 1989, 1999; Margolin 1997.)

The technology employed in these organizations is 'fuzzy', typically including assignments to work in assembly plants as well as leisure oriented activities like sewing baby clothes, playing computer games, working out in the gym, silkscreen painting, and cooking. These are augmented by a range of cognitive activities like group discussions on personal themes, communication training, or talks given by psychologists. The staff members consist of various professionals, e.g., caseworkers, psychologists, doctors, physiotherapists and 'contact persons' that run the various workshops and also act as personal supervisors.

In this article I draw on observations from various meetings and workshop activities as well as interviews. I will present material from the daily

morning gatherings held in the organizations, where social workers attempt to establish a comfortable, informal atmosphere, as well as material from the various activities during which clients are expected to display and develop their personal selves, and, finally, material extracted from social workers discussions of clients. I have used two criteria for making selections from my empirical material. (1) Laughter had to occur and (2) it had to occur in regard to "an everyday life event", i.e. not in an extreme situation. Interestingly, the behavior of the social workers alone made almost all of my material satisfy the first criterion.

Humorous and ironic interaction

The empirical material demonstrates many inherent contradictions. First, social workers attempt to engage in relations with clients as if they are equals. Second, social workers attempt to create an informal relation to these clients. Third, the clients are often poorly suited to the present Danish labor market, which generally demands skilled labor. The first two contradictions – social workers strive for informality and equality – can be viewed as inherent contradictions in the work because these contradictions mirror central organizational goals (to achieve a trusting relationship to clients so they can produce an accurate evaluation of their abilities). When one considers the organizational goal to evaluate the clients' abilities, the interaction between social worker and client must by definition be formal and founded in an unequal relation between the two parties. The third contradiction is also inherent in the work, since an organizational goal is to produce evaluations of clients that indicate the capacity for self-sufficiency despite the fact that many of the clients' skills are in low demand on the present labor market. All these conditions demonstrate what Mary Douglas (1999) has termed "jokes in the social structure", i.e., inherent

contradictions in the social world that often generates humor and laughter.

In the upcoming analysis I will present empirical material that stems from different activities. In short, the evaluation of clients often includes activities inspired by group dynamics and recreational tasks (reflecting the social workers goal of an informal and equal relation to clients). These activities often relegate the client to a child-like role, placing the social worker in the corresponding role of "parent". This parent-child model for contact between social worker and client typically creates a tense and ambiguous situation, a social phenomenon that often results in laughter (cf. Adelswärd 1989, Haakana 2001). In these cases, the laughter of the social workers can be seen as an interactive device that is primarily intended to help the social worker, not the client, through these tense interactions produced by the parent-child relationship.

Case illustration 1: A morning gathering

In both organizations, a day of workshops begins with a morning gathering that is attended by clients and social workers. The gatherings last a half hour, bringing social workers and clients together while they drink coffee and chat. Many jokes and humorous remarks are exchanged between the social workers, which result in much laughter among this group. The clients typically remain more passive. They participate in the conversations only when the social workers approach them directly. Social workers talk about news from the media, popular television programs, and issues concerning their personal life, upcoming activities and other easily understood events. The following account is a typical representation of a morning gathering with – as we shall see – reluctantly participating clients. According to the social workers, the clients' passive, reluctant participation demonstrates this group's difficult

situation. The clients, by contrast, explain in interviews that they find this morning gathering a "waste of time". This group never focuses on their psychological situation when they talk about their behavior.

It is a client's fifty-third birthday and she has therefore brought breakfast rolls to the meeting. Seven clients and three social workers participate in the meeting. Social worker A opens the meeting by asking, "When you were young, you wanted to be older. Back then you wanted to be sixteen. How old do you wish you were now?" The social workers immediately laugh loudly but the client doesn't join in the laughter before a substantial period of time has elapsed. When she does join in, it is soft and brief. There is then a long moment of silence. Then social worker A asks a client what she is going to do in the upcoming weekend. The client explains in few words that she has to prepare dinner to a family event. Another period of silence follows. Social worker B breaks the silence by beginning a story about English beef and rickets (called "English Disease" in Danish). The social workers laugh at this story, while folding their napkins over and over again. A minor friendly exchange of words occurs between social worker A and C. Social worker B informs the participants about his wife's upcoming birthday and engages in a series of jokes with social worker A about his boat, which he implicitly compares to his wife. The clients remain silent. The situation becomes tense, and most participants look down at the table. When the social workers address the clients directly either with jokes or direct questions about their social life, the clients answer in soft voices with short answers. For a long while, the social workers do little more than fold and refold their napkins, doing this with great precision. Both social workers and clients often consult the wall clock in the meeting's final phase.

This example illustrates how social workers at the two rehabilitation organizations try to establish an informal, comfortable contact with clients. When clients decline to laugh, which is viewed as a normal response to humorous statements (Mulkay 1988), a tense situation develops. In the example, we see how social workers (that are exposed to this offensive silence) start to fold their napkins over and over again, interrupted only by new jokes, again resulting in little or no laughter among the clients.

The clients' silence can thus be viewed as a powerful presence in the interaction, because silence works against the goal of the meeting (and the structure of humor itself), which is to create an informal situation that aims to minimize the difference in status between the two groups. By being silent, the clients signal that social workers and clients are not part of the same group, that they are not the social workers' equals (Coser 1959), that they are not having a good time, and that the gathering is not relevant for them. Their silence thus confirms that the gathering cannot be equalized, thereby to become a gathering among people of the same status (Adelswärd 1989). As a consequence, the clients' silence confirms the formality of the interaction, despite the social workers' attempt to establish a comfortable atmosphere. This finding supports Adelswärd's (1989) analysis, which found that unilateral laughter was very common in interactions in welfare organizations, because of the status differences between social workers and clients.

The social workers' continuous jokes and laughter can, in this way, be viewed as a "face saving practice" (Goffman 1967) caused by the clients' rejection. As long as the clients keep up a passive, silent and, thereby, unresponsive attitude in a situation that "demands" positive active participation, e.g., laughing etc., the

situation will demonstrate an inherent contradiction and the social workers will have to repair the situation by joking and laughing. Humor and laughter, however, also give the social workers a powerful position. I have never observed a client responding to a humorous remark with silence if the joke is directed to a particular person (exactly as the client in the meeting also reluctantly laughs). Humor and the responding laughter can thus be viewed as a common rule of interaction, which both parties automatically follow. It thus serves as a mechanism of social control, which social workers can exercise over clients (Mulkay & Howe 1994).

According to Mulkay, humor has a disorganizing effect on the available structure of authority. Despite an authority figure's attempt to establish an informal situation through jokes and laughter, the humoristic remarks themselves typically take over the structure of the very authority they are hoping to neutralize. Characteristically, the teller of the joke addresses it to subordinates (Mulkay 1988). It is thus to be expected that it is the social workers (as in the example) that directs a joke toward a client, and not the other way round. As Coser (1959: 172) puts it:

"To laugh, or to occasion laughter through humor and wit, is to invite those present to come closer. Laughter and humor are indeed like an invitation, be it an invitation for dinner, or an invitation to start a conversation: it aims at decreasing social distance".

That is, humor seeks to foster an informal situation. This goal cannot be reached, however, when humor – as in the illustration above – instead reinforces the difference between social workers and clients, i.e., when jokes are told only *to*

subordinates. Humor and laughter can thus be viewed *both* as a device that social workers use in order to create a comfortable, friendly, informal atmosphere *and* as a symbol of the contradictory conditions implicit in the work. It is both a strategy that is used to deal with the situation and an automatic response created by the situation. It is an example of how interactions can be viewed both as generated by acting persons and as a context that people automatically fit into and adjust their "line" towards. It is comparable to the thesis that a "performance" is created by both the context and the audience (Goffman 1990).

Case illustration 2: Recreational group activities

Both rehabilitation organizations carry out a series of different group activities to encourage the development of the clients' personal situation, e.g., to become happier people, better parents or kinder spouses. The group activities include playing cards (that picture different job activities), making posters ("drawing the week"), discussing personal characteristics ("what am I good at?"), discussing patterns of illness, receiving instruction in how to deal with stress or watching movies about unemployment. In the following analysis, I will present examples from two different "fun" exercises and analyze what they do to the participating individuals. We are dealing with what Warren (2005) calls "structured fun", i.e., actions that perhaps are "not fun at all".

The following account stems from an exercise where clients are to introduce themselves in the light of what they believe they are good at. During the exercise the clients stand up one by one and talk about themselves in front of the other clients and two social workers, while they or a social worker writes cues on the blackboard. In the coming extract we shall see how client A's story is being

stimulated by social worker A and B.

Client A: "I am good at cleaning, talking, listening, I am dependable and efficient. I am not so sweaty any longer". She laughs a little and continues to chuckle while adding that she is not so shy anymore either. Social worker A: "Now you all have to help her brag". Social worker A laughs loudly and few people join her laughter although in a much quieter fashion. Social worker B: "What does it mean to be efficient?" Client A gives examples of her efficiency. Social worker B then asks what it means to be dependable, and once more client A provides examples. Client A always answers briefly and tersely and as such demonstrates little passion in telling her story. To conclude the exercise, social worker A says, "You must write that you are responsible," laughing a little. Client A agrees and social worker B instructs her to write it on the blackboard, saying, "Then put it on the blackboard, sister!" Social worker B laughs again and social worker A joins her laughter after a while. A few clients finally laugh in low voices. Client B closes the discussion of client A's qualities by noting that it is "difficult to ask client A about her abilities, because the exercise seems so obvious."

On the basis of client A's interaction with the social workers, one can see that laughter should not necessary be viewed as a *reaction* to funny statements. This has been pointed out by Mulkay (1988) and Douglas (1999) in other contexts: the social workers laugh also in situations where nothing funny has been said. In the example, the primary role of laughter seems to be to help especially the social workers to manage the ambiguity and tension that the exercise has caused. The ambiguity of the situation can be viewed as a result of the interaction that places the client in a

position where it is no longer obvious that her status is equal to the social workers, i.e., adults (comparable to the example from the morning gathering). This creates a tension between the social workers and the client demonstrated by the client's reluctant participation.

The social workers' praise and engaged listening to client A's qualities can be likened to a parent's praise and engaged listening to a child. The role of laughter thus guides both social worker and client through a "delicate" situation (Haakana 2001). Again, it is primarily the social workers that are engaged in this "apologetic" laughter, which can be seen as a method of leading attention away from the content of the exercise (cf. Mulkay & Howe 1994). The social workers' friendly remarks and laughter can thus be viewed as a modifying strategy (Adelswärd 1989): the laughter's aim is to moderate the potentially face-threatening practices that clients could feel because of the childish interaction (Goffman 1967). Once in a while, clients do laugh with social workers. But when they do so it is typically softly and thus does not indicate joint group membership. It can therefore be interpreted as a form of "polite laughter" (Adelswärd 1989), which aims also at repairing the problematic parent-child relation produced by the exercise.

The parent-child model for interaction is not caused only by the actual activities; it also reflects the social workers discussions of clients. Social workers use terms like "umbilical cord", when they talk about their relation to clients; in a friendly way, social workers explain that they "keep an eye on the clients"; and they note that on the numerous fieldtrips their job is that of a "playground supervisor". A client can be "all grown up", a "rascal" or the social workers' "little helper". Clients are also attentive to their special relation to the social workers. For example, clients' ask the social workers if they are too "naughty" or they refer to the staff members as "adults".

Laughter always accompanies the childish rhetoric, probably because the associations that are connected to the role of children by definition do not apply to clients' status as adults (and is thus a contradictory condition, typically leading to laughter).

Case illustration 3: Social workers discussing clients

In this case I have chosen material from the weekly staff meetings that are dominated by giggling, joking and even gossiping about clients.

A staff meeting typically begins with friendly jokes about clients or a social worker's own personal situation. The point of departure for the evaluation of clients is in this way always rooted in personal, informal interaction. The following extract stem from a staff meeting where two clients (A, B) are being evaluated by three social workers (A, B, C):

Social worker A: I have not seen client A since our meeting last week.

Social worker B: (cautious laughing) I just told client A's supervising caseworker in his municipality that it is going *so* well with him. [A series of jokes follows, which present client A as suffering from premenstrual stress, resulting in great laughter].

Social worker C: Client A walks around downtown.

Social worker B: He can't walk. He has arthritis.

Social worker C: Well, he walks just fine. He wanders about (joint laughter).

Social worker A: I feel sorry for him; I am not saying he can't be deceiving me.

Social worker B: (laughing) He is. You can be sure of that. He is a real deviant (joint

laughter). (…) And client B – she has all kinds of illnesses.

Social worker C: Also in reality? (Joint laughter).

Social worker B: She has several diagnoses, but I don't know...

Social worker A: I have been listening to her for an hour to an hour and a half every day (little laughter). She is a nut case and simpleminded; you name it, she's got it. [The social workers laugh in a hysterical manner].

It is obvious that it can be problematic to mix an evaluation of a client's situation with ironic statements, as exemplified in the dialogue. In this context, however, I will primarily focus on what the irony and laughter that results from it accomplishes in the interaction. In the dialogue, the social workers are talking about two clients that might be lying about their situation, which creates an impossible situation for the social workers, who cannot help or even work with a person that lies about his or her abilities (Hasenfeld 1983). It is this kind of situation that makes Goffman's (1961) query of the relevance of a service ideal (symbolizing an equal relation where clients recognize social workers as experts) in interaction between client and social worker. Sometimes clients do not want the "service" presented to them by social workers, and sometimes clients lie in order to improve their situation (as they see it). The relation between the two parties is thus far from being a voluntarily, equal relation. For these reasons an ideal of service "condemns" the two parties to a false and difficult relationship, as Goffman puts it (1961).

In the example we see how irony and laughter help the social workers through a difficult conversation in awareness of the absurdity of conducting a professional discussion. How can social workers evaluate clients' abilities in these

organizations when clients have been dishonest about their capabilities on several occasions (client A walks around despite his arthritis, and client B might not be trustworthy)? This rhetorical question seems to be implicit in the way they talk. Laughter can also be analyzed as a method to legitimize the derogatory conversation by signalizing that the different statements are humorous and therefore should not be taken too seriously. My material shows that irony and sarcasm mostly concerns clients that the social workers have a hard time helping, not only because clients might be lying, but also in situations were the clients' skills (or lack thereof) make them ill-suited to the Western labor market's demand for educated workers. These situations can be conceptualized by Douglas' term, "a joke in the social structure", because they consist of inherent contradictions generating laughter.

The irony and sarcastic comments about clients, however, also produce a paradox for the social workers, as they in various situations express a wish for an equal and respectful relation to clients. As they gossip, social workers often show signs of embarrassment, e.g., looking down at the table, barely laughing, etc. Obviously, it is a ritual one cannot escape from, although it is sometimes awkward or painful. When I focused on this practice during interviews, the social workers' typical explanation was that they needed to "rid themselves" of all the "emotional shit the clients bombard us with all the time", as one social worker explains. Later in the interview, the social worker explains that they have no way of dealing with "all that illness, all that despair". What is interesting about this particular excuse for the sarcastic comment about the clients (that always leads to laughter) is the missing connection between the "desperate stories" and the derogatory statements. Clients like client A and B are not in a particularly "desperate" situation when viewed in a wider context of "illness" or "problematical background". Many clients are, however,

particularly reluctant to engage in the activities applied by the social workers in the "clarification process", mostly – as the clients explain – because it is not obvious to the clients how the activities can help them. It is understandable that any criticism directed towards organizational and contextual conditions can be difficult, if not downright impossible to deal with for social workers in their daily work. Assuming that humor, irony and laughter connects to contradictory conditions, one can view the derogatory remarks as a sort of "automatic" (not explicitly "chosen") action that reflects the impossible work situation, which clients like client A and B from before places the social workers in. This analysis is supported by the social workers' expression of dislike when we discuss this practice.

The following dialogue with a social worker demonstrates the ambivalent situation produced by the derogatory conversation of clients (that always results in much laughter):

Interviewer: How do you feel about the comments about the clients? You know, all the funny and ironic statements.

Social worker: *That*, I can tell you…*that*, it took me many years to learn how to cope with *that*.

Interviewer: All right. Why?

Social worker: Well, that … I just felt that it was some sort of transgression of limits I couldn't relate to. And I was actually starting to get shocked by being here. And I was going to quit. Because I thought, either you cope or leave, as social worker B told me. Because if I couldn't stand for *that*…It is sick humor sometimes. And you simply have to be able to let *that* out sometimes. Otherwise you simply can't stay here. I just

don't think so.

The social worker emphasizes "that", meaning the "sick humor" several times indicating that this way of communicating is not at preferable way of talking; it is a communication form that she wants to distance herself from. Note that she says "simply" two times in a row to provide a standardization of this behavior, and she thereby emphasizes the lack of choice that is presumably connected to irony and sarcasm. It is the *naturalness* of irony and sarcasm that is interesting here, because it directs attention towards organizational contradictions in the work and not towards specific (problematic) characteristics of clients, or, for that matter, towards specific (problematic) characteristics of social workers. These are not *their* jokes (for which they would have to take responsibility) but are, as I have been arguing, the prevailing jokes inherent in the social structure itself.

Concluding discussion

In this article I have included a range of different (but everyday) situations that provoke laughter in order to show how they relate to the organizational context, i.e., in this case the many inherent contradictions in social work. Organizational conditions in social work render equality (and casualness) as impossible strategies for social workers in their contact with clients because the clients are ultimately forced to participate and the social workers do in fact have authority over them (they must evaluate them). I have shown that the social workers attempts' to create an informal environment dominated by a comfortable, relaxed, joking atmosphere in their meeting with clients. I have also shown that clients typically refuse to participate

in the joking (verified by this groups absence of laughter) indicating that there exists a social distance between the social workers and clients. Because it is mainly the social workers that make the humorous remarks and ironic statements and also mainly them who subsequently participate in the laughter, it is likewise an indication that everyone cannot temporarily take control of a situation. Buttny (2001) has noted this of joking in general.

Gail Jefferson (1979) has noted in a classical article that laughter can be viewed as an invitation that can be accepted or declined. When clients decline the invitation it has devastating consequences for the interaction. When clients decline to laugh they challenge an important goal of the organization, namely to develop a cozy, informal atmosphere among clients and social workers. The article has shown that laughter is a face saving device (Goffman) that especially social workers apply in "delicate" (Haakana 2001) and "tense" (Adelswärd 1989) situations (produced by contradictory conditions). The delicacy is caused by the fact that many activities cast clients in the role of children, contradicting their ordinary status as adults. The article has shown that in most circumstances humor and irony are connected to situations where childish rhetoric and activities produce great tension, and not joyful, comfortable interaction. In these tense situations humor, irony and the laughter that results become tools to test the consensus among social workers and clients. The result is that clients often refrain from laughing, while social workers try to create a mutually comfortable and joyful atmosphere by joking and laughing. Joking is far from a neutral act. By directing a joke at a specific person, social workers can "demand" a response from that person, because of the general interaction rule of humor that requires listeners of jokes to respond with a laugh (Mulkay 1988). Clients can, however, also control the interaction by being silent and thus, as we saw, disturb the

sense of comfort.

These results support Mulkay's (1988: 28) thesis that in the:

"[D]omain of humor (…) the multiplicity of social worlds does not have to be denied (…) In this alternative mode, these problematic features are humorously exaggerated, creatively contrived and celebrated enthusiastically (…) The various contradictory 'worlds' can coexist".

Moreover, it reinforces Coser's (1959, 1960) and Douglas' (1999) ideas about the connection between paradoxes and humor by describing the role of humor and laughter in social work. If humor and laughter reflects paradoxical reality of the social situations then humorous remarks and ironic statement at the two rehabilitation organizations are not only to be expected but also demanded. Throughout the article I have highlighted contradictory conditions in the organizations' practices, related to the goal of the work and related to the social workers' descriptions of the ironic, derogatory statements they often engage in.

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