Buckets of Steam and Left-handed Hammers. The Fool's Errand as Signal of Epistemic and Coalitional Dominance

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Abstract

In various professional groups, experts send rookies on absurd tasks as a joke. The fool's errand appears in factories and hospitals, in elite schools and scout camps, among soldiers, sailors, and airmen. Why are newcomers deceived and humiliated, and why are pranks relatively similar and remarkably persistent over time? I propose that the cultural success and the recurrent features of the fool's errand are based on evolved cognitive mechanisms activated by apprenticeship as social learning and group induction. Epistemic vigilance explains how novices are reliably deceived by experts using opaque statements erroneously perceived as pedagogical. Furthermore, coalitional psychology explains why insiders use the prank as strategic signalling of hierarchies based on epistemic asymmetry. The intersection of cognitive mechanisms and patterns of professional recruitment maintains a tradition of ritualised pranking in which insiders coordinate to humiliate newcomers to assert epistemic and coalitional dominance.

Keywords

1   Introduction

A newly hired nurse is asked to get the "vein caller" or to "borrow the auto-clave" (Buxman 2008). Textile factory apprentices seek for "a long weight", "a long stand", "rubber nails", "a bucket of steam", or a "leather-faced hammer" (Messenger 1988). Novices in Domino Pizza kitchens are asked to retrieve a "dough repair kit" (Foss 1996), baseball rookies go looking for a "box of sliders" (Gmelch 2006) and fresh sailors are instructed to keep watch for the "mail buoy" (Zurcher 1965).

Practical pranks known as "the fool's errand" appear in a multitude of professional contexts. The hoaxes humiliate innocent victims and seem to violate expectations of truthfulness and cooperation among colleagues. Moreover, it is puzzling that so many people everywhere fall for the trick. How does the prank work? Why do members deceive their new mates? And what makes such jokes accepted and reproduced within a local tradition?

This paper argues that the existence and persistence of such pranks and their recurrent features can be explained by an interaction between universal, evolved mental mechanisms and particular forms of social distribution and transmission of knowledge. The pranks successfully exploit evolved mental capacities for epistemic vigilance and metarepresentation. The hoaxes are disguised as lateral learning in apprenticeship, and revolve around incomplete mental representations based on opaque statements received from competent and benevolent individuals.

The motivation to perform the prank derives from evolved dispositions for strategic coordination to signal membership to coalitions. The fool's errand appears within a structure of epistemic asymmetry between seniors and novices, and public humiliation demonstrates dominance by competence and coalitional affiliation. The pranks degrade the status of newcomers and produce a collective display of professional status hierarchies. But jokes also offer a legitimate reason for newcomers to accept the authority of seniors and to become members of the coalition. The fool's errand is thus a form of coercion and dominance which signals the boundaries and the internal hierarchy of a social group based on skill.

2   Prank Variations on a Common Theme: A Review of the Evidence

Folklore archives record the fool's errand as motif J2346: "an apprentice, or newcomer or ignorant person, etc., is sent for absurd or misleading or nonexistent objects or on a ridiculous quest" (Baughman 1966). This

definition covers a plethora of variants of the fool's errand which stand proof to the rich imagination of people everywhere in deceiving others for mirthful purposes, yet all following a surprisingly similar scenario. Before proposing an explanatory model, I offer an overview of the content and context of these pranks as found in academic literature and historical records. A fool's errand starts when an experienced member asks an inexperienced newcomer to perform an impossible task. Usually, the instructions include sending the "fool" to other experienced members who carry the joke further. The "errand" is prolonged and involves as many experts-turned-pranksters as possible until someone reveals the plot to the unfortunate victim, or there is no-one left to carry further the joke.

Among tractor mechanics, young workers fetch a "pipe stretcher", "blinker fluid", "concrete welding rod", "brake pad lubricant", "bubble grease to lubricate the spirit level bubble", "K-9P tire fluid" (Welsch 2005:211ff). Among printers, new employees look for "type lice", "paper-stretchers", or, in recent times, "a bucket of halftone dots" from a non-existent basement (Holtzberg-Call 1992) and "a twenty-four point cap quad" (Thompson 1947). Among construction workers, young workers try to find "skyhooks", "board stretchers", or a "left-handed wrench/screwdriver/hammer"(McCarl 1978:157). Dundee apprentices were sent to find "half-round squares", "the soft-pointed chisel" or the "brass-faced file" (Honeyman 1959).

Fool's errands also occur in the armed forces at the expense of fresh recruits. In the Navy, a "boot sailor" i.e. a novice is asked to keep watch for the "mail buoy", to fetch "sea-stamps" (used to send sea mail using the "mail buoy", of course) or to give a message to "Charlie Noble" – a name for the galley smokestack (Berkman 1946; Zurcher 1965). Another item desired by maritime pranksters is a "can of bulkhead remover" (Johnson 2002). In tank units, a new soldier fetches a "pump for (solid) rubber wheels" (Gilbert and Gerrard 2004:9). Novice airmen are sent to get a "bucket of prop wash" (Taylor 2002:74) and army cadets look for "a tin of striped paint" and "a long wait" (Lingham 2006).

The impossible task usually involves an absurd object, which nonetheless sounds relevant to the surrounding activity. The absurdity comes from:
– definitional self-contradiction (e.g. "half-round squared"),
– technological impracticability ("soft pointed chisel") or incongruity ("diesel spark plugs")
– redundant definitions of real objects ("left-handed screwdrivers")
– wordplays ("K-9P fluid" pronounced similar to "canine pee", "long stand" or "long weight" i.e. wait)
– real things misidentified as tools (e.g. Fallopian tubes).

An impressive incarnation of the "fool's errand" appears in the "Notions", a highly specialised form of slang used by students in their informal conversations and traditional rites of passage in Winchester College(Stevens and Stray 1998; Wakeford 1969). At this prestigious independent boarding school in the United Kingdom, a junior student is sent by an older student to search for a book called Pempe. The errand takes the "fool" from one senior student to the next, each of them adding something to the Pempe task. At one stage, pranksters write on piece of paper "πέμπε τὸν μῶρον πρότερον" in Classical Greek "pempe ton moron proteron" - "send the fool further".

In this paper, I will focus on the vast majority of fool's errands which are associated with transition from one social role to another as a rite of passage (Van Gennep 1960, Dundes 1989), part and parcel of a tradition of "mastering pain" by suffering punishment and abuse (Lancy 2012). These pranks are long-lived elements of the local tradition of the workplace or institution. "Sea stamps" seems to have survived for more than 150 years in the American Navy (Bennett 2005) and the Whykemite hoax may have an even longer history. What explains the cultural success of this prank form? Why does it reliably trick novices in such various contexts? And why do members want to trick newcomers in the first place?

3   Is the Fool's Errand a Form of Hazing?

Newcomers can be disruptive to a social group (Turner 1969, Moreland and Levine 2002) and their induction is both a challenge to the social order and a moment to assert its principles (Turner 1969, Van Gennep 1960). Their presence may activate evolved coalitional psychology which includes a set of mental mechanisms aimed at identifying, punishing and excluding free-riders in cooperative groups (Tooby, Cosmides & Price 2006, Boyer 2018). Thus, "a strong feature of coalitional psychology will be organized around issues of membership, group identity, the price of entry, initiation, genuineness of membership (loyalty, commitment), exclusivity, and the pressure on new members to make contributions to bring them into the implicit exchange relationship in the minds of veteran members" (Tooby, Cosmides & Price 2006:114).

Cimino (2011, 2013) has proposed an evolutionary theory of hazing based on adaptive responses to the inclusion of new individuals in a coalition. His automatic accrual theory suggests that newcomers could exploit default benefits conferred by membership such as pooled goods or status as dominance or prestige. Fresh members whose allegiance has not yet been tested may exploit automatic benefits conferred by affiliation without paying the costs

of producing and maintaining these assets. Hazing may be a test of commitment at entry to a group (e.g, Moreland and Levine 2002) and Cimino argues that the abuse of newcomers or prospective members increases the costs of low-tenure membership to discourage free-riding. Only committed candidates would accept to be humiliated or pay other arbitrary costs, weeding out insufficiently motivated individuals.

Professional pranks are indeed costly for victims induced by seniors to spend time and energy pursuing absurd tasks. But fool's errands are not tests of commitment, since prank victims do not choose to undertake the practice – in fact they are ignorant of what is going on. The hoax does not indicate anything about the motivation of newcomers; it merely proves how easily they can be deceived and humiliated. Since the joke is hidden from outsiders and unilaterally imposed upon newcomers, it cannot screen out free riders.

Moreover, professional pranks and hazing as modeled by Cimino have different timing and conditionality. Hazing happens before newcomers are accepted as full members and one cannot claim to belong to a fraternity unless they submit to its initiation practices. The initiation is known to both inductors and inductees as a condition of membership and its performance is a signal of membership. The situation is different when novices join a work group or professional collective as outsiders in all but formal membership. Pranks occur after the apprentice has been hired or otherwise formally introduced to the activity group and they are not a requirement for formal membership. A boot sailor already wears the Navy uniform when suffering the collective humiliation of searching for "fallopian tubes".

Formal membership is, however, distinct from the actual coalitions and social relationships on the ground. Apprentices have not been accepted by seniors as peers and they have not proven their commitment or desire to integrate. The collective usually has no voice in selecting new members and holds no information about the newcomers since the automatic induction of a novice in a group is externally decided by higher authorities – management, officers, or teachers. Novices also cannot choose their work group and are ignorant about its membership and rules.

Cimino's automatic accrual theory may nonetheless explain why novices are degraded because they do receive a default social resource: the status of a member. However, the social position of apprentices contains an incongruity. They know next to nothing about the profession yet they wear the markers and carry the outward identity of an insider.

The mistreatment of newcomers in hazing may thus be a form of coercion and dominance which communicates skills and attitudes, enforces social hierarchies, and enhances the social dependency of novices (Keating et al 2005).

Senior members may compel newcomers to pursue abasing activities to signal their collective superiority of status: "[t]he punitive sentiment veterans feel towards new entrants, combined with the advantages for veterans of creating strong representations of the dominance of the coalition over new members, together often lead to the coordinated infliction of costs by veterans on new entrants" (Tooby, Cosmides & Price 2006:114).

If our minds are sensitive to newcomers as potential freeloaders as Cimino argues, then any kind of individual joining a shop floor or ship should strike out as suspicious for our evolved coalitionary psychology. However, fool's errands target a special kind of "newcomer": the novice. Apprentices begin as coalitional outsiders and they also lack certain capacities which provide status in professional contexts. Moreover, they are dependent upon insiders to develop said competences in the particular social context of apprenticeship. The very process of learning is engaged by the pranksters for signaling purposes.

4   Cognitive Opacity and Deception

We intuitively "get" how the prank works but its mechanisms rely upon complex systems of mental representation involved in deception (Umbres 2013). We are not gullible (Mercier 2020) and the formidable success of the hoax does not involve some sort of mental error on behalf of the victims. Novices in so many places fall for the same kind of prank, over and over again across history, including a reputed British natural scientist attending Winchester College in the mid XIXth century (Bompas 1909). On the contrary, the mental representations and behaviour of prank victims are explained by naturally-evolved capacities and dispositions for communication.

An apprentice is asked to fetch a "pipe-stretcher" or a "bucket of halftone dots" from another worker. They have never seen or heard about such items and they do not have a clear image of how the items look or function. The information communicated by experts however leads to a mental representation of a "pipe-stretcher" or a "bucket of halftone dots." The mental content can be formalised as [*a tool for stretching pipes that master John needs*] or [*a bucket with unknown contents that can be found in the basement*]. Even though the referenced item cannot be unambiguously represented and identified, the opaque concept can appear in semi-propositional beliefs held to be true despite an incomplete representation of content (Sperber 1982): "I will find the [*tool that stretches pipes*] at master Jack". These (mistaken) beliefs motivate novices to pursue absurd prank tasks, just as jokesters intended.

The capacity to form metarepresentations with incompletely specified contents is not a bug, but a feature of our evolved cognition. We all start our cultural lifes as skilled apprentices (Sterelny 2012) equipped with mental inclinations to acquire knowledge from others. Such mechanisms have evolved by natural selection and they allow for uniquely-human phenomena such language acquisition and culture in general (but see Hayes 2019 for a critical overview and an alternative perspective).

Semi-propositional beliefs allow us to use and communicate complex cultural inventions. One believes that antibiotics fight against bacterial infections although mental representations of "antibiotics", "fight", "bacteria" or "infection" include many opaque parts. For example, do antibiotics kill or stop bacteria from reproducing? Are they liquid or solid? What colour or shape? Whatever the interpretation (if there is any), one will efficiently apply an antibiotic ointment to prevent microbial infection and will teach others to do so as well.

We do not know very much about antibiotics when we seek and use medicines but we also need not find out more. The meanings of many of our concepts are acquired and sometimes held perpetually by deferring their full propositional meaning to experts in the linguistic and cognitive division of labour (Burge 1986, Putnam 1973). I know the meaning of "water" but only a chemist can tell if what I mean by "water" is truly dihydrogen monoxide. The immense advantages of relying upon other minds depend, however, on minimising risk of misinformation.

5   How Hoaxes Deceive Evolved Minds

The truth value of metarepresentations such as "This ring is made of gold" or "Master Jack has the pipe-stretchers" is dependent upon receiving true information from the chemist or the plumber. Testimony can be unreliable if the source transmits information of poor quality. The speaker may genuinely but wrongly believe that the ring is made of gold or may want to manipulate the recipient through intentional deception. Evolution would thus favour mental mechanisms offering the benefits of filtering out false information, helping individuals to acquire true and relevant knowledge from communication.

A recent proposal is the capacity for epistemic vigilance (Sperber et al 2010) based on the evolution of minds and the pragmatics of communication (Sperber and Wilson 1986). The mechanisms aim to secure reliable information and avoid sources of communication which have either poor knowledge,

or bad intentions regarding the recipient. Human minds interpret communication inferentially by analysing both who communicates and what is being communicated.

The latter form of vigilance analyses whether the information is internally-valid (e.g. lacking logical fallacies) and consistent with prior knowledge. We believe our friend says it will rain because we see him carrying an umbrella or we hear the thunder. But we might believe he is well-intended but wrong if the weather forecast mentioned storms without rain.

Vigilance towards the source assesses the competence and benevolence of emitters of information. We believe our partner when they point to the storage and say there are no diapers at home because they are presumably well informed and have no reason to lie about domestic needs. However, when a tout claims his restaurant serves the best biryani in London, we do not trust his testimony because we doubt his capacity to survey (impartially) all curry-houses and we suspect his marketing intentions.

Epistemic vigilance is an optimising cognitive mechanism which often processes incomplete information. The truth value of propositions cannot be evaluated by receivers if they lack prior knowledge, there are no available ways to verify its accuracy, or parts of the utterance may not be intelligible. While epistemic vigilance towards content cannot function in this case, useful and scarce knowledge is sometimes delivered by opaque statements. One cannot fully comprehend complex technical knowledge such as laymen learning about antibiotics use against bacteria, or sailors discovering tools and practices on their first ship.

Incompletely-understood statements may still be deemed true due to vigilance towards the source. Good reasons can make us accept cognitively-opaque testimony (Mercier and Sperber 2011). We believe a partially incomprehensible statement when we trust the source of communication. We believe doctors when they say that this drug taken daily will cure our bacterial infection, just as we learn from trusted sources a great variety of practical knowledge without full comprehension. However, vigilance towards the source may suffer from two kinds of error. We may be unintentionally led into error by speakers with false knowledge, but also intentionally by speakers who know the truth but want to misinform us. Pranksters belong to this second category.

Journalists at Academia Cațavencu, a Romanian satirical newspaper, asked politicians in 1992 about their opinion on the incredibly large amount of hydrogen in Bucharest's water supply: 66%! Many, including the Mayor of Bucharest and several MPS, expressed their outrage and promised immediate

action. Adrian Severn, future MEP in the 2000s, declared that the Council of Europe was already greatly concerned. A similar spoof request made some way inside the legal system in California, exploiting fear of contamination with "dihydrogen monoxide". Whether by ignorance of chemical formulas or by lack of attention, the victims of such hoaxes acted on premises based on incompletely represented states of affairs i.e. contamination of water with foreign substances.

While pranks on politicians are isolated affairs, fool's errands form a tradition of recurrent and widespread events with a similar structure and stable contents. The joke type exploits the vulnerability of minds to opaque statements hiding a ruse, but the weakness comes from the prank's embedding in a social institution of learning and cooperation.

6   Epistemic Dependence in Apprenticeship

Factories, schools, and regiments provide the perfect context for a prank which requires default trust in communication. The fool's errands reliably exploit universal mental mechanisms because they occur in a particular configuration of social interaction under conditions of epistemic asymmetry. Pranksters have mastery over professional knowledge and victims are ignorants with respect to the epistemic domain which defines the social context of the prank, be it factories, schools or armies. Novices begin as outsiders lacking competence and depend upon the expertise of insiders to learn the terminology and technology used in the focal activity. Apprenticeship is a perfect example for the role played by semi-propositional beliefs in acquiring cultural knowledge, and pranks are an intentional exploitation of traditions of learning and minds evolved for communication.

Newcomers cross an epistemic boundary when they join an organisation from the outer world and start to acquire its culture from older members. Like children entering an unknown world to be discovered from within (themselves compared to apprentices in Rogoff 1990), novices start from a position of ignorance of the surrounding material, social, and cultural ecology. Many things said and done will be entirely opaque to novices but transparent for the veterans with common knowledge of words and practices.

Apprentices will gradually learn from experts new words, roles, practices, tools, norms, and names. The process of learning in many professional settings is different to formal teaching and depends upon legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger 2018). In fact, apprentices sometimes should not ask

questions since this would challenge the authority of masters (Herzfeld 1995). Instead of active inquiry or teaching or inquiry, learning is by doing.

Apprentices learn about tools and operations during normal work activities, they accumulate new knowledge by assisting salty sailors, experienced mechanics or older students with minor chores. Apprentices are often asked to fetch tools with arcane names and assist with weird-sounding operations, the "menial phase" of apprenticeship (Lancy 2012). Here is an example of a conversation showing how unknown concepts are used and taught: "Welder: "Get me a 'round about.' "Trainee: "What's a round about ?" Welder: "It's in the truck, get me a round about." Welder: After trainee returns with the wrong tool, "that ain't no round about." Trainee: "Well, I don't know what a round about is." Welder: Walking to the truck to get the tool (a device used to mark pipe for cutting). "Boy, if you gonna' weld on the pipeline, you gonna' hafta learn what a round about is." (Graves 1958:12).

Even when apprentices have formal schooling, they lack practical knowledge and jargon skills – "they don't know a dope pot from a granny rag." (Graves 1958:10). What are the "dogleg reamer" or the "nail eater"? Who are the Commensalibus Praefecti and what can they do to Winchester College freshmen? The initial cognitive opacity of jargon and technique dissipates as apprentices engage in professional activities, observe experts and help out with minor chores. This learning phase is sometimes described as "stealing" the secrets and the lore (Lancy 2012), evoking the active role of apprentices as gleaners of information instead of passive receptors.

Just as novices join an organisation, the fool's errand infiltrates and masquerades as normal lateral pedagogy of opaque concepts. With incomplete comprehension of the opaque prank content, the evolved mechanisms of epistemic vigilance of apprentices can only evaluate the benevolence and competence of the sources of communication. The competence of insiders is common knowledge indicated by senior membership in the professional group and by recurrent and obvious proofs of expertise. Apprentices are thus epistemically justified to defer the meaning of opaque concepts to experts. "A pair of fallopian tubes" is mentally processed similarly to a "granny rag", but only one is a real tool.

Novices are deceived because their epistemic vigilance fails to detect the pranksters' lack of benevolence. Experts do not intend to teach newcomers a new technological concept nor do seniors include novices in cooperative, coordinated interaction for shared purposes of work and/or learning. The prank is a lesson, indeed, but one which teaches something about social relationships in the group.

7 Prank Absurdity as Cue of Competence and Membership

Apprentices occupy a liminal position in organisations: neither outsiders, nor insiders. They receive formal membership yet lack both expertise and social integration in actual socio-professional coalitions. The acquisition of skill depends upon senior members accepting and teaching newcomers, directly but especially indirectly, the terms and the techniques of the trade. However, the process of knowledge acquisition happens over a period of time during which apprentices remain epistemically-dependent upon veterans (Coy 1991).

But when and how do they become members of the social coalition? And what kind of membership do they receive? Fool's errands show that newcomers are members without competence, epistemically subordinate to all others in the coalition. It also proves that unequal technological knowledge is the backbone of the status hierarchy in the shop floor over and beyond formal membership.

The spontaneous and coordinated deception of novices is a form of subtle coercion which demonstrates the dominance of veterans over apprentices in terms of both skill and social alliances. The prank is a collective display of epistemic force based on covert cooperation between veterans to humiliate novices. The joke is not planned in advance but develops through spontaneous coordination. The initiator who sends the "fool" on an absurd errand involves a second expert who sends the victim further and so on. Each time apprentices make a request further down the line, they convey a covert signal which helps experts coordinate for a collective humiliation of newcomers. One by one, pranksters adhere to a coalition which deceives and demeans novices, an impromptu alliance for humiliation which, in theory and often in practice, includes all veterans.

While any secret symbol, any arbitrary cue could serve as a coordination device between pranksters, the use of absurdity in fool's errands delivers a further cue of coalitional discrimination. It is not only that newcomers can be deceived, it is also how. Given epistemic dependence, a naive and obedient apprentice may be sent to search in vain for anything. However, the fool's errand does not use realistic yet non-existent tools. A pink hammer is ontologically possible even though it does not exist on the site and no pink hammer has ever existed. "Left handed screwdrivers" or "Diesel spark plugs" are generally absurd for anyone with relevant professional knowledge. Diesel engines ignite by compression and lefties use regular screwdrivers (which are ambidextrous implements unlike pruning shears or scythes). Not only that such things do not exist, they cannot reasonably exist.

One can trick even a master by asking for a tool which could exist (but cannot be found in that context), but hardly with a technological impossibility. Given expertise, competent workers can be epistemically vigilant towards prank contents and see beyond the ruse, or at least become skeptical of apparently benevolent utterances. The prank is socially selective because it is epistemically selective.

The hoax thus exploits lack of professional acumen, not general ignorance. Trickery by absurd statements delivers a reliable measure of skill for all actors involved. The prank does no harm to anything or anyone else but a "fool" and hence distinguishes novices from experts. The cue is visible for insiders but hidden for apprentices and the society of laymen from which they are recruited. As a secret of the profession (Simmel 1906), it draws a memorable boundary between insiders and outsiders.

Further proof that fool's errands are forms of epistemic dominance is that such pranks never target, to my knowledge, expert newcomers. Though not immune to deception per se, experts joining a professional coalition cannot be tricked because they either detect the absurdity or they already know the joke through past experiences in the workforce. The competences of incoming experts remain valuable and relevant in a new social arrangement of colleagues. They are not dependent upon other members for knowledge and their social value is superior compared to apprentices. Fool's errands thus cannot deceive expert newcomers or degrade a competent new member who occupies a position above the bottom of the professional hierarchy of a skill-based coalition.

Thus, pranksters humiliate apprentices using a joke that experts can detect, a professional shibboleth. However, the trick provides more than the public degradation of novices by collective expert deception. After initial humiliation, the apprentices may appreciate the cleverness of the joke and even show some self-deprecating humour. They also wise up. While fool's errands indexically place apprentices at the lower rungs of the hierarchy, they also provide inclusion to an epistemic coalition. Just like hazing, being pranked also means being included.

8   Coalitional Inclusion by Epistemic Humiliation

The baptism of fire by practical jokes is socially humiliating for novices by proving their lack of professional knowledge and epistemic dependence upon veterans. The pranks are also proof of the experts' coalitional capacity for coordinated deception. The outcome of the prank leaves apprentices subordinated

to each expert and to all of them as a group with shared competences and common incentives to signal distinction from naive outsiders. Yet merely being pranked makes apprentices members of the coalition of veterans, even if at the starting position.

When pranks infiltrate among the normally opaque statements of lateral pedagogy, they underscore the implicit power of experts who allow newcomers to learn the trade in joint activities. Veterans control the knowledge resources needed by apprentices and novices are able to learn from the expertise of seniors, but also due to their benevolence. A temporary suspension of goodwill contrasts with the normal toleration and indirect technological instruction of novices. Moreover, the prank does not change the normal course of activities and its aftermath restores the cooperative intentions of coalitional members towards new entries. Experts remain competent and continue to allow newcomers to acquire professional knowledge.

Usually, apprentices suffer a few "lessons" but the abuse of newcomers eventually comes to an end, just like hazing has a final moment when the hazees gain recognised membership. The boundary is murkier for professional jokes since traditions do not usually stipulate a clear endpoint of pranking. The "apprentice" identity of newcomers slowly morphs into that of colleague or regular worker and then expert. Pranks thus mark the entrance to the group and to the profession, and one could propose that pranks end once the newcomer is recognised by the professional coalition as a fellow member.

Fool's errands teach novices something beyond social domination. The only way to learn about the prank is to be a victim. The prank contents become transparent once the joke is revealed and apprentices will never fall for the same hoax again. Pranking is thus another form of implicit pedagogy of opaque and secret terms of the trade. Apprentices do not improve their professional knowledge after the prank but they gain social competence and social identity. Novices discover the collective cultural practice of pranking newcomers, they learn the lexicon and organisation of trickery, they get in on the joke.

If pranks distinguish between veterans and newcomers, the revelation of the hoax also makes them similar in a certain way. It provides them with a special internal marker of membership to a professional group. The expert-pranksters of today have been naive apprentices in the past and have likely suffered the same humiliation. The tricks target no apprentice in particular, but all novices are legitimate victims of a tradition of pranking just like the abuse of newcomers is not personal in hazing (Cimino 2016). A novice learns about this coalitional ritual by costly humiliation like everyone else did before. Yet after being pranked for several times, a newcomer joins those in the know, the group of professionals with a shared identity and shared lore. Today's "fool"

will probably initiate a joke in the future as a master sending a future novice on an errand.

The cycle of pranked apprentices turned into pranking members explains how fool's errands become a stable tradition which solves both the "Wear and Tear" and the "Flop" problems of cultural transmission (Morin 2016). The joke contents are simple and memorable enough to be reproduced faithfully across time. The motivations of pranksters remain similar across the generations which enter the coalitional structure of the professional organisation. All apprentices are tricked to signal the dominance of experts but also gain the competence and the right to prank. Man hands on misery to man, as the poem goes.

Moreover, the misery of apprentices is universally depersonalised. The cost of humiliation is equally and similarly supported by each newcomer, for as far back as anyone can remember. Fairness intuitions (Baumard 2016) could stabilise the norm that novices can, or should be, pranked at induction. It is a humiliating mark, but one received by all members at the beginning of their professional journey. Since everyone incurred the cost of humiliation in the past, there is no moral incentive to end the practice and give future newcomers a clear bill of induction.

9   Conclusions and Future Research

Some people become the butt of jokes in social groups and the "fool" has been described by sociologists as a deviant social type used as "a device of status reduction and social control" (Klapp 1949: 162). Fool's errands are "fool"-making practices which, despite the variety of linguistic tricks and contexts, share a pattern of coordinated deception and social humiliation.

I have argued that the regularity is explained by an intersection between social ecology and mental mechanisms. Fool's errands appear in contexts with a particular distribution of knowledge between insiders and outsiders where naive newcomers depend upon the explicit competence and the implicit benevolence of experts. This model suggests how the recurrence and prevalence of cultural things such as folklore motifs can be explained by evolved dispositions activated by particular social contexts.

On the one hand, epistemic dependence and lateral learning in apprenticeship makes novices less vigilant towards experts, and thus more vulnerable to deception. On the other hand, the presence of novices evokes evolved motivations for regulating coalitions just as in the case of hazing (Cimino 2013). The

prank coalesces a confederacy of experts around the shared goal of signaling a
salient distinction against laymen, a dividing line crossed by naive newcomers.
In contrast to hazing, professional pranks demonstrate more than the power of
the group over the new individual to impose costly performances as a condi-
tion for membership. Fool's errands prove the veterans' technological superior-
ity over ignorant novices, beyond the mere capacity to coordinate for collective
deception. Veterans humiliate apprentices by exploiting epistemic dependence
to assert individual and coalitional dominance based on competence while also
integrating new members in a confederacy of ex-prank victims.

Several hypotheses can be drawn from considering fool's errands as devices
which signal epistemic and coalitional dominance. While fool's errands use
opaque-yet-absurd concepts, their occurrence is embedded in a flurry of jar-
gon faced by novices in their early moments of apprenticeship. This idiom con-
tains names of unknown tools and activities but some parts are merely slang,
the replacement of popular words by terms restricted to a particular context or
group of users. It could be the case that such inventions add a layer of secrecy
around professional knowledge, a barrier against outsiders learning the tricks
of the trade. Indeed, clandestine professions and marginal/excluded groups
use slang (cant, etc) to hide their communication from dominant coalitions.
Similarly, knowledge of the fool's errands folklore provides an internal marker
of professional belonging.

Are hazing and fool's errands in competition, synergic, or alternatives
adapted to different coalitional contexts? On the face of it, the coercion of
hazing is based on a power imbalance where newcomers are isolated actors
numerically dominated by a larger coalition whose members coordinate to
control the entry mechanisms. While predictable abuse imposes a costly bar-
rier for entry, the fundamental distinction between existing members and
newcomers is that the former paid the cost in the past and the latter have yet
to do so. Veterans need not be more skilled than novices. However, hazing is
less severe when it includes some form of instrumental education (McCreary
and Schutts 2019).

Under certain conditions, pranks may be a more appropriate way to signal
dominance and coercion. One could be accused of unnecessary abuse by exter-
nal agents (management, officers, etc) when forcing newcomers to submit to
hazing. In contrast, trickery by absurd requests exploits the victim's naivete
and makes them unwitting accomplices. The relative importance of expertise
for coalitional identities should thus be positively correlated with pranks and
inversely correlated with hazing. At one end, we may find fraternity fellows
with little skill beyond the capacity to enforce a rudimentary "planned failure"

as a condition of entry (Cimino 2016). At the other end, we find highly skilled professions playing with complex jargon such as typesetters sending apprentices to find a "a twenty-four point cap quad" (Thompson 1947).

Hazing may involve coalitional dominance but no skill whatsoever. In professional groups, humiliation by fool's errand is a dual signal of dominance: the coordinated capacity and motivation to humiliate newcomers but also the epistemic competence to invent, use and detect an absurd prank. Just like other secrets of the trade, everyone learns the jokes by social and epistemic submission. There's only one way into a profession, and the road passes through the Caudine forks of humiliation.

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