

Humour as a Coping Mechanism in the Context of Collective Action

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Abstract

Humour is used as a coping mechanism in a diversity of contexts. However, little is known about humour as a coping mechanism in the context of collective action. It is important to examine this, since being active in collective action brings about challenges that could be detrimental to physical and mental health. In this explorative, qualitative study we investigate when humour is used as a coping mechanism in the context of collective action. We also explore whether the use of humour might be considered inappropriate in certain situations. We conducted semi-structured interviews (N=8) on participants with left-winged political interests and ties to various movements. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. Results show that humour is indeed used as a coping mechanism at different moments in collective action. Nevertheless, humour is considered inappropriate in certain circumstances. We conclude that this study is a great start of the research on humour as a coping mechanism in the context of collective action. By examining when and how humour is used as a coping mechanism in collective action, research can guide activists to ensure the durability of their collective action.

Keywords: humour, coping mechanism, collective action, activists, inappropriateness

Humour as a Coping Mechanism in the Context of Collective Action

Collective action brings about challenges which could potentially lead to activist burnout (Chen & Gorski, 2015; Danquah et al., 2021). Collective action in this article refers to any behaviour, individually or in a group, with the aim of improving the situation of that group. The definition of activism is kept rather broad, including not only street protests, but also activities on social media, or other individual behaviours to further stimulate social change. This means that in this article, the concepts of collective action and activism are interchangeable. An activist movement in this article refers to a certain group of activists, with specific values and wishes for social change. Activist burnout can occur when stressors related to activism become so overwhelming that they jeopardize the ability to continue the activism (Gorski, 2019; Gorski et al., 2019). This in turn can challenge the movement's viability (Chen & Gorski, 2015; Gorski & Chen, 2015). To keep collective action viable, it is therefore important to look at ways to limit the impact of stressors that come with collective action. Previous research found that humour can be used as a coping mechanism in a variety of settings, such as the workplace or when dealing with illness or death (Branney et al., 2014; Dangermond et al., 2022; Grandi et al., 2021; Kuiper & Martin, 1993). However, little is known about the effects that humour might have within collective action. It is interesting to see if humour can function as a coping mechanism in the context of collective action, because then it could help limit the impact of stressors that come with collective action. Therefore, this research explores the use of humour, specifically as a coping mechanism, in the context of collective action. Humour in this article refers to anything that is meant to be or is interpreted as humour. So it is a broad definition, inclusive of jokes, sarcasm, memes, and having fun together.

Conceptualizing collective action

Collective action has been operationalized in many different ways by different researchers within various disciplines (Van Zomeren et al., 2008). For clarification, it is therefore important to understand why we chose our definition of collective action. Highlighted in previous research is the importance of a behavioral measure for collective action, in order to be able to generalize to real life collective action (Van Zomeren et al., 2008). In addition, it is important to realize that there is a variety of behaviours that might be exhibited in collective action (Wright et al., 1990), and the definition of collective action that is used in research should make room for that variety of behaviours. Keeping all this in mind, operationally, collective action in this article refers to any action that is undertaken to further a collective cause. This includes street protests but also individual behaviours conducted with the same ultimate purpose of social change. In this way, we measure behaviour that has already taken place. We also kept the definition broad so participants can talk about a broad range of behaviours that are related to collective action in their eyes.

Relevance of collective action research

It is relevant to do research into collective action because of the challenges that come with being an activist, which could lead to symptoms like deterioration of physical and emotional health, increased feelings of hopelessness and activist burnout (Chen & Gorski, 2015; Danquah et al., 2021; Gorski, 2019; Gorski & Chen, 2015). Research found these results in different domains of activism, such as racial (Danquah et al., 2021) and social justice and human rights activism (Chen & Gorski, 2015). Because of these possibly severe consequences of participating in collective action, it is important to explore ways in which these challenges or stressors can be limited or prevented. One way to achieve this is to find ways to better cope with the burden of being an activist and the challenges activists face. One way of coping might be through the use of humour.

Conceptualizing humour

Humour is a widely used and familiar concept. It is shaped by different factors, therefore making it hard to conceptualize (Weinberger & Gulas, 2019). Because humour is reliant on various factors, our definition is kept rather broad, keeping room for the interpretations of the participants about humour and their experiences of humour. Humour is defined in this article as anything intended or presented as humour or having to do with fun or joy, such as jokes, satirical cartoons, humorous memes, protest signs or playful ludic actions and having fun together. Factors that influence humour are culture (Weinberger & Gulas, 2019), context ('T Hart, 2007) and a person's life experiences (Fry, 1994). Within humour, it is not only about the joke that is made, but also about the person who tells the joke, the people the joke is told to and their reaction, and the people who are present when the joke is being told (Dangermond et al., 2022). Because our definition is so broad, participants have the opportunity to talk about humour in light of their culture, the context in which humour is used, and in relation to their personal life experiences.

Humour as a coping mechanism

Previous research found indications that humour can function as a coping mechanism (Branney et al., 2014; Dangermond et al., 2022; Grandi et al., 2021; Kuiper & Martin, 1993). A positive relationship is, for example, found between humor production and the quality of functioning under stress (Bizi et al., 1988). In line with this, Kuiper and Martin (1993) found that humour was negatively correlated to perceived stress, thus supporting the idea that humour could function as a coping mechanism. A literature review by Ho (2016) also shows evidence of the beneficial effects that humour can have on psychological well-being, including fostering social support and boosting self-esteem, which consequently could lead to limiting the chance of getting burnout.

Humour is found to function as a coping mechanism in a diversity of contexts. One context in which humour is used as a coping mechanism is in the fire fighter culture

(Dangermond et al., 2022). Especially when critical incidents have happened, which are stressful and often life-threatening situations, humour is used to create a safe space where feelings can be expressed, to ensure social support and in general to deal with stress and complex situations. Sharing jokes with each other also generally benefited the group atmosphere and enhanced unity, further facilitating coping (Dangermond et al., 2022).

Another place where humour is found to function as a coping mechanism is in patients with penile cancer (Branney et al., 2014). In this context, humour helped deal with emotions that arose because of illness, treatment and consequences of treatment and also helped with bonding with health professionals (Branney et al., 2014). In funeral industry personnel, humour is also extensively used to cope (Grandi et al., 2021). Humour in this context helped deal with the constant exposure to death and the strong emotions that are connected with that.

In conclusion, previous research found different contexts in which humour can function as a coping mechanism. It would be interesting to see if these results also apply to the context of collective action. As stated before, we use a rather broad definition of humour. This means that, even though previous research sometimes focused on different kinds of humour and their specific effects on coping, it is beyond the scope of this exploratory research to do so, so we will not further discuss that (e.g., Bizi et al., 1988; Grandi et al., 2021).

Inappropriateness of using humour

Although humour is an important coping mechanism in a diversity of contexts, humour is not always considered appropriate. One situation in which humour is not considered appropriate is when feelings of extreme helplessness and defeat arise. Using humour in those situations could lead to breaking unwritten rules and crossing personal boundaries (Dangermond et al., 2022). So it seems that there is a limit to the magnitude of feeling helpless for humour to be seen as an appropriate coping mechanism. In patients with penile cancer, the downside of using humour was the fear of ridicule (Branney et al., 2014).

Humour can also be perceived as negative when a joke is considered hurtful. This is dependent on the context and the frequency that the joke is being told (Dangermond et al., 2022). The right balance of humour use was found to be dependent on social norms, the experiences of the joker, the audience, and the subject (Branney et al., 2014).

In conclusion, humour is used in different situations and can function as a coping mechanism, but at the same time, humour is not always considered appropriate. Aside from the importance of exploring when humour is used as a coping mechanism in the context of collective action, it is also interesting investigate when and why humour is considered inappropriate.

Present study

This research is an explorative, qualitative study that will look at situations in which humour is used as a coping mechanism in the context of collective action. We will also look at moments in which humour is considered inappropriate in the context of collective action. It is important to do this research, since there is a gap in the existing knowledge about humour as a coping mechanism in the context of collective action. This study tries to start filling that gap. Our research consists of semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis. The participants are political left-oriented people, with anti-fascist beliefs, from different generations, from Germany, with connections to a variety of collective action groups. The participants are tied to different movements, including Rote Armee Fraktion, ANTIFA, anarchist and climate movements such as Extinction Rebellion and Fridays for future. This research is part of a larger bachelor thesis project in which we will explore different ways in which humour is used in the context of collective action, explaining the notion that the result section consists of more results than is relevant to my own thesis project.

Method

Both the method and the results were written collectively by all students, to make this project fit into the timeline and course credits for the bachelor thesis. Hence, the method and results sections describe my own core topic of humour as a coping mechanism, as well as the other students' topics. This project received ethics clearance from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Behavioural and Social Sciences at the University of Groningen (research code: PSY-2122-S-0088).

Participants

In total, eight participants were recruited via the personal network of one of the bachelor thesis students in this project. The sample was recruited in order to grasp a wide range of perspectives on humour in collective action. We asked different activists, from various left-wing movements, who were available to participate in our research. This resulted in a sample that is relatively small and heterogeneous in both age and movement categories. The sample consisted of four males, three females, and one non-binary person. Ages ranged from 18 to 77 years old ($M=37$), with four people from generation Z (born 1997-2012), three people from generation X (born 1965-1980), and one person from generation Post War (born 1928-1945). Participants all originated from Germany, all have anti-fascist beliefs, and have a focus on collective action in Germany. Interviews were conducted with participants with different left-winged political interests and ties to various movements, including the ANTIFA, *Rote Armee Fraktion*, anarchists, and climate movements such as Fridays for future and Extinction Rebellion. We feel it is inappropriate to categorize the participants as members of specific movements, because it would inadequately represent the activists as they are all fluid members of multiple movements. Therefore, in the result section we will use quotes of the participants themselves to elaborate on the movements they are or were active in and the political interests they have. During recruitment, participants were told that we were interested in humour in the context of past experiences with protest. No inducement to

participate was given. Two persons who were invited to participate, did not participate after all, due to the COVID-19 situation.

Semi-structured interviews

Individual, semi-structured interviews were used to gather the information. This made it possible to gather information about the different topics of interest, and also leaving room for individual experiences and diverse points of view related to humour and collective action. Interviews were done with two or three interviewers at a time, as it was more feasible to keep track of the questions asked with another interviewer, as well as having the interview be more of a conversation. One interview was done with only one interviewer because of scheduling reasons. The main language for the interviews was English, however some parts were said in German as it seemed more easy for participants to express themselves more freely.

Furthermore, one interview was done entirely in German due to the language barrier, with some explanations in Portuguese for the second interviewer. The other interviews have been conducted in English as the entire project was laid out in English and most interviewers do not speak German. All interviews, except for one, were conducted in real life, in a safe environment in a quiet apartment. One interview has taken place online through Google meet, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The duration of the interviews ranged between 44-97 minutes. All interviews were double audio recorded with mobile phone devices and were transcribed manually. All the recordings were deleted after transcription, due to the privacy regulations. The topics that were covered in the interviews, were (1) involvement in collective action (e.g. 'What kinds of activism have you taken part in?'), (2) functions of humour in collective action, (3) appropriateness of humour (e.g. 'Do you think there is anything that might make humour/fun around this cause inappropriate?'), and (4) violence around collective action (e.g. 'Have you ever experienced a moment in which protest/collective action reached a tipping point, when the atmosphere became tense/grim/ when the atmosphere changed?'). The

main focus of our questions was which effects humour can have in collective action, as we tried to ask the participants as much about their experiences as possible. The interview questions can be found in Appendix A.

The interviews were conducted as casual conversations, using open questions (see the above) as a guideline, in line with the semi-structured interview approach. At the end of the interview there was room for the participants to ask questions or add information or discuss topics they felt were relevant to the interview.

Analytic approach

We chose to use thematic analysis as an analytic method due to it being compatible with open-ended inquiry and a deductive theoretical framework. An initial coding scheme was provided by our supervisor, based on the first four interviews that were transcribed. After that, each transcript was coded by one of the researchers, using the initial coding scheme.

Additional codes were added if it was needed, based on new relevant information. We made an attempt to construct a coding scheme that was extensive and that fitted the research questions. See Appendix A for the interview questions and Appendix B for the final coding scheme. A second researcher went over the transcripts again using the enhanced coding scheme. In that way we tried to make sure that all the relevant information in all eight transcripts were coded, allowing us to answer our research questions as thoroughly as possible.

Results

The analysis contains three parts, divided into sub-parts. The analysis begins with an introduction of the participants. After that, we look at different functions of humour within collective action. Finally, we will look at situations in which humour use might be considered inappropriate.

Participants' demographic backgrounds

First and foremost, for the interpretation and understanding of the quotes, it is of importance to be aware of the content of the sample. The sample consists of people from different generations, indicating different eras of left-wing activism. This may have an influence on their points of view about humour in activism, thus this needs to be taken into consideration when interpreting the quotes. The political identity of the participants is rather difficult to categorise into specific movements, as this is not set in stone and is always subject to change. An overall striking aspect one should keep in mind is that most participants did not feel like they were part of a solid group.

P3, P4, P5 and P7 are all part of the older generations of the sample (post-war and generation X). These participants have taken part in many forms of activism in the past. Currently, all four participants are implementing their experiences from earlier decades in journalism. In this way, they can still advocate for the things they consider important. P3 is currently furthering political action professionally as part of a political newspaper addressing and informing many activists of current events.

P3: I was mainly in antifascist protesting because in Germany after the reunification there was quite a wave of neo-Nazis and not only neo-Nazi movement but also militant neo-Nazis who attacked people with a migration background but really we had to sometimes to go to houses where they lived and just stay there to protect them because we knew Nazis are coming, (...). Well, it's [also] important for me to protest around Fridays For Future and against furthering this climate crisis. (...) What I established in my paper was a small group of people like a project who do only climate issues and they reach out to the movement and try to reach the movement to channel the information from the movement in Instagram as mainly, that's where we do it.

P3 became involved in anti-fascist activism after the Berlin Wall fell and there was a rise of neo-Nazi movements. The climate crisis is also a focus of hers.

A striking similarity between P3, P4 and P5 is the start of their activism, in which antifascism was especially prominent. P4 was first involved in street protest and then moved his interest to investigative political journalism.

P4: Well I started being active when I was sixteen/seventeen years old [in the '80s] when I was still going to school and for many years that was mainly in an antifascist movement so protesting against Neo-Nazis, green research, organising blockades on the streets when a Neo-Nazi march was scheduled, structural work. So antifascism is an entire set of different activities from street activities to organising behind the scenes. Later on, in my twenties, I also engaged in the Anti-gentrification movement so like community neighbourhood activism. The whole neighbourhood was in the process of gentrifying so like the rent went up, people were squeezed out and rich investors came in. So those kind of activities as well. And I basically also participated in what we in Germany would call the Autonomous movement, like anti-G, G8, G20 summits. Generally, it would be more like Anti-capitalism activities. So a broad variety of different things with these two focusses, Anti-fascism on one hand and Anti-gentrification work on the other hand.

Both P3 and P4 are now contributing to social movements with their career, they have chosen professional journalism as their form of activism.

P5: And we [me and my friends] put fascism on the daily to-do list. We had a hunch that it was in many ministries that there are Nazis in there (...) It was about the rigid solid everyday culture that included Nazis. That still lived and still does now. That we [students] suffered from, in school for example. And we slowly started to fight against that [oppression]. Because we couldn't dream of any kind of future in this country. (...) I started being part of the SPK [*Sozialistische Patienten Kollektiv*]. The SPK is the socialist patient collective. (...) I was only half a year in the RAF [*Rote Armee Fraktion*].

P5 has mentioned his participation in two different movements. He mentions in both participations of the SPK in 1971 and the RAF, his focus on any form of anti-fascism from a socialist and communist point of view. P5 has participated in various street demonstrations,

squatting actions as well as the most militant forms of activism such as hostage-taking of an embassy.

P7 has never felt part of a specific movement, which is why eventually he founded his own collective. However, the focus of this collective was similar to the already established movements, the participant mentions leftist, radical, social movements.

P7: Before I also have been a lot in like social movements, I went to some kind of whatever ... leftist left radical and punk rock concerts and places, and you know, so I've been like running around there... (...). I have never really been part of a group, like I never like I never wanted to, be part of the group. (...) I would like look at it and I wouldn't feel good because there's this dogmatism or there is just like, I don't know what it is. I'm just not uhm... yeah, I'm not someone who is like entering a political group,.. that easily. Rather, after a while, I just created my own!

Despite the generation gap between the various participants, there is a great deal of overlap between the goals the activists are pushing for. Noteworthy is the shift of the main focus points. Among the older generation, antifascism was the greatest goal to fight for. Given the German history concerning World War II, the split of Germany, as well as the building of the wall in Berlin undoubtedly had an immense impact on the participants' lives. In addition to antifascism, recent activism has included its focus on for example the climate crisis, racism and feminism. Not only is the younger generation pushing for these, but so are the older ones, through for example journalism, as named above.

In our sample, the younger generation (generation Z) is represented by P1, P2, P6 and P8. These participants are all active in street protests, for various purposes. They have corresponding political opinions among each other, but also differ in their points of focus. P1 and P8 both mention that they have ties to the ANTIFA.

P8: In Germany, in Berlin... it's a mix between political parties that I identify with and then social-political groups and movements outside that I identify with. Of course, generally, I

would identify with ANTIFA, just because I think everybody should, and everybody should be antifascist. So that's something that I identify with. Obviously, I attended a lot of Fridays For Future demonstrations, so I would identify with that as well. Those are groups outside of the traditional political parties that I would identify myself with.

Alongside the ANTIFA, P8 makes a stand against climate change. Before he got the right to vote, because of his age, P8 put out his opinion by attending street protests, for the purpose of contributing to democracy. Climate change is for multiple participants a reason for activism.

P2: It [my focus on collective action] is different things. (...) There was like Fridays for Future, but just some general stuff that I was interested in. And then I also went to this really like left-wing, not left-wing but like leftish political school that really has their own fight against racism club in school. (...) I feel like I'm very interested in feminism just because I feel like that's a topic or an issue that is still very present in my generation [Generation Z] and in my friend groups and in all of my encounters, sort of. (...) It's like everyone, well not everyone, obviously, but like racism or climate change or even the living situation is easier to address and people are more perceivable to it.

Furthermore, P2 feels strongly about the squatting movement and has strong ties to them. She has also participated in different actions concerning the planning of a squatting operation.

A commonality among mainly female participants is the great struggle for feminism. This is not only an important issue for P1 and P2 from generation Z, but also overlaps with the ideologies from P3 from generation X.

P1: I consider myself to be left-radical, radical-left if you say that. I do have connections within the Berlin ANTIFA, but I'm not part of it. I always feel like I have like a half foot in it. (...) I think especially the topic around feminism, this is a huge topic for me and definitely attending a lot of women-organized demonstrations and intersectional feminism also. Since

last year, since the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, there has definitely been a shift [of attention to BLM].

In addition, P1 mentions how she has connections to many people in the activism scene, especially a famous street squat in Berlin. She does not consider herself to be an active part of that movement even though she does participate in many events and demonstrations. P1 also mentions that she is anti-capitalistic and thereby critical of the system.

Being critical of the system is a similarity within the sample. All participants want to see change and are committed to it, however, most participants do not feel part of a solid group.

P6: How can I say, it's a lot of social issues I have a problem with and I want to fight against. A lot of issues with racism, fascism, and people being repressed. So what I want to fight for is freedom for everyone, let's call it that, unity.

P6 does not consider themselves to be part of a group. The only group P6 has a connection with is an anarchist group. They meet up with them and go to protests together. As noted down in the quote above, P6 is fighting for freedom for everybody and makes a stand against racism, fascism and people being repressed.

Concluding, participants were all associated with left-winged, social injustice protests. However, most participants specifically stated that they do not in fact identify with one specific group.

Functions of humour

In this section we cover 1) how humour can serve as a tool for interpersonal relationships 2) the role of humour in radicalisation, 3) the clashing of radical action and humour and 4) the role of humour in coping with activism.

Humour as a tool for strengthening existing interpersonal ties

All participants mentioned the influence and contribution of humour on bonding with the ingroup. Various ways of using humour that can contribute to the bond between people

within a group have been named. These included chanting, laughing together and dancing together among other things.

Interestingly, multiple participants mentioned bonding as an effect of making fun of an outgroup. For example, P7 said the following:

P7: If you're inviting people to laugh about someone more powerful, this is bonding.

P7 was not the only interviewee who mentioned bonding as an effect of making fun of an outgroup. P1 and P6 also talked about laughing at an outgroup but they specifically mentioned the police as the outgroup who they made fun of. P6 said the following:

P6: The people got together and they were singing songs, making fun of the police, holding together, listening to music, singing.

Another example of bonding by joking about an outgroup but then in a context of feminism is mentioned by P1: “also to bond, again, it’s a bonding moment if we make fun of the stupid men that just don’t get it.” The participant points out that for women who have experienced for example body shaming or another hurtful event, joking about men who don’t understand the pain that it causes, also is a bonding experience. Making jokes about or laughing at another group can thus help to form a bond within the group. It seems that the explanation for this is that by making fun of the outgroup the activists in the ingroup distance themselves from the outgroup making the bond between the ingroup stronger.

However, making jokes about a less powerful outgroup or a minority can be problematic as mentioned by P7:

P7: Sexist humour or racist humour or antisemitic humour is always trying to bond over a minority. Like, I mean, women are not a minority, but like, like a less powerful group.

The interviewee is talking about how one of the main international bonding attacks among young men is talking about the hotness of women and making sexist jokes. Hereby the participant expresses their disapproval of this manner of uniting. Apparently, this way of

using humour as a goal to form a bond with the ingroup can therefore also bring harm to a minority.

The previous quotes concerned ingroup bonding between activists but can humour also strengthen new ties with the non-activist outgroup?

Humour as a tool to strengthen new ties

There was a pattern of responses from participants that suggested that humour may in fact be a useful tool to strengthen new ties and for broadening a movement of any collective action. P1, P2, P3, P4, P6, P7 and P8 all indicated the above. P3 said the following:

P3: bonding also with people not of your group but with people around you

This participant mentioned this in the context of cynical humour use. They mentioned that cynical humour makes everyone feel like they can still be part of the movement and make others feel more included, even people of the outgroup. P8 mentioned something similar by saying “when there’s a lot of humour it helps to bond people together, bond groups.” Both participants stressed that in a street protest humour can bond different groups and even the ingroup with the outgroup.

In addition to street protests, humour can increase activists’ reach through the media. For instance, through graphics on social media:

P1: With humour [in communist memes] you can just reach a lot more people. And I think it’s way more fun to follow them.

Or through music:

P4: I think everybody who listens to that [satirical] song feels like part of a club. So I think yes but there must be more than just humour, you probably need to direct it and pinpoint specifically how you want to use it.

On one hand, most participants seem to agree that humour can be used to bond with the ingroup and to broaden the movement.

Humour cannot broaden a movement

On the other hand, P3 expressed doubts about whether humour broadens a movement. This is in contrast to above-mentioned statements.

P3: When I said that I loved memes or just jokes in whatever channel, I don't think that that those jokes really reach people who aren't into this already. (...) Yeah but I still think, so it would be great if all those jokes would reach other people, but I don't think that it's really... [laughs]

J.L.: So, you actually don't think it raises awareness among people who aren't already invested in the...

P3: No, I don't think so. I didn't think about that before but talking with you, I don't think so because I always, I try to imagine like clowns being at demonstrations and doing stuff, that's funny, but it doesn't ... and then people see it, okay, but I don't think it changes the mind of people who are not invested in the topic before.

The participant thinks out loud about their own experiences. Furthermore, she mentions a love for memes before this specific statement. The memes led to her thought that humour does in fact not broaden a movement but rather includes more people that are like-minded already. This participant was the only one saying anything about humour not broadening a movement, however corrected herself again in a later statement. It seemed an overall agreement that humour may broaden a movement.

Thus, most participants agree that humour can create new ties between activists and the outgroup, involve people and mobilise a broader audience for collective action. This can happen through different channels, such as music. In other words, humour seems capable of stimulating collective action. However, can it also stimulate involvement in radical action?

Humour stimulates radicalisation

P1, P3, P4 and P6 talked about how humour can normalise a radical thought or action and therefore can contribute to radicalisation: "Even if you're not communist, I mean I don't consider myself communist either, but that moment if you read it [an anti-capitalist meme by

Simin Jawa], you're like... (...) it seems so obvious when you make a joke and it's funny. It just seems obvious to you, like yes of course. (...) And I think that's probably a process of radicalisation." (P1) By presenting radical thoughts as normal, through humour, such an idea is more likely to be tolerated.

P6: In politics there may be a lot of humour to like normalise your cause, let's say it like that, make it more reachable for the people, kind of joking about it, so maybe you can present more radical themes, more radical ideologies or ideas a lot toned down because you're being funny about it, or joking about it. So, I guess humour is a quite powerful weapon in politics, too.

According to P6, humour can cause radical thoughts or ideas to be expressed with less severity, which ensures that it can reach more people. P6 also mentioned that they think that the first step towards radicalisation is people believing that what they are doing is right or normal, and an ideology can be built on that basis. In addition, P6 deems humour an appropriate means of justifying extreme ideology: "Maybe some people would say humour is not okay to legitimize left-wing radicalism and I, of course, say it is okay." (P6)

Normalising radical behaviour or thoughts as seen as the basis of radicalisation by P6 is also seen in street protests. Additionally, street protests may turn violent in an instant. An instant, where joking about police allowed street activists to engage in more violent behaviour towards police officers. In doing so, policemen were made smaller as individuals, so the activists approved more of their own behaviour. The same jokes to disparage the police are also used to lower the strain. This use of humour to reduce tension gives the idea that humour use also has an opposite effect of preventing radicalisation.

P3: If you're banning all humour and you're getting more and more straight and getting into a fight mode, then that [banning of humour] makes radicalisation and not the humour. (...) in the Fridays For Future movement people are more laughing than in the Extinction Rebellion so the more you radicalise yourself, the less there is humour I would say. So quite the opposite. (...) So the other way around, perhaps humour can avoid a bad radicalisation.

Quite frankly suggesting that radicalisation is a humourless process and that humour therefore can halt the development of more radical convictions. Humour and radicalisation are negatively correlated according to P3, which is contradictory to the views of participants mentioned above. If humour and radical action do in fact not seem to work together, then the question arises whether radical activists overall also use less humour.

Radical action and humour clash

An interesting finding regarding the question mentioned above, was the absence of humour within the radical left. It was explicitly stated by P1, 4, 5 and 6 that radical leftists tend to be very serious and make no use of humour. “Especially since a lot of social protests take themselves extremely seriously like the burden of saving the world is on your shoulder, there is no time to laugh.” (P4) “They [activists] take it [their actions] quite seriously, I have not really experienced that much humour, it’s always like, try to do quite tough and how serious is what we’re doing and there was not a lot of space for humour, I felt.” (P6)

P4 and P6 describe how the gravity of the activism beliefs leaves little room for humour. The radical left ideology is not something to be joked about, as it is severe and to be taken seriously. However, this lack of humour is considered to be a flaw by other participants. “I still have some [left-wing activist] contacts here in Berlin and also the young sometimes, are all, absolutely humourless. I consider this a serious limit” (P5). Additionally, P1 substantiated the statement by saying:

P1: The radical left (...) are very humourless. They are really not funny. [laughter] It’s just serious shit all the time and everything is taken so seriously. And I think that’s what’s sometimes really annoying because I’m like “Oh my God, don’t take it so seriously, like, do you ever have fun?” (...) However, the radical left is, again, way too serious on topics and way too emotional on topics. And like, weakens themselves, with no effect.

High levels of strictness and solemnity might result in internal conflict and division. P5 provides an example of how the radical left is fragmented into separate leftist groups:

“There has been a shift that we [radical left activists] are more and more pointing out or focusing on, or putting political movement into the singular, into the individual, (...) And that’s also, I think from there it also comes that people are fighting against each other all the time. Like “Oh my God, this other left person just silenced me or like misgendered me”, and I think that’s definitely a big topic, and I’m not... but this shouldn’t be the main focus.” This damages the activist solidarity that is vital to successful collective action, because the activists are no longer fighting together towards a collective cause, but each fighting for their own specific beliefs - even against other leftists.

The absence of humour is thus considered harmful to a movement. Even though multiple participants mention that joking around might lighten the tension and further the relationship between activists, participants report that the radical left is not known for its banter among activists. Humour might not fit into that image, but it may serve as a tool in alleviating some of the psychological pressure that many activists experience as a consequence of their continual fighting for change.

Humour as a coping mechanism in activism

Humour as a coping mechanism has been used for a long time to cope with the feeling of being responsible for saving the world. P4 explains this by saying:

P4: Well, there is this famous Emma Goldman saying ‘If I can’t dance I don’t want to be in your revolution’ and I like that very much. She said this in the early 1900 and it was meant as a part of the socialist and communist revolutions. Emma Goldman was an anarchist and what she wanted to express is that political activism can’t always be super serious, super severe, super tough, and super straight, there must be room for some fun like dancing and it must be possible to dance and not always to say: “Today we have to save the world.” I think it expresses something which is really important, that beyond these severe and serious business there must be some space for fun, humour, and enjoying emotions. So she at a very early stage way before the internet and the memes she in a way nailed it in that one sentence.

The importance of humour in activism is emphasized here. Humour can be utilized to cope with different aspects of activism. We will analyse four ways in which humour can function as a coping mechanism, based on the different aspects of activism. This will be done in different sub-sections.

Humour as a coping mechanism to better interact or deal with other groups. Activism can get burdensome due to interactions with the police or other groups of activists. In some situations, these confrontations can even result in violence. According to P1,3,4,5,6 and 8 humour can help to cope with these interactions and the emotions that arise from them.

I.B: Do you think it [humour] also helps to release some stress from activists?

P4: Definitely, especially when you have these confrontations like when we drew a blockade in front of the nuclear power plant or when you have confrontations at the G8-summits with the police, there is an enormous level of stress on a physical and psychological level so laughing always eases these moments.

P3: So I remember a lot of more cynical jokes amongst us when we were dealing with all this Nazi movement. Because you had to get out your feelings somehow (...) but also kind of coping with the hatred you see or the threats you see and all that to also sometimes to make the situation better for those who are threatened really .

P3 and P4 describe different emotions that can arise from confrontation with the police or other groups. Humour can help deal with these feelings of stress, hate, tension and fear. P3 also mentions a specific kind of humour, cynical humour, when dealing with feelings of hate towards the other group. The use of cynical humour in this context might be used to downgrade the other group, related to the above-mentioned joking about outgroups, which might lead to less negative feelings during and after a confrontation with that group. P8 mentions ironic humour when dealing with feelings of helplessness that can arise in situations where you feel powerless:

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P8: The humour that I do like in protest is just being kind of ironic, when for example, when, I've witnessed being at a protest during corona like when the coronavirus was happening and then the police told the organizers to everyone have one like three feet apart, but then the police were so close that the people couldn't be apart. And just taking that with a bit of irony that's something that I find okay, that I do as well, because (...) the organizers make an announcement; alright guys try to be three feet apart, also with the cops or something ... then I mean, it's fine, it's funny. There's nothing you can do about the situation, so you just take it lightly, I guess. So I guess humour just helps take things lightly

Thus, it seems that different emotions can lead to different styles of humour being used, in the context of confrontation with others. Another differentiation that becomes apparent within dealing with other groups, is the moment in which humour is used. This can be during or after the confrontation:

P6: (...) Like, everybody sat in a circle, singing "Wir haben Spaß", [laughter] as the police were like surrounding the people, and that was the moment when I was really laughing about it because we're having fun here, we're sitting, listening to music, taking drinks, everybody was talking to each other, the police were standing there around us. In that situation, if everybody would have been like surrounded by the police, it could have been something so evil, like "Oh my God, we're here now, the police is around us", but the people got together and they were singing songs, making fun of the police, holding together, listening to music, singing.

P4: When you're in such a tough confrontation and everything is so serious including your physical integrity then afterwards the news that you watch on tv about it is all super heavyweight, I think it's incredibly important to somehow let it go and share it with others. It's usually much easier to laugh together than to do something else, but it is also important that you see how others feel.

This indicates that humour can sometimes help during confrontations to avoid a clash, and therefore avoid negative emotions that would otherwise arise during those clashes. By using humour, the tension decreases which creates more room to take a breath. In other

words, humour can help de-escalate the situation. At other moments, emotions can get so high that there is no room for humour during the confrontation. In those situations when de-escalation is not possible, humour can function as a coping mechanism after the confrontation to then create the possibility to deal with those emotions and then let go of them.

Humour as a coping mechanism to deal with emotions as a group. Most activism takes place in groups, which means that people can also deal with emotions together. Examples of these emotions are hatred, anger, anxiety, sadness and helplessness. Humour can be used to cope with these emotions. According to P1,3,4,5 and 8, it is important to laugh together because it is a good way to get your feelings out and talk about what happened. In this way, humour can also help to de-stress and take away tension. Lastly, humour can also help to deal with feelings of repression.

P4: (...) So similar to the clowns you have the possibility to be straightforward and attack someone or to take a different route which is maybe not from A to B directly but surrounding. By using humour, you make fun of someone and you allow people to express emotions and to laugh about the guy even though you feel like you want to cry because he's so super tough and so unfriendly, but you can laugh about it and that's also an opportunity to let emotions flow

P8: yeah, after a protest, you get like, you could go to a supermarket, buy something to drink and then just sit down on a bench and just kind of talk about the protest, kind of joke about it. And that does help unwind in my opinion. Sort of build down like, regress those feelings of anger you might have had.

P7: (...) there was an Indian move- or like in an Indian village, whenever there would be a new repressive law, they would gather and read it out loud and laugh collectively about it. So, this would be like a gathering to kind of ridicule or to like free themselves from this repressive feeling, which is like standing in front of them.

At different moments, humour can be used in different ways to deal with emotions as a group. For example, during preparation for a protest or demonstration, humour can be used to

ease the moment and release tension. In contrast, after a protest or confrontation, humour can make it easier to talk about the cause they stand for in a less heavy way. In addition, humour used after a protest or confrontation can also help to cope with things that happened during activism.

P4: Sometimes there were like twenty people in preparation for an event and everybody was so extremely tight and tense and if someone made a good joke all the tension flowed down like a river that flows down to the valley.

P2: I mean I feel like listening to the music made us feel like we're talking about this. And it just makes it more of a fun activity. I don't think we would have done it if we were just like if we never had a beer and if we never went out after it, we would have just been at the library just painted our posters and then we went. It made it more relaxed, more something enjoyable together.

P2: And this friend of mine, who also gave a speech she was like and next is the neighbourhood legend. And it was really fun, and everyone was really just laughing and just, I don't know, it makes it less formal and makes it more of a get-together.

Humour as a coping mechanism to deal with emotions individually. In addition to coping with emotions as a group, activists individually cope with emotions as well. Activists can deal with these feelings before, after and during collective actions. These negative emotions for instance are anger, anxiety or feelings of responsibility. These emotions can for example arise during protests when situations get heated.

P6: If you're in a situation, and you're walking along there and suddenly the flames are burning up, you hear the hammering of glass all around you, there's stones flying, cars burning, police officers beating people to shit if you see stuff like that... My heart was pounding, I really was in a state of survival there, I went down to primal instincts like, I don't know, live or die kind of. You see how people get beat to shit, get arrested, people officers are running behind you, and you know if you are not fast enough, they are going to catch you and beat you to shit on the ground.

Besides the functions of humour when coping with emotions in a group, participants talk about two additional functions of humour in the context of coping with emotions on an individual level. The first function is to cope with things they have seen. The second one is to tell themselves that what they did was the right thing to do. It is a way to justify what has happened and lower feelings of doubt and anxiety.

P1: Yeah. I feel like humour is sometimes a good thing to lower your own burden.

Aside from humour being a tool to lower the burden it is also a way to justify things you have done during a protest. Afterwards, activists realize what happened during a protest or demonstration. At moments like those, humour is a way to tell yourself that what you did was the right thing. It makes it easier to cope with feelings of doubt and anxiety.

P6: You need the humour to also kind of tell yourself you're right. Because maybe in situations like that you doubt your activism, you doubt what you are doing, because things sometimes get quite ugly. So, I guess humour is important to me sometimes too, to cope with the things I saw.

Concluding, humour can serve two additional purposes: to cope with what they saw and to justify their actions.

Humour as a coping mechanism to continue the work of being an activist. As stated above, humour can be used to deal with confrontations and emotions on an individual and group level. This can ease some of the burdens that activists experience, making it easier to continue the work of being an activist. Nevertheless, there are various reasons why being an activist can also be burdensome. For example, activism does not always result in the change you wish to see, it costs a lot of effort, and there are various negative emotions to deal with. Also, activists often tend to put a lot of pressure on themselves, because they feel highly responsible for the cause they are fighting for.

P6: (...) it really brings you down if you see how much effort is put in by people, how many people get hurt, and how little change, how much power the state still has. Seeing how many

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people get hurt and how many bruises there have been, how many head injuries from police batons, and still so little change. So yeah, it puts a lot of pressure on you.

P2: I feel like especially in left wing activism, there's always this really high standard that people put on themselves, speaking correctly and behaving correctly and just always having to be on the good side, I guess, and never allowing for anything populist. And I think sometimes it gets very tiring of always having to be the ones that phrase what they think well and that they really are thorough in how they express themselves and not never discriminating (...) That [humour] really helps relieve some of that responsibility that you feel like you have if you have a certain political opinion... if you identify with a certain group.

Humour as a coping mechanism to deal with feelings of pressure and responsibility is especially used after events or protests. Humour can then help to cope with these feelings. Also, laughing about things that have happened and being sarcastic can help to keep the morale up. This is especially useful when feelings of helplessness arise. There are always causes to keep fighting for, which can make it feel like there is no end to activism. Using humour might help with this.

P3: Demonstrations can get nasty as well, so there's always a kind of tension or even fear (...). You can't be active in this, in some ways, border ways to militants, without coping with it, without lowering the tension.

P6: (...) It is always so emotional if you see things like that [policemen beating activists], again maybe to process it, but in situations like that you maybe only give humour to process the situation, to keep the comadre up, to not focus on the bad things that are happening. But kind of making a joke out of it, like 'We gotta do this, what happened was shit'. Laughing about it, being sarcastic about it, and next time is going to be better. Maybe that can help to keep the morale up and the fighting spirit, but it doesn't necessarily relieve the pressure. It's still there, because you always experience it again and the humour doesn't stop it, because it's not my choice, it's the state and the problems in the world.

Another way in which humour can help activists to continue their work, is by bringing back some of the joy into activism. By making fun of situations, you can take away some of the seriousness.

P6: Humour is probably quite a powerful weapon because you can make fun of things and probably take the piss out of some situations, tone things down. (...) humour brings interest or brings away from the seriousness and more to the joy and the fun and kind of like, it brings people more into it I think.

P4: Political activism can't always be super serious, super severe, super tough, and super straight, there must be room for some fun like dancing and it must be possible to dance and not always to say: 'Today we have to save the world.' I think it expresses something which is really important that beyond these severe and serious business there must be some space for fun, humour, and enjoying emotions.

In conclusion, there are numerous reasons why activism can get burdensome. Humour can function as a coping mechanism in different ways to avoid the burden of being an activist getting too heavy, making it possible to continue the work of being an activist.

Inappropriateness of using humour in collective active action

Humour is widely used by activists; however, humour is not always appropriate. There are different situations in which humour might not be appropriate. First of all when others have been treated badly, and therefore emotions are high.

P4: If you see that others have been treated, let's say much worse than you and are crying, then it's inappropriate. So it very much depends on the situation. I think humour general a great weapon but you need to be very aware of how you can use it and direct it.

P8: (...) because if someone gets arrested and they also get like punched in the face and they're bleeding while being carried to the police truck, it's, I don't think it's appropriate to laugh about that, because somebody actually suffered and paid a heavy price. So it depends on the outcome if... if it was difficult, but everyone got home safely, then of course humour is a great way. If it didn't go well and people went to jail, then it's, I'm not sure if I would use humour.

(...) But if someone you know suffers then that's not an appropriate moment for humour in my opinion.

P6: I'd say humour is not okay if you are talking about any of the serious issues, like humour at George Floyd. Taking humour for that, that'd be like totally out of place. Humour at serious issues where people got hurt, people even died, or people could die, or people's lives could be, how can I say, diminishing the actual worth of a human through humour. So as soon as humour attacks like, as soon as humour gets inhumane, like calls for violence maybe, in a sarcastic way, against minorities or people that don't really have to do, that can't do anything for their ethnic identity, for their skin colour, their age, whatever. I think as soon as humour attacks something people can't change, as soon as humour kind of calls for violence, it's not okay.

As described by these participants, these are conditions where there is no room for laughter. These conditions are all centred around the people from the ingroup, with a focus on the personal consequences of a clash with other groups or the police.

The second situation in which the use of humour might be inappropriate is when it takes away the focus from the cause that activists fight for.

P1: (...) but... I feel like the radical left is, they're not really funny. They're really serious.

And I think that, I don't know, sometimes it's really important because I mean especially on those days, you have, it's really important to remind yourself what this day actually is about and that this is a serious topic, and sometimes humour can also make the topic seem less important.

P4: (...) if you're always funny there could be the danger of losing focus on the whole message. In a way it's naturally the case that the topics that you raise are in a way serious topics like injustice, BLM-movement, neo-Nazis, racism, protests against summit G-8 and so on. In a way it's all serious business so if there's an overdose of humour it carries the risk that you lose the focus of your whole message. If you only make fun about things then people maybe don't take you serious enough so it's a question of dosing.

So, in order to keep focused on the goal, according to P1 and P4, you should abstain from using humour.

The last situation, which is mentioned by the participants, in which humour is not appropriate, is when it is used to make fun of someone on a personal level.

P6: So as soon as humour attacks like, as soon as humour gets inhumane, like calls for violence maybe, in a sarcastic way, against minorities or people that don't really have to do, that can't do anything for their ethnic identity, for their skin colour, their age, whatever. I think as soon as humour attacks something people can't change (...) it's not okay.

I: And would you say there are moments where humour could be appropriate or not appropriate?

P2: Um, it's like always when it goes on, like personal level, but I feel like that's more generally my opinion than, like specifically on activism. And I feel like discriminating is never no, I don't ever like that in anyways and don't think that is supportive, ever. I think there are some lines that you should not, you should not cross them. (...) In fact, for me, it's mostly certain words that I use. I don't like when people say disabled, like in Germany, you know, it's a very common word to say. Yeah It's discriminating, and oftentimes I'm like please don't use that word. Why are you doing that? Because I feel like language is really impactful. And the only thing and that's the whole thing also with gendering. That's because our language is like the whole way we think, you know, and so impactful. So I think we should watch it.

When humour attacks specific people or groups, especially minorities it is thus not okay to use humour.

Concluding, when considering the use of humour in activism, it is important to keep in mind the situations in which humour might not be appropriate.

Discussion

By doing exploratory, qualitative research, this study aimed to start filling in the existing gap in the literature about humour as a coping mechanism in the context of collective action. More precisely, we wanted to look at when humour is used in the context of collective

action, to better cope with the stressors that can arise from collective action. This study shows that humour is indeed used to cope with different aspects of collective action. We found that humour can help to better deal with confrontations with other groups or the police, help cope with emotions as a group or individually, and that humour can help to better be able to continue the work of being an activist. Interestingly, we also found indications of two factors that might influence the effects humour can have as a coping mechanism, namely bonding and de-escalation. Our study also points out moments in which the use of humour is considered inappropriate.

Theoretical implications

Our study shows that humour seems to enable activists to continue their work in collective action. We found that there are numerous stressors in collective action that can arise from confrontation with other groups of activists or the police, or due to feelings of responsibility, anxiety, helplessness and hate. Humour can help cope with these stressors, bring joy back and keep morale up. This is in line with previous research, stating for example that humour can have beneficial effects on psychological well-being, by stimulating self-esteem and enhancing social support (Ho, 2016). A study by Branney and colleagues (2014) also shows that in people with penile cancer, humour helped to stimulate laughing together and staying positive. The finding of our study is important since it shows that humour can indeed help cope with stressors related to collective action. It was already known that stressors can arise from collective action, potentially leading to a decline of physical and emotional health, feelings of hopelessness and activist burnout (Chen & Gorski, 2015; Danquah et al., 2021; Gorski, 2019; Gorski & Chen, 2015). Our study is the first indication that these detrimental effects of being an activist might be limited by using humour as a coping mechanism. This study gives a first insight into when humour can function as a coping mechanism to deal with the stressors that arise from collective action, and as a consequence

might reduce the risks related to being an activist. It would be interesting for future research to investigate more specifically which stressors can arise in collective action. This would also make it easier to effectively apply humour to cope with the affirmed stressors arising from collective action. Baisley and Grunberg (2019) for example have already started researching a working humour training model that could train people to use humour in a beneficial way to improve their health. It would be interesting to see if such a training model could eventually be specified for people active in collective action.

Our study also shows that humour is frequently used for coping with emotions together as a group, adding to the existing literature that humour can indeed be used for coping with emotions in the context of collective action. More specifically, laughing together is considered an effective way to get your feelings out, talk about what happened, and deal with emotions that can arise from collective action. This is in line with a study that showed that humour can function as a coping mechanism in the fire fighter culture to create a safe space where there is room for feelings, along with benefiting the group atmosphere and enhancing unity (Dangermond et al., 2022). It would be interesting for future research to look into this finding of enhanced unity in the context of collective action. Could it be that humour can facilitate bonding, and, as a consequence, help with coping in collective action? This is interesting, considering that our research also shows that humour can facilitate bonding with the ingroup. ‘T Hart (2007) states that using humour could further the development of a collective identity of a social movement. Interestingly, she also states that a collective identity is necessary to be able to use humour in social protest in the first place (‘T Hart, 2007). Snyder (2009) also mentions a cyclical process where a connection to a community leads to activism like volunteerism. This consequently furthers community connection, which leads to the stimulation of more volunteerism, which leads to other forms of social action. If this is the case, it means that using humour as a coping mechanism is more complex than it looks at

first. It implies that before being able to use humour in collective action, a collective identity should be established already, and also that bonding or having a social identity might influence the effects humour can have as a coping mechanism in collective action. Subsequent research could look at the relationships between humour, bonding, and having a social identity to get a clearer picture of how these factors are related to each other within the context of collective action and coping.

Another factor that becomes apparent in our study that may influence the effects humour can have as a coping mechanism in collective action is the de-escalating effects humour can have. Our results show multiple ways in which humour could help de-escalate a situation, resulting in less violence and fewer negative feelings during and after a confrontation with certain outgroups. Firstly, humour can decrease tension, leading to more room to take a breath during a confrontation with an outgroup. Another way humour can work de-escalating is by dealing with emotions that have arisen from a clash, to be able to let go of those emotions instead of holding on to them. Humour can also help in downgrading an outgroup by making fun of the outgroup, in that way dealing with emotions such as hate, anger, or powerlessness. Lastly, humour can help take the situation at hand more lightly, which can also work de-escalating. These findings give new insights into the ways in which humour as a coping mechanism might work by de-escalating situations in the context of collective action. The findings add to the existing literature on humour research. Meyer (2000), for example, talks about the superiority theory of humour where a feeling of superiority is expressed through laughter. Our study shows that downgrading an outgroup by using humour can de-escalate a situation. It would be interesting for future research to examine the mechanism behind this. It could be possible that by downgrading an outgroup with the use of humour or by using superiority humour, feelings of superiority of the outgroup

become less, consequently lowering feelings of helplessness and powerlessness, resulting in de-escalation.

So, as stated above, humour can indeed function as a coping mechanism in collective action. However, humour is not always considered appropriate to use. First of all, when people from the ingroup are treated badly and emotions are high, participants in our study considered the use of humour inappropriate. This is in line with a study done by Dangermond and colleagues (2022) where fire fighters intrinsically knew not to use humour because that would cross certain boundaries. Feelings of helplessness were related to this absence of humour use. So it seems that there might be intrinsic knowledge about when a certain line has been crossed because of the intensity of the situation or the intensity of emotions, making the use of humour inappropriate. Since these are situations in which emotions run especially high and therefore effective coping would be essential, it is interesting for future research to look into the inappropriateness of humour use more thoroughly. Other situations in which humour are considered inappropriate is when humour takes away the focus from the cause that activists fight for or when humour is used to make fun of someone on a personal level. This latter finding is in line with previous research in other contexts than collective action. A qualitative study for example showed that fire fighters found humour use inappropriate when jokes were perceived as hurtful. Whether this was the case was dependent on the frequency of joke telling and the content of the joke (Dangermond et al., 2022). Moreover, in patients with penile cancer, there was a fear that humour would lead to ridicule (Branney et al., 2014).

Concluding, this study also gives new insights into when humour is considered inappropriate in the context of collective action. Besides looking at moments in which humour is beneficial for activists, it is also important to shed light on the moments in which humour is considered inappropriate. Moments in which humour is considered inappropriate also give valuable information about social norms and experienced emotions. As Branney and

colleagues (2014) highlighted, knowing when humour is appropriate is dependent on social norms and the experiences of the joker, the audience, and the subject. In other words, there are many factors to consider when researching humour use. Subsequent research should look at ways to create a more coherent picture of the appropriateness of using humour by, for example, including factors like social norms and culture. Maybe then, research will also be better able to specify the line between appropriate and inappropriate humour use.

Practical implications

This study offers a first insight into when humour is used as a coping mechanism in collective action. Because it is an exploratory, qualitative study, results might not be generalizable to general collective action. However, some preliminary practical implications can be made. Our study shows humour can indeed function as a coping mechanism in collective action. If future research could replicate and specify these findings, this might ultimately lead to guidelines for activists on how to use humour to cope with the stressors that can arise from collective action. For the viability of collective action, this is very important since activists run the risk of activist burnout (Chen & Gorski, 2015; Danquah et al., 2021). Learning how humour could function as a coping mechanism might lead to better insights into how humour can help cope with stressors that can arise from collective action. These insights can then be used to, for example, create a humour training model (Baisley & Grunberg, 2019), which could help activists be better able to continue their work of being an activist.

Limitations and future research

Firstly, it is important to keep in mind that only German participants were interviewed in our study. This is important because humour is context and culture specific (Weinberger & Gulas, 2019). Therefore, the results of this study can only be interpreted in the context of German, political left-winged activists. Nevertheless, this study gives a great first insight into the use of humour in collective action. Subsequent research should look at ways to research

larger samples of activists from different cultures and backgrounds to see if the same results apply.

A focus point for future research is the varied ways in which core definitions are operationalized in previous research. We kept our definitions of collective action and humour fairly broad, which is important to get a wide range of collective action behaviours and humour use (Wright et al., 1990). This is great for first exploratory research. However, in previous research, sometimes distinctions were made between different styles or kinds of humour (e.g., Bizi et al., 1988; Grandi et al., 2021). For a more coherent understanding of how humour works as a coping mechanism, subsequent research should look into whether different kinds of humour elicit different coping effects. The participants from this study also talked about different kinds of humour, such as cynical, ironic, and sarcastic humour. There is a controversy in the literature about whether cynical, gallows humour is an effective coping strategy or not. Grandi and colleagues (2021) for example, found that cynical humour was used as a defense mechanism to hide emotions and mock the other. However, this only had some short-term benefits, like being able to face the situation at hand, but was not considered helpful in the long term. On the contrary, Dangermond and colleagues (2022) found that cynical, gallows humour could actually help start the conversation about what happened, indirectly creating opportunity to talk about emotions. Nevertheless, this cynical, gallows humour was also considered inappropriate at certain moments, related to unwritten rules or personal boundaries (Dangermond et al., 2022). In line with the research by Dangermond and colleagues (2022), our study suggests that the use of cynical, ironic or sarcastic humour can indeed help in coping, for example by de-escalating the situation. However, because we kept our definitions broad, we are not able to clearly specify whether these kinds of humour have different effects on coping, compared to other kinds of humour. Subsequent research should more thoroughly examine the specific effects of cynical humour as a coping mechanism and

investigate the benefits and downsides of using these specific kinds of humour as a coping mechanism.

Conclusion

This qualitative, exploratory study investigated when humour is used as a coping mechanism in the context of collective action. We found there are different moments in which humour can function as a coping mechanism in collective action. Humour can help to better deal with confrontations with outgroups, with dealing with emotions together as a group or individually, and it can help to continue the work of being an activist. However, sometimes humour is considered inappropriate, for example when it takes the focus away from the cause activists are fighting for. This study is a great start to the research on humour as a coping mechanism in the context of collective action. In getting a clear picture of when, and eventually also how, humour can function as a coping mechanism in collective action, research can guide activists to ensure the durability of their activism by preventing activists from burnout due to the burden that activism can bring about. This study made an important start with that.

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Appendix A

Interview questions

1) Introduction about our interests in the functions of humour around collective action.

(limit this to a couple of minutes)

a) Oral informed consent as specified in the document for the ethics request.

2) Involvement in collective action *(limit this to a couple of minutes)*

a) What kinds of activism / fighting for social change have you taken part in?

Think of any kind of action you've undertaken to further the collective cause, for instance on the streets or on social media

b) For which cause(s)?

c) How would you describe your involvement in fighting for this cause / these causes?

How involved have you been, in which roles (participating, organizing), and for how long?

3) Functions of humour

a) So, are these actions always serious, or are you also having fun?

b) Can you think of a time when you had fun or made fun in any way around your fight for social change? I'm interested in fun broadly connected to action, so not only during a specific action, but also during the lead-up to or aftermath of an action.

c) Can you walk me through what exactly was fun about this instance?

d) Can you explain why you were having or making fun? Did you try to achieve something by having / making fun? What?

i) If they don't understand what you're asking for, you can probe for specific functions / give examples: For instance, sometimes people have fun to lighten their mood or to strengthen their bonds with others. Or people may make fun of something because it

feels awkward. Or they present something as “just a joke” to avoid others’ disapproval.

e) Can you provide other examples of when you have had or made fun in any way around your fight for social change? That is, during, in the lead-up to, or after an action.

f) *If no occasions* → Why not?

4) Appropriateness of humour

a) Why do you think fun is so frequent/rare around the cause you are fighting for?

b) Do you think there is anything that might make fun around this cause inappropriate?

5) Violence around collective action

a) Protests can reach a certain tipping point, when the atmosphere becomes tense or grim.

b) Can you think of a time when you felt that this tipping point happened?

c) Can you walk me through what you experienced during this instance?

d) Why do you think the tipping point was reached here?

e) In situations like this, when the atmosphere changes, some people move to the front and others step back. Have you noticed people in your environment who enjoy these situations, who are having fun?

f) Can you explain why they/you were having or making fun? Did they/you try to achieve something by having / making fun? What?

i) *If they don't understand what you're asking for, you can probe for specific functions / give examples:* For instance, sometimes people have fun to lighten their mood or to strengthen their bonds with others. Or people may make fun of something because it feels awkward. Or they present something as “just a joke” to avoid others’ disapproval.

HUMOUR AS A COPING MECHANISM IN COLLECTIVE ACTION

g) We have now talked about fun during such an event. Sometimes people also have fun when looking back at grim or tense situations. Can you think of a time when this happened?

h) Can you walk me through what you experienced during this instance?

i) Can you explain why you were having or making fun? Did you try to achieve something by having / making fun? What?

i) If they don't understand what you're asking for, you can probe for specific functions / give examples: For instance, sometimes people have fun to lighten their mood or to strengthen their bonds with others. Or people may make fun of something because it feels awkward. Or they present something as “just a joke” to avoid others' disapproval.

j) Can you provide other examples of when you or others had fun around a grim or tense protest? That is, during, in the lead-up to, or after a grim or tense protest.

k) Can you walk me through what you experienced during this instance?

l) Can you explain why they/you were having or making fun? Did they/you try to achieve something by having / making fun? What?

6) Is there anything else you would like to mention about fun around collective action?

7) Checklist: Probe about specific functions of humour, based on literature / our interests

a) Is there any way in which fun might play a role in shifting the boundaries of the acceptable / radicalization / acceptance of violence?

b) Is there any way in which fun might play a role in increasing awareness / mobilization of the wider public?

i) Probe / examples if necessary: For instance, if people use funny members or signs during a demonstration to attract the general public's attention.

HUMOUR AS A COPING MECHANISM IN COLLECTIVE ACTION

c) Is there any way in which fun might play a role in coping with psychological pressure from activism / stigmatized identity / activist burnout?

i) Probe / examples if necessary: For instance, using a joke to cheer someone (or yourself) up or to make the cause you stand for less heavy on your shoulders.

d) Is there any way in which fun might play a role in strengthening ties among activists / strengthening social identity?

i) Probe / examples if necessary: For instance, joking among each other and laughing together.

e) Is there any way in which fun might play a role in self-presentation of activists to the outside world / non-activists?

i) Probe / examples if necessary: For instance, making a joke about your involvement in activism to make an interaction with someone less awkward.

f) Can you think of situations in which fun around the fight for this cause would be inappropriate?

i) Probe / examples if necessary: For instance, joking about a certain topic as taboo because the topic is a serious real-life problem.

8) Demographic details: Age (in broader categories to prevent identification), gender, country of residence

9) Thanks, finish interview, ask whether they know someone else with whom we might want to talk about these topics of fun and protest too.

Appendix B

Final coding scheme

Theme	Sub-theme	Code	
Sample description	CA background: Movements and topics	Anti-facism	
		Feminism	
		Racism / BLM	
		Anti-capitalism	
		Anarchist / anti-system	
		RAF	
		Climate activism	
		Communism	
		Not fitting in with existing groups	
		Social injustice	
		Ways of activism	Protest on the streets
			Journalism
			Squitting

HUMOUR AS A COPING MECHANISM IN COLLECTIVE ACTION

		Identity politics
		Solidarity
Social context	Mention of (radical-)left sub-groups / fractioning	Competition / negativity between sub-groups
		Criticism of “performative action”
		Division between mainstream “woke” people and “real” left
	Emotions around CA	Anxiety / scared
		Anger
		Enjoyment / enthusiasm / having fun
		Empowerment / feeling strong
		Humour can take away the seriousness
General typology of humour	Subject of humour	Making fun of police
		Making fun of non-activists
		Making fun of right-wing
		Making fun of politicians

Different media of humour around CA	Memes / social media
	Other (non-meme) graphic / visual / art
	Music / chants
	Performance (also including clowns during demo)
	Verbal / conversational (telling jokes)

Functions of humour	Humour and radical action / radicalization / escalation	Radical action and humour clash / radicals tough activists have no humour / feelings of anger or taking a topic seriously clash with humour
		Humour can stimulate radicalization / escalation
		Humour can prevent radicalization / escalation

Humour and political identification / mobilization	Humour can be used for ingroup building / bonding
	Humour can energize CA

Humour can cause a nice atmosphere

/ entertainment / having fun together

Humour can broaden the movement, create

insight / recognition / awareness among a

broader audience

Humour and making people smaller / more human	Humour can make activists seem more “human” / approachable to non-activists
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Humour can make police seem more “human” /

less power = easier and less scary target /

opponent (escalating)

Humour can make police seem more “human” /

less power = reducing necessity for violence

against them (de-escalating)

Humour and coping	Humour can help cope with responsibility of being an activist / can make activists feel good about what they do
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Humour can help cope with danger / threat / anxiety, can help people admit they are scared or overwhelmed

Humour can distract from pressure / fear

Humour and creating distance

Humour can create distance from a situation = facilitate de-escalation

Humour can create distance from police = facilitate escalation (“they are not like us”)

Humour can create distance between activists and the general public = no increase in awareness / mobilization

Inappropriateness of humour
OR Arguments against humour use

Group & topic: for left-wing activists politically incorrect humour is inappropriate

Use: humour is not appreciated if it is the only form of CA (e.g. only joking / memes, instead of part of the repertoire)

Topic & group: humour about other people's
(not own) suffering is inappropriate

Humour to facilitate violence is wrong

Humour as ineffective (this is another argument
against humour use, other than whether it is
appropriate)

Humour as not fitting with one's personality
(this is another argument against humour use,
other than whether it is appropriate)

Violence / radical

Attitudes towards violence

Avoidance of violence

CA

Violence undermines the message

Violence can be fun

Violence is (sometimes) necessary to achieve
change

Violence is provoked by police mere presence

Violence is provoked by police behavior

Image of ANTIFA as violent

Being targeted by police violence provides
status

Violence as male / testosterone thing

Other (inductive) themes we note in the interviews	Inter-generation comparisons / relations among activists	Different generations coming / working together
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Different generations having different
approaches

Note. CA stands for Collective Action.