

**Functions of Humour in Collective Action**

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**Abstract**

The role of the functions of humour within a framework of collective action has been largely neglected within the social scientific literature. Humour has a myriad of functions in inter- and intra-group relations and social dynamics, including in the formation and strengthening of social identity. One such a social identity that is vital in collective action is that of allyship on behalf of a disadvantaged group. In the current study we explore the different functions that play a role within the context of collective action. We conducted a qualitative study through semi-structured interviews with both employees and student-participants from Amnesty International Groningen to gather their experiences and investigate them by thematic analysis. Results show a strong pattern of using humour to increase awareness, strengthen social ties, cope with the psychological pressure of activism and undermine power. A perception of increased sensitivities regarding the appropriateness of humour was noted, as well as the possibility that humour could normalise violent behaviour. Theoretical and practical implications as well as limitations were elaborated on.

*Keywords:* humour, collective action, functions of humour, allyship groups

### **Functions of Humour in Collective Action**

Collective action can be defined as action taken by a group or individual on behalf of that group, in order to enhance their position or achieve a common goal (Dowding, 2007). It is a social dynamic that is found within all societies and political systems (Glowacki, 2015) and has frequently changed the course of history. Many factors that contribute to the mobilisation of people have been studied, including perceived injustice, efficacy and identity, and an extensive framework exists in the literature today (van Zomeren, 2008). Also, the opportunities for protest as well as their effectiveness have been analysed (Einwohner, 1999).

A keyword in the literature on these factors that shape social protest is *perceived*. As the controversial American political strategist Lee Atwater stated: “perception is reality” (Kelner, 2014). We would argue that one particularly powerful tool in shaping perceptions is how we use humour. However, studies on the different uses and functions of humour in collective action are few and far between (‘t Hart, 2007), leaving a universal phenomenon unutilised in our understanding of social protest movements.

Two trends can be identified that could help in applying the dynamics of humour to the analysis of collective action. One is an increased emphasis on the constructs of framing, collective identity and emotions within the literature on collective action (‘t Hart, 2007). All of these aforementioned constructs might be better understood when humour is incorporated in our discussion. Another trend is that despite the lack of application to collective action, there has been a steady rise of the study of humour itself (Martin, 2007). Our understanding of the different sorts of humour, the context in which they work or not (Kuipers, 2006) and their functions in social dynamics is increasingly growing. Considering these two developments, there seems to be an opportunity to take some of these functions of humour and apply them to collective action.

To that effect, we aim to explore what functions of humour we can identify as playing

a role in collective action with this qualitative study. We will conduct semi-structured interviews with both organisers and participants of collective action and examine our findings through thematic analysis.

### **Collective action**

In the era of mass politics and mass media, perceived injustices in society are finding their way into public discourse in a myriad of ways. News coverage of demonstrations or online campaigns on behalf of disadvantaged groups are bringing grievances to the forefront and raise awareness on various issues. However, when does awareness of an issue inspire individuals to make their voice heard? Van Zomeren et al. (2008) identify social identity as a key driver of collective action. Social identity theory poses that people have a natural tendency to categorise themselves as part of a group and subsequently base part of their identity on that group membership (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Once a shared identity is formed or made salient, individuals seem more aware of perceived group-based injustices as well as experience a heightened sense of efficacy and feel more encouraged to participate in protest on behalf of that identity (de Weerd & Klandermans, 1999).

In fact, it is argued that social identity underlies perceived injustice since it provides the foundation for a group-based experience of injustice. This softens some of the negative consequences of low-status group membership and heightens emotional readiness to join social protest (Smith, 1993). Moreover, a sense of social identity can empower relatively powerless individuals (Drury & Reicher, 2005) through their notion that as a group, desired effects can be brought about. One example of this social identity model of collective action (SIMCA) that van Zomeren et al. (2008) identified can be found in a Vietnamese study. Individuals from different communes expressed dissatisfaction with a local landfill, but only after they were made aware of a politicized, shared identity did they decide to join a protest and collectively block garbage trucks from dumping at the landfill (Nguyen, 2021). This

indicates that a shared social identity has mobilising potential. The next paragraph deals with what sort of groups can mobilise for the sake of collective action.

Often collective action is organized by individuals from a disadvantaged group on behalf of its own members: from the Dolle Mina's occupation of 't Maagdenhuis in 1969 for the cause of female emancipation in the Netherlands, to the ultimate sacrifice of self-immolation by Tibetan monks protesting Chinese subjugation. However, lasting social change tends to be underpinned by a broader shift in public opinion (David & Turner, 1999). With the development of mass politics and mass media, increasing opportunities have arisen for individuals to join disadvantaged groups in their protest, or protest on their behalf. Historical examples are ample and diverse; from "fellow travelers" writing on behalf of the proletarian Revolution (Trotsky, 1924), to White Americans joining Black Americans in the Civil Rights Movement, to Amnesty International raising public awareness on human rights abuses worldwide. These allyship groups can be instrumental in bringing about social change since they can broaden the support base for a cause and challenge in-group biases of other advantaged group members (Maass et al., 1982). For instance, onlookers considered in-group members to be more persuasive than out-group members when confronting someone engaging in discriminatory remarks (Rasinski & Czopp, 2010). Allyship groups and disadvantaged groups can unite based on shared morality motivations (Radke et al., 2020), but coordinated efforts are not necessary for establishing collective action, as illustrated by the exploits of Amnesty International, who organise worldwide for a variety of causes. Concluding, allyship groups can be an effective vehicle for collective action and through the efforts of organizations like Amnesty International they are today very accessible to join as well as to study.

Summing up, collective action has become increasingly permeable in the mass media era: information on protests flows freely and recruiting allies has therefore become easier for

organising parties. A particularly powerful tool in stimulating people to join a movement is making them aware of a shared identity, such as being an ally. We wonder if humour might play a vital part in the processes of establishing and strengthening these identities. Therefore, our understanding of humour and its functions can broaden our understanding of framing, collective identities and emotions within the context of collective action.

### **Functions of humour**

Humour is a fundamental human experience that occurs in all cultures across any historical epoch (Herring, 2020), and has been studied since antiquity. Cultures as well as social groups within cultures may have their own norms on what is appropriate subject matter for humour, or in what situations laughter is permissible, but laughter is universal nevertheless (Lefcourt, 2001). The scientific study of humour is often ridiculed itself: it seems that humour has a magical quality that eludes our rational efforts. This paradigm has famously been put into words in 1941 by the essayist Elwyn B. White: “humour can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind”. Amusing as such renunciations are, they are but a reflection of the skepticism faced by any pioneering field of science, and fortunately many attempts have been made to study humour and its social functions (Eysenck, 1972).

Jokes are relational and contextual, they have different functions in inter- or intra-group settings. For the purpose of this study, some of the functions of humour are worth identifying. Humour can, for example, have either lubricating or abrasive effects on social interaction (Martineau, 1972), or both lubricating and abrasive effects simultaneously (Kuipers, 2006). This might have implications for the organisation of an allyship group, as positive or affiliative humour is used as a lubricant for social cohesion among in-group members (Fominaya; 2007), but also as a way to make the in-group seem more appealing to out-group members (Lynch, 2010).

In situations where power hierarchies are pronounced, disadvantaged groups can use humour as a means to communicate the realities of their situation. A ‘weapon of the weak’ that can transcend the boundaries of what is permissible within public discourse and increase the persuasiveness of the message of the underprivileged (Bradford Bitterly, 2022).

However, on the contrary it can also serve as a ‘safety valve’, reducing the thoughtful evaluation of circumstances by eliciting a positive mood (Mulkay, 1988; Fominaya, 2007). And more menacingly, disparaging humour can increase prejudice and normalise extreme evaluations of out-group members (Berger, 1993). As stated earlier, perception changes reality and language is powerful in shaping perceptions. Disadvantaged groups can make disparaging jokes targeted at those they hold responsible for their situation in order to blow off steam, but consequently, more extreme evaluations are being normalised by the positive emotions those jokes bring about.

Summarily, humour has the power to make an in-group (and potentially an allyship group) seem more appealing to out-group members (Lynch, 2010), strengthen social ties (Fominaya, 2007), serve as a ‘weapon of the weak’ and elicit a positive mood under stressful circumstances (Mulkay, 1988; Fominaya, 2007). However, it can also increase prejudice and normalise extreme evaluations of others (Berger, 1993). Like a Swiss army knife, the functions of humour are only limited to our imagination, but for the sake of scientific precision we identified the aforementioned functions as most relevant to our research.

### **Present study**

For the present study, we aim to explore the functions of humour that are prevalent within the context of collective action by interviewing members of an allyship group. More specifically; employees and student participants of Amnesty International Netherlands. By way of semi-structured interviews we will ask them about their experiences of being involved in protests, media campaigns and other forms of collective action and what role humour



played in those experiences. Perhaps, a pattern of different functions will emerge, a few of which were elaborated on in the section above, as well as unforeseen ones. Some of those functions were derived from extensive ethnographic research (Fominaya, 2007; Lynch, 2010), that primarily focus on a single aspect of humour. One distinctive feature of this research is the application of multiple functions of humour simultaneously, which we believe might offer a unique insight into the dynamics of humour in collective action movements.

## Methods

### Participants

Participants in this study were recruited through one of our researcher's contacts, who volunteers for Amnesty International Netherlands as National Student Coordinator. We conducted semi-structured interviews via video call. Prior to commencing the interviews, the participants were informed about the aim of our study; to explore the different functions of humour within collective action. There was no compensation for participation, participation was entirely voluntary, and all the data was anonymised. Our sample consisted of  $N = 17$  participants in total. About half of the participants were Amnesty International Netherlands employees ( $n = 9$ ), and the other half were students who actively volunteered in collective actions organised by Amnesty International Netherlands ( $n = 8$ ). The participant's age range was between 20 - 60 years, and we divided them in five-year categories. The study included participants from the ages between 20 and 25 ( $n = 6$ ), participants from the ages between 26 and 30 ( $n = 5$ ), a participant from the age between 35 and 40 ( $n = 1$ ), participants from the ages between 45 and 50 ( $n = 4$ ) and a participant from the age between 55 and 60 ( $n = 1$ ). Of the participants, four were male, and 13 were female. Of the nine employees who participated, all participants were from Europe. Of the eight student participants, their origins included Europe ( $n = 4$ ), Asia ( $n = 2$ ), South America ( $n = 1$ ) and North America ( $n = 1$ ).

### Semi-structured Interviews

The interview structure included scheduling online meetings with one participant and two researchers. The interviewer asked open questions. The assistant to the interviewer would record the interview and use a checklist to check if all relevant topics were discussed (see Appendix A for the entire interview set-up and Appendix B for the checklist). The interview consisted of four phases. In the first phase, participants were introduced to the topic and were asked to give informed oral consent. In the second phase, the interviewer began the interview

with an open discussion about the participant's views and experiences surrounding injustices and collective action. In the third phase, the interview asked more specific and theoretically driven questions. The topics covered in the interviews were derived through a deductive approach: (1) the perception of injustice and identification as an ally (e.g. 'Who is treated unfairly?'); we asked our participants this to ensure they considered themselves allies, (2) participation in protest (e.g. 'How have you tried to make your voice heard?'), (3) functions of humour (raising awareness, strengthening ties, coping mechanism, a weapon of the weak, shifting the boundaries of the acceptable) and (4) the appropriateness of humour (e.g. 'Do you think it is always ok to use humour around this cause?'). In the fourth phase, we concluded by asking the participants what their hopes were for the future, making sure to end on a positive note. The interviews ranged from 30 to 60 minutes, and verbatim transcriptions were made by the researchers individually after dividing them equally among all researchers. The researchers did this by listening to every interview and typing them down.

### **Approach of Analysis**

In our examination of the transcriptions, we used thematic analysis. It is well suited to analyse semi-structured interviews that deal with individual experiences and are based on an existing theoretical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Our supervisor created a preliminary coding scheme based on the first two interviews. The coding scheme included constructs and topics from the checklist. After all the interviews were transcribed, we added new codes to the preliminary coding scheme if participants had made remarks we deemed relevant. After this, we coded two interviews together as a group to ensure we coded all the interviews in the same manner. Following this, we coded the rest of the interviews in pairs and double-checked the codes individually to ensure we agreed with the quotes used for each code. The research analysis was conducted in an exploratory manner to find which themes around the functions of humour are present in the context of collective action within our present sample. We used

both a deductive and an inductive process to identify themes and patterns. The strength of a theme or construct was measured by the prevalence of codes that were used for that specific theme. However, some themes or constructs cannot be tallied up or measured by count-of-hand. We would, for example, have varying answers on the appropriateness of humour that indicated that some participants found humour appropriate and some participants found humour inappropriate. In these instances, direct quotations can illuminate some of these intangibles.

After the thematic analysis was conducted, six main themes were found: (1) Humour and increasing awareness/mobilisation of the wider public, (2) Humour and strengthening ties among activists/strengthening social identity, (3) Humour and coping with psychological pressure from activism/stigmatised identity/activist burnout, (4) Humour and power/(in)equality, (5) the appropriateness of humour and, (6) Humour and shifting the boundaries of the acceptable/radicalisation/acceptance of violence. All of the six themes described above were deductive since they came from previous literature and were included in our interview set-up. However, we found some subthemes inductively within the last two themes (5 and 6). Specifically, the trends: increasing sensitivities surrounding the use of humour, the idea of ‘earning the right to joke’, humour as a provocation, humour as a means of de-escalation of violence and as a means of accepting violence, were found based on the data we gathered. We should note that the identified themes apply to this specific data set and should not be extrapolated.

## Results

### **Humour and Increasing Awareness/Mobilisation of the Wider Public**

Within the present sample, the theme of humour as a way of raising awareness and mobilising the wider public was the most prevalent. The theme indicates how the participants perceive humour in spreading awareness and mobilising collective action. Two sub themes that fall under this concept are how humour can broaden the movement but also how the subjectivity of humour can negatively impact its mobilising abilities.

#### ***Humour can Broaden the Movement, Create Insight/Recognition/Raise Awareness Among a Broader Audience***

Humour has the potential to spread awareness among a broader audience, specifically as a tool of communication:

*R.B.:* What kind of impact does it [humour in collective action] have on the people around you?

*P4:* If you think about impact on different levels: humour is reaching the media. If there's humour involved in an action, the press tends to report on this, I think, more than with a super serious action. So that's definitely important for us, obviously, to get the media involved. Also, if we send out a press release about an action that involves humour, I think the media is more responsive.

The extract above demonstrates how humour can impact the mobilisation and awareness of collective action. It indicates that humourous content is more likely to be spread via the media than content that is not humorous. This can impact the spread of awareness of collective action, as the information is more likely to reach a broader audience. In addition, humour can also broaden the movement, as it can help people become aware of the action or even join the movement. This was further corroborated in the interviews with other

participants. It also sheds light on the premise that humour can grab the attention of people, which may also impact the mobilisation of an action seen in the following:

*P7:* You're already dealing with really heavy issues. And sometimes, adding a funny side to it can make it maybe even a bit more approachable and easier to talk about and get more people involved. And it also catches a lot of attention.

This may indicate that humorous messages may also draw attention to the protest at hand by communicating its goal in a manner that is more accessible to the broader audience. As collective action is usually centered around grave topics, humour has the potential to make serious issues more accessible to a general audience. This also implies that people who might not have much knowledge about the action at hand might be able to understand it due to humour. Furthermore, in the following extract, the participant stated that humour might make people more willing to engage with social issues:

*P15:* Maybe it does some good if more activists or more NGOs use humour instead of always, you know, the horrible images. Where people at one point are a bit like: "oh, can't watch it anymore, I look the other way".

The extract above sheds light on the fact that using only serious images or content may deter people from learning about injustice and violation of human rights. Instead, the use of humour can mobilise a serious topic, as it makes it less heavy. Thus, more people may be willing to engage with it. Other participants also agree with this, and most denote that striking the right balance between humorous and non-humorous content may affect the accessibility of a serious topic.

***The Subjectivity of Humour can Negatively Impact its Mobilising Abilities***

Although activists can use humour to broaden a movement and create awareness amongst a broader audience, some participants offer a different perspective on this:

*P4:* So, maybe our actions and the humour we use are a bit more targeted towards people in certain bubbles, certain groups. If that makes sense.

*R.B.:* Yeah, it does.

*P4:* So, if there would be a critical note to using this humour, it could be that not everyone gets it or that it can be taken the wrong way. And then, you know, you can completely fail to bring across the message or people feel like they cannot be a part of it because they don't get it or because they don't, you know, relate to it in any way. So that might be a risk.

The extract above further elaborates on the fact that humour is subjective. The participant mentions that humour might fail to broaden a movement as individuals may not understand the humour used. This would also indicate that humour could fail to create awareness and insight about an action as individuals may not understand the humour or fail to connect to it and thus, may not choose to become a part of the movement. This was further corroborated by:

*R.B.:* Could you tell me a little bit about the effects of humour and the type of situations where humour is used? Do you think it achieves something?

*P3:* For me, usually when I see something funny, it gives me some sympathy for the one with the message because I think humour is a sign of being clever, and that's something I appreciate. I think this also might be a reason why for Amnesty, we're using humour less because we don't just want to appeal to people who understand the

cleverness of it. We want to appeal to a larger group. When using humour, you are at risk of just appealing to a smaller group.

The extract above indicates the risk of using humour in collective action. Humour may limit the number of individuals that comprehend the content. This has implications for mobilising people to an action and excluding some individuals from the purpose and collective action group. This also illuminates the idea that activists may deliberately choose against using humour in an action to avoid excluding any groups or individuals.

### **Humour and Strengthening Ties Among Activists/Strengthening Social Identity**

Another theme that was discovered to be quite prevalent in our research is that humour strengthens ties among activists and their social identities. After looking at the interviews, we found that many interviewees mentioned that humour could be used to build stronger ties between in-group members. Moreover, humour can also help to create a nice and energetic atmosphere that can motivate others to participate in social activism and to feel more positive towards the cause. With all of this information, three sub-themes and possibly functions of humour were identified. Namely, that humour can be used for in-group building and bonding, that humour can cause a nice atmosphere, and that humour can energise collective action.

#### ***Humour can be Used for In-group Building and Bonding***

Participants' responses indicated that humour was perceived to be an essential communication tool that can help to strengthen or create new bonds between in-group members. One possible reason that was named was that humour could help create a common goal and a sense of unity within a group. This was seen in the following:

*R.B.:* Can you tell me something about the effect of humour in these situations?

*P5:* It creates a bond between activists to sort of make fun of them together and sing about them, like we also have this song: 'Hey, hey, ho, ho, [person/thing] has got to



go'. So yeah, it definitely creates a feeling of unity and of standing together against the common enemy.

Additionally, it was also stated that humour can help to create and share positive situations with one another:

*P15*: I think lots of people understand humour and it's something that unites people, because if you laugh at the same joke together, you share a feeling and you kind of want to be part of it.

As seen by the extract above, using humour to joke around can make people feel more connected since it helps people to engage positively with each other. That is because humour seems to be understood by most people, so it might be an excellent tactic to use to engage with each other. Furthermore, humour could also potentially help create new opportunities to experience an event together and share one's feelings about the event. Moreover, by using humour, most shared experiences might be experienced very positively and an experience that one wants to be a part of. Sharing a positive experience with others, in turn, might help establish satisfying social ties.

### ***Humour can Create a Nice Atmosphere and Serve as Entertainment***

That introduced another important function of humour, namely to help and create a nice and entertaining atmosphere in a group. That also applies to groups that participate in collective actions, as seen by the insights of a participant:

*D.W.*: Do you also think that [humour] is applicable to an organisation or to a lot of people? I mean during ally-ship demonstrations or something like that?

*P16*: I think they are fun because they take place in a relaxed environment. You can have drinks and snacks and a chat before, after and in-between the event. It's just a

really informal setting. Also, you can interact with like-minded people that share your opinion. So, talking with them can also be very fun and can help to create a stronger bond.

This part of the interview indicates that humour is very important to create a better atmosphere. A better atmosphere, in turn, is believed to help create a better social bond because you are more inclined to share your opinion in a relaxed and pleasant atmosphere. Additionally, as mentioned earlier, just having fun, joking around in general, and sharing this fun experience already connects people. Lastly, some participants also mentioned that, next to feeling more positive in general, humour can also help diffuse already tense and negative situations. As seen in the following:

*R.B.:* What are the benefits of using humour?

*P5:* So, humour can sort of diffuse the tension a bit. A joke unrelated to the topic can sort of break the tension. [*P5* nods]. Humour makes it fun and creates a memory to look back on.

### ***Humour can Energise collective action***

Finally, another sub-theme discovered is that humour and fun can help energise the people participating in collective actions. That, in turn, can result in more motivation, as stated:

*P5:* I think humour and making jokes is really important and crucial for keeping your movement and your people and your community together and happy and alive and kicking. The songs are usually sung with a lot of energy and laughing, and like, it's not a serious at all. It's fun to look back, and it is fun to make the jokes about where you were together and it also will motivate you to come again.

The extract shows that humour and fun can energise people and make a situation less serious. That, in turn, can help others to be more motivated and happy. Most participants also agree with this and mention that humour is an essential tactic to interest people to participate and create memories with others during collective actions. Moreover, most participants also mentioned that sharing those memories help people build a social identity and ties in their groups. They also state that humour helps keep most people happy, which is crucial to building positive experiences and in-group relations.

### **Humour and Coping with Psychological Pressure from activism**

As mentioned before, both the employees and the student activists we interviewed often deal with topics they deem very serious or heavy. This part of our analysis examines the psychological impact those heavy topics can have on activists. We then look at how the activists cope with the issues they encounter during their work at Amnesty International or during and after a collective action.

#### ***Humour can Help Cope With the Responsibility of Being an Activist/can Make Activists Feel Good About What They do***

In the responses, a pattern appears which suggests that activists need to cope with the heavy topics that the activists see in pictures or read about. Multiple participants mention this struggle during the interviews:

*P4:* For a lot of people working at Amnesty, it can be very draining, especially if you are a researcher. So I think also for our mental state, it's sometimes important to use humour to kind of unwind just a little bit.

*P5:* You kind of want to leave the protest with a feeling of hope and agreement. You want to leave it with a feeling of power and you can create that also by singing and by chanting.

*P9:* Like you are going through some really gruesome pieces of information in your everyday life. And then there is a way that you can battle it by, well not joke about that, but by just engaging with humour in general.

*P13:* Amnesty International, it's a very serious company to work for, obviously, the information we see every day is, it's tough. You know, we see a lot of details about torture and stuff. For these participants, the impact of the pictures or texts of the subject for their activism can be hard to deal with. The participants mention that it is draining and that they need something to distract them from the impacting information. The participants show that this is an important issue for them and that they use humour to cope with it.

These excerpts portray the different ways in which the activists use humour as their coping mechanism. Many participants mentioned that they joke around the office or during collective action to cope with the heavy subjects. For them, humour can truly function as a 'safety valve'. The participant's answers suggest that different kinds of humour can be used to cope with the psychological pressure from collective action. The older participants use more politically incorrect humour, while younger participants use social media to post memes.

### **Humour and Power/(In)equality**

Besides coping mechanism, humour is used to undermine people perceived as powerful, such as presidents and ministers. A strong theme that arose was that activists try to ridicule them or make them seem less powerful than they are.

#### ***Humour can be a Tool to Undermine Powerful People***

Many activists use humour to show their discontent with how the influential people in a country rule. The participants think that ridiculing powerful people can impact those people:

*P2*: You're kicking up against power. Against people that have might, who are like the most ridiculous, powerful men. Always men who have no sense of humour. And the thing they hate is being ridiculed. So that's where you can get them.

*P5*: You know, in the climate movement, they often say 'Rutte stop met kutte' [*P5* and *R.B.* both laugh]. It basically says that the Dutch prime minister should stop shitting around and it also rhymes. So, you know, it's funny and it's also painful and you kind of make fun of this person in power.

These participants suggest that ridiculing people in power is a way to reach those people and help them see that what they are doing is ridiculous. Many of the participants specifically mention that this kind of humour is directed at powerful people and not toward human rights defenders, as can be seen in the quote of participant 5. Other examples are "humour is usually directed at the perpetrators", "mocking prominent authoritarian leaders", and "make jokes about, you know, politicians and people in power". These examples suggest that humour as a tool of mocking people is used in different collective actions. Secondly, the participants mention that this kind of humour is delivered through songs and signs:

*P5*: It's definitely about the people who cause the unfair treatment. You can see that in the slogans and on the signs.

*P6*: They were doing songs in which they mocked people. People like the government, oppressors and all of that.

*P10*: [Some] artists or musicians use humour in their lyrics or in cartoons or in their artwork, and they're making fun of the president.

*P12:* We also have a song in Ireland that is like a working-class kind of song. It's about all of the elected officials that shouldn't be elected, and they should be shot instead.

### **Appropriateness of Humour**

As the last quote illustrates, whether the use of humour around collective action is perceived as appropriate depends on the subject matter, the audience, and the person making the joke. Multiple participants already mentioned the subjectivity of humour, but some also shared experiences in which they noticed that using humour was deemed inappropriate.

#### ***Increased Sensitivities and Cultural Boundaries***

In some of these experiences, a trend is noted because there seems to be an increased awareness about the appropriateness of using humour around collective action. Especially the older employees of Amnesty International have the experience that some jokes are no longer considered appropriate or are not considered appropriate in different countries.

*P8:* But I guess you can, you can go too far. And now I'm going to sound like the white male, of a certain age. But I think society is getting more sensitive about these matters as well.

*P14:* In the old days, like I would say, like five or 10 years ago, satire was a way of being ironic and a way to post several issues. But this has now also been taken badly in different cultures.

*P14:* So we noticed that in the Netherlands the sense of humour differs very much from other countries. We made a video which can be described as humorous, which was not found humorous by all our colleagues internationally. We hired an

expensive car. One of our colleagues drove it and inside was someone who was dressed up as the Grim Reaper, portraying to be Death visiting after Khashoggi was killed. In the Dutch context, that was taken up very well. But international colleagues, and I can completely understand that, thought it was like, well, not the right thing to do. You don't play with the death of people and very serious business like that.

The anecdote of the participant shows that, when using humour as a communication tool, one must consider the cultural context in which one operates. Whereas in our earlier section on the subjectivity of humour, our participant merely contemplated the misuse of humour, the extract above pictures the actual consequences.

### ***Earning the Right to Joke***

One interesting find was that a participant argued that by virtue of her participation in protesting and organising, she had 'earned the right to joke' about the subject:

*R.B.:* How do you feel about the use of humour around protest against unfair treatment of groups in society?

*PI:* Yeah, but that also depends on the case. Like, you know, when we go back to the women's March: I am a woman, so there are jokes that I can make. I am protesting there, so obviously I'm not an ignorant person that is just calling out things. I'm with a group I've organised, I've put in a lot of effort and time to do something, you know? So I feel like it gives you the right to joke, but it also makes, yeah I don't know, less offensive.

## **Humour and Shifting the Boundaries of the Acceptable/Radicalization/Acceptance of Violence**

In extreme cases, humour cannot just be inappropriate but can be found to be very provocative and incite violent reactions. On the other hand, jokes can also trivialise or normalise the use of violence during protests.

### ***Humour as Provocation***

An ill-considered joke can be very provocative, as two participants note.

*P7:* I think humour can be, if taken wrongly, quite provocative. So I think if people take things too lightly, or joke about something that's very sensitive, it might provoke a potentially disproportionate reaction by other people, which could then result in violence.

*P17:* I think you cannot make jokes about people and their personal story, or about what they've experienced because that would be really disrespectful. I think that can create discomfort and can possibly be seen as a provocation rather than a joke.

### ***Humour as a Means of Accepting Violence***

One participant noted that if violent language is taken as a joke, it can normalise the violence and escalate the situation.

*P5:* The joke can bring this community together, where there is a risk of going violent. If the humour does start, I think there's a risk that you can also escalate. And I mean, sometimes people also think that this sort of violent, very violent, language is a joke, which I think can also escalate to more violent language as well as to actual physical violence.



Contrary to the concept of the ‘safety valve’ that helps protesters blow off steam, the use of humour can also provoke and elicit extreme reactions during collective action. Also, when during a protest, passions run high, joking can potentially trivialise more extreme behaviours. These dynamics are not particularly prevalent within the literature, but considering the observations of our interviewees, they are very much worth investigating in further research.

### *Humour can De-escalate Violence*

This finding is in line with the idea that humour can function as a ‘safety valve’. In fact, participants believed that as humour can energise and create a positive atmosphere, it can also impact the de-escalation of violence:

*D.W:* Do you think humour plays a part in reaching a tipping point?

*P16:* De-escalate, definitely, because humour, as we mentioned, has usually a calming effect.

This participant suggests that humour can be used to de-escalate violence in collective action, as it positively impacts people. We also found that some participants believe that humour can be used to “break tension”, “de-escalate protests and collective actions”, and “de-escalate tension between the police and activists.

### Discussion

The purpose of this research was to explore the functions of humour that are at play within the framework of collective action, specifically among allyship groups. Through our interviews with both employees and student-participants of Amnesty International Groningen we aimed to identify which functions of humour we could discover in their experiences.

In line with Weinberger and Gulas, we found that our participants experienced that humour plays a role in increasing awareness about a movement (2019). It also is beneficial in strengthening ties among activists (Fominaya, 2007), coping with the psychological pressure of activism (Mulkay, 1988; Fominaya, 2007) and can serve as a ‘weapon of the weak’ in the sense that participants use it as a way to ridicule those they perceive as powerful.

Interestingly, we also found experiences on the appropriateness of humour, as well as the role of humour in the escalation of a protest. The appropriateness of the use of humour as a communication tool was found to be dependent on the cultural context. Adding to that, there appeared a notion of an increased awareness surrounding the sensitivities of using humour in protest, as especially the older employees of Amnesty noted that some jokes are no longer appropriate. Lastly, humour was noted as a potential tool of trivialising or even accepting violence.

It was interesting to see that the functions of humour that could be found in the literature were echoed by our participants. A lot of the social dynamics of humour were reported to play a vital role in many of their experiences. Also, new concepts such as ‘earning the right to joke’ and humour as a tool of normalising violent behaviour can be interesting additions to the field.

All in all, humour seems to play a key role in the social dynamics of collective action and this can potentially have several practical implications. For example, it behooves organisers to take the mobilising potential of humour into account and use it to their

advantage. Using humour can be beneficial as both a tool of communication to the broader public, as well as a tool of social bonding or even as a coping mechanism. Several participants noted that humour has a great potential to reach the media, which can help broaden awareness. They often describe the events they experience as joyous and note that they use humour in order to break the ice, or release the tension of dealing with heavy subject matter. These are all practical applications that can be of great benefit to organisers of collective action. However, it should be noted that the appropriateness very much depends on the context in which it is used: organisers should take into consideration the target as well as the subject matter of the joke in order to handle for example cultural differences on the appropriateness of humour. Adding to that, it could potentially be used for the more nefarious purpose of trivialising the escalation of a protest, which is something organisers should be aware of as well.

### **Limitations**

One limitation of this study is that it leans quite heavily on the positive side of humour in collective action. The majority of responses accounted positive experiences: having fun at protests, empowering a movement or coping with pressure. This in part could be explained by the fact that our sample consisted of an allyship group, which does not necessarily have the grievances of the disadvantaged groups they organise on behalf of. Dumitrica noted in 2022 that in the 2017 Romanian anti-corruption protest, ridiculing the political establishment delegitimized their supporters as political participants, with polarising consequences. The argument is extended that a more extensive scientific focus should be put on the ambiguousness of protest humour. Its role in delegitimizing others and normalising violence against them remains clouded, since humoristic language is often absolved of scrutiny. In order to shed some light on this dynamic, our initial goal was to also interview protesters from disadvantaged groups, namely, Dutch farmers who took part in the 2019-2021 farmers-

protests, some of which resulted in vandalism and intimidation (Winterman, 2019). This group was of interest to us not merely since some of the protests escalated, but also because they displayed genuine grievances as well as a humouristic approach to voicing their discontent. Unfortunately, we encountered some reluctance during the recruitment phase and were not able to establish a satisfying sample.

Considering the lack of scrutiny on humour as a means of normalising violent behavior, it would be desirable to execute a similar research using a sample of a disadvantaged group. Not only might it offer a counterbalance to the mostly positive functions of humour found in the literature, it might also bring nuance to the positive dynamics we encountered in the allyship group. Also, additional research on the appropriateness of humour within collective action can perhaps shed more light on that particular dynamic. One notion that emerged in our own study was that the success of using humour in collective action depended on the cultural context, however identifying the boundaries of that cultural context remains an uncompleted task. An ethnographic study of an international protest movement can give more answers to the question of when the use of humour is appropriate, and when it is not.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, this study explored the functions of humour within a framework of collective action. Our participants reported using humour in raising awareness, strengthening ties, coping with pressure and kicking up against powerful people. The importance of taking stock of the appropriateness of humour was mentioned, as well as its potential of trivialising extreme behaviours.

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## Appendix A

### Interview set up

#### 1. Injustice perceptions & social identity – allyship group membership

We are interested in your views, as a human rights activist, on unfair treatment of groups in society. Can you tell me about this?

- a. Who is treated unfairly?
- b. Treated unfairly by whom?
- c. How does this unfair treatment make you feel?
- d. Do you personally belong to the group that is treated unfairly, or do you consider yourself their ally?

#### 2. Protest

When people feel treated unfairly (or: see others being treated unfairly – depending on Q1 responses) they often decide to voice their concern or discontent. Have you ever done this in any way?

- a. How did you voice your concern or discontent?
- b. Who were involved in this action?
- c. Was this an action by individual(s) or by a movement or organisation?
- d. Do you feel like you are part of a larger movement or organisation? If yes, which movement(s) or organisation(s)?
- e. Can you provide other examples of when / how you have tried to make your voice heard?

ONLY in case people say they really never made their voice heard in any way, even after some further stimulation from your side: Why not? Are you aware of ways in which others have voiced their concern or discontent?

- a. How did they voice their concern or discontent?

- b. Who were involved in this action?
- c. Was this an action by individual(s) or by a movement or organisation?
- d. Do you feel like these people are speaking also on your behalf / helping your cause?  
Why (not)?
- e. Can you provide other examples of when / how others around you have tried to make their voice heard?

### 3. Functions of humour

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

- a. Can you think of a time when you had fun or made fun in any way around your fight against unfair treatment? 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.
- b. Can you walk me through what exactly was fun about this instance?
  - i. What kind of humour was used? For example, conversational jokes, funny signs, "ludic" actions, laughing or having fun together enjoying a street protest, etc.
  - ii. Who made the fun / jokes? To whom was it funny?
  - iii. If applicable: What was the topic of the humour? For example, were the jokes/memes/signs about yourself, others (whom), the unfairness, et cetera?
  - iv. If applicable: Who were addressed by the humour? For example, were the jokes / memes / signs directed to a small group being present, to victims or perpetrators of unfair treatment more broadly, to inactive bystanders, et cetera?
- c. Can you tell me something about the effects of humour in this situation?
  - i. Were you trying to achieve something by having/making fun? What?
  - ii. Did anything happen or change while/because you were having or making fun?  
What? How?

- d. Do you think being a human rights activist says something about someone's sense of humour? What / why not?
- e. ONLY 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 who are fighting for the same cause. Or people may make fun of something because it feels awkward. Or they present something as "just a joke" to avoid others' disapproval.
- f. 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.
- g. If no occasions, why not?

#### 4. Appropriateness of humour

How do you feel about the use of humour around protests against unfair treatment of groups in society?

- a. Do you think it is always okay to use humour around this cause? Why (not)? If no: When not?

#### 5. Shifting the boundaries of the acceptable

Is there a tipping point where protest goes too far? Have you experienced such a tipping point? Can you walk me through it? (Provide example of escalation).

- 5.1 - Why do you think this tipping point has been reached? Does humour or having fun play a role in this? Can you elaborate? What are your thoughts on this?

#### 6. Closing

Is there anything else you would like to mention about humour and fun around protests against unfair treatment of groups in society?

What are your hopes for the future?

## Appendix B

**Interview 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/radicalisation/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 memers or signs during a demonstration to attract the general public's attention.
- 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.