

The functions of humour in collective action

Michel IJzer

S2951894

Department of Psychology, University of Groningen

PSB3E-BT15: Bachelor Thesis

Supervisor: Dr. H.J.E. Greijdanus

Second evaluator: Prof. Dr. E.H. Gordijn

In collaboration with: Owen Lichtenberg, Ria Bhojwani, and Diana Wagner

May 22, 2022

A thesis is an aptitude test for students. The approval of the thesis is proof that the student has sufficient research and reporting skills to graduate, but does not guarantee the quality of the research and the results of the research as such, and the thesis is therefore not necessarily suitable to be used as an academic source to refer to. If you would like to know more about the research discussed in this thesis and any publications based on it, to which you could refer, please contact the supervisor mentioned.

Abstract

There are different kinds of functions that humour can have to be an effective tool in collective action. Research shows that humour is used for social bonding between group members, to create awareness for the cause that they are protesting, and as a safety valve for psychological pressure. However, humour is not always appropriate to use in collective action, especially in multicultural groups. While most of the contemporary research on humour in collective action focuses on national collective action groups, our focus is on the role of humour in an international collective action group. In the current study, we investigate the roles of different functions of humour for members of Amnesty International. We do not have any predictions or hypotheses beforehand since this is an explorative study on the role of humour in collective action. We interviewed 17 participants of Amnesty International, and asked questions about their perceived role in the group, and why and how the members use humour before, during and after collective actions. The results showed that humour is used to increase awareness, increase social bonding, as a coping mechanism for psychological pressure, that humour is not always appropriate, and that humour can be used to ridicule people in power. The results showed that humour has different functions for people in an international collective action group. While humour can be an effective tool, it can also be ineffective when humour is not appropriate.

Keywords: humour, collective action, Amnesty International, functions of humour, an international group

The functions of humour in collective action

Humour can be found worldwide in many different styles with different functions, ranging from humour as a coping strategy to using humour as a way to entertain people (Jiang et al., 2019). Especially in collective action, humour is being used more often for multiple purposes ('t Hart 2007). The research on humour as a communication tool has been growing in the last decades. Multiple reviews focused on the role of humour in advertisements, politics, and collective action (Bippus, 2007; 't Hart, 2016; Weinberger & Gulas, 2019). Weinberger & Gulas (2019) found that humour can be used for different purposes in advertisements. In advertisements, humour can be used to convey negative consequences better than without humour. This shows that humour can be used to make a bigger impact on the audience. Additionally, humour is used to decrease people their fear levels to persuade the participant of the message conveyed to them (Mukherjee & Dubé, 2012). However, a pitfall with humour is that it can harm the perceived seriousness of the person who uses humour. This aspect of humour in advertisements can play a similar role to humour in collective action (Weinberger & Gulas, 2019). Besides advertisement, research into the role of humour in politics shows that it can be an effective tool for politicians to use (Bippus, 2007). As the reviews above suggest, humour can have different functions. It can be a helpful tool in communication, as well as that it can be harmful in communication. Although, the activists need to be aware of when and what type of humour is appropriate at certain moments to maintain their credibility.

Humour in collective action can have multiple functions for the activists that use humour. According to 't Hart (2016), humour plays a role in conveying a message of social critique on the society and its leaders, strengthening the group identity, being a safety valve for protesters, and as a motivational tool to take up collective action. These functions of humour in collective action together with the functions that humour plays in advertisement

and politics will be examined through the questions that we pose to students and employees from Amnesty International Netherlands in semi-structured interviews. Afterwards, the collected interviews will be examined through thematic analysis to see the importance of the functions for the collective action group. We decided to focus our research on people from Amnesty International. The reason for this is that we were able to find enough participants because one of our researchers is a member of Amnesty International. Secondly, Amnesty International is a culturally diverse group by the international composition of the group, and this will set our research apart from most of the existing literature on collective action that is discussed in this paper.

Theory of collective action

Before the functions of humour are more thoroughly discussed, it is important to understand why people partake in collective action. Research into participation in collective action by van Zomeren et al. (2008) suggests that subjective injustice, identity, and efficacy are good predictors of why people participate in collective action. However, van Zomeren et al. (2008) found that identification with the group that is being disadvantaged is the best predictor for a person to engage in protests. Using the predictors for collective action, we will ask questions to find out if our participants have similar motivational factors to participate in collective action. Besides that, the role of group identity has been examined for participation in collective action. De Weerd and Klandermans (1999) concluded that group identification has a stimulating effect on the members of a collective action group to participate in collective action, but only if the members already identify with the group. In a more recent study, van Stekelenburg and Klandermans (2013) suggest that a high level of identification with the group identity can lead to a feeling of obligation to participate in collective action. These aspects will be examined by asking about the social identities of the participants and their identification with the groups that Amnesty International is protesting for. One of the

functions of humour for collective action that we want to explore is to strengthen group ties between members. Therefore, it is important to understand if our participants identify with their group, since this function of humour would not be relevant if the participants do not identify with their group. Thirdly, Mummendey et al. (1999) suggest that group efficacy is important in predicting why people participate in collective action. The characteristic of group efficacy can be important for the people from Amnesty International to partake in protests since participation is mostly voluntary. Identifying if the participants believe in the group efficacy and their participation in protests will give us a more complete picture of the activities that our participants engage in. Additionally, this information can guide our interview towards the functions of humour by asking if and how they used the different functions of humour before, during, and after a protest.

Functions of Humour

As mentioned above, the use of humour in collective action can have different functions. One of the functions of humour that has been found is that it can strengthen the existing identity within a group ('t Hart, 2016). As is mentioned in the theory of collective action, a stronger group identity is a predictor of participating in collective action (Fominaya, 2007; 't Hart 2016; Stekelenburg & Klandermans 2013). Additionally, the research on group identity suggests that humour could be an important factor for people from Amnesty International to participate in collective action. However, the research on identity creation and humour shows that there should be a common identity in place since humour alone is not sufficient to create a common identity between people participating in collective action groups (Fominaya, 2007; 't Hart 2016). An example of strengthening ties between group members can be found in the research of Fominaya (2007) in which she examined that multiple group members were able to assimilate into the group by using humour. Consequently, the group cohesion within that collective action movement improved with the

use of humour (Fominaya, 2007). In the current research, we will explore if humour is used to strengthen the group cohesion in an international orientated, since humour had this function in the national groups that Fominaya (2007) and t'Hart (2016) focused on. Fominaya followed a Spanish national group for some time while t'Hart mentions multiple national groups in her review on humour in protest. This is a difference between the current research and the research in the existing literature on humour and group identification. As shown above, the focus is mostly on a national collective action group, while we focus on an international group. What this difference can mean for the use of humour will be revisited at the end of the introduction.

Another function of humour that Fominaya (2007) found in her research is that humour can be used as a safety valve for the members of the collective action group. She mentions that members were able to release some of the tension that was building up, after joking about another group member. Joking together had a positive effect on the group cohesion, but also helped the people to relax after intense moments within the group during for example a group meeting. Besides that, the safety valve can also be used after a group event or a collective action to blow off some steam from the tense moments before. This function of humour can be explained by the Relief Theory that Morreal (2009) proposes. The theory can be used to explain how the lowering of tension works. The laughter from the jokes releases the tension that can build up after a collective action. The laughter works like a valve in steam pipes to release the pressure from tense moments within collective action (Morreal, 2009). The current research will examine if this function of humour is used by the participants of Amnesty International. This will be realized by asking if the participants use humour after collective action, or after they encountered intense situations during their work for Amnesty International.

Another function of Humour is that it can be used to convey the message of a group to a bigger audience. According to Weinberger and Gulas (2019) their review on humour, humorous ads use more resource allocation for memory than non-humorous ads. Indicating that humour needs more processing resources to comprehend and will therefore be better remembered than non-humorous ads (Weinberger & Gulas, 2019). The current research will explore if the participants use humour during their protest. Secondly, we will explore why the participants use humour to understand if the function of humour is being used.

Instead of using humour as a tool for within a collective action group, humour can be a powerful tool for people when directed towards an outgroup person, and especially towards powerful people in a country (Popovic & McClennen, 2020). Humour as a tool to ridicule the powerful people in a country has been used in Serbia when President Milosevic was the target of humorous actions in 2000 (Popovic & Joksic, 2013). Popovic coined the term Laughtivism to describe the use of humour to undermine an authoritarian regime and to show the rest of the population the absurdity that is present in their society (Popovic & McClennen, 2020). A similar effect has been found in Turkey during the Gezi Park protests in which the protesters undermined the authority of the police by using humour (Korkut et al., 2020). In this instance, the police sprayed the protesters with pepper gas from close range without differentiating between violent and non-violent protesters. The protesters appropriated the pepper spray usage of the police by making gas masks out of everyday objects. How the protesters appropriated the pepper spray use of the police led to that “the mask became a ubiquitous metaphor for depiction of the absurdity of police oppression” (Korkut et al., 2020, p.12). This function of humour will be explored during our interviews to see if and how the participants make use of humour as a tool to undermine powerful people.

Contrary to the functions of humour mentioned above, humour could also play a negative role in collective action. Research in advertisements suggests that humour can be

used to persuade people, and has a larger effect in persuading people to buy a product than non-humorous advertisements (Weinberger & Gulas, 2019). Additionally, Muhherjee and Dubé (2012) suggest in their research on advertisements that people can also use humour to decrease the level of fear in a person, and in turn, increase the persuasiveness of the message in the advertisement. Although the researchers focused on advertisements, the results can have implications for the use of humour in collective action. The persuasion effect and the reduction of defensive fear responses following humour could indicate that humour can be used to persuade people to carry out an action that they would otherwise be too scared to carry out. We will explore this persuasive function in relation to violence during a protest by asking about the participant's experiences with humour and violence. In particular, the focus will be on a tipping point moment during a protest. A tipping point moment is defined as a moment when a non-violent protest turns into a violent protest.

Contrary to the function of strengthening ties between group members, humour can deter aspiring and outgroup members from a collective action group, since humour is not appreciated by everyone (Jiang et., 2019). Jokes can be perceived in different ways and what someone believes to be funny can be offensive to another person ('t Hart, 2016). Therefore, the appropriateness of humour is context-bound, and aggressive jokes or insulting jokes will be accepted in some cultures but not in every culture due to cultural differences in humour usage and perception (Jiang et., 2019). Additionally, Schermer and Kfrerer (2020) found differences between four English-speaking countries in humour styles. Therefore, activists need to hold different cultures into account when using humour as a tool in their group. The appropriateness of humour is therefore especially important for Amnesty International since the organisation has culturally diverse members. The appropriateness of humour will be explored during our interviews with the participants to find out if they experienced cultural differences, and if some uses of humour were perceived as inappropriate.

Allyship Groups and Disadvantaged Groups

Amnesty International is an international organisation that focuses on protecting human rights around the world. The organisation has millions of members all over the world, indicating that the organisation has members of different nationalities (Amnesty International, n.d.). Amnesty international can be seen as an allied social movement in which people join a cause to participate in collective action. The biggest difference with a disadvantaged group is that people in an allyship group usually fight for another person their cause, and that people in an allyship group are not directly harmed. Contrary to people in an allyship group, people in a disadvantaged group usually are harmed in some way, as can be seen in the research of de Weerd and Klandermans (1999) in which the farmers in the disadvantaged group were fighting against new legislation that made impacted their profession.

Although the research on humour in collective action is growing, there is still not a lot of research on the role of humour in different collective action groups. Our study adds to the literature that we have an international group as our focus since most of the other research focuses on a national group ((Fominaya, 2007; de Weerd & Klandermans, 1999).

The Current Study

The goal of the current study is to explore the use of humour and the functions of humour as described above in a collective action group. Firstly, we will examine if the participants use humour before, during or after collective actions. Secondly, the focus will shift to the functions of humour that are mentioned above, and we will try to deduce other functions and themes of humour. The subjects of our project are members of Amnesty International. In particular, we will interview employees and student volunteers.

Methods

01Participants

Participants in this study were recruited through one of our researcher's contacts, who volunteers for Amnesty International Netherlands as a 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 into 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 humorous 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 centred 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 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 experiences:

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 perceived positively as 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 connect 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 a 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 towards 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 participating 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?

P1: 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

Although we conducted an explorative study, we did have questions based on the existing literature mentioned in the introduction. The purpose of this study was to discover if and what role humour plays in collective action. The analysis showed that the participants were able to elaborate on the themes that we asked about during the interviews. Additionally, extra trends were identified, as is mentioned in the approach of analysis. First, humour is predominantly used as a tool to increase awareness for collective action and to strengthen the social ties between group members. Second, the participants talked about when and if humour was appropriate, and how humour is used to alleviate the psychological pressure that comes with being a member of Amnesty International. Finally, the least mentioned themes showed that humour was used as a weapon of the weak to criticize powerful people. Additionally, humour could be used as a provocation to the people that you are protesting, and this could turn a peaceful protest into a violent protest, according to some participants.

The results suggest that humour is an important tool in multiple aspects of collective action, and suggests multiple practical implications. The two most prevalent themes of humour are, the ability to create awareness and to strengthen social ties. This is something that can be exploited by the organizers of collective action in creating group bonding activities in which humour is a central aspect, and to use humour during actions to make a

lasting impact on the audience. In addition, humour could be incorporated into group activities taking place after a protest to stimulate the release of psychological pressure.

Although humour has positive effects, the results also suggest the contrary. People in collective action should be aware of the cultural inappropriateness of humour and should take this into account when preparing and executing a protest. The importance of this practical implication can be seen in the quote of participant 14, when he/she talked about the video that was not regarded as appropriate by international colleagues. Another practical implication of the use of humour is that the results suggest that humour is an effective tool against authoritarianism in creating social change. This is in line with the research of Popovic and McClennen (2020), who already showed that humour can be used in this way. Our results complement their research with more examples of how humour is used in practice.

Our results are in line with the research in advertisements on humour to increase awareness, and to increase positive attitudes towards the person using humour (Fominaya, 2007; Weinberger & Gulas, 2019). The results that humour and laughing can be important tools in strengthening social ties are congruent with the results of research on laughing and social bonding (Dunbar et al., 2021). Although Dunbar et al. (2021) focused on laughing and social bonding, since laughing is usually what people do after humour, thus humour is suggested to indirectly strengthen social ties between people. Besides this, the inappropriateness of certain types of humour due to cultural differences was evident in our results. Some humorous actions were deemed funny by the Dutch participants, but they mentioned that people from other cultures did not agree with them. Schermer and Kfrerer (2020) had similar results on cultural differences in humour, and this suggests that humour can be a sensitive topic for people in collective action. The results that we obtained give strength to the relief theory of Morreal (2009), since multiple participants mentioned the use of humour to cope with the psychological pressures of collective action. Lastly, the results of

humour as a tool against an oppressive power, and the use of humour to shift the boundaries, of what is acceptable, are in line with the research of Popovic and McClennen (2020) on the use of humour against authoritarian regimes. They reviewed multiple collective actions and found that humour is used as a tool for provocation towards the person in power.

Besides the similarities in results, our findings add to the existing literature in multiple ways. Our research focused on Amnesty International employees and student volunteers. This means that we had an international participant pool, while most of the other literature focuses on groups that exclusively include people of the same nationality (Fominaya, 2007; de Weerd & Klandermans 1999). Our research gives a different insight into the use of humour since the appropriateness of humour plays a bigger role in international groups due to cultural differences (Jiang et al., 2019). Our results suggest that cultural diversity could influence the amount of humour used, since there will be less humour that will be appropriate for everyone in the group. Additionally, this could mean the themes that we explored will be less influential for an international group than a national group, due to the lowered use of humour. Another difference is that Amnesty International is an allyship group in which people protest on behalf of other people. While the other studies focused on disadvantaged groups, and did not address the appropriateness of humour (Fominaya, 2007; de Weerd & Klandermans 1999).

Although there are advantages to having a different sample and study focus than most of the research into the relationship between humour and collective action, this does mean that our results will be less generalizable and comparable to other populations. The limitation for generalizability should be kept in mind when the results are compared to less culturally diverse groups or disadvantaged groups. When generalizing our results to other groups, the limited sample due to the time and space restraints of the bachelor thesis should be considered. Additionally, our sample contained four males and thirteen females. This means that around 68% of our sample is female. The sample is representative of Amnesty

International, since Tibbits (2020) found that around 67% of the Amnesty International staff was female, while other human rights organisations had a more even representation of males and females. This difference with other human rights organisations could mean that the sample does not represent other allyship collective action groups than Amnesty International. Another limitation of our research is that we were not able to meet the participants face-to-face, and had to conduct interviews online. This made it harder for us to take body language into account, and to be more spontaneous with our questioning. However, conducting the interviews online allowed us to interview people who work for Amnesty International, instead of only having student volunteers of Amnesty International. The online interviews helped us to expand our participant pool to make it more representative of Amnesty International in our research. Due to the time restraints of the bachelor thesis, we were not able to compare the two different groups in our sample. The use of humour can be different, since there is an age difference between the employees and volunteers. This was mentioned by one of our participants, as is written in the increased sensitivity section of our results. Other researchers could investigate this division inside allyship groups, and examine if there are differences between the functions of humour or how the two groups use the functions of humour.

These limitations also implicate suggestions for further research. A suggestion could be to look at how allyship groups such as Amnesty International differ in the use of humour from disadvantaged groups like the farmers in de Weerd and Klandermans' (2009) research. A comparison can show how humour is used in various kinds of groups and can give further implications for how humour can effectively be used for collective action. Another suggestion for further research is to investigate the role of humour as a tool to jeopardize the legitimacy of powerful people. This theme was scarcely represented in our results but can be of importance to activists. It is important for a peaceful organisation such as Amnesty International that a protest cannot turn into a violent protest. This would go against the principles of a non-violent

organisation. Research on how and why humour can be a tipping point during a protest could give insight into what kind of humour should be avoided, and what can be done when a tipping point is reached. Humour is suggested to be a powerful tool, and should therefore not be discarded due to the danger of turning a non-violent protest into a violent protest.

In our research, we tried to identify what the functions of humour are for collective action groups. The results show that the participants used humour to create awareness, increase social bonding, and blow off steam. Additionally, humour was used to ridicule powerful people, and the use of humour could be a tipping point during a protest. However, the participants addressed that not all forms of humour were appropriate in their organisation. Our research tries to fill the gap in the literature on international allyship groups and humour. The results suggest that different functions of humour can effectively be used in collective action for multiple purposes.

References

Amnesty International. (n.d.). *About us*. Amnesty International UK.

<https://www.amnesty.org.uk/frequently-asked-questions#:~:text=Where%20does%20Amnesty%20work%3F,every%20region%20of%20the%20world>

Bippus, A. (2007). Factors predicting the perceived effectiveness of politicians' use of humour during a debate. *Humour*, 20(2), 105–122.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>

de Weerd, M., & Klandermans, B. (1999) Group identification and political protest: farmers' protest in the Netherlands. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 29(8)

1073–1095. [https://doi.org/10.1002/\(SICI\)1099-0992\(199912\)29:8<1073::AID-EJSP986>3.0.CO;2-K](https://doi.org/10.1002/(SICI)1099-0992(199912)29:8<1073::AID-EJSP986>3.0.CO;2-K)

Dunbar, R. I. M., Frangou, A., Grainger, F., & Pearce, E. (2021). Laughter influences social bonding but not prosocial generosity to friends and strangers. *Plos One*, 16(8),

0256229. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0256229>

Fominaya, C. F. (2007). The role of humour in the process of collective identity formation in autonomous social movement groups in contemporary Madrid. *International Review of Social History*, 52(S15), 243–258.

<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859007003227>

Jiang, T., Li, H., & Hou, Y. (2019). Cultural differences in humor perception, usage, and implications. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10, 123.

<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00123>

- Korkut, U., McGarry, A., Erhart, I., Eslen-Ziya, H., & Jenzen, O. (2021). Looking for truth in absurdity: humour as community-building and dissidence against authoritarianism. *International Political Science Review*, 1–20
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512120971151>
- Morreall, J. (2009). Humour as cognitive play. *Journal of Literary Theory*, 3(2), 241–260.
- Mukherjee, A., & Dubé, L. (2012). Mixing emotions: the use of humour in fear advertising. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, 11(2), 147–161. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cb.389>
- Popovic, S. & Joksic, M. (2013, April 5). Why Dictators Don't Like Jokes. *Foreign policy*.
<https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/04/05/why-dictators-dont-like-jokes/>
- Popovic, S. & McClennen, S. (2020). *Pranksters vs. Autocrats: Why Dilemma Actions Advance Nonviolent Activism*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1515/9781501756078>
- Schermer, J. A., & Kfrerer, M. L. (2020). Humour style differences across four English-speaking countries. *Humour*, 33(3), 423–437. <https://doi.org/10.1515/humour-2019-0027>
- 't Hart, M. C. (2007). Humour and Social Protest: An Introduction. *International Review of Social History*, 52, 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859007003094>
- 't Hart, M. C. (2016). The Role of Humour in Protest Cultures. In K. Fahlenbrach, M. Klimke, & J. Scharloth (Eds.), *Protest Cultures: A Companion*, 17, 198–204. Berghahn Books.
- Tibbits, F. (2020, July 1). *The Feminization of Human Rights?* Human Rights Here.
<https://www.humanrightshere.com/post/the-feminization-of-human-rights>
- van Zomeren, M., Postmes, T., & Spears, R. (2008). Towards an integrative social identity model of collective action: a quantitative research synthesis of three socio-psychological perspectives. *Psychological Bulletin*, 134(4), 504–535.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.134.4.504>

Weinberger, M. G., & Gulas, C. S. (2019). The emergence of a half-century of research on humour in advertising: what have we learned? what do we still need to learn?

International Journal of Advertising, 38(7), 911–956.

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 the 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 an 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 memes 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.