

**Humour as a Tool in Collective Action: Exploring the Experiences of Members at
Amnesty International Netherlands**

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Abstract

The current literature describes several functions of humour within the context of collective action. Based on methods of deduction and induction, we aimed to validate the functions of humour in collective action in a person-centred approach based on members' experiences from Amnesty International Netherlands. *Methods:* We conducted semi-structured interviews with 17 individuals. Half of the sample were employees and the other half were student volunteers. Participants were interviewed about how they perceive and use humour within collective action at Amnesty International Netherlands. *Results:* Our results were able to link all the previous findings to the functions of humour, as well as provide new insights into how the perceived appropriateness of humour functions. Specifically, how protestors can "earn the right to joke" and the impact that the appropriateness can have on sensitivities, in particular "increased sensitivities". In addition to this, we also found how humour can function in the escalation and de-escalation of violence and the acceptance of violence. *Conclusion:* Humour can function as a tool for in-group bonding and collective identity, serve as a means to cope, undermining people in power, shift the boundaries of radicalisation; what is acceptable in terms of violence.

Keywords: Humour, functions, collective action, protestors.

Humour as a Tool in Collective Action: Exploring the Experiences of Members at Amnesty International Netherlands

Humour is used around the globe and in almost every social context in one way or another (Martin & Ford, 2018). Laughter is elicited in many casual conversations (Tamada et al., 2022); we laugh with our friends and share funny videos on social media. Laughing with a group can have positive effects. For example, the facilitation of relationships, by creating connectedness and support (Cohen, 2004; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010). But what is the function of humour, and how does it impact more serious contexts, such as in collective action?

Humour can be used as a tool for communication (Takovski, 2019) and, thus, can function as an essential tool in collective action ('t Hart, 2007). More specifically, within collective action, humour can be used to (1) criticise people in power, (2) consolidate collective identity, (3) provide a safety valve for protesters, and (4) motivate protestors (Fominaya, 2007; Korkut et al., 2021; 't Hart, 2016). In our person-centred study, we aim to validate findings of previous literature and investigate the functions of humour in collective action at Amnesty International Netherlands. Amnesty International Netherlands is an influential organisation with a large societal and political impact worldwide (Amnesty International, 2021b). Thus, the present research aims to explore the function of humour as a tool within such an organisation as they could use humour to facilitate in-group bonding, mobilise their actions to a broader audience, and help their protestors cope with activism burnout and to help them undermine powerful people.

First, we will review the nature of humour based on how it was defined in previous literature. The concept of humour is paradoxical (Gulas et al., 2017). It is experienced and comprehended globally (Weinberger & Gulas, 2019). It is *inherent and universal*, transpiring in all cultures and individuals and in virtually every type of interpersonal relationship (Apte,

1985; Lefcourt, 2001). Every individual has a natural ability for humour; however, it is *idiosyncratic* to every culture, context and audience (Gulas et al., 2017). Humour is deeply rooted within its context; thus, there is a chance that a joke will not translate in the manner it is intended; the way it is understood may differ from person to person ('t Hart, 2007). Therefore, while humour is used and manifests itself in multiple ways worldwide (Weinberger & Gulas, 2019), the interpretation of humour is subjective (Olsson et al., 2002). This makes humour an inherently paradoxical concept (Gulas et al., 2017).

Humour then pertains to everything an individual says or does that can be deemed funny or fun, making people laugh (Korkut et al., 2021). Humour is expressed through a change in behaviour, such as laughter (Bui et al., 2016). Customarily, humour and laughter emerge in combination. In essence, humour proceeds to laughter (Watson, 2015). Individuals respond to humour with laughter if they perceive something as humorous; laughter is a vocal expression that functions as a communication tool (Martin & Ford, 2018). It can be infectious and difficult to falsify, as laughter can be contagious between individuals, which argues for its relevance in social communication (Martin & Ford, 2018; Provine, 1992).

Furthermore, humour has significant functions at the individual, interpersonal and social levels (Riquelme et al., 2019). At the individual level, using humour exercises can improve psychological well-being (Maiolino & Kuiper, 2016). At the interpersonal level, research suggests that humour can facilitate the start of new relationships as it helps individuals communicate openly and authentically with each other (Zinger, 1988; Ziv, 2010). Lastly, at the social level, humour can be defined as a behaviour that propels social communication (Martin & Ford, 2018).

In fact, it has been argued that laughter evolved primarily to facilitate communication (Gloor et al., 2021; Nikopoulos, 2017). In essence, humour and laughter can be used to com-

municate a message (Takovski, 2019). There is a growing body of research on humour as a tool for conveying messages within the domains of advertising, politics and collective action (Cline & Kellaris, 2007; Korkut et al., 2021; 't Hart, 2007). These domains are relevant within Amnesty International Netherlands because they (1) advertise their actions, (2) are involved with politics, and (3) are a collective movement (Amnesty International, 2021a; Amnesty International, 2021b).

Within the domain of advertising, it was found that humorous advertisements are more effective in increasing sales than non-humorous ones (Madden & Weinberger, 1982). However, the way an individual comprehends humour has been found to be a strong predictor of whether an advertisement will be interpreted favourably (Cline & Kellaris, 2007). This, in turn, can impact the attention given to a message and its eventual recall (Weinberger et al., 1995).

In politics, humour can challenge fear and apathy by confronting the oppressive powers (Korkut et al., 2021). This is because humour challenges the standardised way of thinking and is a form of rebellion against political regimes (Korkut et al., 2021; Roy, 2007). Humour can also serve as a tool for persuasion and mobilisation, as it can discredit the people in power and negatively affect individual's opinions about them (Martin & Ford, 2018). Thus, humour offers an independent, creative and non-violent means of resisting oppression (Korkut et al., 2021). Humour, then, becomes an act of resistance (Gérin, 2018). Lastly, humour can also function as a powerful and influential tool in collective action ('t Hart, 2007). Specific to our sample, humour can be an influential tool within Amnesty International Netherlands.

Functions of Humour in Collective Action

To understand the role of humour in collective action, it is important first to define collective action. Collective action is defined as collective behaviours of group members, which would be atypical for individuals not part of this group (American Psychological Association, n.d.). As well as actions taken by an organisation against an instigator (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Within the context of an allyship group (i.e. Amnesty International Netherlands), the way collective action is defined, and functions may vary.

Allyship groups have the purpose of helping victims of oppressive regimes, challenge social systems that may be harmful to some groups, and connect to a broader social movement (Jolly et al., 2021). Based on the current literature, we have identified four functions with regard to humour in collective action, (1) Humour can facilitate in-group bonding ('t Hart, 2016), (2) Humour can serve as a coping mechanism (Fominya, 2007; Korkut et al., 2021; Takovski, 2019), (3) Humour can mobilise an action (Dumitrica, 2021; Roy, 2007), and (4) Humour can challenge people in power (Dumitirca, 2021; Korkut et al., 2021). These functions are relevant to our sample (i.e. Amnesty International Netherlands) as they are a social movement, and thus, these functions may influence their movement (Amnesty International, 2021b).

First, humour can help with in-group bonding ('t Hart, 2016). It can be used to strengthen a sense of group membership and common identity ('t Hart, 2016). In accordance with the social identity model of collective action (SIMCA, van Zomeren et al., 2008), collective identity is a fundamental aspect of collective action, as it can act as a motivating factor and boost the effectiveness of collective action. This is important for our sample as collective identity is fundamental to collective action (van Zomeren et al., 2008), the use of humour is encouraged.

Moreover, humour and laughter can have positive effects in a group setting. Amnesty International Netherlands typically conducts group protests and works in groups to prepare for the actions. Laughing along with individuals or a group can create a strong tether within the group ('t Hart, 2007). This may occur as humour can help to break down the barriers present within the context of intergroup settings because humour can reduce interpersonal stress (Freud, 1928): creating warmth, positive emotions and building relationships (Bitterly & Schweitzer, 2019; Cooper, 2008; Cooper & Sosik, 2012; Martin & Dobbin, 1988). Thus, humour can help with in-group bonding.

Second, humour can function as a way to relieve pressure and, thus, cope with collective action (Fominya, 2007; Korkut et al., 2021; Takovski, 2019). It can serve as a 'safety valve' prior to, throughout, or following tense situations to ease them and serve as a means to blow off steam (Fominya, 2007; Korkut et al., 2021). According to relief theory, laughter can facilitate the release of emotions and tension, resulting in relaxation (Morreall, 2009; Watson, 2015). Additionally, due to a joke's vagueness, they can frequently serve as a means of relief in the face of overt or covert social constraints, as is the case with collective action (Takovski, 2019). This is important in collective action (i.e. within Amnesty International Netherlands), as jokes and humour can provide protesters with ease from the severity and seriousness of their political actions (Fominaya, 2007).

Third, humour can mobilise an action, attract attention and make a serious topic more accessible (Dumitrica, 2021; Roy, 2007; Weinberger et al., 1995). In accordance with the Contextual Surprise Hypothesis (Martin & Ford, 2018), individuals may be surprised to find humour in certain situations; thus, they may pay more attention to the situation (Martin & Ford, 2018; Roy, 2007). In the Raging Grannies protests, for example, it was observed that the

use of humour was able to engage bystanders as they chose to join the action (Roy, 2007). This study by Roy (2007) explores the use of humour in collective action with a disadvantaged group; which are actions taken by members of a group with the goal of improving the circumstances of the group at large (van Zomeren et al., 2012). In our study, however, we will examine allyship groups, which will add to the present literature available.

Thus, humour can help protestors communicate with a broader audience which is an important factor to investigate within our sample (i.e. because they have global influence). It can make serious topics more accessible to audiences (Roy, 2007). Protests that contain humour are also more likely to be spread online and attract a larger audience (Dumitrica, 2021). This also sheds light on the framing role of humour, as it communicates a serious cause in a simple and more attention-grabbing manner, which can also lead to the mobilisation of the action to diverse audiences (Dumitrica, 2021). This study by Dumitrica (2021) is an observational field study which also investigated a disadvantaged group. Our study will add to the present literature using a person-centred, qualitative research design.

Fourth, humour can help to ridicule and undermine people in power (Dumitrica, 2021; Korkut et al., 2021). It can act as a tool to challenge power (Dumitrica, 2021). Within the context of collective action, protest humour can challenge the allocation of power in a community (Dumitrica, 2021). It can also signal resistance to power by challenging the limits and undermining political dialogues (Dumitrica, 2021). This type of humour is typically known as *subversion humour*: humour which challenges the power relations and the current state of affairs (Holmes & Marra 2002; Strain et al. 2016). It further aims to create social awareness about the inequalities present and try to change them (Riquelme et al., 2019). Moreover, it can subvert the fear created by people in power and help protests confront them (Korkut et al., 2021).

This is an essential function for Amnesty International as they aim to challenge oppressors and fight injustices (Amnesty International, 2021a).

Although humour may challenge power, it may sustain violence and exclusion not only against the politicians but also against other groups (Dumitrica, 2021). This implies that humour can cause intergroup distance (Martin & Ford, 2018). This introduces the adverse functions of humour. Humour can function as a disguise for violence (Blackford et al., 2014). The previous literature available on the impact of humour on violence within collective action is scarce; thus, this study aims to add to the literature by examining how humour can function with regard to violence in collective action. This is important for our study to explore as Amnesty International Netherlands typically conducts peaceful protests; thus, the role humour plays in violence is of importance (Amnesty International, 2019).

Furthermore, humour can function as a ‘double-edged sword’ within a social context; it holds power to increase collective identity and create distance between individuals (Martin & Ford, 2018). As a joke can be vague, which was previously noted as a positive effect by Takovski (2019). It can also create confusion about the message, which can increase the social distance among people (Martin & Ford, 2018). As humour is bound within its context, a joke may not be interpreted in the way it intends to be, which can also cause interpersonal distance (’t Hart, 2007). This is important to investigate in our sample to explore whether humour could backfire in certain situations at Amnesty International Netherlands.

Not everyone may consider humour appropriate, which can negatively impact collective action (’t Hart, 2016). This has implications for how humour can be regarded as appropriate or not, and what impact this can have on collective action (i.e. at Amnesty Internationals Netherlands). This may have implications for the mobilisation of an action as well. If humour

is not interpreted in the way it intends to ('t Hart, 2007), it can not broaden a movement to a larger audience. Our study aims to add to the present literature by exploring the function of perceived appropriateness of humour in collective action.

In sum, knowing your audience and framing messages appropriately is essential for any type of communication, and humour is not an exception (Fominaya, 2007). In extremely polarised situations, protesters cannot always use humour ('t Hart, 2007). In certain instances, a serious environment and the severity of the circumstances may inhibit the experience of joy and laughter ('t Hart, 2007). This is relevant to our sample, as they are a movement that deals with heavy topics, for example, the violation of human rights (Amnesty International, 2021a).

The Present Study

In the present qualitative, person-centred study, we aimed to validate findings of previous literature by investigating an influential sample population (Amnesty International Netherlands). Particularly, we were interested in how individuals experience the use of humour within collective action at Amnesty Internationals Netherlands. Our study will explore the use of humour within collective action using an allyship group, in order to add to the present literature available. Based on the literature available, the six themes we explored are (1) humour's impact in mobilising an action to a larger audience, (2) humour's function in creating a collective identity, (3) humour as a coping mechanism from the pressure it takes to be an activist, (4) the role of humour in making people in power lose power, (5) how the perceived appropriateness of humour can function in collective action, and (6) the impact violence humour has on violence in collective action.

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 people to 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 mobil-

ising 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 Netherlands 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?

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/Radicalisation/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 pro-

voke 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 has a positive impact on 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 aim of our person-centred study was to explore the functions of humour within the context of collective action at Amnesty International Netherlands and to add some new insights into how humour can function within collective action. In analysing the participant's experiences, we explored different themes that were in line with the present literature. First, it was found that humour has both positive and negative effects on the mobilisation of an action. Second, humour can positively impact in-group bonding and collective identity. Third, humour can function as a means to cope with activist burnout and the pressures that come with dealing with serious topics. Fourth, humour can undermine people in power. Fifth, we also explored how the perceived appropriateness of humour can function in collective action; within this, we found some new insights: ‘Earning the Right to Joke’ and increased sensitivities around the use of humour. Sixth, humour can shift the boundaries of radicalisation, the acceptance of violence. Within the sixth theme found, some subthemes inductively: Humour as a provocation, humour as a means of de-escalation and a means of accepting violence.

Our first finding is that humour has both positive and negative effects on mobilising an action to a broader audience. Firstly, humour can positively impact mobilisation, which is in line with the findings by Roy (2007), who states that more people are likely to join humor-

ous actions. For example, a participant noted that people are more likely to share and engage with humorous content. Furthermore, our findings suggest that protests may use humour deliberately, which is in line with Dumitrica's (2021) research. Typically, protest humour may arise naturally; however, protesters have begun to use it deliberately. This is due to the fact that they have become aware of the influence humour can have on attention and mobilisation of their cause to a wider audience (Dumitrica, 2021). In line with this, our study also validates the findings by Korkut et al. (2021), which states that humour has the ability to make communication about serious and forbidden issues simpler and more accessible. Our research further validated the findings by Korkut et al (2021), which suggest that humour on a social level can assist protestors in building mutual understanding, gain ingratiation and act as a display of cleverness.

Conversely, humour can have a negative impact on mobilisation. Our research adds to this by suggesting that although humour can be used to display cleverness (Korkut et al., 2021), this may not translate into the way a message intends ('t Hart, 2007) and may not be understood by a wider audience. Thus, our findings may also suggest that the use of humour in collective action can backfire. For example, a participant noted that if someone doesn't understand a joke, they may not join the action. This can imply that people may not want to partake in an action, which can reduce the reach and impact it has on society, which is also relevant to other social movements. The above finding is in line with Martin and Ford's (2018) research, which states that if a joke is not understood, it can create interpersonal distance. Our findings were in line with this, suggesting that if people don't understand the humour used, they may fail to feel part of the group, resulting in social distance ('t Hart 2007).

Our second finding suggests that humour can positively impact in-group bonding and the strengthening of collective identity ('t Hart, 2007; 't Hart 2016). This is an important function for Amnesty International Netherlands, as it can help members strengthen their sense of collective identity. This is in line with 't Hart's (2007) research: laughing alone with a group can create a strong bond. A practical implication of this could be using affiliative humour, which can boost social cohesion (Romero & Curthids, 2006). An example of affiliative humour would be to use jokes that everyone can understand (Chiodo & Greene, 2020). Using this type of humour can help to reduce inter-individual tension and facilitate the formation of relationships (Martin et al., 2003). It can also act like a social facilitator in interpersonal communication and can create a positive environment (Romero & Curthids, 2006). This can be important in a serious situation as it facilitates a social identity, energises collective action, and makes a serious topic more accessible (Roy, 2007). This is important within Amnesty International Netherlands as it can help the members bond with each other and create a nice atmosphere.

Our third finding is that humour can function as a coping mechanism (Demjén, 2016; Fominaya, 2007; Korkut et al., 2021). Humour can be used as a 'safety valve' to blow off steam, before, after or during tense situations. We found that our participants at Amnesty International Netherlands use humour before an action (in the office or while preparing for one), during an action (between themselves, through signs or while campaigning) and after (to cool down with each other). Our study adds to this by examining an allyship group (i.e. Amnesty International) using thematic analysis. In the study by Fominaya (2007), the sample investigated are autonomous groups, and the study uses an ethnographic approach.

Furthermore, it was found that humour can be an effective tool for bolstering the quality of life through an increasing positive mindset, hopefulness, reducing stress, suicidal ideation, and feelings of depression (Wellenzohn et al, 2018). For example, a participant stated that humour has calming effects. Humour has the propensity to divert attention from negative cognitive appraisals, which can further increase positive influence, leading to a wide range of positive outcomes for an individual or the situation at hand (Weinberger & Gulas, 2019). This is of great importance for our sample, as protests typically deal with severe and adverse topics; humour can help them deal with this and maintain a positive attitude.

Our fourth finding is that humour can be used to undermine people in power (Martin & Ford, 2018). For instance, humour also has the ability to criticise the people in power and organisations in a simpler manner (Korkut et al., 2021). For example, a participant in our study stated that they used humour to ridicule “People like the government, oppressors and all of that” (Participant 6).

Moreover, humour can act as a persuasion tool, causing individuals to discredit people in power (Korkut et al., 2021; Martin & Ford, 2018; 't Hart, 2016). This has implications for the idea that individuals can be persuaded by a message and change their opinions (Dumitrica, 2021; Martin & Ford, 2018). For instance, when people are in a good mood, caused by the positive effect that humour can create, they are less likely to disagree with a persuasive message (Martin & Ford, 2018). This can have positive and negative implications for protestors as if a message is something they would not generally agree with, humour would cause them to change their beliefs falsely. Additionally, if the message at hand has negative connotations or is not socially just, it could impact the action and the protestors. This may also lead to violence, as individuals may begin to act in a manner they would not usually behave in (Dumitrica, 2021).

Our fifth finding investigated how the perceived appropriateness of humour can function in collective action. In line with 't Hart's (2016) research, we found that when humour is not considered appropriate by everyone, it can negatively impact an action. For example, some participants stated they found the use of humour inappropriate. This implies that the perceived appropriateness of humour is important to an action, such as those conducted by Amnesty International Netherlands.

Within this theme, we found new subthemes: 'Earning the right to joke' and 'Increased sensitivities', which add to the present literature. The subtheme, 'Earning the right to joke' suggests that humour cannot be used by everyone, especially in social issues. A message may be perceived as more appropriate when the person who makes the statement is more likeable (Cialdini, 2014; Moyer-Gusé, 2008). For example, a participant who went for a woman's rights march felt that she had 'earned the right to joke', as she was part of this group. In-group members are typically viewed as likeable (Hogg & Vaughan, 2008). Thus, this may imply that if an individual who is part of a social group or movement makes a joke, it may be more appropriate and appreciated. Furthermore, if humour is used in protest, it should be used by the group being affected socially, as was found in our research. Future research should explore this theme further, specifically, this may be relevant in the case of disadvantaged groups.

Furthermore, the subtheme of 'increased sensitivities' provided new insights. This may link back to the idea that humour is subjective (Olsson et al., 2002). It is highly context-dependent and that it may not be understood in the way it intends to be ('t Hart, 2007). This is relevant to Amnesty International Netherlands, as their actions occur globally and thus, they must adjust their humour based on their context.

Our sixth finding is that humour can shift the boundaries of radicalisation in terms of acceptance of violence. We add to the present literature with our finding that humour can act as a means to provoke violence within collective action. For example, a participant stated if a joke is misunderstood or is about a very sensitive topic, it can provoke violence. Research conducted by Mukherjee and Dubé (2012) states that humour can make people less defensive and reduce fear levels. This has implications for the idea that humour can lead to escalation. Future research regarding humour's impact in the escalation of violence should be conducted as this was beyond the scope of our research.

Furthermore, in line with the research by Blackford et al. (2014), we found that humour can be used to disguise violence. For example, we found that humour can normalise a violent situation. In fact, we add to this idea by suggesting that people may view humorous content which may be violent or negative in nature as more acceptable. This can further imply that humour may lead to escalation as people may say negative things in a humorous manner during collective action.

Conversely, it can be argued that, as humour can release tension in stressful situations (Fominaya, 2007), it may lead to a de-escalation of violence. We add to the present literature available, as some participants suggested that humour can have a positive effect leading to the de-escalation of violence. And as noted found by Gloor et al (2021), humour causes positive emotions. Thus, it may have the ability to de-escalate violence. This has important practical implications for a protest, as using humour may maintain peace in protests, which is important in collective action.

Strengths and Limitations

Our person-centred study about humour in collective action could validate previous research findings. Based on methods of deduction, we interrogated, how humour can be used

to mobilise an action to the wider public (Dumitrica, 2021; Roy, 2007), how humour can strengthen in-group bonding in collective action ('t Hart, 2016), how humour can be used as a means to cope (Fominaya, 2007; Korkut et al., 2021), how humour can challenge people in power (Korkut et al., 2021; Martin & Ford, 2018), humour can change the boundaries of what is acceptable in terms of violence and lastly, the influence of the perceived appropriateness of humour in collective action. Adding to the current body of literature about humour in collective action, we have found five additional subthemes based on methods of induction: Earning the right to joke, increased sensitivities, humour as a provocation, humour as a means of accepting violence, and humour as a means to de-escalate violence. We suggest future investigations to include these themes.

Although we are aware of the potential drawbacks of qualitative approaches (Denny & Weckesser, 2018), our findings shall not be limited to individuals at Amnesty International Netherlands. Imaginably, other collection action groups. Thus, our study not only adds external validity (i.e. by validating real-world examples); it has potential incremental validity to both quantitative and qualitative literature on humour in collective action.

The first potential limitation of our study concerns the homogeneity of the current sample. Members of Amnesty International can be considered an “allyship group”. However, referring back to the nature of humour: Humour is a universal concept yet idiosyncratic at all societal levels (i.e. cultures, groups, individuals) (Gulas et al., 2017). This means that research on humour, generally, cannot be generalised to ‘an overall population’. For future research, we suggest comparing the functions of humour with, for instance, a disadvantaged group to observe how humour functions in collective action, in different contexts.

A second potential limitation of our study is that we conducted our interviews online. For example, body language is an integral part of human communication (Tipper et al., 2015). We were unable to see the participant's body language and interpret their expressions more clearly. However, a positive effect of this is that we were able to interview participants from different cities in the Netherlands, which added some diversity to our sample. Furthermore, our participants were interrogated in their natural habitats. This may positively influence participants' self-disclosure; they may feel more comfortable sharing certain (i.e. sensitive) information (Lewis & Graham, 2007).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study explored the different functions of humour that emerge in the context of collective action and found new themes that emerge through our research. The functions we found are: First, we found that humour can impact the mobilisation of an action. Second, humour can impact in-group bonding. Third, humour can function as a means to cope. Fourth, humour can undermine people in power. Fifth, the perceived appropriateness of humour impacts collective action; sixth, humour can shift the boundaries of radicalisation and the acceptance of violence. Thus, our analysis utilises both inductive and deductive themes based on the interviews and the present literature. Within the current literature available, there is a lack of research which links all the different functions of humour within collective action; our study aims to bridge this gap and add to the literature available. Further research should be conducted, especially on the function of humour regarding violence and the impact of perceived appropriateness of humour.

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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/mobilisation 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/stigmatised 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.