

Humorous Responses to National Tragedy:
Addressing Why the Storming of the Capital was Funny
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Humor in the form of memes often follows nationally devastating events, including the January 6, 2021, storming of the Capitol. The following paper seeks to answer the question: why did some Americans feel a humorous response to the storming of the capital, an event that was initially so terrifying? By dissecting Benign Violation Theory, supplementing with perspectives gained in comedic performance, and strengthening each argument with additional literature within the field of humor psychology, the following paper explores explanations for this question. Conclusions include, tension created set up the opportunity for their to be a release, jokes spread throughout social media, becoming commonplace, as they provide a natural reduction of fear, and ultimately, humor united those against the riots and subverted power away from the threat at hand.

Introduction

On January 6th, 2021, in protest of President Joe Biden's inauguration, over 2,000 Trump supporters stormed the United States Capitol. The unprecedented event was chaotic and violent, resulting in the deaths of a police officer and four protestors, looting and damages to the building, and threats to hang Vice President Mike Pence on the Capitol's front lawn. Frightening live-streamed videos from inside the Capitol went viral on Youtube, and Twitter banned Donald Trump from its platform. The media struggled to explain what was happening, while nationwide, citizens feared they were witnessing the beginning of a civil war.

Despite the serious nature of the January 6th events, within a week, social media sites were filled with jokes and memes mocking the riot and its protestors. Less than a month following the storming of the Capitol, popular sketch comedy show Saturday Night Live debuted segments satirizing groups of rioters, hosts of comedic Late Night shows shared their sarcastic takes on the event, and public figures joked about the absurdity on their social networks. The question arises: why did some Americans feel a humorous response to the storming of the capital, an event that was initially so terrifying?

Jokes and laughter are an important facet of human communication. Babies develop a sense of humor by the time they are one month old, and continue to develop the complexity of their humor processing through childhood (Hoicka et al., 2021). In Western culture, specifically in America, having access to freedom of speech and the ability to voice individual opinions in a humorous tone becomes a highly valued personality trait in adult life, whether it be between friends, romantic partners, or leaders and their organizations (Pundt & Hermann, 2014; Yue et al., 2016). Stand Up Comics such as Dave Chapelle, Taylor Tomlinson, and Kevin Hart sell out theaters and arenas around the world, and release specials that top charts on their streaming

services. Humor has been the subject of philosophical and psychological study, from the times of ancient Greek philosopher Democritus in 460 BC, to modern Humor Psychology, which analyzes the social implications, evolutionary purpose, and developmental process of humor (Polimeni & Reiss, 2006).

Pioneer in the field of humor psychology and director of the Humor Research Lab at the University of Colorado Boulder, Dr. Peter McGraw uses Benign Violation Theory (BVT) as his theoretical foundation of explaining humorous responses to seemingly tragic situations.

According to BVT, humor arises when a joke, situation, or behavior, is a violation, but the violation is benign enough to not create a threat (McGraw & Warren, 2010). McGraw and his team at the Humor Research Lab developed and coined BVT after experimentally testing the ideas of linguist Thomas Veatch, who similarly proposed in his work, *A Theory of Humor*, humor only occurs when the following conditions are satisfied: the situation is normal, relatable, and easily understood, but simultaneously, the situation violates expectations through its absurdity (Veatch, 1998).

I, the author, am a professional stand up comedian. I have built a successful career in the Midwest, sharing the stage with names such as Michael Che and Dave Attell. Beyond local performance, I have hit stages around the country and in the highly international city of Berlin, allowing me to gain a broad, semi-global perspective of what audiences do and don't find funny. I perform this loose research four to seven days a week, and subjectively, I experience the success of BVT firsthand while structuring and delivering my material to large audiences. This experimentation delivering comedic material on stages is not controlled and is only personally anecdotal, but I will use the insights I have personally gathered, as well as interviews from three fellow comedians to supplement the review of existing literature. Through the foundations of

BVT, stand up comedians' perspectives, and additional literature within the realm of humor psychology, the following review explores three comedic principals to discuss why the storming of the Capitol resulted in widespread humor: tension and release, reframing fearful situations, and subverting power.

Tension and Release

Stand up comedians often aim to create tension by posing a joke set up that violates the audience's expectations, morals, or existing beliefs. Widely respected, sometimes controversial comic Dave Attell begins a joke set up:

“Now drinking and driving, a lot of people say it's wrong.

And I call those people the cops.

But sometimes you have no choice...”

This is a premise that most people do not morally agree with: it's okay to drink and drive. He must break the tension with a punchline that either negates the threat of the violation, or becomes so absurd that it's ultimately benign:

“Those kids have got to get to school.” (Attell, 2021)

Dave Attell is not a school bus driver, so his reasoning and explanation for drinking and driving becomes absurd enough that it could be perceived as benign, releasing the initial tension and inducing laughter. The comic principle of creating tension to set up a release aligns with Benign Violation Theory: humor arises when a joke, situation, or behavior, is a violation, but the violation is benign enough to not create a threat (McGraw & Warren, 2010).

McGraw's BVT elaborates, if an individual does not perceive an initial violation and the joke is too benign, say if in the Dave Attell example, an audience member doesn't think drinking and driving is wrong, there is no tension. Without tension, there can't be a release, and there is

no laughter. On the other side, if the violation is too great and the punchline doesn't ultimately make the violation benign, say an audience member at the Dave Attell show felt strong feelings against drunk driving that wasn't negated by the joke, the tension remains and there is also no laughter. The joke threatens the audience members' morals in a way that doesn't allow room for humor (McGraw & Warren, 2010).

For many Americans, the storming of the Capitol violated their expectations, morals, and existing beliefs as to how Americans conduct themselves following the election of a president. This violation checked one half of the BVT formula, and set up an immediate tension that created an opportunity for there to be a laughter-inducing release. In order to reach that release, commentators on the Riot had to find the situation benign enough to make jokes. As seen in the storm of Twitter memes and entertainment commentary, many did.

Yam et al. looked to Benign Violation Theory to explain the tension between moral identity, humor, and moral violations (2019). Moral identity is the set of moral traits one identifies themselves with. The study defined jokes that violate morality as causing someone pain, sexual situations, or unpleasant language. Of a series of studies relating to this tension, Study 1a assigned 300 adults to either a control condition or a moral identity priming condition, in which participants were instructed to remember a time they behaved morally and identify with that feeling when making judgments. Each condition then rated the humor of 18 jokes. 9 of the jokes included a moral violation, involving hurting someone or a sexual situation, and 9 did not.

The results concluded that participants primed to identify with their morality found all jokes less funny than the control condition, and found the moral violation jokes significantly less funny than the control group. The humorous response to the storming of the Capitol implies that many individual's personal morals were not activated or threatened by the actions of the Capitol

rioters. Non-Trump supporters did not identify with the belief that the election was stolen, and the event was so absurd, extreme, and unexpected that many Trump supporters did not identify with the group either. If there is a lack of moral identification with a situation, humor doesn't provide a personal threat, and the jokes directed at the rioters' expense could be perceived as benign.

Morality aside, the storming of the Capitol was intense, and when the rioters were in the midst of their shocking charging of the building it was difficult to determine whether the event was going to cause a dangerous ripple effect across the Nation. Tension was high, and without knowing the end result, there was no opportunity for release.

Timing plays a major role in determining how benign a violation is. McGraw, Williams & Warren assessed how the passage of time affects humorous responses to tragedy by tracking reactions to jokes about Hurricane Sandy over a 100 day long longitudinal study (2013). On par with the Benign Violation Theory, the study revealed that measures of how funny the Hurricane Sandy jokes were high before it was clear how destructive Hurricane Sandy became, plummeted, then rose once again about one month later, peaked, and fell after three months. A similar trend followed the storming of the capital. SNL created sketches about the event 25 days following the insurrection. Timing creates a psychological distance that allows major violations to become benign, and eventually, after too much time passes, the violation is so benign that it no longer matters and the jokes subside.

In the midst of the storming of the Capitol, before time could assist in the perceived benignness of the situation, live-streamed video and photos did show scary, threatening scenes, but they also showed protestors laughing while they ran around the capital like children in capes

and weird costumes. Facial expressions and body language provide cues on whether a situation can be perceived as funny.

Slapstick comedy capitalizes on laughter that comes from seeing people's misfortunes, like falling on ice or losing their wallets. Manfredi, Adorni, & Proverbio used EEG measurements to measure brain activity when participants viewed photos, categorized by the facial expression of the individual experiencing the misfortune: affective (showing a painful or angry expression), comic (a bewildered or comical expression), or with no face visible (2014). Results showed a much larger amusement response to the comic category in contrast to concerned responses towards the affective category, while no visible face imagery resulted in a confusion response. Facial expressions and social cues are highly important when deciding whether something is funny. The easy access to seeing imagery of the rioters gave the public the ability to see how unprepared and ridiculous the rioters were, which greatly reduced the concern that comes from seeing people being seriously hurt.

As exemplified by Dave Attell and reinforced by McGraw's Benign Violation Theory, the tension created through a violation, partnered with the release of realizing the posed violation is benign, elicits laughter. The Capitol Riot was a clear violation of the American Nation and normal human behavior. Many feared that the violation was so intense that a civil war would begin—but the insurrection stayed contained to the events of that day, and as statements and interviews of the protestors surfaced, it became clear that many of their intentions were confused and not as malicious as they initially seemed. Live footage exposing the protestors' body language and facial expressions added context pointing towards the truth that the protestors had no intelligent plan.

Lazer et al. provide comprehensive data that overviews the American publics' opinions of the election and storming of the capital, collected via an online survey of 2,022 nationally representative participants (2021). The majority of Americans, 60-70% of the population believe that President Biden won the election fairly, while 25-30% believe the election was stolen. If the majority of Americans believed the election was stolen and were in support of 'taking back the presidency,' then the threat to the American Nation would be much greater, but they existed in the minority.

After a feeling of reduced threat spread through social media and the American Nation, the situation became just benign enough to release the heightened tension of witnessing such a shocking event, and a sweet spot for humor emerged. Humor is still a subjective interpretation and many Americans continue to find the storming of the Capitol too intense to be a laughing matter, but for many, the psychological mechanisms of BVT allow extensive jokes to be cultivated. Once the jokes began, they continued to spread rapidly through social media, and took on the purpose of reframing the riots to fit a humorous narrative.

Humor Reframes Fearful Situations

The most successful jokes I have written reframe beliefs and situations that initially create insecurity. Through personal experience, I have perceived that audience members relate to and appreciate using humor to overcome ideas and beliefs that threaten one's own confidence. In a performance in Kansas City, I delivered a joke that makes fun of my perception of being a tall, strong woman.

*“One of the biggest personal developments of my early 20s,
has been accepting,
that I’m a big bitch.*

*I'm 6 feet tall,
and I'm not wispy. I've got shoulders, I know what's up.
I'm a sturdy 6 footer.
The wispy tall girls, they're kind of like IKEA furniture.
They look so great, they rock patterns, they might be Swedish,
But don't stand on that table, and don't you dare climb that cupboard.
It wasn't built for that.
I'm more like something made by the Amish.
You can put me on your farm,
And I look great in a city apartment too, if you have the space." (Dalenberg, 2022)*

Facing your insecurities is scary, but humor provides a mechanism of reframing these insecurities in a way that reduces fear. Humor's fear reduction capabilities expand beyond facing insecurity, and may explain why jokes about the Capitol riot spread so rapidly. They were used as a national coping mechanism to reduce group fear.

Ventis, Higbee, & Murdock tested a humor desensitization approach's ability to decrease participant fear towards spiders (2001). Forty highly fearful of spiders participants were split into three conditions: traditional systematic desensitization, humor desensitization, and untreated control. Before the study, using a behavioral approach test towards American tarantulas, the participant's fear levels were measured. They then received the condition treatment before being exposed to a spider. The traditional systematic desensitization involved relaxation techniques and the previsualization of encountering a spider. The humor desensitization asked participants to complete an Unusual Uses Test that has been previously studied as eliciting humorous responses. They were then asked to describe spiders in a humorous manner, and add cartoon captions to

spider photos. In post-testing, the traditional systematic and humor desensitization performed equally as significant in reducing fear between pre and post-testing. This study reveals that humor is an effective means of desensitization oneself towards a fearful situation. By processing with humor, the storming of the Capitol became less of a national threat.

Beyond desensitization, humor has been shown to help with coping with difficult situations. Wu et al. attempted to understand the neural mechanisms in action when humor is used to cope (2020). fMRI imaging was employed to compare the neural emotional regulation effects of humorous coping reappraisal and ordinary reappraisal. 27 students were shown a set of negative pictures, including threat/attack scenes, dangerous animals, and things deemed disgusting. Following seeing the image, participants were either read a humorous explanation for the photo or a calming explanation for the photo. In comparing fMRI imaging of before, during, and after viewing the photos, humorous coping reappraisal was found to be more effective in down-regulating negative emotions. Specifically, coping with humor involved greater cognitive restructuring and the release of positive emotions. When dealing with a situation as frightening as a mass break into the United States capitol building, individuals will seek to downregulate the fear they feel. Humor may have become the immediate response because our brains have been wired to utilize humor as a coping mechanism in frightening situations.

As indicated by humor's ability to reframe prior beliefs, reduce fear, and cope with difficult situations, the common result of historical tragedies leading to waves of jokes and memes exemplifies how Americans use humor to take power away from the situations and events that scare them. Our nation responded to the capital riots with jokes as a means of reducing personal fears and taking control away from the rioters.

Expressing Humor to Subvert Power

The tactic of utilizing humor to reduce fear and subvert power has served a greater purpose of political action since the times of Ancient Greece, as comedy and tragedy laid the foundations for all modern theater. Aristophanes, a Greek humorist working from 450 - 388 BCE, wrote absurd theatrical parodies to make fun of the rich, empower the poor, and commentate on the state of Greek democracy (Platnauer).

Fast forward to the modern-day, writers at SNL follow the same format, satirizing and finding absurdity in the current state of American politics and culture. In an SNL Sketch titled Pandemic Game Night, a group of friends gather in their living room to play a board game. After there's a knock on the door, presumably the pizza man, one of the friends gets up and opens the door, revealing an FBI agent on the other side, stating he is under arrest for storming the Capitol. Satirical dialogue ensues:

Female friend: *"Brad, why would you do that?"*

Brad: *"Because I care about our Nation and its constitution,*

so I wiped jelly on a statue and put Pelosi's phone down my pants ...

what else was I supposed to do? The guy I wanted to win didn't win."

FBI Agent: *"Alright let's go."*

Brad: *"Let me get my coat first."*

Brad then grabs a fur cape and Viking hat, a reference to the ridiculous costumes the rioters wore during the storming of the Capitol (Jost, 2021). By making fun of the rioters, the writers of SNL chose to be humorous, and reduced the seriousness of the narrative surrounding the event.

Beyond national television, social media allows everyone to give their own reactions and responses to political events, taking on the form of memes and TikToks, setting humor trends on a global scale.

Using the Color Revolution of Macedonia as a case study, Tavoski sought to uncover political humor's ability to support civil rights movements by subverting oppression (2019). Two data groupings are utilized to measure the role humor played in the Color Revolution. The first is a content analysis of humor within the social media movement on the protestors' official Facebook page and the contents of three Twitter hashtags from April 22, 2016, to July 20, 2016. All content shared in that time frame was coded as non-parodic/non-humorous or parodic/humorous, resulting in 68 parodic/humorous samples. The second resulted from fifteen interviews with active humorists sharing content during the movement.

Between the two data groupings, the author finds consistency in humor's intended purpose of subverting the oppressor in the Color Revolution, building community and trust between the in-group, and reducing fear towards taking action. The author highlights humorists' intentions when using humor as a tool for social revolution but cannot prove that the use of humor directly supported the mass protests of the Color Revolution. However, this study exemplifies a historically relevant trend of utilizing humor to build community between the oppressed and push back in social movements by pointing out the oppressors' weak points and absurdity of ideologies in a nonthreatening manner.

Sebba-Elran collected 2200 memes created in Israel from February 2020 - December 2020, relating to the COVID-19 pandemic (2021). They looked to understand the social and cultural role of humorous memes in the face of global threat. Although much of the language and imagery coming out of memes in Israel reflected the global meme trends, there was added

Hebrew language and Israeli context that localized the collection. Several categories of meme trends emerged, correlating with the time they were generated, reflecting the previously mentioned BVT study that expressed the importance of timing when reacting humorously to threatening events. The author concludes that the memes served the purpose of protecting and fostering group cohesion at both global and local levels during a time when a threatening virus was changing life as the world knew it. Memes and humor following the storming of the capital reflected a similar purpose. Group cohesion and strength among Americans who did participate in or support the riot was necessary for preventing panic and further escalation of the event, and ultimately placed the control back in the group that fosters humor.

Conclusions

By dissecting the foundational theory of humor, Benign Violation Theory, supplementing with the perspective gained in comedic performance, and strengthening each argument with additional literature on the subject, this review concludes that the BVT aligned comedy technique of tension and release set up the storming of the Capitol to be funny. Tension was immediately created, as the Capitol riot was clearly a violation. After the riots did not result in a civil war and enough time passed to ease the tension, the situation became benign enough for social media users and the general public to begin making jokes.

Once jokes began, humor's natural ability to provide a reduction in fear made making jokes a means of coping with the shocking event that had struck our country, and took power away from the rioters by pointing out their flaws and absurdity. This subversion of power strengthens the in-group of those against the attack by building a communal thought process and undermining the legitimacy of the opponent.

That being said, not everyone found the Capitol riots funny. Humor is a subjective experience that varies from individual to individual, and this explanation is limited to those who did find the Capitol riots funny. If I was to continue this research, I would seek to understand the individual differences that cause one person to find the Capitol riots funny, while another person either felt afraid, angry, or indifferent. Additionally, it is difficult to define what impact humorous responses to the Capitol riots actually had on the American public's actions following the event. This literature review dove into why the Capitol riots were funny through humor's psychological mechanisms, but only touched the surface of humor's capability to subvert power away from those being made fun of. It is difficult to measure the scientific truth in this proposal, and it would be interesting to gather greater evidence supporting this claim. Humor might not just be a joke: as displayed by the Capitol riot meme storm, its applications provide tools to spread ideas and unite large groups of people nationwide.

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Appendix A

Revision Statement

After receiving feedback on my first draft, I fixed some basic structural issues, added an abstract, and gathered more primary sources to support my claims. I decided to incorporate more of my own expertise as a professional stand up comedian, as well as insights received from conducting interviews with fellow comedians that I work with. This gave me the idea to include comedic principles into the main three arguments, which became: Tension and Release, Humor Reframes Fearful Situations, and Expressing Humor to Subvert Power.

As recommended by my lab instructor, I added more background about humor psychology into my introduction, and further developed the role BVT played in my arguments. I focused more attention on BVT in the introduction and used the theory as an anchor throughout the paper. I went through and added more support where it felt appropriate, and I added direct comedic examples in quotations to better explain the principles I used as arguments. Lastly, I added smoothed out language, added limitations and future directions to my conclusion, and created appendices that include information about comic interviews and memes from the Capitol riots.

Appendix B

Professional Comic Interviews

In one to one interviews without context on the topic at hand, I began by asking, “were the capitol riots funny?” Each of the three comics answered yes, to which I followed, “why?” I let the comics give their answer, and I then explained the topic of my paper and Benign Violation Theory.

Quotes

“Smoke grenades, plastic hand cuffs, that shit is so lame, and that’s why it was able to be funny. Nothing serious was actually going to happen”

-Ethan Pederson

“You have to find stuff like that funny, because if you don’t, it’s just sad and scary”

-James Stanley

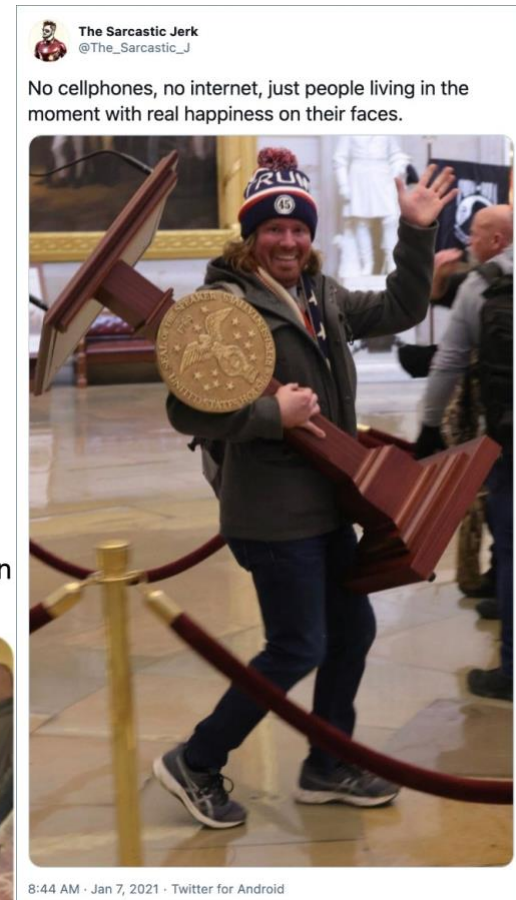
“I do think making jokes and laughing together brought our country together. If there was one thing that most people on the left and right could agree on, it was that the people that stormed the Capitol were dumb”

-Lily Meyer

Appendix C

Capitol Riot Memes

The following memes exemplify the tone of the content shared following the Capitol Riots, and were gathered from a compilation of Twitter's best Capitol Riot memes (Bain, 2021).



Is this the Aunt Tifa everyone's been talking about??

