

## Humour as Aggression: The Case of *Ho Lahla Mollo* among Students at the National University of Lesotho

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### Abstract

Humour is one of the most prevalent features of social life. It pervades human interaction and even occurs in situations where it is not normally regarded as appropriate. Humour has several other functions in human conversation besides just making people laugh. Using a form of joke prevalent among students at the National University of Lesotho known as *ho lahla mollo*, this paper seeks to demonstrate that humour can be used to express aggression. *Ho lahla mollo* literally means to throw fire at (someone). The practice is also referred to as *ho thonya* which literally means to shoot with a gun. The depiction of humour as an act of throwing fire at or shooting someone with a gun illustrates the paradoxical nature of humour. While it often promotes positive feelings and encourages social cohesion, as in the case of *ho lahla mollo*, it can also be used as a form of aggression.

**Keywords:** humour, symbolic, joke, aggression, violence

### Introduction

Humour is one of the most common aspects of social life which occurs in everyday interactions involving different relationships. As Lockyer and Pickering (2005) assert, humour infiltrates every area of social life and interaction and even occurs in situations where it is not normally regarded as appropriate. It serves various functions in conversation (Hay, 2000; Crawford, 2003; Holmes, 2006) besides simply making people laugh (Hay, 2000). As observed by DiCiccio (2012), humour has a paradoxical nature. It serves as a social tool that fosters positive feelings and encourages a sense of kinship, yet it can also act as a demonstration of aggression. The study of humour has, however, not been a popular subject among social scientists. This is because it often assumed that humour lies outside the domain of the serious, it is

therefore not worthy of investigation (Mulkey, 1988). Hay (2000) observes that although increasing attention has been paid to humour in the last few decades, there are still a few ground studies in this area. Using a form of joking referred to as *ho lahla mollo* prevalent among students at the National University of Lesotho (NUL), this paper is an empirical contribution to the view that humour can be a be an expression of aggression.

### **Methodology**

This paper is based on a qualitative study carried out at the National University of Lesotho (NUL) over a period of two years from 2008 to 2010. Data were collected through unstructured interviews and observation. One of us (Maphosa) was a lecturer while the other (Molale-Rankone) was a graduate student at the time of study. We closely observed this phenomenon as we interacted with the students. We also conducted unstructured interviews with 51 students from different faculties at the University. The sample was obtained through availability sampling, a non-probability sampling procedure in which subjects were chosen on the basis of the ease with which they could be accessed. Out of the 51 respondents, 32 of them were female while 19 were male. The larger representation of female than male respondents may be a reflection of the gender composition of the student population at NUL at the time of study which was skewed towards more female than male students. It may also be indicative of the problem of self-selection associated with using a sampling procedure that is based on accessibility of subjects. Female students may have been more willing to talk about this phenomenon than male students as they are more likely to be targets of *ho lahla mollo* than their male counterparts. Findings from this study have been analysed using the method of thematic analysis. Maguire and Delant (2017) praise the method for its ability to identify patterns and themes which ultimately tell a story and uncover meanings.

### **Literature Review**

Humour and joke are closely related concepts. For example according to the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, a joke is "... a thing said or done to

excite laughter”; humour is defined as “... the condition of being amusing or comic”; to amuse means to “... cause [a person] to laugh or smile” and comic means “... causing or meant to cause laughter”. Other definitions also demonstrate the closeness of these concepts. Wilson (1979) defines a joke as any stimulation that evokes amusement and that is experienced as being funny. On the other hand Bremer and Roodenburg (1997) define humour as any message transmitted in action, speech, writing, images or music intended to produce a smile, which can take various forms including apophthegms, spoonerisms, practical jokes, puns, farce and foolery. Humour and joke(s) are used interchangeably in this paper. This however does not imply the absence of nuanced differences between the two terms.

Besides simply making people laugh, humour generally has a serious conversational function (Hay, 2000). This is what Mulkay (1988) refers to as the duality of humour and what DiCioccio (2012) describes as the paradoxical nature of humour, which is evident in our everyday interactions. Driessen (1997) asserts that humour can be both playful and serious, while Hart (2007) states that humour can simultaneously express frivolity and seriousness.

Researchers who have focused on the serious aspects of humour as a social activity, especially as captured in Martin and Kuiper (2016), have emphasised either its positive or its negative outcomes. According to DiCioccio (2012) positive humour functions as a social lubricant that promotes both individual and relational health. It serves as a social tool that fosters positive feelings and encourages a sense of kinship. Bremmer and Roodenburg, (1997:2) assert that humour can be highly liberating. For Hart (2007) humour can serve as a powerful tool in social protest. It helps to construct a sense of solidarity among the protestors. Hay (2000) studied the occurrence of humour among 18 friendship groups in New Zealand and found that it engendered solidarity within the group and between particular members of the group. Holmes (2006)'s study of workplaces in New Zealand found that one of the most important functions of humour was the construction and maintenance of good relations among fellow

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workers. Such workplace collegiality is often constructed and maintained through extended sequences of humour. In a study on joke telling in Botswana, Mthimkhulu (2001) concluded that jokes also act as a “stabiliser” that makes people to forget their antagonisms and differences momentarily. Mthimkhulu found that ethnic and political jokes provided a safe channel through which members of different ethnic and political groups were able to interact without offending one another as would be the case in everyday speech.

As observed by DiCioccio (2012), just as the benefits of positive humour for individuals and their relationships are numerous, so also are the negative effects of humour. Martin and Kuiper (2016) have confirmed that the overall effects of humour can both be detrimental and beneficial. Writers who have examined only the negative impacts of humour have realised that negative humour can sometimes be an expression of aggression or a form of violence (Bilig, 2005; DiCioccio, 2012; Hungwe, 2010). Bilig (2005) as an example argues that those who celebrate humour often downplay its cruelty. The notion of aggressive humour is not new (DiCioccio, 2012). Freud (1960) argues that humour can be disguised aggressiveness. He argued that jokes, like dreams and slips of the tongue, are expressions of repressed desires. He distinguished between innocent and tendentious jokes. Innocent jokes are those that do not fulfil a deep psychological function while tendentious jokes are those that permit repressed desires to be voiced (Myers, 2002). According to Freud, most tendentious jokes express sexual or aggressive impulses or both. Disguised as a joke such impulses are presented as if they are not serious.

Telling a joke can be a way of reinforcing one’s superior position and enhancing and affirming one’s social status (Howitt and Owusu-Bempah, 2005). In fact, Jones, Hunter and Fox (2016) assert that aggressive humour only enhances the self. According to Bilig, (2005) humour has a central role in maintaining social order. The classification of what is humorous is, in itself, a reflection of the stance of the powerful in society. For example, Howitt and Owusu-Bempah (2005) argue that black people are commonly patronised or

insulted under the pretext of humour. They argue that racist jokes therefore act as propaganda in support of racist ideology.

Humour is a powerful tool in the social construction of gender (Hay, 2000; Crawford, 2003). As stated by Crawford (2003), humour is a means through which human beings constitute themselves as masculine men and feminine women. Sexist humour can promote the behavioural release of prejudice against women (Ford, Boxer, Armstrong and Edel, 2008). Ford et.al (2008) argue that sexist humour, the denigration of women through humour, trivialises sex discrimination under the veil of benign amusement, thus precluding challenges or opportunities that non-humorous sexist communication would likely incur. They describe sexist humour a “releaser” of sexual prejudice, that is, for men who have antagonistic attitudes towards women, sexist humour allows them to express their sexism by replacing the usual non-sexist norms in a situation with a norm of tolerance of sex discrimination. As a result sexist humour essentially justifies a wide range of negative responses toward women.

## **Findings and discussion**

### ***The meaning of “ho lahla mollo”***

*Ho lahla mollo*, literally means to scatter or throw fire at (someone). It is also known as *ho thunya*, meaning to shoot with a gun (*sethunya*). This form of joking is different from ordinary joke telling known as *ho soasoa*. What distinguishes *ho lahla mollo* from *ho soasoa* is the former’s offensive intent. The humour in *ho lahla mollo* is at the expense of someone. It is the antithesis of what Holmes (2006) refers to as conjoint humour. Conjoint humour is jointly constructed humour. It is constructed through the interaction of people who know each other very well, where they extend and build on each other’s humorous comments. Conjoint humour can either be supportive or contestive. In supportive conjoint humour the participants take turns to contribute to the joke. They agree with, add to, elaborate or strengthen what the previous speaker would have said. On the other hand, in contestive humour participants challenge, disagree with or undermine the earlier contributions. The humour in *ho lahla mollo* is not jointly constructed. It is directed at a passive target by an agent

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whose main purpose is to amuse an audience at the expense of the target. The following are statements used by the participants in the study to describe *ho lahla mollo*:

*... to intentionally embarrass or tease someone in public or in the presence of friends*

*including girlfriend or boyfriend or someone they like ...*

*... to joke about someone with the intention to embarrass them before a mob ...*

*... making fun of someone in a way that can be both offensive and funny ...*

*... to tease, provoke or joke with someone – but somehow it may sound like being humiliated*

*... something done to “lessen” someone so that he/she appears weird or rejected ...*

*... acting in a way that is not acceptable by society ...*

*... making fun of someone. It includes discriminating and making silly remarks to other people ...*

*... saying stupid or offensive things at the expense of others’ reputation ...*

*... making fun of someone in public with the intention of making them feel belittled ...*

The above statements clearly demonstrate that *ho lahla mollo* is communication whose intention is to amuse someone at the expense of another. It is distinguished from ordinary everyday joking by the use of the metaphors of throwing fire and shooting at a target. In other words the essence of the joke is the pain or discomfort experienced by the target. That explains the prevalence of terms such as “embarrass”, “belittle” “humiliate” “reduce” “provoke” “lessen” and “offend” when describing or defining it. *Ho lahla mollo* takes place in a particular scene, involving an agent, a target and an audience. The agent (joker) acts, the target suffers, the audience laughs (Grey, 2005).

**The scene**

Unlike *ho soasoa* which can be private, spontaneous and conjoint, *ho lahla mollo* is a public spectacle as it occurs in public spaces. Certain circumstances usually prompt the occurrence of *ho lahla mollo*. The following are some of the circumstances described by respondents as likely to create a scene for the occurrence of *ho lahla mollo*.

- ... when a group of boys see or meet girls putting on mini-skirts ...*
- ... when a lady acts in an unacceptable way in public ...*
- ... when a woman passes by a group of men ...*
- ... when a lady seeks attention by talking too much at Student Union meetings ...*
- ... when a girl with a funny hairstyle passes a group of boys ...*
- ... when someone thinks they are smart ...*
- ... when a man tries to propose to a lady when she is among other ladies ...*

The setting for the performance of *ho lahla mollo* is therefore any public space be it a bar, lecture theatre, roadside, library, student union meeting place or shops. It is prompted by the target's conduct or appearance that is defined by the agent as unacceptable. Apparently behavior that is defined as unacceptable attracts *ho lahla mollo*. What constitutes unacceptable behavior is not in the behavior itself but depends on who defines it as such. The definition of unacceptable conduct is influenced by the relationships of power that exist within the group. For example being assertive and engaging in public debate for women might be defined as attention seeking behavior which has to be punished. This means that behaviour that elicits *ho lahloa mollo* (being a target) is not necessarily deviant behavior. The agent can use anything, positive or negative relating to the target to "shoot" at them. One of the respondents for example described how frequenting the library to read left her vulnerable to be "shot" at. This means even behavior that conforms to societal expectations can be turned into something funny, through for example exaggeration and distortion of its motives with the aim of

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attracting the attention and entertaining an audience. Even to be seen wearing new shoes can leave a person vulnerable to *ho lahla mollo*.

*Ho lahla mollo* is a subcultural practice in which the participants have developed values and norms that are not consistent with mainstream culture. It is practiced by a particular group of people who have developed a language and define what is funny. In order to continue pleasing their audiences, agents have to be creative in making the target an object of laughter. As a result they might refer to highly embellished, distorted or even fictitious incidents that would ostensibly have taken place outside the particular *ho lahla mollo* contexts such as at high school. The punchline of *ho lahla mollo* is the target's moment of embarrassment. That is what amuses the audience.

### ***The agent***

The agent - the joke teller - is the central character in *ho lahla mollo*. His/her responsibility is to make others laugh. There are both gains and risks in trying to make others laugh. A successful joke makes its teller feel good and encourages him to make more jokes in future. By consistently making successful jokes an individual emerges as a hero and may eventually monopolise the role of supplier of jokes within the group. There are also risks in providing *ho lahla mollo* jokes. First of all, the joke teller risks the consequences of a hostile response from the target. Secondly, the joke teller risks the consequences of failed humour (Kuipers, 2006; Bell, 2009; Priego-Valverd, 2009; Bell and Attardo, 2010; Bell, 2013). This is where the audience fails to "get the joke" and therefore do not laugh at the joke. Humour may fail for many reasons including, the inability of the hearer to process the language, understand certain words, understand the pragmatic force of the utterance, recognize the humorous frame, grasp the incongruity of the joke or appreciate the humour (Bell and Attardo, 2010; Bell, 2013). Kuipers (2006) observes that very few things are more painful than failed humour. To avoid the consequences of failed humour, the agent needs to know the audience very well.



Both men and women can tell *ho lahla mollo* jokes although in mixed gender groups, the typical joke teller is a man. This demonstrates that in the public sphere, men dominate conversations including joke telling. This male dominance of joke telling in the public sphere implies that men define what constitutes good and bad jokes. In describing the situations that often elicit *ho lahla mollo* most the statements made reference to the behavior of women indicating that the typical *ho lahla mollo* agent is typically a male student.

### ***The audience***

The audience is made up of those people who are being entertained by the joke – those who are expected to see the humour and be amused by it. As a form of communication a joke can be verbal or non-verbal including gestures, postures and facial expressions. For the audience to appreciate a joke there has to be shared meaning between the agent and the audience of the different representations used by the agent? without common understanding, communication intended to amuse can inadvertently turn out to be in bad taste. Communication is influenced by and transmitted through culture. As a result of shared experiences, both the agents and audience of *ho lahla mollo* have shared values, norms and have even developed a peculiar language making it a subculture. The audience should be composed of insiders of this subculture because the same communication that may be amusing to the insiders may be very offensive to outsiders. This explains why one of the respondents described *ho lahla mollo* as “... acting in a way that is not acceptable by society ... “. In mainstream Sesotho culture *ho lahla mollo* communication would be considered deviant. This supports the assertion by Kuipers (2006) that telling the right joke at the right time requires one to have considerable cultural knowledge of the audience. Drieseen (1997: 224) summarises this point succinctly by arguing that “... jokes are acted out on a cultural stage by performers amidst an audience”.

The National University of Lesotho is situated in the Roma Valley, about 37 kilometres from Maseru, the capital city of Lesotho and the nearest major urban settlement. It is surrounded by rural villages which offer very limited social services. Students, including those who

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are not resident on campus, spend most of their time at the University attending classes, studying in the library and participating in extramural activities within the campus. They also spend a considerable amount of their time in the immediate vicinity of the campus where grocery shops, bars, hair salons and other facilities are located. As a result of the close interaction and the consequent shared experiences they have developed a subculture which includes distinctive ways of communicating which are largely incomprehensible to an outsider.

### ***The target***

The target of *ho lahla mollo* is the one whom the joke is about - the one at whose expense the humour is constructed. The target does not have to appreciate the joke. In fact, the intention is to offend the target. In a case where the target also laughs at the joke, the agent feels the urge to push the joke to a point where the target feels belittled or offended. The target's discomfort, embarrassment or pain is the essence of the joke. Hypothetically, anyone can be a target of *ho lahla mollo*, although certain individuals or groups of people are more vulnerable to being targeted than others. We identified three factors that influence whether or not one can be targeted for *ho lahla mollo*, namely, age, gender and familiarity with the agent or audience. According to the social dominance theory as propounded by Sidanius and Pratto (1999) all human societies tend to be structured as systems of group-based social hierarchies.

People who are younger than the agent are more likely to be targets than those who are older. Women are more likely than men to be targeted. Like other forms of stratification, age stratification varies across cultures, although generally being older bestows power over those who are younger. Various cultural ideologies or legitimising myths (Sidanius, 1992) justify and maintain this unequal distribution of power among people at different stages of the life course. The power of age is important in the selection of the target for *ho lahla mollo*. Agents are less likely to target those older than them than those who are younger for *ho lahla mollo*. The following are some of the reasons why respondents would normally not target those older than them.

*... it is disrespectful because sometimes people say things that are very embarrassing to others*  
*... age marks a degree of respect*  
*... ho lahla mollo should be done among age-mates...*  
*... because it is not good to do such things to older people*  
*... because of respect, more especially because it may be used to joke with somebody or to humiliate that somebody*

Gender also affects the choice of a target for *ho lahla mollo* as women are more likely to be targets than men while, as stated above, men are more likely to be agents than women. On why female students were more often the targets of *ho lahla mollo* than male students some respondents stated;

*... because they fear male students ...*  
*... ladies are normally more reserved than men ...*  
*... females are inferior to males ...*

Occasionally, a man can be targeted by a woman if;

*... he acts strangely or portrays gay like characteristics ...*  
*... the man has provoked them and they want revenge ...*  
*... a guy seems to lack self confidence ...*  
*... fails to express himself properly in English in class ...*  
*... he does it first ...*

*... a lady has known the guy for some time and they are familiar to each other ...*

Strangers are less likely to be targeted than those who are familiar. Although they often do not like the joke, targets of *ho lahla mollo* are expected to understand it as a joke. This is what limits the use of *ho*

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*lahla mollo* on strangers. One who performs *ho lahla mollo* on a stranger is taking a risk because they cannot predict how the stranger will react. Strangers are more likely to be shocked, feel humiliated and angry than those who are familiar. As a result they are more likely than non-strangers to react violently or report it as abuse. Even non-strangers sometimes react negatively especially if personal incidents are used as jokes. Sometimes they even seek revenge. On why they were unlikely or had never performed *ho lahla mollo* on strangers respondents had this to say;

*... you cannot be sure with strangers because they might fight you..*

*... it has to happen among people who know each other*

*... the stranger might be too shocked*

*... a stranger might not understand that it is a joke*

*... the stranger might be offended and report you*

*... they might become violent*

*... because it normally involves humiliation*

*... one cannot be disrespectful to strangers because they might fight him/her ...*

Strangers are not completely immune to being targets of *ho lahla mollo*. The following are some of the attributes of a stranger that may make them targets of *ho lahla mollo*;

*... if he or she has done or said something that attracts attention ...*

*... if the stranger is younger or female ...*

*... if the stranger behaves in a weird manner ...*

*... if they act strangely ...*

*... if they deserve it ...*

*... if they are trying to show off about how much they know ...*

*... it depends on what that person has done or said ...*

Lecturers were normally not targeted for *ho lahla mollo*. This is because lecturers are generally older than the average student. As we

have pointed out before, age bestows on someone power over those who are younger. Lecturers are often not targeted also because they have the potential to punish. The respondents mentioned the fear of “victimization”, losing marks or failing the course as some of the deterrents against targeting lecturers for *ho lahla mollo*. The following are some of the reasons respondents gave for not targeting lecturers;

*... because they are afraid that that lecturers might victimize them ...*

*... students have a certain degree of respect for lecturers ...*

*... if a lecturer gets offended you can be sure you will not pass*

...

*... students just respect their lecturers ...*

*... lecturers may not understand that it was just a joke ...*

Furthermore, lecturers are often not targeted because they are “strangers” in the Simmelian sense. Simmel (1950) uses the concept of “stranger” not in the traditional sense of one who “comes today and leaves tomorrow”, but as one who “comes today and stays tomorrow” ([www.infoameica.org/documentos\\_pdf/simmel01.pdf](http://www.infoameica.org/documentos_pdf/simmel01.pdf)). McLemore (1970:86) describes Simmel’s “stranger” as a person who;

*... may be a member of a group in a spatial sense but still not be a member of the group in a social sense; that person might be in a group but not of it.*

Ritzer (2014:169) elaborates on Simmel’s concept of “stranger” as;

*... a type of actor who is neither too close nor too far from a group. The interaction that the stranger engages in with the group members involves a combination of closeness and distance*

Although they interact with students closely, lecturers are still not part of *ho lahla mollo* subculture. This is one of the attributes that makes them relatively safe from being targeted.

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Occasionally, however, lecturers can be targeted. The following are some of the circumstances under which lecturers can be targets of *ho lahla mollo*;

- ... if a lecturer offends the students either by giving them low marks or if he often uses vulgar language before students ...*
- ... when the lecturer has angered them ...*
- ... if the lecturer is too arrogant ...*
- ...if a lecturer cannot speak good English or if he is very boring*
- ...*
- ... when the students are fed up with the lecturer ...*
- ... when the lecturer becomes irresponsible ...*
- ... when a lecturer is bad news to his students ...*
- ... if a lecturer dresses inappropriately ...*
- ... if a lecturer is unfriendly ... never smiling and if he she takes too much time ...*

The foregoing discussion shows that picking a target for *ho lahla mollo* takes into account a number of factors. These factors are however not fixed, they are negotiated. The most important determinant in who becomes an agent or target is power. That is why in every situation there are exceptions.

### ***The content of ho lahla mollo***

*Ho lahla mollo* falls into Dynel (2009)'s category of putdown humour, that which combines ridicule, mocking and sarcasm. Wilson (1979) refers to it as derisive humour. Derisive humour has high critical or abusive content. According to Dynel, putdown humour uses abusive and disparaging remarks whose humour is usually not appreciated by those to whom it is targeted. It contains sexual, aggressive and derisive jokes (Wilson, 1979). Wilson defined sexual jokes as those that express an erotic content, aggressive jokes as those that voice hostility and derisive jokes as those that are critical or abusive. *Ho lahla mollo* is intended to amuse the audience by embarrassing, humiliating, or offending the target using critical and abusive jokes often with a high sexual content.

Most of *ho lahla mollo* jokes have to do with the body or the physical appearance of the target, as well as incidences. Such jokes include comments about one's weight, height, complexion, hairstyle and clothes. Such remarks are often directed at women by men. According to Foucault (1978) this is an expression of patriarchal power which involves the control of the body and sexuality. *Ho lahla mollo* humour also has to do with behavior that is considered inappropriate. An example of such inappropriate behavior is "masculine" behavior in women and "feminine" behavior in men. For example a girl who "talks too much" in a public setting such as a student union meeting is likely to be subjected to *ho lahla mollo*. *Ho lahla mollo* is therefore a form of social control, a public rebuke intended to assert dominance. Assertive women who engage in public debate in forums that include men threaten men's masculinity. The following are some of the

### ***Responses to "ho lahla mollo"***

Most of the respondents who had been subjected to *ho lahla mollo* before expressed negative feelings about their experiences using expressions such as, "humiliated", "annoyed", "angry", "embarrassed", "pissed off", "felt small" "irritated" "frustrated", "stressed" and "not happy". Most of them however stated that they had not done anything about their experiences, despite their displeasure. They simply "ignored" the perpetrator. Very few stated that they "asked him to stop" "retaliated" or "insulted" the perpetrator. Some targets respond to *ho lahla mollo* by laughing. However this response often encourages the agent to do or say more things that are intended to offend or embarrass the target. This is because of the target find humour in the target's conduct, that means the joke has failed because the essence of *ho lahla mollo* is to amuse the audience at the expense of the target.

The following are some of the reasons the respondents gave for not doing anything in response to *ho lahla mollo*.

*... I am not a trouble maker*

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*... “ha lehlanye le hlanya, le tluhele lehlanye (leave the mad man alone). If you take any action against such a person you might as well appear to be the craziest person ever*

*... I try not to show that I am offended because, I know it is intended to be a joke*

*... it does not work ... rather the perpetrator would humiliate me even more*

*... I didn't want to cause a public scene*

*... because it's just being crazy. It's not really important. In any case “ha ke **tose** mali ha ke lahleloa mollo (I can't bleed just because someone has performed ho lahla mollo on me)*

*... Normally if you don't compete with them and just shut up, they will eventually stop*

*... I did not know what to do*

*... I am not a fighting type*

*... It would be a waste of time to try and do something about it because the perpetrator does not mean bad; he/she just wants to have fun at my expense*

*... ho lahla mollo is a test of one's self control. If you show annoyance or fight back you would be seen as a loser*

*... I try to ignore them, otherwise nka hlanya (I would go crazy)*

While some targets take offence and fight back or seek some revenge the typical response to *ho lahla mollo* is that of passive acquiescence. Without necessarily agreeing with them, targets often “ignore” the remarks directed at them and carry on with their lives. The reasons for this passive acquiescence include the fear of attracting further hurtful remarks, averting a verbal or physical confrontation and avoiding being perceived as lacking a sense of humour.

### **Effects of *ho lahla mollo* on its targets**

The findings on the effects of *ho lahla mollo* on its targets show the paradoxical nature of humour (Mulkay, 1988; Driessen, 1997; Hay, 2000; Hart, 2007; DiCioccio, 2012). On the one hand humour has been found to have positive effects on individuals and groups. For example humour has been described as liberating (Bremmer and Roodenburg,



1997), a social lubricant for the benefit of individual and group health (DiCioccio, 2012), as contributing to social solidarity (Hart, 2007), as enhancing collegiality (Holmes, 2006) and as a stabiliser helping people to forget antagonisms inherent in ethnic differences. Some respondents in this study indicated that *ho lahla mollo* has positive effects on the participants, the agents, the target and the audience. The following are some of their descriptions of *ho lahla mollo*:

*... Its a harmless practice. When it comes to ho lahla mollo people just need to control their temper because it is something done without any intention to harm.*

*... its just fun*

*... Its is very interesting, but it depends on where, when and by whom it is done*

*... It provides relief when one is depressed*

*... it is a very interesting thing and it makes school to be exciting*

*... of course some people use it badly but it is not meant to offend ... its just fun*

*... it should continue because it is funny and relieving ... it keeps people happy*

*... Its great .. that's all I can say*

*... I wish the manner in which it is done can be changed so that it leaves all the parties happy, otherwise it there is no problem with it*

*... It is harmless fun ... but can be dangerous*

*... it is a refreshment*

On the other hand some researchers have emphasised the negative impacts of humour particularly that humour can be an expression of violence or aggression (Freud, 1960; Myers, 2002; Bilib, 2002; Howitt and Owusu-Bempah, 2005; Hungwe, 2010; DiCioccio, 2012). The following are some statements from the respondents that portray *ho lahla mollo* as violent humour.

*... one may be wounded for ever*

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*... sometimes it makes one scared of attending school, especially if it is done by classmates .. it causes depression and may lead to hatred towards the perpetrators .. We are university students, future leaders doctors and so on. Why should such things occur among us as f we are not educated. Ho lahla mollo is aggressive and should not be used at all. Some of us are hypersensitive. Re tla shoa ka fe la pelo (we will die of a heart disease).*

*... although it is becoming a norm, ho lahla mollo causes extreme harm to people's self confidence ... some people's feelings get hurt and God doesn't like it. Everyone who does that would not do it if Christ was there physically besides him/her... To sum up I Corinthians 10 verse 31 says we should do all things to the glory of God*

*... it hurts especially when someone refers to your weight*

*... sometimes it is very painful especially because they often make reference to things that you personally don't like but which you can't do anything about, for example that you are not beautiful, that you do not have nice clothes or that your clothes are old. Some people take that seriously.*

*... this thing (ho lahla mollo) may cause violence or school drop-outs because it may lead to extreme embarrassment.*

*... some people can be really offended*

*... It is ok at face value, but people should be who they target. I have seen people being hurt by this (ho lahla mollo)*

### **Discussion**

Pierre Bourdieu's (1989) concept of symbolic (or soft) violence provides a useful conceptual tool for understanding *ho lahla mollo* as violent communication. According to Udasmoro (2013:155) symbolic violence is an extension of the term violence to include other forms of

violence besides physical violence. For Colaguori (2010) symbolic violence involves forms of social domination in which a dominator imposes his/her language, the meanings and the symbolic system on the dominated, who accept that domination. According to Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) symbolic or soft violence is that which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity. Colaguori (2010) further asserts that symbolic violence includes actions that have a discriminatory or injurious meaning or implication such as gender dominance and racism. It is used by individuals against others as a way of confirming those individuals' position in a social hierarchy. Despite its many positive functions (Barsoux, 1996; Chauvet and Hofmeyer, 2007; Howe, 2002; Holmes, 2006; Norrick and Spitz, 2008; Rogerson-Revell, 2007; Holmes and Marra, 2002), humour can be used not only to demonstrate power differences between those interacting (Boxer and Cortes-Conde, 1997; Kotthoff, 2006; Norrick and Spitz, 2008) but also as an expression of violence (Tseng, 1998; Kotthoff, 2006; Hungwe, 2010).

Humour in informal contexts is linked to high situational status and can affirm one's dominance in the hierarchal social structure (Kotthoff, 2006:8). *Ho lahla mollo* affirms dominance of one social group over another. Not only the frequency of humour, but also its direction tends to be towards people who have no authority over the initiator (Kotthoff, 2006). This capacity (power) rests on the interactants' access to power resources such as economic assets, occupation of certain social positions, age, physical strength, expert knowledge and various others (Norrick and Spitz, 2008). Teasing and joking are instruments by which social control is exerted and through which social inequality is displayed (Boxer and Cortes-Conde, 1997). Humour clearly affects and is affected by power relations and joking relationships can be used as an index reflecting the existence of power and changes in power (Cooper, 2008). According to Lundberg (1969) if the initiator of humour is of lower status than the present target, then the joke is not considered funny. If the focus of a joke is of lower status than the initiator, the lower status individual is unlikely to joke back (Lundberg, 1969). That is why the objects of humour are mostly women, black people, subordinates in organisations and young

people. The agents of humour, on the other hand, are typically men, white people, superiors at work and older people.

For example as observed by Howitt and Owusu-Bempah (2005) black people are commonly patronised or insulted under the pretext of humour. Racist jokes act as propaganda in support of racism. In the same way sexist humour does not only denigrate women, it is also both a tool and an expression of male domination. According to Ford, Boxer, Armstrong and Edel (2008) sexist humour denigrates women and justifies sex discrimination under the veil of benign amusement, thus precluding challenges or opportunities that non-humorous sexist communication would likely occur. They argue that sexist humour acts a releaser of sexual prejudice. In *ho lahla mollo*, gender plays a crucial role. Gender is as a system of meanings that influences access to power, status and material resources (Crawford, 2003:1431). Quinn (2000) argues that some women have learnt to deconceptualise sexist jokes as a way of resisting and surviving sexual harassment by rationalising that men do not really mean what they say, when they tell these sexist denigrating jokes. The victims of sexual harassment fear that they might be viewed as too sensitive, too serious, victimising themselves and unable to appreciate jokes. As observed by Rangiwananga, Combes and McCreanor (2011) humour can be hegemonic discourse that dominates and oppresses. Viewing humour this way enables us to investigate the social power relations within which humour takes place.

### **Conclusion**

Violence is a complex social problem which is expressed in various ways. Most people think of violence only in a physical sense. Studies on violence at universities have focused on the physical and overt forms of violence such as murder, rape, assault, stalking, student to student clashes motivated by political, ethnic and religious differences as well as student violence directed at university authorities. Yet violence is a much broader phenomenon. It can be symbolic. No matter what form it takes, violence can have deep and long lasting effects on its victims. Therefore the more we understand violence in its various forms the closer we move towards its amelioration. To perceive *ho lahla mollo* only as communication that is intended to

make people laugh is downplay its cruelty. It should be seen more aptly as violent humour because as demonstrated by this study, it can lead to deep emotional problems for the victims. These include lowering of self-esteem, stress leading to poor academic performance.

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