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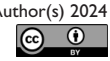

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Laughing through Brexit: Family humour practices, political troubles and everyday life

Adam Carter **Katherine Davies**
University of Sheffield, UK

Abstract

Humour has a well-established role in the public life of politics; however, its use within families affected by macro-level political events remains understudied. This article explores how families employed humour to navigate family troubles introduced by Brexit, the United Kingdom's tumultuous exit from the European Union. Through an ethnographic study, we demonstrate how extraordinary political times test the positive relational potentials of humour. Families reframed situations through 'playfulness', exercised gentle and well-timed teasing, and digitally shared Brexit-related comedy objects to alleviate stresses and anxieties. However, the intensity of the Brexit drama rendered some family humour practices futile, and in particular circumstances, humour became an additional burden. By examining the interrelations of political events, everyday family practices and humour, this article demonstrates the integral role of humour in the reconstitution of familial relationships, the importance of craft, and the significance of relational and situational contexts to the successful deployment of humour.

Keywords

Brexit, ethnography, everyday life, family, humour

Introduction

Humour is a key component in the public life of politics (Morreall, 2005), seen in political rhetoric (Weaver, 2022), political critique through satire (Brassett and Sutton, 2017) and in

Corresponding author:
Adam Carter, Department of Sociological Studies, University of Sheffield, The Wave, 2 Whitham Road, Sheffield S10 2AH, UK.
Email: adam.d.carter@sheffield.ac.uk

online debate (Zappavigna, 2019). Humour also has an elevated potency in times of political upheaval, forging strong political ties and divisions (Gil and Brea, 2021). In this article, we contend that humour is also important in how people manage family relationships in politically controversial times. We know little about how humour operates in domestic political interactions, or its role in everyday family relationships. It may act as a coping mechanism in times of stress and adversity (Martin and Ford, 2018: 34–35), help to strengthen relationships and bonds (Carroll, 2016), and make serious topics or situations less threatening and more 'playful' (Bateson, 1972) – but more work is needed on how these potentials are accomplished in the flow of everyday life. Focusing on the effect of Brexit in the United Kingdom, we bring insights from humour studies together with those from family sociology, particularly David Morgan's (2011) work on 'family practices' and 'family troubles' (Morgan, 2019), to understand the role of humour in families' navigation of political upheaval.

The Brexit political process has been a persistent source of 'trouble' in British public life since early 2016. Antipathy between 'Leaver' and 'Remainer' (Curtice, 2018) camps has led to 'affective polarization' (Hobolt et al., 2020). Brexit has also contributed to the revelation and exacerbation of classed and racialised social divisions (Benson and Lewis, 2019; Guma and Jones, 2019; Mckenzie, 2017; Patel and Connelly, 2019). Brexit has been particularly challenging for migrants and their families, undermining secure residency in the United Kingdom (Barnard et al., 2022; Kilkey, 2017; Turcatti and Vargas-Silva, 2022). Despite this seriousness, humour has been found to be a central feature of public Brexit debate; humour being revealed as a slippery battleground for Brexit rhetoric (Weaver, 2022), as a way of mocking Brexit views on social media (Zappavigna, 2019) and as a feature of post-referendum era European Union (EU) diplomacy (Brassett et al., 2021).

To further explore the relationship between Brexit-related issues and humour, we examine how humour is used in more 'privatised' spaces, with a focus on everyday family practices (Morgan, 2011) used to manage 'family troubles' precipitated by the effects of Brexit. We focus particularly on the humour use of our Remainer participants. They were on the 'losing' side of a Yes/No referendum and experienced a sense of various 'losses' including valued rights and a 'European connection'. Simultaneously, they faced a dissonance between their belief that their voting decision was sensible and logical, supported by a popular public narrative at the time (Moss et al., 2020: 840), and the ultimate referendum outcome. This combination of coping with loss and managing among incongruity saw our Remainer participants using humour in ways that illuminated its complex role in engaging with politically-precipitated troubles in everyday family life.

In this article, we build on Davies's (2022) work on the effect of Brexit on family relationships, emphasising the 'relational underpinnings' of interpersonal negotiations about Brexit, and arguing that humour is an important factor here. In so doing, the article contributes to understandings of family practices, empirically fleshing out the role of humour in constituting 'family' ties, drawing on humour studies to explore the everyday craft of using humour to navigate 'family troubles'.

Navigating family troubles through humorous practices

The interpersonal challenges brought by Brexit can be usefully conceptualised as a form of 'family trouble' (Morgan, 2019) – where trouble enters the realm of the personal, and

family practices (Morgan, 2011) are utilised and innovated to deal with the perceived relational threat. As such, 'families are constituted and reconstituted through engagement with troubles' (Morgan, 2019: 2227). Recent scholarship has applied the notion of family troubles to the contexts of families living with poverty (Kaplan et al., 2022) and dealing with bereavement (Almack, 2022). We extend this notion to include macro-political controversies like Brexit. It has complicated family citizen arrangements, with EU nationals in particular struggling to keep up with the shifting legal status of their residency in the United Kingdom (Fitzgerald and Smoczyński, 2023). It has exacerbated political differences between family members, where the Referendum 'exposed a deep division between the 'types of people' some leavers and remainers imagine each other to be' (Tyler et al., 2022: 2) including within family relationships. It has caused worry and anxiety, and been felt as an intense crisis in everyday life due to the protracted experience of 'waiting' for Brexit (Hall, 2022). Brexit, therefore, is a family trouble that affects how family relationships are constituted or reconstituted.

Work on the public discourse around Brexit is instructive on how and why humour is a feature of engagements with the effects of Brexit. Weaver (2022) draws mostly on the incongruity theory of humour to approach Brexit rhetoric. Incongruity theory posits that humour arises from the unexpected juxtaposition of incongruous concepts or ideas, resulting in an amusing contrast (Kant, 1892 in Morreall, 2009; Schopenhauer, 1964 in Morreall, 2009). Weaver (2022: 19–23) highlights the incongruities of Brexit itself, making it fertile fodder for humour that 'demonstrated, mediated and resolved' those underlying ambiguities (Weaver, 2022: 22). Brexit discourse also draws attention to the common use of ridicule. Zappavigna's (2019) analysis of Brexit-related tweets aimed at exposing perceived hypocrisy in Michael Gove's claims about experts found the majority of them employed a mocking tone. This is related to the superiority theory of humour, suggesting that humour involves a sense of 'triumph' or elevation over others' perceived shortcomings or misfortunes (Morreall, 2009). A further manifestation of this came in EU diplomats' use of humour to ridicule and shame the United Kingdom's approach to Brexit, asserting the EU's own position of superiority and confidence amid Brexit-related uncertainties (Brassett et al., 2021). Brassett et al. (2021) also link this to the relief theory of humour, which proposes that humour serves as a means of releasing built-up emotional or psychological tension (Freud, 1963 in Morreall, 2009). Weaver (2022) similarly suggests that Brexit humour holds a relief aspect, providing a way for people to cope with the 'lived experience' (p. 22) of Brexit.

Humour plays a vital role in navigating challenges in the 'lived experience' of family life. Hedin et al. (2012) identify humour as an inclusion practice that integrates foster children into their foster family by way of creating 'positive emotional energy' and 'warmth' (p. 625), manifesting family boundaries. The humorous practices that resolve the incongruity experienced through incorporating an individual into a family group is then felt as relief or positive affect. Fiadotava (2021) highlights humour's roles in managing everyday family issues, such as conflict resolution, communication about difficult topics and bonding. Crucially, it is not just positive humour that has these potentials. Teasing and other 'aggressive forms' of humour contribute to 'insider'-ness; it is a form of humour that only works with familiarity and trust within a given relationship (Fiadotava, 2021: 5–6). In addition, Tannen (2006) shows how couples overcome conflicts and arguments through 'humorous reframing and rekeying' (p. 602), while Norrick and Spitz (2008: 1681–1682) identify how

a 'light tone', humorous 'exaggeration' and employing 'ironic intonation' can defuse negative emotions in family discussions.

Further to this, humour's potential in everyday interaction within broader social contexts has been much discussed, and has applications to the navigation of family troubles. Carroll (2016) and Kuipers (2009) emphasise humour's role in social bonding and the drawing of symbolic boundaries between groups. Shared humour relies on shared knowledge, including shared appreciation of what counts as transgressive of, or incongruous within, group norms. Collective laughter over this shared knowledge and outlook helps build positive emotions, for coping in the face of adversity (Carroll, 2016), and strengthening feelings of 'closeness, solidarity and trust' (Kuipers, 2009: 231). Humorous exchanges serve meta-communicative functions within social groups, allowing individuals to address 'juxtapositions of contrasting polarities' that might be otherwise difficult to articulate (Bateson, 1953: 15). Bateson's (1972) conceptualisation of the 'play frame' elucidates how humour may enable groups to approach potentially threatening issues in a non-serious manner. We draw on this to understand how specific humour practices, like teasing, label certain interactions as playful, and facilitate the coming together of those with divergent positions. This aligns with Francis's (1994) attention on the importance of a 'shared definition of [a] situation (pp. 156–157)', alongside an expert understanding of that situation in the interpersonal management, and manipulation, of emotions through humour.

To emphasise the active nature by which humour as part of family practices is established and expertly performed, we draw on Sennett's (2008) notion of 'the craft of experience' (p. 286). Sennett argues that, like a craftsperson working with physical material, people practice and refine techniques in the production of social things. Sennett (2008) emphasises this in specifically relational terms stating that 'both the difficulties and the possibilities of making things well applies to human relationships' suggesting that people must practice, anticipate and revise their skills in order to 'improve these relations' (p. 289). Techniques practised in ongoing experience serve as 'an envelope of tacit knowledge for our actions' (Sennett, 2008: 289). We therefore conceptualise humour use in family life as crucial to the ongoing craft of family relationships. It is a skill developed over time, drawn upon while navigating everyday family experiences, and actively utilised to face potential family troubles.

Combining these considerations of humour theory with family practices, family troubles and the craft of experience gives us analytical purchase on family humour use in politically troubled times – as 'family humour practices'. It draws together how families invoke humorous forms of practice and how politically troubled times may contribute to the ambiguities and vulnerabilities (Weaver, 2022) at the heart of humour and its uses. It also highlights the relational aspects of humour use, as a joint activity in the service of emotional management (Francis, 1994) and the 'doing' of family (Morgan, 2011). Finally, the idea of craft (Sennett, 2008) draws attention to humour-use being both a skill built over time, and a tool to be used in new, and troubling, circumstances.

Tracing the effects of Brexit in everyday family life

The article is based on a qualitative study conducted between July 2019 and July 2021 funded by the Economic and Social Research Council in the United Kingdom, and granted

ethical approval by the University Research Ethics Committee at the University of Sheffield (Ref: 024903). The study explored how Brexit was experienced in everyday family life, emphasising the influence of relationships on people's views, behaviours and attitudes towards Brexit, and vice versa. Humour was not a specific focus initially but, influenced by one author's previous interest in the sociology of comedy and humour (see Carter, 2019), it was soon detected as a mode through which many participants managed their relationships in 'Brexit Britain'.

Twelve initial participants were recruited through advertisements in neighbourhood Facebook groups, leaflets and 'hanging out' in local community centres and cafes in a city in the North of England. We chose diverse locations to recruit a varied sample and emphasised to participants that we were interested in people's everyday experiences of Brexit rather than their political opinions. This allowed us to generate data with those with relevant, relational experiences of living with Brexit. We had further recruitment plans for a wider range of participants, particularly reaching more Leave voters; however, the COVID-19 lockdowns introduced mid-project limited our efforts. Our networked recruitment went some way to mitigate this – eight of the initial participants connected us with family members, half of whom were local, the other half being geographically dispersed. We maintained contact with each participant, 26 in total from 12 families, for at least a year. All participants gave informed consent, sought at the beginning of their engagement with the project and checked at each new research encounter, and were regularly reminded of their right to withdraw. Participant ages ranged from 22 to 76; 15 were female, and 11 were male; 19 were from the North of England, 1 from Scotland, 1 from Wales, 1 from Jersey and 4 from the South of England. We did not explicitly ask participants to disclose their sexuality. However, based on the information shared during the research process, all participating families appeared to be headed by heterosexual couples, or were single-parent families that had previously been in heterosexual relationships. Twenty-one participants identified as White British, two as British South Asian, one as Black British Caribbean, one as Mixed Race and one as White Other. Two participants also identified as EU nationals. There was also some range in socioeconomic background, indicated by occupation – from small business owners, to those in managerial/administrative roles, through to unemployed persons and retirees. In all, 6 participants told us they were 'Leavers', while 20 told us they were 'Remainers'.

The study used various research methods. Participants chose to partake in interviews, to fill diaries or to carry out 'Gogglebox'-style[1] video observations – where they were filmed watching Brexit-related television such as news or satirical programmes. We also 'hung out' and 'checked in' with participants face-to-face, via text, social media or email. A total of 42 interviews were conducted and 11 participants were interviewed 2 or 3 times over a year. Three interviews were with couples. Initial interviews covered political biography, family relationships and experiences. Follow-up interviews tracked participants' Brexit experiences, and related relationship experiences. 'Gogglebox' observations were conducted by 5 participants; 13 participants provided diaries, covering periods from 2 weeks to a year. Single diary entries were requested on significant days. For 'The Brexit Election' (Coppola, 2019) of December 2019, 11 participants provided single diary entries; 9 were provided for 'Brexit Day', 31 January 2020. The data set includes, with permission, 188 SMS/WhatsApp/Facebook messages and emails

mentioning Brexit, public political issues or family relations, and researcher field notes and reflections from 'hanging out' with participants. In this article, we do not refer to the Gogglebox observations as evidence, but we report their use here as they influenced our interpretation of some participants' approaches to humour. All written data were anonymized with pseudonyms and the removal of personally identifying details. Participants were assured that video footage would not be used for publications or online.

NVIVO was used to thematically code the data based on established areas of interest derived from previous literature and media coverage, and themes that 'emerged' during fieldwork. Humour was one such theme that emerged quickly. Data coded under 'humour' were then approached narratively, and reanalysed in the context of the whole family data set in which they occurred, to trace the wider relational contexts in which humour use was entangled during Brexit. As noted earlier, this article focuses on the data related to our Remainer participants. All of our participants used humour in our research engagements, yet in the specific review of data coded under humour, we noticed distinctive ways in which our Remainers' sense of loss and experience of Brexit-related incongruities were being engaged through their humour. These appeared related to maintaining a sense of 'ontological security' in a situation that prompted vulnerability, requiring a coping mechanism (Brassett et al., 2021: 12–13). We are conscious that our own political positions as white professional university workers who voted 'Remain', will have affected our relationships with our participants – most participants asked us how we voted. There were challenges in our engagements with people holding different views, views that extended beyond the Leave versus Remain narrative and we have discussed these issues at length elsewhere (Davies and Carter, 2021). Our political alignment with Remainer participants may have facilitated 'insider status', important with regard to the humour focus of this article, given its basis in shared assumptions (Francis, 1994).

Humour practices in relational and situational context

In the following cases, we explore the complex role of humour as a form of family practice amid the relational tensions brought about by Brexit. We consider how humour is craftily applied within specific relational and situational contexts, highlighting humour's potential to manage such challenges. However, we suggest that there are limits to humour's utility if the underlying circumstances of the social situation are not approached carefully, emphasising how humour practices require crafty application, sensitive to the contexts in which they are deployed, for any hope of their potentials to be realised.

Crafting a play frame for Brexit-based incongruities

Humour was used in families to reduce tensions surrounding Brexit controversies. Brexit introduced a 'family trouble' (Morgan, 2019) in the form of citizenship concerns for Basil, a French, mixed-race, EU national, and his wife Beth, a white British citizen, who have a young daughter together. As an EU national, Basil was compelled to first seek 'settled status',[2] and, as he was unsatisfied that this was enough of a guarantee of a right to stay in the United Kingdom with his family, then sought full British citizenship. The bureaucratic processes proved a huge wrench for Basil – he hesitated to get started and

in all of our research encounters with him, he expressed a deep distrust of the prevailing administration, stating that it was 'not a good feeling' putting his status 'in the hand of some people in government'. This incongruity between recognising the need to complete the required applications, but not trusting those in charge of the system, created relational friction with Beth, who recounts how she had been 'snappy' with Basil, and urged him to 'just get on with it'.

To navigate this, Basil and Beth turned the bureaucratic requirement into a shared, playful experience. Basil was regularly practising for the 'Life in the UK'[3] test, and Beth 'trained' alongside him. They completed practice tests online, and compared their scores in friendly competition:

Beth: He passed me one over last night, and he said, like, oh, I got, like, 75 per cent. .
Basil: Eighty per cent.
Beth: . . . eighty per cent. And he passed it over, and I was on the first four questions, I was like, this is loads easier than the other ones that we've done.
Basil: And bam! [laughs]
Beth: And then, bam! [laughs] Fail. You don't know about Boadicea again!

The imposing of a 'play frame' (Bateson, 1972) here has simultaneously turned a threatening process into a ludic pursuit, as well as bringing Basil and Beth together, addressing their divergent views of the process. Processing the unsettling ambiguities about Brexit trouble in this way has found them coming to a shared understanding, cultivating a renewed perspective of the citizenship process – that they both regard as ridiculous:

Basil: It is a strange test [laughs] because I can understand why they want to do it, but the content of it and the questions are just sometimes ridiculous. It's a good laugh but it's strange.
Beth: Not when your life depends on it!
Basil: Yeah well, an ironic, ironic laugh.

However, as much as it reveals a convergence in perspective on the process, this exchange also reveals the lingering presence of Brexit as a family trouble. The references to the test as strange, and as fundamentally threatening to their life, shows the unease still felt even when engaging with the process as a playful game. In persisting with the game in the face of such troubling circumstances, Basil and Beth demonstrate the craft of 'working with resistance' (Sennett, 2008: 289) – in the process of creating something, the material you are working with may not yield easily. The underlying, threatening incongruity does not yield easily to humorous and playful practices in the management of Brexit trouble. The maintenance of the 'play frame' requires 'crafty' work and the careful application of family practices. This further aligns with Bateson's (1972: 180) conceptualisation of the 'play frame' – those actions within an occasion marked as 'this is play' still carry the implication that were it not play, it would be very serious. Humorous playfulness is not an escape from the reality of the situation, there is no fundamental 'relief', but it is a delicate construct that Basil and Beth craftily maintain to try and navigate their

family relationships through a troubling period. This highlights the potential struggles to maintain levity in overwhelmingly challenging situations.

Mis-matched emotional intensities and their management through teasing

Fiona, 55, and Frank, 60, a white British married couple with similar political outlooks, including avowed 'Remainer' views, experience a family trouble prompted by their mismatched emotional intensities towards Brexit. In all our interactions with Frank, he adopted an interested but distanced stance on Brexit politics, confessing to enjoying it. He refers to the situation as 'Pythonesque',[4] juxtaposing the seriousness of Brexit with comic absurdity, creating a humorous incongruity (Morreall, 2009) and actively modifying his perspective (Carroll, 2016). Individually, at least, Frank's humour-based outlook provided some measure of relief in dealing with the lived experience of Brexit (Weaver, 2022).

Conversely, Fiona found Brexit a constant source of worry. She hoarded medicines fearing supply shortages, and had sought the help of healthcare services regarding anxiety fuelled by her Brexit worries. In her participant diary entries, Fiona, unprompted, incorporated a daily 'anxiety rating' out of 10, giving us a glimpse of the flows of Brexit anxiety in Fiona's everyday life. There are fleeting experiences of mirth in her diary reflections, however, these soon give way to despair. Compared with Frank, Fiona's own experiences of humour-as-relief in the midst of Brexit are much more fleeting:

> Tuesday 8 am: Brexit on the news. Guardian headline was about Boris being 'trapped in no 10'. This made me chuckle. Vague bit of humour in depressing mess. A nation tearing itself apart. (Fiona Diary Entry, 25 October 2019)

However, within their relationship, these contrasting stances towards Brexit are managed through the deployment of teasing as a family humour practice. During an interview with Frank at the kitchen table in the family home, Fiona walks in from work and makes a deadpan comment:

> Fiona: Oh hello – has he been moaning about me?

Frank responded with a dramatic eyeroll, Fiona took a cup of tea to an adjoining room and the interview continued. The topic soon turned to if Frank and Fiona talk about Brexit. As there was a small 'serving hatch' connecting the living room and kitchen, Frank, with a wry smile on his face, said:

> Frank: We'll chat about [Brexit] – it concerns and worries Fiona. And irrationally so in my view!
>
> Fiona [from the adjoining lounge]: Get lost!
>
> [They both laugh]
>
> Frank: In my view!

The teasing within a play frame enables the emotional juxtaposition to be approached non-seriously. Yet there is also an 'emotional manipulation' component (Francis, 1994), teasing cloaking a nudge from Frank to Fiona that she should be 'rational'. The teasing is craftily applied, likely honed (Sennett, 2008) through their shared relational history, showing Frank's caring awareness of how far he can safely venture in playfully approaching Fiona's anxieties. The relationship between humour and criticism is complex (Fiadotava, 2020), this episode showcasing a benevolent form of teasing, intended with care and producing the temporary release of laughter, but the accusation is very clear. Relationally, the humour temporarily alleviates the family trouble, allowing Frank and Fiona to check their couple connection– forcefully shown in their shared laughter (Kuipers, 2009). The family practice of teasing, through engaging with a family trouble, has reconstituted the bond (Morgan, 2011), staving off the danger of Brexit-related anxieties seriously damaging this interpersonal connection. The teasing may create a temporary bubble where Fiona feels, fleetingly, relieved of Brexit anxiety, but it does not resolve her underlying worries about medical supplies. For Fiona, the lived experience of Brexit was not fully mitigated by humour use.

Digital humour sharing and the formation of symbolic boundaries amid family trouble

Brexit-based family trouble was also managed through the sharing of comedy objects digitally. Colin, a white male British 40-year-old small business owner and his mum, Camilla, a retired white, 70-year-old EU national, found it difficult to discuss Brexit directly. The source of the family trouble was similar to Basil and Beth, in that it stemmed from settled status issues. Unlike them, however, Colin and Camilla live in different parts of the country, so face-to-face family humour practices were not often an option. For Colin and Camilla, funny memes sent at a distance showed care and thoughtfulness. As Fiadotava (2020: 107) states, the digital sharing of comedy objects 'is situated on the boundary between the private and public realms' where 'people tend to choose publicly available humorous media items, but share them privately, reinforcing close personal connections'. In this way, humour served a meta-communicative function (Bateson, 1953), allowing Colin and Camilla to navigate their contrasting, and difficult to communicate, stances.

Colin states the source of the problems with discussing the settled status application with his Mum:

> I kind of avoid bringing it up. . . I know there's nothing she can do about it, and she must be worried, but she says, I'm not worried, I'm sure it will sort itself out, because that's all you can do. . . bringing it up is painful and neither of us have anything to contribute

Camilla had concerns about the settled status system but had contrasting reasons for not discussing it with her son. In her first interview, she characterised Colin's interest in political matters as 'militant':

> When he starts, he's unstoppable. . . he just has all this information. . . he would get on a hobbyhorse and he wouldn't let go. . . I realised that, well, Colin was annoyed and appalled almost on my behalf because he thinks I'm being treated like a second-class citizen.

The uncertainty of the 'settled status' requirements caused a partial communication breakdown. Both parties avoid discussing Brexit, assuming the other is too sensitive. Physical distance may be a factor, the lack of face-to-face contact causing both parties to make assumptions about the other's emotional state. The incongruous nature of Brexit has produced an ambiguous emotional setting between Colin and Camilla. The use of digital humour is a crafty innovation of their family practices to maintain their connection.

Camilla sent jokes about Brexit to show how 'silly it all' was, and Colin mentioned the family WhatsApp group, where memes and jokes were frequently shared. One notable comedy object shared in the group was a YouTube video entitled 'The Clown'. Playing off the title of the Netflix series 'The Crown', this German-made video lampoons Brexit by framing Boris Johnson as 'a notorious buffoon at the head of the country' (extra 3, 2020) and humorously demonstrates a number of absurdities of the Brexit situation as a whole (Weaver, 2022)–amusing particularly to those from the shared European Remainer perspective of Colin and Camilla (Brassett et al., 2021).

The video also allows Colin and Camilla to exercise superiority through humour (Morreall, 2009; Zappavigna, 2019). The Remainer position is paradoxical – narrativised as rational but on the losing side of an era-defining election, occupying both a socially superior and inferior position simultaneously. Sharing and enjoying the video and similar jokes against Brexit provides a temporary resolution to this paradox. Shared laughter over a common adversary fleetingly feels like a victory or a 'sudden glory' (Morreall, 2009: 6). In addition, the shared enjoyment uses the material of Brexit to build a 'symbolic boundary' (Kuipers, 2009) around their familial relationship, creating internal solidarity against an 'other'. While it lampoons an external threat, it functions as a form of caring family practice internal to the relationship. However, the use of humour here did not resolve Colin and Camilla avoiding the settled status issue. Camilla said they stopped talking about Brexit altogether, whether it related to the settled status process or otherwise. The relational craft (Sennett, 2008) shown was in recognising the issue needed avoiding and so innovating a light way to address it, affirming the family relationship without triggering assumed worries.

So far, the examples in this article confirm humour's capacity to help people engage craftily with Brexit-based family trouble, and to cope by relieving incongruities or by reconstituting familial bonds. These practices require skill, effort, innovation and interpersonal knowledges, formulated through lifetimes of trial and error (Morgan, 2011: 7). Humour does not resolve the underlying causes of the tensions, but reaffirms family relationships as sources of support in dealing with those issues, or waiting them out until they are no longer relational threats. In the following sections, we explore examples where humour as a family practice appears less useful, highlighting why craft is important in applying humour in the face of family troubles.

'I won't be able to resist' – stubborn humour practices as relational risk

There is always an element of risk with the use of humour. There is a chance that a given humorous utterance or act will fail (Hale, 2018). Humour is a matter of inter-subjective negotiation (Carter, 2019), vulnerable to miscommunication. Attempts at humour, especially in the midst of family troubles, are at risk of failing.

Debbie, a 41-year-old, white British woman, had always considered herself politically active, relating tales of student activism and involvement in local politics. Debbie had helped with leafleting for her local 'Remain' campaign in the lead-up to the Brexit referendum. Debating and disagreeing over politics, through humorous means or otherwise, was something she enjoyed. However, in late 2019, Debbie had largely disengaged from politics due to the profound disappointment and stress she felt post-Referendum, avoiding television news and social media. Brexit also affected her family relationships, particularly with her 69-year-old white British mother-in-law, Doris, who had voted 'Leave'.

Due to their political differences, both tried to avoid political talk, however, stubborn humour practices troubled these efforts:

> [Brexit] does occasionally come up. . . Occasionally it's barbed, snarky comments, mostly from me to be fair. Now and then she'll say something and I won't be able to resist. . . she'll be surprised by something in the news and I'll say 'well, it's Project fear isn't it?'. . . I just tend to walk out the room now. . . I recognise it's not helpful to our relationship at all. . . I used to be much more confrontational but I can't be arsed anymore.

In this account, there is tension between recognising that snark (snide sarcasm) has been unhelpful, but also that using it is irresistible. The Brexit-based incongruity – Doris's surprise at Brexit developments juxtaposed with the Leave campaign rhetoric of 'Project Fear' (Weaver, 2022) – may be too tempting to exploit. Humour can provide a 'safety valve' (Morreall, 2009: 15) for the stress and tension that Debbie was experiencing. The nasty edge of snark can also provide a sense of superiority. The irresistibility also comes from family practices as habit (Morgan, 2011: 25), engrained as a way of doing family that is difficult to stop. Debbie had previously enjoyed political repartee, and being 'confrontational' was part of that – a form of play. Yet this established snarky humour practice met with a fundamentally changed situational context. Brexit family trouble, as dramatically divergent viewpoints, had rendered snark dangerous. While a 'play frame' can draw together those with polarised perspectives, Bateson (1972) notes that playful jibes can turn into 'the 'real' blows of combat' (p. 182). Debbie goes on to recognise the unhelpfulness of her formerly playful digs in this new context. Both Debbie and Doris informed us that they now completely avoid talking about politics and focus on the shared safe terrain of the grandchildren. Significantly, the solution is not to just avoid joking, but avoiding politics altogether. The inability to resist the humour practice may be too strong in a topic area so incongruous as to forcefully invite humorous comment.

Debbie's jokes may have managed her own frustration, but did not expertly manipulate the relationship's emotional tone. The shared definition of the situation (Francis, 1994) had changed at a pace that had outstripped her humour habit. The shifting ground of Brexit had altered the shared knowledge of what does, or does not, count as transgressive (Kuipers,

2009), and Debbie's humour practice had to give way. There is still a note of craft here; recognising that a tool is no longer effective, or that material is no longer workable, is itself 'crafty'. The crafty family member must identify when humour may be helpful or useless, and decide whether to skilfully apply it in given situational and temporal contexts. Humour is therefore revealed as less a coping mechanism, a bond strengthener or a boundary builder, and more a relational tool that needs to be wielded with *care*.

Tumultuous troubles and the burden of managing 'uncrafty' humour

We return to Beth from the earlier example to explore how Brexit humour became part of the family trouble she faced. We interviewed Beth initially in August 2019, and she mentioned how interactions with her dad were few and far between. By May 2020, Beth informed us that something had changed, influenced by Brexit, and a new humour practice had developed over WhatsApp between them:

> I have had the odd funny meme from my dad in WhatsApp. . . We've got like a WhatsApp group that's me, my sister, my mum and my dad. . . Now and again I'll get a direct WhatsApp outside the group which is one of his memes or GIFs, about some of the more lefty political persuasions. And it is brilliant, I love that he's decided that that isn't appropriate for the WhatsApp group but he knows that I'll like it. I've really enjoyed it.

Sharing political memes, like the Camilla and Colin example, can be constitutive of a family relationship. Creating an 'in-group' within the family 'in-group' was particularly exciting for Beth, with the meta-communicative message being – 'the others wouldn't get this, but *we* do'. This symbolic construction of a special bond is strengthened by the limited contact being replaced with a form of exclusive inclusion, producing the positive affects Beth attests to (Hedin et al., 2012).

In June, Beth's enjoyment of her dad's WhatsApp communications was fading. We checked in with Beth during a Brexit-related controversy involving Dominic Cummings, Leave campaigner and then-communications head for the Prime Minister, who was accused of breaking Covid-related quarantine rules. Beth said:

> 'My Dad has gone into Dominic Cummings meme overdrive. It was funny at first, but I semi-seriously tried to impose a 5 meme a day maximum'.

Weaver (2022: 163) notes the convergence of Brexit and COVID-19 themes in political satire post-March 2020. The proliferation of Cummings memes during this controversy is a key example. The memes primarily address the incongruity of a governmental figure allegedly breaking the rules the government had put in place. In addition from the Remainer perspective, holding the 'rational' standpoint, there is a struggle to reconcile how the Leave campaign won when a major figure in that campaign acted, allegedly, so irrationally. Later in the same communication, Beth attempts to resolve this incongruity non-humorously by referring to Cummings as a 'clever, horrible' man, replacing the idea that Remain was beaten by irrationality with the notion that they were defeated by morally reprehensible individuals. The tone of the communication was angry rather than playful.

While it would appear that her dad used these memes to further their reconstituted connection, Beth only partially appreciated the effort, resolving one incongruity but otherwise triggering anger. Due to the digital nature of the communication, her Dad may not have registered her anger or fully appreciated the situation (Francis, 1994), or the unworkability of the material he was trying to craft a relationship with.

In late July, Adam encountered Beth in the local area, and asked about her dad's memes:

Field Note Extract:

> She sighed and put her hand to her face and told me she'd had to 'knock that on the head'.[5] She said she couldn't keep 'forcing herself' to send 'haha' and laughing emojis.

The 'brilliant' family humour practice Beth had once enjoyed had been closed down due to private struggles exacerbated by Brexit politics, the once humorous ground becoming beyond a laughing matter. Beth struggled with the uncertainties of Basil's citizenship, making the humour a burden, another politics-related trouble to manage. In addition, the humour practice lacks craft, as Beth's dad did not, or was unable to, take into account the ever-uncertain situation. This highlights the fragility of new humour practices, and particularly those innovated over digital communication, with fewer relational cues for the joker to gauge perception. The mocking and ridiculing tone of the memes (Zappavigna, 2019) initially celebrated a shared perspective, but as the situation changed, so did Beth's view of the humour exchanges.

It is crucial to note that Beth and her dad had only occasional contact before the meme-based relationship began. Their limited relational history, and absence of prevailing family practices built on experiential trial and error (Morgan, 2011) likely contributed her dad's limited understanding of Beth's other Brexit-related family trouble. Shared knowledge, appreciations of transgressive-ness and common understandings of the situation are foundational to humour use within groups (Carroll, 2016; Francis, 1994; Kuipers, 2009) and sharing digital humour among family involves 'knowing one's audience' for the 'targeted sharing of humour' (Fiadotava, 2020: 107). In relational contexts, these commonalities and knowledges are built through practice, and in family contexts, constituted through family practices, building tacit understandings of the biographical and situational contexts of valued others (Morgan, 2011). Beth's dad's appreciation of her situation and standpoint appears partial, able to target their shared 'lefty' Remainer positions (Brassett et al., 2021) but unable to fully grasp the family trouble experienced by Beth and Basil.

The example also demonstrates how the 'receiver' of humour attempts must act appropriately to sustain a humour practice, involving emotion work (Hochschild, 1979) and craftiness (Sennett, 2008). Beth goes through stages of managing the inundation of humour – first enjoying it, then trying to humorously manage the amount, then 'knock[ing] it on the head'. Negotiating this, alongside keeping things light with and for Basil, shows how humour practices can become a burden in troubled times, and quite the opposite of a 'coping mechanism'. Increasing humour is not the key to coping with trouble or to building relationships – the crafty application of humour, that recognises the contextual limits of its utility, is.

Conclusion – the crafty skill of everyday humour

This article set out to explore how families employed humour to navigate family troubles introduced by Brexit, with a particular focus on how 'Remainer' participants used humour to deal with their sense of loss and the incongruities they experienced. Our analysis of the experience of these families demonstrates the complex role that humour plays in the constitution and reconstitution of family relationships in politically tumultuous times. Humour has served as a buffer, managing emotional intensities, providing relief, or facilitating the avoidance of difficult conversations. The sharing of humorous memes and jokes through digital means, for example, allowed families to show care and maintain connections. However, we also highlight that humour is no panacea for family troubles, and that its effectiveness depends on the skilful navigation of situational and relational contexts, alongside the rancorous political contexts. The findings presented in this article highlight how attempts at humour can fail or exacerbate everyday tensions if not applied with sensitivity to the specific circumstances and relationships involved.

Theoretically, this article contributes to family sociology by unpacking the interrelation of family practices, family troubles and the craft of humour. We highlight how in the utilisation of humour to navigate politically precipitated family troubles, shared understandings and relational histories shape the effectiveness of humour as a family practice. We also centre humour and its use as a key concern, demonstrating its integral importance to how families build and maintain valued relationships. For humour studies, this article brings key concepts from the sociology of everyday life into contact with humour theory, to emphasise the situational, temporal and relational flows that affect humour's use, and emphasise its embeddedness in social relationships. By conceptualising humour as a 'crafty' practice, we emphasise the care required in its use, as well as its potential fallibility, and wish to provide a basis for further exploration of the relational factors that shape the effects of humour in everyday life.

The focus on 'Remainer' participants in this article has allowed us to explore some of the unique challenges posed by Brexit as both a felt loss and source of incongruity, experienced as trouble in everyday family life. The profound, multidimensional turmoil attested to by our Remainer participants, and their subsequent attempts at inviting in humour to diminish these family troubles, further establishes the complex role of humour in circumventing contradictions and making sense of political upheaval. We recognise that our article has limitations – future research could explore the use of humour among 'Leaver' participants, to pick apart some of the peculiarities of that political standpoint and the implications of humour use there. In addition, it is important to acknowledge that there are issues related to humour in terms of social class, taste, gender and ethnicity that have been left unexplored in this article, and undoubtedly intersect in significant ways with political divisions and the lived experience of everyday life. However, we suggest that the conceptualisation of humour as a crafty practice in everyday life may provide useful groundwork for further exploration of these factors in relational contexts.

In sum, this article demonstrates the complex and situated nature of humour as a family practice in the context of Brexit. Bringing together insights from family sociology and humour studies demonstrate how the crafty deployment of humour can help families navigate political troubles, while highlighting its potential pitfalls. Our work underlines

the importance of attending to the macro-political and micro-relational dimensions of everyday humour, emphasising the constitutive role of family practices in politically troubled times.

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ORCID iD

Adam Carter https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6942-8687

Notes

1. 'Gogglebox' is a popular UK TV programme. Families are filmed watching television together and having conversations with each other.
2. The 'EU Settlement Scheme' (Home Office, 2023) is a government run process through which EU Nationals apply for the right to remain in the UK post-Brexit. On successful application, those EU Nationals are said to have 'settled status'.
3. The passing of a 'Life in the UK' test is part of the requirements for becoming a citizen of the United Kingdom. It tests knowledge of British laws, customs, history and politics.
4. Relating to the UK comedy troupe 'Monty Python', whose humour is characterised as surreal and unpredictable.
5. This is a UK idiom, meaning to stop something from happening.

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Author biographies

Adam Carter is a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow in the Department of Sociological Studies at the University of Sheffield. His current research interests include the connections between affect/emotion and power relations in society, the social life of laughter, humour, and comedy, and the use of video methods in forms of qualitative inquiry. His current research project utilises video observations and reflexive interviews with families to explore how everyday humour is employed to face challenges such as childcare, managing long-term health conditions and moving home.

Katherine Davies is a Senior Lecturer in Sociology at The University of Sheffield. Katherine's research focuses on everyday personal relationships and, in addition to her work investigating how Brexit has affected family life, Katherine has researched friendship, shared housing relationships and siblingship. Katherine's latest publications include the article, 'Sticking Together in 'Divided

Britain': Talking Brexit in Everyday Family Relationships' published in Sociology in 2021 and the monograph, 'Siblings and Sociology' published by Manchester University Press in 2023.

Résumé
Si l'humour a un rôle avéré en politique dans la vie publique, le recours à l'humour au sein des familles concernées par des événements politiques au niveau macro est un sujet qui reste peu étudié. Dans cet article, nous nous intéressons à la façon dont les familles ont utilisé l'humour pour surmonter les problèmes familiaux créés par la sortie mouvementée du Royaume-Uni de l'Union européenne connue comme le Brexit. À partir d'une étude ethnographique, nous montrons comment des périodes politiques exceptionnelles mettent à l'épreuve les potentiels relationnels positifs de l'humour. Des familles ont réinterprété des situations en recourant à l'esprit ludique et à la taquinerie inoffensive à des moments propices, et ont partagé sous forme numérique des éléments comiques liés au Brexit pour atténuer le stress et l'anxiété. Cependant, l'ampleur du drame du Brexit a rendu parfois futile l'humour pratiqué en famille, le transformant dans certaines circonstances en une charge supplémentaire. En examinant les liens réciproques entre événements politiques, pratiques familiales quotidiennes et humour, l'article démontre le rôle essentiel de l'humour dans la reconstitution des relations familiales et l'importance de l'art et des contextes relationnels et situationnels pour le déploiement réussi de l'humour.

Mots-clés
Brexit, ethnographie, famille, humour, vie quotidienne

Resumen
El humor tiene un papel bien establecido en la vida pública de la política. Sin embargo, su uso dentro de familias afectadas por eventos políticos de nivel macro sigue siendo poco estudiado. Este artículo explora cómo las familias han empleado el humor para sortear los problemas familiares producidos por el Brexit, la tumultuosa salida del Reino Unido de la Unión Europea. A través de un estudio etnográfico, se muestra cómo los momentos políticos extraordinarios ponen a prueba los potenciales relacionales positivos del humor. Las familias han reinterpretado diferentes situaciones a través del espíritu lúdico, han hecho bromas inocentes en momentos propicios y han compartido digitalmente elementos cómicos relacionados con el Brexit para aliviar el estrés y la ansiedad. Sin embargo, la intensidad del drama del Brexit hizo que algunas prácticas del humor familiar se hicieran inútiles y, en circunstancias particulares, el humor se convirtiera en una carga adicional. Al analizar las interrelaciones de los eventos políticos, las prácticas familiares cotidianas y el humor, este artículo demuestra el papel integral del humor en la reconstitución de las relaciones familiares y la importancia de la inventiva y de los contextos relacionales y situacionales para el despliegue exitoso del humor.

Palabras clave
Brexit, etnografía, familia, humor, vida cotidiana