



# Learning by Laughing: The Use of Ethnic Humor in Increasing Students' Multicultural Awareness in Indonesia

Surahmat<sup>(✉)</sup>

Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Universitas Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta, Indonesia  
surahmat@mail.ugm.ac.id

**Abstract.** This study investigates the effectiveness of ethnic humor in increasing students' multicultural awareness. As a form of discourse, humor possesses distinctive textual property and towering persuasive force, encouraging the implied message more understandable and pleasing at once. Besides, humor appreciation also incorporates a unique cognitive process that is useful for socializing specific values. These features make ethnic humor have massive potential to instill students' multicultural awareness. This study applied the literature review method. The results point out that ethnic humor can increase students' knowledge of diverse Indonesian cultures. Besides taking a role as a means of socialization, ethnic humor can instill a positive attitude towards diversity. Since the adoption of multiculturalism values is influenced by students' personal experiences, environmental support is needed.

**Keywords:** ethnic humor · multicultural awareness · multiculturalism · pluralism

## 1 Introduction

Indonesian people have experienced burdensome times due to social conflicts triggered by cultural differences. Many prominent cases that have occurred include ethnic riots in Sampit (2001), ethnic riots in Solo and Jakarta (1998), the Poso conflict (1998), the Ambon conflict (1998-2002), and ethnic violence against Papuans in Malang and Surabaya (2019). In addition to political disputes and economic disparities, cultural diversity plays a role in giving birth to these social conflicts [1].

Departing from these bitter experiences, Indonesians have learned to develop strategies to manage cultural differences to prevent negative impacts. They also learn to use the differences as social capital with positive impacts. The motto “Bhinneka Tunggal Ika” is the foundation established by the nation's founders to unite cultural diversity. Furthermore, the government has issued Law No. 40 of 2008 on the Elimination of Racial and Ethnic Discrimination to avert racial and ethnic discrimination. In fact, Indonesia also ratified the 1965 International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination by issuing Law No. 29 of 1999.

Indigenous peoples and local elites in the regions pursue difference strategies. According to Lidah Wetan et al. [2], both parties manage diversity by combining mythology, developing rules in public spaces, and setting superstructure networks. Mythology is regarded efficacious since the contained values are able to convey tolerance and pluralism under the local community beliefs. Meanwhile, the development of a healthy public space is needed to accommodate a harmonious dialogue between ethnic and racial groups. Then, a superstructure network has to be set so that people from different ethnicities or races can articulate a common agenda fairly and equally.

In the initial part, humor features and characteristics as a discourse form would be presented. In the next part, ethnic humor forms and structures in Indonesia would be elaborated. Furthermore, this study would be ended by explaining ethnic humor use to increase students' multicultural awareness.

## 2 Research Methods

This study was a systemic literature review. The research stages follow the theory conceived by Snyder [3], namely design, literature provision, analysis, and presentation. In the first stage, the researchers developed a design according to the research purposes. In the second stage, the researchers provided 20 relevant articles on the study topic from two journal indexing databases for literature review purposes. In the third stage, the researchers analyzed the data by investigating the correlation between acquired resources. In the final stage, the researchers presented the conclusion

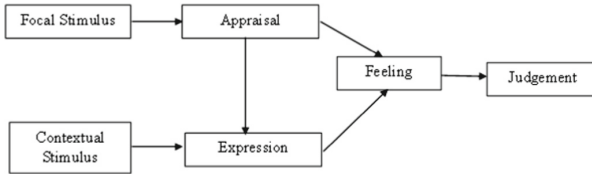
## 3 Results and Discussion

### 3.1 Humor as Discourse: Its Features and Characteristics

Based on the three developing humor theories, namely relief theory, incongruity theory, and dan superiority theory. A communicator can exemplify his position (as either an insider or outsider) and establish his credibility through humor. Then, the clarification function is related to humor's capability to express certain ideas in a memorable way. The reinforcement function embeds humor to enforce norms carefully by criticizing unfavorable situations. Then, the differentiation function is related to its use to contrast oneself with the opponent, his view with the opponent's view, and his own social group with other social groups.

These various functions of humor appear to be related to humor's grammatical and cognitive characteristics. Ford & Ferguson [4] demonstrate that humor has a particular marker (clue) that makes its humorous nature recognizable to the audience. The marker can be grammatical but can also be implied. The statement that humor has linguistic features is also reinforced by the findings of Mihalcea & Pulman [5] pointing out the existence of five semantic markers of humor: human-centric vocabulary, negation, negative orientation, professional communities, and human "weakness".

When recognizing the marker, those enjoying humor can either reject or accept it. If they refuse, they take the attitude of disobeying the terms offered to enjoy humor so that they do not enjoy it. On the other hand, if they accept it, they agree on a set



**Graph 1.** The cognitive model of humor processing by H. Leventhal and M. A. Safer [6]

of rules that allow them to enjoy the humor. If they agree, the special marker will activate a non-serious mode of thinking, allowing the facts in humorous discourse not to be understood critically as in the serious thinking mode. In this mode of thinking, irrelevant, incongruent, and even absurd things are considered reasonable.

The shifting from serious mode to non-serious humorous mode shows that humor is processed cognitively through a distinctive process from other serious forms of discourse. According to Suls [6] many models are needed to explain the cognitive process of humor appreciation due to its complex nature. Humor cognitive processing does not only use cognitive properties but also involves emotional properties. This is why the Incongruity-Resolution Model is considered unable to fully describe humor processing, which can be even more complicated since humor also involves subconscious experiences [7] (Graph 1).

The preceding model exemplifies that humor does not only incorporate personal stimulus but also gets influenced by contextual stimulus from the surroundings. Humor stimulus produces subjective judgement about its comicality. However, the stimulus through subjective way cannot stand alone. There are two distinctive ways, even though correlated, that make humor can bring forth judgment. There is a formed expression of contextual stimulus. Both create certain feelings that eventually engender judgment triggering laughter.

This unique processing equips humor with an exceptional capability to demonstrate certain persuasive messages. According to Lyttle [8], humor has four communicative advantages: it can create positive feelings, escalate liking for sources, hinder serious processing by preventing the birth of counterarguments, and work up trust in sources. These four advantages bring humor to be widely used in various fields, ranging from education, marketing, and politics.

### 3.2 Ethnic Humor in Indonesia: Discovering Diversity

Ethnic humor is seen as possessing two opposite social impacts. Internally, ethnic humor has a constructive function since it can intensify internal solidarity. In this context, humor benefits bonding by emphasizing the group's equality of fate, knowledge, and views. But on the other hand, ethnic humor is also regarded as potentially destructive because it can build social distance with outside groups. Its destructive effect occurs as humor produces and perpetuates stereotypes, breeds prejudice, and excludes certain groups.

Folklore experts promote a more neutral perspective on ethnic humor. They explore that humor can have either constructive or destructive functions depending on its use in a particular social space. However, apart from that, humor describes how certain social

groups face various life problems. Humor is also a tool functioning esoteric and exoteric. Esoteric humor can be utilized to see how one group thinks about itself and how others think about them.

Language distortion humor is formed by utilizing the variety of regional languages in Indonesia. These languages often have a lexicon that looks the same but has different meanings. A funny situation occurs when two users from different ethnic backgrounds use the same word but have different meanings. The script for language distortion can be seen in the following examples of humor 1 and 2.

### 3.2.1 Humor 1

A Madurese man entered the emergency room because his stomach hurt. He screamed in pain. For the sake of the initial diagnosis, the doctor tried to ask the family who accompanied him.

“Tell me, Sir, how can this happen? How come he feels that massive pain?”

The family member answered, “This must be due to eating ra diator (irregular eating habits).”

The doctor was definitely surprised. There was no way someone could eat a radiator.

Humor 1 uses language distortion of the Madurese dialect, which is considerably different from standard Indonesian. The patient’s family tries to explain that the patient is sick due to his irregular eating habits (in Madurese: ora diator). However, since the clause is said in Madurese dialect, ora diator sounds like “radiator”.

### 3.2.2 Humor 2

An Ambonese ate something at a Papuan stall. After eating, he asked, “What kind of vegetable is this, Pa’ce? It’s incredibly delicious!”

The merchant replied, “It is bamboo vegetable (sayur bambu).” (He means bamboo shoot)

He ate there on the next day and asked again, “Pa’ce, so what kind of vegetable is this? It is also tasteful.”

The merchant answered, “Ow, it is nail vegetable (sayur paku).” (He means fern)

The Ambonese came out shaking his head and said, “It’s done, perfect. Maybe tomorrow, I will defecate out a complete fence.”

Humor 2 points out differences in semantic perceptions of vegetable names due to cultural differences. In a multicultural society in Indonesia, the same object can be referred to using different words. These distinctive terms can lead to ridiculous misunderstandings.

Humor with a stupid script is usually created by making characters from certain tribes who show stupid behavior. In Indonesia, the Madurese and Ambonese are often the “targets” of this type of humor. Humor 3 below demonstrates the use of the script. Humor with a stupid script is usually created by making characters from certain tribes who show stupid behavior. In Indonesia, the Madurese and Ambonese are often the “targets” of this type of humor, as shown in the following humor 3.

### 3.2.3 Humor 3

On his visit to Madura, Mr. Habibie was amazed by the height of the flag flown by the people there.

Pak Habibie : “Wah .. ini tiang bendera tinggi sekali berapa tingginya ini Pak?”

Mr. Habibie: “Wow, this flagpole is very high. How tall is this, Sir?”

Madurese: “Yes, Sir! I do not really know, but I can measure it.”

The Madurese man then climbed the pole with the measuring tool until the flagpole bounced and almost broke.

Mr. Habibie was once again amazed and said: “Why did you climb the pole instead of just taking it off to be measured?”

Madurese: “We would only be measuring the length if the pole was put down, Sir. But, if I climb it up, then we can just measure the height.”

Mr. Habibie smiled wryly and left.

Humor with a miserly script also uses certain tribal stereotypes as a joke. Ethnic Chinese and Arabs are often targeted because they are represented as stingy figures. Meanwhile, the Jew is often stereotyped as a clever figure.

### 3.2.4 Humor 4

Ateng, a 70-year-old Glodok Chinese, died before the Chinese New Year. He met an angel when his spirit was on the way to the hereafter.

Angel: Teng, you wanna go to heaven or hell, huh?

Ateng: It’s not important whether hell or heaven lah. But I wanna ask, is it hell or heaven having more people inside?

Angel: Many people go to hell nowadays. Why?

Ateng: Cuz I wanna open up a shop there lah.

### 3.2.5 Humor 5

A child asked his father, “Is it true that the Padang people are stingy?”

The father replied, “They eat at Bunda Kanduang’s (literally means ‘biological mother’) stall, but they still have to pay. How come they are not stingy?”

Humor 4 is written in the script of greed and stinginess. Ethnic Chinese are stereotyped as love doing business. So great is their love for the business world that they keep thinking about business when they die. Meanwhile, humor 5 demonstrates the penurious nature of the Minang tribe. The ambiguity of the word “Bunda Kanduang”, which has a double meaning, namely the name of a restaurant and “biological mother”, is used to describe this trait. The following ethnic humor script is cunning-based humor that often puts ethnic Madurese and Jews as the targets.

### 3.2.6 Humor 6

An internal auditor for a manufacturing company was concerned about anomalies in inventory quantities in the warehouse. He thought someone might have stolen things, but he couldn’t prove it.

He fully paid attention to a vibrant officer who drove his truck out of the factory daily, with a tub covered by a tarp.

Over time, the auditor stopped the driver, asked him to take off the tarp, and then checked the loads. On every occasion, there was only a piece of metal that the driver said was only for the tub weight, and he would bring it back the following day.

Three times the auditor pushed him to open the tarp and unload the metal piece directly before his eyes, still prejudiced that there was stolen stuff hidden.

But, there was nothing. He never found any.

After a few months, the auditor was offered a better job in another place and eventually resigned. Several weeks later, he drank at a café when the ex-investigated driver entered the same place.

On impulse, the auditor approached him and said, “Listen, I’ve left the company, I’m not interested in taking it any further. And I’m not going to stop you, but I’m just curious. What did you steal?”

Finally, the driver replied, “The trap.”

However, Raskin [9] mentions various other forms of ethnic humor scripts. One of the most popular forms of the script is the inter-tribal comparison, as shown in the following humor.

### 3.2.7 Humor 7

A man from Ambon met with someone from Palembang, a merchant from Medan, and a lawyer sitting beside him. They were taking the train together.

The Ambonese man took out one banana, gave each person a bite, then threw the half out the window.

“Why did you throw the half banana?” asked the merchant from Medan.

“In my region, Ambon, banana is very much everywhere. So, it won’t run out no matter how much we eat,” said the Ambonese.

A few times later, the Palembang man shared duku fruit to everyone. He himself had just finished one and then threw the others out the window.

“Ey, why did you throw the duku out?” said the Ambonese.

“Aa... duku, it is also very much everywhere in my region that we Palembang people have no idea to eat it up,” the Palembang man answered.

The merchant from Medan, who was sitting there, did not speak anymore. Then he suddenly stood up and deftly grabbed the lawyer beside him and threw him out the window. “There are too many lawyers in my place,” he said.

Ethnic humor, as can be seen in the preceding examples, holds in information about various types of ethnicity, characteristics, habits, linguistic characters, and patterns of relations with other ethnic groups in Indonesia. The previous examples only mention a few major ethnic groups, such as Madura, Ambon, Minang, Ambonese, Chinese, and Papuans. However, almost every ethnic group has their own humor concerning themselves or other ethnic groups. Furthermore, as Apte (1985) stated, more in-depth information can be traced through humor, such as the origin of the region, ancestry, traditions, physical characteristics, and even beliefs.

The explicitly-or-implicitly-carried information in humor is a form of precious knowledge for students to acknowledge that there are miscellaneous ethnics with distinctive language characteristics and life paradigms in Indonesia. The next question: is knowledge enough to encourage multicultural awareness? Surely, it is not. In the next part, the researcher would describe humor potential as a means of self-reflection instead of knowledge only, which then accommodates students to understand the cultural diversity in Indonesia and have positive traits towards it.

### **3.3 Laughing Comicality: Accepting Diversity**

#### **3.3.1 Joy creates a Positive Learning Atmosphere**

Humor use accuracy can be measured using two criteria: the suitability of the type of humor and the teacher's ability to apply it. The exact humor has a positive impact on students' perceptions of the characteristics of the lesson, motivation, and attitudes. On the other hand, inappropriate humor tends to reduce students' interest.

Choosing the right humor and delivering it attentively are challenges for teachers or parents. However, the positive feelings that might be created through humor make students more ready to receive messages from teachers. They can be knowledge, feelings or emotions, or instructions. As Meyer [10] argues, affective messages regarding emotion and feeling can be executed through humor.

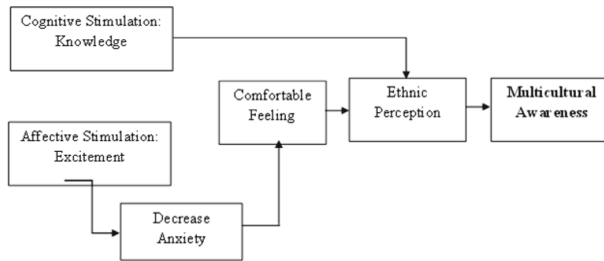
#### **3.3.2 Comfortable with Cultural Differences**

Ethnic humor potentially flourishes multicultural awareness as it encourages students to be familiar and comfortable with differences. Findings by Borgella et al. Anxiety arises for the majority ethnic group because they are worried that they will display a discriminatory attitude, a generally considered unfavorable trait. Members of the majority group must suppress stereotyped knowledge that may have been stored and believed. Meanwhile, the anxiety of minorities emerges because they feel annoyed by multiple stereotypes. Also, they experience attributional ambiguity as they must manage two identities within themselves: 1) identity under themselves or their group and 2) identity according to their outer group.

The anxiety makes people from different ethnic background avoid interaction. The cost of cognitive and psychological matters is too huge to pay. Thus, they tend to decide avoiding the interaction. For this reason, Borgella et al. Rahardjo et al. Although the percentage of reluctance to marry people of different ethnicities is relatively small, this finding clearly exemplifies that social prejudices in the form of avoidance and discrimination still exist, in this case, namely, rejecting individuals from different ethnic groups.

People who have experience associating with other ethnic groups in the past tend to have more positive attitudes. This is because the entire human experience in the past can form a stock of knowledge that becomes a habit which can influence his behavior in the present and the future.

In this context, ethnic humor plays an essential role in giving a socialization simulation with other ethnics. Students can reveal and understand the natures and identities of



**Graph 2.** The process of ethnic humor use to instill multicultural awareness

other ethnics represented in humor. Although only a simulation. However, it should be noted that different types of humor can produce dissimilar perceptions and basic values. Self-disparagement humor tends to change the perception of the enjoyers of the speaker. Meanwhile, other-disparagement humor will change their perception of the target group.

### 3.3.3 Bisa karena biasa ‘PRACTICES make perfect’

Indonesian proverb *Bisa karena biasa* ‘practices make perfect’ can set out a model of using humor in establishing students’ multicultural awareness. The proverb implies that someone can master certain abilities through habituation. Behavioristically, this implies academic truth because a person’s behavior is shaped by his habits, among others. If multicultural awareness is placed as an ability, humor is the stimulation granting to be formed.

The initial role of ethnic humor in triggering students’ multicultural awareness is by providing cognitive stimulus, which can be in the form of knowledge of the existence, nature, characteristics, and world paradigms of other ethnics. Simultaneously, since humor can give a pleasing experience, ethnic humor is also able to grant positive affection as a stimulus. Both stimuli integrate, forming an ethnic perception.

The simulative experience of associating and interacting with different ethnicities then forms a familiar feeling. This feeling can reduce anxiety, allowing security and comfort amidst other ethnicities. The accumulation of knowledge and feeling of comfort eventually form multicultural awareness. Students can feel that other ethnics are part of their social environment because they are used to hanging out and interacting with them. The process can be schematized in the following Graph 2.

This process engenders ethnic humor, as said by Wijana [11], and is potentially beneficial to build multicultural awareness. People can understand each other’s characteristics, strengths, and weaknesses through humor. By understanding both aspects of other ethnic groups, it is expected that respect for differences and tolerance will grow. In the long term, humor can be an instrument to develop a harmonious Indonesia—despite its diversity. However, humor requires environmental support from teachers, parents, and the community so that the multicultural spirit it carries is relevant to students’ lives.



## 4 Conclusion

Behind the tend-to-be-ambiguous ethnic humor feature, there is an enormous and valuable potential to instill students' multicultural awareness. The potential can be identified by looking at ethnic humor characteristics which have information on cultural diversity and pleasing nature as well. Humor cognitive property, namely knowledge, also facilitates students to understand the existence, characteristics, and perspectives of other ethnics. Meanwhile, humor's emotional property makes students able to behave more appreciatively toward other ethnics. Reading ethnic humor can grant students a simulative experience that makes them comfortable with cultural differences. This feeling of comfort gives birth to positive traits that allow the growth and maintenance of multicultural awareness.

**Acknowledgments.** This paper is part of the author's dissertation research proposal at the Doctoral Program in Humanities Studies, Universitas Gadjah Mada, which is funded by Puslapdik Kemdikbud (Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia) and Indonesia Endowment Fund for Education (Lembaga Pengelola Dana Pendidikan). Thanks to the promoter and co-promoter, Prof. I Dewa Putu Wijana and Dr. Suryo Baskoro who has guided the author in writing this paper.

## REFERENCES

1. I. Siddiq and E. A. Olsen, "Ethnic Conflict In Indonesia: Causes And Recommended Measures," Naval Postgraduate School, 2005.
2. J. Lidah Wetan, M. Legowo, F. Sri Sadewo, and Z. Maliki, "Managing diversity in indonesia the role of local elites in a plural society in religion," *Komunitas*, vol. 11, no. 2, pp. 223–230, 2019.
3. H. Snyder, "Literature review as a research methodology: An overview and guidelines," *J. Bus. Res.*, vol. 104, pp. 333–339, 2019, [Online]. Available: <https://doi.org/10.1016/J.JBUSRES.2019.07.039>.
4. A. M. Hawkins, *Bergerak Menurut Kata Hati: Metoda Baru dalam Menciptakan Tari*. Jakarta: Ford Foundation & MSPi, 2003.
5. R. Mihalcea and S. Pulman, "Characterizing humour: An exploration of features in humorous texts," in *Computational Linguistics and Intelligent Text Processing*, 2007, vol. 4394, pp. 337–347, doi: [https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-540-70939-8\\_30/COVER](https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-540-70939-8_30/COVER).
6. J. Suls, "Cognitive processes in humor appreciation," *Handb. Humor Res.*, pp. 39–57, 1983, doi: [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4612-5572-7\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4612-5572-7_3).
7. J. Newirth and A.B.P.P., "Jokes and their relation to the unconscious: Humor as a fundamental emotional experience," *Psychoanal. Dialogues*, vol. 16, no. 5, pp. 557–571, 2006, doi: [https://doi.org/10.2513/s10481885pd1605\\_6](https://doi.org/10.2513/s10481885pd1605_6).
8. J. Lyttle, "The effectiveness of humor in persuasion: The case of business ethics training.," *J. Gen. Psychol.*, vol. 128, no. 2, pp. 206–216, 2010, [Online]. Available: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221300109598908>.
9. V. Raskin, "Semantic Mechanisms of Humor," *Semant. Mech. Humor*, 1984, doi: <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-009-6472-3>.

10. J. C. Meyer, "Humor as a double-edged sword: Four functions of humor in communication," *Commun. Theory*, vol. 10, no. 3, pp. 310–331, 2000, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2000.tb00194.x>.
11. I. D. P. Wijana, "On Ethnic Jokes in Indonesia," *J. Lang. Lit.*, vol. 15, no. 2, pp. 103–110, 2015.

**Open Access** This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

