

# From theory to practice: an empirical investigation of the Mutual Vulnerability Theory of laughter using Trevor Noah's comedy

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## Abstract

*This study constitutes the first systematic investigation of the Mutual Vulnerability Theory (MVT) of laughter, through an exploratory examination of audience responses in Trevor Noah's 2013 stand-up comedy segment "It Makes No Sense". While classical humour theories—incongruity (triggering laughter through resolution of cognitive contradictions), superiority (eliciting laughter via perceived dominance over others' misfortunes), and relief (producing laughter as tension release from repressed emotions)—have dominated scholarly discourse for centuries, the MVT presents a paradigm that conceptualises laughter as a communicative mechanism for negotiating social status hierarchies through the recognition and articulation of shared human vulnerabilities. The investigation examines three primary objectives: to evaluate the MVT's explanatory capacity in accounting for observable laughter patterns within this specific comedic context; to assess the theoretical coherence and analytical utility of its vulnerability taxonomy; and to identify conceptual limitations requiring theoretical refinement. Employing systematic video analysis methodology, all 57 instances of audience laughter were documented and categorised according to MVT principles, with each episode analysed for antecedent vulnerability references across the framework's four domains—physical, emotional, cognitive, and social areas. The empirical findings demonstrate that every documented laughter instance was preceded by the identification of at least one vulnerability type. This empirical examination provides supporting evidence for the MVT's explanatory capacity within this specific context while simultaneously illuminating theoretical tensions, particularly concerning the theory's conceptualisation of vulnerability and its epistemological alignment with contemporary disability studies scholarship.*

*Keywords: humour, laughter, Trevor Noah, Mutual Vulnerability Theory, stand-up comedy.*

## 1. Introduction

The phenomenon of laughter has captivated scholarly inquiry across millennia, generating diverse analytical frameworks that attempt to explain its underlying mechanisms and social

functions. Philosophers from Hannah Arendt to Martin Heidegger have conceptualised laughter as a moral indicator—an instinctive reaction to the unethical or inauthentic—contending that laughter serves as a mechanism through which individuals may challenge established ideologies and foster independent critical thinking (Walker, 2021). Contemporary scholars have alternatively positioned laughter as a social signal that coordinates interpersonal interactions and promotes group affiliation (Davila-Ross et al., 2011) or as a communicative device that conveys emotional states, moods, and intentions (Curran et al., 2018). Physiological approaches have characterised laughter as an innate response involving the coordinated contraction of facial, thoracic, and abdominal musculature, accompanied by distinctive vocal inflections, triggered by specific internal or external stimuli ranging from physical tickling to cognitive humour processing (Yim, 2016; Wilson-Barlow, 2024).

Before examining the theoretical foundations of laughter research, it is essential to establish a distinction that has significant implications for this investigation: the difference between theories of humour and theories of laughter. While these terms are frequently used interchangeably in scholarly discourse, they represent distinct but related phenomena that require analytical differentiation. Humour encompasses the broader cognitive and social processes involved in the creation, perception, and appreciation of amusing content, regardless of whether it produces a vocal response (Attardo, 2001). Laughter, by contrast, constitutes a specific physiological and communicative behaviour that may or may not correspond to humour appreciation (Browdy, 2021). This distinction proves particularly significant when examining certain forms of humorous content that may not elicit laughter responses, such as aggressive or disaffiliative humour directed at targets who experience it as hostile rather than amusing (Dyrel, 2013). Conversely, laughter can occur in response to non-humorous stimuli, including tickling, nervousness, social discomfort, or as a performative social signal independent of genuine humour appreciation (Scott et al., 2014). However, this investigation focuses specifically on laughter as a communicative phenomenon, examining how the MVT accounts for the vocal expression itself rather than the broader cognitive processes of humour comprehension.

The theoretical landscape of humour research has been traditionally dominated by three foundational frameworks. The superiority theory, tracing its intellectual genealogy to Plato, Aristotle, and Thomas Hobbes, proposes that laughter constitutes a response to others' misfortunes or shortcomings, thereby affirming the laugher's ego and social status (Morreall, 1983, pp. 4-5). The incongruity theory, associated with Immanuel Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer, and Henri Bergson, suggests that laughter arises from the physiological resolution of linguistic or conceptual ambiguities, logical impossibilities, or contradictions—specifically, the substitution of expected events or remarks with unexpected alternatives (Kant, 1952, p. 199). The relief theory, proposed by Herbert Spencer and developed by Sigmund Freud, contends that laughter serves as a mechanism for relieving psychological and physiological tension resulting from repressed emotions and desires (Freud, 1905, p. 1735; Spencer, 1860, p. 104).

Contemporary theoretical developments have largely represented variations, extensions, or syntheses of these classical frameworks. For instance, the benign violation theory suggests that humour arises when phenomena appear simultaneously threatening (violating) and harmless (benign), thus integrating elements of incongruity and superiority theories (McGraw & Warren, 2010, p. 1142). Further, the social identity theory of humour builds upon superiority theory by arguing that humour functions to establish in-group belonging and out-group exclusion, with laughter serving to affirm group membership while simultaneously marginalising perceived outsiders (Billig, 2005, pp. 23, 176). Additionally, play theories of humour have gained increasing recognition within contemporary scholarship, positioning laughter as a sophisticated play signal that facilitates social bonding and communicates benign rather than hostile intentions (Boyd, 2009; Morreall, 2009). This theoretical approach conceptualises humorous performances as manifestations of playful creativity that invoke enjoyment and mirth appreciation in

audiences, with laughter functioning as a social signal indicating non-serious, cooperative interaction. Morreall's conception of "humour as cognitive play" (2009) emphasises that humour involves a playful disengagement from practical concerns, enabling individuals to manipulate thoughts, concepts, and language for enjoyment rather than utilitarian purposes.

Despite this theoretical heritage, laughter research faces a persistent challenge: the limited empirical validation for many theories of laughter, including the MVT, which has primarily been conceptual rather than tested against observable responses. This research addresses this gap by conducting an initial empirical case study examination of the MVT through an analysis of audience laughter responses in Trevor Noah's stand-up comedy segment "It Makes No Sense" from his 2013 special *African American*. The research aim is threefold: (1) to assess the MVT's explanatory power in accounting for observable laughter patterns in within this specific comedic context (2) to evaluate the theoretical coherence and empirical applicability of the MVT's vulnerability taxonomy; and (3) to identify theoretical limitations and areas requiring conceptual refinement within the MVT framework. This investigation represents a methodological contribution to laughter studies by providing empirical testing of theoretical propositions regarding audience laughter responses in a stand-up comedy performance.

Stand-up comedy represents an advantageous analytical medium for laughter theory examination within this specific context due to several methodological considerations. This performance context provides an environment where audience laughter—spontaneous, observable, and quantifiable—can be systematically documented without the artificial constraints of laboratory settings that compromise ecological validity. Also, professional comedians operating within this context must consistently elicit laughter from diverse audiences, creating conditions where theoretical predictions can be tested against observable behavioural outcomes. Further, the controlled nature of comedy venues enables clear identification and measurement of audience reactions, while the temporal sequencing of comedic content and responses facilitates the establishment of relationships between humour stimuli and laughter outcomes. Additionally, the availability of recorded performances enables replication and verification by independent researchers. However, it is important to acknowledge that limiting research to this specific context reduces the validity of claims concerning laughter and humour in general, as the situational context fundamentally affects interaction patterns and audience behaviour.

Trevor Noah's "It Makes No Sense" segment was strategically selected for analysis based on several factors that optimise empirical testing of the MVT framework within this specific performance setting. The segment demonstrates exceptional density of vulnerability-related content, with Noah systematically addressing cognitive misunderstandings or confusion and social awkwardness—elements that directly correspond to the MVT's theoretical categories. The routine's focus on language differences and measurement systems provides a controlled thematic environment where specific vulnerability types can be isolated and analysed, enabling examination of the relationship between vulnerability identification and laughter responses. Furthermore, the segment's 8.5-minute duration contains sufficient comedic material to generate meaningful data while remaining manageable for detailed analysis. The high frequency of audience laughter episodes (57 instances) within this timeframe provides empirical data for testing the MVT's core proposition that laughter corresponds to perceived status shifts following the highlighting of vulnerability/vulnerabilities within this specific performance context.

## **2. The Mutual Vulnerability Theory of laughter: A theoretical framework**

The MVT represents a paradigmatic departure from traditional humour theories, conceptualising laughter's function beyond approaches that treat it merely as a response to incongruity, tension

relief, or expressions of superiority. The theory posits that laughter evolved as a form of conscious, non-verbal vocal communication—comparable to crying or moaning—and serves as “a vocal affirmation of mutual vulnerability” (Simon, 2008, p. 46)<sup>1</sup>. This definition positions laughter as a communicative signal serving adaptive purposes in facilitating social cohesion, conflict resolution, and hierarchical negotiations across diverse cultural contexts. In its fundamental communicative function, laughter essentially conveys: “I’d like to remind you that we share some degree of vulnerability” (Simon, 2008, p. 46).

The concept of vulnerability constitutes the theoretical cornerstone of the MVT’s analytical framework and thus requires definitional clarity to support the theory’s explanatory claims. Simon defines vulnerabilities as “traits (physical characteristics, behaviours, or combinations thereof) that make success less probable than normal, but not impossible” (2008, p. 57). This theoretical conceptualization diverges from conventional dictionary definitions, which typically emphasize vulnerability as exposure to being attacked, harmed, or hurt (Cambridge Dictionary, 2025). However, in human social contexts, such harm extends far beyond physical means to encompass psychological, social, and reputational damage that can ultimately impact evolutionary fitness. Non-physical forms of harm—including insults, false accusations, emotional manipulation, deception, and social ostracism—while not causing immediate physical injury, can result in profound consequences such as reduced social status, diminished reproductive opportunities, loss of resources, and exclusion from cooperative networks essential for human survival and success. Simon’s definition thus establishes a critical continuum distinguishing vulnerability from both normality and deficiency, where deficiencies would render goal achievement highly unlikely or impossible (2020, p. 76). This distinction proves essential for understanding why certain qualities or situations precipitate laughter while others elicit alternative responses such as pity, disgust, or horror.

Simon acknowledges the inherently subjective nature of vulnerability assessment, noting that “vulnerabilities are ‘fuzzy’ properties that aren’t always easily categorised or objectively measured” (2008, p. 69). These subjective and interpretive challenges present ongoing methodological challenges for empirical validation, but do not invalidate the theory. Rather, they represent broader epistemological complexity inherent in humour studies. Simon notes that such vulnerability assessments are shaped by complex interactions among factors including age, sex, educational background, emotional state, religious beliefs, linguistic context, social environment, and group dynamics (2008, pp. 110-112). This subjectivity reflects the nuanced and variable ways in which personal experiences, cultural backgrounds, and social positions inform vulnerability perception in specific contexts.

Nevertheless, the MVT provides analytical clarity through a structural taxonomy of vulnerabilities, offering a systematic framework for understanding the multidimensional and intersecting facets of human vulnerability. Although these categories are not mutually exclusive, they collectively encompass core domains of physical, emotional, cognitive, and social existence. Simon conceptualises these vulnerability categories as a hierarchical pyramid with physical vulnerabilities forming the foundation, followed by emotional, cognitive, and social vulnerabilities—each level building upon and interacting with those below (2008, pp. 67-68).

Physical vulnerabilities constitute the most fundamental limitations inherent to human beings as biological organisms, profoundly shaping survival and reproductive prospects. Evolutionary biology reveals that the human body represents not an optimised machine but rather the outcome of evolutionary compromises responding to competing selective pressures. These evolutionary trade-offs manifest as universal physical vulnerabilities—susceptibility to

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<sup>1</sup> The term “mutual,” in the MVT framework, means “held in common” or “shared” (Simon, 2008, p. 70). It refers to shared human susceptibility to various forms of vulnerability rather than requiring vulnerability in both parties. In stand-up comedy contexts, “we” typically encompasses the comedian, audience, and referenced individuals/groups as members of a shared human community experiencing common vulnerabilities.

injury, illness, fatigue, ageing, and mortality (Simon, 2008, p. 59). The ubiquity of such limitations across the human species helps explain why physical comedy, which highlights these frailties, represents one of the most universally accessible forms of humour across cultures.

Emotional vulnerabilities pertain to inherent limitations in managing motivational and affective systems. These vulnerabilities manifest in disproportionate or maladaptive emotional responses, including irrational fears, overwhelming attractions, or inappropriate anger displays (Simon, 2008, pp. 61-62). Simon characterises these as “emotional short-circuits, overplays, and misapplications that depict an inherently vulnerable control system” (2008, p. 62). When audiences laugh at someone startled by harmless noise or displaying excessive excitement over trivial success, they acknowledge collective susceptibility to emotional miscalibration.

Cognitive vulnerabilities encompass mental faculty limitations, including perception, memory, reasoning, and knowledge acquisition deficits. These shortcomings manifest in problem-solving failures, information processing lapses, and judgement or decision-making errors (Simon, 2008, p. 64). Despite evolutionary advantages conferred by human intellect, cognitive systems remain imperfect: individuals frequently misinterpret signals, overlook critical information, draw incorrect conclusions, and make suboptimal choices based on incomplete or misleading data. The enduring appeal of cognitive humour—from wordplay and puns to logical paradoxes and misunderstandings—derives from the universal experience of these mental limitations.

Social vulnerabilities emerge from challenges in navigating interpersonal relationship intricacies and adhering to often-unwritten social conduct rules. These vulnerabilities manifest in difficulties including misreading social cues, inadvertently violating social norms, or failing to sustain appropriate and meaningful relationships (Simon, 2008, p. 67). While social vulnerability structure remains constant across humanity, specific expressions vary considerably, shaped by interactions between biological predispositions and unique cultural environments.

Within this conceptual architecture, status assumes a central and highly nuanced role. Simon articulates status as a multidimensional and dynamic assessment of individual goal-achievement ability across broad life domains (2008, p. 69). Rather than treating status as singular or static, he introduces the “status collage” concept—a metaphor evoking intricate and overlapping social standing layers that individuals occupy within shifting human relationship landscapes (Simon, 2008, p. 70). This “status collage” reflects status’s inherently fluid and context-dependent nature: individuals may simultaneously enjoy considerable authority in professional spheres while occupying subordinate positions within familial or peer contexts. This multidimensionality underscores social life’s complexity, wherein individuals constantly negotiate positions across multiple, intersecting networks—familial, occupational, communal, and beyond.

Central to the MVT is the assertion that status relates inversely to vulnerability. It posits that those with fewer or less significant vulnerabilities generally attain higher status, while those with numerous or substantial vulnerabilities tend to occupy lower social hierarchy positions (Simon, 2008, p. 76). Crucially, the MVT postulates that laughter is triggered by the highlighting of one or more vulnerabilities, whether actual or perceived, which prompt corresponding social standing adjustments, which elicit laughter responses. Laughter thus operates not merely as a spontaneous or emotional reaction but as a sophisticated social signal—one that communicates, negotiates, and sometimes contests status within given social contexts.

Simon advances a nuanced functional taxonomy of laughter grounded in emotional and relational dynamics motivating its expression. Central to his framework is the proposition that laughter serves as a communicative signal — “a vocal affirmation of mutual vulnerability”—prompted whenever the potential laugher consciously perceives status shifts relative to others (2020, p. 76). He identifies four principal scenarios encapsulating laughter’s communicative

roles. Lifting Laughter arises when laughers perceive others' status as diminished, such as when someone experiences minor mishaps or embarrassment (Simon, 2020, p. 77). In these instances, laughter is typically expressed sympathetically "with" the other, signalling solidarity and shared vulnerability, often functioning to comfort or reassure. Lowering Laughter occurs when laughers perceive others' status as increased—perhaps through unexpected success, boastfulness, or social elevation—and respond by laughing "at" the person (Simon, 2020, p. 77). Here, laughter serves to question, challenge, or gently undermine perceived status gains, reaffirming social equilibrium by highlighting vulnerability or inadequacy.

The taxonomy also includes two self-referential forms, Self-Lifting and Self-Lowering Laughter. Self-Lifting Laughter may be prompted in one of two ways: when individuals recognise their own vulnerabilities or shortcomings have become apparent, as when being tickled or making a conspicuous error (Simon, 2020, p. 77) or where someone else's superior achievement or notable asset (e.g. earning a much higher test score, superior jumping ability) reveals their positive shift in status and thus one's own ranking becomes lower relative to what it was originally (J. C. Simon, personal communication, October 23, 2024). In these instances, laughter functions as a dual communicative mechanism, operating simultaneously as both an assertion and an interrogation. It serves to acknowledge the individual's diminished social position while expressing an implicit desire to restore the antecedent relational arrangement. Concurrently, this laughter seeks validation through the elicitation of reciprocal Lifting Laughter from others, thereby soliciting empathetic confirmation of one's predicament and potential rehabilitation within the established social order. Self-Lowering Laughter is expressed when individuals seek to downplay their own abilities, good fortune, or praise—such as after receiving compliments or enjoying unexpected victories (Simon, 2020, p. 77). This laughter form communicates a desire to re-establish mutuality and status parity, reminding others of continued vulnerability and maintaining social harmony.

Having established the theoretical parameters of the MVT and its taxonomical framework for understanding laughter's social functions, the present analysis now turns to an empirical examination of these conceptual propositions through the comedic work of Trevor Noah.

### **3. Trevor Noah's "It Makes No Sense" segment: background and context**

Noah's comedic background provides essential context for understanding the analysed segment's cultural and social dimensions. Born in South Africa during apartheid, Noah developed a comedy style frequently addressing racial dynamics, cultural differences, and language peculiarities (Donian & Holm, 2021, p. 32). His perspective as someone navigating multiple cultural identities provides rich material for exploring vulnerabilities across different contexts, making him an ideal subject for MVT analysis.

The stand-up special *African American* was filmed in New York City as part of Noah's national tour of the same name. At the time, Noah was establishing himself as a comedian in the United States, and the special helped introduce his unique perspective to wider American audiences. The 69-minute show centres on his experiences navigating racial dynamics as an outsider and exploring differences between being 'Black' in South Africa and 'African American' in the US. Noah relies on his signature comedic arsenal—impersonations, observational humour, stereotypes, and distinctive accents—all delivered in his characteristic conversational and enigmatic manner.

In the specific segment analysed, titled "It Makes No Sense", Noah humorously contrasts pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammatical differences between South African English and American English, while also examining the complexity of the American imperial measurement system compared to the metric system. This material provides an ideal testing ground for the

MVT, as it involves multiple vulnerability types—cognitive (language confusion), social (cultural misunderstanding), and cultural (system complexity)—while simultaneously positioning Noah as both insider and outsider to American cultural norms.

## **4. Methodology**

The analysis employed a systematic approach designed to capture and categorise all observable laughter responses according to MVT principles. The video analysis commenced at timestamp 0:00 and continued until the routine's conclusion at 8:30. During this process, I documented the timestamp and approximate duration of each audience laughter bout, excluding instances where only limited audience members participated. In cases where laughter was accompanied or followed by applause, I acknowledged uncertainty regarding precise bout duration. To ensure accuracy, I replayed individual laughter segments multiple times to establish definitive start and end timestamps.

Subsequently, I examined dialogue preceding each laughter bout to identify references to traits reasonably classified as vulnerabilities or notable assets that might illuminate others' vulnerabilities. This assessment involved determining whether Noah, referenced individuals or groups, or audience members experienced status shifts. It is important to note that status shifts experienced by audience members cannot be directly observed but must be inferred from their laughter responses and the content of Noah's material. Each identified trait was documented with its corresponding category—physical, emotional, cognitive, or social—while new terms were added as they emerged. For each laughter bout, I recorded up to three vulnerability or asset types and provided brief descriptions of dialogue bringing these traits to the audience's attention. Upon segment completion, I conducted a thorough record review to identify any laughter bouts not correlating with status shifts.

This methodological framework provides initial exploratory testing of the MVT's central theoretical proposition that laughter responses correlate with the identification of vulnerabilities that prompt perceived status shifts between individuals. The detailed documentation allows for replication and verification of findings while providing empirical data for assessing the theory's explanatory power in naturalistic stand-up environments.

However, several methodological considerations must be acknowledged regarding the use of recorded stand-up comedy performances as empirical data. First, the analyzed material represents an edited performance that may not capture the full range of audience responses present during the live recording, potentially affecting the completeness of laughter data. Second, comedy special audiences constitute a self-selected population who have actively chosen to attend or view the performance, likely predisposing them toward positive reception and laughter responses compared to more diverse or randomly selected audiences. Third, the unique energy and social dynamics of live recordings create a collective atmosphere that may amplify laughter responses through social contagion effects, potentially inflating the apparent strength of vulnerability-laughter correlations. These factors do not invalidate the theoretical insights generated through this analysis but rather suggest that findings should be interpreted within the context of these methodological constraints and that future empirical investigations might benefit from examining diverse performance contexts and audience compositions.

## **5. Results**

Throughout the 8:30 routine, I documented a total of 57 instances of audience laughter, each of which was preceded by the identification of at least one vulnerability. Among these 57 bouts, I observed that 19 instances emphasised a single vulnerability or asset, 18 instances highlighted

two, and 20 instances featured three vulnerabilities or assets, resulting in a total of 115 identified traits (calculated as follows:  $[19 \times 1] + [18 \times 2] + [20 \times 3]$ ). This total encompassed 30 distinct types of vulnerabilities and two types of assets, as detailed in Table 1 below. Note, that this table presents the most frequent vulnerability types observed in the analysis; less frequent types have been omitted for brevity.

Table 1. Vulnerabilities (assets) identified in Noah's comedy routine

Category	Types/Description	Count
<b>Physical</b>	Poor Strength/Coordination/Balance	2
	Sensory Malfunction/Assault	2
	Interpersonal Altercation (Physical)	1
	Gender Confusion/Nonconformity	3
<b>Emotional</b>	Anxiety/Insecurity/Self Doubt	2
	Frustration/Annoyance/Disappointment	4
	Pride/Inflated Ego/Vanity	1
	Disgust/Hatred	1
<b>Cognitive</b>	Ignorance	8
	Misinformed	2
	Misperception/Misapprehension	15
	Delusion/Self Deception	1
	Disjunction/Nonsensical	6
	Poor Planning	1
	Communication Failure/Breakdown	27
	Misread Threat/Gullibility	4
	Inadequate Problem Solving/Stupidity	7
	Confusion/Uncertainty/Indecision	6
	(Exceptional Problem Solving; <i>Asset</i> )	1
	(Exceptional Cleverness; <i>Asset</i> )	3
<b>Social</b>	Competing Objectives	1
	Argument/Disagreement	1
	Poor Interpersonal Coordination	2
	Deception	1
	Taboo Subject/Activity	4
	Negative Image (Deserved)	1
	Mimicked/Mimed/Impersonated	1
	Unequal Exchange/Contribution	1
	Immoral/Lawless Behaviour	1
	Insensitivity Toward Others/Gloating	3
	In Failing Relationship/Rejected/Divorced	1
	Neg. Image/Appear. Undeserved	1
	<b>Total</b>	<b>115</b>

## **6. Analysis**

The analysis examines how Noah's comedy routine navigates various vulnerabilities and how these relate to audience laughter according to the MVT principles. I present this analysis chronologically to preserve the narrative flow and transitions of Noah's performance, which is essential for understanding how he builds comedic momentum through interconnected jokes.

### **6.1. Topic 1: Excessive heat**

At the beginning of his routine, Noah establishes a relatable vulnerability by describing his experience with Atlanta's extreme heat:

I just got back from Atlanta. It was 107 degrees Fahrenheit. The hottest weather. The worst thing is everybody comes up to me and they go, 'Well you must be used to this being from Africa.' And I'm like 'no'... *[Time stamp 0:12; audience laughs]* I'm not. I'm from Africa but that shit is hot *[0:15, laughter]*. Just...no! *[He shakes his head emphatically, and his brow furrows in exasperation]*.

This opening sequence highlights two key vulnerabilities: Noah's physical sensitivity to extreme heat and the misperception of his American interlocutors, who incorrectly assume all of Africa have similar climate conditions (a cognitive vulnerability). The audience's laughter appears to function as "lifting laughter" that acknowledges these shared vulnerabilities while restoring the status relationship between Noah, his audience, and the referenced interlocutor. Noah builds on this theme by imagining a scenario of physical collapse:

I was scared to go jogging because I thought if I ran out into the street and fainted, wouldn't the local news love that? *[Noah pauses, his eyes widening as he imagines the scenario playing out]*. I'd be running and fall down in the heat *[He mimes the action, his body crumpling dramatically as he acts out the imagined collapse]*. They would have their vans reporting live *[He sweeps his arm out wide, as if framing the scene for a news camera]*. They would be standing there going, 'It is so hot in Atlanta even Africans are fainting.' *[0:33, laughter; Noah's voice rises in pitch, his eyes widening with exaggerated disbelief as he delivers the punchline. The audience bursts into another round of hearty laughter with applause]*.

Here, Noah amplifies his vulnerability through an imagined physical collapse (poor strength/stamina) and anxiety about how media might report it, further emphasising the cross-cultural misperception. The audience's enthusiastic response suggests they recognise and appreciate this acknowledgement of shared vulnerability—the human susceptibility to environmental conditions and public embarrassment.

### **6.2. Topic 2: Partners in comedy (meta-humour)**

Noah smoothly transitions to a meta-commentary on the comedy performance itself, using a sexual analogy to illustrate the comedian-audience relationship:

So, I am enjoying this. Really happy to be here. This is going to be good for us...I hope. I say 'I hope' because I never know with stand-up comedy. It's an awkward experience. I find I am always nervous. I find comedy is very similar to sex for me. Well, it's exactly like sex if you think about it. Me, the comedian, playing the role of the man, and you the audience, the role of the woman *[1:02; laughter]*. Because it's my job to satisfy you *[1:06; laughter]*...and you just have to sit there. *[1:10; laughter accompanied by applause and whistling]*.

This sequence demonstrates a complex interplay of vulnerabilities and assets. Noah initially displays emotional vulnerability (nervousness, uncertainty) about the performance, a relatable feeling for anyone who has spoken publicly. He then demonstrates a cognitive asset through his clever analogy comparing comedy to sexual intimacy. This comparison itself highlights social vulnerabilities (taboo subject matter, potential for interpersonal miscoordination). The audience's increasingly enthusiastic response suggests both recognition of the aptness of the analogy (appreciating Noah's cognitive asset) and acknowledgement of the shared vulnerability inherent in the performer-audience relationship. It is important to note that the creativity of the metaphor itself may evoke appreciation that transcends vulnerability recognition. Noah extends this metaphor:

And then just like sex, [his voice drops to a conspiratorial tone] my success or failure will somehow be determined by how much noise you make during my performance [1:26; laughter], which makes it a one-sided affair, I feel, you know. Yeah, I don't know, maybe you're the quiet type [1:34; audience laughs as Noah brings his hand up to his mouth, stifling a series of feigned giggles as he mimes an imagined reticent audience member.]

This continuation reinforces the vulnerabilities established earlier while adding a new social vulnerability—the unequal power dynamic and potential for misinterpretation in intimate relationships. The audience's laughter here appears to serve as “self-lifting laughter” as they recognise their own participation in this dynamic.

### **6.3. Topic 3: U.S. English vs “correct” English**

Noah then transitions to linguistic differences, highlighting cognitive vulnerabilities related to cross-cultural communication:

I've been in America for a few months now and I'm, I'm really just thrown by the place. It's not what I expected at all...different from the brochures and the pamphlets. [2:11; mild laughter] There's many assumptions I had about America before I came here and I have come to learn that those are wrong. For one, I just assumed people speak English here. [2:19; laughter] Wrong. It's far from it. [2:23; mild laughter] You know, it's not so much the language so much as the pronunciation of words that throws me off. It's just what Americans have done with the language. You guys have just...wow. You've just done something...you put 22's on the English language [2:34; mild laughter]. You just have rims that say 'pimp my language' [2:37; laughter]. That's what you've gone with, ya know.

This segment highlights cognitive vulnerabilities (misperception, communication breakdown) and social vulnerabilities (poor interpersonal coordination) that arise from cross-cultural linguistic differences. Noah's comedic strategy involves a deliberate status negotiation: he initially presents himself as misinformed about American English usage, temporarily lowering his status, before repositioning himself as the arbiter of “correct” English, thereby elevating his position relative to his American audience. The audience's laughter reflects recognition of these complex dynamics and shared cross-cultural vulnerabilities.

Throughout this extended section (which continues for approximately 4.5 minutes), Noah explores various linguistic misunderstandings, highlighting universal cognitive and social challenges that transcend cultural boundaries. The vulnerabilities emphasised primarily reflect cognitive limitations (misperceptions, communication failures) and social limitations (poor coordination, relationship breakdowns)—challenges that resonate with diverse audience members.

#### **6.4. Topic 4: The Ku Klux Klan and spelling of “clan”**

In the final segment, Noah shifts to a more politically charged topic—the Ku Klux Klan:

I stumbled on an organisation known as the Ku Klux Klan [...] worst magic show ever [...] guy gave me a pamphlet saying come meet the grand wizard [...] Grand wizard the grand wizard [...] didn't do one trick not one trick [...] I mean I noticed a few black people disappear but I mean that's not magic [...] no that's just Reaganomics; I wasn't impressed by that [...] like where's the magic I sat there forever [...] these guys running around in their sheets [...] Hee Haa! [...] the KKK as they are affectionately known [...] has nobody bothered to tell them ever that you do not spell clan with a K [...] Nobody stopped, even in America clan is spelled with a C.

This segment addresses multiple vulnerability types—cognitive (ignorance, misperception), social (immorality), and physical (threat of violence)—through Noah's critique of the Klan. By positioning Klan members as ignorant of proper spelling and the historical origins of their name, Noah creates a status reduction for the group while simultaneously acknowledging his own physical vulnerability as a Black man discussing a violent racist organisation. The audience's response illustrates the complexity of laughter categorisation within the MVT framework, as it appears to represent a simultaneous occurrence of both “lowering laughter” directed at the Klan and “lifting laughter” expressing solidarity with Noah's vulnerable position. This dual response raises important theoretical questions about how the MVT accounts for mixed or simultaneous forms of laughter, where audiences may be responding to multiple vulnerability dynamics operating concurrently within a single comedic moment. The challenge of definitively categorising such complex laughter episodes highlights potential limitations in the theory's taxonomic framework when applied to nuanced social situations involving intersecting power relations and multiple vulnerability types.

Having completed this systematic empirical examination of the MVT through the performance analysis of Noah's comedy, we now proceed to a comprehensive discussion of these findings and their theoretical implications. This discussion will critically evaluate the MVT's explanatory power in accounting for observed laughter patterns, assess the framework's theoretical coherence and analytical utility, and examine potential limitations that may constrain its broader applicability. Furthermore, we will consider how these empirical results contribute to advancing scholarly understanding of laughter's complex role as both a communicative mechanism and a social negotiation tool while identifying areas where the MVT requires theoretical refinement to achieve greater integration with contemporary academic discourse in humour studies and related disciplines.

## **7. Discussion**

The MVT represents a theoretical contribution to humour studies through its comprehensive framework for understanding laughter's diverse manifestations within specific contexts such as stand-up comedy. This approach addresses limitations in the field where fragmented theoretical perspectives have impeded the development of unified understanding. Unlike traditional approaches focusing on isolated aspects of laughter—such as cognitive processing in incongruity theory, physiological release in relief theory, or social dominance in superiority theory—the MVT proposes an integrated framework encompassing vulnerabilities across four fundamental domains of human experience: physical, emotional, cognitive, and social realms. This multidimensional approach represents a shift from reductionist explanations toward a more comprehensive understanding of laughter as a complex communicative phenomenon operating simultaneously across multiple levels of human functioning. The theory demonstrates preliminary empirical support within this specific comedic context, evidenced by perfect

correspondence between laughter episodes and vulnerability identification (n=57). These findings, while supportive of the MVT framework, should be understood as initial evidence from a case study of stand-up comedy rather than definitive validation across all laughter-producing contexts.

However, several important limitations constrain the generalisability of these findings. The analysis examined a single performance by one comedian within a specific cultural context (a South African-born comedian performing for an American audience), limiting conclusions about the MVT's applicability across diverse comedic genres, cultural settings, and performer-audience relationships. The unique cross-cultural dynamics present in Noah's performance may have created particular vulnerability recognition patterns that do not generalise to other comedic contexts. Additionally, the focus on stand-up comedy – a context where humorous intent is explicitly established – provides limited insight into how the MVT might explain laughter in conversational humour or other contexts where humorous intent requires negotiation.

The subjective nature of vulnerability assessment, while acknowledged by Simon, presents ongoing methodological challenges for empirical validation. Different audience members may perceive different vulnerabilities in identical comedic content, and researchers' cultural positioning inevitably influences vulnerability identification and categorisation. These subjective and interpretive challenges are not unique to the MVT and represent broader epistemological complexity inherent in humour studies. As humour theorist Thomas Clark Veatch observes, "humour perception is doubly subjective, not only in that it is a psychological event in a subjective perceiver, but also in that different subjects may differ in their perceptions" (1998, p. 166). This dual subjectivity necessitates methodological frameworks that reconcile the universalising theoretical ambitions of analytical schemas with the fundamentally experiential and contingent nature of comedic perception.

Most significantly, the MVT's terminological framework presents considerable epistemological tensions within contemporary disability discourse. Its reliance upon terms such as "vulnerabilities", "deficiencies", and hierarchical status differentials operates in potential contradiction to the social model of disability, which has revolutionised scholarly understanding by reorienting analytical inquiry from individual pathology toward the examination of socially constructed barriers and exclusionary practices (Filipe et al., 2021). Contemporary disability scholarship positions society as actively producing disability "through its organisation around particular kinds of bodies" rather than locating limitation within individuals, foregrounding the recognition that language functions not merely as neutral descriptive apparatus but as a constitutive force that actively shapes social perceptions of embodied difference and hierarchical value systems (Ford et al., 2024, p. 3).

Nevertheless, recent evolutionary research examining the "Vulnerable Ape" hypothesis offers a potentially transformative perspective for the linguistic reframing of vulnerability within more constructive theoretical parameters. Nick Winder and Isabelle Winder's groundbreaking research demonstrates that genetic vulnerability catalysed human cooperation, innovation and social learning (2015, p. 40), challenging contemporary discourse that frames vulnerability as individual limitation. Their work reveals that early hominins experiencing demographic bottlenecks favoured not individuals with optimal genetic endowments but those demonstrating adaptive capacity in managing genetic challenges (Winder & Winder, 2015, p. 40).

Additionally, contemporary research on Indigenous Australian communities provides empirical validation for this evolutionary trajectory, demonstrating how these populations have cultivated sophisticated social capabilities—including enhanced communication systems, compassionate behavioural patterns, and adaptive flexibility—as collective strategies for managing shared vulnerability (Usher et al., 2021, pp. 1-2, 11-12). This convergence of evolutionary theory and ethnographic evidence suggests that vulnerability served as the

foundational catalyst for developing complex social capabilities that distinguish human societies.

These perspectives offer potential pathways for reconciling epistemological tensions between vulnerability theory and disability scholarship by demonstrating how vulnerability can be understood as a collective resource rather than an individual deficiency. This framework suggests possibilities for linguistic reframing that avoids the MVT's problematic deficit terminology while retaining vulnerability as an analytical concept without perpetuating oppressive discursive frameworks.

## **8. Conclusion**

This exploratory case study of the MVT within stand-up comedy contexts provides supporting evidence and establishes a foundation for further investigation. The study established perfect correspondence between all 57 documented laughter episodes—each preceded by at least one identifiable vulnerability in Trevor Noah's comedic performance—and the MVT's central proposition that laughter functions as “a vocal affirmation of mutual vulnerability” within this specific performance context. This finding offers preliminary empirical support for the theory.

The investigation validated the analytical utility of the MVT's four-domain vulnerability taxonomy within this comedic setting. The framework demonstrated analytical precision through its capacity to systematically categorise diverse comedic content while accommodating multiple simultaneous vulnerabilities within single laughter episodes (38 of 57 instances). This multidimensional capability transcends the limitations of traditional binary humour classifications, with the taxonomy's hierarchical structure proving methodologically robust within the specific analytical context.

Simultaneously, the study identified epistemological tensions between the MVT's deficit-based terminology and contemporary disability studies discourse, exposing the need for linguistic reframing that preserves analytical power while avoiding potentially oppressive conceptualisations of human difference. The evolutionary research on the “Vulnerable Ape” hypothesis emerged as a promising pathway for reconciling these tensions by repositioning vulnerability as a collective resource rather than an individual limitation.

However, several methodological constraints require acknowledgement. The researcher's role as sole analyst introduces potential interpretive bias in vulnerability identification and categorisation. The focus on observable laughter responses cannot capture the full complexity of audience humour processing and appreciation. Furthermore, the temporal constraints of the analysed segment (8.5 minutes) and its specific thematic focus may not represent the full range of vulnerability types present in diverse comedic performances.

Future research should extend this study's exploratory methodology to diverse comedic contexts, including conversational humour, improvisational comedy, and cross-cultural performance settings, to determine whether these preliminary findings represent context-specific phenomena or broader theoretical patterns. This case study thus serves as an initial step toward systematic empirical testing of contemporary humour theories rather than a definitive theoretical validation.

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