Alex M. Borgella*, Simon Howard and Keith B. Maddox

Cracking wise to break the ice: The potential for racial humor to ease interracial anxiety

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Abstract: We explore the idea that humor focused on social group disparities can be a viable tool to reduce some of the negative outcomes associated with interracial interactions. These interactions are crucial in promoting common understanding about the causes of social, educational, and economic disparities and crafting solutions to redress them. However, investigations have demonstrated that interracial interactions can be emotionally and cognitively taxing, and for these reasons are often avoided. When not avoided, these interactions often result in negative outcomes. Anxiety has been identified as a key factor in these outcomes as majority group members cope with concerns over appearing biased and minority group members cope with concerns over being discriminated against. Humor may be able to alleviate anxiety that contributes to negative outcomes associated with intergroup dialogue. To explore this claim, we first review the literature on interracial interactions and the role of anxiety in shaping them. We then discuss investigations exploring the impact of group-related humor, specifically disparagement humor, on intergroup perceptions. Finally, we draw from both literatures to consider factors that might determine race-related humor's potential to facilitate positive interracial dialogue through anxiety reduction. We conclude with some possible areas for further research.

Keywords: humor, interracial interactions, stereotyping, prejudice, discrimination

***Corresponding author: Alex M. Borgella**, Psychology, Fort Lewis College, 1000 Rim Drive, EBH 288, Durango, CO 81301, USA, E-mail: amborgella@fortlewis.edu

Simon Howard, Psychology, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI, USA,
E-mail: simon.howard@marquette.edu

Keith B. Maddox, Psychology, Tufts University, 490 Boston Ave, Medford, MS 02155, USA,
E-mail: keith.maddox@tufts.edu

Just for the record my Arab friends, I don't do any Arab jokes in my act. It's not that I don't think you are funny. It's just ... I don't know, I don't want to ... die?

– Russell Peters

What's the first thing black people do when we get some fucking money? Buy some ... chains. Brothers be like, 'Look at all these chains on my neck! I'm getting my feet shackles bling next week'.

– Marlon Wayans

1 Introduction

Given the growing awareness of racial and ethnic disparities in social and economic arenas, it is important to explore methods to increase the amount of productive interracial dialogue. Through dialogue, experiences, ideas, and perspectives can be exchanged toward the development of effective policies and programs to reduce racial disparities (Al Ramiah and Hewstone 2013; Trawalter and Richeson 2008; Tropp and Pettigrew 2005). However, people often avoid interracial dialogue because these settings can be associated with increased anxiety, stress, and other negative psychological outcomes (Dovidio 2001; Dovidio et al. 2002; Toosi et al. 2012) and can be exaggerated when talking specifically about race or diversity issues (Norton et al., 2006; Sommers, Warp, and Mahoney 2008). The quotes above reflect instances where two comedians use humor to reflect on their experiences and promote dialogue about race issues in the United States. Russell Peters, Marlon Wayans, and many other comedians from racial minority groups often use humor in seemingly counterintuitive ways – by either disparaging their own disadvantaged group or confronting existing stereotypes about their group in an attempt to subvert them. Each of the jokes above makes light of sensitive and serious social issues that might otherwise be avoided: stereotypes linking Arabs to terrorism and the past enslavement of Blacks in the United States. Humor of this kind might be an effective way to more easily discuss sensitive topics. But is that potential benefit worth the possible costs?

Humor attempting to describe, critique, and promote interracial relations, often through disparaging comparisons, is a common form of communication among and between members of racial majority and minority groups in the United States (Schoem 2003). But does it help or hurt? Responding to questions about why they use this type of humor, Peters and Wayans point to two specific benefits: an opportunity to acknowledge, satirize, and subvert stereotypes and a potential to decrease anxiety stemming from interracial contact.

I make it look like the person I'm talking about is the victim, but when you listen to the joke, you realize, 'Oh wait a minute, they're not the victim, they're the winner of this joke.'

– Russell Peters

Humor helps ease the tension of race and the differences in society. If there wasn't comedy, I don't know if Obama could have ever become president.

– Marlon Wayans

With a focus on the relationship between racial minority and majority groups in the United States, this review explores conditions that might influence the efficacy of humor to facilitate interracial dialogue about racial bias. We consider evidence from two literatures: one exploring the role of anxiety in interracial interactions, and one exploring the effects of group-related humor. We seek to identify conditions under which the use of race-related humor may facilitate productive dialogue between members of different racial groups. First, we discuss the role of anxiety in producing negative outcomes in interracial contexts, relying on work in the field of psychology. Next, we discuss research exploring the impact of group-related humor (both race-related humor and humor targeting other social groups) on both perceptions of humorists and attitudes toward the targeted group. Finally, we draw from theory in each literature to consider factors that might determine race-related humor's potential to facilitate positive interracial dialogue through anxiety reduction.

2 Anxiety in interracial contexts

Research has demonstrated that interracial interactions often go poorly in part because they can be affectively and cognitively taxing for both racial majority and minority group members (e. g. Richeson and Shelton 2003; Richeson and Shelton 2007). However, there are differences in what types of issues each face in these situations (for reviews of this research, see Devine et al. 1996; Godsil and Richardson 2017; Stephan and Stephan 2017). In short, majority group members are largely concerned about appearing biased, while minority group members are concerned about experiencing bias. Below, we discuss research in these domains, with a particular focus on the role of anxiety in determining the experiences of racial majority and minority group members. These concerns can be associated with anxiety (as indexed by various measures including self-report and physiological arousal) contributing to worsened cognitive, intellectual, and interpersonal outcomes that may motivate people to avoid interracial contexts in the future. Below, we discuss several of these outcomes as they are described in the social psychological literature on interracial interactions from the perspective of racial majority and minority group members respectively.

2.1 Concerns over appearing biased

2.1.1 Aversive racism

As mentioned above, members of racial majority groups are commonly concerned about appearing biased to others in interracial contexts. These concerns and the behaviors they produce can stem from internal factors (e. g. the desire to maintain a non-prejudiced identity) or external factors (e. g. the desire to maintain a non-prejudiced appearance to others; Plant and Devine 1998). For individuals with high levels of external motivations to control prejudice, the internal struggle between explicitly endorsing egalitarian views but privately harboring negative affect toward minority group members can lead to *aversive racism* (Gaertner and Dovidio 1986). In this relatively subtle form of prejudice, individuals who are highly motivated to respond without prejudice due to concerns over how they will be viewed by others are more likely to avoid interracial interactions entirely or experience undesirable outcomes when interracial interactions are unavoidable. This is due to the fact that, compared to those high in blatant racism, those high in aversive racism are mentally preoccupied with their concerns and efforts to appear non-biased. For example, Dovidio et al. (2002) found that interaction pairs consisting of a White person high in aversive racism and a Black person took significantly longer to solve a laboratory-based problem than race-congruous pairs or pairs consisting of a White person high in blatant prejudice (i. e. with tendencies to explicitly express prejudice toward minority group members) and a Black person.

2.1.2 Stereotype suppression

Individuals who are concerned about appearing prejudiced may exert effort to suppress any prejudicial thoughts or behavior. For example, Richeson and Trawalter (2008) demonstrated that Whites who scored high on a measure assessing external motivations to control prejudice (for example, concerns about one's own social appearance; Devine 1989) were more likely to unconsciously divert their attention away from neutral Black faces, signaling an attentional bias shaped by anxiety. In actual interracial interactions, this anxiety has been demonstrated to have detrimental effects on both psychological and physiological outcomes. Trawalter et al. (2012) found increased cortisol levels (signaling a heightened stress response) amongst Whites concerned about appearing prejudiced during an interracial interaction with a Black partner. In a longitudinal

investigation, the authors also discovered spikes in cortisol levels amongst these participants when engaging in interracial interactions throughout an entire academic year (Trawalter et al. 2012; Study 2). As a result of investigations like these, it is not surprising that members of racial majority groups tend to avoid interacting with racial minority groups entirely.

Paradoxically, the concern of appearing prejudiced, the subsequent attempt to suppress that prejudice, and even the avoidance of situations in which prejudicial attitudes might be exposed may not be enough to prevent it. As Crandall and Eshleman (2003) note in their development of the justification-suppression model of prejudice expression, the suppression of prejudice requires substantial cognitive energy and is often accompanied with justifications for the expression of “genuine” prejudice – that is, prejudice learned early in development from family or direct cultural learning which is activated automatically (Fazio et al. 1995). The justification of prejudicial attitudes is prominent and can take many forms according to social psychologists (e. g. believing in just society or attitudes about one’s own status; *system justification theory*, Jost and Banaji 1994; *social dominance orientation*, Pratto et al. 1994; *belief in a just world*; Rubin and Peplau 1973), and some investigations even report more positive attitudes toward interracial interactions on behalf of the perpetrator of the prejudice (Crandall and Eshleman 2003). Other work suggests that individuals who are instructed to suppress – or who spontaneously suppress – stereotypic thoughts are sometimes subject to increases in the expression of these stereotypes at a later time (Monteith et al. 1998; Macrae et al. 1994; Wyer et al. 1998). In either case, prejudice is still experienced by minority group members in these situations, often leading to undesirable and harmful outcomes relating to self-perception (e. g. feeling unjustly mistreated or disrespected; Barrett and Swim 1998).

2.1.3 Being confronted for bias expression

For some race-related problems such as police brutality, education disparities, mass incarceration, and immigration policies, dialogue begins with a confrontation of the (alleged) perpetrator. In general, those faced with confrontations that threaten the self-image can experience an increase in negative emotions or aggression (Baumeister, Smart, and Boden 1996; Czopp et al. 2006), and react accordingly. For example, several investigations have demonstrated that majority group members who are confronted respond with evaluative backlash toward racial minority group members who confront expressions of bias (e. g. Czopp et al. 2003). Those who choose to confront are disliked and viewed as

“complainers” relative to those who do not confront (Kaiser and Miller 2001; Schultz and Maddox 2013).

2.2 Concerns over experiencing bias

2.2.1 Stereotype threat

Like their interaction partners, members of racial minority groups experience measurable anxiety both during and after interracial interactions (see Trawalter et al. 2009, for a review). In contrast to racial majority group members, however, racial minority group members are more concerned with being perceived through the lens of negative stereotypes and experiencing bias (Swim and Hyers 1999). This concern often leads minority racial group members to monitor their own thoughts and behaviors in situations in which they believe they may be the targets of prejudiced. For example, members of minority racial groups for whom stereotypes about their group membership are salient prior to performing in a stereotype-relevant domain (e. g. awareness of the stereotype that Black Americans are unintelligent in the context of a standardized testing situation) may experience anxiety leading to decreased performance (*stereotype threat*; Steele and Aronson 1995; Spencer et al. 1999). It has been shown that individuals experiencing stereotype threat can show heightened cardiovascular response and surface skin temperature throughout the performance in which the threat is induced (Osborne 2007).

2.2.2 Attributional ambiguity

In other scenarios, racial minority group members may experience *attributional ambiguity* (i. e. psychological state of uncertainty about the cause of a person's outcomes or treatment). These situations have been shown to induce stress responses in racial minority groups. Additionally, anxiety during performance tasks may lead to *attributional ambiguity* – the uncertainty experienced by minority group members about whether or not feedback, either positive or negative, is due to their own aptitude or to prejudice of the evaluator (e. g. Crocker et al. 1991). Like those experiencing stereotype threat, individuals experiencing attributional ambiguity have shown heightened arousal associated with cognitive vigilance (e. g. cardiovascular increases, skin conductance) after receiving positive feedback from a different-race evaluator, with these patterns

of reactance becoming more pronounced when that feedback was negative (Mendes et al. 2008).

2.2.3 Observing bias

Members of racial minority groups need not be the direct targets of discrimination in order to experience anxiety-related arousal. In another example, Merritt et al. (2006) found that Black men exposed to audio recordings depicting the unfair treatment of a Black customer in a shopping center demonstrated higher blood pressure, even when the behavior in question was ambiguous and the discrimination was unclear. Results like these suggest that racial minorities are sensitive to subtle cues in interracial contexts that have the potential to chip away at their physical health. In the past decade, counseling psychologists have documented among patients of color anxiety associated with experiencing racial *microaggressions*: purposeful or unintentional actions which perpetuate racial stereotypes and subtly communicate racial hostility or prejudice (e. g. Wing Sue et al. 2007).

2.2.4 Confronting bias expression

As discussed in Section 2.1.3, racial majority group members often respond to accusation of bias by attacking the confronter, particularly if that person is from a minority group (e. g. Czopp et al. 2003; Kaiser & Miller 2003). Accordingly, members of racial minority groups are aware of the potential for backlash and may avoid confrontations as a result (Ashburn-Nardo, Morris, and Goodwin 2008; Stangor et al. 2002).

2.3 Attenuating majority and minority concerns

Concerns of appearing biased and experiencing bias by majority and minority group members manifest in anxiety and excess mental regulation, as the attempt to control prejudice or self-monitoring one's actions in anticipation of experiencing prejudice is cognitively taxing and can impact processes related to memory, planning, and attention (Monteith 1993; Devine and Plant 2002). This is especially true for members of majority groups who behave in ways that are inconsistent with internal prejudicial thoughts and members of minority groups who may understand the consequences of calling attention to bias (e. g. Kaiser and Miller 2001). In response, a significant body of empirical work has investigated methods

that both majority and minority group members can adopt to engage and navigate these social situations (e. g. Crocker and Major 1989; Crocker et al. 1998).

2.3.1 Majority interventions

For members of racial majority groups, research suggests that acknowledging and reassessing the source of their anxiety may help to alleviate it during interracial interactions. For example, Whites who were provided with instructions that help them to reframe the anxiety they anticipate before interracial interactions were more likely to choose to speak with a Black partner about race issues and displayed more positive nonverbal indicators of engagement during those interactions (Schultz et al. 2015). Alternatively, instructing White participants to work toward a positive exchange (promotion focus) versus to avoid prejudice (prevention focus) has been demonstrated to lead to less cognitive depletion after an interracial interaction (Trawalter and Richeson 2006). Increased contact with minority groups members has also been shown to alleviate majority group members' concerns (the *intergroup contact hypothesis*, Allport 1954; Dovidio, Gaertner, and Kawakami 2003). Indeed, researchers argue that majority group members exposed to members of minority group prior to interactions are cognitively better equipped to handle these interactions (e. g. Hewstone and Brown 1986).

2.3.2 Minority interventions

Racial minority group members also develop and learn coping strategies which have been demonstrated to alleviate the anxiety involved with perceiving and confronting bias from intergroup interactions. These strategies are associated with *stigma consciousness* (Pinel 1999), which asserts that a certain level of preparation to handle prejudice is associated with growing up and living life with a stigmatized identity. These individuals may be somewhat more cognitively prepared to handle the anxiety associated with prejudice and discrimination from certain majority groups because of previous experiences as members of devalued groups (e. g. Crocker, Major, and Steele 1998). For example, a Black person might have experience with being discriminated against, and may use parts of that experience to influence his or her behavior in future situations in which discrimination might occur (e. g. confronting perceived bias). That said, many coping mechanisms can lead to short term relief with negative long-term interpersonal outcomes (e. g. avoiding confrontation or disidentification with

stereotype-relevant domains). Thus, stigmatized individuals may be at a disadvantage when interacting with others who they perceive to be biased. Because of this disadvantage, it has become vital for researchers to examine strategies minority group members can utilize in order to manage interracial interactions.

While recognizing the costs of confronting prejudice, Czopp et al. (2003) suggest that members of racial minority groups can still be effective agents for bias reduction amongst prejudiced majority group members by directly confronting prejudiced statements and behaviors, often leading to future avoidance of public displays of prejudice by perpetrators (for a review, see Kaiser and Major 2006). While many negative consequences associated with confrontation are well-documented, research has also identified methods that members of racial minority groups can use to increase its effectiveness in reducing bias while preventing negative evaluations of the individual confronting. For example, Schultz and Maddox (2013) demonstrated that Blacks who use high-quality arguments to support racial bias confrontations experience less backlash – indistinguishable from that of their White counterparts – over and above Blacks using low-quality arguments.

2.3.3 Summary

In sum, interracial interactions can be stressful for members of both racial majority and minority groups. However, a growing body of research has helped to identify potential ways to ameliorate the concerns faced by those involved. For members of racial majority groups, reframing pre-interaction anxiety has been shown to be effective in reducing stress during interactions (e.g. Schultz et al. 2015). Additionally, previous intergroup contact could have a buffering effect on stress during interactions, leading to more positive evaluations of interaction partners and their groups. For members of racial minority groups, the anxiety associated with experiencing prejudice is difficult to minimize but can be tempered by confronting bias when it is encountered. However, the potential costs of confrontation are high, which has led researchers to identify distinct strategies to buffer these costs.

2.4 Humor's potential in interracial interactions

Humor and laughter are powerful phenomena associated with many positive social outcomes, including reduced emotional pain after stressful situations,

increased self-esteem, and higher levels of interpersonal affection (Lefcourt and Martin 1986). These benefits are widespread, including increased student learning and memory in primary school and college (Lovorn 2008, 2009), better performance perceptions amongst athletic coaches (Burke et al. 1995; Grisaffe et al. 2003), and better patient/physician relationships in oncology units in hospitals (Penson et al. 2005). Thus, humor that produces laughter has the potential to benefit a broad range of contexts in which feelings of anxiety may hinder positive outcomes. Humor that seeks to acknowledge group disparities could be a viable strategy for majority and minority group members to buffer the experience of anxiety in interracial contexts and its downstream consequences. Racial humor could make bias confrontations more effective and less costly, mitigate the expression of bias, alleviate stereotype threat, and facilitate interracial dialogue more broadly. To our knowledge, there is little to no research that directly explores these hypotheses. Perhaps this is due in part to the fact that the idea of using racial humor to facilitate interracial dialogue is somewhat counterintuitive. The use of racial humor might be perceived with skepticism and thought to exacerbate tensions rather than relieve them.

In order to assess these claims, we next review research exploring the effects of general group-related humor on various social judgments. We choose to extend our analysis beyond the relatively smaller literature on race-specific humor to permit consideration of findings that address several important aspects of the current hypothesis. Specifically, we focus on how the use of this humor affects perceptions of the humorist, how it affects the humorist's audience (e.g. physiological or affective reactions, perceived humor generally), and how exposure to it affects intergroup attitudes and behavior.

3 Humor and intergroup perceptions

While there is no single widely accepted definition of humor, for our purposes we define humor as any form of communication that is intended to elicit laughter (Martin 2007; Zillmann 1983). Though many types of humor have the potential to influence interpersonal outcomes (e.g. Martin and Kuiper 2007), the literature exploring humor in intergroup contexts has focused almost exclusively on humor that targets a person or persons based on their membership in a social group and, more specifically, *disparagement humor*, defined as humor that denigrates or maligns

social groups (e. g. Cundall 2012; Martin 2007), whether playful or malicious (e. g. Janes and Olson 2010).

The potential of group-related humor to affect communication and relationships within and between social groups has been outlined by sociologist Martineau (1972; for a review see Ford, 2015). Essentially, Martineau considered how the group membership of the source (humorist), target (“butt” of the joke), and audience might affect intragroup and intergroup dynamics. His model described the relationships among these variables that might predict whether intergroup humor functioned as a social “lubricant” or an “abrasive.” Along with these factors, humor’s social function depended largely on the evaluation of the humor by the audience, regardless of the content or intentions of the source. Martineau’s analysis focused on three contexts under which humorous communication might take place. The first is an intragroup context, the humorist and the audience are members of the same group with a focus on intragroup dynamics (e. g. identity and cohesion). The second is an intergroup context in which the humorist and audience belong to different groups, with a focus on the intragroup dynamics within the audience group. The last is an intergroup context where there is an exchange between humorists from each group, with a focus on both intragroup and intergroup dynamics.

On balance, Martineau’s analysis and review of the available evidence suggested that intergroup humor that is perceived as disparaging tends to increase cohesion and morale within the relatively esteemed group, decrease cohesion and morale within the disparaged group, and create or exaggerate intergroup hostility and prejudice. Among the exceptions to this rule, ingroup-disparaging humor used by Blacks and Jews in an intragroup context can serve to increase cohesion if it is perceived as funny (Wolff et al. 1934; Middleton 1959; as cited in Martineau 1972). In addition, disparaging humor used in an intergroup context can serve to increase cohesion among the disparaged group by rallying the disparaged group against a perceived “attack” (Arnez and Anthony 1968; as cited in Martineau 1972).

Using both the extant literature on interracial interactions and Martineau’s framework as a springboard, we next unpack the effects of different types of disparagement humor on perceptions of humorists and intergroup attitudes broadly, with consideration of how humor might serve a positive role in reducing anxiety in interracial contexts for both racial majority and minority group members.

3.1 Effects of group-related humor on perceptions of humorists

3.1.1 Self-disparagement

Self-disparaging (or self-deprecating) humor is a type of humor that individuals use to make fun of themselves directly, individual members of their ingroup, or their ingroup in general (e. g. Gruner 1997). It is commonly used to address perceived deficits in an individual or group's intelligence, personality traits, moral virtues, mental health, or physical attractiveness, and in peacemaking after arguments or other tense interpersonal events (e. g. Lundy et al. 1998). Though beginning a speech with pointed self-deprecation may seem counter-intuitive, self-disparaging humor is a tool recommended by many resources designed to help people prepare and execute speeches through its potential to lighten the mood, improve speaker credibility, or create a bond with the audience (e. g. Andeweg et al. 2011). Thus, much of the empirical research on self-disparaging humor is related to audience perceptions of speakers, and generally reports relationships between the use of self-disparaging humor and perceptions of speaker humor, wit, and general levels of attraction (e. g. Gruner 1997; Chang and Gruner 1981). As humor theorist Gruner (1985, p. 1295) states, "Humor that is self-disparaging enhances speaker image ... and will have a cushioning effect [on perceptions of the speaker]." For example, Chang and Gruner (1981) demonstrated the use of self-disparaging humor in speeches has the potential to increase perceived levels of likeability, sense of humor, wittiness, kindness, and trustworthiness. Importantly, this same type of humor also has the potential to reduce feelings of anxiety among audience members while simultaneously increasing speaker credibility. But the potential benefit of self-disparagement may depend on several factors, such as the goals of the presentation or whether the attempted humor is perceived as funny (e. g. Andeweg et al. 2011; Chang and Gruner 1981).

3.1.2 Other-disparagement

To the extent that people can infer personality from behavior, using jokes which disparage others has the potential to heighten negative perceptions of the humorist. Research suggests there may be personality differences between people who prefer to tell jokes about themselves versus others, with those who report using self-disparaging humor more likely to possess low extraversion, low

agreeableness, and low conscientiousness and those who use other-disparaging humor more likely to possess low agreeableness, but more competitiveness and dominance (Greengross, Martin, and Miller 2012; Greengross and Miller 2011; Hodson 2010). In addition, using other-disparaging humor could result in more negative perceptions. Greengross and Miller (2011) explored the implications of using disparagement humor for individuals with low- or high-status in a study of mate potential. Their findings suggested that high-status individuals were seen as more attractive when telling self- vs. other-disparaging jokes, while joke type did not influence judgments of low-status individuals. The authors suggest this status disparity in the use of self-disparaging humor reflects that potential of high-status individuals to lose status when they belittle low-status individuals.

3.1.3 Summary

Taking this research into consideration, it is clear there are both positive and negative consequences for those who use disparaging humor with the goal of improving how others may see them. Consistent with Martineau's (1972) framework, these consequences seem to depend on the sources, audiences, and targets of the humorous material. This is also the case when considering of how exposure to this type of humor may affect intergroup attitudes, which we discuss next.

3.2 Effects of group-related humor on intergroup attitudes

Disparagement humor not only has implications for how observers think and feel about a humorist, it is also related to observer's attitudes toward the targeted group. Indeed, previous research has demonstrated that the level of amusement elicited by disparagement humor depends on the presence and extremity of negative explicit or implicit attitudes toward the targeted individual or group (Lynch 2002). For example, Cantor and Zillmann (1973) found that cartoon protagonists' humorous misfortunes were viewed as significantly funnier when the characters were first portrayed to garner resentment from participants, compared to characters portrayed to garner sympathy.

3.2.1 Prejudice expression

Building on the hypothesis that encountering disparagement humor can lead to prejudicial responses, Ford and Ferguson (2004) proposed a model known as

Prejudiced Norm Theory (PNT). This model describes four steps that outline a potential mechanism by which exposure to disparagement humor encourages the expression of prejudice against outgroup members, suggesting perpetrators of prejudice rely primarily on external social norms dictating either the suppression or release of prejudice (Devine 1989), and are more likely to express prejudice when exposed to disparagement humor. Briefly, this mechanism operates as follows: (1) When exposed to disparagement humor, people to switch from a serious mindset to a noncritical “humor mindset” that trivializes its subject. This implies that one can treat prejudicial attitudes and behaviors in a more lighthearted manner. (2) A shared understanding of the message underlying the humor is accepted if the recipient approves of the humorous content. (3) Once the disparagement humor is interpreted through a noncritical humor mindset, people are more likely to perceive and assent to a prejudiced norm in their immediate social context. (4) The acceptance of this prejudice norm can then guide their own potentially prejudicial responses toward the targeted outgroup.

Investigations of PNT have been used to describe attitudinal changes as a result of disparagement humor targeting many social groups. Ford and Ferguson (2004) applied PNT to describe effects related to the perception of sexist humor in men and found that exposure to sexist humor, over and above non-humorous sexist communication and neutral communication, was found to increase sexist attitudes among men high in hostile sexism. Similar effects have been reported in other investigations of sexist humor; for example, Ryan and Kanjorski (1998) found that college-aged men who perceived sexist jokes to be funny were also more likely to display higher levels of sexual aggression, specifically on self-reported attitudes about sexual assault and rape. Additionally, this research found that even women who enjoy sexist humor were also likely to tolerate more interpersonal and domestic violence. Other studies have shown men who self-report they have no moral qualms against the use of sexist humor have been shown more likely to indicate signs of rape proclivity following exposure, an increased tolerance of hypothetical situations involving rape, and even diminished respect for women outside the context in which the humor was presented (Romero-Sanchez et al. 2010; Romero-Sánchez et al. 2016). These findings of increased tolerance of sexism after exposure to sexist humor extend beyond self-report measures. One study even found a significant relationship between exposure to sexist humor and various discrimination measures (Ford et al. 2008). Specifically, it was observed that men high in hostile sexism were less likely to donate money to a women’s organization and more likely to endorse the cutting of funds from that organization after exposure to a sexist comedy skit.

These effects also extend to other traditionally and nontraditionally stigmatized minority groups and can lead to prejudice and discrimination toward these groups as well (e. g. Hodson and MacGinnis 2016). For example, one study found that exposure to Black actors portraying stereotypically Black characters in comedy sketches was more likely to result in higher guilt ratings for a Black suspect in an assault investigation (Ford 1997). Maio et al. (1997) found that participants who recited humor disparaging Newfoundlanders (a commonly disparaged area in Canada) reported more negative attitudes about that group after the recitation. Additionally, Hobden and Olson (1994) reported similar effects when asking people to tell jokes about lawyers, with these individuals reporting higher negative attitudes toward lawyers than their counterparts who were not asked to tell these jokes. These effects may be related to the costs of suppressing prejudice among those already high in prejudice; as Ford et al. (2017) demonstrate, individuals who are asked to restrict the expression of prejudice can consequently express more prejudice at a later time – a phenomenon referred to as “prejudice rebounding”. However, prejudice rebound was shown to be minimal after exposure to disparagement humor, indicating the prejudiced norms fostered by this humor are a sufficient substitute for prejudice. Taken together, these findings indicate that there are some very unfunny consequences of being exposed to stereotypes about social groups, and that humor which utilizes these stereotypes can create a norm of prejudice tolerance and expression.

3.2.2 Attitude and stereotype change

Though disparagement humor can clearly affect the expression of bias and even endorsement of prejudice and discrimination in the context in which the humor is being perceived, there has been some debate as to whether or not exposure to disparagement humor has the potential to change individuals’ stereotypes and attitudes about targeted groups over time (e. g. Ford 2000). An investigation by Olson et al. (1999) suggests that the expression of prejudice might temporarily increase in contexts where disparaging jokes are being overheard, but the underlying impact on stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination are minimal. Over three studies, the authors exposed participants to either disparaging or non-disparaging jokes about men and lawyers. Of many outcome measures related to the extremity of participants’ stereotypes and attitudes and some additional measures related to the accessibility of stereotypes in general (e. g. interpretations of ambiguous behaviors), only one significant difference emerged between groups exposed to disparaging vs. non- disparaging

jokes – participants were more likely to have less favorable impressions of men after hearing a disparaging joke about men, but did not influence other groups of relatively lower status (e. g. women).

3.2.3 Status as a moderator

The pattern of findings in Olson et al. (1999) may have emerged as a function of the relatively high status of the social groups targeted (e. g. men and lawyers). Ford et al. (2013) suggest that social groups are differentially susceptible to prejudice from disparagement humor depending on their societal position. To specify, Crandall et al. (2013) normative window model of prejudice argues that members of a social group occupy one of three positions in society: the left-most position (called the “justified prejudice region”), reserved for those largely agreed upon as deviant (e. g. terrorists), the right-most position (called the “unjustified prejudice region”) consisting of groups uniformly considered good (e. g. nurses), and the middle position (called the “normative ambiguity region”) comprised of historically disadvantaged groups (e. g. Muslims). The “normative ambiguity region” describes groups once blatantly discriminated against but who are currently treated with ambiguity. It is considered socially unacceptable to express prejudice against those in the unjustified prejudice and normative ambiguity regions, but prejudice may be expressed against those in normative ambiguity regions in the presence of situational “releasers” (e. g. disparagement humor) that allow for these expressions.

3.2.4 Identity as a moderator

As suggested by the quotes in our introduction and the model by Martineau (1972), the context of the delivery of humor can influence how it is perceived – and thus its potential impact on intergroup attitudes. This may be especially important regarding the racial or ethnic makeup of the humorist and their audiences. This question has not been explored in the context of the impact on intergroup attitudes. However, as Asian-American blog writer Liz Lin explains, disparagement humor used by members of stigmatized minority groups has the potential to influence how members of nonstigmatized groups behave, often with indignation from members of the group being deprecated:

I feel conflicted about this on a regular basis, whenever I see an Asian person – be it a friend, a comedian, or a celebrity – make generalizations about Asian people in mixed

company. On one hand, it's great that Asians have other Asians in their lives, either in person or on screen, who can make observations and poke fun at familiar experiences. That's a beautiful, cathartic thing. But on the other hand, I always tense up a little, worrying that the non-Asians in the crowd will take this person uttering these words as license to do the same. So to anyone who may be uncertain about this: A person of color (or a gay person, or a woman) making fun of their group does not give you permission to make the same joke.

– Liz Lin (Lin 2013)

This sentiment is also consistent with PNT, suggesting that exposure to disparagement humor increases the likelihood that non-stigmatized majority group members will repeat what they hear, but perhaps with a very different impact on the audience.

3.2.5 Summary

The work reviewed in this section suggests that exposure to disparagement humor will likely lead to greater expressions of prejudiced attitudes and behavior toward disparaged groups. This pattern may depend on the status of the group in question, with some groups being associated with statuses that may make them more or less likely to experience the normative effects of disparagement humor. And while the identity of the humorist is theorized to have an influence, this question has yet to be explored in the context of humor's influence on intergroup attitudes.

3.3 Strategic use of group-related humor in intergroup contexts

The effects of disparagement humor on perceptions of both majority and minority group members is a relatively understudied domain across psychological, sociological, and other social science disciplines. However, its effectiveness in managing intergroup dialogue has been noted and discussed since as early as 1946 (Burma 1946). Indeed, some research reports disparagement humor is often used strategically by minority group members in order to discuss complex social issues. For example, the sociologist Davies (1993) says of his observations of Jewish humor in post-World War II Israel: "Ethnic jokes that are told from the outside as mockery can become assertions of autonomy and vitality when told by the butts themselves" (Davies 1993: 33). However, different interpretations of the humorous material can affect its effectiveness in contexts like these.

In their theoretical analysis of humor surrounding attitudes about rape culture, Strain et al. (2016) reference two distinct types of humor – one which promotes and encourages rape culture and one which subverts it. *Reinforcing humor* (or *antisocial* humor) is humor that maintains and reinforces the gendered power differential perpetuated by rape culture. This kind of humor serves individuals in socially superior positions, while potentially harming those in inferior positions (e.g. rape victims, women). In line with the effects documented in PNT research (e.g. Ford and Ferguson 2004), this humor operates by perpetuating inaccurate ideas about rape, silencing individuals against whom rape may have been perpetrated, or increasing tolerance of sexist events. It is aggressive in nature, and often takes the form of disparagement conveyed in a “friendly” manner, allowing its deliverer to use the humorous format as a cover for expressing attitudes that may be socially undesirable. Alternatively, *subversive humor* (or *prosocial* humor) is humor that challenges and subverts the status quo and existing power relationships. In the context of humor regarding rape, subversive humor targets rapists or rape culture in its subtext. It does this by challenging individuals’ acceptance of rape, and thereby increasing the collective awareness of rape as a social problem. It may point out the absurdity of social hierarchy and its continuity or make individuals who perpetuate these social hierarchies the “butt of the joke.”

Saucier et al. (2016) use the analogy of humor as representing a “sword” or a “shield” (see Rappaport 2005, for a review) to describe the disparate outcomes of reinforcing and subverting humor, respectively. They report subversive humor is often prone to misinterpretation as reinforcing humor because it is often delivered through sarcasm or satire, and therefore may be difficult to understand. For example, the authors cite Baumgartner and Morris (2008), who examined the effects of *The Colbert Report* – a television show designed to mock right-wing television programming during the presidency of George W. Bush – on attitudes toward conservative personalities and ideologies. Instead of increasing negative attitudes toward the far right, the show was demonstrated to instead increase positive attitudes toward various right-wing attitudes, positions, and leaders, specifically amongst viewers with previously held conservative ideologies.

Subversive humor such as this is likely to produce multiple interpretations and may require additional cognitive processing, background information, and knowledge to grasp the hierarchy-challenging subtext. For example, Saucier et al. (2018) demonstrated that humor intended to challenge and subvert stereotypes about Black Americans was commonly misinterpreted as disparaging by participants, leading to increased prejudicial responses consistent with PNT (Ford and Ferguson 2004). Therefore, the listener’s ability to understand the target and intention of the humorous material seems paramount in its

effectiveness as a confrontational or subversive tool. Nonetheless, individuals should consider the potential for subversive humor to create positive social change. For example, while some research has demonstrated that exposure to stereotypical portrayals of Black television characters increases negative evaluations of Blacks amongst people high in prejudice (Mastro and Tropp 2004), this effect could be muted in situations depicting those portrayals as humorously attempting to subvert the stereotypes they depict (e. g. Koller 1988; Saucier et al. 2016; Strain et al. 2016).

3.3.1 Strategic humor and bias reduction

To the authors' knowledge, there have been three modern empirical investigations attempting to resolve questions involving the attempted use of strategic group-related humor by members of racial minority groups in the context of intergroup perceptions. In the domain of occupational/managerial psychology, the use of humor in different-race dyads has been investigated through the lens of conflict negotiations. Using a large sample of flight attendants, Smith et al. (2000) examined how workers from different social groups (e. g. men, women, Whites, Blacks, Hispanics, and Asians) used group-related humor to facilitate either confronting or avoiding workplace intra- and intergroup conflicts. The researchers found that both women and members of racial minority groups were more likely to use this type of humor when attempting to avoid conflict, whereas White men reported a much higher incidence of humor use when confronting conflict in the workplace. In related research on the managerial structure of large organizations, it was demonstrated that women in supervisory positions use humor related to their identities to acknowledge and navigate potentially tense interpersonal dilemmas with both their employees and superiors (Martin 2004). However, the effect of this humor on interpersonal and intergroup outcomes (e. g. anxiety reduction, prejudice reduction) was not examined.

Similarly, Focella (2014) investigated explicit disparagement humor compared with humor designed to acknowledge stereotypes about one's own group identity without explicitly disparaging that identity (termed by the author as *acknowledgement* humor), as tools members of minority groups might use to reduce bias. For example, a woman who makes a sexist joke which acknowledges stereotypes about women but does not explicitly disparage them (e. g. if a woman showed up late to an event and casually used the excuse "sorry, I took three hours to pick a dress" to acknowledge the stereotype that women take a long time to prepare for social gatherings) would be using acknowledgment humor. The results demonstrated that the effects of disparaging humor were

similar to acknowledgement humor in that they both increased interpersonal liking toward the target. However, disparagement humor resulted in more discriminatory behaviors toward the target's stigmatized group. Specifically, participants exposed to disparagement humor about Muslims were less likely to distribute an equal amount of funding to a Muslim Student Association after hearing this humor compared with acknowledgement humor, humor unrelated to the target's group, and no humor. This effect would be well explained well by the propositions of PNT, with exposure to humor resulting in increased discrimination against the targeted group, but no evidence of changes in perceived local or general norms as a result of humor exposure were documented in the investigation.

3.3.2 Strategic humor and bias confrontation

Though the theoretical work by Strain et al. (2016) and Saucier et al. (2016) and the empirical investigations by Smith et al. (2000), Martin (2004), and Focella (2014) support the claim that some disparagement humor can subvert stereotypes and effectively relieve anxiety in members of majority groups, there are some questions left unanswered by these investigations. Notably, these works do not address whether self-disparaging humor affects the subsequent confrontation of bias by minority group members. Additionally, these investigations seem to be relegated to effects of disparagement humor used by a member of the derogated group. Investigations exploring how the group membership of the humorist affects the expression, tolerance, and subsequent confrontation of prejudice would aid in determining whether subversion of stereotypes and anxiety reduction are restricted to members of the disparaged group.

Recent work on the effects of humor on bias confrontation has attempted to fill some of these gaps. For example, Mallett et al. (2016) investigated how the use of sexist humor, compared to nonhumorous sexist statements, affected women's likelihood to label a male interaction partner as sexist. Broadly, their results demonstrated that the use of sexist humor led to decreased perceptions of the male humorist as a sexist, as well as a decreased likelihood of confronting that individual for those views. Additionally, the presence of hostile sexist beliefs among the female participants in this investigation exacerbated these effects (Mallett et al. 2016; Experiment 2). Research by Woodzicka et al. (2015) helps to contextualize these effects. In two experiments, the researchers compared participants' willingness to confront disparaging humor or nonhumorous disparaging remarks related to race and sex. Results demonstrated that humor tampered participants' negative attitudes toward biased statements overall, and

that sexist humor was viewed as less offensive and less worthy of confrontation than all other forms of communication. Importantly, participants viewed both types of racist communication as worthy of confrontation. This set of experiments begins to address how disparagement humor used members of majority groups might affect subsequent confrontations of prejudice by those targeted, as well as how the attitudes of those exposed to the humor might play a role in these confrontations.

4 Summary and future directions

Though humor in general as an anxiety-reduction tool is understudied across scholarly disciplines, there is some information on how group-related humor could operate to potentially subvert stereotypes, reduce prejudice, and perhaps decrease anxiety in interracial contexts for majority and minority group members. Many of the investigations on disparagement humor to date have outlined negative consequences of both exposure and recitation (e.g. increased prejudice among those reciting and listening to the humorous material; Ford and Ferguson 2004) which may be indicative of negative outcomes in intergroup settings as well. However, other research on disparagement humor's utility indicates that it may be a valuable tool in these contexts. The effects of disparagement humor types on prejudice toward different social groups have been well documented, but significantly less information is known on how these effects translate into various interracial interaction contexts. Barring one investigation in which disparagement humor used by a member of the targeted group was purported to decrease levels of liking and increase discrimination (Focella 2014), the use of disparagement humor has not been linked with discriminatory behavior when targeting the humorist him or herself. Further, besides the experiment by Smith et al. (2000) and Martin (2004), these effects have not been documented in actual interracial settings. With these and other methodological limitations in mind, future investigations will be able to focus on demonstrating the effects of disparagement humor in more applied settings.

On the surface, the use of disparagement humor in the service of improving interracial attitudes seems counterintuitive. However, this type of humor has the potential to highlight social disparity and inequality directly in an attempt to subvert stereotypes and prejudice (e.g. Strain et al. 2016), and could therefore provide a valuable opportunity for productive dialogue. As such, there may be a benefit to this type of humor if its usage can be put into the proper context.

4.1 Is it funny?

The perception of humor in the intended humorous content is important; research has demonstrated the strength of humor's persuasive ability (specifically attitude change) is related to the extent to which the humor and the individual using the humor are perceived as humorous (e. g. Markiewicz 1974; Conway and Dubé 2002). Therefore, if disparagement humor is intended to improve attitudes, promote positive perceptions, and alleviate anxiety in inter-group contexts, it is important to understand which factors predict whether or not the humor – and perhaps the humorist – is perceived as funny.

Recently, McGraw and Warren (2010) proposed the Benign Violations theory of humor that may help to explain when and why disparagement humor is perceived as funny. Across five studies, they demonstrated that moral or social norm violations perceived in benign contexts were rated as more humorous than when these violations occurred in malign contexts. There are many contextual factors that could potentially determine whether most humor is seen as benign. In line with the often-repeated idiom “comedy is tragedy plus time”, the psychological or even physical distance of a violated norm can impact how benign it seems (McGraw et al. 2012). Additionally, the presence of another social or moral norm that dictates a violated norm is acceptable can result in the perception of humor (McGraw and Warren 2010; Experiments 1 & 2). To illustrate competing norms, these researchers used a vignette describing Keith Richards (the guitarist and founding member of the Rolling Stones infamous for drug use) after his father's death and cremation. In each vignette, participants were told Richard's father instructed him to do “whatever he wanted” with the ashes. Participants were exposed to one of two outcomes – Richards either buries the ashes or snorts them. While one moral norm (respecting the dead) dictates the latter behavior is unacceptable, another (harmlessness conveyed through his father's explicit instructions) dictates the opposite. It was demonstrated participants exposed to the latter vignette reported significantly higher perceptions of both amusement and disgust, indicating the perception of a benign moral violation.

4.2 Does humorist identity matter?

It is possible that disparagement humor used by racial minority group members targeting themselves is generally viewed as more benign and therefore more humorous. Additionally, as Liz Lin explains below, it is also the case that racial

majority group members may face negative interpersonal outcomes from using disparagement humor about minority groups:

I'm regularly surprised by the number of people who don't know that these kinds of comments aren't appropriate – that if you aren't black, you can't make generalized statements about black people; that if you're not gay, you can't make jokes about gay people; and on and on and on. I can make jokes about being Asian because I'm Asian, but if you aren't Asian, you better not be making Asian jokes. It doesn't matter where you grew up, how many Asians you went to high school or college with, where you studied abroad or went on vacation, or where you live or work now; you aren't one of us, and thus you can't make generalizations about us without sounding like an a-hole. To steal a friend's analogy: I can make fun of my mom, but you can't make fun of my mom.

– Liz Lin (Lin 2013)

The results of a few of the aforementioned investigations on self-disparaging humor suggest that exposure to racial minority group members using disparagement humor may lead to increases in prejudicial attitudes and even discriminatory behaviors by bystanders, but how does this compare to investigations on PNT involving race? Ford (1997) found that exposure to Blacks starring in stereotypically Black comedic roles resulted in more anti-Black stereotyping and discrimination than exposure to Blacks in non-stereotypical roles. However, a gap in this literature exists; to date there has been no direct comparison between the results of exposure to racial minority group members using disparagement humor about their ingroup and majority group members using the same jokes. Whereas the majority of the literature on PNT suggests increases in prejudice and discrimination following exposure to disparagement humor, these studies have focused almost exclusively on either (1) majority group members reciting the humor or (2) exposure to the humorous material in isolation. Future research could compare racial majority and minority group members using disparagement humor and examine whether its effects on anxiety, attitudes toward the target, and attitudes toward the minority group are affected by group membership.

These directions for future research should also consider methodological constraints present in other research on interracial interactions. For example, a review by Toosi et al. (2012) identified concerns over participant demographics in the literature, citing the prevalence of college-aged samples and the need for participants representing a broader age range to extend the results to a wider population. Additionally, while this same review found that face-to-face intergroup interactions and interactions through other mediums (e. g. email, instant messaging) were comparable when information about the ingroup member was made salient, face-to-face interactions involving the use of humor should still be conducted in order to determine whether its effects vary depending on its presentation.

5 Conclusion

When using – or simply being exposed to – disparagement humor, there is an increased likelihood of the expression of prejudice in the humorous context (e.g. Ford and Ferguson 2004), although there is some debate in terms of whether negative attitudes toward the disparaged group decrease depending on the social groups targeted (e.g. Olson et al. 1999). Conversely, self-targeted humor used by racial minority group members has the potential to increase positive responses toward the humorist, but these may not be necessarily related to decreased stereotyping, prejudice, or discrimination (e.g. Ford 1997). As interracial interactions are rife with stress and anxiety (e.g. Richeson and Shelton 2007), and humor can alleviate these outcomes in other stressful contexts (e.g. Penson et al. 2005), it is important for researchers to further investigate how humor can aid in these situations.

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Bionotes

Alex M. Borgella

Alex M. Borgella is an Assistant Professor of Psychology at Fort Lewis College. He received his B. A. in Psychology from the University of West Florida, his M. A. in Psychological Sciences from James Madison University, and his Ph.D. in Social Psychology from Tufts University. His research focuses on cognitive and behavioral processes associated with stereotyping and prejudice in stigmatized social groups (e. g. racial minority groups, overweight and obese people). His current interests involve disparagement humor and its effects on members of stigmatized social groups, within-group differences in racial stereotyping, and the effects of stereotype threat in performance domains. Email: amborgella@fortlewis.edu

Simon Howard

Simon Howard is an Assistant Professor of Psychology and Director of the Psychological Social Inquiry (PSI) Lab at Marquette University. He completed his undergraduate degree at San Jose State University and went on to earn his M. A. and Ph.D. in Social Psychology at Tufts University. His research examines how race or sociocultural ideas associated with race (i. e. stereotypes) influence the psychological processes of both racially marginalized and non-marginalized group members.

Keith B. Maddox

Keith B. Maddox is an Associate Professor of Psychology and Director of the Tufts University Social Cognition (TUSC) Lab. He received his A.B. in Psychology from the University of Michigan, and his M. A. and Ph.D. in Social Psychology from the University of California, Santa Barbara. His lab is focused on research programs examining social cognitive aspects of stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination. The long-range goal of this work is to further the understanding of the representation of stereotypic knowledge and its implications for the behavior and treatment of members of stereotyped groups.