

NOT ALL GROUPS ARE EQUAL: DIFFERENTIAL VULNERABILITY OF SOCIAL  
GROUPS TO THE PREJUDICE-RELEASING EFFECTS OF DISPARAGING  
HUMOR

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Clinical  
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## ABSTRACT

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Research has shown that sexist humor allows men to express sexism by replacing non-sexist norms in a situation with a norm of tolerance of sex discrimination (Ford, Armstrong, & Edel, 2008). Our study extends those findings by testing the hypothesis that disparaging humor fosters the "release" of prejudice against only groups for whom society's attitudes are ambivalent and thus for whom the expression of prejudice is dependent on immediate social norms to justify it (e.g., women, homosexuals). The expression of prejudice against groups like racists is socially acceptable and should not be dependent on events like disparaging humor to justify it. Consequently, disparaging humor should have little effect on the release of prejudice against them.

One hundred sixty four participants completed measures of prejudice against homosexuals and racists (Cotrell & Neuberg, 2005). Participants read four jokes that disparaged homosexuals, or racists, or that contained no disparaging content. Next, participants allocated budget cuts to four student organizations including one that either supported racist or homosexual agendas.

Results supported our hypothesis. Prejudice against homosexuals predicted the amount of money participants cut from the homosexual organization relative to the others upon exposure to anti-homosexual jokes ( $\beta = .61, p < .001$ ) but not neutral jokes ( $\beta = .10, ns$ ) or anti-racist jokes ( $\beta = .13, ns$ ). In contrast, attitudes toward racists did not differentially predict budget cuts allocated to the racist organization upon exposure to anti-racist jokes ( $\beta = .30, ns$ ), neutral jokes ( $\beta = .12, ns$ ) or anti-homosexual jokes ( $\beta = .12, ns$ ).

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Disparaging humor refers to remarks that elicit amusement through the denigration, derogation, or belittlement of individuals or social groups (Ferguson & Ford, 2008). Because humor communicates that its message is to be interpreted in a non-serious manner, disparaging humor can uniquely denigrate its target while avoiding challenge or criticism (e.g., Bill & Naus, 1992; Ford & Ferguson, 2004; Johnson, 1990).

I contend, however, that disparaging humor is not simply benign amusement. For instance, exposure to sexist humor can negatively affect the way sexist men perceive discrimination against women (e.g., Ford, 2000; Ryan & Kanjorski, 1998) and their willingness to discriminate against women (Ford, Boxer, Armstrong, & Edel, 2008). Ford and Ferguson (2004) proposed their prejudiced norm theory to explain these findings. For people high in prejudice, disparaging humor communicates an implicit norm that discrimination against the targeted group is tolerated in the immediate context. Prejudiced people then use this "prejudiced norm" to regulate their own behavior. Accordingly, disparaging humor functions as a "releaser" of prejudice that people otherwise would suppress.

This research extends research derived from prejudiced norm theory by addressing the novel question of why societal norms regarding the treatment of some groups (e.g., women, homosexuals) can be especially susceptible to ambiguity and change as a result of disparaging humor.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Prejudiced Norm Theory**

Ford and Ferguson's (2004) prejudiced norm theory is built on three interrelated propositions. First, when communicating through humor, a new sense of levity is created. Instead of holding a serious mindset, the communicators adopt a non-serious humor mindset that is used to decipher the message. According to Berlyne (1972), "Humor is accompanied by discriminative cues, which indicate that what is happening, or is going to happen, should be taken as a joke. The ways in which we might react to the same events in the absence of these cues become inappropriate and must be withheld" (p. 56). In the case of disparaging humor, cues communicate that the message is non-threatening and can be interpreted in a playful, non-serious mindset. As Zillmann and Cantor (1976/1996) suggested, the "club over the head" is funny when the protagonists are clowns in cartoons but not when they are police officers responding to a riot (p. 105).

Second, by making light of the expression of prejudice, disparaging humor communicates an implicit "meta-message" (Attardo, 1993) or normative standard that it is acceptable in this context to relax the usual "critical sensitivities" and treat such discrimination in a less critical manner (Husband, 1977). Humor indicates a shared understanding of its meta-message only if the recipient approves of the humor (Fine, 1983; Kane, Suls, & Tedeschi, 1977). So, if the recipient approves of the disparaging humor—that is, switches to a non-serious humor mindset to interpret the expression of prejudice—he or she implicitly consents to a shared understanding (a social norm) that it is acceptable in this context to make light of discrimination against the targeted group. In

keeping with this hypothesis, Ryan and Kanjorski (1998) found that men who were exposed to sexist jokes reported greater acceptance of rape myths and violence against women but only when they found the jokes amusing and inoffensive—that is, when they interpreted the jokes in a non-serious humor mindset.

Third, one's level of prejudice toward the disparaged group affects their reaction to disparaging humor. Depending upon the extent to which recipients are high in prejudice toward the disparaged group, they will interpret disparaging humor through a non-serious humor mindset (Zillmann & Cantor, 1976/1996). Thus, upon exposure to disparaging humor, people high in prejudice are more likely than those low in prejudice to perceive an external social norm of tolerance of discrimination against the disparaged group. Furthermore, people who are high in prejudice tend to have more weakly internalized non-prejudiced convictions compared to people who are low in prejudice (Monteith, Devine, & Zuwerink, 1993); they are primarily motivated by external forces (social norms) to respond without prejudice (e.g., Devine, Monteith, Zuwerink, & Elliot 1991; Devine, Plant, Amodio, Harmon-Jones, & Vance, 2002; Plant & Devine, 1998). As a result, people high in prejudice are more likely to use external norms as a standard defining how one ought to behave (Monteith, Deneen, & Tooman, 1996; Wittenbrink & Henly, 1996). Highly prejudiced people suppress prejudice when social norms dictate restraint and release prejudice when the norms communicate approval to do so.

Like people who are high in other forms of prejudice, people who are high in hostile sexism are motivated to suppress prejudice against women to avoid social sanctions, but not because of internalized convictions (Ford & Lorion, 2000). However, Ford and Lorion (2000) found that people high in benevolent sexism did not show lower

internal motivation to respond to women without prejudice than those low in benevolent sexism. Because benevolent sexism is characterized by the glorification rather than disdain of women, people high in benevolent sexism might be more likely than those high in hostile sexism to internalize nonsexist standards of conduct.

Because people who are high in *hostile* sexism are primarily externally motivated to respond without prejudice, they are more likely to subscribe to the norm implied by sexist humor that it is acceptable to make light of sex discrimination and not take it seriously in the immediate context. Indeed, research shows that people approve of sexist humor to the extent that they have sexist attitudes (e.g., Butland & Ivy, 1990; Greenwood & Isbell, 2002; LaFrance & Woodzicka, 1998).

Ford, Boxer, Armstrong and Edel (2008) addressed more directly the processes that mediate the effects of sexist humor. They found that, upon exposure to sexist comedy skits, men who were high in hostile sexism were more likely than those who were low in hostile sexism to *perceive* a norm of tolerance of sexism in the immediate context, and they were more likely to *use* that norm to guide their own reactions to a sexist event. Hostile sexism predicted the amount of money participants cut from the budget of a women's organization relative to four other student organizations upon exposure to sexist comedy skits but not neutral comedy skits. A perceived local norm of approval of funding cuts for the women's organization mediated the relationship between hostile sexism and discrimination against the women's organization. See also Ford, Wentzel and Lorion (2001).

## **The Position of Groups in the Social Order**

I propose that sexist humor derives power to foster a prejudiced norm and discrimination against women from the position that women occupy in the broader "social order." As a result of ambivalent attitudes toward women, society does not treat sexism as completely unacceptable. On the other hand, society does not treat sexism as being completely acceptable and free to be expressed openly. That is, sexism is gradually shifting from being completely acceptable to being completely unacceptable. Thus, sexism is conditional. It must be suppressed under most circumstances (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003). However, it may be released if immediate social norms justify its expression (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003). In such a context, one can release prejudice and be spared the recognition that he or she has behaved inappropriately (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986). Previous research demonstrates that sexist humor creates such a normative context that justifies the release of prejudice against women.

The blatant sexism and open discrimination that existed prior to the civil rights movement of the 1960s and the feminist movement of the 1970s has been largely replaced by subtle, more complex forms of sexism such as "ambivalent sexism" (Glick & Fiske, 1996), "modern sexism" (Swim, Aikin, Hall, & Hunter, 1995), and "neo-sexism" (Tougas, Brown, Beaton, & Joly, 1995). Contemporary models of sexism suggest that attitudes toward women have become ambivalent, containing both positive and negative components. That is, many Americans consciously espouse egalitarian values and non-prejudiced attitudes while possessing negative sentiments toward women.

I further contend that other groups are susceptible to the same effects of disparaging humor insofar as they occupy a social position characterized by a shifting

acceptability. Sociologist Herbert Blumer (1965) suggested that social groups occupy different positions in the social order, and that society attaches to each position different value and a different set of rights and privileges. Below I review two theories that address the dimensions on which the social position of groups can be distinguished. Together, these theories provide a framework for understanding how broad societal norms influence the suppression and expression of prejudice toward social groups, and why norms regarding treatment of some groups may be vulnerable to ambiguity and change in a given social context as a result of exposure to disparaging humor.

### **The Color Line Theory**

Herbert Blumer (1965) developed a metaphor, the "color line," to distinguish the social position of Whites and African-Americans and to define stages by which African-Americans (and presumably other historically disadvantaged or disenfranchised groups) gain acceptance in society. Blumer's "color line" consists of three bands or layers that represent different dimensions of social life on which African-Americans have been historically separated from Whites (dimensions on which historically disadvantaged groups have been separated from fully accepted groups in society more generally). The outermost band refers to the public domain of civil rights; the intermediate band refers to economic position and opportunity; and the inner band refers to interpersonal relationships and intergroup attitudes.

Blumer contended that changes in the social position of historically disadvantaged groups such as African-Americans in the mid-1960s begin at the outer band of civil rights and gradually move inward to effect economic opportunity and then finally interpersonal relations. That is, for a historically disadvantaged group to overcome economic

subordination, it first must have attained fundamental civil rights. As the status positions of different groups become equalized, the nature of social interaction in intergroup attitudes too may begin to change. Blumer suggested that the initial agents of social change are found in large-scale social movements that derive momentum from the cumulative effect of multiple forces that shape public life. The American Civil Rights Movement, for instance, mobilized (a) branches of federal government—administrative acts of the executive branch, judicial rulings by the courts, legislation by congress and enforcement acts by federal agencies, (b) policies and positions of national organizations and institutions, (c) national media coverage, and (d) national action groups such as the NAACP (Blumer, 1965, pp. 325-326).

Social change at the innermost layer of social interaction is predicated on advances in the outer layers of civil rights as well as economic and social opportunity. However, social change at the innermost layer lies "outside the formal controls of a society; it is a matter of personal attitude and thus falls inside the area of individual determination" (p. 335).

Research on contemporary racism suggests that African-Americans have made significant progress in gaining acceptance in society. However, that African-Americans still occupy a social position characterized by shifting acceptability (particularly in innermost layer of social interaction) is evidenced by the ambivalence of Whites' racial attitudes characterized by models of racism such as symbolic racism (Kinder & Sears, 1981), modern racism (McConahay, 1986) and aversive racism (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986).

### **The Normative Window Model of Prejudice**

Ferguson and Crandall (2006) expanded on the Blumer's (1965) color line theory in their normative window model of prejudice. Ferguson and Crandall contend that a social group occupies one of three conceptually adjacent positions in the social order based on the degree to which society justifies prejudice against the group and the degree to which that societal standard is consensually shared among individuals.

The first or left-most position is called the “justified prejudice region” and consists of groups that are consensually defined as deviants. There is a clear and stable consensus that groups in this location are bad (e.g., harmful, morally inferior). Groups in this region might be “racists” or “terrorists.” They are “socially unprotected groups” in that prejudice toward them is defined as just and completely acceptable. Because this norm of justified prejudice is consensual and stable, it is highly resistant to change.

The second or right-most region is called the “socially unjustified prejudice region” and consists of groups that are consensually defined as good. Groups in this region might be “fire fighters,” or “doctors.” They are “righteous” groups in that negative evaluations of them are socially defined as completely unjustified, wrong and inappropriate. The norm of unjustified prejudice is consensual and stable, and therefore resistant to change.

The third or middle structural region is called the “normative window.” Groups in this region are not seen as deviant or righteous but rather as socially disadvantaged in a particular historical period. For “disadvantaged” groups in the normative window, there is a general social norm against expressions of prejudice. That is, expressions of prejudice are generally considered to be wrong and unjustified and the norms are

enforced through the perceived threat of social sanctions for violations. That means groups in the normative window are “socially protected.” However, this norm of unjustified prejudice is *not* consensual—not everybody accepts the prescriptive non-prejudiced norm. Because these non-prejudiced norms are not consensually agreed upon, they are unstable and vulnerable to change in a given social context. Norms regarding the expression of prejudice toward groups in the normative window can become ambiguous or conflicting under the right circumstances.

Like Blumer (1965), Ferguson and Crandall suggest that the social position of groups change with society's values and collective attitudes. Specifically, groups in the normative window were once located in the justified prejudice region. But through broad societal changes (e.g., social movements), the justified prejudiced norms began to give way to norms of increasing acceptance of the groups. Groups in this window then are in a state of shifting acceptability. Prejudice against them is changing from being completely justified to being completely unjustified. Prejudice is increasingly considered by society to be wrong and unjustified. It is because of the growing norm of unjustified prejudice that people feel pressure to suppress their prejudice under most circumstances.

Empirical research shows that today such groups include racial and sexual minorities, women and religious minorities (Crandall & Ferguson, 2005; Ferguson & Crandall, 2006). Groups in the normative window may have once been located in the justified prejudice region. For example, social norms have historically promoted justified and seemingly rational prejudice against groups such as women, African-Americans, homosexuals, religious minorities, and feminists. However, through broad societal changes (e.g., economic changes, conflict among social groups), the justified prejudiced

norms began to erode, becoming less consensual and stable. People now feel less justified in harboring such prejudices.

### **The Position of Homosexuals in the Social Order**

Like women and African-Americans, there is evidence suggesting that homosexuals too have been working their way through a “shifting state of acceptability” for many decades. From the framework of Blumer’s (1965) color line theory, homosexuals are making advances in each of the three layers of acceptability: gaining basic civil rights, economic opportunity, and establishing interpersonal relationships. In the context of Crandall and Ferguson’s (2006) normative window model, they are moving from being characterized as deviant and unacceptable to having a level of acceptability that is not completely agreed upon in society. Accordingly, society’s attitudes toward homosexuals have become ambivalent.

The United States has seen a movement taking place for homosexual rights since the 1950’s. In a similar way to Rosa Parks’ protest, which initiated the civil rights movement, the Stonewall Inn incident in New York City on June 27, 1969 triggered the gay rights movement (Schroeder, 2004). The Stonewall Inn was a popular gay bar that was raided by the police in hopes the customers would disperse. Instead, rioting erupted between the police and the patrons of the bar. The three days of unrest that followed resulted in additional protests and a new level of political activism.

The early 1970’s saw a broad ideological shift in American society in the treatment of homosexuals and homosexuality. In 1973, through meetings with the American Psychiatric Association, activist groups proposed that homosexuality should be removed from the DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of mental disorders) as a

diagnosable psychological disorder (Silverstein, 2009). These changes paved the way for homosexuality to be defined by society not as a disorder, but as an “alternative lifestyle” and for homosexuals to be defined not as a deviant group, but as a disadvantaged group.

Additionally, there has been a strong push in the United States legislature for homosexual civil rights. Related Supreme Court decisions have made sexual relations between same sex couples legal, created “domestic partnership” clauses, and have granted homosexuals additional opportunities in educational, military, and occupational settings. Homosexual couples who are registered as a “domestic partnership” are afforded economic opportunities that were not previously available to them (Marino, 2004).

Another homosexual rights topic that is currently under heavy debate is gay marriage. Pro-homosexual groups believe homosexual couples should be allowed to participate in the institution of marriage. Groups who are against gay marriage commonly believe that a homosexual couple being allowed to marry is a violation of the tradition of marriage; gay marriage breaches the core values important to these groups.

Loftus (2001) suggested that this "ideological shift" in society's position on homosexual rights and the acceptability of homosexual lifestyles has affected individuals' attitudes toward homosexuals and homosexuality. In 1973, 72 percent of Americans believed that same-sex relations were completely wrong. More recent data from 1998 showed that 58 percent of Americans still held these beliefs. Also associated with this shift was a greater willingness to grant civil rights to homosexual people (Loftus, 2001).

## Research Overview and Hypotheses

From the general framework of the normative window model, I derived the following hypotheses. The prejudice-releasing effects of disparaging humor are limited to groups in the normative window—those groups in the “in between” state of acceptability against whom the expression of prejudice is dependent upon immediate norms to justify it (e.g., women, homosexuals). In contrast, for groups like criminals or racists—groups in the justified prejudice region, society does not promote a general norm of prejudice suppression. Instead, society treats prejudice against such groups as completely acceptable and free to be expressed openly. Therefore, the expression of prejudice against such groups should not be dependent on events like disparaging humor to create a local norm to justify it. As a result, exposure to disparaging humor should have little effect on the release of prejudice against them.

To test this hypothesis, participants completed a measure of prejudice against homosexuals and racists adapted from Cotrell and Neuberg’s (2005) measure of emotional reactions toward social groups. In an allegedly unrelated study, participants read jokes that disparage either homosexuals or racists. Then, participants were given the opportunity to discriminate against either homosexuals or racists. Following Ford et al (2008), participants were asked to recommend budget cuts for several student organizations including one that is described as either supporting racist or homosexual social and political agendas. I predicted participants would recommend greater budget cuts for the homosexual student organization after reading anti-homosexual jokes than after reading neutral or anti-racist jokes, insofar as they held a high level of prejudice toward homosexuals. In contrast, I predicted that the relationship between anti-racist

attitudes and budget cuts allocated to the racist student organization would not vary as a function of reading anti-racist jokes, neutral jokes or anti-homosexual jokes.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHOD

### **Participants and Design**

Participants consisted of 59 male and 104 female Caucasian undergraduate students recruited from the Psychology Department's subject pool (students enrolled in Psychology 150—Introduction to Psychology). Participants included in the data set were restricted to Caucasian students due to an abnormally large proportion of minority participants being randomly assigned to the anti-racist humor, racist student group target condition. Minority participants showed an unusually high amount of prejudice toward racists, which skewed the data in the aforementioned condition. Participants were randomly assigned to one of six conditions in a 3 (type of humor: anti-homosexual, anti-racist, neutral) x 2 (target of discrimination: homosexual organization, racist organization) between-subjects factorial design.

### **Procedure**

The experiment was completed in three phases. Each phase of the study was disguised as being a separate study altogether to prevent participants from realizing the true purpose of the study. All tasks for each phase were completed using Qualtrics, an online survey tool. Students were brought into the lab and used individual computers. Once participants clicked to begin the study, they were presented with a brief introduction to the study and a consent form. After reading this information and giving consent, the participants were asked to complete a series of surveys.

In phase one of the experiment, participants completed a measure of prejudice against homosexuals and racists using an adapted form of Cotrell and Neuberg's (2005)

measure of emotional reactions toward social groups. Through this survey, participants reported the extent to which they feel dislike, antipathy, hostility, disgust, fear, aversion and negativity toward each group. They completed the measure for two other groups (feminists and firefighters) as well to reduce suspicion of the true purpose of the study. Responses were made on a 9-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 9 (extremely). Participants completed the Cotrell and Neuberg measure to participants as they were seated in the computer lab and the experimenter introduced it as a "Social Attitudes Survey," allegedly designed to assess attitudes about a variety of social issues. I computed a measure of prejudice against homosexuals and a measure of prejudice against racists by averaging responses to each of the seven items for each group. Cronbach's alpha was .87 for the measure of prejudice against homosexuals and .84 for the measure of prejudice against racists. The Cotrell and Neuberg measure can be found in Appendix A.

In phase two, participants read jokes that disparage homosexuals, jokes that disparage racists, or neutral jokes that disparage neither homosexuals nor racists. In the anti-homosexual humor condition, participants read four jokes that disparage homosexuals (e.g., What do you call a gay dentist? The Tooth Fairy) and two neutral jokes (e.g., How do you double the value of a Geo Metro? Fill it with gas). In the anti-racist humor condition, participants read four jokes that disparage racists (e.g., How are a racist and a drunk alike? Everything they say ends in a slur) and two neutral jokes. In the neutral joke condition, participants read six neutral jokes. Participants read the jokes under the guise of a pilot test for a different study that involves the use of funny jokes. After reading each joke, participants rated how funny the joke was using a 9-point scale

ranging from 1 (not at all funny) to 9 (extremely funny). A complete listing of all jokes used in this study can be found in Appendix B.

Twenty-eight pilot participants (9 males, 19 females), who did not participate in the study, rated 30 selected jokes on scales measuring funniness, offensiveness, and to what degree each joke disparages homosexuals and racists. Participants provided ratings on each scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 9 (extremely). I conducted several analyses to select the jokes used within each condition. Pretest ratings indicated that the jokes selected for each condition are equally funny. Jokes that disparage homosexuals ( $M = 3.05$ ,  $SD = 2.04$ ) were rated as equally funny as the jokes that disparage racists ( $M = 2.82$ ,  $SD = 2.09$ ),  $t(27) = .77$ . The neutral jokes ( $M = 3.15$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ) were equally funny as jokes that disparage homosexuals,  $t(27) = .24$ , and jokes that disparage racists,  $t(27) = .868$ .

Jokes were also tested for level of offensiveness. Jokes that disparage homosexuals ( $M = 3.75$ ,  $SD = 2.37$ ) were rated as more offensive than jokes that disparage racists ( $M = 3.19$ ,  $SD = 2.40$ ),  $t(27) = 2.51$ ,  $p < .02$ . Jokes that disparage homosexuals were also rated as more offensive than the neutral jokes ( $M = 1.70$ ,  $SD = .66$ ),  $t(27) = 5.32$ ,  $p < .01$ . Jokes that disparage racists were rated as more offensive than the neutral jokes,  $t(27) = 3.81$ ,  $p < .01$ .

Finally, analyses were conducted to be sure that the disparaging jokes disparaged only our targeted group. Homosexual jokes were rated to disparage homosexuals ( $M = 5.78$ ,  $SD = 2.60$ ) more than they disparage racists ( $M = 1.07$ ,  $SD = .38$ ),  $t(27) = 9.21$ ,  $p < .01$ . Racist jokes were rated to disparage racists ( $M = 6.32$ ,  $SD = 2.27$ ) more than they disparage homosexuals ( $M = 1.44$ ,  $SD = 1.38$ ),  $t(27) = 8.82$ ,  $p < .01$ . Neutral jokes had a

low amount of disparaging toward homosexuals ( $M = 1.09$ ,  $SD = .47$ ) and racists ( $M = 1.19$ ,  $SD = .60$ ). Furthermore, the homosexual jokes disparage homosexuals more so than the neutral jokes,  $t(27) = 9.06$ ,  $p < .01$ . The homosexual jokes disparage racists to the same extent that the neutral jokes do,  $t(27) = -1.39$ ,  $p < .18$ . Finally, the racist jokes disparage homosexuals to the same extent that the neutral jokes do,  $t(27) = 1.66$ ,  $p < .11$ .

After participants were exposed to the disparaging humor they completed phase three of the experiment. In phase three, participants were invited to participate in a project designed to determine how the student population believes the university should allocate funding cuts to selected student organizations. Participants were shown information using the online survey tool. The first page introduced the project and provided instructions for allocating budget cuts to the selected student organizations. In order to ensure clarity, the experimenter read the first page as the participants read along. The first page contained the following passage:

*Next year's funding for RSOs [registered student organizations] at WCU have to be cut by 18% (\$21,600) from the 2009-2010 budget of \$120,000. The RSOs that will be affected by the budget cut are listed on the following page. A brief description of each of those RSOs is included with your budget cut recommendation forms.*

*The Western Student Association (WSA), the student governing body, is investigating how the student body believes these funding cuts should be allocated among those organizations. The WSA has commissioned researchers on campus to aid them in determining how the student population wishes the university to*

*allocate the funding cuts. The WSA has given us the form on the next page to be completed by participants in our studies.*

*Each organization has reported that the 2009-2010 budgets were sufficient in funding their needs. However, each has expressed serious concerns that an 18% decrease will severely curtail their programs and possibly threaten their ability to continue operations.*

*Your task is to allocate budget cuts so that across the four organizations, the overall RSO budget is reduced by 18% (\$21,600). Allocate budget cuts to the organizations as you see fit. We understand that your budget cuts may not add up to exactly \$21,600. However, please try to match an overall budget cut of \$21,600 as closely as you can.*

*Keep in mind that your opinions are important. The WSA will use student allocations to make recommendations to the Student Senate who will represent the student body in the final allocation decisions.*

The second page listed four student organizations and their 2010-2011 operating budgets. The names and descriptions of the student organizations were created to sound similar to real registered student organizations you might find on a university campus. The student organizations and their budgets were listed as follows: Safe Arrival for Everyone (\$28,075), Gay and Lesbian Student Association OR Southern Heritage Student Association (\$29,925), Study Abroad Learning Program (\$32,075), and Jewish Cultural Collective (\$29,925). The student organizations were listed in this order for all participants. The Gay and Lesbian Student Association represented the homosexual student group and the Southern Heritage Student Association represented the racist

student group. After allocating budget cuts to each organization, participants were asked to indicate if they were members of any of the listed organizations. Additionally, participants were asked to list all student organizations they belong to. See Appendix C for a complete representation of the budget cut task.

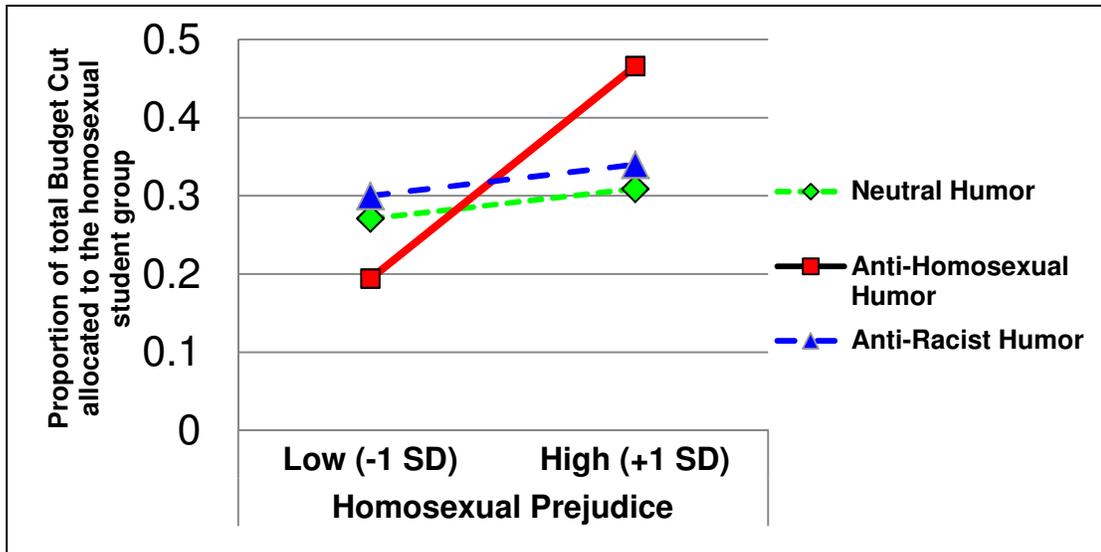
## CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

I predicted that, to the extent that participants were high in anti-homosexual prejudice, they would allocate a greater percentage of the total budget cut to the homosexual student organization upon exposure to anti-homosexual humor than the anti-racist or neutral humor. In contrast, in the racist target condition, I predicted that there would be an equal level of budget cuts allocated to the racist student organization across the three humor conditions.

To test this prediction, I used the General Linear Model procedure in PASW Statistics 18 to conduct a regression analyses on the budget cut allocation measure. The target organization (homosexual, racist) and type of humor (anti-homosexual, anti-racist, neutral) served as manipulated (categorical) variables and standardized scores on the measure of prejudice against the targeted group serving as a continuous individual difference variable. The predicted target organization x type of humor x prejudice interaction effect almost reached conventional level of significance,  $F(2, 151) = 2.50, p = .08$ .

To further test the hypotheses, I conducted separate regression analyses within the homosexual target condition and the racist target condition with type of humor (anti-homosexual, anti-racist, neutral) serving as a manipulated (categorical) variable and standardized scores on the measure of prejudice against the targeted group serving as a continuous individual difference variable. In the homosexual target condition, there was a main effect of prejudice,  $F(1, 73) = 11.71, p < .01$ . Overall, higher levels of prejudice are associated with greater budget cuts allocated to the homosexual organization ( $\beta = .34$ ,

$t = 3.18, p < .01$ ). In keeping with my hypothesis, there was a significant type of humor X prejudice interaction effect,  $F(2, 73) = 3.42, p < .05$ . Figure 1 displays regression lines pertaining to this interaction effect.



As seen in Figure 1, prejudice against homosexuals predicted the amount of money participants cut from the homosexual organization relative to the others upon exposure to anti-homosexual jokes ( $\beta = .61, p < .001$ ) but not neutral jokes ( $\beta = .10, ns$ ) or anti-racist jokes ( $\beta = .13, ns$ ). Simple effects tests further supported my hypotheses. The relationship between prejudice and budget cut allocations to the homosexual organization was significantly stronger in the anti-homosexual humor condition ( $\beta = .61$ ) than in the neutral humor condition ( $\beta = .10, F(1, 49) = 4.73, p < .05$ ), or the anti-racist humor condition ( $\beta = .13, F(1, 53) = 6.42, p < .01$ ). Finally, there was no difference between prejudice and budget cut allocations to the homosexual organization in the neutral humor condition ( $\beta = .10$ ) and the anti-racist humor condition ( $\beta = .13, F(1, 44) < 1.0$ ).

In contrast, attitudes toward racists did not differentially predict budget cuts allocated to the racist organization upon exposure to anti-racist jokes ( $\beta = .30, ns$ ), neutral jokes ( $\beta = .12, ns$ ) or anti-homosexual jokes ( $\beta = .12, ns$ ).

## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

These results show that upon exposure to anti-homosexual humor, people who harbor prejudice against homosexuals release their prejudice. Alternately, I have shown that, when people are exposed to anti-racist humor, their level of prejudiced attitudes toward racists does not predict the amount of prejudice expressed behaviorally. These results support my hypothesis that only certain types of groups are vulnerable to the prejudice-releasing effects of disparaging humor.

This research has also shown that, like women and African-Americans, homosexuals occupy a unique position in the broad social order of society. Social groups must go through a transition to move from being unaccepted to being accepted by society. Groups who are currently in this state of shifting acceptability are vulnerable to the prejudice-releasing effects of disparaging humor. Presumably, social groups in this state will eventually reach a level of full acceptability and will no longer be vulnerable to these effects.

### **Directions for Future Research**

In a related study, which is in its final stages, I examined the effects of disparaging humor toward groups who are stereotypically related. The social groups used in this study included Muslims, a minority racial group whom is in a shifting state of acceptability, and terrorists, a group for which society holds a consensual level of prejudice. In a pretest, it was confirmed that Muslims are stereotypically associated to terrorists in society. Previous research would suggest that upon exposure to humor disparaging Muslims, participants would discriminate against Muslims when given the

opportunity. Conversely, it would be expected that exposure to humor disparaging terrorists (compared to other types of humor) would not influence the level of discrimination toward terrorists.

This study set out to test the hypothesis that exposure to both anti-Muslim humor and anti-terrorist humor would act as a release of prejudice against Muslims. Results supported the hypothesis; participants discriminated equally against Muslims in the anti-Muslim and anti-terrorist humor conditions. These findings suggest that there is a unique effect of being stereotypically associated with a group for whom there is a consensual norm of prejudiced attitudes. Future research could examine similar effects with respect to other stereotypically related social groups (i.e., rednecks and racists).

### **Conclusions**

My findings suggest that disparaging humor fosters discrimination against only social groups for whom society's attitudes are ambivalent. Homosexual prejudice predicted discrimination against a homosexual student group after exposure to anti-homosexual jokes. Presumably, anti-homosexual humor created a norm of tolerance of discrimination against homosexuals and thus justified discrimination against them (Ford & Ferguson, 2004).

In contrast, negative attitudes toward racists did not more strongly predict discrimination against a racist student group after exposure to anti-racist jokes. The expression of prejudice against racists is socially accepted, thus it is not dependent on events like disparaging humor to justify it.

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11. To what extent do you feel disgust toward *feminists*?  
1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9
12. To what extent do you feel fear toward *feminists*?  
1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9
13. To what extent do you feel aversion toward *feminists*?  
1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9
14. To what extent do you feel negative toward *feminists*?  
1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9
15. To what extent do you feel dislike toward *racists*?  
1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9
16. To what extent do you feel antipathy toward *racists*?  
1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9
17. To what extent do you feel hostility toward *racists*?  
1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9
18. To what extent do you feel disgust toward *racists*?  
1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9
19. To what extent do you feel fear toward *racists*?  
1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9
20. To what extent do you feel aversion toward *racists*?  
1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9
21. To what extent do you feel negative toward *racists*?  
1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9
22. To what extent do you feel dislike toward *firefighters*?  
1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9
23. To what extent do you feel antipathy toward *firefighters*?  
1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9

24. To what extent do you feel hostility toward *firefighters*?  
1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9
25. To what extent do you feel disgust toward *firefighters*?  
1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9
26. To what extent do you feel fear toward *firefighters*?  
1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9
27. To what extent do you feel aversion toward *firefighters*?  
1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9
28. To what extent do you feel negative toward *firefighters*?  
1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9

## Appendix B: Jokes and ratings form based on condition

### *Anti-Homosexual Humor Condition*

Using the following scale, please rate the funniness of each of the jokes listed below

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9

Not at all Funny

Very Funny

1. How do you tell if a novel is homosexual? The hero always gets his man at the end.  
 1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9
  
2. If you took sponges out of the ocean, what would it be? Deeper.  
 1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9
  
3. What do you call a gay dentist? The tooth fairy.  
 1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9
  
4. What happened when the three gays attacked a woman? Two held her down and the other did her hair.  
 1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9
  
5. Why don't aliens eat clowns? Because they taste funny.  
 1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9
  
6. How many gays does it take to change a light bulb? One to change it and six to shriek "Faaaabulous!!"  
 1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9

*Anti-Racist Humor Condition*

Using the following scale, please rate the funniness of each of the jokes listed below

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9

Not at all Funny

Very Funny

1. How are a racist and a drunk alike? Everything they say ends in a slur.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9

2. If you took sponges out of the ocean, what would it be? Deeper.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9

3. Why do racists watch Jerry Springer? To see their friends and neighbors.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9

4. A racist was married 3 times, but what stayed the same? Their in-laws.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9

5. Why don't aliens eat clowns? Because they taste funny.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9

6. What do you call a racist's senior year? 5<sup>th</sup> grade.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9

*Neutral Humor Condition*

Using the following scale, please rate the funniness of each of the jokes listed below

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9

Not at all Funny

Very Funny

1. If you took sponges out of the ocean, what would it be? Deeper.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9

2. What do you call a fish with no eyes? A fsh

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9

3. Why don't aliens eat clowns? Because they taste funny.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9

4. What is the difference between a PhD in mathematics and a large pizza? A large pizza can feed a family of four.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9

5. Where do you find a no-legged dog? Right where you left him.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9

6. How do you double the value of a Geo Metro? Fill it with gas.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9

### **Appendix C: Budget cut instructions, group descriptions, and forms**

Next year's funding for RSOs [registered student organizations] at WCU have to be cut by 18% (\$21,600) from the 2009-2010 budget of \$120,000. The RSOs that will be affected by the budget cut are listed on the following page. A brief description of each of those RSOs is included with your budget cut recommendation forms.

The Western Student Association (WSA), the student governing body, is investigating how the student body believes these funding cuts should be allocated among those organizations. The WSA has commissioned researchers on campus to aid them in determining how the student population wishes the university to allocate the funding cuts. The WSA has given us the form on the next page to be completed by participants in our studies.

Each organization has reported that the 2009-2010 budgets were sufficient in funding their needs. However, each has expressed serious concerns that an 18% decrease will severely curtail their programs and possibly threaten their ability to continue operations.

Your task is to allocate budget cuts so that across the 4 organizations, the overall RSO budget is reduced by 18% (\$21,600). Allocate budget cuts to the organizations as you see fit. We understand that your budget cuts may not add up to exactly \$21,600. However, please try to match an overall budget cut of \$21,600 as closely as you can.

**Keep in mind that your opinions are important. The WSA will use student allocations to make recommendations to the Student Senate who will represent the student body in the final allocation decisions.**

|                |   |
|----------------|---|
| Organization   |   |
| Formal Name    | Safe Arrival for Everyone   |
| Nick Name      | SAFE  |
| Description    | The purpose of SAFE is to provide social and academic support for new college students, nontraditional students, first generation students and students with dependants. SAFE is supporting a new housing cooperative in Cullowhee in conjunction with civic and community leaders. |
| Classification | Special Interest  |

|                |  |
|----------------|--|
| Organization   |  |
| Formal Name    | Southern Heritage Student Association  |
| Nick Name      | SHSA   |
| Description    | The Southern Heritage Student Association (SHSA) is committed to serving and protecting the political and social advancement of white people. The SHSA has recently drafted a proposal to eliminate government oppression of white students through affirmative action admission policies. |
| Classification | Political & Social Action  |

|                |  |
|----------------|--|
| Organization   |  |
| Formal Name    | Study Abroad Learning Program  |
| Nick Name      | N/A  |
| Description    | We are the people who will assist students in planning, preparing, and returning from a study abroad experience. We help students come up with ideas, show them how to research a place, or find a program in a certain field. We give students an idea of what to expect when they go abroad. |
| Classification | Academic   |

|                     |   |
|---------------------|---|
| <b>Organization</b> |   |
| Formal Name         | Gay and Lesbian Student Association   |
| Nick Name           | GLSA  |
| Description         | Gay and Lesbian Student Association (GLSA) is committed to serving and promoting political and social advancement of homosexual people. It has just released "The ABC's of Homosexual's Social and Political Issues." Members seek change by playing an active role in the social justice movement. |
| Classification      | Political & Social Action   |

|                     |   |
|---------------------|---|
| <b>Organization</b> |   |
| Formal Name         | Jewish Cultural Collective  |
| Nick Name           | JCC   |
| Description         | Jewish Cultural Collective aims to provide opportunities for Jewish students to explore and celebrate their Jewish identity and to offer spiritual and social support for Jewish students at WCU. |
| Classification      | Faith/Spiritual   |

## ***Western Student Association***

Student Government

| Student Organization                  | 09-10<br>Budget | Student Proposed<br>Funding Cut | Remaining<br>Budget |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------|---------------------------------|---------------------|
| Safe Arrival for Everyone (SAFE)      | \$28,075        | _____                           | _____               |
| Southern Heritage Student Association | \$29,925        | _____                           | _____               |
| Study Abroad Learning Program         | \$32,075        | _____                           | _____               |
| Jewish Cultural Collective (JCC)      | \$29,925        | _____                           | _____               |
|                                       | \$120,000       | \$21,600                        | \$98,600            |

Do you belong to any of these student organizations?

YES            NO

If you answered YES, which ones do you belong to?

## ***Western Student Association***

Student Government

| Student Organization              | 09-10<br>Budget | Student Proposed<br>Funding Cut | Remaining<br>Budget |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------|---------------------------------|---------------------|
| Safe Arrival for Everyone (SAFE)  | \$28,075        | _____                           | _____               |
| Gay & Lesbian Student Association | \$29,925        | _____                           | _____               |
| Study Abroad Learning Program     | \$32,075        | _____                           | _____               |
| Jewish Cultural Collective (JCC)  | \$29,925        | _____                           | _____               |
|                                   | \$120,000       | \$21,600                        | \$98,600            |

Do you belong to any of these student organizations?

YES            NO

If you answered YES, which ones do you belong to?

## Appendix D: Informed Consent Form

Western Carolina University

Department of Psychology

Title of Project: Attitudes Study

Principal Investigator: Shane Triplett

You are invited to participate in a research project entitled “Humor Study.” This study is being conducted by Shane Triplett and Professor Thomas Ford from the Department of Psychology at Western Carolina University.

This study is comprised of three separate phases. They are separate and independent of each other but we've included them together because each is so brief. All together, it should take approximately 20 to 25 minutes to complete all three phases of the study.

Participation in this project will count as one research credit toward fulfillment of the research participation requirement for Psychology 150 students. Keep in mind that your participation is completely voluntary and you may stop participating at any point without penalty. You may stop participation at any time. There is no penalty for stopping participation. However, you must complete all three phases in order to receive credit toward the research participation requirement. If you choose to discontinue your participation at any time you may simply exit the on-line study. You must be 18 years or older to participate. If you are under 18, please exit the survey at this time.

Phase I consists of a social attitudes survey. This survey is comprised of seven items designed to assess your feelings toward a variety of social groups. You will complete the survey for four different groups. The survey will take approximately 10 minutes to complete.

In Phase II is the humor perception phase. You will read six different jokes and rate the funniness of those jokes. We will ask you to rate the funniness of each joke after you have read it. In total, this phase of the study should take approximately 5 minutes.

Finally, Phase III consists of a funding cut allocation task. You will be asked to allocate budget cuts to four RSOs [registered student organizations] at WCU so that across the four organizations, the overall RSO budget is reduced by 18% for next year. You will be asked to allocate budget cuts to the organizations as you see fit. This phase of the study should take approximately 15 minutes.

Your participation in each phase is voluntary. You may withdraw at any time or decline to answer any question you choose without penalty. Also, please keep in mind that your responses are completely anonymous and will be held strictly confidential. Completion of the survey indicates our consent to use the responses you supply and that you are at least 18 years old.

Finally, there are also no immediate benefits to you for participating in this study. If you have any questions, you may contact Shane Triplett at [srtriplett1@catamount.wcu.edu](mailto:srtriplett1@catamount.wcu.edu) or Professor Ford at 227-2109 (or [tford@email.wcu.edu](mailto:tford@email.wcu.edu)). Also, if you have any concerns about how you were treated during the experiment, you may contact the office of the IRB, a committee that oversees the ethical dimensions of the research process. The IRB office can be contacted at 227-3177. This research project has been approved by the IRB.

If you would like to receive a summary of the results, once the study has been completed, please enter your email address in the space below.

## Appendix E: Debriefing Script

There's more to this study than I told you from the beginning. I'm curious, do you have any idea what that might be?

Well, there is more to this study, and I'm going to explain what that is. But first, I want to explain why I didn't tell you everything about the study from the beginning. Social psychology studies are designed to examine how people spontaneously react to certain situations or events. But sometimes, if participants know what we're studying from the beginning or know the hypotheses from the beginning it can affect the way they respond. For instance, often people give us responses they think we want them to. If that happens our results could be misleading. We wouldn't get an idea of how people spontaneously respond in a given situation. So, do you see why I didn't tell you everything about the study from the very beginning?

Now, let me explain the details of the study you just completed. Social psychologists study the effects of exposure to humorous material (like the jokes you read) on the way people think about and behave toward others.

We propose that exposure to *disparaging* humor (e.g., humor that derogates groups or individuals) can have negative social consequences. By making light of the expression of prejudice, disparaging humor may communicate a message of approval or tolerance of discrimination against members of the targeted group. As an example, our research shows that exposure to humor against a particular group actually can increase people's tolerance of other instances of discrimination aimed at that group. This effect is particularly true for people who have negative preconceived notions about that particular group.

This study was designed to follow up on previous research by looking at how/whether exposure to disparaging humor toward homosexuals and racists can affect how favorably people are likely to behave toward them as a group. As in previous studies, precautions were taken to be sure none of the jokes used were overly offensive and that they did not include foul language. So, in this study, we exposed participants to a set of jokes that

targeted homosexuals, racists, or jokes that were neutral (Do you recognize which of those conditions you were in?).

Okay. And then after participants have had a chance to read the jokes, we're giving them an opportunity to behave favorably or unfavorably toward related student groups. That's where the fund allocation study comes in. We're giving people a chance to cut funds to a number of organizations including a homosexual or racist organization. We wonder whether exposure to humor directed toward homosexuals or racists will (perhaps unknowingly) lead people to recommend greater funding cuts for the homosexual or racist's organizations relative to the others. It is important to know that we're not interested in or even tracking any individual's responses. What we'll do is compare the average amount of funding cuts allocated to each group determined by all of our participants in each of the conditions. Does that make sense to you?

Do you have any questions about the study--about any of the activities you completed or anything I said during the study?

Okay. Thank you very much for taking time to participate in this study. We really appreciate it. One last thing before you leave. I'd like to ask you to not discuss this study with your classmates as they will likely participate in the study later in the semester; and if they know anything about it before they come in, we may not get those spontaneous responses that we talked about earlier. Is that okay? Good. Again, thank you for coming. If you have questions or concerns, feel free to contact myself ([srtriplett1@catamount.wcu.edu](mailto:srtriplett1@catamount.wcu.edu)) or Dr. Thomas Ford ([tford@wcu.edu](mailto:tford@wcu.edu)).