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“What Do You Call A Black Guy Who Flies A Plane?” Disparagement and Confrontation in the Context of Racial Humor

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HUMOR AS DISPARAGING AND CONFRONTATIONAL

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Abstract

We conducted two studies to test our overarching hypothesis that racial humor may increase or decrease subsequent expressions of prejudice by setting social norms that indicate prejudice is either more or less acceptable. We selected riddles that were disparaging, confrontational, or neutral, and examined their effects on subsequent prejudiced expressions. We predicted humor that disparaged Blacks would convey that prejudiced expressions are more socially acceptable, resulting in increased expressions of prejudice toward Blacks. Conversely, we predicted humor that confronted prejudiced expressions would convey that prejudiced expressions are less socially acceptable, resulting instead in reduced expressions of prejudice toward Blacks. Our studies demonstrated that, consistent with prejudiced norm theory, disparagement humor, and confrontational humor perceived as disparaging, has the potential to disinhibit expressions of prejudice when used, even in brief social interactions. Our studies also showed that individuals often misinterpreted the subversive nature of confrontational humor, frequently perceiving the confrontation intended to challenge expressions of prejudice as instead intending to disparage Blacks. Thus, while it is possible racial humor may have the potential to tighten norms inhibiting prejudice, the perceptions of confrontational jokes as disparaging may result in jokes (created to subvert and inhibit prejudice) ironically reinforcing prejudiced responding.

Keywords: Confrontation, Disparagement, Humor

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“What Do You Call A Black Guy Who Flies A Plane?” Disparagement and Confrontation in the
Context of Racial Humor

“What do you call a Black guy who flies a plane?” This riddle is like countless jokes that begin with questions referring to social groups and end with punchlines that contain (usually negative) stereotypes about those groups. These punchlines may highlight and reinforce these stereotypes, delivering an antisocial message to the audience that stereotypic expressions are acceptable. However, if the punchlines instead indicated that stereotypic expressions are unacceptable, then the jokes may deliver a more prosocial message to the audience.

This riddle above can be told with different punchlines that may convey very different messages. One version responds to the riddle’s question with, “A nigger.” The message indicates that all Black people, no matter how accomplished, may be reduced to a slur described as one of the most vile words in the English language (Camp 2013; Jeshion 2013; Kennedy 2002; Vallée 2014). This message is indisputably antisocial, and may convey that expressions of prejudice are acceptable. However, a contrasting version of the punchline responds to the riddle’s question with, “A pilot, you fucking racist!” The message may then convey that the stereotypic thoughts inspired by the riddle’s question are inappropriate. This message is comparatively prosocial, and potentially confronts the stereotypic thoughts and expressions that the first version of the punchline may have condoned. These punchlines suggest that racial humor may have the ability to convey both powerful antisocial and prosocial messages, with the consequent potential to set social norms that increase or decrease the acceptability and expression of racial stereotypes and prejudice. The objective of our research was to examine whether racial humor that conveys these antisocial and prosocial messages influences subsequent expressions of racial stereotypes and prejudice.

1.1 Disparagement Humor

Much research has examined humor that targets social groups in negative ways (Billig 2001; Ferguson and Ford 2008; Ford and Ferguson 2004; Hobden and Olson 1994; Murray 1932; Wicker et al., 1980). Termed “disparagement humor,” this humor may attribute negative stereotypes to social groups with the intention of stigmatizing and marginalizing these groups. Humor used in this way to disparage individuals of various groups has been referred to as a “sword” (Rappoport 2005) that conveys an antisocial message that attacks the target group. Disparagement humor has been used to ridicule individuals on the basis of their appearance (Baumeister and Carels 2014), political affiliation (Braun and Preiser 2013), race (Apte 1987; Billig 2001; Maio et al. 1997; Weaver 2010), religion (Ford et al. 2014; Wolff et al. 1934), and sex (Ford 2000; Ford et al. 2008; Ford et al. 2001; Gray and Ford 2013; Greenwood and Isbell 2002; Korchersberger et al. 2014; Romero-Sanchez et al. 2010; Ryan and Kanjorski 1998; Thomae and Viki 2013; Thomas and Esses 2004). Thus, humor has exceeded the bounds of mere levity. Specifically, disparagement humor is a vehicle through which toxic ideas, values, and judgments about social groups may be conveyed. And, dangerously, because of the inherent ability of joke-tellers to defend their use of disparagement humor by claiming to be “just joking,” disparagement humor may provide a method of expressing prejudice without inciting negative reactions from others. Thus, the external motivations that often compel individuals to inhibit expressions of prejudice (Devine et al. 2002; Plant and Devine 1998; Plant and Devine 2003) may be circumvented, and, consistent with prejudiced norm theory (Ford and Ferguson 2004), expressions of prejudice subsequently may be made more freely.

1.2 Loosening and Tightening of Societal Norms Regarding Prejudice

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Prejudiced norm theory contends that disparagement humor may loosen the societal norms that inhibit expressions of prejudice toward various social groups (Ford and Ferguson 2004; Ford et al. 2008). Specifically, the theory asserts disparagement humor may serve as a relatively safe method for joke-tellers to express prejudice, thereby loosening norms to make expressions of prejudice more acceptable. The humorous message evokes a non-serious mindset in the observers, making them less critical of further expressions of prejudice (Ford and Ferguson 2004).

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Alternatively, racial humor that targets racism may tighten societal norms, potentially decreasing future expressions of prejudice by mocking their inappropriateness (e.g., Rossing 2011) and serving as a “shield” instead of a sword (Rappoport 2005). Simply stated, racial humor is not always disparagement humor. And because racial humor is not always antisocially intended, it may not always produce antisocial consequences.

1.3 The Justification and Suppression of Racial Prejudice

The justification-suppression model of prejudice asserts that various factors increase or decrease expressions of genuine feelings of prejudice toward outgroup members (Crandall and Eshleman 2003). Suppression factors (e.g., egalitarian beliefs, fear of social sanction) decrease of prejudice. In contrast, justification factors increase expressions of prejudice, often by providing “cover” for the prejudiced behavior, such that actors can rationalize their behavior as having nothing to do with prejudice, creating ambiguity about whether or not the behavior was actually prejudiced (Crandall and Eshleman 2003; Crandall et al. 2002; Dovidio and Gaertner 2000; Dovidio et al. 2002; Gaertner and Dovidio 1986; Murrell et al. 1994; Nail et al. 2003; Saucier et al. 2005).

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Consistent with the justification-suppression model (Crandall and Eshleman 2003), we predicted that exposure to disparagement racial humor may serve as justification for otherwise suppressed prejudiced attitudes. Because individuals will have observed a possible expression of prejudice occurring without great risk of social sanction (due to the defensibility of the joking context), and potentially with social reward (e.g., by eliciting laughter), they may feel less compelled to inhibit their own expressions of prejudice. Further, consistent with prejudiced norm theory (Ford and Ferguson 2004; Ford et al. 2008), humor may arouse non-serious mindsets that allow for increased allowances and expressions of prejudice. Together, these theories suggest racial disparagement humor may set social norms that allow for increased expressions of prejudice (Crandall and Eshleman 2003; Ford et al. 2008). Accordingly, we expect individuals will be more likely to endorse negative stereotypes toward Blacks and become less supportive towards policies that benefit minorities after exposure to disparaging racial humor.

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Alternatively, confrontation research suggests that castigating expressions of prejudice conveys the message that they are inappropriate, tightening the norms that inhibit them (Czopp et al. 2006; Monteith et al. 1996). Confrontation has been found to decrease subsequent expressions of prejudice, but also results in negative attitudes toward the confronter (Czopp et al. 2006). The expectation (and reality) that there is potential social cost to confronting perpetrators of prejudice may make individuals hesitant to engage in such confrontation (Czopp et al. 2006). Research has shown that when individuals failed to confront a perpetrator they felt they should have confronted, they perceived the perpetrator more positively, and were less likely to confront in the future (Rasinski et al. 2013). In effect, individuals' failure to confront prejudice makes them less likely to challenge its expression, and loosens the norms that inhibit it.

1.4 Humor as a Confrontation Mechanism

Although racial humor is often used to disparage, it also has the potential to challenge racism. It may be that racial humor provides a unique method of confrontation that decreases expressions of prejudice and incurs less social costs than more overt forms of confrontation. Due to its inherent levity, racial humor may be a more subtle, but effective form of confrontation, providing a safer method of combating prejudice while maintaining positive relationships with the perpetrators of prejudice. Aggressive confrontations may elicit negative, and potentially even violent, responses (e.g., Baumeister et al. 1996; Baumeister and Campbell 1999). However, humor, as a method of confrontation, may be less aggressive. The expectation that jokes are intended to be non-serious (Ferguson and Ford 2008) may make humorous confrontations easier to assimilate. Confrontation humor (e.g., humor is intended to challenge, rather than reinforce, the expression of prejudiced ideas) may activate social norms prohibiting the expression of prejudice.

We conducted two studies to test our overarching hypothesis that racial humor may increase or decrease subsequent expressions of prejudice by setting social norms that indicate that prejudice is either more or less acceptable. We selected riddles that were disparaging, confrontational, or neutral, and examined their effects on subsequent prejudice expressions. When the riddle was designed to confront prejudiced attitudes, we expected individuals to show decreased subsequent expressions of prejudice compared to when the riddle was disparaging. We also expected individuals to experience greater negative self-directed and negative other-directed affect after exposure to the confrontational joke compared to the disparaging joke (Monteith et al. 1993).

Further, much of the research on disparagement humor has been conducted by having participants read the jokes (e.g., Ford et al. 2001; Ford et al. 2008; Ford et al. 2014). We conducted our studies by having experimenters approach passers-by and tell them the jokes verbally to better represent actual social interactions. We could therefore both replicate the results from previous disparagement humor research and test our novel hypotheses about confrontation humor in settings that contained higher levels of mundane realism.

2 Study 1

2.1 Method

2.1.1 Participants

Participants ($N = 150$) were approached in several small communities throughout the North Central Kansas region and participated voluntarily for no compensation. The majority were non-students (61%), male (53%), beyond traditional college age ($M = 31.10$, $SD = 12.55$), and White (95%).

2.1.2 Procedure

We were interested in the effects of disparagement humor that targeted Blacks and confrontational humor that targeted racism on majority group members. Individual participants who appeared to be White were approached by one of five White undergraduate researchers. Participants were asked to participate in a research study. After providing consent, participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions in which they were told one of three riddles. In the Confrontational Humor condition ($n = 50$), participants heard riddles intended to challenge the appropriateness of thinking about or expressing negative stereotypes about Blacks (“*What do you call a Black guy that flies a plane? A pilot you fucking racist.*”). In the Disparagement Humor condition ($n = 50$), participants heard riddles intended to reinforce negative stereotypes

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3 about Blacks (i.e., “*Where do you hide your money from a Black thief? In your books.*”). It
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5 should be noted that for this condition, we did not use the racist punchline to the pilot riddle (i.e.,
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7 “*A nigger.*”) because we did not want to subject our experimenters to potentially extreme
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9 negative reactions this may have instigated. In the Neutral Humor condition ($n = 50$),
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11 participants heard riddles making no reference to stereotypes about Blacks (“*Have you heard*
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13 *about corduroy pillows? They’re making headlines.*”). Participants then completed
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15 questionnaires consisting of items to assess the participants’ demographic information (e.g., sex,
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17 age, ethnicity, college student status) and the measures described below. Participation took less
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19 than 10 minutes. All materials and procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board.
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24 25 **2.1.3 Reaction Measures**

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27 *Ratings of the jokes.* Participants rated how funny, offensive, enjoyable, and prejudiced
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29 they found the joke to be using scales from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*). Participants were also
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31 asked, “Who (if anyone) was being made fun of in the joke you were just told? In other words,
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33 who (if anyone) was the “butt” of the joke?” and indicated their answer using free response
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35 formats.
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39 *State affect.* Participants reported the extent to which affective descriptors (e.g., Devine
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41 et al. 1991) applied to how they felt at that moment in time, on scales from 1 (*not at all*) to 7
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43 (*very much*). Composites were created for positive affect (e.g., *inspired, excited*), self-directed
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45 negative affect (e.g., *guilty, angry at myself*), and other-directed negative affect (e.g., *frustrated*
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47 *by the researcher*) by averaging participants’ responses to the items for each type of affect,
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49 respectively, with higher scores indicating higher levels of positive, self-directed negative, or
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51 other-directed negative affect.
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Attitudes toward Blacks. Participants reported their overall feelings toward Blacks using a thermometer rating from 0 (*cold/unlikeable*) to 100 (*warm/likeable*). Participants reported their levels of affiliation with Blacks by selecting among seven sets of converging circles, one of which contained the word “*self*,” and one of which contained the word “*other*.” The sets progressed from non-overlapping (labeled with a 1) to almost completely overlapping (labeled with a 7), and the selection of circles with greater degrees of overlap (i.e., higher numerical values) indicated greater levels of perceived affiliation with Blacks. Further, participants reported their likelihood of using the term “we” to describe their degree of affiliation with Blacks from 1 (*not at all likely*) to 7 (*extremely likely*).

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Attributions of stereotypes to Blacks. Participants indicated how accurate ten stereotypic descriptors were in describing Blacks by on scales from 1 (*not at all accurate*) to 7 (*extremely accurate*). These stereotypic descriptors consisted of a variety of both hostile terms (e.g., *lazy*, *aggressive*) and benevolent terms (e.g., *athletic*, *entertaining*). Composite scores were calculated by taking the average of the participants’ responses for the hostile/negative and benevolent/positive stereotypes, respectively, with higher scores indicating higher levels of attributions of stereotypes to Blacks.

Attitudes toward scholarships for Blacks. Participants completed two items to assess their attitudes toward scholarship initiatives for Black students at a nearby large state university. One item assessed the participants’ likelihood to support an initiative to increase scholarships for Black students from 1 (*not at all likely*) to 7 (*extremely likely*); a second item assessed the participants’ perceptions of the fairness of such an initiative from 1 (*not at all fair*) to 7 (*extremely fair*).

2.2 Results and Discussion

2.2.1 Ratings of the Jokes

Participants perceived the jokes differently as a function of the joke condition, with significant differences emerging for their ratings of how offensive, $F(2, 137) = 76.43, p < .001$, and prejudiced, $F(2, 134) = 94.22, p < .001$, they perceived the jokes to be, and marginally significant differences emerging for their ratings of how funny, $F(2, 144) = 2.75, p = .067$, and enjoyable, $F(2, 137) = 2.90, p = .058$, they perceived the jokes to be. Bonferroni-corrected multiple comparisons revealed the three joke conditions all differed significantly in terms of ratings of how offensive and prejudiced they were; the joke in the Disparagement Humor condition was rated as more offensive and prejudiced than the jokes in the Confrontational Humor and Neutral Humor conditions, and the joke in the Confrontational Humor condition was rated as more offensive and prejudiced than the joke in the Neutral Humor condition. Further, the joke in the Confrontational Humor condition was rated as marginally funnier and marginally more enjoyable than was the joke in the Disparagement Humor condition. The means for these joke ratings are shown in Figure 1.

In reporting the target (i.e., “butt”) of the joke, 46 of the 50 participants in the Disparagement Humor condition reported that Blacks were the target of the joke. The other four participants in this condition left the item blank. In the Neutral Humor condition, 39 of the 50 participants reported that the joke targeted no one, pillows, or that they did not know who the target of the joke was, and 10 of the remaining participants left the item blank. The final participant, ironically, listed Blacks as the target of the joke. In the Confrontation Humor condition, the results were more variable. While 27 of the 50 participants identified the target of the joke as racists or the listener (as intended), 15 of the remaining participants identified the target of the jokes as Blacks. That is, almost one-third of the participants in the Confrontation

Humor condition did not perceive the confrontational intent of the joke, possibly assuming that any joke that makes reference to a racial group must intend to disparage that group. The remaining participants left the item blank or provided a response that the target of the joke was someone other than Blacks or the listener/racists (e.g., “no one”).

2.2.2 State Affect

Contrary to predictions, participants' reports of positive affect, $F(2, 130) = 1.52, p = .223$, and negative self-directed affect, $F(2, 131) = 1.17, p = .314$, did not differ among the joke conditions. A significant effect of the joke condition did emerge on the participants' reports of negative other-directed affect (i.e., toward the joke teller), $F(2, 134) = 4.32, p = .015$. Bonferroni-corrected multiple comparisons revealed that, as expected, participants reported higher levels of negative other-directed affect in the Confrontation Humor condition, $M = 1.78, SD = 1.57$, than they did in the Neutral Humor condition, $M = 1.13, SD = 0.49$. The participants' reported levels of negative other-directed affect in the Disparagement Humor condition, $M = 1.35, SD = 0.91$, did not differ from the levels reported in the other two conditions, however.

2.2.3 Attitudes Toward Blacks

Contrary to hypotheses, there were no significant differences between the means reported by participants in the Disparagement, Confrontation, and Neutral Humor conditions for their ratings of warmth toward Blacks, $F(2, 143) = 0.67, p = .512$, or their ratings of affiliation with Blacks on the measure of overlapping circles, $F(2, 145) = 0.68, p = .511$. However, there were differences among the joke conditions for the ratings of using the term “we” to describe their affiliation with Blacks, $F(2, 144) = 3.14, p = .046$. Consistent with hypotheses, Bonferroni-corrected multiple comparisons revealed that participants in the Disparagement Humor condition reported less affiliation with Blacks, $M = 3.74, SD = 1.79$, than did participants in the Neutral

Humor condition, $M = 4.69$, $SD = 1.89$. However, participants in the Confrontation Humor condition did not differ from the participants in either of the other two joke conditions, $M = 4.20$, $SD = 1.93$.

2.2.4 Attributions of Stereotypes to Blacks

No differences emerged among the joke conditions for the participants' attributions of positive stereotypes to Blacks, $F(2, 134) = 0.43$, $p = .647$, but a significant effect between the joke conditions did emerge for the participants' attributions of negative stereotypes to Blacks, $F(2, 133) = 4.62$, $p = .011$. Bonferroni-corrected multiple comparisons revealed that participants attributed negative stereotypes at (similarly) higher levels in both the Disparagement Humor, $M = 2.86$, $SD = 1.42$, and Confrontation Humor, $M = 2.95$, $SD = 1.24$, conditions than participants did in the Neutral Humor condition, $M = 2.16$, $SD = 0.49$.

2.2.5 Attitudes Toward Scholarships for Blacks

Contrary to predictions, participants' ratings of their likelihood of supporting the scholarship initiatives did not differ as a function of the joke condition, $F(2, 145) = 1.88$, $p = .156$. But participants' ratings of their perceptions of the fairness of these initiatives did vary as a function of the joke conditions, $F(2, 146) = 3.24$, $p = .042$. Bonferroni-corrected multiple comparisons revealed that, partially supportive of predictions, participants in the Disparagement Humor condition, $M = 2.64$, $SD = 1.74$, reported these initiatives were less fair than did participants in the Neutral Humor condition, $M = 3.58$, $SD = 2.14$. Participants in the Confrontation Humor condition did not report perceptions of the fairness of the initiatives to increase scholarships for Blacks, $M = 3.04$, $SD = 1.65$, that differed from either of the other two joke conditions.

2.2.6 Exploratory Analyses Based on the Perceived Target of the Joke

As reported above, participants in the Confrontation Humor condition were divided in their interpretation of who was targeted as the “butt” of the joke, with almost one-third of the participants perceiving the joke as targeting Blacks, rather than targeting the listener or racists. Accordingly, we re-conducted our analyses using the joke condition independent variable as a four level variable reflecting four joke “conditions”: Disparagement Humor ($n = 50$); Confrontation Humor as Disparaging (consisting of the participants who interpreted the confrontational joke as anti-Black, $n = 15$); Confrontation Humor as Confrontational (consisting of the participants who interpreted the confrontational joke as anti-racist, $n = 27$); and Neutral Humor condition ($n = 50$). Because this new categorization of our participants who were originally in the Confrontation Humor condition is not a true manipulation, we offer these analyses for their exploratory value.

To avoid redundancy with the effects we reported above, we confined the report of our exploratory results to only those analyses that showed differences involving the newly created divisions of the original Confrontational Humor condition. Accordingly, we found significant differences involving the divisions of the Confrontational Humor conditions on the measures of how offensive the jokes were, $F(3, 136) = 51.11, p < .001$, as well as marginally significant differences in the participants’ attributions of negative stereotypes to Blacks, $F(3, 143) = 2.43, p = .068$. We conducted Bonferroni-corrected multiple comparisons to probe these main effects.

We found that participants in the Disparagement Humor condition, $M = 4.98, SD = 1.61$, Confrontation Humor as Disparaging condition, $M = 4.14, SD = 1.75$, and Confrontation Humor as Confrontational condition, $M = 3.74, SD = 1.94$, rated the jokes to which they were exposed as significantly more offensive than did participants in the Neutral Humor condition, $M = 1.24, SD = 0.61$. Interestingly, participants who interpreted the confrontational jokes as intended rated

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3 them to be less offensive than did participants who either interpreted the same confrontational
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5 jokes as anti-Black, or who were exposed to the disparaging jokes. In fact, participants in the
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7 Disparagement Humor condition and Confrontation Humor as Disparaging condition did not
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9 differ in their ratings of how offensive they rated the jokes to be.
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13 We found that participants who interpreted the confrontational jokes as anti-Black
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15 attributed the highest levels of negative stereotypes to Blacks, $M = 3.71$, $SD = 1.32$. These levels
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17 were significantly higher than the levels reported by participants in the Neutral Humor
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19 Condition, $M = 2.16$, $SD = 1.33$, marginally higher than the levels reported by participants who
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21 interpreted the confrontational jokes as intended, $M = 2.65$, $SD = 1.10$, and were not different
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23 from the levels reported by participants in the Disparagement Humor condition, $M = 2.86$, $SD =$
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27 1.42.
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29 30 **2.3 Summary of Study 1**

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32 Overall, our results in Study 1 showed that disparagement humor against Blacks was
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34 well-understood by participants to be targeting Blacks, and was perceived as more offensive and
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36 prejudiced than other forms of humor. Further, consistent with previous research (Ford 2000;
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38 Ford et al. 2008; Ford et al. 2001; Gray and Ford 2013; Kochersberger et al. 2014; Romero-
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40 Sanchez et al. 2010; Ryan and Kanjorski 1998; Thomae and Viki 2013; Thomas and Esses 2004)
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42 and our hypotheses regarding disparagement humor, exposure to disparagement humor appeared
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44 to set a norm that allowed for more expressions of racial prejudice toward Blacks in the form of
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46 more endorsement of negative stereotypes toward Blacks, more reports that scholarships for
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48 Blacks are unfair, and less affiliation with Blacks (in including them in the term “we”).
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53 We found partial support for our hypotheses for confrontation humor designed to
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55 challenge expressions of prejudice against Blacks. Consistent with hypotheses, participants
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3 exposed to confrontation humor reported the highest relative levels of negative-other directed
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5 affect. However, these levels were not high at absolute levels, suggesting participants were not
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7 greatly bothered by the confrontation. Consistent with hypotheses, we found confrontation
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9 humor resulted in some reduced expressions of prejudice compared to the disparagement humor
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11 condition. Importantly, we also found that about a third of the participants exposed to
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13 confrontation humor interpreted it as disparagement humor. Rather than perceiving the riddle to
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15 be challenging expressions of prejudice toward Blacks, these participants perceived the riddle to
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17 be derogating Blacks. This perception may have produced (unexpected) greater endorsement of
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19 negative stereotypes toward Blacks among individuals exposed to the confrontation humor.
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25 These results suggest disparagement humor may relax the social norms prohibiting
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27 expressions of prejudice, making it a dangerous social convention with the potential to reinforce
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29 expressions of racism. Further, confrontation humor intending to tighten the social norms
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31 prohibiting expressions of prejudice may also be dangerous, because its intention may be
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33 perceived as disparaging instead of confrontational, ironically reinforcing the expressions of
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35 racism it intends to subvert.
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39 **3 Study 2**

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41 One of the most interesting, and unsettling, findings in Study 1 was that almost one-third
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43 of participants exposed to a joke that confronted stereotypic thinking perceived the joke as
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45 targeting Blacks. Thus, rather than receiving a prosocial message about the inappropriateness of
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47 racial stereotypes, these participants may have received an antisocial message about the
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49 appropriateness of racial stereotypes. In essence, the attempt to subvert prejudiced norms
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51 through humor may have backfired to ironically reinforce them.
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In Study 2, we focused our investigation on the confrontational joke. We used the same methods and materials as in Study 1 with an added manipulation such that half of our participants received the joke in exactly the same way that participants did in Study 1, and the other half of the participants received the joke with instructions to think about the joke carefully before reporting their perceptions. We wondered if taking a moment to ponder the joke and consider its underlying intention would increase the likelihood that participants would perceive the joke as targeting the listener, or racists in general, such that the joke would tighten, rather than loosen, norms regarding expressions of prejudice.

3.1 Method

3.1.1 Participants

Participants ($N = 123$) were approached on the [UNIVERSITY] campus as well as in several small communities throughout the North Central Kansas region and participated voluntarily for no compensation. The majority were students (79%), male (58%), of traditional college age ($M = 22.74$, $SD = 6.43$), and White (96%).

3.1.2 Procedure

As in Study 1, individual participants who appeared to be White were approached by one of six White undergraduate researchers, and asked to participate in a research study. After providing consent, participants were told the “Black pilot” riddle used in the Confrontation Humor condition in Study 1. Additionally participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. In the Instruction condition ($n = 62$), participants were told to think carefully about the joke for a minute before responding to the subsequent measures. In the No Instruction condition ($n = 61$), participants proceeded to respond to the measures just as the participants did

in Study 1. Participant then completed questionnaires consisting of the same measures used in Study 1. Participation took less than 10 minutes.

3.2 Results

3.2.1 Analyses Comparing the Instruction and No Instruction Conditions

Ratings of the jokes. Participants did not differ between the Instruction and No Instruction conditions in their perceptions of the joke as funny, $t(119) = 0.92, p = .358$, enjoyable, $t(118) = 0.81, p = .419$, prejudiced, $t(116) = 0.53, p = .601$, or offensive, $t(117) = 0.33, p = .746$.

State affect. Participants did not differ between the Instruction and No Instruction conditions in their scores on positive affect, $t(114) = 0.19, p = .853$, negative self-directed affect, $t(112) = 0.30, p = .767$, or negative other-directed affect, $t(113) = 0.12, p = .905$.

Attitudes toward Blacks. Participants did not differ between the Instruction and No Instruction conditions in their reported levels of warmth toward Blacks, $t(118) = 0.20, p = .840$, or their ratings of affiliation with Blacks on the measure of overlapping circles, $t(120) = 1.14, p = .419$. However, participants in the Instruction condition reported mean levels of their likelihood to use the term “we” to describe their affiliation with Blacks, $M = 4.61, SD = 1.83$, that were marginally higher, $t(120) = 1.67, p = .098$, than in the No Instruction condition, $M = 4.03, SD = 1.97$.

Attributions of stereotypes to Blacks. Participants attributed marginally higher levels of negative stereotypes to Blacks, $t(115) = 1.84, p = .068$, in the Instruction condition, $M = 2.85, SD = 1.36$, than in the No Instruction condition, $M = 2.40, SD = 1.25$. Participants in the Instruction and No Instruction conditions did not differ in their attributions of positive stereotypes to Blacks, $t(115) = 0.24, p = .814$.

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3 *Attitudes toward scholarships for Blacks.* Participants did not differ between the
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5 Instruction and No Instruction conditions in their ratings of their likelihood of supporting
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7 scholarship initiatives for Blacks, $t(118) = 1.26, p = .211$, or their ratings of the fairness of these
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9 scholarship initiatives, $t(118) = 1.21, p = .228$.

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12 *Perceptions of the target of the joke.* As in Study 1, our results indicated that participants
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14 misinterpreted the target of the confrontational joke at alarming rates. In the No Instruction
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16 condition, 31 of the 61 participants indicated the target of the joke was Blacks, while only 27
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18 indicated the target of the joke was the listener/racists. In the Instruction condition, participants
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20 were no more successful in interpreting the joke as intended, $\chi^2(1) = 0.81, p = .368$. Over half,
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22 34 of the 62 participants, indicated the target of the joke was Blacks, while only 21 correctly
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24 indicated the target of the joke was the listener/racists. The remaining participants left the item
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26 blank or indicated no one was the target of the joke.

3.2.2 Analyses Showing Effects Related to the Perceived Target of the Joke

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34 As in Study 1, we examined the possibility that participants who interpreted the
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36 confrontational joke as targeting Blacks would differ on the measures from participants who
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38 interpreted the joke as targeting the listener/racists. Regardless of their being in the Instruction or
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40 No Instruction condition, we categorized participants into a Confrontation Humor as Disparaging
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42 condition or a Confrontation Humor as Confrontational condition based on their perceived target
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44 of the joke, and re-conducted our analyses using this categorization as the independent variable.
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47 As in Study 1, because these new “conditions” are not true manipulations, we offer these results
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49 for their exploratory value.

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53 Participants who perceived the Confrontation Humor as Confrontational were marginally
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55 less likely to perceive the joke as prejudiced, $M = 3.71, SD = 1.90$, than were participants who
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perceived the Confrontation Humor as Disparaging, $M = 4.42$, $SD = 1.87$, $t(106) = 1.94$, $p = .055$. The groups did not differ in their perceptions of the joke as funny, enjoyable, or offensive.

Participants who perceived the Confrontation Humor as Confrontational did not differ from participants who perceived the Confrontation Humor as Disparaging in levels of warmth toward Blacks, affiliation with Blacks, support for or ratings of fairness of scholarships for Blacks, or overall attributions of either positive or negative stereotypes to Blacks. Interestingly, in partial support of our expectations, participants who perceived the Confrontation Humor as Confrontational tended to attribute lower levels of the stereotypic qualities “athletic”, $t(107) = 2.36$, $p = .020$, and “musical”, $t(106) = 1.97$, $p = .052$, to Blacks, $M_s = 4.72$ and 3.57 , $SD_s = 1.85$ and 1.79 , respectively, than did participants who perceived the Confrontation Humor as Disparaging, $M_s = 5.47$ and 4.20 , $SD_s = 1.45$ and 1.49 , respectively.

Participants who perceived the Confrontation Humor as Confrontational did not differ from participants who perceived the Confrontation Humor as Disparaging in levels of positive affect, $t(102) = 0.67$, $p = .506$, or negative self-directed affect, $t(103) = 0.58$, $p = .565$. Partially supporting our expectations, participants who perceived the Confrontation Humor as Confrontational reported levels of negative other-directed affect that tended to be higher than did participants who perceived the Confrontation Humor as Disparaging, $M_s = 1.73$ and 1.35 , $SD_s = 1.45$ and 0.73 , respectively, but the difference was not significant, $t(101) = 1.73$, $p = .088$.

3.3 Summary of Study 2

In Study 2, we found that instructing participants to think carefully about the joke before responding to the measures made little difference on their responses to the measures. This is likely because the majority of participants, regardless of whether or not they received these instructions, were similarly likely to perceive it as targeting Blacks, rather than confronting

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3 prejudice. When participants did perceive the joke to be confrontational, they expressed
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5 benevolent stereotypes (i.e., athletic, musical) toward Blacks at lower rates, reported marginally
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7 more negative other-directed affect, and rated the joke to be marginally less prejudiced. Overall,
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9 these results demonstrate the inherent danger in using confrontation humor to challenge
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11 expressions of prejudice. The misunderstanding of the joke's target and overall intention may
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13 result in the ironic reinforcement of, and allow for greater tolerance of, expressions of prejudice.
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16 17 18 **4 General Discussion**

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20 We predicted that humor that disparaged Blacks would convey to participants that
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22 prejudiced expressions are more socially acceptable, resulting in increased expressions of
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24 stereotypes and prejudice toward Blacks. Conversely, we predicted humor intended to confront
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26 prejudiced expressions would convey to participants that prejudiced expressions are less socially
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28 acceptable, resulting instead in reduced expressions of stereotypes and prejudice toward Blacks.
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32 Our results in Study 1 generally supported our predictions about the effects of humor that
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34 disparaged Blacks. Participants exposed to humor that disparaged Blacks reported less
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36 affiliation with Blacks, more attributions of negative stereotypes to Blacks, and more negative
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38 perceptions of the fairness of scholarship initiatives to help Black students. These results,
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40 interestingly, came despite participants perceiving the humor to be higher in offensiveness and
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42 prejudice. These results are consistent with prejudice norm theory (Ford and Ferguson 2004;
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44 Ford et al. 2008) and the justification-suppression model of prejudice (Crandall and Eshleman
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46 2003; Crandall et al. 2002) and suggest disparagement humor released prejudice toward Blacks
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48 by loosening social norms about its inappropriateness.
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53 Our results were less consistent with our predictions about the effects of humor intended
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55 to challenge expressions of prejudice. In Study 1, we expected confrontational humor to activate
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3 social norms prohibiting expressions of prejudice; we instead found that participants exposed to
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5 confrontational humor reported higher levels of attributions of negative stereotypes to Blacks
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7 than did participants exposed to neutral humor, but lower levels than participants exposed to
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9 disparagement humor. Consistent with confrontation theory (Czopp et al. 2006; Devine et al.
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11 1991; Monteith et al. 1996), the confrontation humor instigated more other-directed negative
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13 affect toward the joke-teller than did the neutral humor.
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17 In Study 2, we sought to make participants more aware of the subversive intention of the
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19 confrontational humor by providing instructions that they think carefully about the joke. We
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21 compared the reactions of the Instructions group to a No Instructions group. We found that the
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23 Instructions group reported marginally higher affiliation with Blacks and, surprisingly,
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25 marginally higher attributions of negative stereotypes towards Blacks. Overall, providing
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27 instructions did not improve participants' understanding of the humor's subversive intention, nor
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29 did it lead to greater suppression of negative stereotypes.
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34 These counter-theoretical findings were likely due to participants to perceive
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36 confrontational humor as confrontational. In each study we found that a substantial number of
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38 participants (about one-third in Study 1 and just over half in Study 2) perceived the
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40 confrontational humor as disparaging. In Study 1, when participants interpreted the
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42 confrontational humor as anti-Black, they were more likely to attribute negative stereotypes to
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44 Blacks. It appears the participants interpreted the humor at face value and missed the subversive
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46 intention. This misinterpretation of the humor as disparaging Blacks may have consequently
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48 served to justify increased expressions of negative attitudes towards Blacks.
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53 The purpose of the confrontational joke was to establish a norm that discouraged
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55 expressions of prejudice. However, in order for humor that confronts prejudiced thinking to be
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3 effective, it needs to be understood. Herein lies the danger of using humor as a confrontation
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5 mechanism; it requires thought and elaboration for the audience to perceive the true intent of the
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7 jokes. Satire and irony may be inherently more difficult for audiences to understand, particularly
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9 due to the non-serious, non-critical mindset activated by the context of humor. Past research has
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11 shown that individuals frequently fail to “get the joke” when exposed to such humor; audiences
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13 perceived Stephen Colbert as conservative, rather than mocking conservatives (Baumgartner and
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15 Morris 2008), and perceived Archie Bunker to be a role model for social attitudes, rather than a
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17 caricature of a bigot (Brigham and Giesbrecht 1976; Vidmar and Rokeach 1974). The challenge
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19 in using humor to confront prejudice is how to increase the audience’s understanding of its
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21 subversive intention. Some evidence (AUTHORS in preparation) suggests educating audiences
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23 about racial humor’s potential to be used as either sword or shield (Rappoport 2005) may
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25 increase the likelihood they will perceive the subversive meaning of confrontational humor, and
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27 provides optimism for its use in establishing social norms that discourage expressions of
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29 prejudice. Future research should explore factors affecting the comprehension and social effects
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31 of racial humor that may confront, challenge, and subvert expressions of racism.
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39 These studies are not without limitations. While our results suggest there is potential for
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41 humor to be used in confronting prejudice, it would be inaccurate to conclude that doing so is
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43 completely “safe” in such situations. Individuals may or may not understand the intention
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45 behind such humor. Further, it is possible the joke we selected as confrontational may have
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47 clouded our affect-related outcomes, due to its use of profanity. It is possible that differences in
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49 negative affect may be partially explained by the relatively crass language the joke used, not just
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51 individuals’ perception of the joke as targeting them or their attitudes. Additionally, in our
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53 design, the riddle itself primed potentially racist thoughts or attitudes in listeners, which was then
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3 confronted in the punchline. That is, the joke was not used in response to spontaneous
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5 expressions of prejudice from participants, nor was the joke compared to non-humorous forms of
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7 confrontation. These factors should be incorporated into future research to more closely examine
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9 the potential for humor to serve as method of confronting prejudice.
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13 Our studies contribute to the extant literature in several ways. First, unlike much of the
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15 prior research that has examined the effects of disparagement humor in lab settings in which
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17 participants read the jokes (e.g., Ford et al. 2001; Ford et al. 2008; Ford et al. 2014), our studies
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19 were conducted in field settings with the jokes being verbally conveyed by our experimenters.
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21 Second, our studies are among the first to empirically examine how racial humor may be used to
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23 convey social norms intended to subvert, rather than reinforce, racist social hierarchies. While
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25 we failed to show clear evidence of this process, we hope our methods and findings will provide
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27 inspiration for future research to examine racial humor's potential to set social norms that both
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29 increase and decrease tolerance for and expressions of stereotypes and prejudice. Finally, our
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31 studies support the practical social implication that individuals should be careful in their use of
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33 racial humor by showing that even racial humor with prosocial intentions of discouraging
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35 expressions of stereotypes and prejudice may backfire when misinterpreted by the audience.
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40 41 **5 Conclusion**

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43 Our studies demonstrate that, consistent with prejudiced norm theory, disparagement
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45 humor, and confrontational humor perceived as disparaging, has the potential to disinhibit
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47 expressions of prejudice when used, even in brief social interactions. We also sought to extend
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49 research on confrontations of prejudice by examining whether racial humor could be used to
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51 tighten societal norms inhibiting prejudice by challenging stereotypic and prejudiced thoughts
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53 and expressions. Disturbingly, our studies showed that individuals often failed to perceive the
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HUMOR AS DISPARAGING AND CONFRONTATIONAL

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3 subversive nature of the confrontational humor. Instead, individuals frequently perceived the
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5 confrontation intended to subvert their stereotypic thoughts and expressions as instead intending
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7 to disparage Blacks. Thus, while it is possible racial humor may have the potential to tighten the
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9 norms inhibiting prejudice, the perceptions of confrontational jokes as disparaging may result in
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11 jokes created to subvert and inhibit prejudice ironically reinforcing prejudiced responding. That
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13 is, humor wielded to tear down racist social hierarchies may instead strengthen the walls that
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15 hold them in place.
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For Preview Only

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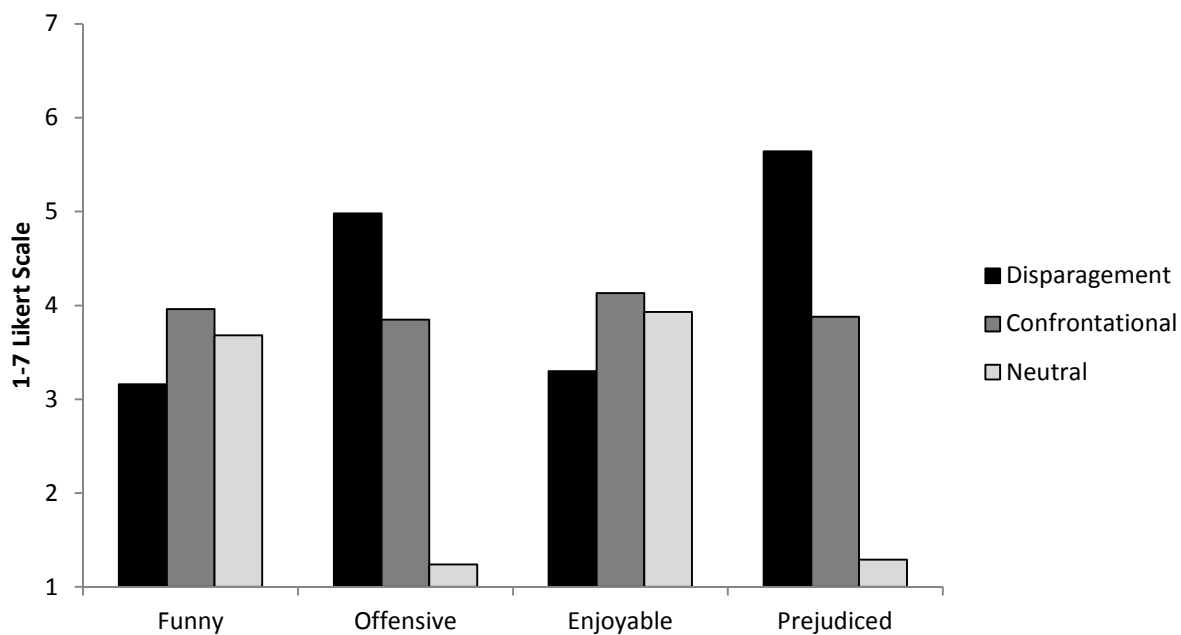
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Figures

Figure 1. Perceptions of the joke (Study 1).



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