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I, Aaryn L. Green , hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Sociology.

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Abstract

An overwhelming facet of race literature suggests that American society has entered an era of colorblindness; where instead of perpetuating racist ideology through blatant discriminatory legislation, racial differences are either understated or ignored entirely. These new racial processes are reflected in the policies of major social institutions, but also within popular culture. Yet, as made evident by the success of comedians such as Chris Rock and Dave Chappelle, stand-up comedy challenges acceptable racial discourse; placing race in the forefront. Comedy persists as a facet of popular culture where racial difference is made apparent, yet ironically the art of comedy is usually overlooked by sociologists. What is lacking in the humor research is an understanding of how comedy creates an environment where race can be spoken about directly, and often times harshly. Through the analysis of focus groups, the present study finds evidence to suggest that racial and ethnic comedy serves to both reinforce and wane racial and ethnic stereotypes, similarities, and differences. After watching stand-up comedy clips of popular comedians, black and white respondents show both agreement and disagreement on: (1) the offensiveness of ethnic comedy (2) stereotypes and perceived truths and (3) the utility of ethnic comedy in everyday interactions. These findings are helpful in understanding how comedy serves as one of the few openly racialized facets of popular culture as well as uncovering some of the ways in which race works within the culture of a self-proclaimed colorblind society.

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Theoretical Background.....	2
A Brief History.....	2
Theories of Humor.....	3
Relief Theory.....	6
Superiority Theory.....	8
Incongruity Theory.....	9
Past Studies.....	10
Methods.....	13
Findings.....	16
Offensiveness.....	17
Stereotypes and Perceived Truths.....	21
Utility of Comedy in Everyday Interaction.....	23
Conclusion.....	26
References.....	29
Appendix A.....	33
Appendix B.....	34

Introduction

For generations comedy has been an American pastime. Much like music, film, and art, it has been incorporated into the mainstream facets of popular culture. Stand-up comedy in particular, one of the most direct and reflective forms of comedy, has become a favorite American pastime as evidenced by its growing net worth. Stand-up comedy is a multimillion dollar industry. The top ten grossing stand-up comedians grossed approximately \$165 million between 2009 and 2010 alone (Forbes.com 2010). Still, these figures do not include those comedians such as Jerry Seinfeld or Chris Rock (or even comedians from older generations such as Bill Cosby or Richard Pryor) who have been successful in utilizing their stand-up comedy to venture into hosting major award shows, lecturing at universities, and even launching movies and sitcoms. Major cable television stations such as Comedy Central, Showtime, and HBO have incorporated stand-up comedy specials into their regular broadcasting, highlighting both established and up and coming comedic talent.

While it is easy to overlook the sociological implications of an enjoyable pastime such as stand-up comedy, a critical investigation of the content of and the affinity for such comedy generates interesting discussions. For one, stand-up comedy is political. Comedians often base routines off of common conceptions of race, class, gender, democracy, family dynamics, and economics. Famed comedian and actor Chris Rock for instance often reports that he reads the daily newspaper as a catalyst for choosing the topics of his comedy. Similarly George Carlin has spoken about the importance of using his comedy to challenge existing social structure and common beliefs. The fact that comedians formulate jokes in regards to current events and common social issues underscores the potential importance of looking at comedy as a form of social commentary.

One such controversial topic, race and ethnicity, is often introduced within comedy routines. Not only is race discussed by comedians, but it is often done so in what could be considered blatant and insensitive manners. Still, the growing success of stand-up comedians tells us that the audience is both receptive to and tolerant of speech that would otherwise be considered callous and unacceptable. Why is it that comedians can get away with making obvious racial, even racist commentary, and people still enjoy it? What is it about comedy that alters how we react to racially charged discussions? Critically investigating race within stand-up comedy is an opportunity to understand the paradox of a discourse that purposely highlights racial difference while simultaneously transcending racial boundaries.

Through the use of stand-up comedy, I analyze the helpful and harmful implications of comedic racial and ethnic commentary. Through cross-racial analysis, I examine the ways in which racial and ethnic comedy is perceived to both reinforce stereotypes and provide a more comfortable environment for discussing racial difference. This study focuses in particular on the reaction to and interpretation of racial/ethnic humor in social settings, and promises to extend our understanding of the degree to which -- and if so, how-- humor potentially adds to and/or lessens racial tensions and (mis)understandings in a colorblind society.

Theoretical Background

A Brief History

Present-day ethnic comedy (comedy that is centered on racial or ethnic conditions, commonalities, and differences) finds its roots in the racial turmoil of the past. American comedy has a history that parallels the racial tensions of its times. White-Black relations in particular have been mirrored through comedic expression, beginning in the decades before the Civil War and lasting through the postbellum period. "Black comedy is tied inextricably to the

African American condition” writes Bambi Haggins (2007, p. 1). The popularity of minstrelsy and vaudevilles spoke directly to the subordination of blacks to their white counterparts.

Early minstrel troupes, formed during the mid 1800’s, featured white actors who, while made up in black face, performed comedic skits, sang, danced, and portrayed stereotypical and exaggerated black behavior and vernacular. The shows became so wildly popular that many cite minstrelsy as the first form of American popular culture (Dirks and Mueller 2007). Eventually, after the Civil War, these troupes began to feature black entertainers who fulfilled the same roles. Regardless of the race of the entertainer, minstrel and vaudeville shows depicted the late 19th and early 20th century Negro as lazy, jovial, musical, gullible, and unsophisticated; characteristics which whites believed to be telling of blacks in everyday life. Although many minstrel troupes presented the negative outcomes of slavery, they did so through mockery, and more often than not, illustrated black slaves and newly freedmen as being both content and worry-free under plantation life (Watkins 1994). These portrayals proved to both reflect and strengthen Southern whites’ justifications for slavery and Northern whites’ indifference to abolition. The progression of the Civil Rights period and the brief Reconstruction period afterwards, decreased the popularity of minstrel shows and replaced them with vaudevilles. Despite the liquidation of the genre, however, the imagery of the freed Negro persisted. As vaudevilles continued and more blacks both performed and attended the shows, race-related humor began to fasten itself to black cultural entertainment. (Watkins 1994)

Fast forward to the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements of the 1960s and 1970s, and we find that ethnic comedy had all but disappeared from white comedy venues, but had taken on a more revolutionary tone in minority circles, especially among African Americans. Racial and ethnic comedy during this period brought forth black comedians who were more

brazen, rebellious, and candid in their public discussions of race relations. In particular the comedians of this era were committed to challenging whites' maltreatment of blacks, both past and present. The increased popularity of Richard Pryor and Dick Gregory, whose comedy served to directly challenge white hegemony, reflects a time where cultural and political resistance were central to the African-American community. Take for instance a popular skit written by famed black comedian Paul Mooney from the first season of *Saturday Night Live* (a majority white venue) in 1975. Here the white interviewer, Chevy Chase, uses word association during an interview with the black job applicant, Richard Pryor:

Interviewer (Chase): Alright, Mr. Wilson.... We've got one more psychological test we always do here. It's just a Word Association. I'll throw you out a few words - anything that comes to your mind, just throw back at me, okay?.... "White".

Mr. Wilson (Pryor): "Black".

Interviewer: "Bean".

Mr. Wilson: "Pod".

Interviewer: [casually] "Negro".

Mr. Wilson: "Whitey".

Interviewer: "Tarbaby".

Mr. Wilson: [silent, sure he didn't hear what he thinks he heard] What'd you say?

Interviewer: [repeating] "Tarbaby".

Mr. Wilson: "Ofay".

Interviewer: "Colored".

Mr. Wilson: "Redneck".

Interviewer: "Junglebunny".

Mr. Wilson: [starting to get angry] "Peckerwood!"

Interviewer: "Burrhead".

Mr. Wilson: [defensive] "Cracker!"

Interviewer: [aggressive] "Spearchucker".

Mr. Wilson: "White trash!"

Interviewer: "Jungle Bunny!"

Mr. Wilson: [upset] "Honky!"

Interviewer: "Spade!"

Mr. Wilson: [really upset] "Honky Honky!"

Interviewer: [relentless] "Nigger!"

Mr. Wilson: [immediate] "**Dead honky!**" [face starts to flinch]

(Saturday Night Live Transcripts)

While this skit was among the more risky of the time in regards to its open mockery of race, comedians like Pryor highlight the very essence of modern-day ethnic comedy. Far less frequent are the days of the jolly, childlike Negro image promoted in minstrel shows. Where prior racial

comedy was used to make a mockery of minorities, new-aged comedy saw minorities using humor as a tool to oppose oppression and celebrate blackness. Beginning with Dick Gregory and Richard Pryor's cohort, racial and ethnic comedy became a paradox in the sense that the divisive nature of racial tensions and differences were brought to the forefront while simultaneously attracting people of all races with its new frame of "integrated humor" (Watkins 1994, p. 495). Traditional theories of humor provide some explanations for how humor such as Gregory's and Pryor's has impacted group relations both within and across groups.

Theories of Humor

The history of gelogeny, the study of humor and laughter, extends from the philosophic periods of Plato and Aristotle to 17th century thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes. These early philosophers discussed the production of joy and laughter as it relates to the passion, pleasure, and pain of human interaction. For Aristotle, comedy was the opposite of – and a necessary counterpart to – tragedy. His early discussions of comedy considered incongruous or antithetical humor. This form of comedy arises from the gap between "*what* is presented and *the way* it is presented" (Watkins 1994). Aristotle's conception, aside from some limitations, is maintained in current theories of humor, specifically Incongruity Theory. Later, Thomas Hobbes forewarned of the propensity for comedy to rejoice in man's inhumanity. Hobbes' concerns seemed to have anticipated some less affable forms of comedy, particularly minstrelsy and vaudevilles.

Existing theories of humor, specifically regarding racial and ethnic humor, suggest that comedy can impact racial relations and understandings in several ways; (1) it can encourage reflection and investigation of existing racial systems or experiences (Watkins 1994; Nilsen and Nilsen 2006); (2) it can promote social resistance or strengthen collective identities (Freud 1960;

Gordon 1998; Mulkey 1998; Lynch 2002); and (3) it serves to reinforce existing sociocultural norms and stereotypes, and normalize and validate racialized social experiences (Park, Gabbadon, and Chernin 2006). Psychologists (who focus heavily on audience reception) and communication scholars have established how humor can prompt various emotional responses (e.g., release of tension, heightened feelings of superiority, and reduction of cognitive incongruity). Broadening the three leading theories of humor, (relief theory, superiority theory, and incongruity theory) helps to better frame *public* understandings of race relations. However, I demonstrate that none of the three dominating theories of humor—relief, superiority, incongruity—entirely account for the overall relationship between race and stand-up comedy.

Relief Theory

The origins of relief theory align with theories of the physiological effects of humor. Sigmund Freud (1960) investigated the mechanics and purpose of jokes and their relation to the subconscious. He discussed the increase or decrease in levels of arousal when people were confronted with a joke. Freud argued that laughter allows individuals to subconsciously overcome inhibitions. He writes, “by the help of a joke, [this] internal resistance is overcome in the particular case and the inhibition lifted” (Freud 1960, p. 144). Freud, who related many of his theories regarding suppression and arousal to humor, believed that laughter was a possible gateway into the unconscious. In his essay surveying theories of humor, John Lowe (1986) writes, “Freud's key perception here is that jokes succeed in liberating an otherwise suppressed, or ‘censored’ thought via the disguise of humor, thereby releasing energy and creating joy” (p. 442). In other words, Freud’s assertion is that jokes allow us to tap into thoughts and emotions that we would otherwise disregard or restrain. Through these neglected emotions we experience

a type of pleasure that would normally be inaccessible. This newfound pleasure, some scholars argue, has positive physiological benefits and also promotes good health (Wilkins and Eisenbraun 2009).

However, for an investigation of the social implications of comedy, relief theory is most useful as it is defined by psychology and communication scholars. The communication field has expanded Freud's theory to analyze social interactions. Rather than focusing on psychological relief at the individual level (Berlyne 1972), relief in the field of communication refers to social tensions (Meyer 2000). In this regard, engagement in humor reduces social strain in gatherings of individuals. This type of relief can be felt when someone cracks a joke during a tense interaction. The pleasure is created by the relief that is felt once the discomfort or unfamiliarity of the interaction is disrupted or diminished. Reducing this dissonance facilitates further interaction between parties by making the uncomfortable situation appear more manageable and less overwhelming.

The approach to relief theory taken by communication scholars provides a good entry point for sociologists to study comedy. Ethnic comedy in particular has been referenced as a way for minorities to release the frustrations that come along with holding a subordinate social status (Berlyne 1972, Watkins 1994, Gordon 1998, Meyer 2000, Haggins 2007, Carpio 2008). Joking about the hardships of minority status, allows minorities to release social angst in a way that does not threaten the dominant group. According to Dexter B. Gordon, "Humor continues to be a relatively safe way to do violence to the oppressor in return for injustice" (1998, p. 259). Moreover, it allows for the dominant group to gain easy insight into the cultural world of the minority group. From this perspective, laughter in essence is a release of nervous energy for both dominant and marginal groups. With the rise in popularity of stand-up comedy, this type of

relief from social tension could be potentially helpful in addressing persisting racial misunderstandings. However, this paper will illustrate that when discussing race, stand-up comedy also serves to increase social tension.

Superiority Theory

While relief theory points to the potential for comedy to relieve tension and consequently bring groups together, superiority theory emphasizes comedy's potential to further segregate groups. This theory is most in line with the analysis of humor presented by Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes predicted that humor was a way for the jokesters to express their dominance over the targets of jokes. In other words, humor at the expense of an out-group serves to create or reinforce a sense of supremacy among those in the in-group. Social identity theory can also be asserted in these instances. Of most relevance, social identity states that having a shared identity in a particular social group motivates one to positively evaluate that group when doing out-group comparisons (Abrams and Bippus 2011, Tajfel & Turner 1986).

Superiority theory also frames laughter as a social corrective. Laughing at undesirable behaviors not only heightens one's own sense of superiority but also encourages the target of the joke to correct the offending behavior. Those who laugh view themselves as right, whereas those being laughed at are viewed as wrong. The latter group is "censored by laughter" while the former is unified by a feeling of dominance (Meyer 2000). Typically this has been the way that sociological case studies have approached humor. For example, David L. Collinson (1988) conducted an ethnographic case study of men working on the shop floor in a trucking factory and found that humor was used to pressure workers to conform to the values of the workplace and to ensure that everyone was "pulling their weight" (p. 197).

Minstrelsy and vaudevilles are classic examples of superiority theory at work. Much of the laughter that whites engaged in at the expense of Negroes was based on the perceived inferiority of the customs of the group. Imitations of black dress, dialect, and song expressed and even strengthened the superiority that whites felt over their black counterparts. Although the way in which racial and ethnic humor is presented has changed since the time of minstrelsy, disparaging humor is still a key component of comedic entertainment. Humor of this sort succeeds in creating social distance between the individual who initiates the joke (or the group that the individual represents) and those who are the butt of the joke.

Abrams and Bippus (2011) found that participants rated jokes focusing on the out-group to be funnier than those focusing on the in-group. Both men and women found jokes regarding the opposite gender to be funnier than those regarding their own. This effect was particularly strong for female participants. The authors argue that women are aware of their secondary position in society and therefore seek to reinforce their positive social identity by distancing themselves from men. Although Abrams and Bippus related their work to gender, their findings illustrate that humor does in fact succeed in increasing feelings of superiority of in-groups. In this paper I examine if the differences spotlighted in modern day ethnic comedy have the potential to do the same, and consequently increase racial tension.

Incongruity Theory

Lastly, there is the incongruity theory of humor. From this perspective, it is the element of surprise that causes people to laugh. Humor is evoked by the violation of a norm— “Close enough to the norm to be nonthreatening, but different enough from the norm to be remarkable” (Berger 1976, Meyer 2000).

Ready examples of incongruous racial humor can be found in the vastly popular *Chappelle's Show* (2003). The comedy sketch show displayed the candid humor of famed comedian Dave Chappelle, who is widely known for his racially charged social commentary. Many of the most popular skits featured within the three seasons of the show were laced with incongruous jokes. Take for instance the *Frontline* sketch (a spoof on the PBS series of the same name) which featured a skit titled *Blind Supremacy*. The skit told the story of blind white supremacist, Clayton Bigsby. Bigsby adamantly vocalizes his hate for Jews and gays, and freely uses the word "nigger." However, the irony of the joke is that Bigsby is unaware that he is actually a black man. Chappelle's use of incongruent humor in this sketch points to what he saw as the ridiculousness of racially-based hatred. However, Chappelle stopped production of the show because he felt that the satire and commentary he was attempting to create only served to perpetuate racial stereotypes when received by the "white eye" (Schulman 1992), that is, white audiences. Dave Chappelle's apprehension, and later his refusal to continue taping the show, hints at the difficulties, and social and personal ramifications, of attempting to promote racial comedy, particularly for racially mixed audiences (Banjo 2008).

Past Studies

Past studies have investigated the outcomes of comedic racial commentary (Omi 1989; Haggins 1995; King 2002; Park, Gabbadon, and Chernin 2006; Banjo 2011). These studies found that comedy serves to strengthen racial stereotypes among, and pertaining to, various racial groups. Through textual and audience analysis, Park, Gabbadon, and Chernin (2006) examined the impact of racial stereotypes in the comedic blockbuster film *Rush Hour 2*. Through the use of white, black, and Asian focus groups the authors found that stereotypes in

comedy served to “naturalize racial differences rather than to challenge racial differences” (Park, Gabbadon, Chernin 2006, p. 157). For whites, stereotypes in comedy were laughable, not because they promoted an amusing opposition to the mainstream, but because they humorously portrayed what they believed to be accurate, although exaggerated, accounts of both blacks and Asians. The authors write, “The racial imagery in the film did not challenge prevailing notions of race and did not provoke feelings of discomfort or anxiety in White viewers” (Park, Gabbadon, and Chernin 2006, p. 169).

Black and Asian viewers, in contrast, pointed out positive portrayals of their own race within the film, even in the face of stereotypes. For example, while black viewers admitted that there were many stereotypes of African Americans in the film, they were not offended because these portrayals were considered to be based on minuscule and common misconceptions (e.g. blacks speak loudly, Asians know karate). However, blacks did note that had the stereotypes centered on more serious issues (e.g. poverty or drug abuse) they would have found the comments offensive. Both blacks and Asians tended to focus on the aspects of the film that countered stereotypes (e.g. the fact that both the black and Asian characters were “good guys”).

Despite each of the participants’ declaration that the stereotypes in the film were inoffensive, the authors say, “...they perceived and accepted many of its racial portrayals as real” (Park, Gabbadon, and Chernin 2006). While they did not put much weight on the stereotypes being portrayed, the participants’ for the most part viewed the stereotypical portrayals in the film as authentic. Herein lays the importance of investigating comedy through a sociological lens. It seems that much of the interpretation of racial portrayals in media are *said* to be inaccurate, yet are still accepted as legitimate for the sake of entertainment. Therefore, the social context matters for understanding comedic portrayals of race.

Communication studies have attempted to address this paradox by focusing on the communicative functions of humor (persuasion, relaxation, teasing, etc.) through micro-level analyses (Goodchild & Smith 1964; Smith & Powell 1988). The limited numbers of sociologists who have studied humor have mostly focused on its function as a form of social control or corrective (Collinson 1988; Lynch 2002; Mulkay 1988). While the potential consequences of racial humor have been made clear, the social determinants of them are not as evident. Existing studies investigating the content and delivery of humor have advanced our understanding of the various racial themes in comedy, but still leave an explanation of how audiences respond to and interpret this comedy to be desired. However, because much of this research focuses on individual level reactions to humor, it has little to say with regards to the social circumstances that shape these reactions. Furthermore, much of the previous research on ethnic comedy has focused on comedic programming and not stand-up comedy. One such study, conducted by Omotayo Banjo, concludes, that “future research should not only consider using stand-up comedy instead, but also may consider making comparisons between reactions to stand-up comedy which is more explicitly disparaging, and comedy programming, which is more implicit” (2008, p.154). While the current study does not produce a comparison between comedy forms, it does investigate the explicit nature of stand-up ethnic comedy.

Scholarship on comedy has demonstrated that comedy is both social and cognitive. A comedian by definition has no role to fill if there is no audience to receive his routine. The profession in and of itself is reliant upon successful communication with listeners and/or consumers. For this reason, communication scholars have been at the forefront of theorizing about comedy. However, the successful communication between a comic and his or her spectators is not solely based on the brief interaction between the two parties. There must also

be an awareness of the subject matter discussed. A successful joke, and in turn a successful comedian, rests on social awareness as well as social integration (Watkins 1994, p. 175). The tensions surrounding American race relations and their social consequences make them a primary theme within stand-up comedy and therefore one worth investigating sociologically.

Methods

To investigate the implications of ethnic stand-up comedy, focus groups were conducted. This method was chosen for several reasons. First, focus groups most closely mimic the social setting in which stand-up comedy takes place whereas interviews or surveys would not be a good simulation of the social climate of standup. Secondly, previous studies have successfully used focus groups to examine audience response to issues surrounding race portrayals in media (Gamson 2002; Park, Gabbadon, and Chernin 2006). When discussing sensitive topics, focus groups allow a more natural flow of conversation than other qualitative methods. According to Gamson the greatest example of the focus group method “it allows us to observe the process of people constructing and negotiating shared meaning, using their natural vocabulary” (2002, p. 17). Thirdly, and unique to this study, the respondents recruited to participate were accustomed to talking about race in a group setting. Therefore, the focus group setting as a venue for discussing race-related issues was familiar to the respondents.

The focus groups were conducted with black and white participants. There were three primary focus groups separated by race: Black (4 participants), Whites (4 participants), and a mixed race group (3 participants). The black and white groups were headed by a group moderator of the same race as the participants in the corresponding group. The mixed race group was headed by a black moderator. Matching the race of the moderator with the participants was preferred because it created a more relaxed climate where potentially sensitive topics such as

race could be discussed without concern of out-group judgment. Robert Weiss writes that matching the interviewer to the respondent is desirable because of the “acceptance of the interviewer by the respondent and a greater likelihood that the interviewer would be able to understand [the respondent]” (1994, p.136). Furthermore, it aided in comparisons between racial groups. Moderators were given a loose interview guide [See Appendix B] and were instructed to ask questions to initiate conversation, but to allow the respondents’ responses to take shape naturally. If there were any topics of interest that were not covered in the natural flow of conversation, moderators were instructed to directly pose questions about those topics.

Recruitment was done through both verbal announcement and written fliers at a large Midwestern university. All participants frequented a racial awareness student group titled RAPP and/or attended racially themed programs or seminars conducted by or in the student center for African American students. RAPP was formed in 1986 in response to racial conflicts that occurred on campus. The group defines itself as an experimental program that encourages students to challenge, debate, and learn about issues of social justice. They explore race as well as culture, gender, socioeconomic class, sexuality, and overall social difference. Had the goal of the study been to gain general audience responses to ethnic comedy, these participants would not have been ideal. However, this study aimed to gain in-depth understandings of the relevance and utility of ethnic comedy. In this sense, the participant’s heightened awareness of race as a social construct, previous experiences of having frank racial discussions, and propensity to address rather than disregard racial dissimilarity was ideal. The insight they provided can help us understand how comedy is used for altering the climate of racial discourse, rather than simply observing the direct impact of specific jokes.

In total there were eleven participants; four black, one Hispanic black, five white, and one biracial (White and Native American). Of these, five were men and six women. All participants were students, graduates, and or staff of the university. Their ages ranged between 19 and 29 years old.

In order to generate responses, participants were shown a series of short clips (some longer than others) from popular stand-up comedians. Only comedians who have headlined their own stand-up comedy specials, movies, or major tours were included. All of the comedians used are recognized for their racially charged comedy. The use of well-known comics mitigated any potential opposition to controversial comments made by less-known comedians. Clips of stand-up routines included acts from relatively household name comedians such as: Chris Rock, George Carlin, George Lopez, Margaret Cho, Bernie Mac, Wanda Sykes, Lisa Lampanelli, and Dave Chapelle [See Appendix A]. While a couple of the comedians (e.g., George Carlin) are more commonplace among older generations, all of the participants reported that they had heard of or were familiar with every comedian included in the clips. Although there were comedians of different races, the bulk of them were minorities as there are very few popular white comics who consistently use race as a major theme in their comedy routines. The clips included jokes that targeted African American, White, Asian, Hispanic, Native American, and Jewish populations.

All focus groups were conducted in a classroom at the university. The participants of each focus group watched the clips together and afterwards the group moderator encouraged participants to discuss their feelings regarding what they heard and saw. The moderators prompted each group with questions regarding the use of stereotypes, whether or not the participants found truth in the jokes, and how they would feel if the jokes were told somewhere

other than in a comedic setting (i.e. at work or in a classroom). Although the moderators probed and prompted the participants at certain points, the discussions were informal and more or less followed the natural flow of conversation. The total length of the clips was approximately one hour combined, and the subsequent discussions lasted from twenty to forty minutes. All discussions were audio recorded and transcribed, at which time pseudonyms were selected to protect participants' anonymity.

The analysis of the focus group data centered on participants' views in regards to the usefulness of comedy as a tool to discuss race. The overarching themes introduced by the participants included the truth or accuracy of the jokes, the intention of the comedian, and the offensiveness of the jokes. In keeping with these themes, in the analysis I pay particular attention to how much the participants accepted or rejected racial comedy as well as their optimism or pessimism regarding comedy's usefulness in changing current understandings of racial difference.

Findings

Irrespective of race, almost all of the participants audibly laughed while watching the clips. All of the participants were able to indicate parts of the clips that they found to be especially funny as well as parts they did not find particularly funny. Three dominant themes emerged from the discussions: 1) the offensiveness of the joke and/or comedian, 2) the stereotypes and perceived truths that were contained within the jokes, and 3) the utility of comedy as a tool for improving racial discourse.

Offensiveness

With the exception of one white woman, none of the participants in any of the racial groups reported feeling personally offended by the comedic clips. However, when discussing how the generalized public may have viewed some of the clips, participants spoke about offensiveness in a variety of ways. I begin by discussing how African Americans came to rate clips as more or less offensive and then contrast those perspectives with white participants' responses.

With the exception of one African American focus group member, none of the participants indicated that the race of the comedian had an impact on the perceived offensiveness of the joke. Several other African American respondents recognized the potential liability of white comedians joking about non-white issues, but they still placed more emphasis on tone, delivery, and intention than on the race of the speaker when they evaluated the jokes. For black respondents, the initial technique used to judge offensiveness was based on perception of the tone and delivery of the joke. For instance, James, a 22 year old black man says:

“I just feel like it’s all about delivery. It doesn’t really matter what race you are but it’s how you say or present it.”

In direct response to white comedian, Lisa Lampanelli, who made jokes about African Americans, Tonya, a 23 year old black woman in the African American group states:

“I have to say it was her tone... it was kind of like, oh she’s a little too serious. It was her tone... Where like [lists non-white comedians]... theirs was more like a performance. You could feel the performance; it was a little more of a joking performance than her.”

African American respondents who spoke of the offensive tone and delivery of jokes usually thought of these infractions as directly related to the intentions behind the joke. Several black

respondents spoke about ways in which racial comedy can be “too harsh” or “malicious” and viewed these types of racial jokes as stemming from some type of negative intent.

The second way in which African American respondents discussed offensiveness was in relation to the experiences of the comedian. Often times, respondents mentioned that comedians who appeared to share too few experiences with the target group of the joke came across as more offensive. For instance, Christine, a 24 year old black woman says:

“Usually, black people, when we make jokes about ourselves we know what we’re talking about, but, like Lisa Lampanelli, when she was making jokes about black people they were very vague, they weren’t detailed. It was just like... she would just say stuff that you guessed she probably had heard somewhere from somebody else, she hadn’t experienced it. So I guess that made it as a factor to why she wasn’t as funny, because she doesn’t understand fully because she hasn’t experienced it.”

In regards to the same comedian, 24 year old Keith agrees with Christine:

“I felt she wasn’t speaking I guess from experience, it was, to me it just seemed like it was hatred. I don’t know, I’ve seen her on TV before but it just came off as hatred and I was like, I know you’re a comedian and you’re going to have jokes, but that’s a little harsh.”

While there were various comedians who joked about the experiences of racial or ethnic groups that they did not belong to, African American respondents thought that those who relayed more firsthand experience in their jokes were less offensive. Similar conclusions have been drawn by Patricia Hill Collins who argues that for African Americans biography and shared experience are important when addressing race-relevant topics (2000).

For white participants, offensiveness was also measured in part by tone, delivery, and intention, but a greater emphasis was placed on the race of the comedian in relation to the race of the group being targeted. While the African American focus group tended to deemphasize the race of the comedian, all of the participants in the white focus group saw the race of the comedian as a direct indicator of the comedian’s experiences with race. For these respondents, white comedians were ultimately more likely to come across as offensive when joking about

non-whites. Paul, a 29 year old white man, highlights this response when asked if the race of the comedian matters:

“First of all, I wouldn’t know the things [a non-white] knows...I wouldn’t have the position to make that observation and when I said it, like, I don’t have the creditability. I haven’t lived the experience. It’s just... it’s completely important.”

Kelly (22 year old white woman) expresses the same sentiment:

“...the black comedians were saying things just out there being open about it and as soon as it comes out of a white person’s mouth it’s a totally different thing and that’s what makes me so uncomfortable. I probably could have heard a black person say the exact same words but it takes on a totally different meaning when someone from the supportive majority says it.”

Later on Paul adds:

“I would compare it to like being a part of a family. Like, I can go out in public and say the worst things about my mom, my dad, my sister. Other people can’t, you just can’t do that. Like, *I’m* a part of that group therefore I have some privilege or license to talk about that.”

Paul and Kelly’s responses are examples of the white respondents’ tendency to be more sensitive to the race of the comedian than were their black peers. White respondents verbalized their discomfort with whites using racial humor, thus suggesting that white comedians, because they are white, cannot joke about African Americans without coming across as offensive.

However, the African American respondents had a more complex understanding of the potential peril of white comedians in this regard; if nonblack comedians could successfully show that they have experience with minorities and could deliver those experiences in a nonthreatening tone then the African American respondents remained receptive.

The racial differences regarding offensiveness underscore the importance of racial proficiency when presenting comedy. According to critical race theory, whites’ greater unfamiliarity and/or discomfort with minorities’ issues causes them to be more sensitive than African Americans in their analysis of what is racially (in)appropriate. For this reason, whites place more emphasis on the race of the comedian. Previous research, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva’s in

particular, has indicated that the perception of a colorblind society has impacted the way in which whites discuss race. Bonilla-Silva finds that whites' are often purposeful in choosing when and how to address race directly and are likely to exhibit politically correct responses to race (Bonilla-Silva 2006). Keeping in mind that the white respondents in the present study were more adept in having racial conversations than most, their responses indicated that even in a comedic setting, participants believed that whites should be cautious in regards to how they speak about or deal with race directly.

Similarly, Omotayo Banjo finds that those who reported having lower racial proficiency (for example, whites who claim to know little about black experiences) tended to report discomfort when they viewed comedic entertainment with explicit racial humor and preferred more race neutral humor (Banjo 2011). Conversely, African Americans are more likely to be familiar with and comfortable discussing minorities' issues and are therefore less concerned with comedians' race and more concerned with the comedians' ability to authentically express black experiences. Moreover, blacks are aware of or accustomed to hearing stereotypes about African Americans from members of out-groups (Brown, Boniecki, and Walters 2004), and as a result are less offend by the race of the speaker alone.

This finding presents challenges for superiority theory's claim that comedy at the expense of an out-group strengthens the solidarity and sense of superiority of the in-group. Whites in the study expressed a desire to create social distance rather than solidarity with the white comedians who targeted minorities in their jokes. Similar findings came out of an experimental study evaluating whites' responses to racial comedic sitcoms. Superiority theory would suggest that whites would experience more enjoyment when viewing black disparagement than when viewing white disparagement. Interestingly, the study found that whites reported less enjoyment when

exposed to black disparagement. Such findings, according to the author, are “contrary to the humor literature which argues that out-group members experience less enjoyment when they are the target of a joke by someone outside of their group” (Banjo 2011, p. 151). Furthermore, African Americans in the present study were open to laughing *along with* out-group members in regards to in-group experiences if the jokes were delivered in a nonthreatening way. It seems that for blacks especially, racial/ethnic stand-up comedy that is centered on shared experiences can serve to decrease the potential offensiveness of racial discourse no matter the race of the joke teller.

Stereotypes and Perceived Truths

“...You know how the phrase goes ‘there’s truth in jest?’ and it’s just like, they were talking about real issues that we face today, but it was so sad that you just have to laugh at it.” (Christine, 24 year old, black woman)

“What makes them funny...is...yeah part of what makes them funny is that there is some truth. Or that other people would think that but wouldn’t say it at least.” (Paul, 29 year old white man)

Christine and Paul’s remarks express how most of the respondents, irrespective of race, thought of the accuracy of racial comedy. Participants in all groups regarded ethnic comedy as being rooted in social truths, but there were still some important differences between black and white participants. White participants spoke more of these jokes as reinforcing existing stereotypes. Although they were concerned with the impact of verbalizing negative stereotypes, whites still thought (or believed others to think) that there were elements of truth to these same jokes. Black respondents instead focused on the similarities between their day-to-day racial experiences and the stand-up routines and hence viewed the jokes as truth-telling. When prompted to explain why they believed ethnic comedy was truthful, African Americans would say things like:

“They’re talking about things we do as a culture...it’s just how we are (James),” or “I can relate to that (Tonya).”

While some white respondents brought up personal experiences, they did so within the confines of the more traditional and explicit stereotypes that they have experienced via their nonwhite associates. For example, whites referenced jokes that portrayed blacks eating chicken and watermelon or having troublesome interactions with the police. When asked which particular joke he found funny Ryan (a 19 year old white man) replied:

“Well I loved the watermelon one. Cause my friend was just telling me, she’s black, she was like at the grocery store with her mom and her mom like picked up a watermelon and she was like ‘oh no! Put that back!’ I don’t know I was just thinking about that while I was watching this, I guess it just connected to a real story a friend of mine told me...”

Some of the scholarship dealing with race and entertainment suggests that whites are drawn to the jokes exhibiting stereotypes because they have little interactions with minorities that would enable them to appreciate jokes about other aspects of the racial group (Entman & Rojecki 2000). The mentioning of a black friend may also be an attempt for Ryan to increase his creditability in answering the question. For the current study, whites’ tendency to focus on explicit stereotypes lead them to conclude that ethnic comedy reinforces racial misunderstandings.

“ A lot of the African American comics really kind of drive home the preexisting stereotypes, like the watermelon thing or the chicken thing...They talk a lot about negative stereotypes but they kind of um...what’s the word I’m looking for? Exploit the stereotypes, but they pass them off as being fact rather than stereotypes. They make, all the comedians, made broad generalizations which doesn’t do anything but enforce those stereotypes.” (Kelly 22 year old white woman)

“You’re a black man and you’re saying black men don’t want to work. You know what I mean? It’s almost like giving a bad impression like you’re like slamming you’re race. Basically, saying like ‘hey this is true because I’m a black man and I would know it’s true.’ Like it’s kind of funny because I know he’s just playing on a stereotype but at the same time it’s almost like he’s reinforcing it to everybody else... and nobody should really go on that, but you know people

generalize. So if you're reinforcing it and it's a less educated white person, they might be like 'oh well, there you go.'" –Sarah (26 year old white female)

Although respondents from all racial groups expressed concern with stereotypes, in general whites were more emphatic in their declaration that stereotypes are reproduced through ethnic comedy.

Interestingly, white respondents still discussed the ethnic jokes they watched as being based in some truth or accuracy; a finding that mirrors those found by Park, Gabbadon and Chernin (2006) and Banjo (2011). Whites claim that they do not have the experience or creditability to joke about minorities but report that they still believe that the jokes are accurate portrayals of race. In keeping with incongruity theory, there must be prior knowledge or familiarity with the context of a joke in order for the audience to respond. More specifically, for there to be enjoyment of ethnic humor, there must be some familiarity with a group's culture (Nilsen and Nilsen 2006). Based on whites' responses, racial comedy that utilizes common stereotypes is effective because it pulls from the audience's existing knowledge of minority culture(s). As a result, stereotypes are reinforced within stand-up comedy routines through the emphasis of certain cultural characteristics. This finding has more implications for whites because they are more likely to perceive stereotypes regarding minorities as truthful (Entman & Rojecki 2000).

Utility of Racial Comedy in Everyday Interaction

"There are still problems going on today and I think they are our voices. And they kind of send out the message that says 'hey we haven't changed we still have these issues going on.'" – (Tonya, 22 year old black woman)

When it comes to viewing comedy as a useful tool for addressing racial difference, there was variation within and across groups. Some respondents, both white and black, saw ethnic comedy as having little utility when it comes to correcting racial misunderstandings. Simply put,

some participants viewed race as “too touchy of a subject.” Others, while recognizing the delicate nature of race as a topic of exchange, still saw ethnic comedy as having the potential to facilitate racial discourse and/or counter racial misconceptions. Comedy for these respondents was a safe zone that allowed controversial topics to be addressed. For example:

“Some of what they say can be used to improve things, even if it’s like talking about the struggle of the minority group. So people who don’t understand that or obviously can’t go through it can get some type of sense... so [they have] more base of knowledge in a sense. [They’re] not so oblivious to the fact that there’s a difference in treatment. So I think in some ways it is touchy, but I think some ways people can look at comedy and learn a bit about other things through it...it can be used as an educational tool.” (Nicole, 21 year old black woman)

Nicole’s interpretation of the utility of comedy suggests that racial jokes can help educate those who may be unaware of racial disparities. Sarah (a 26 year old white female) offered forth a similar response:

“... I really do feel like comedy is a great way to do that because it lightens it and it doesn’t make it as heavy...They put these jokes together and it facilitates a discussion...and I really feel that sometimes comedy breaks down racial barriers and...it can also sometimes reinforce them, but at the same time I think it actually can help.”

It is important to note, that even among those participants who acknowledged the potential usefulness of ethnic comedy, there was almost a unanimous agreement that professional presentations of ethnic comedy are more effective than day-to-day uses. That is, almost all of the respondents claimed that they would find racial jokes significantly less humorous if experienced outside of a comedic setting. African Americans expressed particular concern that sharing racial humor in everyday experiences, particularly when interacting with nonblacks, would lead to increased racial tension. Note the exchange between Tonya and James:

Moderator: Do you tell black jokes around other races?

Tonya: No I don’t. I don’t. I don’t want them to get a confirmation...

James: Yeah, that it’s ok for them to make jokes about my race.

Moderator: Can you talk about that a little more?

James: ... Let’s say I hung out with a group of white people and I was the only black person in that group. I wouldn’t be telling black jokes to them so they can laugh about who I am. And I wouldn’t want it

to be vice versa either... I feel that there would be lines and boundaries that could get crossed. It may also go too far...like bringing up the n-word and I don't want them getting comfortable using the n-word. Like for instance one girl at my job. We were cool. We would tell jokes and stuff. Then she took it that step further like, 'What's up my Nigga!' I looked at her like she was crazy, she got too comfortable.
Tonya and Keith: YES! [laughs]

Tonya and James's exchange coincides with previous research which suggests that blacks are concerned with the implications of openly sharing African American comedy with white audiences. One study investigating the effect of the race of co-viewers on the enjoyment of black entertainment found that "while Blacks recognize stereotype and accept it as an accurate portrayal, they are still concerned about the effects films like these could have on White audiences" (Banjo 2008, p. 19). Although Tonya and James were referring to real life experiences and not films in the exchange above, they still indicate concern about whites' interpretations of racial conversations and/or jokes.

Whites place limits on the utility of ethnic comedy as well. However, they point to the professionalism of the comedian as being the key issue. Although African Americans mentioned the professionalism of comedians as well, whites made this central to their conception of comedy's utility. For instance, when asked if comedy could be used to ease racial tension in everyday life Calvin (a 26 year old white man) says,

"They are professional comedians and their job is to perfect something: a joke. So I think... they've probably done a lot of thought about what they are saying... Where if it's something I overhear somebody else saying who I don't know, my first reaction is to question what their intent is, whereas I don't have that feeling when I'm watching somebody on screen."

White respondents understand comedy as being a skill of the comedian and less as a conversational tool for engaging in racial discourse. Conversely, African Americans are comfortable with the use of race within comedy but are wary of the art form's potential for furthering racial tension.

The limitations of the usefulness of ethnic comedy provide challenges to the relief theory of humor. In terms of racial interactions in everyday experience, comedy may not be enough to lessen racial dissonance and enhance racial relations. In fact, the findings illustrate that comedy of this type may increase racial tension instead. Especially during a time of colorblind ideology matched with a desire to be a post-racial society, the fear of openly discussing race seems to dilute the relieving effects of comedy when outside of a comedic setting. For blacks, ethnic comedy can potentially open the floodgates for less acceptable forms of race talk from out-group members. For whites, ethnic comedy is limited to use by comedic professionals whose intentions are less likely to come into question.

Conclusion

The goal of this study was to investigate the ways in which stand-up comedy may impact racial (mis)understandings. Traditional theories of humor as well as previous studies have focused on the various functions that comedy serves in regards to social control and face-to-face interactions. However, a large amount of previous studies have investigated racial and ethnic comedy through the evaluation of situational comedies. The use of stand-up comedy in this study has brought challenges to both previous research and the traditional theories of humor.

The findings here demonstrate that there are some areas where respondents of different races have similar reactions. First, all of the respondents, regardless of race, reported that ethnic and racial comedy is indeed entertaining and funny. More importantly they claim that comedy about race can be enjoyed by all races, no matter what racial group is targeted by the joke. The agreement among whites and blacks alike suggests that stand-up comedy is successful in making the topic of race more palatable and approachable in a comedic group setting. Secondly,

participants in all focus groups also agree that ethnic and racial comedy is based at least in part on social truth. That is, they perceived racial and ethnic comedy to be reflective of accurate, albeit embellished, accounts of racial groups in American society. Respondents in each group were forthcoming in stating that perceived truth was fundamental in making a racial or ethnic joke funny. Thirdly, the majority of participants of all races were hesitant to claim that ethnic comedy can be used as a tool to aid racial discourse outside of a comedic setting. But the findings also point to some interesting nuances within the scholarship, particularly regarding current explanations of the impact of racial comedy on racial interactions.

In sum, the results of this study are mixed. Based on the findings, ethnic comedy serves to lighten the topic of race within a comedic setting but is perceived to have little utility in everyday interaction. However, there are racial differences in reactions to ethnic comedy in regards to stereotypes and perceived truths. Black respondents focused less on stereotypes and more on shared experiences. Whites tended to emphasize the stereotypes being used in the comedy as unattractive, yet they also used these same stereotypes to validate ethnic comedy as truthful by juxtaposing them with their personal experiences with race. A 1959 study of humor between blacks and whites also found similar results. Although African Americans in the study did not believe the stereotypes presented about them, they were willing to “suspend disbelief temporarily in order to enjoy the humor of the joke” (Middleton 1959, p. 180). Both the findings of the past and the present study closely mirror those of Park, Gabbadon, and Chernin’s 2006 study. The similarities in the findings of these studies suggest that interpretations of racial and ethnic humor have not changed much over time.

It is not the goal of this study to suggest that ethnic comedy has the potential to cure racial woes. As illustrated by the findings, ethnic comedy succeeds in making the topic of race

less taboo in a period where colorblind ideology and racial indifference is the norm. In many instances, comedians, such as Dave Chappelle, have set out to use comedy as a social corrective. Nevertheless, this study finds that while ethnic comedy may lighten the topic of race, it does not yet portray meaningful interactions that can be used in everyday racial discourse for improving racial interaction. That is, the racial unity that appears to occur within comedic settings is often shallow and short-lived.

The implications of this study speak to more than just comedy. It suggests that racial portrayals within popular media have the potential to reinforce racial misunderstandings, and as cultural theorist Stuart Hall has said, popular media “[constructs] for us the meaning of race by telling us what race is and what it is understood to be” (Hall 2000). If racial portrayals within comedy and entertainment media in general are not preceded by greater cultural competence, discussing racial issues in a public and relaxed forum may only serve to reify misconstrued ideas of racial realities (Park, Gabbadon, and Chernin 2006). As Sarah noted during the white focus group,

“Something about hearing racism depicted in a light funny way makes everybody feel a little better about the racist thoughts running through their own head.”

There is a need for more research that can fill in the gap between individual dealings and structural framings of racial and ethnic humor. While recognizing the potential positive effects of ethnic comedy, the overall conclusion of this study is that ethnic comedy promotes and even naturalizes undesirable portrayals of minority groups, particularly among audiences who are not adept at critically thinking about race. The colorblind perspective that suggests that our society has matured past racial stratification so much so that we can laugh at its implications proves to be a myth.

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Appendix A- Video Clips

Below is a listing of the comedians and the comedy specials that the focus groups viewed before their discussions.

Bernie Mac

“The Original Kings of Comedy” (2001)

Chris Rock

“Bigger and Blacker” (1999)

“Never Scared” (1999)

“Kill the Messenger” (2009)

Dave Chappelle

“Killing Them Softly” (2000)

“For What It’s Worth” (2004)

George Carlin

“What Am I Doing in New Jersey?” (1988)

“It’s Bad for Ya” (2008)

George Lopez

“Tall, Dark & Chicano” (2009)

“America’s Mexican” (2007)

Lisa Lampanelli

“Dirty Girl” (2007)

“Long Live the Queen” (2009)

Margaret Cho

“I’m the One I Want” (2001)

“Revolution” (2004)

Wanda Sykes

“I’m a Be Me” (2009)

Appendix B – Interview Guide

Below is the beginning script and some of the questions that moderators refer to while leading the focus group discussions after the clips were viewed:

- 1.) What are your general reactions to the clips? Did you enjoy them?
 - a. What did you enjoy/find funny in particular?
 - b. For those of you who did not enjoy the clips, what did you dislike?
- 2.) What are some of the stereotypes that were mentioned in the video?
 - a. Were they funny?
 - b. What makes them funny?
- 3.) Did you find any of the clips offensive?
 - a. What in particular did you find offensive?
 - b. Why don't you consider it offensive?
- 4.) What would you think if you heard that same joke told in a different setting, at work or in a classroom for example?
 - a. Prompt those who say they would have a different reaction to elaborate.
 - b. Then prompt those who said they would not react differently to elaborate.
- 5.) Is it ok or acceptable to joke about race now-a-days?
 - a. Why do you think racial jokes are seen as funny? Why not?