“If You Laugh Does It Mean You’re Prejudiced?”

Why we should adopt a more humor-critical mindset.

Post published by [Shawn M. Burn Ph.D.](https://www.psychologytoday.com/experts/shawn-m-burn-phd) on Mar 30, 2014 in [*Presence of Mind*](https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/presence-mind)

Every few months it seems that a comedian, television show, or movie is called out for racist, sexist, or heterosexist comedy (what we social psychologists call derogation or disparagement [humor](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/humor)). Invariably those that enjoy such humor minimize these concerns. Offended others are told they “need to lighten up,” “get a sense of humor,” or “stop being so sensitive.” The generators and consumers of derogation humor sometimes respond defensively because written between the lines of the callouts is the suggestion that they are racist, sexist, or heterosexist. I

Ironically, they feel unjustly stereotyped as prejudiced.

Does making and laughing at jokes that capitalize on group stereotypes mean you’re prejudiced?  Maybe. For example, studies of sexist humor find that people are most likely to enjoy sexist humor when they have negative (sexist) attitudes toward women. Enjoyment of sexist humor is also correlated with rape-related attitudes and beliefs as well as self-reported likelihood of forcing [sex](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/sex). Studies do find that when people are prejudiced, they are more likely to interpret disparagement humor with a non-critical mindset.

Also consider that jokes that put down groups of which we are not members may boost our [self-esteem](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/self-esteem). As psychologists Wicker, Barron, and Willis once said, the jokes we think are funny may reflect our prejudices and our [laughter](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/laughter) comes from feelings of superiority. According to social [identity](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/identity) theory we categorize into ingroup and outgroup and we gain self-esteem from believing we’re members of a superior group (this type of self-esteem is called collective self-esteem). Jokes at the expense of another group can provide a source of downward social comparison, where comparisons to “lesser” others make us feel good about our group and ourselves because in contrast, we do not “suck” in that particular way (such jokes provide positive distinctiveness).

There are many problems with disparagement humor, including that it can shape beliefs and attitudes about other groups. Our beliefs about other groups are partly derived from what our group (and the media) tells us about those groups, especially when our experiences with members of those groups are limited. And, when people laugh, it reinforces the idea that these perceptions are socially acceptable. Disparagement humor also feeds enemy perceptions and conflict between groups because it can feel hateful and aggressive.

Disparagement humor at the expense of traditionally discriminated against groups may be especially hurtful since it is a bitter reminder of their group’s lower status and historical experience of [discrimination](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/bias). The cleverness of derogation humor and that it is not intended to harm, sometimes masks its meanness and makes us forget that many people from the derogated groups may experience it as prejudiced, hurtful, and exclusionary.

All that said, I grant that some people that enjoy disparagement humor may not be prejudiced or attempting to boost their collective self-esteem. Some people (especially professional comics and comedy writers) process humor with a different critical mindset where comedic cleverness (and sometimes pushing the comedic envelope) trumps all other lenses of humor evaluation. I am conflicted about disparagement humor because I [love](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/relationships) comedy and humor and consume it in many forms, but also recognize its potentially negative social effects.

Disparagement humor intended to reduce prejudice by extreme portrayals of the prejudiced (meta-disparagement humor) adds another wrinkle. Should we “grant a pass” to meta-disparagement humorists given their good intentions? Maybe. For example, [Stephen Colbert’s “Ching Chong Ding Dong” is a parody of old-fashioned racism](http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/headlines/2014/03/stephen-colbert-on-the-defensive-after-ching-chong-ding-dong-tweet/)

[(link is external)](http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/headlines/2014/03/stephen-colbert-on-the-defensive-after-ching-chong-ding-dong-tweet/)

. The ridiculous Colbert character doesn’t believe he is prejudiced even declaring he “doesn’t see color” and can’t discern the [ethnicity](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/race-and-ethnicity) of his guests or himself. In this way the “bit” illustrates how many prejudiced people are oblivious to their prejudices (an idea documented by many studies on aversive racism and implicit bias). Colbert is in a bit of hot water for this comedic bit because a related Tweet was too short to provide the meta-context. Even some folks that get it’s supposed to be meta still think it fosters negative stereotypes of Asian Americans (a concern with some merit).

As Dave Chappell, Paul Rodriquez, and Matt Stone and Trey Parker would likely attest, even meta-disparagement humor can inadvertently promote prejudice and harm to others and making fun of your own group is often interpreted by non-group members as permission for them to do so as well. As I sometimes say to my students, the problem with humor that capitalizes on group stereotypes, even meta-disparagement humor, is that it’s potentially dangerous when consumed by the uninformed or non-critical.

Take for example the [South Park episode](http://www.southparkstudios.com/full-episodes/s09e11-ginger-kids)

[(link is external)](http://www.southparkstudios.com/full-episodes/s09e11-ginger-kids)

where after giving a presentation on 'Ginger Kids' (red-heads) in class, Cartman gets the other students to discriminate against them. The episode actually demonstrates how prejudice is sometimes used to boost self-esteem, how members of discriminated-against groups may turn a badge of [shame](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/embarrassment) into a mark of pride to feel good about themselves in the face of stigma, and how this generates the ingroup solidarity necessary to fight for equality. It’s really quite sophisticated social commentary in some ways. But this is not what many viewers got out of the episode. Instead, the take-away message for some viewers was that prejudice towards red-headed people is funny and red-headed people are humor objects. After this episode aired, many red-haired children and adolescents found themselves bullied and teased because they were “ginger.”

I’m unsure how to resolve these concerns but I have a few thoughts. I think [parents](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/parenting) should recognize that their children might misinterpret meta-disparagement humor so parents should pay attention. I think we should be more discerning senders and receivers of humor, expressing our concerns when we feel a line has been crossed and apologizing when informed we have crossed one.

I think that instead of telling people they shouldn’t be offended we should have some empathy and a conversation instead of getting defensive and minimizing their concerns. Likewise, we should understand that “racist,” “sexist,” etc. are fighting words that will elicit defensiveness. To reach a peaceful [understanding](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/empathy) we must choose our words carefully and keep our approach friendly if we want others to understand why we feel a comedic instance may harm the progress of our group.

I think we should appreciate that when people make fun of their own group it’s different from when we make fun of them. I think we should realize that despite that, making fun of our own group carries the risk of promoting stereotypes in non-group members instead of appreciation for our culture, and some of them will think that if it’s funny when we say it it’s even funnier when they say it.

I think we should recognize that telling and laughing at jokes that stereotype other groups is risky since it can harm our social or professional reputation, hurt people, and promote prejudice, regardless of our intent. And I think that sometimes we need to ask ourselves why we are laughing and whether our humor is a way to get away with putting down other groups.

Note: You might want to watch [this clip from the March 29th 2014 episode of Saturday Night Live](http://www.nbc.com/saturday-night-live/video/black-jeopardy/2768586%20)

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using a critical humor mindset. The episode, about an African American version of “Jeopardy,” cleverly capitalizes on a number of negative stereotypes.

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