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Social Consequences of Disparagement Humor: A Prejudiced Norm Theory

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In this article we introduce a “prejudiced norm theory” that specifies the social-psychological processes by which exposure to disparagement humor uniquely affects tolerance of discrimination against members of groups targeted by the humor. Our theory posits that a norm of tolerance of discrimination implied by disparagement humor functions as a source of self-regulation for people high in prejudice. For people high in prejudice, this norm regulates the effect of exposure to disparagement humor on tolerance of subsequently encountered discriminatory events. Our theory contributes to the literature on prejudice and discrimination by delineating the processes by which disparagement humor creates a normative climate of tolerance of discrimination, as well as variables that accentuate and attenuate its effects.

Disparagement humor (e.g., racist or sexist humor) is humor that denigrates, belittles, or maligns an individual or social group (e.g., Janes & Olson, 2000; Zillmann, 1983). The general public has become more critical of the use of disparagement humor in public domains (Apte, 1987; Barker, 1994). As the criticisms of comedian Andrew Dice Clay, and actor Ted Danson for his “roast” of Whoopie Goldberg in 1993 suggest, people have become less willing to allow joke tellers “moral amnesty” (Zillmann & Cantor, 1996) for their derision of social out-groups through humor. The disapproval of disparagement humor in public domains is presumably based on the belief held by the general public and humor theorists alike that such humor has negative consequences. Specifically, it is thought to create and reinforce stereotypes of social groups and, thus, perpetuate prejudice (e.g., Berger, 1993; Stephenson, 1951; Zenner, 1970).

In this article, we review the theoretical and empirical literature on the effects of disparagement humor on stereotypes and prejudice. Based on the empirical evidence, exposure to disparagement is not likely to create or reinforce negative stereotypes or prejudiced attitudes. Exposure to disparagement humor does, however, have a negative social consequence: It increases tolerance of discriminatory events for people high in prejudice toward the disparaged group. We propose a prejudiced norm theory to explain this effect. For people high in prejudice, disparagement humor changes the rules in a given context that dictate appropriate reactions to discrimination against members of the disparaged

group. That is, it expands the bounds of appropriate conduct, creating a norm of tolerance of discrimination.

Our theory makes an important contribution to the literature on prejudice and discrimination. Contemporary models of prejudice assert that social norms are important underpinnings of the expression of prejudice (e.g., Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986; Katz, Wackenhut, & Hass, 1986; McConahay, 1986). Our theory identifies disparagement humor as an important medium, naturally operating in the social environment, through which changes in social norms occur. Our theory delineates the processes by which disparagement humor creates a normative climate of tolerance of discrimination—the social conditions that encourage the expression of prejudice—as well as variables that accentuate and attenuate its effects. In addition, we raise a number of issues that remain to be addressed by future research to further test and extend our theory.

Effect of Disparagement Humor on Stereotypes and Prejudice

Humor theorists have argued that disparagement humor has negative consequences at both the individual or psychological level and at the macrosociological level. At the individual level, disparagement humor is thought to create and reinforce negative stereotypes and prejudice toward the targeted group (e.g., Berger, 1993; Freud, 1905/1960; La Fave & Mannell, 1976; Meyer, 2001; Ruscher, 2001; Stephenson, 1951; Zenner, 1970). Martineau (1972), for instance, suggested that the initiation of disparagement humor serves a divisive function: It creates and reinforces hostility toward the targeted group.

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By reinforcing negative stereotypes and prejudice at the individual level, disparagement humor is thought to maintain cultural or societal prejudice at the macrosociological level. Husband (1977), for instance, proposed that racist humor depicted on television reinforces stereotypes and prejudice among racist people and thus functions to perpetuate a racist society. Similarly, Sev'er and Ungar (1997) suggested that disparagement humor functions as a means of social control, allowing members of the dominant group in society to maintain their privileged position. Specifically, they asserted that sexist humor perpetuates power imbalances between men and women.

Consistent with such theoretical positions, reciting disparagement humor can have a negative effect on the humorist's attitudes and stereotypes of the targeted group. Hobden and Olson (1994) found that reciting jokes that disparaged lawyers led participants to report a more negative attitude toward lawyers. Likewise, Maio, Olson, and Bush (1997) found that Canadian participants who recited humor material that disparaged Newfoundlanders reported a more negative stereotypical representation of Newfoundlanders. As Hobden and Olson suggested, both self-perception theory (Bem, 1972) and cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) can account for these findings. According to self-perception theory, the negative remarks participants made about a social group could have informed them of their attitude toward the group and thus led them to report more negative attitudes and stereotypes. Alternatively, according to cognitive dissonance theory, the participants' negative remarks could have been inconsistent with their attitudes and thus created cognitive dissonance. Participants might have changed their attitudes and stereotypes to become more consistent with their remarks to reduce cognitive dissonance. According to either explanation, the negative consequences of reciting disparagement humor do not implicate any unique effects of humor as a medium of communication apart from the disparaging content.

The effects of exposure to disparagement humor are less straightforward. Weston and Thomsen (1993) found that participants made more stereotypical evaluations of men and women after watching sexist comedy skits than after watching neutral comedy skits. Similarly, Ford (1997) found that White participants were more likely to make stereotype-based judgments of an African American target after viewing comedy skits that disparaged African Americans but not after viewing neutral comedy skits. The studies by Weston and Thomsen and Ford suggest that exposure to disparagement humor activates stereotypes, which in turn bias social perception.

The problem with these early studies, however, is that they both lack nonhumorous control conditions that are necessary to make conclusions about the

unique effects of humor above and beyond mere disparagement. In fact, Ford (1997) explained his findings as merely a priming effect resulting from exposure to the negative, stereotypical portrayal of African Americans. Indeed, priming studies exposing participants to nonhumorous stereotypical portrayals of social groups have found similar effects. For instance, Hansen and Hansen (1988) found that exposure to nonhumorous stereotypical portrayals of men and women increased the accessibility and subsequent use of sex-role stereotypes to interpret behavior.

Olson, Maio, and Hobden (1999) conducted three experiments that were better designed to test the unique effects of exposure to disparagement humor. They exposed participants to either disparagement humor targeting men, disparagement humor targeting lawyers, neutral humor, nonhumorous disparagement of men, or nonhumorous disparagement of lawyers. They then measured the content and accessibility of stereotypes about and attitudes toward the men and lawyers. Across the three experiments, they performed a total of 83 analyses, and only 1 revealed a significant effect of exposure to disparagement humor relative to exposure to neutral humor or nonhumorous disparagement. Exposure to disparagement humor simply did not affect the content or accessibility of stereotypes about and attitudes toward the targeted groups relative to nonhumorous disparagement or neutral humor.

Although Olson et al. (1999) found no effects of exposure to disparagement humor, they did not empirically address two issues that are relevant for interpreting their findings. First, Olson et al. did not measure individual differences in prejudice toward the targeted groups prior to completing the studies. Therefore, it is possible that disparagement humor could affect stereotypes of an out-group for people high in prejudice toward that group. Second, Olson et al. measured the effects of disparagement humor on stereotypes and attitudes toward groups that were high in status or social power (e.g., men, lawyers). They concluded that disparagement humor might only affect the recipient's stereotypes and attitudes when the targeted group is relatively disadvantaged or low in status (e.g., women).

Addressing these two issues, Ford, Wentzel, and Lorion (2001) demonstrated that, even among men high in hostile sexism—men who had antagonistic attitudes toward women (Glick & Fiske, 1996)—exposure to sexist humor did not affect the evaluative content of men's stereotypes about women relative to nonhumorous disparagement or neutral humor. Collectively, then, Olson et al. (1999) and Ford et al. (2001) provided no evidence that exposure to disparagement humor uniquely affects stable, internal knowledge structures, such as stereotypes and attitudes toward the targeted group.

Effect of Disparagement Humor on Tolerance of Discrimination

Although exposure to disparagement humor may not affect *internal* sources of self-regulation (i.e., attitudes and stereotypes), Ford (2000) demonstrated that it can still have negative social consequences. Ford (Exp. 1) exposed male and female participants, who were either high or low in hostile sexism, to sexist jokes, sexist statements, or neutral jokes. Then participants read a vignette in which a male supervisor treated a new female employee in a patronizing manner. The supervisor communicated low performance expectations and addressed the female employee using a pet name, which suggests a level of romantic intimacy that is inappropriate and potentially threatening in the workplace. After reading the vignette, participants rated the offensiveness of the supervisor's behavior and how critical they were of the supervisor's behavior. The results indicated that exposure to sexist jokes led to greater tolerance of the supervisor's sexist behavior in comparison to exposure to neutral jokes or comparable nonhumorous disparagement, but only for participants high in hostile sexism.

Similarly, Ford et al. (2001) exposed male participants who were either high or low in hostile sexism either to sexist jokes, sexist statements, or neutral jokes. Participants then read the sexist supervisor vignette used by Ford (2000, Exp. 1). As they read the vignette, participants were asked to imagine they were the supervisor and thus had behaved in a sexist manner. Participants subsequently indicated how they would feel about themselves for having done so. The results revealed that when men high in hostile sexism imagined they had behaved in a sexist manner, they anticipated feeling less self-directed negative affect (e.g., guilt, shame) upon exposure to sexist jokes than upon exposure to nonhumorous sexist statements or neutral jokes.

The findings reported by Ford (2000) and Ford et al. (2001) cannot be easily explained as a simple priming effect. The content of the sexist humor and nonhumorous sexist material was comparable in both studies. The sexist jokes were simply converted to serious discourse in the nonhumorous conditions to communicate the sexist stereotype implied in the jokes. For instance, one sexist joke that appeared in both studies was:

A man and a woman were stranded in an elevator and they knew they were gonna die. The woman turns to the man and says, "Make me feel like a woman before I die." So he takes off his clothes and says, "Fold them!"

In the nonhumorous condition, the joke was converted to the following statement: "I just think that a woman's place is in the home and that it's a woman's role to do do-

mestic duties, such as laundry, for her man." Importantly, the sexist jokes communicated an equally sexist message as their corresponding statements. Pretesting revealed that there was no difference between the mean sexism rating for the sexist jokes and the mean sexism rating for the sexist statements. In fact, there were no significant differences in sexism ratings between any of the sexist jokes and their corresponding statements. See Ford (2000) for a description of means and significance tests. If the sexist content of the jokes merely functioned to prime negative attitudes, stereotypes, or a chronic motivation to respond in a sexist manner (e.g., Bargh, 1990; Bargh & Barndollar, 1996), then similar effects should have emerged in both the humorous and nonhumorous conditions. This, however, did not occur. Exposure to sexist material only increased tolerance of the sexist event when presented in a humorous manner.

The Prejudiced Norm Theory

Taken together, Ford (2000) and Ford et al. (2001) suggested that disparagement humor is likely to increase tolerance of other instances of discrimination against the targeted group, above and beyond its specific content, for people who are relatively high in prejudice toward the disparaged group. We propose a prejudiced norm theory to explain these findings. Our theory delineates the psychological processes that mediate the effects of disparagement humor on tolerance of discrimination; it also specifies variables that potentially moderate those effects. The theory addresses the case in which a person finds him or herself in a social context in which he or she is an intended recipient of disparagement humor.

Overview of Prejudiced Norm Theory

Our prejudiced norm theory is built on four interrelated propositions. First, humorous communication activates a conversational rule of levity—to switch from the usual serious mindset to a nonserious humor mindset for interpreting the message. Therefore, people are likely to interpret disparagement humor in a nonserious, humor mindset unless internal or external cues suggest that it is inappropriate to do so. Second, by switching to a nonserious humor mindset, the humor recipient tacitly consents to an implicit normative standard communicated by the humor that, in this context, one need not be critical of discrimination against the targeted group. Thus, upon exposure to disparagement humor, people are less likely to define the situation as one in which they need to be critical of discrimination against the targeted group. Third, the humor recipient actually uses this perceived norm of tolerance of discrimination as a source of self-regulation, creating greater personal tolerance of discrimination against

members of the disparaged group. Finally, one's level of prejudice toward the disparaged group affects reactions to disparagement humor and thus the effect of disparagement humor on perceptions of normative tolerance of discrimination as well as personal tolerance of discrimination.

Accordingly, recipients are likely to interpret disparagement humor through a nonserious humor mindset, unless some external cue discourages it, insofar as they are high in prejudice toward the disparaged group. Indeed, both vicarious superiority theory (La Fave, Haddad, & Maesen, 1996) and disposition theory (Zillmann & Cantor, 1996) suggest that people adopt a nonserious humor mindset to interpret disparagement humor to the extent that they have negative attitudes toward the disparaged target. Thus, upon exposure to disparagement humor, people high in prejudice are more likely than those low in prejudice to perceive an external social norm of tolerance of discrimination against the disparaged group. Furthermore, people high in prejudice are more likely to use that external norm as a source of self-regulation—a standard defining how one ought to behave (Devine, Monteith, Zuwerink, & Elliot, 1991; Plant & Devine, 1998; Wittenbrink & Henly, 1996). As a result, upon exposure to disparagement humor, people high in prejudice are likely to express greater tolerance of other instances of discrimination against members of the disparaged group.

The “Humor Mindset”

Communication is interpreted differently when presented in a humorous rather than a nonhumorous manner (Mulkay, 1988). Humorous communication is accompanied by cues (e.g., identification of the communication as a joke) that activate a conversational rule of levity—to switch from the usual serious mindset to a playful or nonserious humor mindset to interpret it (e.g., Attardo, 1993; Berlyne, 1972; Kane, Suls, & Tedeschi, 1977; Mannell, 1977; McGhee, 1972; Mulkay, 1988; Sev'er & Ungar, 1997; Suls, 1972; Zillmann, 1983, 2000; Ziv & Gadish, 1990). According to Berlyne, for instance,

Humor is accompanied by discriminative cues, which indicate that what is happening, or is going to happen, should be taken as a joke. The ways in which we might react to the same events in the absence of these cues become inappropriate and must be withheld. (p. 56)

Similarly, Mulkay suggested that when in the humor mindset people loosen the rules of logic and expectations of common sense. Consequently, when presented with a joke, people do not apply the information-processing strategies typically required by serious communication. They abandon the usual (serious) ways of thinking.

McGhee (1972) characterized the serious mindset as “reality assimilation” and the humor mindset as “fantasy assimilation.” He described reality assimilation as the accommodation of cognitive schemas to account for unexpected or incongruent events. McGhee suggested that such accommodation is the default process that occurs when encountering discrepancies between our cognitive structures and actual events. In contrast, when in the fantasy assimilation mode, people do not attempt to change their cognitive schemas to fit unexpected or discrepant events. That is, people do not require or even expect a realistic resolution of incongruous events. They simply disregard the requirement of literal congruity that characterizes reality assimilation.

The resolution of incongruity should be amusing if it is accompanied by humor cues suggesting that it is to be interpreted through a nonserious humor mindset (e.g., Mannell, 1977; McGhee, 1972; Suls, 1972; Zillmann, 1983, 2000). In the case of disparagement and aggression, humor cues essentially communicate that the perceived incongruity is nonthreatening, thus making a playful interpretation seem appropriate (Gollob & Levine, 1967; Mutuma, La Fave, Mannell, & Guilmette, 1977; Wicker, Baron, & Willis, 1980; Zillmann, 1983). As Zillmann and Cantor (1976/1996) suggested, the “club over the head” is funny when the protagonists are clowns in cartoons but not when they are police officers responding to a riot (p. 105).

A number of empirical studies have demonstrated that aggression and disparagement must be accompanied by humor cues to be interpreted through a humor mindset. Mannell (1977) found that participants reported greater enjoyment (acceptance) of violent behavior when it was depicted in a humorous form (cartoons featuring animals acting like people) rather than in a nonhumorous form (realistic depictions of people). Gollob and Levine (1967) found similar results. Their participants first rated the funniness of cartoons featuring aggressive content and cartoons featuring neutral content. Ten days later, participants were given the same cartoons and told to focus their attention on the content of the cartoons. Participants then rated the funniness of the cartoons a second time. The results indicated that participants rated the aggressive cartoons as slightly funnier than the neutral cartoons on the pretest but as significantly less funny than the neutral cartoons on the posttest. The instructions to focus on the cartoon content presumably activated internalized norms or attitudes about violence, thus preventing participants from adopting a nonserious humor mindset and appreciating the aggressive cartoons.

In addition, Zillmann and Bryant (1980) found that, consistent with disposition theory, participants who resented a confederate were more amused when she spilled hot tea all over herself than participants who did not resent her. Furthermore, participants were significantly more amused by the confederate's blunder when

it was accompanied by humor cues (i.e., a jack-in-the-box suddenly opening and causing the confederate to mishandle her cup of tea) prompting them to interpret the blunder through a playful, nonserious humor mindset. As participants switched to a nonserious humor mindset to interpret the blunder, they suspended the usual serious (critical) ways of responding to it. Participants approved of the conversational rule to make light of the blunder.

The Humor Mindset and Perception of a Prejudiced Norm

We propose that disparagement humor (e.g., a sexist or racist joke) makes light of the expression of prejudice toward the targeted group. And, by making light of the expression of prejudice toward the targeted group, disparagement humor communicates an implicit “meta-message” (Attardo, 1993) or normative standard that, in this context, one need not consider discrimination against the targeted group in a serious or critical manner. Rather it is acceptable in this context to relax the usual “critical sensitivities” and treat such discrimination in a more light-hearted manner (Husband, 1977). In support of this hypothesis, Bill and Naus (1992) found that male participants considered incidents of sex discrimination harmless and acceptable when they perceived the incidents as humorous.

In contrast, nonhumorous disparagement does not activate such a conversational rule of levity (e.g., Attardo, 1993; Berlyne, 1972). Indeed, our research suggests that, upon exposure to nonhumorous disparagement, the recipient essentially brings to bear the usual critical reactions to such sentiments prescribed by nonprejudiced norms of conduct (Ford, 2000; Ford et al., 2001). In fact, it is possible that nonhumorous disparagement makes the usual nonprejudiced norms more salient.

We further propose that the recipient’s response to disparagement humor contributes to whether he or she will define the context as one in which discrimination need not be considered critically. Humor indicates a shared understanding of its meta-message only if the recipient approves of it (Fine, 1983; Kane et al., 1977). So, if the recipient approves of disparagement humor—that is, switches to a nonserious humor mindset to take the expression of prejudice lightly—he or she tacitly consents to a shared understanding (a social norm) that it is acceptable in this context to make light of discrimination against the targeted group. Other theorists have made similar arguments regarding the communication of socially unacceptable sentiments through humor (e.g., Emerson, 1969; Francis, 1988; Khoury, 1985). Emerson, for instance, suggested that by communicating socially unacceptable sentiments in

the form of a joke, the source and recipients negotiate an agreement to suspend the typical, serious norms for responding to such sentiments.

The recipient may, however, reject the conversational rule to switch to a nonserious humor mindset for interpreting the disparagement. Specifically, the recipient may think it inappropriate to make disparaging jokes—to make light of the expression of prejudice (Apte, 1987; Barker, 1994; Mannell, 1977; Sev’er & Ungar, 1997). That is, the recipient may challenge or reject the normative standard implied by the humor (Attardo, 1993; Francis, 1988). Opposition to the disparagement humor suggests there is not a shared understanding of its meta-message. Indeed, if the derisive message draws unexpected criticism, the source will likely dismiss the message as “only a joke” and not a statement of his or her genuine attitude toward the target (Johnson, 1990). The source essentially de-commits from his or her endorsement of the normative standard implied by the humor (Kane et al., 1977).

By rejecting the disparagement humor—that is, not switching to a nonserious humor mindset to interpret the disparagement—the recipient should be less likely to perceive a shared norm of tolerance of discrimination. The recipient should be less likely to tacitly define the context as one in which discrimination need not be considered critically. As a result, the usual nonprejudiced standards of conduct would not be displaced by the disparagement humor, and instances of discrimination would still be perceived in accordance with those norms. In keeping with this hypothesis, Ryan and Kanjorski (1998) found that men who were exposed to sexist jokes reported greater acceptance of rape myths and violence against women, but only when they found the jokes amusing and inoffensive—that is, when they interpreted the jokes in a nonserious humor mindset.

In addition, Ford (2000, Exp. 2) tested this hypothesis by manipulating the judgmental mindset participants used to interpret sexist or neutral jokes. Gollob and Levine (1967) showed that instructions to focus on the content of humor material prevented participants from adopting a nonserious humor mindset. Thus, before exposing participants to sexist or neutral jokes, Ford gave participants either (a) instructions to focus on the content or underlying message of the jokes (serious mindset condition) or (b) no instructions as they read the jokes (control condition). Participants then responded to the sexist supervisor vignette described earlier. Results indicated that the activation of a nonserious humor mindset was necessary for sexist humor to increase tolerance of the supervisor’s sexist behavior. When participants (both men and women) high in hostile sexism interpreted sexist jokes in a serious manner (as they would serious discourse), the effect of exposure to sexist humor

on tolerance of the sexist event was nullified. Instructions to take sexist humor seriously essentially communicated to the recipient to bring to bear critical reactions to the sexist humor that would otherwise be suspended.

It is noteworthy that these findings further undermine the plausibility that sexist humor increases tolerance of sexism merely by increasing the accessibility of sexist attitudes. Indeed, they highlight the unique effect of humor as a medium for communicating disparagement. For participants high in hostile sexism, the sexist jokes created greater tolerance of the sexist event in the control condition than in the serious judgmental mindset condition. The accessibility of sexist attitudes in those two conditions, however, should have been the same because the content of the sexist communication was identical. Furthermore, in the serious judgmental mindset condition, participants high in hostile sexism who were exposed to sexist jokes did not exhibit greater tolerance of the sexist event than their counterparts in the neutral joke condition. This supports our theory that the communication of disparagement through humor has unique social consequences when the recipient interprets it through a nonserious humor mindset. When the recipient switches to a nonserious humor mindset to interpret disparagement humor, he or she tacitly consents to a shared definition of the social context as one in which the expression of prejudice need not be considered critically.

Although we propose that switching to a nonserious mindset to interpret disparagement humor implies tacit consent to its underlying meta-message, we recognize that the social context may cue a benign meta-message of the humor. For instance, a person might approve of disparagement humor—switch to a nonserious mindset to interpret it—in a context in which he or she knows that the humor source intended to lampoon rather than support social stereotypes. In this case, the meta-message of the humor would not be “discrimination need not be taken seriously.” Thus, approval of the humor would not mean tacit consent to a normative standard of tolerance of discrimination. Switching to a nonserious humor mindset to interpret the humor would imply tacit consent to a different normative standard—that denigration of social stereotypes is acceptable in this context.

Prejudiced Norms and Tolerance of Discrimination

Because disparagement humor communicates a norm of tolerance of discrimination, we propose that exposure to disparagement humor affects the recipient through social influence processes. In their norm focus theory, Cialdini and colleagues (e.g., Cialdini,

Reno, & Kallgren, 1990; Cialdini, Kallgren, & Reno, 1991; Kallgren, Reno, & Cialdini, 2000) distinguished between two types of social norms: descriptive norms and injunctive norms. Descriptive norms refer to one’s perception of typical behavior in a given context. Thus, they influence individual behavior and social judgment by providing information about what is sensible or effective in that context. In contrast, injunctive norms refer to socially shared sets of rules defining appropriate and inappropriate conduct. Injunctive norms, therefore, influence behavior and social judgment by providing information about what is likely to be positively or negatively sanctioned in a given context.

Research has shown that descriptive norms can affect people’s tolerance and expression of prejudice (e.g., Blanchard, Crandall, Brigham, & Vaughan, 1994; Blanchard, Lilly, & Vaughan, 1991; Monteith, Deneen, & Tooman, 1996; Stangor, Sechrist, & Jost, 2001). When members of one’s reference group explicitly express their views related to prejudice, it creates a descriptive norm—although not completely without injunctive implications—that can lead to public compliance (Blanchard et al., 1991) or private acceptance of the expressed view (Blanchard et al., 1994; Stangor et al., 2001). For instance, Blanchard et al. (1994) exposed participants to a confederate’s reactions to how the participant’s college should respond to a number of instances of racism. Participants heard the confederate either condemn or condone the racist incidents. There was also a control condition in which participants were not aware of the confederate’s responses. Relative to participants in the control condition, participants who first heard the confederate condemn the racist incidents expressed more antiracist opinions of the incidents; participants who first heard the confederate condone the incidents expressed fewer antiracist opinions of them. According to norm focus theory, the confederate’s responses presumably informed the participant of what was a reasonable or effective response to the specific racist incidents.

The unique quality of disparagement through humor is that it undermines the seriousness of the expression of prejudice. Disparagement humor seems innocuous or harmless. And our empirical research suggests that, for people high in prejudice, this innocuous quality of disparagement through humor communicates an implicit *injunctive* norm of tolerance of discrimination. Upon exposure to disparagement humor, prejudiced recipients evaluated subsequent discriminatory events (for which others have not explicitly evaluated) less critically (Ford et al., 2001). In effect, disparagement through humor “frees” the prejudiced recipient of the usual externally imposed critical sensitivities toward discrimination against the disparaged group more generally.

The Role of Prejudice Toward the Disparaged Group

Switching to a Nonserious Humor Mindset

Empirical research has indicated that exposure to disparagement humor affects tolerance of discrimination only for people high in prejudice. The reason for this may be found in theories about the motivations that underlie the expression and suppression of prejudice. According to such theories, people high in prejudice have more weakly internalized nonprejudiced convictions than nonprejudiced people. Consequently, they are primarily motivated by external (normative) forces to respond without prejudice (e.g., Crandall, Eshleman, & O'Brien, 2002; Devine, Plant, Amodio, Harmon-Jones, & Vance, 2002; Monteith, Devine, & Zuwerink, 1993; Plant & Devine, 1998). Plant and Devine developed the Internal Motivation to Respond Without Prejudice Scale (IMS) and External Motivation to Respond Without Prejudice Scale (EMS). They found that racial prejudice was related to scores on each scale. Racial prejudice was positively related to scores on the EMS and negatively related to scores on the IMS.

Similarly, Ford and Lorion (2000) found that hostile sexism was related to scores on a version of the IMS and EMS adapted to assess motivation to respond without prejudice toward women. Hostile sexism was positively related to scores on the EMS and negatively related to scores on the IMS. People high in hostile sexism were primarily motivated to suppress prejudiced responses to avoid social sanctions rather than because of their internal regulatory guides. In addition, Crandall et al. (2002, Study 6) found that people high in prejudice scored high on their Suppression of Prejudice Scale. This indicates that people high in prejudice are not internally motivated to suppress prejudice but rather are motivated to conform to group norms about the appropriateness of prejudice responses. Overall then, it appears that social norms are likely to guide self-regulation in intergroup settings to the extent that one is highly prejudiced and has not truly incorporated nonprejudiced standards into his or her personally important self-regulatory guides (Devine et al., 2002; Moretti & Higgins, 1999).

On the basis of this research, we propose that the recipient's level of prejudice influences the degree to which he or she approves of the disparagement humor—switches to a nonserious humor mindset to interpret the disparagement. Because highly prejudiced people have more weakly internalized nonprejudiced convictions than nonprejudiced people, highly prejudiced people should be less likely to challenge or reject disparagement humor and its implicit meta-message that discrimination need not be taken seriously. In fact,

they may want a norm of tolerance of discrimination to replace the usual nonprejudiced norms (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003). In contrast, people low in prejudice are likely to have well-internalized nonprejudiced convictions and attitudes, which because they are contrary to the sentiments communicated in the disparagement humor, naturally highlight the inappropriateness of the humor and its meta-message that discrimination need not be taken seriously.

In keeping with our hypothesis, many studies have found that people are less critical of disparagement humor insofar as they dislike the target (e.g., Cantor & Zillmann, 1973; La Fave, McCarthy, & Haddad, 1973; McGhee & Duffey, 1983; Wicker et al., 1980). In the context of sexist humor, there is substantial evidence suggesting that, regardless of gender, people enjoy sexist humor to the extent that they have sexist attitudes (e.g., Butland & Ivy, 1990; Greenwood & Isbell, 2002; Henkin & Fish, 1986; LaFrance & Woodzicka, 1998; Moore, Griffiths, & Payne, 1987). Greenwood and Isbell, for instance, found that participants high in hostile sexism were less offended and more amused by sexist jokes than participants low in hostile sexism. A reanalysis of data collected by Ford (2000, Exp. 3) revealed a similar finding. In conditions not designed to encourage participants to interpret humor in a serious mindset, participants high in hostile sexism were less offended by sexist jokes than participants low in hostile sexism. Furthermore, participants high in hostile sexism were *not* more offended by sexist jokes than by neutral jokes. In contrast, participants low in hostile sexism were more offended by sexist jokes than neutral jokes.

Perceiving a Prejudiced Norm

Due to their greater approval of disparagement humor, people high in prejudice should be more likely to perceive a shared normative standard of tolerance of discrimination in the immediate context. They should be more likely than those low in prejudice to define the context as one in which they need not consider discrimination in a critical or serious manner.

In support of this hypothesis, Ford et al. (2001) found that men high in hostile sexism were more likely than men low in hostile sexism to perceive a norm of tolerance of sexism in the immediate context upon exposure to sexist humor but not upon exposure to comparable nonhumorous sexist statements or neutral humor. Specifically, upon exposure to sexist humor, men high in hostile sexism believed that others in the immediate social context (other participants in the experiment) would be more tolerant of the supervisor's sexist remarks in the sexist supervisor vignette. That is, they defined the social context as one where they need not consider instances of sexism in a serious or critical manner. Men low in hostile sexism, however, did not.

In addition, when the underlying meta-message of disparagement humor is ambiguous, one's level of prejudice may affect how the recipient interprets the humor and thus whether he or she perceives a norm of tolerance of discrimination. Vidmar and Rokeach (1974), for instance, studied amusement with the television show *All in the Family*, which focused on the bigoted character, Archie Bunker. They found that both prejudiced and nonprejudiced people approved of *All in the Family*—switched to a nonserious humor mindset to interpret it and found it amusing. Prejudiced and nonprejudiced people, however, perceived the humor of *All in the Family* differently. Nonprejudiced people perceived *All in the Family* as a satire on bigotry and that Archie Bunker was the target of the humor. In contrast, prejudiced people enjoyed the show for “telling it like it is”—for satirizing the targets of Archie's prejudice (p. 38). Thus, only the prejudiced people in Vidmar and Rokeach's study would have perceived an implicit meta-message or normative standard of tolerance of discrimination communicated by *All in the Family*.

Using the Prejudiced Norm as a Source of Self-Regulation: Mediation Analyses

People high in prejudice are not only more likely to perceive a norm of tolerance of discrimination upon exposure to disparagement humor, they are more likely to use that norm as a guide for regulating social judgment. Ford et al. (2001) found that, for male participants high in hostile sexism, a perceived norm of tolerance of sexism mediated the effect of exposure to sexist humor on the amount of self-directed negative affect (e.g., guilt, shame) they felt upon imagining they had behaved in a sexist manner. Path analyses revealed that when perceptions of the local norm—how others in the immediate context would respond to a sexist event—were controlled statistically, the effect of sexist humor on self-directed negative affect was nullified. Because sexist humor created a perceived norm of tolerance of sexism for participants high in hostile sexism, and because these participants are relatively more attuned to external norms as a source of self-regulation (Ford & Lorion, 2000), participants high in hostile sexism anticipated feeling less self-directed negative affect upon imagining they had behaved in a sexist manner. That is, upon exposure to sexist humor, the thought of behaving in a sexist manner represented less of a violation of their externally derived standards of appropriate conduct. The sexist behavior represented less of a discrepancy with participants' “ought-self” (Higgins, 1987, 1989).

Our theory suggests that, for people high in prejudice, both the adoption of a nonserious mindset and the perception of a prejudiced norm mediate the effect of exposure to disparagement humor on personal toler-

ance of discrimination. Specifically, we propose the following causal model. People high in prejudice adopt a nonserious mindset to interpret to disparagement humor. Thus, they perceive a norm of tolerance of discrimination toward members of the disparaged group. As a result, they express greater personal tolerance of other instances of discrimination toward members of the disparaged group.

To test this causal model, we conducted a path analysis on data collected by Ford et al. (2001) combined with data from a pilot study using the same stimulus materials, procedure, and dependent measures. In the Ford et al. (2001) study and in the pilot study, we collected a “mindset measure” after participants read sexist jokes, sexist statements, or neutral jokes told among a group of students. Specifically, participants indicated the extent to which they interpreted the interaction among the students in a light-hearted (nonserious) manner versus a critical (serious) manner. Participants then read the sexist supervisor vignette and imagined they were the supervisor who had behaved in a sexist manner. Participants next rated the extent to which others in the immediate social context would be tolerant of the supervisor's sexist remarks and the degree to which they would feel self-directed negative affect if they had actually made those remarks.

Because the adoption of a nonserious mindset should relate to the perception of a prejudiced norm and personal tolerance of discrimination in only the sexist joke and sexist statement conditions, we based our path analyses on data from those conditions. In the neutral joke condition, participants high in hostile sexism should (and did) adopt a nonserious mindset to interpret the humor. But, because the humor was not sexist, it did not communicate a norm of tolerance of discrimination against women. As a result, participants did not relax their critical sensitivities toward sexism more generally.

Our path analyses followed the recommendations outlined by Shrout and Bolger (2002), who suggested the use of bootstrap methods to assess mediation in studies with small samples. Accordingly, we used Amos 4.0 (Arbuckle & Wothke, 2000) to simultaneously estimate the paths in our model. This program also provided bootstrapped standard errors, which we used to calculate the significance of each path coefficient.

The path analysis results supported our causal model. For men high in hostile sexism, the direct effect of communication type (sexist jokes vs. sexist statements) on the mindset variable was significant, $\beta = -.47$, $t(24) = -2.66$, $p < .05$. Participants adopted a less serious mindset when interpreting sexist jokes than when interpreting sexist statements. Furthermore, the direct effect of mindset on normative tolerance of sexism reached marginal significance, $\beta = .40$, $t(24) = 1.93$, $p < .07$. This indicates that participants perceived a norm of tolerance of the supervi-

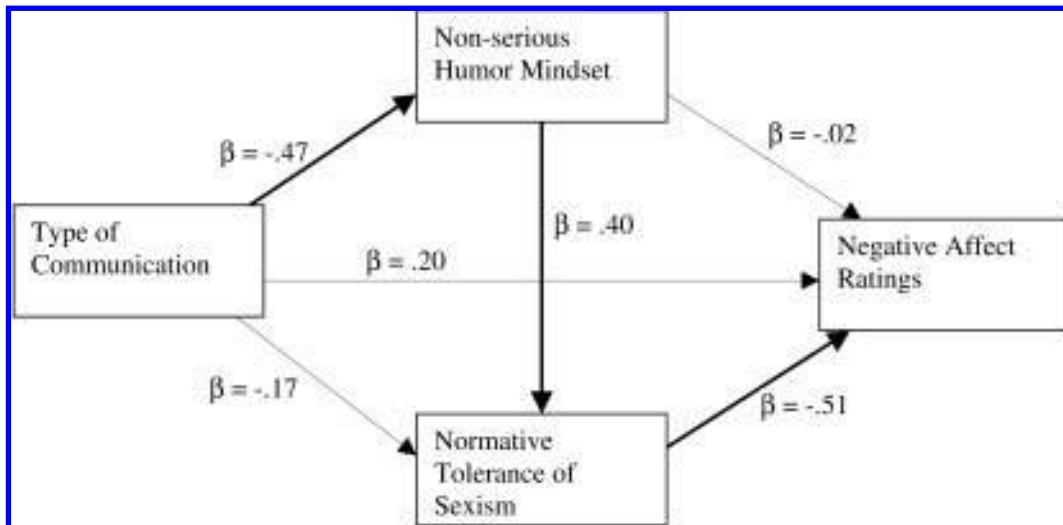


Figure 1. Path analysis for participants high in hostile sexism.

sor's sexist remarks to the extent that they had adopted a nonserious mindset to interpret the sexist communication. Finally, the direct effect of normative tolerance of sexism on negative affect ratings reached significance, $\beta = -.51$, $t(24) = -2.57$, $p < .05$. This suggests that participants anticipated feeling less self-directed negative affect upon imagining they had behaved in a sexist manner (expressed greater personal tolerance of the sexist event) insofar as they perceived a norm of tolerance of sexism. No other paths in the model reached significance.¹ The complete model for men high in hostile sexism is depicted in Figure 1.

We performed the same path analysis for men low in hostile sexism. Only the path from normative tolerance to negative affect reached significance, $\beta = -.21$, $t(22) = -2.16$, $p < .05$. Overall then, path analyses support the causal model derived from our theory. Upon exposure to sexist humor, men high in hostile sexism (but not men low in hostile sexism) adopted a nonserious mindset for interpreting disparagement and thus perceived a norm of tolerance of sexism in the immediate social context. They then used the perceived norm to regulate their own evaluations of a sexist event. Therefore, for people high in prejudice, the adoption of a nonserious mindset and the perception of a prejudiced norm both mediate the effect of exposure to disparagement humor on personal tolerance of discrimination. Although supportive of our theory, we re-

gard these analyses as preliminary and recognize that further research explicitly designed (a priori) to test our predicted causal model is necessary.

Moderating Variables

Empirical evidence supports our contention that exposure to disparagement humor primarily affects people high in prejudice toward members of the disparaged group. However, a number of variables in the humor context may moderate the effect of exposure to disparagement humor for people high in prejudice by affecting the extent to which they interpret the humor in a nonserious mindset and the extent to which they perceive a norm of tolerance of discrimination.

Group Membership of the Humorist

Gutman and Priest (1967) suggested that recipients interpret disparagement humor differently depending on their perceptions of the humorist's intentions. If the recipient believes the humorist is malicious, he or she will likely judge the disparagement humor as a socially inappropriate expression of hostility or prejudice and therefore interpret it in a serious, critical mindset (Wyer & Collins, 1992). Furthermore, Rouhana (1996) and Ford, Johnson, Blevins, and Zepeda (1999) suggested that the recipient uses the joke teller's group membership to infer his or her intentions. Ford et al. found that participants high in hostile sexism were more offended by sexist jokes told by men than told by women, or joke tellers whose sex was not revealed. These findings suggest that, for people high in prejudice, the explicit identification of the humor source as a member of a

¹When the nonsignificant paths are removed from the model, the marginal path from mindset to normative tolerance becomes significant, $\beta = .48$, $t(24) = 2.71$, $p < .05$. It therefore seems possible that the nonsignificant paths contribute a disproportionate amount of error to the model, thereby reducing our ability to detect causal effects. As a result, it seems noteworthy that the more complex model containing these nonsignificant paths received such strong empirical support.

social out-group can serve as an external cue indicating that the disparagement humor represents an inappropriate expression of hostility. As such, the recipient may perceive that others would take the disparagement humor seriously and that, therefore, they should also interpret it in a serious (critical) manner. Interestingly, participants low in hostile sexism in Ford et al.'s study were offended by the sexist jokes regardless of the joke tellers' sex. We do not suggest from these findings that people low in prejudice do not also use the group membership of the humor source to infer intentions. Perhaps participants low in hostile sexism simply thought it inappropriate to make light of sexism even when the humor sources were women, who would not presumably hold malicious intentions.

Because recipients high in prejudice interpret disparagement humor presented by a member of an out-group in a serious manner, they should not perceive a shared norm of tacit approval of discrimination upon exposure to such humor, and, thus, they should not report greater personal tolerance of discrimination. In keeping with this hypothesis, Ford (2000, Exp. 3) found that exposure to sexist jokes delivered by female sources, and sources whose sex was not revealed, increased tolerance of a sexist event among participants high in hostile sexism. This effect, however, was nullified when the sexist jokes were delivered by male sources. Also, in subsequent studies we found that, for participants high in hostile sexism, exposure to sexist humor increased tolerance of an instance of sexism when the humor was delivered by a group of both men and women (Ford, Ferguson, & Kalair, 2002, Exp. 1; Ford et al., 2001). Thus, for exposure to disparagement humor to increase tolerance of discrimination for people high in prejudice, it appears necessary that only some of the disparaging agents not be explicitly identified as belonging to an out-group.

Extremity of Disparagement Humor

In addition to group membership of the humor source, Zillmann, Bryant, and Cantor (1974), as well as Cantor and Zillmann (1973), found that participants were less amused when a disliked target person suffered an extreme versus less extreme form of disparagement (misfortune). The implication for our theory is that the negative effect of disparagement humor on social judgment may be limited to instances of relatively mild disparagement. Extreme or severe disparagement appears to inhibit one from switching to a playful, nonserious humor mindset to interpret the humor. Accordingly, one might hypothesize that, by failing to "accept" extreme disparagement humor, even people high in prejudice should be less likely to perceive a norm of tolerance of discrimination as a source of self-regulation.

Others' Reactions to Disparagement Humor

Perceptions of humor material are affected by others' reactions to it. One person's laughter, for instance, can enhance another's enjoyment of humor material (e.g., Chapman, 1974; Gadfield, 1977; Young & Frye, 1966). Young and Frye, for instance, argued that a confederate's laughter enhanced amusement of sexist humor in their study by relaxing the "social taboos" associated with expression of sexist sentiments (p. 754). By displaying cues of approval of disparagement humor, recipients might further encourage the person high in prejudice to adopt a noncritical mindset for interpreting the underlying derision and to perceive a shared norm of tolerance of discrimination in the immediate context. On the other hand, others can also decrease one's enjoyment of humor material by displaying cues of disapproval and disinterest (e.g., Chapman & Chapman, 1974; Osborne & Chapman, 1977; Young & Frye, 1966). Thus, we hypothesize that by displaying cues of disapproval of disparagement humor, recipients would prevent the person high in prejudice from switching to a noncritical humor mindset to interpret the humor and from perceiving a shared norm of tolerance of discrimination in the immediate context.

Norm Saliency

A central hypothesis of Cialdini, Reno, and Kallgren's (1990) norm focus theory is that social norms guide one's behavior or social judgment to the extent they are salient or focal in consciousness (Kallgren et al., 2000). Research by Cialdini et al. (Exp. 5) supports this hypothesis. The experimenters manipulated participants' focus on an injunctive norm against littering by placing handbills on the windshields of cars in a library parking lot. The handbill contained a message that varied in how closely it related to the societal injunctive norm against littering. The experimenters found that participants littered the handbill less if it contained an antilittering message (i.e., "April is Keep Arizona Beautiful Month. Please Do Not Litter") than if it contained a message irrelevant to the antilittering norm (i.e., "April is Arizona's Fine Arts Month. Please Visit Your Local Art Museum"). The societal injunctive norm against littering regulated behavior to the extent that it was made salient in the immediate context.

The implication of these results for our theory is that the norm of tolerance of discrimination implied by disparagement humor is likely to be used as a guide for regulating evaluations of discrimination insofar as the perceiver is (a) receptive to the norm as a source of self-regulation (e.g., high in prejudice) and (b) acutely attuned to normative standards of conduct. To test this hypothesis, Ford et al. (2002) exposed men who varied

in their level of hostile sexism to either sexist or neutral humor. Half of the participants—those in the norm-focus condition—first completed a priming procedure designed to heighten their focus on social norms as a source of self-regulation. The other half—those in the no-prime control condition—did not complete the priming procedure. The results indicated that men high in hostile sexism were more responsive to the norm implied by the humor in the norm-focus condition—they were more tolerant of the sexist event when they were attuned to social norms as a source of self-regulation. Conversely, upon exposure to neutral humor, men high in hostile sexism responded more according to default nonsexist norms when they were acutely attuned to normative standards of conduct. In the neutral humor condition, the norm-focus manipulation presumably made the default nonsexist norms more salient as a source of self-regulation. As a result, men high in hostile sexism tended to report less tolerance of the sexist event. Overall, Ford et al. identified norm-saliency as an important moderating variable in our model of the effect of disparagement humor on tolerance of discrimination.

Humorous Versus Nonhumorous Disparagement

Collectively, the results of our research have demonstrated that exposure to disparagement humor has effects on social perception apart from comparable nonhumorous disparagement. Specifically, for people high in hostile sexism, sexist jokes appear to uniquely expand the bounds of socially acceptable conduct, creating an implicit norm of tolerance of sexism and, thus, greater personal tolerance of sex discrimination. In contrast, we found no evidence that nonhumorous disparagement of women created an implicit norm of tolerance of sexism for people high in hostile sexism (Ford et al., 2001) or that it increased personal tolerance of sex discrimination (Ford, 2000; Ford et al., 2001).

However, other research has found that exposure to nonhumorous forms of disparagement can affect attitudes, social judgment, and behavior in a discriminatory manner. Greenberg and his colleagues (Greenberg, Kirkland, & Pyszczynski, 1988; Greenberg & Pyszczynski, 1985; Kirkland, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1987; Simon & Greenberg, 1996), for instance, found that White participants rated an African American target person negatively upon hearing someone else refer to the target using a nonhumorous derogatory ethnic label (DEL). In addition, Simon and Greenberg found that this effect was accentuated among people high in racial prejudice.

Greenberg and Pyszczynski (1985) and Kirkland et al. (1987) suggested that overhearing a DEL primes negative stereotypes and attitudes about the targeted

group, making them more likely to come to mind and influence social judgment, provided that the target's behavior is consistent with those views. Blanchard et al. (1991) suggested an additional possibility based on "normative" social influence (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). Specifically, when people in the immediate context explicitly express prejudiced attitudes, an individual might perceive pressure to respond in a more prejudiced manner.

Whether priming or normative influence mediates the effects of exposure to a DEL on social judgment, exposure to disparagement humor appears to affect social judgment through a different mechanism than nonhumorous disparagement. For people high in prejudice, humorous disparagement can create the perception of a shared norm of tolerance of discrimination to guide their own reactions to discrimination in the immediate context. In contrast, exposure to nonhumorous disparagement of women did not lead to the perception of a social norm of tolerance of sexism or personal tolerance of sexism, even among people high in hostile sexism (e.g., Ford, 2000; Ford et al., 2001). In addition, the findings by Simon and Greenberg (1996) and Kirkland et al. (1987) that participants (even those high in racial prejudice) responded with anger and hostility toward a person using a DEL suggest that exposure to the DEL did not influence social judgment by creating a shared understanding that racial discrimination need not be considered in a critical manner. In contrast, our empirical research suggests that, for people high in prejudice, humorous disparagement can create the perception of a shared norm of tolerance of discrimination that may be used to guide reactions to discrimination in that immediate context.

Our prejudiced norm theory may be relevant to understanding other forms of nonhumorous disparagement to the extent they communicate a meta-message of tolerance of discrimination. Some pornography, for instance, disparages women by depicting them as degraded, dehumanized sex objects and has been associated with the trivialization of rape and acceptance of violence against women (e.g., Malamuth & Briere, 1986; Malamuth & Check, 1981; Zillmann & Bryant, 1982). Zillmann and Bryant found that both men and women who were exposed to massive amounts of pornography exhibited less condemnation of rape. Furthermore, men exposed to large amounts of pornography exhibited greater "sexual callousness toward women" in general (p. 18).

A number of psychological and physiological processes may be responsible for the effects of pornography on reactions to violence against women (Donnerstein, Linz, & Penrod, 1987; Malamuth, 1984). However, Malamuth suggested that the most compelling explanation is that exposure to pornography increases the accessibility of cognitions related to female promiscuity and myths about rape. The accessi-

bility of such cognitions may distort judgments about the normality of rape and women's reactions to it (Donnerstein et al., 1987).

In addition to this accessibility explanation, our model prompts speculation that, just as the communication of disparagement through humor creates an implicit norm of tolerance of discrimination, pornography may communicate tacit approval of sexual exploitation of women. Thus, the sexual callousness associated with exposure to pornography may be, at least in part, a manifestation of a perceived norm or climate of tolerance of exploitation of women (Malamuth & Spinner, 1980). Whereas disparagement humor communicates tolerance of discrimination through cues suggesting that the underlying message need not be considered in a critical manner, pornography may communicate tolerance of sexual exploitation by depicting women as condoning or even desiring being treated as sex objects. Zillmann and Bryant (1982), for instance, noted that pornography "appears to thrive on featuring social encounters in which women are eager to accommodate any and every imaginable sexual urge of any man in the vicinity" and that "women are portrayed as hysterically euphoric in response to just about any sexual and pseudo-sexual stimulation" (p. 12). Approval of pornography, then, might suggest tacit approval of a shared norm that, in this context, sexual exploitation of women need not be considered in a critical manner. More research is necessary to fully investigate this possibility.

Relevance to Contemporary Models of Prejudice

Crandall and Eshleman's (2003) justification-suppression model of prejudice suggested that people express prejudice only after engaging in a process of suppression and justification. That is, internal forces (e.g., personal standards, religious beliefs) or external forces (nonprejudiced norms) motivate people to suppress the expression of prejudice. As a result, people express prejudice only when there is sufficient justification. Justifications essentially allow people to express an otherwise suppressed prejudice without feeling self-directed negative affect (e.g., guilt, compunction) or fearing negative social sanctions. Accordingly, Crandall and Eshleman referred to justifications as "releasers" of prejudice.

Other contemporary models of racism (e.g., Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986; Katz et al., 1986; McConahay, 1986), sexism (e.g., Swim, Aikin, Hall, & Hunter, 1995; Tougas, Brown, Beaton, & Joly, 1995), and weight prejudice (e.g., Crandall, 1994) have identified social norms as an important source of suppression and justification of prejudice. Gaertner and Dovidio, for instance, suggested that people are most likely to express racial prejudice (engage in discriminatory behav-

ior) when the norms in a given context are "weak, ambiguous or conflicting" (p. 66). Under such conditions, discriminatory behavior can be easily justified—defined as not socially inappropriate and thus not likely to elicit social reprisals (e.g., Frey & Gaertner, 1986).

Research guided by our prejudiced norm theory thus contributes to this literature by demonstrating the relevance of disparagement humor for creating social conditions that encourage the expression of prejudice—a normative climate of tolerance of discrimination. Apte (1987) suggested that the use of humor and responsiveness to humor are valued attributes in American society. As a result, humor pervades nearly every type of interpersonal relationship. Thus, we propose that disparagement humor is an important medium through which the normative structure of the immediate social context is changed. According to the justification-suppression model, disparagement humor serves as a releaser of prejudice. For people high in prejudice, disparagement humor diminishes the suppression of prejudice by replacing the usual nonprejudiced norms in a given situation with a norm of tolerance of discrimination toward the disparaged group. Disparagement humor essentially justifies a wider range of negative responses toward the members of the targeted group.

To date, our research has not directly addressed the effects of exposure to disparagement humor on the actual performance of discriminatory behavior. However, it seems plausible to hypothesize that highly prejudiced people are more likely to engage in subtle forms of discrimination upon exposure to disparagement humor. In a context of disparagement humor, discriminatory behavior can be easily rationalized as falling within the bounds of social acceptability. Explicit tests of this hypothesis would be a fruitful avenue for future research. Research showing that exposure to disparagement humor fosters discriminatory behavior among people high in prejudice would expand the scope of our prejudiced norm theory to behavioral consequences of exposure to disparagement humor.

Conclusion

Although the vast majority of research on disparagement humor has addressed the antecedents of amusement, researchers have recently turned their attention to examining the social consequences of disparagement humor. Contrary to intuition and speculation by laypeople, humor theorists, and other social scientists, recent empirical studies have not found evidence that exposure to disparagement humor affects either the accessibility or evaluative content of the recipient's stereotypes or attitudes toward the targeted group. It does not appear that exposure to disparagement humor reinforces negative images of the targeted group (Ford et al., 2001; Olson et al., 1999).

We have proposed in this article, however, that exposure to disparagement humor does have a negative social consequence. It implies a change in the external sources of self-regulation—the norms in a given context that dictate appropriate reactions to discrimination against members of the disparaged group. By making light of the expression of prejudice, disparagement humor communicates a message of tacit approval or tolerance of discrimination against members of the targeted group. Our theory proposes that the recipient must accept the disparagement humor for a shared norm of tolerance of discrimination to actually emerge. Furthermore, our research suggests that people high in prejudice are more likely to accept disparagement humor and thus perceive a norm of tolerance of discrimination in the immediate context. Finally, people high in prejudice are likely to use the activated normative standard as a source of self-regulation, or a guide for interpreting discriminatory events encountered in that context.

Empirical research supports the propositions of our prejudiced norm theory. First, exposure to disparagement humor uniquely increases tolerance of discrimination insofar as it is interpreted in a light-hearted, nonserious humor mindset (Ford, 2000). Second, people high in prejudice toward the targeted group are more likely to interpret disparagement humor in a nonserious humor mindset (Butland & Ivy, 1990; Ford, 2000, Exp. 3; Ford et al., 1999; Greenwood & Isbell, 2002; Henkin & Fish, 1986; LaFrance & Woodzicka, 1998; Moore et al., 1987). Third, because people high in prejudice are more likely to adopt a humor mindset for interpreting disparagement, they are more likely to perceive a social norm of tolerance of discrimination against members of the disparaged group (Ford et al. 2001; Vidmar & Rokeach, 1974). That is, they are more likely to define the context as one in which people need not consider instances of discrimination against the targeted group in a serious, critical manner. Finally, for people high in prejudice, the perceived norm of tolerance of discrimination mediates the effect of exposure to disparagement humor on social judgment. People high in prejudice are more likely to use the norm implied by disparagement humor as a source of self-regulation, to guide perceptions of other instances of discrimination (Ford et al., 2001), particularly when they are acutely attuned to normative standards in the immediate context (Ford et al., 2002).

We have raised a number of issues throughout this article that remain to be addressed by future research. For instance, we have not addressed the accentuating or attenuating effect of a number of possible moderator variables such as the effect of others' reactions to humor on the recipient's perceptions of the humor and subsequent discriminatory events. In addition, we have not yet considered the effect of exposure to dis-

paragement humor on the actual performance of discriminatory behavior. Future research on such issues is necessary to more fully substantiate our theory, further delineate its boundaries, and extend its utility beyond the understanding of tolerance of discrimination. In addition, all of our studies addressed only the effects of sexist humor on tolerance of sexist events. All of our studies have addressed the effects of humor presented in the form of written jokes. Thus, future research is necessary to more fully substantiate our theory in the context of other forms and targets of disparagement humor.

In conclusion, we believe our prejudiced norm theory makes an important contribution to the literature on prejudice and discrimination. Humor pervades nearly all types of social relationships, and our theory identifies disparagement humor as a significant medium for creating a normative climate of tolerance of discrimination. As we have pointed out, more research is needed to further test and extend our theory. To this end, we hope the explication of our prejudiced norm theory will generate interest in further exploring the social consequences of humor as a medium for communicating disparagement.

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