

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Abstract approved:

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Employees from two different organizations, a public university and a hospital in Oregon, were asked to take part in an interview to assess their perceptions of how race is discussed in their workplace, if racial humor is used in their workplace, if this humor offers an opportunity to discuss race further, and as a result of this discussion, if participants had altered their previous held beliefs about a particular race. Results proved that for the participants in this study, racial humor was used in the workplace and it did offer an opportunity to discuss racial issues further which for the majority of participants, resulted in altering their previous held beliefs about a certain race.

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Using Racial Humor at Work: Promoting Positive Discussions on Race

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Teela Foxworth, Author

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Using Racial Humor at Work: Promoting Positive Discussions on Race

Chapter 1: Introduction

On April 12, 2007, popular radio show host, Don Imus, was fired by CBS due to a controversy that emerged from comments he made the previous week. During his radio show, Imus referred to the members of the Rutgers' women's basketball team as "nappy-headed hoes," in which 'hoes' is slang for whores. This comment led to a national discussion regarding the boundaries of freedom of speech. Although much speech is protected, the concept of freedom of speech carries with it a responsibility for that speech. Arguably, Imus may have been trying to be funny, but given the heated debate that followed these comments, I believe it is our duty as a nation to discuss these types of racial issues further and not just for the sake of cleaning house once a wrong has been committed.

Racial humor is prevalent in the media in the form of stand-up routines, sitcoms, and sketch comedies. The result of such broadcasts has been to transform race, arguably a sensitive and taboo topic, into something to laugh about. Shows such as Chappelle's Show, Mind of Mencia, In Living Color, and The Boondocks are prime examples of the way humor has been used to address racial issues. Clearly, some people view some aspect of the racial humor as funny. Some research has shown that the humorous presentation of serious issues may mitigate defensiveness, thus generating increased opportunities for discussing racial issues further. Such discussions can have positive implications for diverse workplaces. Thus, the purpose of my paper is to learn how racial humor may be used positively to improve cross-racial relationships in workplace contexts.

Relevance

Humor holds great potential for discussing serious issues (Lynch, 2002). However, if we continue only to laugh and not discuss the joke further, we are missing the opportunity to better understand one another. Worse yet, we may inadvertently cause harm to some individuals. Several critical benefits flow from increased cross-racial understanding, including the potential for less conflict and lower levels of divisiveness, both of which may lead to improved employee performance and productivity. First, engaging in proactive discussions about race involves learning about different others and can increase understanding between cross-racial counterparts. This can lead to a second benefit, which is preventing further divisive acts such as Jena 6 and Don Imus' comments, contributing ultimately to improved cross-racial workplace functioning.

After reviewing the relevant literature on humor and some overarching theories as to its use as well as the effects of humor in general, I will examine how jokes can be looked at as a form of storytelling and why people use humor to tell stories. Next, I will discuss race and stereotypes as the latter often is the material that forms the basis of much racial humor. Then, I will provide a brief history of racial humor along with both its negative and positive effects. From this discussion, I will show that research has not yet explored the potential for racially humorous stories to provide a segue for serious positive discussions on racial issues.

Traditionally, racial humor has been examined in terms of its negative effects. However, this limited view omits the rest of the picture. I believe that a critical and complete analysis of the effects of humor will show that it can be used for positive

effects. In short, I believe racial humor as a form of storytelling, has the potential to promote serious discussions about race that can promote improved cross-racial understanding in organizational contexts.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Humor

The fundamental goal of a joke is to produce humor. “[H]umor is an intended or unintended message interpreted as funny” (Lynch, 2002, p. 423). What is problematic is that humor is subjective, and although different people are able to enjoy the humor in the same joke, there will also be those who will not appreciate the humor (Perlmutter, 2002). Humor can also be seen as a good way to deliver bad information. In fact, humor is considered a good way to give unpleasant information because it can mask statements to make them seem less malicious than they really are (Young & Bippus, 2001).

Why use humor.

Three popular theories seek to explain why people use humor to tell stories. According to Lynch (2002) and Meyer (2000) these theories include the following: (a) Superiority Theory (also called the Great Humor), (b) Relief of Tension Theory and (c) Incongruity Theory. Superiority Theory (ST) states that one uses humor to triumph over another group that is not in on the humor (Lynch, 2002; Maschio, 1992; Meyer, 2000). ST is derived from an individual’s profound awareness about the large and small tragedies that come from life experiences (Harms, 1943; Raskin, 1944). “[The jokes] have no negative, malicious background of sarcasm, hate, or other superficial mental attitudes, but grow out of a ground of human understanding and kindness” (Harms, 1943, p. 353). Present day comedians that exhibit this type of humor include Jerry Seinfeld and Ellen DeGeneres both of whom rely strictly on the common human experience for their laughs. For example, Seinfeld made fun of the

stereotypical perceptions that men and women have pertaining to sex in the following joke:

Seems to me the basic conflict between men and women, sexually, is that men are like firemen. To men, sex is an emergency, and no matter what we're doing we can be ready in two minutes. Women, on the other hand, are like fire. They're very exciting, but the conditions have to be exactly right for it to occur (Seinfeld, 1995).

Self-deprecating humor, which is commonly found within racial humor, can be explained by ST. Individuals are able to make fun of their own race, such as Dave Chappelle and Carlos Mencia, and others may find it funny because they share the same culture and/or race as the comedian. As well as forming group identity for the race that is being made fun of, it is also able to integrate outsiders (Lowe, 1986). Notably, a person is not necessarily racist if they laugh at racial humor and are not a member of that race (Blum, 2002). This type of humor can be accepted and laughter emitted even if one would not normally express the views or beliefs held in the joke in a serious discussion (Perlmutter, 2002).

The second of the three theories of humor is the Relief of Tension Theory (RT) claims that humor is used to reduce tension in stressful or awkward situations. This type of humor can have positive physical effects on the body (Bippus, 2003; Lynch, 2002; Meyer, 2000). Arguably, Ahmed Ahmed, an Egyptian American comedian, fits the description of what many Americans have come to label a terrorist. Acknowledging this prevalent stereotype, Ahmed uses humor to relax the audience as evidenced in the following joke:

All you white people have it easy, you guys get to the airport like an hour, two hours before your flight, takes me a month and a half. Security's gotten so bad that I just show up to the airport in a G-string and I'm like, "how you guys doing" (Ahmed, 2007)?

Lastly, the Incongruity Theory (IT) contends that people laugh at what comes as unexpected (Goldberg, 1999; Lynch, 2002; Meyer, 2000; Mulkay, 1988; Perlmutter, 2002). Such humor occurs when there is an unexpected transition between diverse frames and incompatible things are occurring simultaneously within a joke (Goldberg, 1999; Mulkay, 1988). Chris Rock, a well-known comedian, exemplifies this when he begins to blame President Bush for many of the world's problems, all of which obviously, are not necessarily related to him.

I think Bush sent that girl to Kobe's room, Bush sent that little boy to Michael Jackson's house, Bush killed Lacey Peterson...all to get your mind off the war (Rock, 2006)!

Each of these theories helps us to better understand why different individuals may use different kinds of humor in their efforts to connect with a particular audience. What's important about the use of these perspectives however, is the appropriate use of humor which signals the degree of thought necessary to its selection. Clearly, the effective use of humor at work requires some attention. The four important functions of humor will be explored next.

Functions of humor.

There are many different purposes that can be fulfilled by using humor to express a feeling or thought. According to Meyer (2000), there are four different functions of humor: (a) identification, (b) differentiation, (c) clarification, and (d) enforcement. Identification is used to create unity within a group, and simultaneously can set apart certain individuals. In the following joke, Ellen DeGeneres poked fun at members of the 1960's generation and those that were a part of this time are expected to be more accepting and understanding of the joke:

The sixties were when hallucinogenic drugs were really, really big. And I don't think it's a coincidence that we had the type of shows we had then, like *The Flying Nun* (Brachhold, 2008).

The second concept, differentiation occurs when an individual attempts to separate a group from another (Lynch, 2002; Meyer, 2000). *Seinfeld* exemplifies differentiation in the following joke:

Men definitely hit the remote more than women...men don't care what's on TV, men only care what else is on TV. Women want to see what the show is before they change the channel, because men hunt and women nest (Seinfeld, 1994).

Humor also can be used to illuminate a perspective, and thus has the potential to make the perspective more memorable. This function of humor is known as clarification (Lynch, 2002; Meyer 2000). Comedian Chris Rock demonstrates this when he attempted to explain that the government has it all wrong when it tells us who we should fear:

They [the government] tryin' to scare us...tell us to be on the lookout for Al Qaeda. I ain't scared of Al Qaeda, I'm from Brooklyn...Did Al Qaeda blow up the building in Oklahoma? No! Did Al Qaeda put Anthrax in your mail? No!...Shit, I ain't scared of Al Qaeda, I'm scared of Al cracka (Rock, 2006)!

Lastly, enforcement is used to reiterate the norms of a group and is exemplified in a stand-up routine by an American soldier turned comedian, Jim Barlow (Lynch, 2002; Meyer 2000). Barlow enforced a normative behavior of making fun of one's enemy when he poked fun at the hijab, a form of Iraqi religious dress, when he said the following:

Now, if you don't follow politics the reason they're [Iraqi's] so upset is because they have no idea what their girlfriends look like until they marry them...these guys are gambling on their wedding day (Barlow, 2006).

Of the four functions, the two that relate most to this study are clarification and differentiation. In clarification, a particular perspective is being emphasized in telling humorous stories. This would then leave room for a post-humor discussion since the person speaking is explaining what is true in their personal experience of being of a particular racial background. Differentiation also relates as an individual can make a humorous division between their race and another in order to help someone understand their experience. Next, I will discuss the negative and positive effects humor can have in particular contexts.

Negative effects of humor.

Although Aristotle believed humor could produce positive effects which we will look at later, he acknowledged the negative effects of humor. Cicero and Freud also contended that humor could have negative effects. Aristotle claimed that humor was an effective communication tool that was able to produce disdain (Hughes, 2003). More specifically as Mintz (1996) reported, Aristotle claimed:

[A] joke reflects social attitudes and provides a vehicle through which people can voice feelings for which there is no socially acceptable or easily accessible outlet (p. 25).

An example of this would be when an individual tells a racist joke to another individual in order to convey negative feelings toward the second individual because of the second individual's race. As a result, Aristotle warned that using humor could involve serious consequences (Hughes, 2003). Cicero agreed with Aristotle's notion about the negative consequences associated with humor as he too advocated precaution when using humor (Hughes, 2003). More recently, Freud also claimed that jokes could be a way to express negative feelings, which marries well with Cicero and

Aristotle's beliefs about the potential danger associated with using humor maliciously (Hughes, 2003).

In summation, although I contend that humor can be used positively, it's important to note that according to the aforementioned theorists, humor has the potential to do damage if the intent is to convey discontent and express malice. The focus of this study, the positive effects of humor, will be discussed next.

Positive effects of humor.

Laughter, the ultimate goal of humor, can have positive effects. For example, according to Harm (1943) the act of laughter can create positive feelings. Furthermore, according to Raskin (1944), among these positive feelings are the expression of a variety of emotions which include, pleasure, freedom, relaxation, and laughter, all of which he suggested, is the beginning of love. Aristotle added to the list of these positive feelings when he stated that humor can also produce joy (Hughes, 2003). Some examples of how joy can be manifested are described by Darwin and according to Raskin (1944, p. 9) include, "Joy, when intense, leads to various purposeless movements-to dancing about, clapping the hands, stamping, etc." Clearly, these are indicative of the types of behaviors often associated with happy feelings and substantiate why these authors and others consider laughter to be healthy. In turn, because laughter is healthy, the overall effect of humor is deemed positive.

In conversation, jokes can be employed to discuss taboo topics such as race, religion, and politics (Lynch, 2002). Used in this way, humor then provides a shield for the teller of the joke to invite less responsibility upon themselves if the reaction from their present company is negative (Mulkay, 1988), thereby alleviating anxiety or

embarrassment. If one does not respond to the humor in the way the teller anticipated, the teller has the opportunity to use the phrase, “it was just a joke” (Young & Bippus, 2001). Moreover, the use of such phrases makes the teller less likely to experience animosity from others because the teller is not seen as serious about the jokes’ content. Jokes are a way that people tell stories, and thus I will discuss storytelling and how we are able to analyze jokes as such.

Storytelling

Jokes can be examined as a form of storytelling. To better understand this link, I’ll first substantiate the connection between jokes and storytelling. Then after providing a brief background on the tradition of storytelling including its associated benefits, I’ll present the theoretical justification for relying on narratives to understand the impact of jokes as a form of racial humor.

Jokes can be examined as a form of storytelling because they represent short narratives (Galinares, 2005). Within a joke there are storylines that often offer quick and vague descriptions. When a joke lacks a plot or a character is given minimal description, the receiver creates these elements in order to discover their meaning and make sense of the joke (Correll, 1997). This self-creation generates unique associations between components of the joke and an individual’s experience that can be shared with another through conversation, laughter, and the telling of other jokes with another individual (Correll, 1997). This connection between elements of the joke and an individual’s experience is called associative contextualization (Correll, 1997). For instance, if someone hears a joke for the second time, it may trigger the memory of when they heard the joke for the first time (Correll, 1997). This is a unique element

that a joke holds as a person may recall their state of mind when they first heard the joke, how it made them feel, where they were at, or the images that were provoked (Correll, 1997).

Due to different life experiences, an individual's schema may produce vastly different representations than those constructed by the teller or other receivers of the same joke. Thus, "[Jokes] are made meaningful, by these streams of associations that people bring to, and in turn, take away from such events" (Correll, 1997, p. 324). Moreover, the product of a joke may be a conversation in which one learns from another what that joke means to the other conversant.

For generations, people have used the art of storytelling as a way to express their experiences and to form intimate relationships with those around them. Native Americans often told stories to teach their young life lessons according to Deschenie (2007) while African-Americans told stories to help remember their homeland, Africa, when they were brought to America as slaves (Banks-Wallace, 2002).

A story portrays an event, real or imagined, and gives the event spatial and temporal components (Banks-Wallace, 2002; Henderson, 2005). The process of assembling a story, called storying, interprets an experience by connecting things that may have not had a previous relationship. Stories commonly introduce metaphors (Banks-Wallace, 2002). This use of metaphor or the creation of a character to represent a lesson enables the story to both demonstrate and verbalize messages (Gargiulo, 2006). Jokes also introduce these elements of being fictitious or non-fictitious and use metaphors, making them a form of storytelling.

The human connection, through the art of storytelling, reaps benefits that may not result from just plain dialogue. Specifically, individuals can be connected through stories physically, cognitively, and emotionally (Silverman, 2006). Furthermore, individuals can relate throughout the duration of a story so that the story, “establishes a common experience between teller and listener, creating a connection” (Banks-Wallace, 2002, p. 11). When this type of connection takes place, an intimate relationship is formed, leading to trust (Banks-Wallace, 2002; Silverman, 2006).

Some stories however, are not always meant to be straightforward and express an obvious message, and many times may hold an unintended message (Gargiulo, 2006). Hopes, fears, and dreams that an individual may have can also be expressed through stories as this indirectness may invite less vulnerability for the teller (Banks-Wallace, 2002). When racial topics are approached in this less forward way, they can be easier for the individuals to discuss serious issues. Individuals are able to express things in humorous form that they may not say otherwise, as was mentioned previously. Fisher’s Narrative Paradigm provides an important theoretical framework for better understanding the power of storytelling as narrative; it is discussed next.

Fisher’s narrative paradigm.

According to Fisher’s Narrative Paradigm (1984) stories are significant in our lives. He explained the way that humans generate stories ultimately affects an individual’s actions. To that end, Fisher’s Narrative Paradigm combined two themes: (a) argument and persuasion and (b) literary and aesthetics (Fisher, 1984). In looking at a narrative with this double lens, Fisher challenged the traditional belief that all rhetorical communication must be purely argumentative (Fisher, 1984). Instead, he

claimed that by looking at the words and context in stories, the storyteller gives meaning to the story, and simultaneously, the receiver can discover his/her own meaning. To aid in this process the receiver must each examine the story in terms of narrative probability and narrative fidelity. The former tests the intelligibility of the story and the latter indicates the significance of the story. More specifically, narrative probability deals with whether or not the story is coherent and displays no internal contradictions (Fisher, 1985). Narrative fidelity looks at the authenticity of the story, and forces the hearer to examine the story against his/her own sound reasoning in terms of formal and informal logic (Fisher, 1985).

In the realm of joke telling, narrative probability involves the hearer's interpretation of the joke. However, it is important to note that jokes often involve incongruity, so it is up to the hearer to evaluate if the degree of incongruity is sensible. Taking the example of Chris Rock blaming President Bush for all of the ills in society, the listener evaluates the degree of incongruity for themselves and decides then how to interpret the joke. Narrative fidelity is when the hearer compares the joke to his/her own experiences to find the humor within. If we look at Ahmed's joke about going through security, individuals will measure that up to their own experience to see if they can relate to the experience. Both narrative probability and fidelity are essential for jokes to resonate with hearers.

After critically analyzing these two components, Fisher argued that people can then choose to adopt and/or believe stories, and further, these stories can be used to guide their behavior (Banks-Wallace, 2002; Fisher, 1984; Fisher, 1985). Essentially, when an individual hears a story, it can influence how they think or feel about an

issue, or how they choose to live their lives. Notably, even if a story is non-fiction, such as a news story, a newsperson builds a context around the facts and then connects the data into a meaningful story (Fisher, 1984). Arguably, if jokes are short narratives, then similar effects are likely to occur in the sharing of racial humor. Race will be explored next.

Race

One of the reasons race is so controversial is because it is one of the most easily observed characteristics of difference or similarity we can make about one another. In cross-racial contexts, easy detection of racial difference often leads to the use of stereotypes which, as previously mentioned, are often the basis of racial humor. After defining stereotypes and addressing some key issues involving their use, I'll discuss in greater detail why race continues to be a controversial topic in America. Finally, I'll close with a brief discussion of the negative effects of avoiding discussions about race.

Stereotypes.

Stereotypes are attributions that cover up individual differences and ascribe certain characteristics to a certain group (Root, April 17, 2008, lecture). Although race relations in America have improved since the Civil Rights movement, cross-racial relationships remain problematic because of a persistent over-reliance on stereotypes. Often, people rely on stereotypes to reduce the uncertainty about individuals who are different from them (Park, Gabbadon, & Chernin, 2006). Functionally, stereotypes minimize the amount of cognitive thought one has to expend in new situations and therefore it is often inevitable that they will be used when an individual is

unmotivated, devoid of energy, and lacks the ability to engage in thinking (Bodenhausen, 1990; Park, Gabbadon, & Chernin, 2006). However, an over-reliance on stereotypes can result in: (a) faulty thinking, (b) inaccurate presumptions, and (c) continued dehumanization of social minorities (Cowan, 2001; Park, Gabbadon, & Chernin, 2006). Therefore, it is critical that their use be limited at best as an over-reliance on stereotypic beliefs tends to justify ill treatment toward the minority (Cowan, 2001).

Stereotypes can be challenged when one comes into contact with an individual that creates a discrepancy between a stereotypic belief and the reality of the individual before them (Hewstone, Johnston, & Aird, 1992; Hill & Augoustinos, 2001; Johnston & Macrae, 1994). When this occurs, there are three different ways that stereotype change can take place: (a) bookkeeping, (b) conversion, and (c) subtyping. Bookkeeping occurs when an individual is exposed to information from credible sources that disconfirms their stereotype (Hewstone, Johnston, & Aird, 1992; Johnston & Macrae, 1994; Macrae, Shepherd & Milne, 1992). For example, if an individual has a stereotype of Hispanics and he/she takes a class with Hispanics on Hispanic culture, as the individual gets to know his/her classmates and learns more about Hispanic culture, such knowledge can lead to a stereotype change. However, for most individuals, only time will determine if a major change will occur in that individual's reliance on stereotypes (Macrae, Shepherd & Milne, 1992).

The second mode of stereotype change is conversion. Unlike bookkeeping, this version of stereotype change relies on one dramatic incident to transform a stereotype (Hewstone, Johnston, & Aird, 1992). For instance, if an individual goes to

their Italian friend's house for dinner and expects traits that they have witnessed in the media and are instead confronted with a situation that does not resemble their stereotype, that individual could alter their stereotype.

Lastly, the third type of stereotype change is subtyping, which occurs in a hierarchal structure. According to Hewstone, Johnson, and Aird (1992) although the overall stereotype does not change, individuals make "exceptions" to the stereotype and those experiences will be noted and categorized. For example, if a person expected all African-Americans to love fried chicken and he/she encounters an African-American who does not care for fried chicken, the individual will make a mental note of the situation. Therefore, individuals will generate categories in which to place people. These hierarchically structured categories will then begin to replace the lone overarching belief initially held about the particular race or group.

Although some individuals are willing to change their stereotypes once those stereotypes are contested, others choose to ignore the disconfirming information they receive. Instead of keeping track of incidents that disagree with their current stereotypical belief, some will disregard these incidents as irrelevant. This occurs because these individuals prefer the consistency of their own beliefs to the inconsistency introduced by the alternative information (Johnston & Macrae, 1994). As a result, even if a person observes disconfirming information, it is unlikely that their attitudes and behaviors will change. According to Hill and Augostinos (2001) this is especially true if an individual consistently focuses on the differences between him/herself and the other individual(s). Of course, an individual's failure to alter his/her beliefs in the face of contradictory evidence, is a precursor to the formation of

prejudiced beliefs. Prejudicial belief systems are usually consistent with an individual's desire to continue to associate certain undesirable traits with the minority, while associating positive traits with the population to which the stereotype holder belongs (Davies, 1982). Race remains a controversial topic in America and I will discuss some of the reasons that this is true next.

Why discussing race is controversial.

Despite many American's tendency to over-rely on stereotypes, most individuals refrain from openly discussing their own racial prejudices to avoid appearing racist. According to Blum (2002) a working definition for racism is any prejudice, dominance, or injustice that denies dignity to a particular race. Based on this, discussing race is not tantamount to expressing racism unless the purpose of the discussion was an attempt to put down the race being discussed. For example, if a Caucasian individual wanted to express negative racial sentiments to an African-American and they said denigrating things, this would be racism. On the other hand, if they asked them about their experience as an African-American, this curiosity would not be considered racist. In short, if there are no prejudice thoughts, then an individual should not conceal a curiosity about another race.

However, it is very difficult and maybe impossible to ever know an individual's true intentions. A better understanding of an individual's intentions may come along with an increased understanding of that individual that derives from a relationship with that individual. Evaluating a person's character based on this relationship is a logical way to base their intentionality of a joke that they share.

According to Akiba & Miller (2004), many White Americans avoid discussing race altogether, especially in mixed company. Because of this, Eliasoph (1999) asserts that the entire body politic is perceived as more racist than it really is. In short, an individual's fear of showing prejudices leads them to avoid getting to know different individuals. In some cases this fear may be an illusion. In fact, some individuals will not surround themselves with individuals of other races as they experience racial anxiety due to their lack of knowledge about that other race (Blum, 2002). Thus, a lack of knowledge due to ignorance or limited experience rather than intentional racism, is often the contributing reason some individuals avoid cross-racial contexts altogether (Eliasoph, 1999). However, we need to focus on the intentionality as Blum's definition implies that racism is only racism if it is purposive in attempting to deny an individual of their dignity.

Another reason whites may avoid discussing race as such a discussion may force them to question their own privileged position in society (Eliasoph, 1999). If the negative stereotypes that they attribute toward minorities are not factual, then some Whites could be forced to examine why they have previously viewed their race as superior to other races. In the next and last section on race, I will look at the potential harm that comes from refusing to participate in discussions on race.

Negative effects of not discussing race.

Avoiding discussions of race ultimately does more harm than good. When race is not discussed, an individual contributes to greater ignorance, greater reliance on stereotypes and further division within cross-racial relationships. According to Eliasoph (1999), each of these negative effects can occur when individuals act as: (a)

officiants, (b) passive bystanders or (c) acolytes. Officiants are the individuals that discuss race in a negative way by insulting another race. For example, officiants may refer to races other than their own by using derogatory racial slurs such as “japs” “chinks” or “beaners.” Although the second role, the passive bystander, does not support the racist thoughts and behaviors of the officiant, they do nothing to speak out against this type of behavior. For example, if a passive bystander heard the officiant refer to a group using racial slurs, the passive bystander would say nothing. Evil reigns when good men do nothing. Finally, unlike bystanders, acolytes support the acts of the officiant by encouraging them to speak out (Eliasoph, 1999). Using the previous situation, an acolyte would encourage the use of racial slurs to demean the different other. As mentioned previously, acolytes’ goals involve active participation in the dehumanization of the minority.

Of the three roles, passive bystanders are of particular interest because they are centrally concerned with avoiding *appearing* racist. Arguably, this fear is motivated by situations that are depicted in the media, where too many times, incidents are quickly labeled as racism when, in fact, they may not have been at all racist (Blum, 2002). For example, recently Geraldine Ferraro, the first woman to run for vice president on a major presidential ticket in 1984 and more recently an advisor for Hillary Clinton’s 2008 presidential campaign, made a statement that is paraphrased here: The only reason Barack Obama, Clinton’s democratic opponent, is doing so well in the presidential race, is because he is an African-American. When Ferraro was criticized for her comments, she immediately lashed out at her critics saying she was being attacked for making her statements only because she is White. Although

different individuals will draw different conclusions about the underlying meaning of her statements, the immediate media reaction was to paint Ferraro as a racist.

On our own campus community at Oregon State University, we have had outcries from minority groups on activities and stories published in our campus newspaper. In the fall, students united to attend a home football game and “black-out Reser stadium” by wearing all black and painting their faces. Immediately, minority groups began to protest this action as it was perceived as a racist act, associating this with what actors did during Vaudeville to portray African-American characters. In addition, a newspaper article was published in *The Barometer*, the campus newspaper, claiming that African-Americans needed new leaders as people such as R. Kelly and Michael Jackson were not good leaders for the community. However, the writer did not explain why these two individuals were selected to be representatives for the Black community. With all of these situations, Ferraro, black-out Reser stadium, and the newspaper article, it needs to be assessed what the intentionality of the actors or writers were. Then we can begin to discuss if these acts were racist.

In closing, discussions of race remain problematic because of the speed with which the media and society in general, label race related comments as racist. Until we are able to “unpack” racial discussions without leaping to the conclusion of racism, cross-racial discussions will continue to be difficult. Racial humor can be a way that we can mitigate the defensiveness in conversation between cross-racial counterparts.

Racial Humor

Racial humor has manifested itself many ways throughout American history. Although, I use the African-American plantation experience to exemplify how racial

humor has been used historically and how such humor may have helped accomplish a greater goal, I readily acknowledge that many different races are and have been the target of racial humor. Among those other groups are Native Americans, Italians, Germans, the Irish, Scottish, and Jews to name a few. Thus, I will first look at the origins of African-American racial humor on the plantation. That is followed by a discussion of Vaudeville's use of humor encompassing African-Americans as well as other minority groups. I will then analyze how minorities themselves began using racial humor to resist White's initial use of such humor to denigrate racial minorities, concluding with an analysis on the positive and negative effects of racial humor.

Humor on the plantation.

Plantations represent a dark place from which African-American racial humor emerged. Slaves used humor as a way to survive day-to-day life on the plantation. With it, they poked fun at their masters' apparent ignorance about the slaves themselves and their masters' belief that slavery was both a necessary and an acceptable practice (Hughes, 2003). Because the masters' believed slaves did not know any better, masters' interpreted the slaves' behavior as bona-fide ignorance. This type of humor allowed two things to occur. First, it helped slaves mask their true feelings and capabilities in the presence of their owners and thus made slaves no threat. In turn, African-American men were not viewed as intelligent or powerful which increased survival. The masters' characterization of slaves as naïve and ignorant enabled slaves to escape harm. If slaves had been seen as clever by their masters', then their masters' would have had to worry about their potential ability to devise plans in opposition to their enslavement. It was not without a price however,

and that leads directly to the second effect of the slaves' use of humor. According to Cowan (2001), Sambo was hegemonic in that the humor was a form of internalized oppression:

Sambo was an extraordinary type of social control, at once extremely subtle, devious, and encompassing. To exercise a high degree of control meant also to be able to manipulate the full range of humor; to create, ultimately, an insidious type of buffoon. To make the black male into an object of laughter, and, conversely, to force him to devise laughter, was to strip him of masculinity, dignity, and self-possession. Sambo was, then, an illustration of humor as a device of oppression, and one of the most potent in American popular culture (p. 4).

Next, I will discuss Vaudeville stage acting which began in the late 19th century.

Vaudeville.

Racial humor made its way onto the stage through Vaudeville, which presented racial stereotypes via theatrical performance. The characterization of minorities in this way was seen as a positive expression by some, including Charles Winick who claimed that through jokes, individuals were able to express their racial attitudes and beliefs in a common outlet (Mintz, 1996). Boskin and Dorinson (1985) agreed with this claim stating that:

Ethnic humor in the United States originated as a function of social class feelings of superiority and white racial antagonisms, and expresses the continuing resistance of advantaged groups to unrestrained immigration and to emancipation's black citizens barred from participation and productivity (p. 81).

In addition to expressing underlying but common feelings, it was also believed that Vaudeville created social boundaries, gave control to White individuals, and aided in acculturation (Davies, 1982; Mintz, 1996). Vaudeville also used the stage as a place to mediate conflict and to make common human shortcomings the "common

denominator” from which humor stemmed (Lowe, 1986, p. 442). Obviously, the stereotypical shortcomings of minority groups were emphasized. For example, Mintz (1996) states that, “Italian immigrants are associated with crime and huge families” (p. 21).

Another important contribution of Vaudeville to racial humor was the representation of self-deprecating humor. The Russell Brothers, two Irish men, used self-deprecating humor in an Irish maid routine, capitalizing on well-known Irish stereotypes about race, gender, and class (Maschio, 1992). They were able to capture an audience for a number of years, but eventually were attacked by fellow Irishmen who did not appreciate or see the value in laughing at the humor aimed at their own race (Maschio, 1992).

By the end of the 1920’s, ethnic humor on the stage was beginning to cease (Lowe, 1986; Maschio, 1992; Mintz, 1996). There are different opinions as to why this was the case, including dissatisfaction, maturation, and outright rejection as was the case with the Russell Brothers (Mintz, 1996). Talking pictures also have been a possible explanation for the shift from the stage. However, despite its demise in Vaudeville, racial humor emerged again in the 1960’s and interestingly, it would be minorities themselves who would resurrect its use.

Transformation of racial humor.

When minorities began using post-Vaudeville humor, they used it as a way to reverse the negative effect of Whites’ use of humor towards them (Boskin & Dorinson, 1980). Thus, in this type of humor, African-Americans took positive characteristics and ascribed them to their own race. An example of this is Richard

Pryor's use of a fictitious character named Mudbone. Mudbone was a clever, wise, and strong-willed Black man (Coleman, 1984). The positive use of humor to uplift African-Americans was in direct defiance of Whites' attempts to use humor to negatively characterize African-Americans (Fujioka, 1991; Jacobs-Huey, 2003; Zolten, 1993). Although Richard Pryor, who emerged in the early 1970's, was preceded by the likes of Caucasian comedian Lenny Bruce in the 1950's, Bill Cosby in the early 1960's, and Flip Wilson in the late 1960's, Pryor is recognized as one of the forerunners using this type of humor. Currently, we see comedians such as African-American comedians Dave Chappelle and Chris Rock along with Latino comedians Carlos Mencia and George Lopez, carrying on this rich tradition.

As a result of this type of racial humor, minorities' positive use of humor was and is an effective method for debunking prevalent negative stereotypes and led Zolten (1993) to make the following assertion:

“[A] new role for comedians, not strictly as entertainers, but as social commentators and bearers of messages that, packaged in any other way, could alienate rather than inform and persuade” (p. 74).

Clearly, regardless of the positive intentions of racial humor, adverse effects can occur. Comedians could perpetuate stereotypes rather than doing away with them and so they must be careful in their execution and clear in their purpose (Zolten, 1993). Again, although my interest and focus is on the positive effects of racial humor, it is important to address the negative effects.

Negative effects of racial humor.

Although the idea of this research is to maintain that racial humor can have positive effects, still it is important to recognize that the use of racial humor can also

have negative effects. In conjunction with the general negative effects of humor discussed previously, specifically racial humor can be detrimental when it is intentionally used to perpetuate negative stereotypes as a means of lowering the status of the target group's race. This is the case despite the attitudes of the joke teller as it is quite possible for an individual to tell a racist joke though he/she is not racist (Blum, 2002). However, despite the potential for the negative effects of humor, I contend that there is potential for positive effects.

Positive effects of racial humor.

According to Mintz (1996), Mary Douglas, an anthropologist who studied human symbolism and culture, claimed that racial humor offers a medium through which individuals are able to release repressed attitudes, give others a chance to process these ideas, and ultimately it can result in possible social change. Davies (1982) added that racial humor can aid in cultural awareness and acculturation. Notably, each of these benefits is positive precisely because each could result in some type of learning taking place.

In order to maximize positive effects, an individual must consider the appropriateness of the racial humor, the context in which the humor is shared, and the relationship between interactants. Mintz (1996) summed it up succinctly when he stated that it depends on, "Who says what to whom under what contextual circumstances" (p. 26). Thus, comedians and others are cautioned to consider these factors when attempting to use racial humor positively.

Reaction to racial humor.

While some Whites may feel comfortable in responding to racial humor centering around minorities, others may hesitate in responding to a racial joke. This may be the case because jokes are considered dull; and/or the target minority of the joke is present (Akiba & Miller, 2004). The first reason is self-explanatory; the second one requires further explanation because the presence of the minority may affect White individuals in two ways: (a) an individual may superficially suppress their laughter as a form of politeness to minorities in the room and/or (b) an individual may feel actual pressure to refrain from responding to the joke in the presence of a minority, resulting in suppression of laughter (Akiba & Miller, 2004). Censoring laughter due to politeness, does not make feelings of curiosity or prejudices disappear. Instead, it ignores them, allowing them to persist.

Contrary to this perspective, as previously mentioned, storytelling using humor is able to connect people if the humor is considered to be funny if there are similarities that can be found in the humor that resonates with the hearer, and if there is a relationship among participants.

Conclusion

Most of the research on racial humor has suggested that it is a means to dictate social boundaries, release aggression, and level the playing field. It is possible that an examination of jokes as a form of storytelling may enable racial humor to be examined more carefully and therefore extend our knowledge of its use.

More specifically, research needs to look further into the potential for the connection that individuals can create during and after the process of joke telling.

Since little research has been done examining the use of racial humor as a positive phenomenon as a way to connect individuals cross-racially, my research may provide a starting place for such work.

As I have demonstrated thus far, humor is powerful, humor can be used for positive or negative ends, and humor can express racial sentiment. Furthermore, humor is able to connect people through the art of storytelling. Although most of the studies to date have focused on racial humor as having negative racial sentiments, in my personal experience in the workplace, I've discovered that it may be possible to express positive racial sentiment. Thus, the following research question is posed:

RQ #1: In work contexts where racial humor is used, is it possible that such humor can provide a basis for positive discussions about race among cross-racial colleagues?

Chapter 3: Methods

Qualitative Research Design

For this research, it was vital to spend the time necessary to attain relational depth and breadth with participants' to obtain their honest and accurate perceptions about theirs and others use of racial humor in the workplace. Thus, I needed the latitude that a qualitative analysis offers for individuals to relate their lived experience.

Yow (2005) claims that there are two advantages in conducting a qualitative analysis: First, participants' have the ability to choose from a range of responses (i.e. open ended vs. closed ended questions) and the researcher is able to learn things that they may have not previously thought of. Second, the participants are free to describe the life they live in their own terms, the researcher is often able to learn more fully about the phenomena under investigation. Because qualitative research offers the opportunity to study things as they are, there is less room for pre-conceived researcher notions or biases.

Studying people as they are is what social scientists refer to as the naturalistic paradigm (Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 1991). The naturalistic paradigm contends that there are multiple realities which derive from each individual's experience (Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 1991). Exploring this personal experience is likely to provide a truthful representation of how people feel about their experience with racial humor and the formation of a positive cross-racial work environment.

For this particular study, these individual perspectives were imperative as participants were asked to recall certain humorous stories, jokes, and situations that they may have experienced at work.

Sampling Technique

My sample of participants was derived using a nonrandom purposive sampling technique featuring individuals with whom I had a previous professional relationship. A purposive sample was the best choice as having this relationship was important to the internal validity of the study. Individuals that were unknown to the researcher may have been less likely to disclose this kind of sensitive information.

Sample

Twelve individuals were studied in this research, ranging in age from twenty-five to forty-five. Of the twelve participants, four were male. Participants had been with their respective organizations from two years to twenty years. Half of the participants came from a public university in Oregon and half from a hospital in the Portland metropolitan area. Two participants had obtained their master's degree, one is currently in graduate school, six had their bachelor's degree, two reported having some college background, and one had their high school diploma.

Participants self-identified themselves as members of five different ethnic groups: seven were Caucasian and/or European American and of the remaining five, two were African-American, one was Asian-American, one was Latina, and finally one was an Asian Pacific Islander.

The two workplaces were overwhelmingly described by many of the respondents as task-oriented, fast-paced, and customer service focused. In addition to these descriptors, individuals also described their workplaces as "family like" and/or tight-knit, hard working, and professional.

Procedure

To recruit participants, an email was sent to the potential participants from the two organizations. Interested parties were instructed to contact me by phone or email to schedule a time to meet for a face-to-face interview.

Prior to the interview, I emailed a consent form to the participants so they were able to review the document before the actual meeting. At the time of the interview, I went over the consent form with the participants to guarantee that there was no confusion. At that point, the participant signed the consent form.

At the interview, I audiotaped the discussion in order to accurately represent the participants' answers. The recordings were only accessible to myself and the principal investigator.

The participants were informed of the taping prior to the interview via the recruitment letter and again in the consent form. Additionally, before we started the interviews, I again reminded participants that their responses would be taped.

Interviews were held at each of the respective workplaces, during each participant's lunch hour or as a scheduled meeting. The interviews lasted approximately thirty to sixty minutes.

Respondents answered questions based on Flanagan's (1954) Critical Incident Technique (CIT). This method asks respondents to account for particular experiences. Flanagan suggests five steps in order to enhance reliability and validity which are the following: (1) determine the activity to be studied; (2) create explicit standards for the collection of data; (3) carefully collect data in a structured way; (4) classify and analyze data so all incidents are accounted, allow for the formation of categories and

lastly, (5) interpret data in a manner that accurately portrays how respondents feel about an activity and include examples. Respondents were asked to recall a time when they or themselves engaged in sharing racial humor and times when they discussed race with co-workers. An example of such questions are the following: (a) tell me a specific racial joke that you told and (b) what conversation, if any, took place after the joke?

Participants were not asked to reveal the actual identity of people they engaged in the discussions; instead they were directed to use pseudonyms. Additionally, I used pseudonyms for the respondents I interviewed. These measures ensured that both the identity of the participant and the third party is kept confidential. Participants were not compensated for their participation in this study.

Measurement Instrument

An open-ended questionnaire was administered during each interview. The questionnaire focused on four main areas: (a) the prominence of discussions involving race in the workplace, (b) participants' or their co-workers use of humor to discuss race, (c) participants' perception evaluating if racial humor provided a segue to discuss racial topics seriously, and (d) if participants' changed previous held beliefs about race as a result of this discussion. The answers to these items were intended to provide a holistic idea of the participants' involvement in discussions on race with their co-workers and the potential for such conversations to improve cross-racial relationships at work.

A semi-structured interview was used to ensure that the questions were pertinent to the research and would indeed answer the research question. The

principal investigator and myself reviewed the interview protocol several times before administering the interview to participants. This was done in order to ensure that the interview flowed, each question asked was necessary, and questions were open-ended enough that they allowed for a variety of responses. As a result of this review, minor organizational changes were made to ensure logic, fluidity, and overall coherence.

Coding Scheme

After transcribing participants' interviews, the data was analyzed to identify keywords and phrases. More specifically, using the functions and effects categories of humor, I identified the purposes and consequences of respondents' use of humor. Following that, and based on the research question, I identified categories of information consistent with respondents' perceptions of whether or not they or others used racial humor and whether or not that humor was a spring board for possible discussions of cross-racial similarities and differences.

Chapter 4: Results

This study set out to answer one question, but in order to address this question, the following issues were examined. First, I had to determine the prominence of discussions involving race in the workplace. Second, I had to learn if people used humor to discuss race. Thirdly, I needed to discover whether humor provided a segue for participants to discuss racial issues on a more serious and positive level. Lastly, if this discussion was occurring, I then needed to learn if participants' changed a previously held belief about a certain race.

Talking Race

Participants were asked to recall their experience of participating in discussions about race in their workplace. Participants unanimously replied that race was discussed in their work environments for one of two reasons: it directly related to their job or it was a topic in their personal discussions with others at work.

Professionally, Scott, who is employed in a higher education context, reported that he and his co-workers discussed race often since it was part of the job they perform:

The reason why we talk about it is not just because it's the water cooler conversation. We talk about it because we have to be able to professionally answer to it, particularly to students and parents that come to us.

Gabby, an African-American woman working in healthcare, stated that she too discussed race in the workplace. However in Gabby's case, race was discussed only because she had struggled with patient's unwillingness to work with her because of her race. Thus, in both cases, race was related to job performance though clearly for two distinct reasons.

Scott's co-worker George added that though the discussion may sometimes be professional, it often turned personal. George reported, "I'm assuming that people feel comfortable letting that part of themselves, that part of their identity, be part of who they are in the workplace." Brooke, Scott and George's co-worker, elaborated on why their workplace is conducive to racial discussions:

We work in a pretty diverse office and we are pretty well representative of ages, races, and socioeconomic background, so we have quite a mix here and a lot of times when you have that mixture, people are curious. Especially in the state of Oregon, where we're pretty homogenous. Having people that are different than you is like, oh okay, let's learn about each other.

Courtney, who works in healthcare, reported that things happening in the city where they work, usually led to discussions about race:

There is so much racial diversity in Portland that there's always somebody in the news or in the workplace that has a difference and that often generates topics of discussion.

With the exception of one respondent, everyone reported at least hearing a conversation in the workplace that dealt with race and with which they were indirectly involved. These dialogues ranged from professional to personal matters as well.

One professional conversation that Brandon overheard was his co-workers discussion on implementing a bilingual recruitment program for Hispanic students:

The discussion gets into, just because the students we're working with are Hispanic, Latino/Latina, doesn't mean that we need the program to be in Spanish or bilingual. But then we think, what about their parents?

Jerry, working in healthcare, recollected hearing conversations of co-workers discussing stereotypes about patients in the workplace:

My co-workers were discussing or gossiping about the race of one of the patients and making stereotypical remarks about them. It was unprofessional for the workplace.

On the personal side, Brandon's co-worker Miranda recalled hearing conversations where co-workers were sharing their experiences outside of work. "We have people telling stories about their family, you know, their weekend at home, something with their friends, and race will come up."

Rachel reported listening to her co-worker's stories regarding her dating life with men of a different race. "I have a co-worker who is Caucasian, but will only date Black men. When she mixes with his family, some of the stories she comes back with are quite funny."

In sum, respondents reported that they have either participated or overheard discussions about race in the workplace. These discussions do not always pertain to the job directly, but often spill over into their personal lives. Next we will look at how respondents reported their use of humor in discussing race.

Using Humor to Discuss Race

Participants were asked if they had ever told racial jokes to other co-workers. Again, there was an overwhelming response of participants who took part in this type of sharing, but two who maintained that they refrained from this type of humorous interaction.

Laura, who is Caucasian, said that she did not use humor to talk about race, as serious issues should be discussed seriously. "No, definitely not, because I am aware. I make a conscious effort not to."

Her co-worker Gabby added that as an African-American, she refrained from participating in such humor:

...[I]f I tell a racial joke it opens up the gates for them to cross boundaries that I'm not comfortable with or they're not comfortable with. I generally don't tell racial jokes in the workplace.

Participants who indicated that they told racial jokes, were asked to recall a particular joke they had shared, and to recall their co-workers use of racial humor.

The ten remaining participants all claimed to have shared racial humor. Their reasons for sharing ranged from having commonalities cross-racially, to sharing for the purpose of addressing a specific topic.

George, a Caucasian male, reports that even though he and his Latina co-worker Mary are of different races, they share racial humor based on a similar upbringing:

Mary is Latina and I come from a very heavy Latino populated school. So we share a lot of jokes back and forth because I have more in common with her than a lot of White folks around.

Scott, a Japanese American, had different reasoning for using racial humor. "...[J]ust for the humor. It might be to address a certain topic. A lot of the time it's laughing at an ignorance issue, so making light of that."

Brooke, a Caucasian, said that she used humor also to address issues light heartedly in the workplace:

One of our favorite jokes is, I'm a minority, where's my scholarship? [Students don't understand that] while there is money out there for scholarships, you do need to apply yourself and qualify for those scholarships on merits, not just race.

Jokes participants shared with others.

Participants that disclosed that they used racial humor, reported jokes with different races being the punch line of the humor. Participants were asked to recall one joke that they had shared with a co-worker.

The following participants reported jokes they had told that dealt with their own race. Scott, staying true to his claim that he uses humor to address specific topics, used self-deprecating humor to inform his co-workers about his native Japanese cuisine.

My pet peeve is people calling rice, sticky rice. Because regular rice, to me, should be sticky. Someone was talking about how they made sushi and the rice wasn't sticky, and I was telling them they didn't cook it right and they need a better rice cooker. Regular rice *is* sticky.

Brooke, a Caucasian female, shared a joke that someone had emailed to her and then she forwarded it on. The internet video portrayed what she referred to as, "white trash." "It was about rednecks living in the woods with their cars out in front of their house, something like that. White trash. I love it."

Like Brooke, Brandon, an African-American, recalled a joke that he received as a video, and also forwarded on. This video featured three African-American men that had just found out that the Whopper had been discontinued at Burger King.

Brandon recollected the video through laughter:

There was some profanity, there was a very stereotypical response from these three African-American men of, what the hell do you mean you don't have any Whoppers at Burger King?! These guys are saying things that I would probably see myself and friends I've grown up with being African-American men, saying.

Samantha, a Caucasian, recalled telling her co-workers about how she thought it was funny that her African-American ex-boyfriend used funny names to refer to Caucasians as. "[He'll] call the white guys little white boys. And he'll also refer to us as, you crackers."

In addition to these jokes that the participants shared that dealt with their own race, participants also described jokes that they shared dealing with a race besides their own.

Rachel, a Pacific Islander, shared a racial joke dealing with a 'Haole', a common Hawaiian slang term for a mainland Caucasian. Her joke centers around a Caucasian man visiting Hawaii and not being aware of the time difference:

So he goes to the nearest bar he finds, sits down at the bar, and orders a drink. After taking his first gulp he goes, "ahh, T.G.I.F." and the guy sitting at the bar as well takes a sip of his drink and says, "S.H.I.T." And the guy is thinking, wow, I've ran into a rude person already. Anyway, he ignores it, takes another sip of his drink and same thing, "ahh, T.G.I.F." The other guy goes, "S.H.I.T." The guy goes, "Wow, did I offend you in anyway?" And he's like, "No," so he's like, "oh, okay." So he takes another drink of his beer and says, "aah T.G.I.F., you know, thank God it's Friday." The other guy takes a drink and goes, "Aah, S.H.I.T., stupid haole, it's Thursday!"

Brooke explained how she and her co-workers responded to applicants' essay questions at the university she works for. She claimed that they find humor in stereotypical responses from certain races:

Just the stereotypes as you read [essays] about Asian kids that are in the band, that have straight A's, the typical things you'd expect to see on their application. Oh look another Asian kid who is valedictorian, oh look perfect SAT score.

Jokes participants reported their co-workers told.

All but one participant acknowledged hearing their co-workers share racial humor in the workplace. Courtney, who is Caucasian, shared a humorous interaction between herself and her African-American co-worker, Carol:

Carol said, all you White people look the alike. I thought it was hysterical to tell you the truth. [I said] well that's why we're all going to the tanning booth, so we can look like you. We're paying millions

of dollars to go get brown. It's true, right? Only white girls are in the tanning booth.

Samantha, who is Caucasian, also remembered a story she found humorous that her co-worker told:

John, he is Japanese, was talking about his grandma and how he'd given her a present, a trinket of some sort, and she just loved it. She thought it was the greatest thing ever. Then she flipped it over and saw that it was from China and she is from Japan, and John was saying that the present was great until his full-blooded Japanese grandmother found out that it was made in China by Chinese people.

Overwhelmingly, participants disclosed telling and/or hearing humorous stories involving race in the workplace. Next we will look to see if these humorous interactions were able to spark serious and positive discussions about race.

Post-Humor Discussion

Participants were asked to recall if the sharing of racial humor provided a segue to discuss race on a more serious level with their co-workers. Participants were asked first if a conversation took place after the sharing of a racially humorous story, if they judged this as a positive or negative discussion, and lastly if a discussion did take place, if they considered altering a previous held belief they had about a certain race as a result of the post-joke conversation.

Respondents who reported that no conversation took place after the racial humor had varied reasons for the absence of discussions. Rachel claimed that there was no discussion as the workplace is busy. "Not at work, you don't have time for conversation at work. Or at least you shouldn't."

Brooke attributed the personal relationships that she has with her co-workers for not always having a discussion following racial humor. "Not always, but I think

there is some sort of understanding that we have with each other about what is appropriate.”

Jerry shared a similar viewpoint to Brooke:

I know my co-workers pretty well and we have an understanding and make a conscious effort to keep it “clean” in the workplace. I think because we avoid stepping on anyone’s toes, there isn’t a need for a discussion.

Discussions taking place post-humor.

Of the ten participants who responded that they personally have used racial humor in the workplace, seven claimed to have had some sort of discussion after the humor. Samantha recalled that after her co-worker John shared his story about his grandmother and the gift from China, John was able to share some historical significance to explain his grandmother’s feelings:

He was able to explain that his grandma did have valid reasons that were much deeper than all the products being shipped over. It gave him an outlet to talk about his family’s experiences.

Miranda recalled pulling her co-worker aside after a humorous interaction to discuss his use of humor:

I have a co-worker who brings up race in a self-mocking way and other people in the office now kind of pick on the same characteristics or stereotypes. We’ve actually had a serious conversation after; I wanted to make sure they were okay. It had gotten to the point where everybody kind of tried to joke around about it and even though they started it, I wanted to make sure they were okay with it continuing.

Scott remembered having conversations with co-workers post-humor and what that conversation consisted of:

I think the follow up conversation may be someone else bringing in their own culture in terms of food they make, the way they were brought up. It definitely can lead to an open conversation to give you more depth of that person.

One of the participants, Gabby, who claimed to not use racial humor in the workplace, overheard a co-worker telling another co-worker of a Halloween costume she had intended on wearing. Gabby cut into the conversation to explain why this idea was not funny, but instead, very offensive:

I had a co-worker say that for Halloween she was going to dress up, painting her face black as slaves used to do to entertain their White slave masters. And they were laughing, thinking it was funny and I looked at her and said, "That's degrading and that indicates that you think that slavery was okay and was a funny situation." She didn't really think it was a negative thing until I pointed it out to her.

From these accounts of their discussions, participants were then asked to evaluate whether they felt this discussion was positive or negative. All seven participants who engaged in conversation post-humor asserted that this discussion was positive.

Positive evaluation of post-humor discussion.

Shelby reported that the conversation gave her more insight into the individual and she perceived this as a positive experience. Miranda, who made sure her co-worker was alright with the ongoing jokes around the office pertaining to his race, judged her discussion as positive. She also reported having discussions with co-workers after racially humorous stories and judged these as positive as well. "You can always learn something from them [conversations]. I have definitely gotten different sides to a scenario through conversations that take place after racial jokes."

Samantha recounted her experience in learning about her co-worker John's personal experience as positive, as she was learning something about his culture that she had not previously known.

Gabby, who overheard her co-workers laughing at the Halloween costume idea, judged her interaction with her co-worker as positive. “It was a very positive discussion because until I mentioned that to her, she didn’t realize she was making fun of an entire race of people in a really bad time for them.”

Lastly, participants were asked if their perceptions about a certain race altered because of this discussion. All but one responded that some beliefs changed.

Stereotype Change

George claimed that through discussion, he had a better understanding about his Japanese American co-worker and changed the way that he viewed him. Samantha reported an eye opening experience as a result of the dialogue she had with her co-worker after he humorously accounted his experience giving his Japanese grandmother a gift made in China:

It broadened my perspective. Those types of conversations make you step back and think. There’s a lot more to people’s feelings, to these stereotypes, and to people’s reactions to different races than what meets the eye or ear. I just thought more about why people have certain feelings toward certain groups.

Brooke had a similar reaction to hearing stories that contradicted her belief system. “[The conversation] definitely changes my way of thinking because I’m trying not to stereotype people, not to categorize people into one generalized statement.” Brandon attributed his experiences of meeting diverse people and interacting with them overtime to changing his beliefs, not just the result of one conversation.

One respondent reported that her beliefs remained unchanged after the humorous exchange. Courtney claimed that the conversation did not change her

beliefs. “No, not adjusting my beliefs, but certainly being more in tune to when and where it’s appropriate [to tell certain jokes].”

Conclusion

From the personal accounts of the twelve respondents, I conclude that race was discussed in their workplaces, humor was used to discuss race, and there was an overwhelming response from the participants that they engaged in positive post-humor discussions. Consequently, as a result of the positive discussions, some respondents were able to change some of their beliefs.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This study led to some significant conclusions regarding discussions of race in the workplace. The following categories were addressed by participants: (a) the prominence of racial discussions in the workplace, (b) how people use humor to discuss race, (c) the potential for humor to provide a segue for positive discussions on race, and (d) the possibility of stereotype change from one of these discussions which leads to improved cross-racial understanding.

Theoretical Implications

Discussing race.

Akiba and Miller (2004) concluded that many White Americans refrain from discussing race because they fear the possibility of offending someone mostly due to unexamined stereotypes some White Americans hold. Thus, individuals may avoid cross-racial encounters to avoid this discomfort and anxiety (Eliasoph, 1999). As a result, over-reliance on stereotypes is likely to be maintained.

All participants, both Whites and minorities, claimed that they had discussed race in their workplace. Reasons for this were not only because race was integral to the job they performed, but also because race was related to their personal affairs. This finding is significant because it suggests that contrary to previous research, Whites do discuss race in the workplace among their minority co-workers. This may exist in this sample as respondents' reported working in diverse contexts. Next I will compare the research on the uses of racial humor to my findings.

How racial humor was used.

Of the three proposed theories that attempt to explain why people use humor, only Superiority Theory was applicable to these findings. According to Lynch (2002), Maschio (1992), and Meyer (2000) Superiority Theory occurs when an individual triumphs over another group through a common understanding that comes from life experience. Self-deprecating humor was acknowledged as a form of Superiority Theory, as certain individuals are included and excluded from the humor because of certain life experiences.

Participants' answers concurred with the research, as they claimed to use racial humor in order to connect with others because of similar life experiences.

Respondents used self-deprecating humor either through telling personal humorous stories or forwarding humorous emails about the race they belonged to or strongly identified with. This connection made it possible for individuals to identify and understand the humor. Even though only one theory was exemplified in the data, this finding is consistent with what the humor theories suggested on the reasons why individuals may use humor. This may hold true for the participants' studied as some recalled the nature of their jobs dealt with discussing race because of their diverse clientele. Approaching race humorously using self-deprecating humor could have made it easier to address such topics, for those of the race being discussed. Next I will compare the research on the functions of humor with the respondents' answers.

How racial humor functioned.

Of the four ways that humor functions within social settings, three were present in participants' answers. To recap, Meyer (2000) claimed that these functions

are identification, differentiation, and clarification. Participants' reported using humor in order to establish similarities cross-racially, to address certain topics, and to laugh at ignorance.

The humorous functions of identification, differentiation, and clarification were all found in participants' answers. Participants' reported that they identified cross-racially using humor, differentiated themselves from other racial groups to laugh at ignorance of other groups, and also clarified perspectives dealing with race which was also was capitalizing on ignorance of others.

This assimilates with the research that anthropologist Mary Douglas and researcher Christie Davies proposed as what constitutes positive elements of racial humor. More specifically, Douglas as cited in Mintz (1996) claimed that humor can offer a channel in which to express repressed attitudes, invite others in to these ideas, and this results in learning and possibly social change while Davies (1982) contended that racial humor aids in cultural awareness. The consistency between the research and respondents could be due to the culture of the environments studied. The majority of respondents have experienced some form of higher education which could be responsible for their zest to either learn or teach others about race in their workplace.

These findings suggest that the relationship among respondents enabled humorous discussions of race that then functioned to enable greater cohesion. Whether it was within the same race, cross-racially, or an attempt to help an outsider understand a concept, humor was used. These findings are significant in that they suggest that humor although absolutely essential, was only engaged in because respondents felt comfortable enough with each other to share jokes about race in the

first place. Next I will analyze how racial humor offered a segue to positive discussion on racial issues.

Humor as a segue to serious racial discussions.

Research indicated that individuals tell stories in order to create meaning from an experience with the goal of connecting with other individuals (Banks-Wallace, 2002; Deschenie, 2007). Jokes can be a way that people tell stories in a humorous way in order to establish such a connection (Galinaes, 2005). Correll (1997) claims that through jokes, individuals are able to connect through associate contextualization. In addition to this element, Correll (1997) also notes that a unique function of jokes are the streams of associations that participants bring into a conversation. Thus, a conversation to discuss these thoughts seemed to be implied by Correll's findings.

Of the ten respondents who reported using racial humor, seven indicated that they also took part in subsequent conversations, indicating that the majority of respondents engaged in serious racial discussions. Participants who claimed to have engaged in this post humor discussion, evaluated the discussion as positive. This positive assessment was because of the learning that took place about their co-worker who was of a different race. Respondents' claimed that they understood one another more, some type of insight was gained, and they would talk more about certain issues when it was addressed humorously. Research indicated that storytelling was able to connect individuals and doing this humorously, through jokes, made it easier to address certain topics. Arguably, this too may highlight the relevance of relationships as respondents use their lived experience to assess fidelity (Fisher, 1985).

As there was no previous research done with the post-discussion, we have nothing to compare this research's findings with. However, participants' willingness to engage in such discussion may be due to the racial composition of the workplaces studied and their education level. Because both workplaces were racially diverse and race was central to both of the jobs that were being performed, race was a topic of discussion in both work environments. Next I will compare the research of storytelling and stereotype change with the results that this study yielded.

Adjusting views due to post-humor discussions.

Fisher's Narrative Paradigm asserts that the stories we tell are significant and can have an effect on our behaviors and actions (Fisher, 1984). Fisher (1984) explains that individuals will scrutinize a story in terms of the narrative probability and narrative fidelity, which respectively means to analyze the logic involved and the trueness in terms of the hearers own experience.

This connection between hearing a story and testing the validity of it has the possibility of changing the behaviors and actions of a person. This concept that Fisher offered has a connection with the research presented regarding stereotype change. If an individual is to engage in discussion about a stereotype, it is possible that stereotype change can take place. Hewstone, Johnston, & Aird (1992) claimed that if an individual is confronted with a contradiction to their current stereotype, it is possible to alter their stereotype in three different ways: (a) bookkeeping, (b) conversion, or (c) subtyping.

Theorists Aristotle, Cicero, and Freud all contended that in general, humor could have negative consequences and therefore due to the potential damage that

could be done, it should be used cautiously. More specifically, racial humor has been looked at negatively as it has been away that stereotypes have perpetuated.

Harms (1943) and Raskin (1944) noted positive effects of humor such as laughter, feelings of joy, and relaxation. Also, as aforementioned, Davies (1982) and Douglas as mentioned in Mintz (1996) claimed that racial humor could aid in acculturation and learning.

All but one of the participants reported that they adjusted their beliefs about a certain race after a post-humor discussion. This finding that humor was seen as positive is substantial as it proves through the respondents' answers, that racial humor can be viewed as positive because of the possible dialogue that follows the sharing of racial humor. Furthermore, it has been demonstrated by the participants in this study that this dialogue has the ability to alter stereotypical beliefs that an individual may hold about a particular race. None of the participants expressed malicious undertones within the context of the sharing of racial humor or in the dialogue that followed. The interview questions were open ended in that participants could have shared such encounters, but all of the reported encounters were positively expressed.

Most of the participants' who changed a previous held belief due to this positive discussion, said that the change took place after the conversation they reported on, which Eliasoph (1999) referred to as conversion. However, one respondent revealed that these types of changes took place overtime through multiple conversations which refers to bookkeeping. Many reported the reason they openly engaged in humorous sharing was because of their personal relationships. Therefore if an individual debunked a stereotype about their race to their co-worker, their co-

worker may have been more susceptible to changing their belief because of credibility of the source of information. Next, I will look at some of the limitations of this study.

Limitations

The results showed that the individuals studied do discuss race, that people may use racial humor in order to discuss race, and that positive discussions may follow the humor that have inevitably aided in a better cross-racial understanding in the two workplaces studied. Although these results indicate a positive cross-racial workplace amongst the participants studied, there are limitations to how applicable this information may be to the greater population.

In work environments that are composed of similar types of people demographically, the results may show some similarities, which is why these two workplaces may have yielded similar results. Given that, the first limitation to this study is that due to the education level of those involved, it may be more likely for them to discuss certain issues, race in this case, than those with a lower level of education. Nine of the twelve respondents had a Bachelors degree or higher while only three had their high school diploma. Those with an advanced education may be more likely to participate in conversations on sensitive subjects because of their educational training and classroom discussion experience.

The second limitation lies in the racial make-up of the workplaces that were studied. Both workplaces were diverse. While the majority were Caucasian, seven of the twelve participants, this still may be a unique experience for a workplace in Oregon where Oregon is 90% Caucasian (US Census). This diversity that they are faced with was reported to be a contributing reason that they do engage in the types of

behavior that this study analyzed. For individuals that work in a relatively homogenous workplace, it may be less likely for race to be a part of daily discussion because they do not deal with racial differences. Next I will address some specific directions future research on this topic could possibly go.

Future Implications

This study provided a foundation in which to study racial humor and the subsequent serious discussions on race. As this was a starting point, there are considerations that future research may take into account when studying this phenomenon. Some ideas for the expansion on this area are looking toward different populations and analyzing this concept within a different context.

Looking at different populations addresses one of the limitations. The workplaces that were studied had racially diverse staffs and high education levels. It would be important to look at those workplaces that are not made up of college educated individuals to see if this is a subject that is able to transcend educational lines. This is vital to look at as only a small amount of the population possess advanced degrees and if this type of discussion is not taking place, then it is likely that individuals may be comfortable and confined to their stereotypical thinking when it comes to other races. It is problematic to allow this ignorance to sustain as this is a precursor for heated racial debates that we find ourselves smothered in within the media.

A second possible route for future research to look toward is outside of the workplace. The workplace in this study was a justifiable context in which to study race because many individuals spend a good deal of time in the workplace. However,

future research may explore different contexts such as schools, social circles outside of school and work such as book clubs, or family events. Each would offer different insights because of the professional expectations and relationships between individuals. For instance, some people withheld sharing racial humor in the workplace because of concerns with professionalism, however this may not be the case in a social circle where an individual is among friends. One of the respondents to this study claimed that there is not time in a busy workplace to engage in these discussions, and although this participant's claim may be valid, this did not hinder the discussion for the majority of respondents. It would be valid to study this phenomenon elsewhere, where racial diversity isn't prevalent, education levels are diversified, and where individuals are not on the clock and therefore may be more likely to engage in more relaxed and honest conversation.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Prior to this study, researchers had put a dark cloud over racial humor as events of the past proved that it was used for subjugation, malice and getting even. When we look at the twentieth century vindictive intentions that Vaudeville had and the later post-Vaudeville attempt to reclaim ownership of racial humor for positive ends, we can see that initially racial humor was indeed negative. However, because humor is powerful and capable of arousing strong emotion, garnering involvement from the public, and producing social change, it was intuitively clear to me that it also must have positive uses.

Most respondents reported participating in serious discussions about race after sharing racial humor. Racial humor was not intended to portray maliciousness or hurt, but instead came out of the participants' desire to teach one other about their respective race, laugh at the ignorance in stereotypes, and establish similarities, which resulted in improved cross-racial understanding and relationships.

It is nice to know that discussions of this kind are taking place; perhaps they are taking place in other workplaces, homes, ballparks, restaurants, and bars. Perhaps people are learning about, accepting, and appreciating their differences instead of expressing hate because of their fears or lack of knowledge about one another. Perhaps someday we will live in a world not saturated in stereotypes, but one where we are able to interact with one another, using humor positively to achieve a better understanding. This study certainly suggests it is possible.

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APPENDICES

Informed Consent Document

Project Title: Promoting Race Talks: Using Humor as a Segue into the Unfunny Business
Principal Investigator: Dr. Walls, Speech Communication
Co-Investigator(s): Teela Foxworth, Speech Communication

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?

I am asking for your help in discovering whether racial humor can provide a platform for people to increase cross racial understanding. Since studies have shown that humor can be used as a tool to discuss difficult topics, the purpose of my research is to discover if racial humor can act as a segue to discuss racial issues further, leading to improved cross-racial understanding.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS FORM?

This consent form gives you the information you will need to help you decide if you would like to participate in the study. Please read the form carefully. You may ask any questions about the research, the possible risks and benefits associated with the research, your rights as a volunteer, and anything else that is not clear. When all of your questions have been answered, you can decide if you would like to participate.

WHY AM I BEING INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?

You are being invited to take part in this study as you are an employee at Oregon State University or Oregon Health Sciences University. These are the two places in which I have chosen to study this phenomenon.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN DURING THIS STUDY AND HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE?

You will be asked to complete an interview that will be asking about your experience with racial humor in the workplace. If you agree to take part in this study, the interview will last for approximately 30 minutes.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF THIS STUDY?

There are minimal risks to the you in taking part in this study. Some may experience some discomfort discussing theirs or others use of racial humor, however due to the professional relationships that I have established with many of you, I expect that your discomfort will be minimal.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF THIS STUDY?

You will not directly benefit from this study.

WILL I BE PAID FOR PARTICIPATING?

You will not be paid for participating in this study.

WHO WILL SEE THE INFORMATION I GIVE?

The information you provide during this research study will be kept confidential. All information that is published will be presented using pseudonyms so your identity is not revealed.

DO I HAVE A CHOICE TO BE IN THE STUDY?

Yes. If you decide to take part in the study, it should be because you really want to volunteer. You can stop at anytime during the study and still keep the benefits and rights you had before volunteering.

You will not be treated differently if you decide to stop taking part in the study. You are free to skip any question that you prefer not to answer. If you choose to withdraw from this project before it ends, the researchers may keep information collected about you and this information may be included in study reports.

WHAT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?

If you have any questions about this research project, please contact the co-investigator, Teela Foxworth, at Teela.Foxworth@gmail.com or the primary investigator, Dr. Walls, at drwalls@oregonstate.edu.

If you have questions about your rights as a participant, please contact the Oregon State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) Human Protections Administrator, at (541) 737-4933 or by email at IRB@oregonstate.edu.

Your signature indicates that this research study has been explained to you, that your questions have been answered, and that you agree to take part in this study. You will receive a copy of this form.

Participant's Name (printed):

(Signature of Participant)

(Date)

Interview Questions

Before beginning the interview, I want to ensure that you understand your rights as a participant by looking over the informed consent form with you. After reviewing this document, I'll have you sign it if you decide that you still would like to participate in the study.

Thank you for participating in my study, the interview will take about 30 minutes. All of your answers will be kept confidential and an alternate name will be used for you in reporting any information in my thesis. However, if you refer to any co-workers in the interview, please use a pseudonym to protect their identity.

I'll ask you some questions first dealing with your experience with telling stories using humor, then I'll ask you some questions about race in your workplace, which will lead us to our discussion on racial humor. Lastly, I'll ask some demographic information in order to accurately represent you in my sample.

Storytelling through Humor

1. Do you use humor to tell stories?
If so, can you give me an example of a humorous story you told to a co-worker using humor?
2. Do you use humor to talk about serious issues?
If so, what are some examples of these issues?
Can you give me an example of an actual story?
3. Do any of your co-workers use humor to talk about serious issues?
If so, what are some examples of these issues?
Can you give me an example of an actual story?
4. Why do you use humor to discuss serious issues?
If so, why do you?
If no, why not?
5. Overall, and generally speaking, do you think using humor is an effective/ineffective way to discuss serious issues?

*Now that I have a better understanding of how you use humor to tell stories, I'd like to segue into a discussion on race. [Pause]
Specifically, I want you to think about if racial topics are discussed in the workplace [Pause]. Have you had enough time to think about it? Don't feel rushed.*

Race

6. Have you ever discussed racial issues in your department?

If not why not?
 If yes, why?

7. Do you think race is a sensitive topic?
 If so, why do you feel it's so sensitive?
 If not, what makes it a relatively easy topic of discussion?

Next, let's focus on racial conversations that you may have heard or been a part of.

8. Have you ever heard a co-worker in the workplace discussing stories involving race?
 -If yes, did their stories appear to be job related or does it seem to be of a more personal nature?
 -Can you recall a specific story that you overheard?

Now that I have a better understanding of how racial topics are discussed, I want to next focus on racial humor.

Racial Humor

First, I will ask you a series of questions about your own use of racial humor.

9. Do you ever tell racial jokes to your co-workers? (*This can be repeating jokes*)
 Why or Why not?
10. Do these jokes involve stereotypes?
11. Have you used stereotypes to refer to racial groups?
 If yes, what was your perception of the stereotype? (funny, stupid, indifferent)
 If no, why not?
12. To what extent do you think racial stereotypes are useful?
 To what extent are they detrimental?
13. Do you share racial jokes with people of the same race, different race, or both?
14. What effect, if any, did the race of your counterpart have on this discussion?
15. Tell me a specific racial joke that you told.
16. What conversation, if any, took place after the joke?
17. Would you judge this discussion as positive or negative?
 Why?

18. As a result of this discussion, did you consider adjusting a previous belief you had about another race?

19. If you changed a previously held belief, did it pertain to just that person you had the dialogue with or the entire ethnic group referred to in the humor?

Now we'll discuss your perception of your co-workers use of humor in the workplace.

20. Have you ever heard a co-worker tell racial jokes to other co-workers?

21. Did this joke involve stereotypes?

22. Have you ever heard co-workers use stereotypes to refer to racial groups?

If yes, what was your perception of the use of the stereotype? (funny, stupid, indifferent)

If no, why not?

23. If your co-workers share racial humor, do they usually share it with people of the same race, different race, or both?

24. What effect, if any, do you think the race of the audience of the joke have on the discussion?

25. Tell me about a specific racial joke you overheard a co-worker telling.

26. Did any type of conversation take place after the joke was told?

27. Would you judge this as a positive or negative discussion?

Why?

28. After the discussion, did any of your co-workers alter their previous held beliefs about a race?

29. If they did change their belief, do you think it applied just toward the individuals involved or all of the people of that race?

Finally, I'd like to end this survey by asking you a few demographic questions (age, race). The point of which is to be able to place you in my sample. I'll also ask you a question about the culture of your workplace.

Demographics

30. What is your age?

31. What gender do you most identify with?

32. What ethnicity or ethnicities do you identify with?
33. What's your level of education?
34. What type of organization do you work for? (Health care, marketing, HR, law enforcement, etc)
35. How would you describe the culture of your organization? (*Norms, values, beliefs in your workplace. If respondent is still unsure, I'll provide examples: Does your boss give awards for the employee of the month, are success stories told at meetings to motivate you and your co-workers?*)
36. How long have you been with the organization?
37. Given the racial composition of your department, are you a racial minority in your workplace?