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Race and Racism in Post Racial America

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### **Race and Comedy -- Not A Laughing Matter**

From the days of black face comedy to modern day television shows like "Chappel's Show," we have seen how the topic of race can be used in comedy to facilitate laughter, provoke emotion, and also offend people. Many comedians today continue to talk about race as a way of shocking an audience with a topic that is typically considered taboo amongst society. This lead me to question what does racial comedy actually do for us as a society? Does making fun of each other and ourselves open the playing field between races and bring us to an equal level? Or is it mostly just offensive? After spending some time researching this topic and watching a class presentation, I have experienced a change of thought that I have previously held throughout my life. I originally thought that comedy and race are good for society because it opens us up to conversation that we initially may have avoided. And in fact this paper was originally titled, "Race - It's A Laughing Matter." However, I have now come to a new conclusion. Just because we laugh at something, and we understand it is a joke, doesn't mean we are not associating what we hear or see with reality. Although what I originally believed may be true in some select circumstances, I now believe that overall, race in comedy mainly serves two purposes: First, it is used as a way of representing where we stand racially as a society, and secondly it typically reinforces racial stereotypes. I will support this point of view throughout my paper.

Blackface was a form of comedy that started in the 1800's and involved a white

person wearing black make-up or sometimes using soot, to cover ones face in order to portray and mock black people. During its most popular usage in time between 1830 and 1930, it became so popular even black people were doing the act wearing exaggerated wigs with red and white mouth make-up. Comedians like "Pigmeat" Markham continued this trend into the later half of the twentieth century. In an article by John Patterson for The Guardian (website) titled "Paint it black," he briefly describes the history of some of the early forms of racial comedy including blackface. "The black version of blackface was inevitably more "authentic", the music was probably a lot better, and even the great black reformer Frederick Douglass felt moved in 1849 to say of the phenomenon, "It is something to be gained when the coloured man in any form can appear before a white audience" (which only proves how awful things were). In the 20th century, radio comedy The Amos'n'Andy Show, starring white comedians performing a sort of "aural blackface", was one of the most popular and (in formal terms) most influential and innovative programmes of the 1930s, with its short-lived TV spin-off still being syndicated in 1966."

Looking back on comedy like this, it seems so offensive and utterly ridiculous that it is hard to believe it was popular at one point. I would also be hard pressed to find anyone who would support this type of comedy today. Which leads me to an important question: Why was this considered ok within our culture at one point and what did this say about where we stood as a society on a racial level? This question has lead me to two conclusions. One is that comedy is used to show us where we stand racially as a society of people, it can be used as a mirror. If people were ok with forms of comedy like this in the past, than they must have been ok with the realities it

portrays (at least enough to laugh at it, regardless if they agreed or disagreed with the message). Because some audiences laughed at this form of comedy in the past, it shows that they had a much more demening and negative view of Blacks, which of course was true during that time period. That is why in modern day society, forms of comedy like this would no longer be accepted because we have progressed past this.

In a senior thesis written by Melissa Hughes in 2003, as a student from the University of Southern California Law School, she explains how racial jokes depicted stereotypical views of people throughout multiple points in history, mainly focusing on new immigrants to the country. "Racial jokes during the nineteenth century reflected two primary social concerns. First, the flurry of jokes that targeted newly arrived immigrant groups reflected the concern of white Americans that they could lose their privileged social position. Such jokes typically defined immigrants as stupid, dirty, or lazy, and emphasized their inalterable differences. Second, racial jokes usually centered on current social concerns. For example, during the Industrial Revolution, entrepreneurs succeeded by constantly evolving with the furious pace of technology. Those who could not keep up, such as immigrants with little exposure to many industrial innovations, were depicted in ethnic jokes as stupid. Thus, many popular jokes at this time ascribed to minority groups an utter lack of sophistication and understanding of newly invented technologies, reflecting the pressures and anxieties created by the new industrial society." Hughes essentially states here that jokes were used as a way of representing the anxieties some americans felt from the newly arriving immigrants, which therefore was a depiction of how people felt at the time.

Later on, Hughes provides another example as to when the time period

reflected the type of humor that was circulating, "As the Irish achieved higher socioeconomic status, other minority groups faced the brunt of twentieth century "stupid immigrant" jokes. In the 1940s and 1950s, ethnic jokes began to circulate depicting Italian-Americans as inept dunces, capable of performing only the simplest of jobs. Donald C. Simmons, a psychiatrist who has researched the psychological nature of humor, suggests that the proliferation of the Italian- American joke cycle in the mid-twentieth century was spurred in part by their successful assimilation and eventual competition with minority groups that had successfully achieved a level of socioeconomic success. Thus, many jokes paired Italian-Americans with African-Americans to illustrate that they also resided at the lowest levels of the racial hierarchy:" After this time period, Hughes then provides a good example as to when humor changed to represent the changing times, "The anti-Italian post-World War II joke cycle, however, was relatively short-lived, dying out almost entirely by the 1970s when their association with organized crime significantly changed their social image from dunce to mobster and effectively rendered "stupid" Italian jokes ridiculous." Based on this small sample of examples, we can see that racial jokes were used as a reflection of societies current view of different races, therefore showing the current state of racial affairs at the time.

Comedy today will be viewed in the same way by people of the future. They will look back at us and think "why were they always joking about their differences in such an offensive way?" We may laugh at it now, and we may even understand how it does not support our own beliefs, but the fact that we are laughing at it shows where we stand as a society. We find it funny because we believe it holds some level of truth. If

someone were to joke, "White people couldn't get a job if an employer knocked on there door.." We would not find that funny unless we took it sarcastically, because it does not hold true to what we know of our society today.

Secondly, race based comedy typically reinforces racial stereotypes. Yes we can all laugh about how "white guys can't dance," and "black people are the best at sports," etc. But are we really that good at disassociating what we hear with how we view reality around us? I personally can't believe that when many forms of media have been shown to affect our views of reality in multiple studies. From the textbook titled "Fundamentals Of Media Effects (second edition), authors Jennings Bryant, Susan Thompson and Bruce Finklea reference a study about media effects that describes how audiences can react to stereotypical portrayals of minorities: "Many priming studies have examined how exposure to minority stereotypes (such as thinking that Blacks are criminals and Hispanics are sensual) can have a short-term effect on audiences, especially majority audiences, and their evaluations of minorities in the real world... Other priming studies have found that stereotypical portrayals in mass media cause White audience members to respond to those stereotypes in their evaluations of minorities."

In another quote from the book, cultivation studies have shown that similar effects occur when consuming media that is deemed stereotypical. "Cultivation studies have been conducted in the area of stereotyping among White audiences. Several studies have shown that Whites who are heavy consumers of television news tend to stereotype Blacks as being lower in socioeconomic status because of lack of initiative rather than lack of opportunity... One cultivation study that made use of mental models

perspective found that White audiences who were heavy viewers of television cultivated attitudes in line with stereotypical portrayals of Hispanics." Finally, it has been shown that people will change or have their behavior affected from viewing stereotypical portrayals in media, "Additional research has shown that heavy viewing of stereotypical portrayals of minorities on television can influence White viewers' voting and public policy decisions... More recent studies (citation) ... revealed not only that Whites who were heavy viewers of stereotypical televised portrayals of minorities were impacted negatively, but that their views caused them to be less supportive of affirmative action or other race-based policies."

These studies show that humans have a difficult time disassociating what we consume in media, with our own perceptions of the real world. Because of these findings, I would argue that hearing stand up comedians joke about another person's race in a negative way, would in turn cause us to internalize what we hear in a way we may not have ever wanted. Even when we understand something is a joke, or is a fictional depiction, we still learn from these things just as we would when a message is true. In this way, racial humor that incorporates stereotypes, has an inadvertent affect of appropriating these attitudes and beliefs even when it is unintended.

An argument can be made that viewing stand up comedy (or hearing a joke in person), would not be considered the same as viewing other forms of television media like the news or sitcoms, causing the effects to be different. However, viewing of any form of media sometimes involves stereotypical humor especially in sitcoms, so people receive this type of humor from many different sources rather than just stand-up comedy or the jokes of others. Secondly, stand up comedy and peer to peer humor,

can have the same effect as sitcoms and other media forms. Studies have shown that learning occurs through media just as much as learning from our peers or teachers. Without diving into the science of learning, overall people are consuming a stereotypical message, through various different sources, and since learning has been shown to happen through media and through our own observation of the environment, I would not segregate the learning that occurs from hearing racist jokes from our peers and comedians, from watching media that depicts the same things.

A good example of modern day racial comedy is "Chappelle's Show," created and hosted by comedian Dave Chappelle. The show typically involved some standup comedy as well as recorded skits that parodied many aspects of American culture, pop culture, and different races. In an article from Oprah Winfrey's website titled "Chappelle's Story," the show's popularity is explained, "Dave's trademark humor—outrageous, politically incorrect explorations of popular culture, race, sex, drugs and fame—infused every skit. His fans love quoting his lines, especially his impersonation of funk music impresario Rick James. Despite the show's controversial subjects, it became the highest rated program on Comedy Central and earned three Emmy nominations. When the first season was released on DVD, it became the best-selling TV show in DVD history!" With all this popularity, I found it important to explore the fact as to why Chappelle quickly quit the show after only two and a half seasons. From the same article, this is explained.

"During his third season, Dave began questioning his work on the show. From the very first episode, Dave's sketches sparked controversy. But, over time, he says some of his sketches started to make him feel "socially irresponsible." One particular

sketch still disturbs Dave today. The skit was about a pixie (played by Dave) who appeared in black face, which Dave describes as the "visual personification of the n-word." "There was a good-spirited intention behind it," Dave says. "So then when I'm on the set, and we're finally taping the sketch, somebody on the set [who] was white laughed in such a way—I know the difference of people laughing with me and people laughing at me—and it was the first time I had ever gotten a laugh that I was uncomfortable with. Not just uncomfortable, but like, should I fire this person?" After this incident, Dave began thinking about the message he was sending to millions of viewers. Dave says some people understood exactly what he was trying to say with his racially charged comedy...while others got the wrong idea. "That concerned me," he says. "I don't want black people to be disappointed in me for putting that [message] out there. ... It's a complete moral dilemma." "

I believe this interview is significant to my point because Chappelle explained that he essentially felt as though the show was sending the wrong message to some people and was reinforcing racial stereotypes. I believe the show also depicted some of the viewpoints that many Americans have, or are socially aware of, about race in America. Because they related to the show so much, they were laughing because they saw a level of truth behind it. Overall, the point is that making a joke of race regardless of the medium it is delivered, has two inherent qualities. One is that it is based off of a societal level view of race, which reflects where we stand as a society currently. Secondly, when the message is stereotypical, it can have an inadvertent affect on those consuming it, of reinforcing these stereotypes because of the way our brains learn things.



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