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IN-GROUP DISPARAGING HUMOR: CONDITIONS OF AMUSEMENT
AND CONSEQUENCES FOR SOCIAL IDENTITY

by

Mark Allen Ferguson

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IN-GROUP DISPARAGING HUMOR: CONDITIONS OF AMUSEMENT AND CONSEQUENCES FOR SOCIAL IDENTITY

Mark Allen Ferguson, M.A.

Western Michigan University, 2003

The present research develops and empirically tests a theoretical model of in-group disparaging humor. In an experiment, one hundred and seventy-five undergraduates were exposed to a comedy routine that disparaged an in-group, an out-group, or did not contain disparaging content. Subjects then completed measures of amusement and social identity. Results suggest that in-group disparaging humor can simultaneously elicit amusement and threaten social identity. The implications of these results for understanding the effects of in-group disparaging humor on amusement and social identity are discussed.

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Acknowledgments—Continued

Mark Allen Ferguson

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Introduction

Disparaging humor refers to remarks that evoke amusement through the derogation of individuals or their social groups. Much research has focused on humor that disparages social out-groups: that is, groups with which people do not affiliate. For instance, researchers have historically sought to understand the conditions for amusement in the case of exposure to *out-group disparaging humor* (La Fave, McCarthy, & Haddad, 1973; Middleton, 1959; Priest, 1966; Wolff, Smith & Murray, 1934; Zillman & Cantor, 1972). In addition, researchers have recently begun to consider the social-psychological consequences of exposure to out-group disparaging humor (e.g., Ford, 2000; Ford, Wentzel, & Lorion, 2001; Hobden & Olson, 1994; Maio, Olson, & Bush, 1997; Olson, Maio, & Hobden, 1999).

Less research has addressed, however, the conditions for amusement and consequences of exposure to *in-group disparaging humor*: that is, humor which disparages groups with which people do affiliate. The present research addresses these relatively neglected issues. Specifically, this research develops and empirically tests a theoretical model of the conditions for amusement and psychological consequences of exposure to in-group disparaging humor. This model derives from “superiority theories of disparaging humor,” including La Fave and colleague’s *Vicarious Superiority Theory* (1973; 1976) and Zillmann and colleague’s *Disposition Theory of Humor and Mirth* (1976; 1983; 2000), and Martineau’s work on the *Social Functions of Humor* (1972).

This thesis will begin with the derivation of the theoretical model of the conditions for amusement and consequences for social identity of exposure to in-group

disparaging humor. It will next discuss the empirical test of this model and the results of this test. The thesis will then conclude with a discussion of the current state of contemporary disparaging humor research and what the current research contributes to this literature.

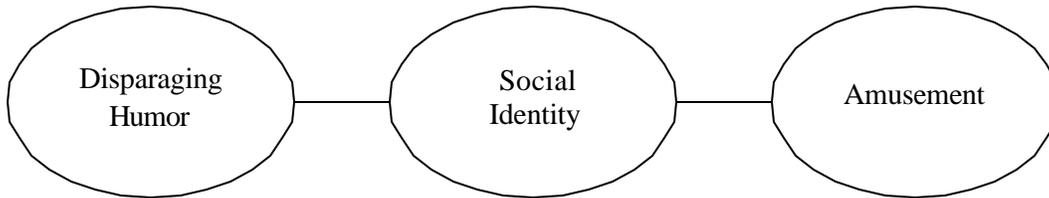
Superiority Theories of Disparaging Humor

Early disparaging humor theories have suggested that amusement results from a sudden feeling of superiority or triumph that one feels upon recognition of the infirmities or misfortunes of others (Hobbes, 1651/1996). Essentially, amusement was believed to result from self-esteem enhancement derived from a “downward social comparison” (Wills, 1981) with unaffiliated or disliked others (Priest, 1966; Priest & Abrams, 1970; LaFave, Haddad, & Marshall, 1974; Wolff, Smith, & Murray, 1934). Theories based on these ideas are known as “superiority theories” (e.g., Morreall, 1983).

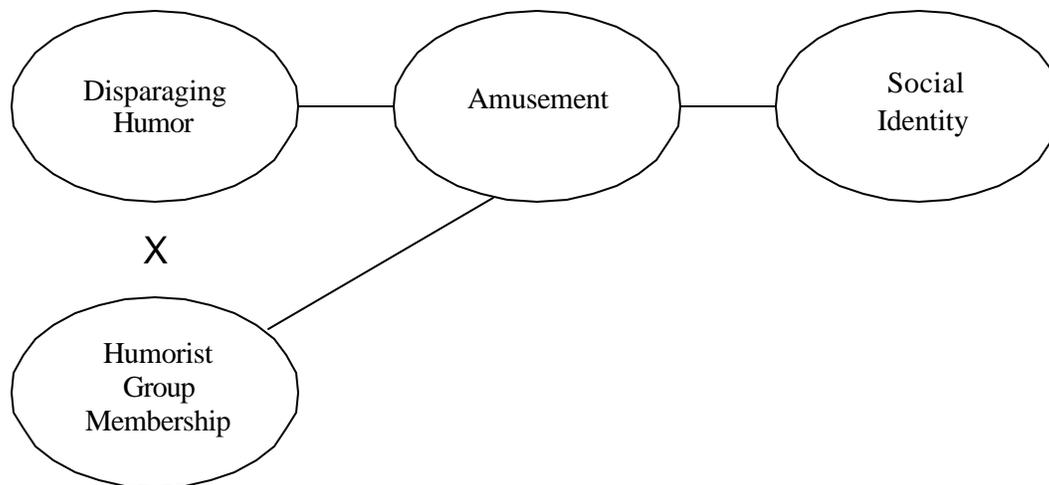
According to superiority theories, the effect of disparaging humor on amusement is mediated by its consequences for social identity (see Figure 1, p. 3). Tajfel (1981) referred to social identity as “that part of the individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the *value and emotional significance* (i.e., self-esteem) attached to that membership” (p. 255). In particular, people are amused by *out-group disparaging humor* because it implies a social comparison that favorably distinguishes their in-group from the disparaged out-group, thus enhancing social identity. For instance, La Fave, Haddad, and Maeson (1976) suggested that out-group disparaging humor allows people to experience “vicarious feelings of superiority” over the targeted out-group. Zillman and Cantor (1972)

Figure 1. Theoretical Models of Disparaging Humor

Superiority Theories



Martineau's Theory



suggested, likewise, that out-group disparaging humor amuses people because it implies “temporary dominance” of their in-group over the disparaged out-group. In contrast, humor that disparages one’s in-group should not result in amusement because it implies a social comparison that negatively distinguishes the in-group from an out-group; thus, the humor should diminish or threaten social identity (Bourhis, Giles, & Tajfel, 1973).

Affiliation and Reference Group Models. The earliest empirical research has offered *equivocal* support for superiority theory. For example, Wolff, et al. (1934) suggested that affiliated objects are psychological extensions of the self. Accordingly, membership in a particular group implies affiliation with that group. Therefore, Wolff et

al. hypothesized that people are more amused by the disparagement of unaffiliated targets (members of social out-group) than affiliated targets (members of an in-group).

Consistent with their hypothesis, Wolff et al. (1934, Exp. 1) found that Gentiles were more amused by the anti-Jewish jokes than were Jews. For the Gentiles, the anti-Jewish jokes favorably distinguished their in-group from a relevant out-group, Jews.

Consequently, the anti-Jewish jokes were funny. In contrast, for Jews, the anti-Jewish jokes were not funny because they negatively distinguished their in-group from an out-group.

However, in a second study, Wolff et al. (1934; Exp 2) exposed Jews and Gentiles to jokes that disparaged a mutual out-group, Scots. According to superiority theory, Jews and Gentiles should have found the anti-Scottish jokes equally funny since neither the Jewish nor Gentile subjects were Scottish; that is, neither Jews nor Gentiles were affiliated with Scots. Contrary to their superiority theory hypothesis, however, Gentiles reported more amusement with the anti-Scottish jokes than did Jews.

Middleton (1959) also tested the hypothesis that people will enjoy humor that disparages a non-affiliated group, but not humor that disparages an affiliated group. And like Wolff et al. (1934), Middleton's study provided only partial support for superiority theory. Whites and Blacks were exposed to jokes that disparaged Whites, Blacks, or jokes with neutral content. Subjects then evaluated the jokes. Consistent with expectations, Blacks evaluated the anti-White jokes more positively than Whites, whereas there were no differences found amongst evaluations for the neutral jokes. However, evaluations of the anti-Black jokes did not differ between Black and White subjects.

Similarly, Priest and colleagues (Priest, 1966; Priest and Abrahams, 1970) explicitly equated the concepts of affiliation and reference group in the context of political party affiliation. Consistent with superiority theory, Priest (1966) and Priest and Abrahams (1970) exposed subjects to jokes that disparaged democrats, republicans, or did not contain any disparaging content (in 1970 a third party candidate was also disparaged). Subjects then evaluated the humor. The data supported expectations. Subjects reported more amusement when humor disparaged a political out-group than when humor that disparaged a political reference group.

Collectively, the research by Wolff et al. (1934), Middleton (1959), Priest (1966), and Priest and Abrahams (1970) expand Hobbes' original superiority theory to predict amusement with disparagement humor directed not at the self, but at a social group with which one belongs. Accordingly, people should enjoy humor that disparages social out-groups more than humor that disparages social in-groups. However, in Wolff et al's (1934) second study, Jewish subjects did not enjoy humor that disparaged an out-group. Likewise, in Middleton's (1959) study, Black subjects enjoyed anti-Black humor. The affiliation and reference group models cannot easily account for such findings.

Vicarious Superiority Theory: An Identification Class Model. LaFave and colleagues (e.g., 1976/1996) introduced the concept of identification class (IC) to resolve these inconsistencies of previous research. An IC is defined as both an affiliation (group membership) and an attitude toward a class or category of persons. LaFave et al. (1976/1996) provide this definition:

If a given IC (identification class) exists for S (a subject): then S either believes himself at a given moment a member of that class, or believes he is a nonmember, or his belief with respect to that particular IC lies dormant at that moment in his non-conscious storage system; and (2) S either feels positive, neutral or negative about that class, or else it lies dormant at that moment in his non-conscious (p. 67).

As this definition suggests, a positive IC is one for which the person believes they are a member or has a positive attitude (identifies) with the class of people. A negative IC is one for which the person does not affiliate or has a negative attitude toward (does not identify with) the class of people. The concept of IC highlights the possibility that people's group membership may not correspond with their psychological or attitudinal affiliation. In both the Wolff et al. (1934, Exp. 2) and Middleton (1959) studies, therefore, subjects may have informally identified with the non-ascribed groups (groups with which they did not belong). The Jewish subjects in the Wolff et al. study may have identified with Scots because of a common set of stereotypes ascribed to both groups. Similarly, the Black subjects in Middleton's study might not have identified with the "stereotypical Blacks" depicted in the jokes.

Consistent with Hobbes' (1651/1996) initial conceptualization of superiority theory, La Fave (1972) and La Fave et al. (1976/1996) suggested that the effect of disparaging humor on amusement is mediated by the self-esteem enhancement resulting from social comparison. One experiences self-esteem enhancement vicariously through humor that disparages a negative IC and/or esteems a positive IC.

LaFave, McCarthy, and Haddad (1973) tested the hypothesis that people will be more amused by humor that both “esteems [their] positive IC and disparages [their] negative IC than a joke stimulus that disparages a positive IC and esteems a negative” (p. 56). In this study, Pro-Canadian Canadians and Pro-American Americans read twenty jokes that concerned Canadian-American relations. In one of these jokes, the Canadian was esteemed and the American was disparaged, and in another, the American was esteemed and the Canadian was disparaged. Subjects then evaluated jokes on a continuum from “not funny” to “very funny.” The results of this study supported expectations. Subjects reported more amusement with jokes that esteemed their positive IC and disparaged their negative IC than with jokes that disparaged their positive IC and esteemed their negative IC.

LaFave, Haddad, and Marshall (1974) tested the same hypothesis—people are more amused by humor that both esteems a positive IC and disparages a negative IC. The study took place during a protest that occurred at the University of Windsor in 1969. Subjects were fifty Windsor students who either supported ($n = 25$) or opposed ($n = 25$) the protest. Consistent with their hypothesis, each group reported more amusement with jokes that esteemed a positive IC and disparaged a negative IC than with jokes that disparaged a positive IC and esteemed a negative IC.

Disposition Theory: An Attitudinal Model. Zillmann and Cantor's (1976/1996) disposition theory represents an alternative to LaFave's vicarious superiority theory in that it more explicitly separates attitude from group membership. Disposition theory emphasizes the humor recipient's attitude toward the source and target of disparaging

humor, rather than *categorical* evaluations of the social group membership of the source and target of the humor.

According to disposition theory, amusement with disparaging humor is only a function of attitudes toward the humor source and the disparaged target; it is not a function of the source and target's group membership. Moreover, unlike other superiority models, it considers attitude as a continuous variable. That is, attitudes toward a given group take on a continuous range of values that vary from highly negative, to neutral, to highly positive. The disposition theory hypothesizes that:

...humor appreciation varies inversely with the favorableness of the disposition toward the agent or entity being disparaged, and varies directly with the favorableness of the disposition toward the agent or entity disparaging it.

Appreciation should be maximal when our friends humiliate our entities, and minimal when our enemies manage to get the upper hand over our friends (Zillman, 1983; p. 101).

Disposition theory has been supported by empirical research. For example, Zillmann and Cantor (1972) exposed superordinates and subordinates to jokes and cartoons that the depicted disparagement of one party within three hierarchical relationships: parent-child, teacher-student, and employer-employee. These jokes and cartoons were created so that in one instance, the superordinate (e.g., parent, teacher) would be esteemed, and in another, the subordinate (e.g., child, student) would be esteemed. Subjects then reported their amusement. The results of this study proved consistent with disposition theory. Superordinate subjects were more amused with humor

that disparaged subordinates, and subordinate subjects were more amused with humor that disparaged superordinates.

Cantor and Zillmann (1973) further improved upon the disposition version of superiority theory by showing that disparagement of a disliked group is sufficient for amusement. That is, it is not necessary for disparagement of a disliked group to be accompanied by enhancement of an esteemed group in order to elicit amusement. It was the contention of LaFave and colleagues (1973; 1974; 1976/1996) that humor needed to disparage a negative IC *and* esteem a positive IC in order to elicit amusement. Zillman and Cantor's (1972) study drew upon this earlier logic by using cartoons and jokes that disparaged a disliked group *and* esteemed a liked group to elicit amusement.

The idea that disparagement of a disliked group was sufficient to elicit amusement was empirically tested by Cantor & Zillman (1973). Subjects were exposed to cartoons that depicted the misfortune of a person with whom subjects were likely to sympathize (a zookeeper), or not sympathize (a police officer). The misfortune itself was produced by either a person (a child) or an object (a bird) toward which the subjects were likely to have a neutral (rather than strongly positive or negative) attitude. The results of this study confirmed expectations. Subjects reported more amusement with cartoons that depicted the police officer suffering a misfortunate (not-sympathetic condition) than a zookeeper suffering a misfortune (sympathetic condition). Thus, although subjects held a neutral attitude toward the object that produced the misfortunate, they enjoyed humor that disparaged a less-liked person more than humor that disparaged a liked one.

Although the importance of disposition theory may seem to eclipse vicarious superiority theory, a test of these theories revealed their mutual importance in predicting amusement with disparaging humor. Gallois and Callan (1985) found that both attitudes toward the generic social categories of the source and target of disparaging humor, and attitudes toward the specific source and target, are important in predicting amusement. Thus, it seems the concept of identification class does contribute to amusement above and beyond attitudes toward the specific source and target of disparaging humor.

Summary. Each superiority theory is based on the common assumption that amusement is the result of self-esteem enhancement derived from a downward social comparison with relevant out-groups. However, these models differ in that affiliation and reference group models assume that one's attitude toward an in-group is positive and their attitude toward out-groups is negative. Likewise, both affiliation and reference group, and identification class, treat people's attitudes as dichotomous variables (like or not like). This type of crude scaling is problematic because it fails to capture the range of variation that characterizes people's attitudes. Disposition theory resolves this particular limitation. However, research has shown that attitudes toward the source and the target of the humor *and* identification classes are relevant concepts in predicting the amusement derived from disparaging humor.

In terms of prediction, superiority theories postulate that, given a positive attitude toward the in-group, people should be amused by out-group disparaging humor because it enhances their social identity. Likewise, people should not be amused by in-group disparaging humor because it diminishes social identity.

Social-Functional Theories of Humor

Martineau (1972) proposed an alternative to superiority theories, that social identity *does not* mediate the effect of disparaging humor on amusement. In fact, amusement mediates the effect of disparaging humor on social identity (see Figure 1, p. 3). Further, Martineau argued that group membership of the humorist moderates the effect of in-group disparaging humor on amusement, and thus, social identity.

Contrary to superiority theories, Martineau proposed that in-group disparaging humor delivered by another in-group member does not represent a negative social comparison that threatens social identity. In fact, in this situation, humor is likely interpreted in a light-hearted manner, thereby affirming people's bond as in-group members. When humor is interpreted in this light-hearted frame of mind, it is more likely to amuse.

However, Martineau argues that when an out-group member delivers humor disparaging the recipient's in-group, the humor will be interpreted more seriously. In fact, a recipient is likely to actively consider the motivations of the out-group humorist in this case, which may lead them to believe the humorist intends to disparage them (Wyer & Collins, 1990). After all, it may seem counterintuitive that an out-group humorist would deliver in-group disparaging humor unless the humorist intended to disparage the in-group, or unless they held a negative attitude toward the in-group. Should recipients believe that an out-group member has a negative intention in delivering the humor, or if they think the humorist has a negative attitude toward the in-group, they are not likely to be amused by in-group disparaging humor. In fact, they likely perceive that the humor

implies a negative social comparison, which diminishes social identity. Consequently, in-group disparaging humor would not likely lead to increased cohesion among in-group members.

Martineau's ideas are consistent with other theories that suggest humor has a cohesion-building effect when delivered amongst in-group members (Robinson & Smith-Lovin, 2001; Meyer, 2000). Cohen (1999), for instance, suggested that humor builds intimacy between humorists and recipients when they share a common background for interpreting the humor. A common background and intimate context, moreover, are important antecedents to amusement. In fact, when humor is delivered between those without a shared background, the humor is less likely to be amusing and can even elicit disapproval. As Ruscher (2001) mentioned, disparaging humor among in-group members is more likely to entertain and affirm than it is to disparage.

Similar conclusions about the cohesion-building function of in-group disparaging humor were drawn by Pratt (1998) in an ethnographic study of American Indians. In this study, Pratt—himself an American Indian—observed interactions and conducted informal interviews to assess “razzing. This is a form of in-group disparaging humor that helps American Indians to establish social identity by affirming their common bonds as “true Indians,” distinct from groups who do not “understand” their sense of humor. In fact, in-group disparaging humor, in this context is a way of identifying out-group members by their reactions to the humor. When the recipient does not respond according to cultural norms, they are considered to not be “true Indians.”

Likewise, humorists need a shared background with American Indians to razz them and not receive retaliation. For instance, American Indians have particular topics that are safe to use in a razzing situation. One informant in the study stated that:

You can usually razz another Indian about anything they've done, or said, or even make up something to razz them about. But if you razz somebody about their family, then you better be ready to go to blows. If you want to get somebody to fight, then just say something about their family (p. 67-68).

This example alludes to the important of a shared background in the interpretation of in-group disparaging humor. When the humorist is a member of the in-group, the humor is likely to be interpreted as an attempt to build cohesion and social identity amongst group members. Yet, when the humorist is an out-group member, the humor is likely to result in negative reactions and even exclusion from the group.

Summary. Humor theories and Pratt's ethnographic study corroborate Martineau's ideas that in-group disparaging humor will build cohesion amongst group members when delivered by an in-group humorist, but not when delivered by an out-group humorist. Thus, when an in-group humorist delivers in-group disparaging humor, the recipient likely switches to a humor mindset for interpreting the humor. They are amused by the humor and it enhances their social identity. However, when the humorist is an out-group member, the recipient is likely to be suspicious of the humorist's motives in delivering the humor. Therefore, recipients will cognitively elaborate upon the actual content of the humor. These cognitive elaborations (e.g., the recipient's beliefs about the attitudes and intentions of the humorist) are likely to inhibit the switch to a humorous mindset for

interpreting the mindset. As a result, recipients are not likely to be amused, and are likely to experience a diminished or threatened social identity. To our knowledge, Martineau's ideas have yet to receive *empirical* support.

Theoretical Model

Both superiority theory and Martineau (1972) show that amusement and social identity are related. More specifically, if disparaging humor enhances social identity, it will also elicit amusement. However, if disparaging humor threatens or diminishes social identity, it will not elicit amusement. Although these two frameworks disagree about whether or not social identity enhancement precedes amusement, they clearly show that these variables will not be affected independently. The purpose of our model is not to disentangle the relationship between social identity and amusement, but rather to show that changes in *both* social identity *and* amusement are key consequences of in-group disparaging humor. In particular, when in a serious mindset, in-group disparaging humor is interpreted as reflecting an actual, negative social comparison. This research is the first attempt to quantify the actual consequences of in-group disparaging humor for amusement *and* social identity in the context of a single study.

To better understand the effects of in-group disparaging humor on amusement and social identity, we have derived a theoretical framework from both superiority theory and Martineau's work. Our model postulates that group membership of the humorist moderates the effects of in-group disparaging humor on amusement and social identity. When the humorist is an in-group member, recipients likely adopt a humorous, playful mindset for interpreting the humor. Humor will not be interpreted as intending to

disparage the in-group because group membership of the humorist serves as a cue that suggests this person only intends to entertain recipients, and has a positive attitude toward the in-group. In any case, it would seem counterintuitive that an in-group member would deliver in-group disparaging humor to disparage their own group. As a result, the humor recipients will be amused by the humor and not experience a threat to social identity.

However, when the humorist is a member of an out-group, recipients likely adopt a more serious mindset for interpreting the humor. Since group membership is a cue for interpreting the humor, it would seem counterintuitive that an out-group member would want to deliver in-group disparaging humor unless they intended to disparage the in-group, or held some negative attitude toward them. Thus, the humor likely provokes cognitive elaborations that lead to the perception that the humorist has dishonorable intentions. Consequently, elaboration upon the content of in-group disparaging humor leads to humor-inhibiting cognitions—for example, the humorist has negative intentions, the humorist dislikes us—which prevent the switch to the humor mindset, a necessary component of amusement. As a result, the humor does not amuse recipients and diminishes their social identity. Our model explicates the importance of whether the humor's content and meta-message are “taken seriously” as implied in Martineau's work, and its role in the consequences of in-group disparaging humor.

The “Humorous Mindset”

The manner of presentation influences the way that communication is interpreted. When communication is presented in a humorous manner—that is, when it contains humor cues (e.g., the explicit identification of the communication as a joke)—it activates

a unique perspective for interpreting the content of the message (Berlyne, 1972; Mulkay, 1988). More specifically, these type of communications activate a “conversational rule of levity” that encourages people to not interpret the message in the usual serious mindset, but to interpret it in a playful or non-serious way (e.g., Attrado, 1993; Berlyne, 1972; Mannell, 1977; McGhee, 1972; Mulkay, 1988; Sev’er & Ungar, 1997). Mulkay (1988) suggested that a humor mindset implies an abandonment of the usual, serious ways of interpreting messages. Logic and expectations of common sense are no longer expected, nor even desired. For instance, when in a humor mindset, the communications which might normally seem offensive can be given more “interpretive leeway.” This is in-line with Berlyne (1972) who stated that cues allow people to interpret a communication as a joke, rather than as inappropriate behavior.

Empirical research has shown that humor cues can encourage a playful interpretation of both disparagement and aggression (e.g., Gollob & Levine, 1967; Mutuma, La Fave, Mannell, & Guilmette, 1977; Wicker, Baron, & Willis, 1980; Zillman, 1983; see Ford & Ferguson (2003) for a review). Gollob and Levine (1967) had subjects rate the funniness of cartoons presented with humorous or non-humorous content. Ten days afterwards, participants read the same cartoons, but were told to focus on their content. Subjects then rated the cartoons again. Results showed that aggressive cartoons were rated funnier than non-aggressive cartoons on the pre-test, but these same aggressive cartoons were rated much less funny than the non-aggressive cartoons on the posttest. Focusing on the violent content of the cartoons had presumably led participants to not adopt the playful, humor mindset for interpreting the humor. Thus, the aggressive

cartoons were not rated as funny on the posttest as on the pretest. Mannell (1977) found similar results. Subjects in this study reported that violence among cartoon characters was funnier than violence among real world people. The humor cues contained within the cartoons presumably led subjects to adopt a playful, non-serious mindset for interpreting the violence within the humor. In both studies, humor cues implied that disparagement was not real violence, but rather was amusement.

Social Identity

Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; 1986; Tajfel, 1978; 1979; 1982) posits that people are motivated to maintain a positive social identity through favorable social comparisons with relevant out-groups. Remember that social identity refers to “that part of the individual’s self-concept which derives from his *knowledge of his membership* of a social group (or groups) together with the *value and emotional significance* attached to that membership” (Tajfel, 1981, p. 255). These two dimensions, referred to as *in-group identification* and quality of self-esteem (or *collective self-esteem*; Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992) respectively, comprise distinct components of social identity (see Perrault & Bourhis, 1998; 1999). In particular, in-group identification refers to how strongly an individual psychologically identifies with a particular group, apart from how they feel about that group membership. Collective self-esteem, however, refers to an individual’s affective self-evaluation as a member of a particular social group. As Perrault & Bourhis (1998) have pointed out, an individual may strongly identify with a particular group, but this might not provide them with positive feelings about themselves as a group member.

We have accordingly measured these two components of social identity separately in the present study.

In essence, social identity theory suggests that people are motivated to perceive their own social groups in a positive manner. This positive distinctiveness is garnered from favorable social comparisons with relevant out-groups on valued dimensions. The more flattering a comparison is for the in-group, the more it enhances social identity—that is, the more the comparison increases both in-group identification and collective self-esteem. Moreover, people are even motivated to seek positive social comparisons with out-groups in the social context. However, when they are faced with negative social comparisons—comparisons in which the in-group does not compare favorably with out-groups on valued dimensions—social identity (that is, in-group identification and collective self-esteem) is reduced. Negative social comparisons not only block an in-group from positively distinguishing itself, but they also portray the in-group in a less than flattering manner. People are motivated, therefore, to avoid such social comparisons in the social context (see Wheeler & Petty, 2001 for a review).

The social identity perspective has garnered considerable empirical support. Studies on the *minimal group paradigm* (e.g., Tajfel, 1969; Tajfel, Billing, Bundy, & Flament, 1971) provide such support (see Brewer & Brown, 1998 for a short review). The minimal group refers to a group based upon meaningless criteria for membership, such as preference for a given artist or people's ability to estimate the number of dots on a page. Presumably, people in these groups would not have psychological or affective ties for each other, nor would a group structure exist between them. In a classic minimal

group study, Tajfel et al. (1971) asked subjects to estimate the number of dots on a sheet of paper. Subjects were next assigned to two groups based upon their ability to estimate dots. Those who estimated more than the true number of dots were called “overestimators,” while those who estimated less were called “underestimators.” Subjects did not know, however, that they were actually assigned to groups on an arbitrary basis. Then, subjects were asked to allocate tokens to in-group members and out-group members. Tajfel et al. found that subjects allocated more tokens to fellow in-group members than to out-group members. In effect, the in-group favoritism displayed by these subjects was driven by the motivation to seek positive social comparisons with relevant out-groups, even when the criteria for group inclusion were not meaningful. Indeed, just about any intergroup distinction can provoke the in-group bias (see Turner & Bourhis, 1996).

Other research also provides support for social identity theory. A study by Cialdini et al. (1976) demonstrated that people feel good about themselves as members of a social group when it compares favorably with relevant out-groups. The authors thought that college students would be more likely to announce their university membership after the school experienced a sporting success than when it experienced a sporting failure. In Experiment 1, subjects were more likely to wear apparel from their college after their team was victorious than when it was not. Similarly, in Experiments 2 and 3, subjects were more likely to use the pronoun “we” when discussing their school after a victory than after a failure. These three experiments demonstrate that people want to feel good about their group memberships and in fact, will “bask in the reflected glory” of the group

when it does well. However, when the group compares poorly with a relevant out-group on valued dimensions, they are less likely to do so. Indeed, positive social identities seem to be critical to our long term well-being. A study by Wright and Forsyth (1997) found that a positive experience with a social group in high school leads to both higher levels of self-esteem in later life and more stability of self-esteem in the negative social comparisons.

Although the effect of favorable social comparisons on social identity appears clear, the effect of negative social comparisons is less so. In fact, research has shown that people respond to negative social comparisons in a number of ways (e.g., Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002; Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999; Doosje & Ellemers, 1997). One way to respond to negative social comparisons is by disidentifying from the impacted domain: that is, people can reduce the psychological importance of that activity, attribute, or group membership, as a way to protect their esteem (Crocker & Major, 1989; Major & Schmader, 1998). Disidentification thus serves to deflect the implications of a negative social comparison for our self-concept (Crocker & Quinn, 2001; Schmader, Major, & Gramzow, 2001; Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998; Major, Spencer, Schmader, Wolfe, & Crocker, 1998). Similar statements have been put forth by Deaux and Ethier (1998) who suggested that reducing the psychological importance of a given social identity relieves immediate pressures while still preserving the valued identity.

Humorist Group Membership

The present study is designed to examine the effects of in-group disparaging humor on the two components of social identity: degree of identification with the in-group and collective self-esteem. We predict that these effects will be moderated by humorist group membership. In particular, subjects exposed to in-group disparaging humor delivered by an out-group humorist will report a decrease in both degree of in-group identification and collective self-esteem. This would be indicative of a threat to social identity. However, subjects exposed to the same humor delivered by an in-group humorist will not report a decrease in either in-group identification or collective self-esteem. This indicates a lack of social identity threat.

The idea that humorist group membership moderates responses to in-group disparaging humor suggests that people make inferences about the humorist based on the humorist's membership in a particular social group. Wyer and Collins (1992) referred to this inferential process as *cognitive elaboration*—that is, inferences that recipients make about the humor and humorist following the delivery of the humor. For instance, without concrete information about the humorist's attitudes and intentions, people will make a number of inferences—the humorist's attitude toward the in-group, their intentions in delivering the humor, etcetera—from humorist group membership. In effect, the process of cognitive elaboration influences interpretation of the meta-message of the humor. Thus, when people believe that the humorist intends to disparage them, this cognition is likely to inhibit amusement. Conversely, when people think that the humorist simply intends to entertain them, amusement is not likely to be inhibited. Consequently, out-

group humorists are likely to elicit more cognitive elaboration than in-group humorists because it is counterintuitive that they would deliver in-group disparaging humor. The counterintuitive nature of an out-group humorist delivering in-group disparaging humor probably elicits cognitive elaboration as people search for why the humorist intended to disparage the in-group. As Wyer and Collins seemed to allude, the process of cognitive elaboration itself could inhibit amusement.

Although Wyer and Collins focused upon how humorist group membership can provoke cognitive elaboration, it also suggests that cognitive elaboration is implicated in the mindset that people use in interpreting the humor. Ford and colleagues (Ford, 2000; Ford and Ferguson, 2003) have suggested that the consequences of disparaging humor depend upon the mindset that people adopt to interpret the humor. More specifically, if people adopt a humor mindset, they are more likely to be amused by the humor, than when they adopt a serious mindset. These ideas received empirical support (see Ford, 2000; Exps. 2 & 3). It seems plausible that the mindset people use to interpret the humor is the outcome of cognitive elaboration. That is, when an out-group humorist delivers in-group disparaging humor, people engage in a great deal of cognitive elaboration due to suspicions associated with the out-group humorist. Recipients come to think that the humorist has negative attitudes toward the in-group and holds negative intentions in delivering the humor. As a result, these cognitive elaborations inhibit amusement by activating a serious, critical mindset for interpreting the humor. However, when an in-group humorist delivers in-group disparaging humor, people do not engage in a great deal of cognitive elaboration. It is presumed that the in-group humorist holds positive attitudes

toward the in-group and positive intentions in delivering the humor. Thus, these cognitions fail to prevent the switch to a humorous mindset for interpreting the humor. And as a result, in-group humorists are more likely to elicit amusement and enhance social identity than out-group humorists.

Research has provided empirical support for the role of humorist group membership in responses to in-group disparaging humor. For instance, a study by Johnson (1990) suggested that people infer consistency between the content of disparaging jokes and the humorist's attitudes toward the disparaged group. To test this hypothesis, subjects were randomly assigned to two-groups: a self-attribution group (i.e., when you tell disparaging jokes, does your attitude match the content of the jokes?) and an other-attribution group (i.e., when others tell disparaging jokes, do you think their attitude matches the content of the jokes?). Results supported the consistency hypothesis. Subjects in the other-attribution condition were more likely to infer consistency between the content of disparaging jokes and the humorist's attitudes than those in the self-attribution condition. Note that in this study, humorist group membership (in-group vs. out-group) played a role in the interpretation of the humor. When disparaging jokes are delivered by an in-group humorist (such as ourselves), they are seen as holding more positive attitudes than when delivered by an out-group humorist (others). Therefore, when delivering disparaging jokes, group membership of the humorist serves as a proxy for attitudes toward the disparaged target.

Ford, Johnson, Blevins, and Zepada (1999) and Ford (2000) more directly tested the idea that humorist group membership serves as a proxy for attitudes toward the

disparaged group. Yet Ford and colleagues went beyond Johnson (1990) insofar as they also elucidated upon the role of recipient group membership on humor ratings. For instance, Ford et al. (1999) hypothesized that when in-group disparaging humor is told by an in-group humorist, it is less offensive than when it is told by an out-group humorist. To test this hypothesis, female subjects were exposed to sexist jokes told by a man, woman, or humorist whose sex was not revealed. Results showed that female subjects were more offended by sexist jokes when the humorist was a man, than when the humorist was either a woman or a humorist whose sex was not revealed. Although these findings only held for subjects high in hostile sexism—those low in hostile sexism were offended by the sexist jokes regardless of the humorist's sex—this probably represents the egalitarian convictions of those low in hostile sexism. Thus, it remains possible that these subjects believed that the in-group humorist had positive intentions, but nevertheless was inappropriate to deliver the humor. Similar results were found in the Ford (2000) study. Taken together, these results demonstrate that humorist group membership serves as a cue which suggests humorist attitudes and intent in delivering in-group disparaging humor.

Furthermore, Rouhana (1996) stated that in the absence of direct information about the humorist's attitude toward the in-group, or their intentions in delivering in-group disparaging humor, people use humorist group membership as a proxy for their attitudes. This attitude will then be used to infer consistency between the content of the humor and its underlying meta-message—whether the humor is intended to disparage or

to entertain. The outcome of this inferential process then determines both degree of amusement and degree of offensiveness of the humor.

Consequently, Rouhana hypothesized that when an out-group humorist delivers in-group disparaging humor, people will perceive that the humorist holds negative attitudes toward the in-group, and thus, believe the humorist intends to disparage them. As a result, people will be less amused and more offended by the humor than when it is told by an in-group humorist. Yet, when delivered by an in-group humorist, people will believe that the humorist holds positive attitudes toward the in-group, and thus, intends to entertain them. As a result, people are more amused and less offended by the humor than when it is told by an out-group humorist. These hypotheses did find support. Female subjects reported more offense and less amusement by sexist jokes when told by a man than when told by a woman. This suggests that in-group disparaging humor seems funnier, and less offensive, when told by an in-group humorist than when told by an out-group humorist. These results are consistent with the in-group favoritism tradition in social psychology (e.g., Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971; Brewer, 1979)—out-group members are perceived much less favorable than in-group members, regardless of the basis for group membership. They are also consistent with other research that shows people attribute negative in-group feedback to prejudiced attitudes toward the in-group (e.g., Crocker & Major, 1989).

Summary

Humorist group membership likely serves as a proxy for their attitudes and intentions in delivering in-group disparaging humor. Therefore, when the humorist is an

in-group member, people likely interpret the humor in a positive manner because they presume that the humorist holds positive attitudes toward the in-group, and positive intentions in delivering the humor. People view the humor as merely meant to entertain. As a result, people do not engage in the process of cognitive elaboration that inhibits amusement and social identity enhancement. In addition, receivers do not take the humor seriously; hence, they “accept” the humor—adopting the playful or non-critical mindset necessary for amusement (Attardo, 1993; Husband, 1977). Consequently, receivers should find in-group disparaging humor amusing when delivered by an in-group humorist (Rouhana, 1996).

However, if the humorist is an out-group member, people likely interpret the humor in a negative manner because of cognitive elaboration. That is, it seems counterintuitive that an out-group humorist would deliver in-group disparaging humor unless they intended to disparage the in-group. People search for confirmation of their suspicions, utilizing out-group membership to infer consistency between the derogatory content of the humor and the humorist attitudes about the in-group (Johnson, 1990). The receiver, thus, likely infers that an out-group humorist who delivers in-group disparaging humor *intends* to belittle or decry the in-group (Rouhana, 1996). As a result, receivers interpret the humor quite seriously; receivers thus “reject” the humor by failing to adopt the playful or non-critical mindset (Attardo, 1993; Husband, 1977). Therefore, receivers likely find in-group disparaging humor as less amusing and more offensive when delivered by an out-group humorist (Rouhana, 1996).

Hypotheses

According to our model (see Figure 2, p. 28), exposure to in-group disparaging humor will produce the following effects. First, in-group disparaging humor delivered by an out-group member will be “taken seriously.” The humor will be perceived as implying an *actual* negative social comparison, an attempt to derogate the in-group. These cognitive elaborations will inhibit amusement by failing to activate a humor mindset for interpreting the humor’s meta-message. People will remain in the usual, serious mindset for interpreting the humor. Therefore, in-group disparaging humor delivered by an out-group member will both produce a less amusement and threaten social identity. That is, it leads to decreased psychological identification and collective self-esteem.

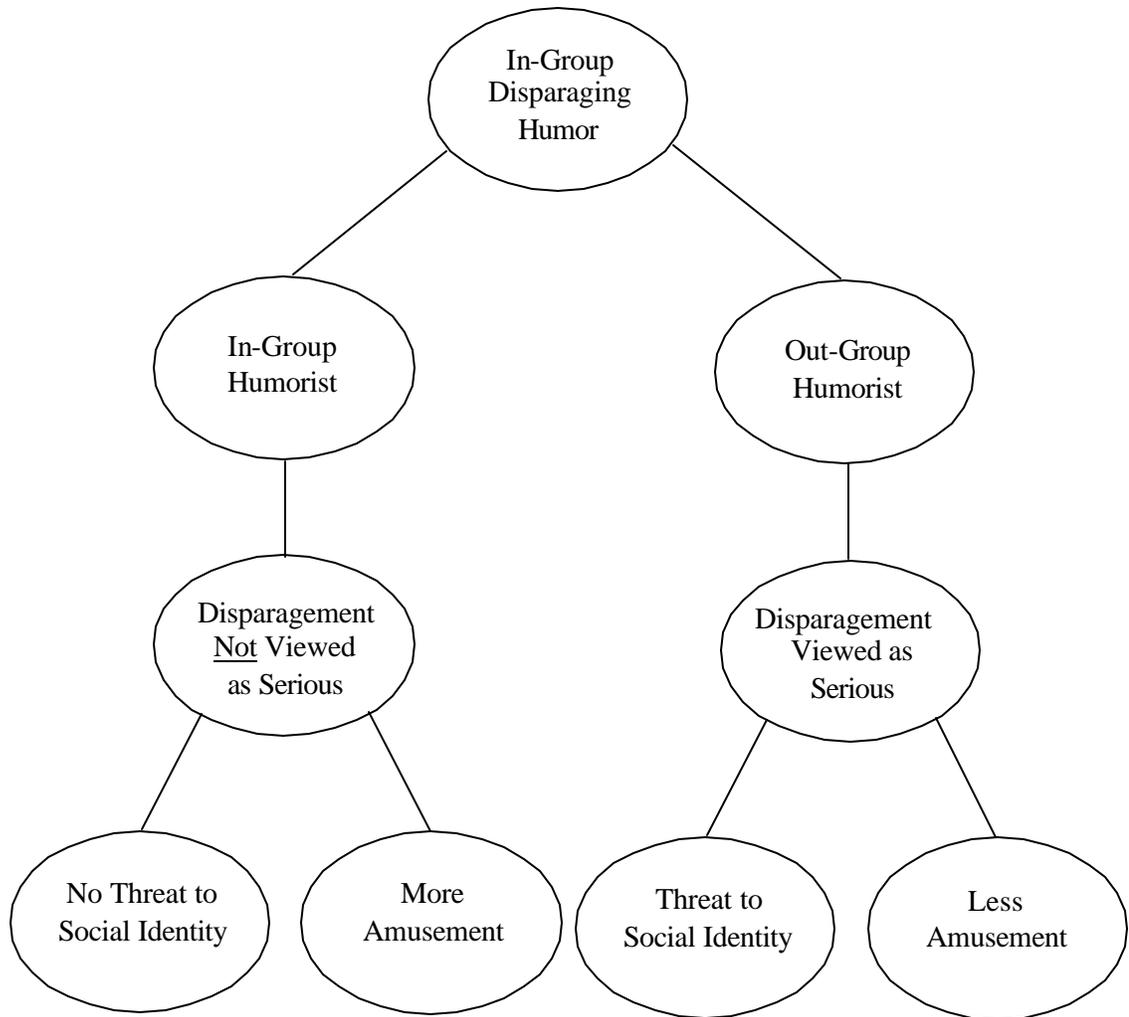
However, when the in-group disparaging humor is delivered by an in-group member, it will not be “taken seriously.” That is, it will not be seen as implying an actual negative social comparison, but rather as meant solely to entertain. Therefore, people will switch to a humor mindset for interpreting the meta-message of the humor. Consequently, in-group disparaging humor delivered by an in-group member will produce a higher degree of amusement and will enhance social identity. That is, it will not decrease psychological identification and bolsters collective self-esteem.

Method

Overview

To test our theoretical model, Western Michigan University (WMU) undergraduates were exposed to one-of-six comedy routines that disparaged either WMU (the in-group), Central Michigan University (CMU; an out-group), or contained no

Figure 2. Theoretical Model of In-Group Disparaging Humor



disparaging content. In each humor condition, the comedian expressed attending either WMU or the University of Michigan (UM). Subjects then completed three dependent measures: (1) degree of amusement with the comedy routine; (2) strength of identification with WMU; and (3) private collective self-esteem.

Subjects and Design

One hundred and seventy-five WMU Sociology and English undergraduates participated in our study on a voluntary basis. Subjects were randomly assigned to one-

of-six experimental conditions in a 3 (humor type: WMU-disparaging humor, CMU-disparaging humor, neutral humor) x 2 (humorist group membership: WMU, UM) between-subjects design.

Procedure

LaFave has shown that degree of identification with the ascribed in-group represents an important factor for responses to disparaging humor. One must identify with the disparaged in-group—at least to some extent—to experience the consequences of in-group disparaging humor. Accordingly, this study was conducted in two phases. In phase 1, we collected a pretest measure of degree of identification with the in-group. It consisted of one item used in previous research (e.g., Perrault & Bourhis, 1998) and modified to fit the context of our study: “To what extent is being a student at WMU an important part of who you are?” Subjects responded on a scale that ranged from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much).

Phase 2 took place with subjects seated in their classrooms. An experimenter introduced the research as designed to assess the “essential characteristics of successful comedy routines.” The experimenter informed subjects that they would read a brief, stand-up comedy routine—supposedly transcribed from an amateur comedian’s demo tape—and then, rate its funniness. The experimenter then distributed booklets which contained the comedy routine and dependent measures (for a sample booklet, see Appendix A, p. 57).

The cover page of the booklet contained a brief description of the project, and a consent form, while the second page presented the comedy routine that contained a

manipulation of type of humor and comedian group membership. The content of the routines varied so that it either disparaged Western Michigan University (WMU; the in-group), Central Michigan University (CMU; an out-group), or did not contain disparaging content. These routines also varied by the comedian's university affiliation. He expressed attending either WMU or UM. See Appendix B (p. 65) for copies of the six comedy routines.

Subjects then completed three dependent measures. The first measure consisted of three items that assessed degree of amusement with the comedy routine: "how humorous is this standup comedy routine; how creative is this standup comedy routine; and "how entertaining is this standup comedy routine?" Subsequent measures addressed social identity. Recall that Perrault & Bourhis (1998) drew attention to the distinction between degree of psychological identification and quality of social identity (i.e., collective self-esteem). Consistent with this perspective, we included measures of both constructs in this study. Therefore, our second measure assessed degree of psychological identification with the in-group. It consisted of one item, and was identical to the measure we used to assess pre-test identification. Our third measure assessed collective self-esteem. This consisted of four items drawn from Luhtanen & Crocker's (1992) collective self-esteem scale. We adapted these items to fit the context of our study: "How happy do you feel as a student at WMU;" "How satisfied do you feel as a student at WMU;" "How comfortable do you feel as a student at WMU;" and "How much do you like being a student at WMU?" Subjects responded on scales ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much).

Results

Consistent with La Fave and colleagues (e.g., 1976/1996), we had reason to believe that subjects' pre-test in-group identification might influence our analyses. More specifically, people need to have at least some measure of in-group identification to experience the consequences of in-group disparaging humor. As a result, we chose to omit subjects from all our analyses whose pre-test identification scores did not exceed a value of one (that is, the minimum observed value possible).

We also wanted to run each analysis separately by sex of participant. We were not able to collect enough data, however, to conduct these preliminary analyses. Neither men nor women as a separate group provided adequate statistical power. Thus, no reasonable conclusions about sex effects could be drawn from our data. As a result, we collapsed all analyses across the sex factor.

Amusement

A reliability analysis was performed on the three amusement items. This analysis yielded a Cronbach's alpha of .87. Although .87 suggests that the amusement items provide an adequate measure of amusement, the reliability analysis revealed that one item—"how creative is this standup comedy routine"—decreases the overall alpha by .06. Thus, we chose to remove this item from our measure of amusement. A reliability analysis on the remaining two amusement items yielded an alpha of .93. The remaining items were thus averaged to represent our measure of amusement. The item that was removed from the amusement scale was analyzed separately as a creativity item.

Other research has shown that peoples' degree of identification with the in-group may impact their responses to discriminatory events (e.g., Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002; Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999; Doosje, & Ellemers, 1997). Thus, to determine whether pre-test identification might represent a significant covariate, we correlated the pre-test identification measure with both our amusement and creativity measures. Pre-test identification scores did not significantly correlate with amusement, $r(129) = .03, p < .71$, nor with creativity, $r(129) = .03, p = .73$. Therefore, we did not consider pre-test identification a necessary covariate in this analysis.

Remember that our theoretical model postulates people will be more amused by in-group disparaging humor when delivered by an in-group humorist than when delivered by an out-group humorist. Thus, we hypothesized that subjects in the WMU-disparaging humor condition would report more amusement with a WMU comedian than with the UM comedian. To test these ideas, we subjected amusement and creativity to a 3 (type of humor) x 2 (comedian group membership) analysis of variance (ANOVA).

This analysis revealed the expected humor type x humorist group membership interaction effect for amusement, $F(2, 123) = 5.72, p < .01$. See Table 1 (p. 33) for descriptive statistics. Planned comparisons were conducted to determine the source(s) of the interaction. These comparisons utilized the pooled error variance from the overall design, which provides for a more sensitive test of our hypotheses (see Winer, 1963). We therefore used the pooled variance in all further analyses. Comparisons indicated that subjects in the WMU-disparaging humor condition were marginally more amused by a WMU humorist ($M = 3.40, SD = 1.26$) than with a UM humorist ($M = 2.69, SD = 1.49$),

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Amusement

Humorist		Type of Humor		
		WMU-D	CMU-D	Neutral
WMU	<i>M</i>	3.40	3.91	2.13
	<i>SD</i>	1.26	1.11	1.00
	<i>n</i>	21	23	20
UM	<i>M</i>	2.69	3.31	3.10
	<i>SD</i>	1.49	1.29	1.42
	<i>n</i>	21	24	20

Note. Higher numbers indicate more amusement.

$F(1, 123) = 3.34, p < .08$. Therefore, consistent with our model, in-group disparaging humor was more amusing when delivered by an in-group humorist than when delivered with an out-group humorist.

Analysis of the creativity item also revealed a humor type x humorist group membership interaction effect, $F(2, 123) = 6.00, p < .01$. See Table 2 (p. 34) for descriptives. Planned comparisons indicated that subjects in the WMU-disparaging humor condition felt that the WMU humorist delivered a more creative routine ($M = 4.05, SD = 1.40$) than the UM humorist ($M = 2.81, SD = 1.63$), $F(1, 123) = 7.47, p < .01$. This result is consistent with our model. People should be more positive about in-group

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics for Creativity

Humorist		Type of Humor		
		WMU-D	CMU-D	Neutral
WMU	<i>M</i>	4.05	3.70	2.50
	<i>SD</i>	1.40	1.52	1.19
	<i>n</i>	21	23	20
UM	<i>M</i>	2.81	3.46	3.50
	<i>SD</i>	1.63	1.50	1.50
	<i>n</i>	21	24	20

Note. Higher numbers indicate more creativity.

humorists than out-group humorists. Taken together, the amusement and creativity measures support our general hypothesis that in-group disparaging humor should be seen in a more positive light when delivered by an in-group humorist than when delivered by an out-group humorist.

Identification with the In-Group

To determine whether pre-test identification might represent a significant covariate in our analyses, we correlated pre-test and post-test degree of identification. This analysis did reveal a significant correlation, $r(127) = .67, p < .001$. A significant correlation was not surprising since research shows that in-group identification moderates

the impact of threats to social identity on the various components of social identity (e.g., Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002). Therefore, consistent with Cohen and colleagues (2002), we subjected our in-group identification measure to a 3 (type of humor) x 2 (comedian group membership) analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) with pre-test identification serving as a covariate. This analysis controls for the effects previous in-group identification, thereby increasing our statistical power to detect the effects of in-group disparaging humor.

Recall that our model suggests that people are likely to report decreased identification with the in-group when exposed to in-group disparaging humor. However, this will only occur when an out-group humorist delivers the humor. Therefore, we hypothesized that subjects in the WMU-disparaging humor condition would report less identification with the in-group when the humorist was from UM than when the humorist was from WMU. The ANCOVA revealed the anticipated effect of the covariate, $F(2, 120) = 99.78, p < .001$. After adjustment for subjects' pre-test identification, the predicted humor type x humorist group membership interaction did not reach significance, effect, $F(2, 120) < 1.00$. See Table 3 (p. 36) for descriptive statistics. In-group identification did not vary as a function of humor type and humorist group membership.

Surprisingly, however, the ANCOVA revealed a significant main effect of humor type, $F(2, 120) = 3.63, p < .05$. Post hoc comparison indicated that subjects in the WMU-disparaging humor condition reported less in-group identification ($M = 3.93, SD = 1.42$) than subjects in the neutral humor condition ($M = 4.52, SD = 1.06$), irrespective of humorist group membership, $F(2, 120) = 6.90, p < .01$. In particular, even when the

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics for Identification with the In-Group

Humorist		Type of Humor		
		WMU-D	CMU-D	Neutral
WMU	<i>M</i>	3.76	4.57	4.55
	<i>SD</i>	1.48	0.84	1.19
	<i>n</i>	21	23	20
UM	<i>M</i>	4.10	4.23	4.50
	<i>SD</i>	1.38	1.57	0.95
	<i>n</i>	21	22	20

Note. Higher numbers indicate more in-group identification.

humorist was from WMU, exposure to WMU-disparaging humor led to less identification with WMU ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 1.48$) than did neutral humor ($M = 4.55$, $SD = 1.19$), $F(2, 120) = 5.86$, $p < .01$. These results are not consistent with our model, it predicts that people exposed to in-group disparaging humor will report a lesser degree of in-group identification when delivered by an out-group humorist than when delivered by an in-group humorist. Moreover, these results suggest that exposure to in-group disparaging humor itself decreases identification with the in-group, regardless of group membership of the humorist.

Collective Self-Esteem

A reliability analysis was performed on the four collective self-esteem items. It yielded a Cronbach's alpha of .90. Although this suggests we have an internally consistent measure of the underlying construct, the analysis revealed that one item—"how comfortable do you feel as a student at WMU"—decreases the overall alpha by .03. Thus, we chose to remove the item from the measure of collective self-esteem.¹ A reliability analysis on the remaining three items yielded a Cronbach's alpha of .93. These items were thus averaged to represent our measure of collective self-esteem.

To determine whether pre-test identification was an important covariate in our analyses of collective self-esteem, we correlated pre-test degree of in-group identification and collective self-esteem. This analysis did reveal a significant correlation, $r(127) = .32$, $p < .001$. Since past research has shown that in-group identification moderates the effects of social identity threats on social identity, this correlation is again not surprising. As a result, we subjected the collective self-esteem measure to a 3 (type of humor) x 2 (comedian group membership) ANCOVA with pre-test identification serving as a covariate.

Recall that our theoretical model suggests people exposed to in-group disparaging humor will experience decreased collective self-esteem when the humor is delivered by an out-group humorist rather than an in-group humorist. Thus, we hypothesized that subjects in the WMU-disparaging humor condition would report less collective self-esteem with the UM humorist than with the WMU humorist. The ANCOVA did reveal the anticipated effect of the covariate, $F(1, 120) = 14.39$, $p < .001$. After adjustment for

the covariate, the predicted humor type x humorist group membership interaction did reach significance, effect, $F(2, 120) = 3.20, p < .05$. See Table 4 (p. 39) for descriptives. Planned comparisons revealed that those exposed to the UM humorist reported a lesser degree of in-group identification in the WMU-disparaging humor condition ($M = 5.06, SD = 1.57$) than in the neutral humor condition ($M = 5.77, SD = 0.80$). Consistent with our model, in-group disparaging humor diminished collective self-esteem when delivered by an out-group humorist.

Discussion

The results of an experiment generally supported our model of in-group disparaging humor. According to our model, people will find in-group disparaging humor funnier when delivered by an in-group humorist than when delivered by an out-group humorist. Our results support this hypothesis. As expected, subjects in the in-group disparaging humor condition reported more amusement with the in-group humorist than with the out-group humorist. When exposed to in-group disparaging humor delivered by an in-group member, subjects presumably did not view the humor as an actual, negative social comparison. They instead viewed the humor as entertainment, and thus, switched to a humor mindset for interpreting the humor. However, when exposed to an out-group humorist, subjects seemed to perceive the humor as an actual, negative social comparison. They viewed the humor not as entertainment, but as disparagement. As a result, subjects did not appear to switch to a humor mindset for interpreting the humor, but instead remained in the usual, serious mindset. This result is consistent with

Table 4
Descriptive Statistics for Collective Self-Esteem

Humorist		Type of Humor		
		WMU-D	CMU-D	Neutral
WMU	<i>M</i>	5.11	5.33	4.90
	<i>SD</i>	0.93	0.88	1.28
	<i>n</i>	21	23	20
UM	<i>M</i>	5.06	4.92	5.77
	<i>SD</i>	1.57	1.25	0.80
	<i>n</i>	21	22	20

Note. Higher numbers indicate higher collective self-esteem.

Martineau's (1972) work that suggests humorist group membership moderates responses to disparagement humor.

Our model also postulates that people exposed to in-group disparaging humor delivered by an out-group humorist will psychologically disidentify from the in-group. Disidentification will not occur, however, with an in-group humorist. The results did not support this hypothesis. Subjects in our study did not disidentify from the in-group as a function of type of humor and humorist group membership. Surprisingly, however, subjects disidentified from the in-group only as a function of humor type. More specifically, subjects exposed to in-group disparaging humor reported less in-group identification than in all other humor conditions, irrespective of humorist group

membership. Previous research has shown that psychological disidentification represents a response to social identity threat (e.g., Major & Schmader, 1998). Thus, in-group disparaging humor seems to threaten social identity irrespective of humor group membership. Neither our model, nor previous research accounts for this serendipitous result.

Finally, our model suggests that in-group disparaging humor will also diminish collective self-esteem when delivered by an out-group humorist because the humor implies a social identity threat. This will not occur, however, with an in-group humorist. The results supported this hypothesis. Subjects exposed to in-group disparaging humor delivered by an out-group humorist reported less collective self-esteem than when an in-group humorist delivered neutral humor. In effect, humorist group membership does seem to influence the interpretation of disparagement and in so doing whether or not the humor threatens social identity. More specifically, when the humorist is an out-group member, people seem to interpret in-group disparaging humor as real disparagement. The humor thus reduces collective self-esteem. Yet when the humorist is an in-group member, people see the humor as entertainment. The humor therefore does not diminish collective self-esteem. This result is consistent with the literatures on superiority theories and social identity which together suggests that in-group disparaging humor will only lead to self-enhancement when delivered by an in-group humorist.

Moreover, our results do support the idea that psychological identification and collective self-esteem are distinct components of social identity. Perrault and Bourhis (1998; 1999) stated that since these components are distinct, social identity threats would

not *necessarily* influence these identity components in the same manner. Our study found that those exposed to in-group disparaging humor delivered by an in-group humorist reported less in-group identification, but *not* less collective self-esteem. However, subjects exposed to an in-group humorist reported a decrease in both psychological identification *and* collective self-esteem.²

Another interpretation of our collective self-esteem results seems reasonable. Although collective self-esteem did not decrease when the humorist was an in-group member, it remains possible that social identity was threatened. That is, it is possible that the social identity threat reduced a particular type of collective self-esteem, public collective self-esteem (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992). Public collective self-esteem refers people's beliefs about how others view the in-group. In our study, we measured private collective self-esteem, how people themselves view the in-group. Thus, it is plausible that in-group disparaging humor functions to communicate a negative image of the in-group to others. Social identity is hence threatened via public (but not private) collective self-esteem. Therefore, it remains possible that the social identity threat our disparaged subjects reported in the in-group humorist condition—that is, a marked reduction in in-group identification—also diminished public, but not private, collective self-esteem. These ideas are consistent with research by Rubin and Hewstone (1998) who show that the value an individual attaches to their group memberships (i.e., collective self-esteem) is multifaceted.

The results of this experiment have important implications for our understanding of the relationships between in-group disparaging humor, amusement, and social identity.

Superiority theories suggest that in-group disparaging humor delivered by an in-group humorist will produce amusement and enhance social identity. Our results do not support this idea; they rather indicate that the effects of in-group disparaging humor on amusement and social identity are *independent*. Recall that subjects who were exposed to in-group disparaging humor delivered by an in-group humorist reported both *more* amusement and *less* identification with the in-group than when an out-group humorist delivered the humor. This does not follow from a superiority framework; it suggests that amusement and social identity covary in the same direction.³ People should not be amused by humor that threatens their social identity.

Future Directions

This research contributes to the literature on disparaging humor by providing empirical support for a theoretical model of the effects of in-group disparaging humor on amusement and social identity. A great deal of research, however, remains to be completed. For instance, future research could attempt to provide support for the idea that in-group disparaging humor threatens social identity irrespective of humorist group membership. Our study provides preliminary data that support this idea, but more research is needed to establish this effect. In addition, research is needed to disentangle the causal relationship between amusement and social identity. As we had said previously, superiority theories surmise that amusement results from self-enhancement. But Martineau states that self-enhancement results from amusement. These competing views require empirical testing.

Research could also directly test the idea that in-group disparaging humor represents a threat to social identity that manifests in public, not private, collective self-esteem. Our data do suggest that in-group disparaging humor constitutes a threat to social identity on psychological identification with the in-group, regardless of humorist group membership. This was surprising, especially since a similar threat did not manifest on the collective self-esteem scale for subjects exposed to an in-group humorist. As we proposed earlier, it remains plausible that these people did also experience a threat to social identity, but it manifested on public collective self-esteem. This would explain the discrepancies between our measures of psychological identification and collective self-esteem. Future research should include measures of private *and* public collective self-esteem.

Researchers might also address the role of previous in-group identification in moderating the effects of in-group disparaging humor. In our analyses, we chose to control for identification by including it in covariance analyses. We do know from past research, however, that those who strongly identify with a particular group exhibit different behavioral responses than those who do not. For example, high identifiers are more likely to engage in the intergroup bias (Jetten, Spears, Manstead, 1997) and also utilize different strategies to deal with social identity threats (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002; Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999; see also Mummendey, Kessler, Klink, & Mielke, 1999). Moreover, previous in-group identification may even influence the type of social comparison implied by the humor. Festinger (1954) suggested that people have a preference for within-group comparisons rather than between-group

comparisons. This notion has received empirical support (Major, Testa, & Bylsma, 1991; see also Major, Schiaccitano, & Crocker, 1993). For instance, research has shown that high identifiers are more concerned with the evaluation of other group members rather than evaluations outside the group (Ellemers, van Dyck, Hinkle, & Jacobs, 2000).

Finally, the actual content of in-group disparaging humor could change the nature of the social comparison implied by the humor, and thus, lead to differential effects on amusement and social identity. Branscombe and colleagues (1999) have shown that responses to social identity threats depend upon the type of threat that is manifested in the particular situation. For example, social identity threats may imply a negative social comparison in terms of either competence or morality. It seems plausible that—and surely other—types of social comparisons derive from the actual content of the humor, and therefore, constitute unique implied meta-messages. Apart from other humor-related cues, the content of the humor could produce different effects on amusement and social identity, even though the in-group remains the target in each case. Research is needed to address each of the aforesaid possibilities.

Conclusion

Humor represents a pervasive phenomenon in contemporary society, and has repeatedly been identified as an important medium for the communication of prejudice and discrimination (see Ford and Ferguson, 2003). This thesis contributes to the literature on disparaging humor by exploring the unique notion of in-group disparaging humor. Consistent with the recent focus in social psychology on the target's perspective of prejudice and discrimination, our results show that in-group disparaging humor can

indeed elicit adverse effects on social identity, at both the psychological and emotional levels. Therefore, contrary to the claims of lay theorists, “a little joke between friends” may actually be harmful after all. More research, however, is needed to discern the extent of these adverse effects.

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Footnotes

¹ As with the “creativity” item, we chose to run an analysis on the “comfort item.” In this analysis we ran an ANCOVA. The anticipated effect of the covariate did reach significance, $F(1, 120) = 6.46, p < .05$. However, no other significant effects were found. Thus, we decided to not consider the “comfort” item further.

² In-group identification and collective self-esteem do appear to be positively related. A Pearson correlation between the two was significant, $r(127) = .42, p < .001$. However, consistent with the ideas of Perrault and Bourhis (1998; 1999) our results do not support the idea that social identity threats affect in-group identification and collective self-esteem in the same manner.

³ In fact, amusement and social identity do not appear covary at all. A Pearson correlation between amusement and social identity did not yield a significant result, $r(127) = .06$.

Appendix A

Stimulus Materials and Measures

Western Michigan University
Department of Sociology

Title of Project: Comedy Impressions
Principal Investigator: Dr. Thomas Ford

You are invited to participate in a research project entitled “Comedy Impressions” designed to examine reactions to different comedy material (e.g., jokes, stand-up routines). This project is being conducted by Dr. Thomas Ford from the department of sociology at WMU. This survey is comprised of an excerpt from a stand-up comedy routine. You will be asked to read the excerpt and then give your reactions to it by answering three questions. The project will take approximately 5 minutes to complete. Your replies will be completely anonymous, so do not put your name anywhere on the form. You may choose to not answer any question and simply leave it blank. If you choose to not participate in this project, you may either return the blank survey or you may discard it in the box provided. Returning the survey indicates your consent for use of the responses you supply. There is no extra credit offered for participating and no penalty for choosing not to participate. If you have any questions, you may contact Professor Ford at 387- 52&), the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (387-8293) or the Vice President for Research (387-8298).

Sex: M F

Date: _____

This consent document has been approved for use for one year by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) as indicated by the stamped date and signature of the board chair in the upper right corner. Subjects should not complete this document if the corner does not show a stamped date and signature.

Comedy Impressions

The Context

Social psychologists actually study humor. And through research they have identified a variety of different characteristics or ingredients of successful humor. In order for comic material (e.g., a joke, stand-up routine, or situational comedy skit) to be funny it must have at least some of those essential humor ingredients. Well, we're interested in more systematically studying the importance of certain humor ingredients in short stand-up comedy routines. So, you will be asked to read an excerpt from a comedy routine that has been transcribed from a "demo" tape from an amateur comedian. You will either read a routine that does have certain potentially important humor ingredients (and therefore should be funny) or one that does not have those particular ingredients (and as a result should be less funny). After you have read the comedy routine, you will be asked to give your reactions to it along a number of dimensions.

Jake Daugherty's Comedy Routine (See Appendix B, p. 65, for the Six Comedy Routines)

Hi. My name's Jake... and as you can see from my sweatshirt, I'm from Michigan... (people cheering and clapping)... yep a proud senior at the University of Michigan. Thank you... I see there are some others from Michigan here tonight... good... and some people over here from... from where? Oh, Western. Okay... good...

So, college is cool—I've really enjoyed being a student... You know I almost didn't go to college... yes... After graduating high school, like a lot of young men at 18, I seriously thought about joining the monastery... it was a toss up for me... monastery/college... celibacy/women... vow of silence/parties until 4am? ...tough decision... Anyway... here's a funny joke about monastery life...

Each year, monks who have taken the vow of silence are allowed to utter two words to the brethren. John Paul had recently entered the monastery and taken the vow of silence. After his first year, John Paul was summoned to meet the brethren and utter his two words of wisdom. John Paul utters "bed hard." The brethren take note and send John Paul away. A year later John Paul was summoned again and asked to utter his two words of wisdom to the brethren... This time, John Paul says "food bad." The brethren take note and send John Paul away. After the third year, John Paul completed his vow of silence. He was called to share his enlightenment with the brethren. John Paul says only "I have decided to leave the monastery." To this the brethren replied, "It's a good thing. You've done nothing but complain since you got here!"

Ahh... the monastery... I frequently ponder all the fun I missed out on... Oh well... You know, in college, I thought about medical school... Its funny how medical terminology is rooted in Latin... and that can make it pretty confusing. You know, the meaning of some of those terms is nothing like they sound. For instance, here are some medical terms and some definitions that would seem to follow from phonetically...

- Artery: "a place that sells fine paintings!"
- Barium: "what you do when CPR fails!"
- Cesarean Section: "a district in Rome!"
- Tumor: "an extra pair!"
- Benign: "what you are after you're eight!"
- Varicose veins: "veins which are very near to one another!"

Thank you very much. You've been a great audience... I'm Jake Daugherty... good night.

1. How humorous is this stand-up comedy routine?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not at all						Very
humorous						humorous

2. How entertaining is this stand-up comedy routine?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not at all						Very
entertaining						entertaining

3. How creative is this standup comedy routine?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not at all						Very
creative						creative

Western Michigan University
Department of Sociology

Title of Project: Social Group Survey
Principal investigator: Dr. Thomas Ford

You are invited to participate in a research project entitled “Social Group Survey” designed to assess people’s perceptions of the social groups to which they belong. This project is being conducted by Professor Thomas Ford from the department of sociology at Western Michigan University.

This survey is comprised of 8 questions concerning your attitudes and beliefs a variety of social groups or categories to which you belong. The survey will take approximately 5 minutes to complete. Your replies will be completely anonymous, so do not put your name anywhere on the form. You may choose to not answer any question and simply leave it blank. if you choose to not participate in this survey, you may either return the blank survey or discard it in the box provided. Returning the survey indicates your consent for use of the responses you supply. There is no extra credit offered for participating and no penalty for choosing not to participate, if you have any questions, you may contact Professor Ford at 387-5280, the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (387-8293) or the Vice President for Research (387-8298).

Sex M F Date: _____

This consent document has been approved/or use/or one year by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) as indicated by the stamped date and signature of the board chair in the upper right corner. You should not participate in this project if the corner does not show a stamped date and signature.

Social Group Survey

Below is a series of questions pertaining to your membership in various social groups or categories. Circle the number on scale below each question that best represents your belief or opinion.

1. To what extent is your major or future career an important part of who you are?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
not at all important						very important

2. To what extent is your race/ethnicity is an important part of who you are?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
not at all important						very important

3. To what extent is being a student at WMU an important part of who you are?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
not at all important						very important

4. To what extent is your gender an important part of who you are?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
not at all important						very important

5. How happy do you feel as a student at WMU?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
not at all happy						very happy

6. How satisfied do you feel as a student at WMU?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
not at all satisfied						very satisfied

7. How comfortable do you feel as a student at WMU?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
not at all						very
comfortable						comfortable

8. How much do you like being a student at WMU?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
not at all						very much

Appendix B

Six Comedy Routines

WMU-Disparaging Humor, UM Comedian

Jake Daugherty's Comedy Routine

Hi. My name's Jake... and as you can see from my sweatshirt from Michigan... (people cheering and clapping)... yep a proud senior at the University of Michigan. Thank you... I see there are some others from Michigan here tonight... good... and some people over here from... from where? Oh, Western. Okay... good... yeah... when I was in high school I thought about going there... but I tested out of Western! (laughter). So, college is cool—I've really enjoyed being a student... sort of hate to graduate and join the "real world."

So, how many college students does it take to change a light bulb anyway? ...Well, it depends on the college... at Michigan, it takes two: one to change the bulb, and the other to brag about how they did it as well as any ivy league school... at Western though, it takes twenty: ten to figure out how to screw it in and another ten to find a ugly enough lamp shade to match their school colors! No, actually it only takes one Western student to change a light bulb... but they get three credit hours for it! (laughter)

It depends on the school... You know, college students pretty much look the same and act the same no matter which university they go to—it's sometimes hard to tell them apart. So, I've developed a short quiz on medical terminology to help you identify where students go to school. You ask the student to define a series of medical terms. And for instance, you can tell Western students by the following responses:

- Artery: Western student... "a place that sells fine paintings!"
- Barium: Western student... "what you do when CPR fails!"
- Cesarean Section: Western student... "a district in Rome!"
- Tumor: Western student... "an extra pair!"
- Benign: Western student... "what you are after you're eight!"
- Varicose veins: Western Student... "veins which are very near to one another!"

Thank you very much. You've been a great audience... I'm Jake Daugherty... good night.

WMU-Disparaging Humor, WMU Comedian

Jake Daugherty's Comedy Routine

Hi. My name's Jake... and as you can see from my sweatshirt, I'm from Western... (people cheering and clapping)... yep a proud senior at Western Michigan University. Thank you... I see there are some others from Western here tonight... good... and some people over here from... from where? Oh, Michigan. Okay... good... my brother went to Michigan... he tested out of Western! (laughter). So, college is cool—I've really enjoyed being a student... sort of hate to graduate and join the "real world."

So, how many college students does it take to change a light bulb anyway? ...Well, it depends on the college... at Michigan, it takes two: one to change the bulb, and the other to brag about how they did it as well as any ivy league school... at Western, it takes twenty: ten to figure out how to screw it in and another ten to find a ugly enough lamp shade to match the school colors! No, actually it only takes one of us to change a light bulb... but we get three credit hours for it! (laughter)

It depends on the school... You know, college students pretty much look act the same no matter which university—it's sometimes hard to tell them apart. So, I've developed a short quiz on medical terminology to help you identify where students go to school. You just ask the student to define a series of medical terms. And for instance, you can tell Western students by the following responses:

- Artery: Western student... "a place that sells fine paintings!"
- Barium: Western student... "what you do when CPR fails!"
- Cesarean Section: Western student... "a district in Rome!"
- Tumor: Western student... "an extra pair!"
- Benign: Western student... "what you are after you're eight!"
- Varicose veins: Western Student... "veins which are very near to one another!"

Thank you very much. You've been a great audience... I'm Jake Daughtery... good night.

CMU-Disparaging Humor, UM Comedian

Jake Daugherty's Comedy Routine

Hi. My name's Jake... and as you can see from my sweatshirt, I'm from Michigan... (people cheering and clapping)... yep a proud senior at the University of Michigan. Thank you... I see there are some others from Michigan here tonight... good... and some people over here from... from where? Oh, Central. Okay... good... Yeah... when I was in high school I actually thought about going to Central Michigan University... but I tested out of Central! (laughter). So, college is cool—I've really enjoyed being a student... sort of hate to graduate and join the "real world."

So, how many college students does it take to change a light bulb anyway? ...Well, it depends on the college... at Michigan, it takes two: one to change the bulb, and the other to brag about how they did it as well as any ivy league school... at Central though, it takes twenty: ten to figure out how to screw it in and another ten to throw a party over it! No, actually it only takes one Central student to change a light bulb... but they get three credit hours for it! (laughter)

It depends on the school... You know, college students pretty much look act the same no matter which university—it's sometimes hard to tell them apart. So, I've developed a short quiz on medical terminology to help you identify where students go to school. You ask the student to define a series of medical terms. And for instance, you can tell Central students by the following responses:

- Artery: Central student... "a place that sells fine paintings!"
- Barium: Central student... "what you do when CPR fails!"
- Cesarean Section: Central student... "a district in Rome!"
- Tumor: Central student... "an extra pair!"
- Benign: Central student... "what you are after you're eight!"
- Varicose veins: Central Student... "veins which are very near to one another!"

Thank you very much. You've been a great audience... I'm Jake Daugherty... good night.

CMU-Disparaging Humor, WMU Comedian

Jake Daugherty's Comedy Routine

Hi. My name's Jake... and as you can see from my sweatshirt, I'm from Western... (people cheering and clapping)... yep a proud senior at Western Michigan University. Thank you... I see there are some others from Western here tonight... good... and some people over here from... from where? Oh, Central. Okay... good... Yeah... when I was in high school I actually thought about going to Central Michigan University... but I tested out of Central! (laughter). So, college is cool—I've really enjoyed being a student... sort of hate to graduate and join the "real world."

So, how many college students does it take to change a light bulb anyway? ... Well, it depends on the college... at Michigan, it takes two: one to change the bulb, and the other to brag about how they did it as well as any ivy league school... at Central though, it takes twenty: ten to figure out how to screw it in and another ten to throw a party over it! No, actually it only takes one Central student to change a light bulb... but they get three credit hours for it! (laughter)

It depends on the school... You know, college students pretty much look act the same no matter which university—it's sometimes hard to tell them apart. So, I've developed a short quiz on medical terminology to help you identify where students go to school. You ask the student to define a series of medical terms. And for instance, you can tell Central students by the following responses:

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- Benign: Central student... "what you are after you're eight!"
- Varicose veins: Central Student... "veins which are very near to one another!"

Thank you very much. You've been a great audience... I'm Jake Daugherty... good night.

Neutral Humor, UM Comedian

Hi. My name's Jake... and as you can see from my sweatshirt, I'm from Michigan... (people cheering and clapping)... yep a proud senior at the University of Michigan. Thank you... I see there are some others from Michigan here tonight... good... and some people over here from... from where? Oh, Western. Okay... good...

So, college is cool—I've really enjoyed being a student... You know I almost didn't go to college... yes... After graduating high school, like a lot of young men at 18, I seriously thought about joining the monastery... it was a toss up for me... monastery/college... celibacy/women... vow of silence/parties until 4am? ...tough decision... Anyway... here's a funny joke about monastery life...

Each year, monks who have taken the vow of silence are allowed to utter two words to the brethren. John Paul had recently entered the monastery and taken the vow of silence. After his first year, John Paul was summoned to meet the brethren and utter his two words of wisdom. John Paul utters "bed hard." The brethren take note and send John Paul away. A year later John Paul was summoned again and asked to utter his two words of wisdom to the brethren... This time, John Paul says "food bad." The brethren take note and send John Paul away. After the third year, John Paul completed his vow of silence. He was called to share his enlightenment with the brethren. John Paul says only "I have decided to leave the monastery." To this the brethren replied, "It's a good thing. You've done nothing but complain since you got here!"

Ahh... the monastery... I frequently ponder all the fun I missed out on... Oh well... You know, in college, I thought about medical school... Its funny how medical terminology is rooted in Latin... and that can make it pretty confusing. You know, the meaning of some of those terms is nothing like they sound. For instance, here are some medical terms and some definitions that would seem to follow from phonetically...

- Artery: "a place that sells fine paintings!"
- Barium: "what you do when CPR fails!"
- Cesarean Section: "a district in Rome!"
- Tumor: "an extra pair!"
- Benign: "what you are after you're eight!"
- Varicose veins: "veins which are very near to one another!"

Thank you very much. You've been a great audience... I'm Jake Daughtery... good night.

Neutral Humor, WMU Comedian

Hi. My name's Jake... and as you can see from my sweatshirt, I'm from Western... (people cheering and clapping)... yep a proud senior at Western Michigan University. Thank you... I see there are some others from Western here tonight... good... and some people over here from... from where? Oh, Michigan. Okay... good...

So, college is cool—I've really enjoyed being a student... You know I almost didn't go to college... yes... After graduating high school, like a lot of young men at 18, I seriously thought about joining the monastery... it was a toss up for me... monastery/college... celibacy/women... vow of silence/parties until 4am? ...tough decision... Anyway... here's a funny joke about monastery life...

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Ahh... the monastery... I frequently ponder all the fun I missed out on... Oh well... You know, in college, I thought about medical school... Its funny how medical terminology is rooted in Latin... and that can make it pretty confusing. You know, the meaning of some of those terms is nothing like they sound. For instance, here are some medical terms and some definitions that would seem to follow from phonetically...

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- Benign: "what you are after you're eight!"
- Varicose veins: "veins which are very near to one another!"

Thank you very much. You've been a great audience... I'm Jake Daughtery... good night.

Appendix C

HSIRB Protocol Approval Letter

Human Subjects Institutional Review Board



Kalamazoo, Michigan 49008-5162
616 387-8293

WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

Date: 13 July 2000

To: Thomas Ford, Principal Investigator

From: Sylvia Culp, Chair *Sylvia Culp*

Re: HSIRB Project Number: 00-07-09

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project entitled "Comedy Impressions" has been **approved** under the **exempt** category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note that you may **only** conduct this research exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project. You must also seek reapproval if the project extends beyond the termination date noted below. In addition if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: 13 July 2001