The appreciation of humor is arguably a fundamental aspect of social life. Yet passing jokes off as “just jokes” can have serious and negative intergroup consequences (e.g., discrimination; denial of rights). We review some recent findings concerning how group dominance motives are expressed in humor contexts through cavalier beliefs about humor. These beliefs legitimize and provide psychological cover to avoid the appearance of bias. We propose that humor and ridicule play a critical part of the delegitimization process, operating in tandem with processes such as dehumanization (representing others as animal-like and/or machine-like) and system justification (i.e., maintaining the status quo in terms of intergroup hierarchies). As such, humor plays a key role in the delegitimization of others that occurs in much of everyday life, such as in the workplace or schoolyard setting. Disparaging intergroup humor effectively rules social groups in as acceptable targets for devaluation, working in tandem with dehumanization processes that rule others out as targets worthy of protection. Several recommendations for practitioners and researchers are offered, including greater use of social media tools in tracking and understanding humor as a delegitimization strategy in real time, multilevel analysis of the person within their social context, and harnessing the power of humor to combat (not facilitate) prejudice and discrimination. We also urge prejudice researchers to devote greater attention to humor, ridicule, and joke-telling or risk falling into the bigot’s trap of passing humor off as “just jokes.”

Keywords: disparaging humor, jokes, delegitimization, group dominance
If humor is playful, are scientists and educators overly concerned about its negative implications? Let’s consider a few recent examples of the intergroup “humor” from the news headlines:

- “I love animals, but when I see her, I can’t help but think of an orangutan.” Comment by Roberto Calderoni (Italian politician) regarding Cécile Kyenge (a Black minister of integration in Italy). He later characterized his comment as a “little joke,” fully denying racism on his part (Foot, 2013).
- Marilyn Davenport (Orange County, California, GOP Central Committee member) e-mailed a picture of President Obama as a nonhuman primate (image at Hutchinson, 2011); she later dismissed this communication as merely a joke.
- Basketmouth (Nigerian comedian) joked that, unlike White women, African women are less willing to have intercourse, necessitating rape by the ninth date. He then defended himself as a champion for women, claiming to turn a spotlight on an important social problem. He subsequently made “granny-rape” jokes (Hamada, 2014).
- Canadian police accidentally distributed an internal “joke” about Native Canadians drinking mouthwash for intoxication purposes (a stereotype). Local mayor dismissed this communication as simply a joke that did not involve race; police were “disappointed” and “discouraged” about the human rights complaint filed against them (“Thunder Bay Police ‘Insulted,’” 2012).
- In reference to combat-active female jet pilot Major Mariam al-Mansouri, Fox News hosts joked about “boobs on the ground” (a play on “boots on the ground”) and mocked her ability to “park” the plane after bombing runs (Williams, 2014).

Rather than debate the merits or acceptability of these comments or jokes, it is more fruitful to consider the intergroup implications of such communications. These are contemporary examples of the use of humor to put down, if not delegitimize, outgroups (e.g., women, natives) or specific representative members (e.g., President Obama), often through the use of dehumanization/objectification that likens targets to animals or objectifies them by reducing them to body parts. Humorous communications can be contradictory, such as Carr’s jokes suggesting that women both dislike and like rape, yet reflect a clear consistent disregard for the rights of women. We also see assertions that these are “just jokes,” and “not prejudice,” with strong defense against (and indignation over) insinuations of bias. With Cosby, we also see attempts to make allegations (of bias, or rape) go away by drawing in consensual humorous approval from audience members. Indeed, Cosby’s “joke” was met with applause, not disdain. Such jokes, therefore, can effectively redefine the offense, the debate, and the controversy. Throughout each, humor is used as an effective and powerful strategy of delegitimization in order to obtain or maintain power, and to control and avoid negative (or punitive) sanctions.

With this in mind, it would be reasonable to assume that the intergroup relations literature has provided deep and thoughtful analysis to the topic of humor, jokes, and satire. After all, humor appreciation is considered a quality that makes humans “special” relative to other species (but see Martin, 2007). We also value it in others—second only to intelligence, a good sense of humor outranks honesty, kindness, and physical attractiveness as a quality desired in romantic partners (Lippa, 2007). Humor is, at its core, a potent form of communication, one that can walk the line between what is acceptable or unacceptable, sanctionable or not. It is at such ambiguous gray areas where intergroup biases often emerge in modern society (see Hodson, Dovidio, & Gaertner, 2004), with bias being released yet expressed attitudes attributed to nonprejudicial motives or characteristics (e.g., valuing a good sense of humor; socially bonding).

Yet, in his seminal and otherwise comprehensive book *The Nature of Prejudice*, Allport (1954) spoke very little of humor, despite considering it “probably important” and a “missing ingredient” (p. 437) in the prejudice puzzle. Contemporary theorists and researchers have continued to pay intergroup humor surprisingly little attention, particularly relative to widely covered topics such as stereotyping. Virtually nothing about humor is covered in broad authoritative texts such as the *Handbook of Social Psychology* (Fiske, Gilbert, & Lindzey, 2010); a pattern observed also in prominent texts such as...
the Handbook of Prejudice, Stereotyping, and Discrimination (Nelson, 2009); the SAGE Handbook of Prejudice, Stereotyping, and Discrimination (Dovidio, Hewstone, Glick, & Esses, 2010); Prejudice: Its Social Psychology (Brown, 2010); Psychology of Prejudice and Discrimination (Whitley & Kite, 2010); or the Blackwell Handbook of Intergroup Processes (Brown & Gaertner, 2001). Indeed, across the more than 4,000 pages in these volumes, the number of pages referring to jokes or humor can be counted on one hand. Prejudice researchers have largely failed to recognize the importance of humor in intergroup life, despite the cultural popularity of programs such as the Colbert Report and the Daily Show, important vehicles for shaping policy support and thinking about social groups through humor.

Disparaging Humor as a Facilitator of Prejudice

In the interpersonal domain, researchers have long recognized that disparaging humor possesses an aggressive element relevant to putting down others and establishing superiority (see Martin, 2007, Chapter 2). Recent research demonstrates, for instance, that priming participants with control motivations (that theoretically threaten self-regulation) leads to increased appreciation of hostile (vs. nonhostile) humor, particularly among those initially higher in state hostility (Weinstein, Hodgins, & Ostvik-White, 2011). In this way, threats to the self can be mitigated, especially by those prone toward lashing out, by participating in disparaging humor.

Intergroup Processes and Humor Expressions

Such findings also have implications for intergroup life. Social dominance theory (SDT; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) argues that human societies are universally hierarchical in nature, with some groups at the top (and enjoying the benefits of distributing social value, including resources and group rights), and others at the bottom. This emphasis on hierarchy contributes meaningfully to prejudice and discrimination in ways that entrench existing social relations, social policy, conventions, and so forth. Within this framework there exist individual differences in social dominance orientation (SDO), whereby those higher (vs. lower) endorse and support intergroup hierarchies and accept inequality. Not surprisingly, this construct is one of the strongest individual difference predictors of prejudice (Altemeyer, 1998). Central to SDT is the notion of legitimizing myths, “[the] attitudes, values, beliefs, stereotypes that provide moral and intellectual justification for the social practices that distribute social value” (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999, p. 45). Hierarchy enhancing myths (e.g., Protestant work ethic) link SDO (the endorsement of intergroup hierarchies) with policies that establish or entrench systems/relations in ways that (largely) favor one’s ingroup. This takes the form of SDO → legitimizing myths (e.g., Protestant work ethic; stereotypes) → policies entrenching hierarchies (e.g., resistance to affirmative action). These legitimizing myths, therefore, facilitate the expression of group-dominance based motives, providing “justification” for disempowering and delegitimitizing others.

This approach is consistent with other theoretical frameworks recognizing that outward and overt expressions of bias have become more unacceptable in Western societies (e.g., Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986). According to aversive racism theory, expressions of bias are most likely when the context is ambiguous and/or the expression can be attributed to nonprejudicial grounds (such as meritocracy; Hodson et al., 2004). Despite being understudied, humorous contexts meet these criteria, introducing ambiguities about motives/intent of the speaker and the social appropriateness of laughter (vs. scorn) as a response, and providing attributions for reactions that do not necessarily point to prejudice, such as the need to lighten up and bond with others. Building on these ideas, the justification-suppression model (Crandall & Eschleman, 2003) stresses how modern life imposes the need to suppress and inhibit expressions of biases. Factors that socially sanction, legitimize, normalize, or rationalize prejudices will facilitate their expression, consistent also with SDT and aversive racism theory. As such, “to the extent that group-dominance motives are routinely held in check, joke telling and humor appreciation can provide outlets for their release” (Hodson, Rush, & MacInnis, 2010, p. 662; see also Ferguson & Ford, 2008). Humor can grease the wheels of communication in
ways that foster prejudicial expressions, keeping groups in positions of disadvantage (or advantage).

Some of the most compelling work on the damaging effects of disparaging humor in recent times has been put forward by Ford and colleagues. For instance, in a series of studies Ford (2000) exposed male and female participants to sexist or nonsexist jokes, who subsequently evaluated a potentially sexist scenario (e.g., a woman being patronized by her male boss). Overall, exposure to sexist jokes led to more tolerance of the discriminatory behavior. But original levels of hostile sexism moderated the effect: only those high in hostile sexism reacted to sexist jokes with greater tolerance toward a discriminatory act. Interestingly, these effects were found among both male and female participants. In addition, a manipulated mindset (i.e., critical, playful, not serious) promoted or explained these findings: When made serious or mindful of the joke content, or aware that a man told these sexist jokes, these effects disappeared. Overall, these results highlight the harmful effects of sexist humor, particularly among those relatively high in hostile sexism, an effect maintained by a noncritical mindset.

In subsequent studies, Ford, Boxer, Armstrong, and Edel (2008) demonstrated that, among sexist male participants, the negative effects of sexist joke exposure had behavioral implications: lowering donation levels to women’s organizations. Moreover, effects of hostile sexism on donations were mediated (i.e., explained by) the formation of a local norm that others approved of such budget cuts. Central to these studies is the notion that disparaging humor can have deleterious intergroup effects among those already prone to bias, particularly when people are induced to be noncritical in their mindset, and operates through the generation of social norms facilitating the bias.

Functions of Intergroup Humor

Fortunately for the intergroup relations field, humor theorists have become increasingly interested in the functions of humor, that is, its psychological purpose. In particular, Martin (2007; Martin, Puhlker-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, 2003) has developed the Humor Styles Questionnaire to tap the reasons why people use humor. These can be broken into both positive and negative functions, each with two subcomponents. Capturing positive functions, people can use humor for affiliative reasons (i.e., making others feel good and bonding with them), and also for self-enhancing reasons (i.e., to regulate one’s emotions and maintain a positive outlook on life). Of particular relevance to our discussion are the negative functions, especially aggression, where humor is used to put down, control, and manipulate others, often taking on offensive and nasty forms. Critically, people differ systematically from each other in how they use humor and for what function (Martin, 2007), in ways that can theoretically be associated with intergroup behavior.

In a sample of undergraduates at a Canadian university, Hodson, MacInnis, and Rush (2010) explored humor as a function of intergroup concerns. In addition to scales such as the Humor Styles Questionnaire, several prejudice-relevant individual difference measures were administered, including (a) SDO (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), a measure of endorsement of intergroup inequality and dominance; (b) right-wing authoritarianism (RWA; Altemeyer, 1998), a measure of conventionalism, traditionalism, and aggression against norm violators; (c) personal need for structure (Neuberg & Newsom, 1993), a measure of preference for routine, order, and structure in life; and (d) modern racism (McConahay, Hardee, & Batts, 1981), anti-Black attitudes reflected in feelings that Blacks push too hard and get too many favors. SDO and RWA are generally regarded as two of the strongest individual difference predictors of intergroup prejudices, and thus of central focus.

The results revealed that respondents overall endorsed positive humor functions (affiliative and self-enhancing humor). However, those prone to intergroup prejudices showed preferences toward negative functions for humor use. In particular, both SDO and modern racism were associated with significantly more aggressive uses of humor. In contrast, aggressive humor was unassociated with RWA and was negatively associated with a need for structure. Contrary to overall trends toward positive uses

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1 Another negative function involves self-defeating humor, where the self is the target of ridicule, which is outside the scope of our review.
for humor, therefore, those prone to prejudicial orientations gravitate toward negative uses for humor, especially aggression, to the extent that their orientations are grounded in dominance and hierarchy (but not traditionalism and need for structure). These findings support our contention that humor, generally used for positive and prosocial purposes, can be co-opted and used by prejudicial people in dominance-relevant ways that derogate others (and keep them in disadvantaged positions). As we argue next, the fact that humor has positive uses and functions unfortunately provides psychological cover for those expressing otherwise socially unpalatable attitudes.

**Group-Dominance Model of Humor Appreciation**

In a series of studies, we sought to more directly explore how disparaging intergroup humor can be passed off as harmless (Hodson, Rush, et al., 2010). We grounded our approach within SDT (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), predicting that those higher (vs. lower) in SDO would respond more favorably to derogatory jokes targeting low status outgroups. We reasoned that for those higher in SDO, socially unacceptable disparaging jokes would be evaluated favorably, and that a humor-relevant legitimizing myth would likely play a mediating role. Specifically, we introduced the concept of cavalier humor beliefs (CHBs), the contention that jokes are “just jokes,” not to be taken seriously nor as reflections of personal bias. Sample scale items include “Sometimes people need to relax and realize that a joke is just a joke,” and “Society needs to lighten up about jokes and humor generally.” Those scoring higher on this construct theoretically believe that people should lighten up about jokes, disregard harm to others from humor, and so on. The scale deliberately does not refer to groups but rather represents a generalized belief in the importance of levity around humor. Such a belief, we argued, would mediate expressions of dominance toward low status groups by those higher in SDO, as represented in Figure 1 (see shaded box). The crux of this argument is that, if not for “legitimizing” CHB, group dominance motives would not predict positivity toward outgroup-disparaging humor.

Study 1 (Hodson, Rush, et al., 2010) established the reliability and validity of CHB, confirming its association with both positive (affiliative; self-enhancement) and negative (i.e., aggression) functions of humor. This positive-
negative outward appearance is what affords this legitimizing myth its social currency and power, releasing negativity under the cover of merriment. As predicted, CHB was positively correlated with SDO (concerning mean-spirited group dominance) but not RWA (prejudice-proneness relevant to religiosity, societal respect, and concern for moral decay). Canadian participants were then exposed to several jokes, including neutral jokes or those disparaging Mexicans. Of critical interest, those higher (vs. lower) in SDO or CHB rated favorably the anti-Mexican humor, but did not consider the neutral nonintergroup humor more amusing, despite the jokes being rated equivalently humorous in the overall sample. Seeing jokes as “just jokes,” it appears, is associated with outgroup negativity, and is not merely a benign outlook on humor. In keeping with our group-dominance model of humor appreciation (see Figure 1), CHB fully mediated the link between greater SDO and favorable reactions to outgroup disparaging humor. Put simply, SDO would not predict joke reactions toward lower status outgroups if not for facilitation by cavalier humor beliefs.

In subsequent studies Hodson, Rush, et al. (2010) pushed the implications of this basic model further. Study 2 not only involved a wider range of disparaging jokes but manipulated group status. The same jokes were exposed to all participants, but the target of the groups rotated through participants so that a particular joke could target Mexicans (lower status outgroup), Americans (higher status outgroup), or Canadians (higher status ingroup). This design ensured that any favorability expressed toward a joke reflected its target, not contents. In keeping with the dominance emphasis of our model, those higher in SDO or CHB should appreciate jokes targeting low status outgroups, but not the same jokes targeting high status outgroups or the ingroup, an effect we confirmed. Moreover, as expected SDO predicted greater amusement in Mexican jokes and greater harmlessness perceptions of such jokes, with much of the effect operating through greater CHB.

Study 3 of Hodson, Rush, et al. (2010) again considered neutral versus anti-Mexican jokes, but also tapped postjoke attitudes to determine whether exposure to disparaging jokes (and finding them inoffensive and harmless) subsequently contributes to more prejudice (see the full Figure 1). Even after statistically controlling for prejoke attitudes, SDO impacted joke reactions through CHB. Critically, these favorable joke reactions in turn predicted more anti-Mexican attitudes. That is, prejudice-prone individuals therefore not only appreciate outgroup disparaging humor more, but their personal reactions to jokes sour their intergroup attitudes further. All of this is made possible through cavalier humor belief endorsement as a legitimizing myth that humor should not be treated seriously and malfeasance should not be read into jokes.

The investigation by Hodson, Rush, et al. (2010) demonstrates that passing off humor as “just jokes” (and hence harmless) can have negative intergroup implications. A recent investigation by Hoffarth and Hodson (2014) examined the effect of such downplayed harm in an instance of intergroup bullying that involved humor, using an experimental paradigm. Specifically, Canadian heterosexuals read a fictitious but realistic news editorial describing a legal case in which a high school boy was harassed, bullied, teased, and called names (e.g., “gay boy”; “filthy faggot”). Participants were informed that the antigay bullying was deemed by others as either (a) normatively justified (i.e., socially tolerable behavior), with text emphasizing that “boys will be boys,” or (b) normatively unjustified (i.e., traumatizing behavior), with text emphasizing that this represented “more than boys being boys.” Within a bullying context, this research sets up a situation where an event (or humor-based context) can be passed off as harmless (and by implication not prejudicial) or as harmful.

Consistent with the justification suppression model, presenting humor-based bullying as normative and acceptable (“boys will be boys”), as opposed to unacceptable, lowered perceptions of collective guilt about heterosexual privilege and advantage, with lower collective guilt pre-

dicting less opposition to gay bullying (Hoffarth & Hodson, 2014, Study 2). The significant indirect effect ($p = .010$) of normative justifications on opposition to gay bullying through collective guilt remained significant after statistically controlling for initial levels of ambivalence toward gays and traditional antigay attitudes. Thus, manipulating social norms about boys just being boys, conceptually akin to jokes being just jokes, shapes reactions toward outgroup members and their rights for protection.

**Humor as a Delegitimization Strategy**

Delegitimization represents a strategy by which people are categorized into negatively valued social groups that are not afforded protection or rights otherwise considered normative, for the purposes of justifying maltreatment (Bar-Tal & Hammack, 2012). Essentially, delegitimization paves the way for moral exclusion. Bar-Tal and colleagues argue that this process can take many forms, including dehumanization (seeing others as animals or monsters), trait characterization (e.g., portrayal as brutal), the use of labels (e.g., colonialists) or comparison to other vilified groups (e.g., Huns). Whereas their conceptualization focuses on extreme categorizations or emotions/labels, we recognize that groups can be also be delegitimized in everyday, more mundane ways, through the use of humor. For example, a male boss expressing chauvinistic jokes in the office delegitimizes female workmates (and even female bosses). This renders women targets of ridicule, robbing them of power and normalizing differential treatment.

We argue that humor, ridicule, and mockery are part of an overall architecture of delegitimization in everyday life (see Figure 2). One delegitimization strategy is dehumanization, where targets are deemed animal-like and/or machine-like, precluding the target from normal protections afforded to people. As argued elsewhere, animalistic dehumanization of outgroups stems ultimately from an overvaluing of humans over other animals (see Hodson, MacInnis, & Costello, 2014). That is, (mis)treating human others as “animals” only has social value or currency because society largely undervalues animals in the first place, denying animals protection in ways that facilitates exploitation of nonhuman creatures. Whereas dehumanization rules targets out for consideration, care, and rights-based protection, disparaging humor rules targets in as socially acceptable targets for derogation. For instance, jokes about Republicans/Democrats or blondes represent socially shared means of targeting social groups for putdowns, that are cloaked in humor, valuing a sense of humor, or otherwise being cavalier and fun-loving and nonserious. The third leg in our figure represents support for the status quo, or system justification (see Jost & Hunyady, 2002), which entrenches the aforementioned categorization processes that rule out (dehumanization) and rule in (disparaging humor).

![Figure 2](image.png)

*Figure 2*. A visual depiction of several strategies to delegitimize others.
This lends inertia to existing social structures and relations, rendering the target’s (lack of) rights largely unalterable, and can be endorsed by both advantaged and disadvantaged groups so as to not worsen the ingroup position.

The relations between these aspects of delegitimization (see Figure 2) remain unstudied and thus ripe for future study. We propose that these components (dehumanization, disparaging humor, status quo support) represent unique aspects of delegitimization that are interrelated. As noted in the introduction, Marilyn Davenport’s “humorous” depiction of President Obama as a nonhuman primate incorporates both dehumanization and humor. Similarly, disparaging humor and status quo endorsement are linked: Exposure to sexist humor increases the relation between hostile sexism and gender-based status-quo-justifying beliefs (Ford, Woodzicka, Triplett, & Kochersberger, 2013). Together with outgroup dehumanization and system justification, disparaging humor can play a key role in delegitimating outgroups, trivializing their rights, concerns, and right to protection. In fact, these three legs share many elements, especially the need for consensual “buy in.” As noted by Billig (2001), jokes need no grounding in reality to be appreciated and shared. But the sharing is critical. There is nothing objective that renders animals inferior to humans, or some groups as more animal-like than others, just as there is nothing objective about classifying a joke as funny or harmless, or anything objective about how intergroup hierarchies cannot become more fair and equitable. These processes, we suggest, operate in concert and reinforce each other to validate their own reality and social value or currency. With dehumanization as the mental representation of the other as “less human,” humor as the communication vehicle that legitimizes the derogation, and the status quo as the glue holding social groups in position, these joint processes of delegitimization clearly warrant further investigation by intergroup researchers.

An illustration of this interlinking among the delegitimization legs might be beneficial. The example of President Obama portrayed as a primate by powerful White elites makes this interplay salient: Depictions of the other as inferior and less human, delivered and defended as merely a joke, serve to keep minorities out of positions of power. Humor based on “Black-face” (Whites cartoonishly painting their faces black and dancing comically) functions in a similar manner, making Blacks appear childlike and impish and thus excluded from power positions. The same can be said for Carr’s “joke” about women enjoying rape: Women are objectified as creatures that tolerate abuse. This message is wrapped in the protective cover of humor by a comedian on stage, creating a strain toward consensus in the audience (including women) that, when endorsed socially, helps keep women from positions of social value and power.

**Future Directions and Practical Implications**

Our review has discussed how humor is remarkably understudied in the intergroup domain, scarcely being represented in the central texts of note. Yet there exists considerable evidence that humor is fundamental to the human experience and can play a critical role in communicating messages about what others are (i.e., representations), understanding how to treat them (i.e., discrimination), knowing whether to protect them (i.e., afford them rights), and recruiting social support from others (i.e., socialization and validation). As Western societies have become increasingly intolerant of open expressions of bias, we argue that humor has become more (not less) relevant, facilitating the expression of group-dominance motives in ways that shield the communicator and perpetuate injustice and inequality.

We envision multiple avenues for future research and several implications for interventions. As noted by Crandall, Ferguson, and Bahns (2013), norms shift with regard to which groups are considered acceptable targets for bias expressions. As they argue, researchers study groups that are culturally located between being unacceptable (e.g., Blacks) and acceptable (e.g., pedophiles) targets. Such theorizing can help us to understand humor, both historically and contemporaneously. For instance, whereas Victorians openly joked about race but not sex, we now joke openly about sex but are sensitive to racist humor (Billig, 2001). Presently, jokes about New Jersey Governor Chris Christie’s weight are very common on popular shows such as the Daily Show or Real Time.
With Bill Maher. His political opponents have tapped into this consensual apathy, accusing him of “throwing his weight around” (Halbfinger, 2009) and airing ads emphasizing his weight. But why are dehumanizing jokes about Obama widely considered offensive, yet jokes about heavy people considered inoffensive (or at least acceptable)? Is it due to the categories themselves (race vs. weight), the permeability or choice associated with category membership, or the presence/absence of dehumanizing metaphors? In seeking answers to such questions, we encourage researchers to avail themselves of modern technologies such as tracking Internet search patterns and social media communications (see MacInnis & Hodson, 2015). Such methodologies allow us to track not only when social categories become socially acceptable targets as joke targets, but also why, and the implications (e.g., tracking voting patterns, etc.). Such technologies can facilitate an understanding of social norms concerning humor and must become better integrated with traditional methodologies.

Although many of the studies to date have done an excellent job testing humor in the lab, complete with state-of-the-art experimental controls (e.g., Ford, 2000; Ford et al., 2008; Hodson, Rush, et al., 2010), the field needs more naturalistic studies of intergroup humor use.

Billig (2001), for instance, provided a rich analysis of the use of humor on KKK-related websites. His analysis provides valuable insights, including the finding that even extreme racists ardently argue that their “jokes are just jokes,” going to lengths to offer multiple disclaimers disavowing prejudice. Such meta-discourse, therefore, may not be limited to the expression of more covert prejudices, with important implications for theory development.

We are encouraged that the humor field examines both the person (e.g., SDO) and the situation (e.g., joke content), given that both are critical in understanding prejudice (see Hodson & Dhont, 2015). In fact, this particular sub-domain of intergroup relations is ahead of the curve relative to more traditional domains (see Hodson, 2009). For instance, several studies have observed stronger humor effects among those initially higher in hostile sexism (Ford, 2000; Ford et al., 2013; see also Weinstein et al., 2011 with regard to state hostility). Others consider how individual differences predict joke-relevant outcomes as a function of contextual factors (e.g., Ford et al., 2008; Hodson, Rush, et al., 2010). Such results critically highlight that people differ in reactions to disparaging humor, and that people do not uniformly use intergroup humor to serve personal or ingroup interests. This nuance adds complexity to future model building and interventions but better accounts for humor use in intergroup contexts. We argue to take this a step further: Given that humor is an inherently social phenomenon, future research examining individual differences (Level 1) can also consider group-level differences (Level 2), whether these be local norms (e.g., in classrooms) or more distal (e.g., national). Multilevel analyses will allow us to directly examine whether individual differences become more or less relevant as a direct function of support for such humor in the participant’s own milieu. Relatedly, we encourage future researchers to pursue not only participants’ reactions to disparaging humor, but their reaction to others’ reactions to disparaging humor (e.g., Yoshida, Peach, Zanna, & Spencer, 2012, Study 5). Such a focus would add greater attention to the intragroup processes involved in group-dominance-based humor.

Missing from the present discussion is how disadvantaged groups react to disparaging humor (in parallel to trends examining the impact of prejudices on minorities in the general literature). Equally exciting avenues can be pursued by examining how, when, and why disadvantaged groups use ingroup-derogating humor, and whether this obviates negativity toward the ingroup, diverts it to other disadvantaged groups, and/or more deeply entrenches the status quo (with the disadvantaged group “buying into” the disparagement). Relatedly, the field would benefit from closer examination of how disadvantaged groups (e.g., Blacks) employ disparaging outgroup humor to gain strategic advantage over other disadvantaged groups (e.g., Hispanics). Better understanding how targets of disparaging humor react to and use such humor will provide insights into the intergroup dynamics of prejudice. Such findings could become integrated into workplace and classroom interventions targeting bullying.
Closing Reflections

Allport (1954) speculated that the more we laugh at ourselves, the less we laugh at others. Interpersonally, it is possible that laughing at oneself can exert positive outcomes (such as laughing with, not at, others) and less negative laughing at others (e.g., aggressive humor). But we are hesitant to fully endorse Allport’s proposition at the intergroup level given that self-defeating humor is unrelated to prejudice (Hodson, MacInnis, et al., 2010). Yet this remains an empirical question of value. Perhaps a more promising springboard for future ideas involves Allport’s (1954) observation that “. . . ridicule and humor help to prick the pomposity and irrational appeal of rabble-rousers. Laughter is a weapon against bigotry” [emphasis added]. It too often lies rusty while reformers grow unnecessarily solemn and heavy-handed” (p. 509). This strikes us a powerful and pragmatic insight, that is, harnessing humor to combat prejudice. We have echoed this point previously, noting that many of Sacha Baron Cohen’s characters (Borat, Bruno) are “meta-bigots” who expose others’ bigotry through their own (Hodson, Rush, et al., 2010).

To be clear, we are not prudish killjoys who oppose humor and find evidence of malfeasance everywhere. On the contrary, we fully recognize that humor is playful, critical for well-being, excellent for social bonding, and a fundamental part of human nature (see Martin, 2007). In fact, these very features make humorous communications ideal for being co-opted by those wishing to express intergroup bias under the cover of “just having a laugh” or enjoying themselves. For this reason, we urge the prejudice field to afford humor serious attention as a vehicle for promoting group dominance motives. As Billig (2001) cautions, we must be careful not to dismiss humor as “just jokes” ourselves. Considering that humor has almost no representation in the key prejudice texts, the prejudice field appears to have done precisely this. If we continue down this path, we risk falling into the trap set by bigots who seek consensual support for the notion that jokes are just jokes, when, in fact, jokes can also rationalize and reify intergroup hierarchies and justify prejudice and the delegitimization of others.

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