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Understanding Race Through the Lens of Racial Humor

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Abstract

I undertook this study because, while attending college in a primarily white environment, I could not help but notice the absence of race, of difference around me. However, I did not notice an absence of racialized sentiment, even though our society proclaims to be past race. For these reasons, I wanted to explore how others people around my same age group think about and understand race today. And because much of the racialized sentiment I have been made aware of has been through the use of racial humor, I wanted to apply that lens to my study. This study was conducted via two focus groups where participants were shown various racial humor clips and asked to discuss them, and afterwards, via individual interviews with each focus group participant. Through this research, I found that while the majority of participants struggled to define what crosses the line when it comes to racial humor, the white participants and participants of color differed in how they felt about and reacted to such racial humor. Due to privilege and colorblind ideology, white participants were not personally affected by the clips shown, while the participants of color were. However, the white participants did seem to realize this privilege and lack of understanding to some extent, and recognize its unfairness. These findings go against colorblind ideology because these white, privileged individuals were not blind to their privilege or to the fact that race still affects ones experiences.

With the election of Barack Obama as the President of the United States, millions of people around the country and the world threw up their hands in celebration and joy. Many thought that this event – the election of a black man as President – provided further evidence of the insignificance of race in the U.S.; his election thus represents a further shift towards the cementation of a color blind ideology, or the belief that race no longer matters (Rodgers, 2010). A black man had been deemed as capable to lead as a white man. People here and elsewhere felt relief—now we can say the United States of America lives up to its constitution and views all men as created equal. We can stop talking about race and racial inequality.

The hope that Obama’s election instilled in our nation and in our world is that we are finally free from the chains of our racist past; many believed that the United States had entered a sort of post-racial or colorblind society, and that Obama’s ascendancy was proof of this. Within this context, many increasingly viewed complaints made by people of color about feelings of discrimination or racism to be unfounded or obsolete. Those complaints were increasingly seen as attempts to drudge up something from the past. Furthermore, due to colorblind ideology, people are becoming increasingly reluctant to talk about race. It has become a taboo subject. As one woman in an article done by Rodgers explains, “A lot of Americans were quick to embrace the idea of a post racial America because it would mean they wouldn’t have to talk about race anymore. . . We still want to avoid the conversation because we are still so screwed up on the racial issue” (2010: 2).

The explicit racial discourse that still exists in some aspects of our society, such as in racial humor, hints at how we as a society might still have intense feelings about race that we are trying to bury. The study of racial humor provides a window through which it is possible to see

how people do still see and talk about race and attach certain meanings to different races, given how racial humor is all about race. Through my analysis of how racial humor is understood by college students at a predominantly white, public university, I found that the move towards colorblindness is even more problematic than we thought because it squelches all attempts to recognize how race still matters in order to move past it, and impedes the ability of willing individuals to even discuss racism, especially across racial lines. And in this way, colorblind ideology does not only ignore racism, impeding the ability to undermine it, but also hurts all individuals, not just people of color.

Before today's so called post-racial society and before colorblindness became so firmly entrenched, in order to combat racial discrimination, people put a lot of hope into our education system to teach their children how to respect and embrace difference and diversity. Not only did people hope that this sort of sentiment might be taught, but also that, by meeting kids who were different from themselves, our children would learn to see one another as equals, cultivate a more open-minded point of view, and be able to engage in effective communication with one another. However, as discussed by Gary Orfield (2001), our schools are far from diverse. And in fact, contrary to the belief of a post racial society, school segregation has become even worse. This is not just true of K-12 education, but also college settings. While most people like to think of college not only as a way to further academic learning, but also as a great opportunity to meet different people from different backgrounds, college campuses themselves tend to be very racially and ethnically homogenous. The hope of college still doesn't diversify and bring about understanding as well as we hoped. And today, these young people, who we may expect to be the most open to difference, are not able to open their minds to new ideas and new people as much

as expected. Through my research with college-age students on the topic of racial humor, I found that a major barrier lying in their way is color blind ideology.

The issue that my research raises and explores – how individuals who are currently attending or recently graduated from a predominately white public university, think through and talk about race through the lens of racial humor and in a “post-racial” context - is theoretically important because it examines one of the most prominent social issues our country still faces—that of race. More specifically, it helps us see the existence of negative racial stereotypes or misunderstandings that are ensconced within the new form of racism that has taken root in our nation—color blind racism. My study also explores privilege and the ways in which it is and is not recognized by college-aged individuals. Finally, since my study is based on the humorous representation of race as put out by popular culture and consumed by many college aged students, my findings illustrate how people use humor to discuss race. This research fits into the multitude of other, in-depth research that has been accumulated on the issue of race and racial attitudes today. It draws from research done on color-blind racism, racial humor and its underlying meaning, white privilege, and the effects of stereotyping..

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this study I engage the literature on colorblindness, racial humor, and white privilege. In the existing literature on colorblindness, such as work by Beverly Daniel Tatum (1994), and Derald Wing Sue (2010), there is much discussion of the effects of colorblindness for people of color, such as how it diminishes their still prevalent concerns about racist sentiment, and how to come to terms with their racial identity even within a society that claims race does not matter. Many scholars also discuss how colorblindness both ignores and promotes racial inequality (Bonilla Silva 2010; Gallagher 2003; Omi and Winant 1986). My study will push this further by

investigating how colorblindness also negatively affects white individuals who are more aware of race than colorblind ideology would like to admit.

The current dominant ideology of the U.S.—colorblindness—comes from how many white individuals think that because, salsa has replaced ketchup as the best selling condiment in our country, or because you can find a person of color represented in each social class, that every race has become integrated in our country and has gained equality, thus leaving us “post race” (Gallagher, 2003: 576). Because of high level success and the integration some people of color have attained in our society, Barack Obama being the leading, most prominent example, many feel that this is proof that we have fully shed our past of racism and have gone on to the other side of true equality. Color blindness stems directly from how a majority of white people feel that the so-called playing field (Gallagher, 2003) is now level, or has at least improved enough from that of the past that it should be considered level. The idea is that most whites have managed to rid their racist perceptions and behaviors, thus allowing equality to reign. This accounts for why many white individuals want to see an end to affirmative action, for it is their belief that people of color no longer need a boost up the socio-economic or academic ladder, for race and negative racial perceptions are no longer holding them back. In fact, having programs like affirmative action in place which actually see race and thus go against our color-blind ideology are the ones, it is claimed, that promote racism. For they, unlike the rest of our institutions, are counting race as a factor for life achievement and saying race is a reason for some people’s lack of achievement. Taking race into consideration is wrong, for race has no impact anymore, it has no effect. Essentially, it no longer exists—we are all simply the same (Gallagher, 2003).

This belief that we have entered a post race society that is color blind, where race no longer matters, inhibits racial discourse. As noted by Bell and Hartmann (2007), because Americans “have adopted colorblind ways of talking about race” which really end up being an “avoidance of ‘race talk’ [in order to] maintain bonds and decorum in civil society,” people do not know how to talk about the race and racial issues that still are prevalent in our society, despite what the ideology proclaims. Colorblind ideology leads to a “deep ambivalence and contradiction in the diversity discourse” because of how it squelches racial discussion. And, ironically, this only has the “effect of reinforcing and legitimizing the racial status quo and its associated inequalities” (905). People cannot talk about it, and so the racial issues and racism that colorblindness is ignoring and veiling cannot be addressed.

Given these downsides to colorblindness, one wonders why it endures. A typical explanation seen in the literature is that colorblindness remains because it is in the best interests of whites to maintain the status quo which gives them racial privilege (Bonilla Silva 2010). This, some argue, explains why it is such a powerful U.S. ideology despite how it seems to contradict other beliefs, such as equality for all or freedom from oppression. Most experts on this topic, such as Walter Rodgers (2010), who has written on the very phenomenon of post-race after the Obama election, argue that, in fact, it is mainly white Americans who have declared our nation free from racism. Studies have identified these beliefs of post-racism and color blindness as operating among the U.S. white population, and only to a lesser degree in U.S. communities of color (Bonilla-Silva 2010). This strong belief in a colorblind ideology is thought to be held by whites because of how, as Gallagher himself argues, “color blindness maintains white privilege by negating racial inequality” (Gallagher, 2003: 576). Color-blindness allows whites to alleviate any guilt due to racial privilege, and allows them to think that all success is simply due to the

possession or lack of merit. The colorblind ideology, therefore, allows them to keep their position of privilege and power and be at peace with the current structure of racial inequality.

Racism, privilege, and discrimination is not gone. Since the Civil Rights Era, racism has simply become more subtle and less visible, well hidden within the walls of our institutions and everyday practices (Bonilla-Silva 2009). And with such invisibility, instances of “incidental racism” (Gallagher 2012)—discriminations which are not viewed as being connected to race or racism, such as much racial humor, still occur. This is one of the basic functions of color-blind racism. It minimizes obvious difference or discrimination in order to make it into something one should not see at all (Batts 2002). Race no longer matters because we do not see race; therefore racial jokes cannot be racist because we have no racism. Thus, instances of overt race talk or stereotyping that still exist even within colorblind ideology, such as racial humor, seem to negate actual racial experience by making it into simple humor, something to have a laugh about and not take seriously.

While color-blind ideology is the leading framework for viewing, or ignoring, social relations in the U.S., racial humor remains an integral part of our culture, forcing one therefore to wonder how truly color blind our society is. The wide use and consumption of racial humor suggests that people still are fully aware of race. They are not blind to it, but perhaps use it to diminish or ignore the discrimination of others. Therefore, the study of racial humor can lend much insight into the role of race in society.

Humor is most commonly understood as a way of discussing or appreciating “prevailing social dynamics” (Polimeni, 2006:1). It is a universal way for people to connect, discuss issues, and have a laugh. As one sociologist quoted, “According to Freud, the joke format provides a socially accepted means of breaking taboos, particularly in relation to sex and aggression”

(Billig, 2001:4). Humor can be used to get past our differences and come to an understanding. It can be a way for people to naturalize their differences or, in relation to this study, try and skim over racial differences instead of contest racial prejudice (Park et.al, 2006: 4). A study by Park, Gabbadon, and Chernin explores exactly this—whether or not racial humor facilitates racial tolerance (2006: 157), or if it simply replicates the same stereotypes that fuel racism by naturalizing difference and making those meaningful differences obsolete. They found that the jokes people deemed funny replicate the same racial hierarchy that exists in our society. These jokes consistently made the minority the butt of the joke, and also represented minorities as conforming to or proving some stereotype correct. It seemed that people enjoyed this portrayal of “blatant stereotypes” (Park et. al., 2006: 158), and it was unclear if they enjoyed them because they found them to be ridiculous, or because they felt they were true. The other concern brought up in this article revolved around whether or not such racial jokes really do only play off stereotypes as harmless, something to simply laugh off, and do nothing to point out the possible and very negative ramifications of such stereotypes in the real world.

A study done by Christina Sue and Tanya Golash-Boza on the use of racial humor in Mexico and Peru also found that such humor only reinforced those countries racialized and oppressive “systems of domination” (Sue and Golash-Boza, forthcoming: 1). However, like many people who live in the United States, many people in Peru and Mexico view humor as something that should not be taken seriously. They view it as something that is only light-hearted and superficial (Sue and Golash-Boza 10), and thus should not be compared with racism—something that is heavy, overt, violent. Another study done in South America by Goldstein found that humor, though also considered light hearted, actually “...rendered darkly through the glass of their collective experience, masked a certain loss of innocence—and [she] took their messages

about the world, however disguised, as a profound form of truth” (Goldstein, 2003: 3). And this truth was about discrimination and oppression, none of which are lighthearted. Although many people like to view jokes as simply a joke, much of the research done has shown that jokes have the power to promote social acceptability of negative racial stereotypes (Billig 2001).

As we can see, there is debate over the impact of humor, especially in regards to race. Many believe that racial humor is meant to point out the ridiculousness and insanity of racism or racial prejudices by making fun of them. Others feel that racial humor only perpetuates these racist, “othering” notions and are considered funny because they are so widely held. Humor has also been found, as previously discussed, to act as a cover, allowing for racist sentiments to be expressed and promulgated, all the while hiding in the vein of “just a joke,” enabling color-blind ideology and a system of inequality to subsist. Saying something is just a joke and should not be taken seriously discounts the experience of those the joke is being made about. It says that the racial comment that was made should not be seen as racist, disallowing for a conversation on racism at all, since that concern should not exist. While racial humor allows for a break from the silence that has been constructed around race due to how it addresses race explicitly, which is why this study used racial humor explicitly to explore people’s understandings of race, it can also be viewed as preventing conversations on actual racial issues due to how people most often do not take it seriously. This mirrors that of how color blindness is also considered a barrier to progressive discussion and articulation of race and racism in the U.S. today, even though the idea is that not talking about race is supposed to somehow suffocate racism, but it instead simply conceals it, pushes it out of sight.

These concepts relate to white privilege because of how color blind racism reproduces white privilege in how it negates inequality (Gallagher, 2003: 576). Furthermore, the inability to

see reality which often comes with white privilege is often prevalent in the ways in which white people understand racial humor. As Beverly Daniel Tatum describes, while many white individuals think, for example, that all adolescents go through a period in their lives where they wonder who they are and struggle with their identity, not all kids ask themselves; “What does it mean to be black?” (Tatum, 1997: 214). That is not a question for white kids because they don’t even think of themselves as white, as raced. They think of themselves as normal. And this is their privilege. As highlighted in the famous article by Peggy McIntosh, “Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” (1998), white privilege is the ability to “choose blemish cover or bandages in “flesh” color and have them more or less match my skin” (2). This simple example highlights the overarching privilege that many white individuals are blind to. The word “flesh” is an umbrella term, not meant to describe the color white or non-black, just as “American” is an umbrella term meant to include all Americans, not just white Americans and not just North Americans. However, flesh is made to represent “white” in how it is the only term describing a certain color, which matches white skin. Black bandages are not labeled as being “flesh” colored. They are labeled as black. When you think American, you are most likely imagining someone who is white and who lives in the U.S. After all, when you want to discuss an American who is not white, you say “African American” or “South American.” They are not simply “American,” but are somehow put in a different, non-generalizable category based on race. These examples help highlight how white privilege works. Being white is seen as the norm, not as a color or as a race. It is what everyone is thought of as being, unless otherwise differentiated or othered.

This white privilege, the privilege to blend in, to not be asked to represent all white people, to buy “flesh” colored bandages that match your skin (McIntosh, 1988), is not something that is discussed critically very often, especially by whites. Eduardo Bonilla Silva (2000), author

of “I am not a racist but...: mapping white college students’ racial ideology in the USA,” also found that there is a new racial ideology emerging that avoids direct racial discourse “but effectively safeguards racial privilege” (Bonilla-Silva, 2000:52). The question remains how do we as a society get white, privileged individuals to want to become allies when that would mean learning about their privilege and possibly giving it up? This question is discussed in an essay done by Minnie Bruce Pratt, a white woman who moves to a place where she is suddenly very much the minority. In this essay, she discusses the challenge of motivating people to undergo this change in both how they view the world and how they view themselves. As she says, “Where does this...inner push to walk into change, if we are ...by skin color, ethnicity, birth culture, are in a position of material advantage where we gain at the expense of others...A place where *we* can have a degree of safety, comfort, familiarity, just by staying put. Where is our *need* to change what we were born into? What do we have to gain?” (Pratt, 1983: 265). Beverly Daniel Tatum describes the many difficult stages people can go through in order to realize the racism that is still prevalent in our society. In her model, “Understanding White Identity Development,” she lists these stages that are necessary in order to fully realize one’s privileges and what they afford. However, there seems to be a gap in the literature that explicitly suggests ways in which to motivate people to want to take that first step, that first change.

In the context of racial humor, white privilege, as seen through my study and others, can not only have negative effects for people of color, but for white individuals as well. White privilege and its’ blindness’s often prevent whites from truly understanding and recognizing the harm that some people of color experience from racial humor and white reaction to it. By buying into colorblind ideology and the negation of discussion that comes from saying racial humor material is “just a joke,” people of color often feel misunderstood and deflated. A study done by

Derald Wing Sue (2010) found that, for people of color, the sort of encounter with white people where they deny any racial biases or prejudices even though their behavior, as exemplified through such contexts as racial humor and their use of it, belies such denial, is intensely draining because they find themselves constantly having to assess or question the meaning behind every word, joke, or action their white friend or acquaintance does (73). And, as my study shows, such privilege also prevents well intentioned white individuals who want to be free from racist thinking and actions from being able to attain that freedom. Contributing to these literatures, my study explores the ways in which college aged students attending or recently graduated from a state funded, mostly white college understand and interact in racial situations within the confines of colorblindness, white privilege, and through the lens of racial humor.

SITE AND METHODOLOGY

I generated my data by constructing two racially diverse focus groups. Focus groups were used in order to get more realistic reactions from individuals since they would be conversing with peers. I thought this might not happen if I only did one-on-one interviews. At least in a focus group, there is more potential to forget or not get caught up in the fact that you are having a discussion in front of a researcher. Together, the groups consisted of nine individuals. I decided to do two focus groups of mixed race because I wanted to view how people in a mostly white, college environment understood and reacted to racial humor in group settings, and also how they reacted to it in a more diverse group than they might otherwise usually find themselves in. The focus groups consisted of students who go to Mountain U, a state funded college which has a mostly white demographic. In the County of Rocky's population of 97,385 (Marshall, 2012:14), there are 89.9% white people, 5.2% Asian, 13.4% Hispanics/ Latinos, and 1.6% black, and 5.3% other identified people in Rocky County. My focus groups consisted of three white women around the age of 21 and 22, three white males whose ages ranged from 22 to 24, two African

born black men, ages 20 and 22, and who moved to the U.S. when they were around the age of 12 and one Venezuelan born, 21 year old Latino male who has lived in the U.S. for a total of five years (see appendix pg. 48).

During both focus groups, I used racial humor video clips that are readily available on YouTube and on cable television to prompt discussion on racism in the popular media and uncover people's understandings of race and racism. I played clips from *Family Guy*, *Tosh.0*, who is a white comedian, and Dave Chappelle—a black comedian—as these are well known shows that people have relatively easy access to and probably have seen before. In this way, it was easier to get the conversation started since people have some experience with the clips. And since these shows are generally considered funny, I felt they would help loosen the group up. The *Family Guy* clip displayed a montage of examples of when race was addressed throughout several seasons of the show, including a depiction of Cleveland, the black character, being beaten up by robotic arms while an alarm saying “Minority alert” goes off in the background. *Tosh.0* also portrayed a montage of racial jokes made throughout several seasons and played off of stereotypes such as black men can jump higher and you cannot see them in the dark. After these clips I showed the Dave Chappelle clip *Racist Pixies*¹ which made fun of various racial stereotypes across many different races, including the white race. After this clip, I had the focus group participants read an article describing how it was after this clip was aired that Dave Chappelle left the show. It tells how, after viewing a white man's reaction towards the sketch, Chappelle decided that he was not putting forth the message that he wanted to—instead of understanding the irony and satire within the jokes, and recognizing such stereotypes as wrong, he got the impression that he was simply perpetuating said stereotypes. I wanted the groups to

¹ “The Sketch that Made Chappelle Say ‘Enough’” http://spring.newsvine.com/_news/2006/07/14/287958-the-sketch-that-made-chappelle-say-enough

read this in order to highlight the range of implications that racial humor has. After Chappelle, I showed footage of white comedian Michael Richards (aka Kramer on *Seinfeld*), at a comedy club verbally harass some black audience members who had been talking during his routine. Richards' screams the N word directly at them several times and calls himself "the white man" while also referencing old forms of violence against people of color. He explicitly yells to the people of color, "Shut up! Fifty years ago we'd have you upside down with a fucking fork up your ass."

After the focus groups, I also conducted one-on-one interviews. I felt these were extremely important to do because they would allow for people who maybe did not feel as comfortable speaking up in front of a group, the chance to tell me what they had thought about their experience. In the interviews I asked everyone how they generally felt about the conversation and the clips that were shown. I asked them if there was anything in particular that they did not like or that really stood out to them, and I also asked them what they thought about racial humor in general. I later inquired what they thought being an ally meant and if they had been or ever would be an ally in the context of racial humor and why. After conducting the two focus groups and all the individual interviews, I searched for themes throughout all of the transcriptions in order to discover what sorts of findings I had collected.

One thing that should be taken into account when interpreting this study is the fact of my positionality as a white U.S. born female researcher. I have grown up in this society that fosters a color blind ideology, which, doubtless, has given me some blindnesses that perhaps prevent or blur my ability to interpret the data as compared to someone else who did not grow up with the privilege and racial positionality I did. That said, because my study is being done in a town that is disproportionately white, I would be able to interpret the white individuals' understandings of

race better since I too have grown up in their location, or from their standpoint. Thus, my own whiteness may be a benefit in some instances. In addition, I would hope my background in Sociology and Women's Studies may give me a more critical view of issues of race and racial inequality. This study largely explores the ways in which white people deal with race via racial humor, while trying to adhere to the rules of color blind ideology.

FINDINGS: UNDERSTANDING RACIAL HUMOR

The main findings throughout my research revolved around the divergence between the white participants and the participants of colors' reactions to the racial humor showed during the focus groups as well as to the actual discussion of this humor across racial lines. I highlight these differences by discussing whether or not participants view racial humor as racist, what the participants thought about the use of racial humor in general, how participants reacted to portrayals of overt racism, and finally how participants reacted to the idea of being an ally in social situations where racial humor is present. These findings address the themes of color blindness, privilege, and social positionality.

When does racial humor become a form of racism? Throughout the literature on humor and racial humor, there seems to be somewhat of a consensus that although jokes and racial humor can be used as a format to break taboos or discuss topics that are not necessarily socially comfortable, like race, they can also cross a line and promote social acceptability of unacceptable and oppressive ideas and behaviors. The question comes down to whether or not racial humor or the use of racial humor crosses the line and becomes racism. During the focus groups, all of the participants seemed uncertain about what type of humor does cross this line. When discussing the *Family Guy* montage, people were ambivalent as to how they felt. Most of them found it funny, especially when they thought, as one group member, Tat, a white male, vocalized, that the

joke was just “really taking apart either some kind of standard in society or some supposed stereotype and just kind of making fun of it.” Most of the group members in both groups agreed with this kind of interpretation, even the people of color. Interestingly, they were even more apt to agree with a benign interpretation when the clip shown was of a cartoon. As one black male participant, Shabaz, said, “I find it easier to laugh at the *Family Guy* because it is just easier to laugh at a cartoon. . .It’s a little less real to me” (Shabaz). Even when the cartoon depicted violence, such as when it showed Cleveland being beat up by robotic arms, people were still ambivalent. One white, female participant said she did not find it funny, that the violence went too far. However, others were still able to laugh because of the perceived ridiculousness of it.

The majority of the participants judged racial humor as acceptable if it was satirical. As Tat, the white male participant said: “The reason I could find humor in a show “like *Family Guy* is that it’s incredibly satirical and takes things to such an extreme that it’s almost like look at how ridiculous this is that anybody could really think this or feel like this.” Another white female participant, Rain, struggled when discussing her impression of the *Family Guy* clip during the part when Cleveland was being beaten by robotic arms . Initially, she said “I felt like what I got out of that was violence against African Americans,” so her perception was that the clip was racist, not funny. However, regarding the same scene, she later remarked: “[that] is the one that sticks with me when there was like a robot that came out and beat him and it was funny because they had satire in there, not just like let’s beat up black people. It was like look at what our culture does.” Because the respondents found most of the beginning clips satirical, something that was trying to point out what was distorted in our society, it could be funny.

As participants discussed, to help themselves define what constitutes racist or humorous within the category of racial humor, they made their distinctions based on if the joke was

satirical or farcical which enabled the joke to become something so ridiculous and exaggeratory that it is obviously immoral and wrong. However, an argument can be made that the racial jokes made on shows such as *Family Guy* or *Tosh.0* cannot be considered farcical or satirical because of how satire is supposed to offer a way to suggest how to change things, when done artistically. The question for some is can *Family Guy* be considered satire? Do these types of shows suggest how to change that which is wrong in our society regarding race? Or do they simply perpetuate that joke and nothing more? Another difference between the racial humor in shows like *Family Guy* and the type people used to go to, such as actual comedian shows, like Richard Pryor, is how, when people went to see Pryor or those like him (stand up comedians who used a lot of racial humor in their skits), they got dressed up and they paid money. It was a night out. So, of course, after the show people would talk about what they had just seen. It was meant to be discussed, it required some critical engagement. Shows like *Family Guy*, on the other hand, are on all the time, for thirty minutes a shot. They are meant to be consumed quickly and regularly, while you are taking a break. Then, after it's over, people go do something else. They do not usually sit there and mull over what they have just seen or heard, or come up with ways to change the terrible depictions they just saw. They do not critically engage with the material, they simply absorb it. And this means that people are simply absorbing those stereotypes. One female participant, Wall, spoke to this point exactly when discussing racial humor. As she said,

We have so many examples of this in our culture. We are just sponges. Even if you try not to, you are going to internalize some of the things that are around you. Like, even if you try to be conscious of it, even if you try to avoid it and you think you know, you are above that or better than, smarter than that, you can avoid it, like we all kind of adopt what's around us. And you know, even if you try not to, you are going to absorb some of it. . . .Cuz I think that after prolonged exposure to these type of jokes, and if you like, assuming that you are just hearing these jokes and then you are not really analyzing them or talking them through afterwards, then ya, I mean I think it could promote racism

Without this critical engagement, you are not debunking any stereotypes or recognizing the wrongs in our society that these jokes may be playing out. You are merely soaking them up, which can create actual racist sentiments—exactly the kind people do not want to have in today’s society.

Eli, the black male participant, furthered this discussion by bringing up his concern about whether or not other audience members are able to understand this satire. As he says, “trying to do irony on race, or you know, satire on race, that’s a tough market, because depending on how aware or knowledgeable your audience is, they are not gonna catch what you are trying to do.” Many of the other participants agreed that, while they still felt the humor was funny, they could see how it might be problematic for people who might not get what they saw as the underlying message—the absurdity of racism. As Samantha, the white female participant described, “the more dangerous thing is the people who just don’t get it and who think that it’s okay. That they think ‘O, they are making a joke about a certain race and I am laughing because that race totally does that thing’, you know? That’s more the dangerous part where people just don’t understand.” If the audience member does not have a critical lens, then racial humor will not be progressive. As Eli, the black male participant says, “it takes the viewer being conscious, to be able to unpack that message. And for the mainstream, the people who are just taking in these messages without any kind of media literacy skills, it’s just like, ah, you’re just dumping it in.” It is interesting to note, however, that most of the participants believed they themselves could understand the satire and subtle implications of the jokes. This may be related to how they all have the common characteristic of having a college education.

The way in which participants viewed racial humor also seemed to depend on their racial position and location in society, and what sort of privileges or discriminations they face. Eli, a

black participant, discusses the *Family Guy* clip where Cleveland is beaten by robotic arms. In the following excerpt he is respondent to how one of the white male participants said it was not necessarily offensive to him. Eli reflects:

The joke they have where he goes in and the police sticks come down and beat him down. See that, that's a joke, right? As far as you know if you are just talking about comedy and humor. Ah you know, it's a good joke, making some kind of observation. But that's only funny if you are on the side of the street where it's not your family member getting beat up by the police in the middle of the street for no goddamn reason.

Only by using a lens that looks at how race is treated in actual society by specific people did the ambivalence of the *Family Guy* clip end. The majority of the participants found the clips to be ridiculous and thus inoffensive. The degree of ridiculousness was the factor that allowed the participants to view the clips in a satirical and thus harmless light. Such satire was seen as acceptable to the participants because it allowed them to, as Rain, a white female participant said, "find something that [they were] all kind of feeling uncomfortable about and...poke fun at [it]." Most participants felt this fulfilled the purpose and benefit of comedy.

The one clip that participants all agreed was racism was the clip portraying Michael Richards during his late night comedy show. Here there was consensus from everyone that it was not humorous at all and that it totally crossed a line. In the words of Jack, a white male, it crossed a line because it was said in a "hateful light." Wall, a white female participant thought it was obvious that Michael Richards had "snapped and [showed] his underlying racism that's probably like just below the surface. He just keeps it just barely covered and then the second he loses his temper it all comes out. . . That was really disturbing." A line had clearly been crossed and Richards could easily be considered by all participants, as Eli voices, a "racist piece of shit." Here the distinction was clear because of the overt racism that Richards embodied in his rant. In

today's colorblind society, overt racism is without question terrible and unacceptable. No one wants to appear racist. Samantha, a white female respondent, explains :

No one wants to admit their own racism that exists in their own life. Even going into something like this where you know this is going to be the topic, you kind of like shield yourself, you know? And you're like, I don't want to come off as racist. And I think that's such a part of our society and also you know interesting that this kind of racial humor stuff, we see all the time. Because I think personally it's very important to a lot of people if they don't seem racist. So you are very careful about what you say. . .

Even after Richards, who was exposed for his rant due to how it was considered so overtly racist by so many, apologized on television, he still insisted that he is not a racist. Shabaz, one of the participants of color, describes how this statement fits within today's form of racism. "When he said umm "I'm not a racist" . . . I think what he is trying to say is ya, he's not a you know, a racist of the past you know, he is not lynching black folks and what not, but he's fully a racist of today and he has all these things lying beneath and they come out. But you know, the word racist is so charged, no one wants to use that" (Shabaz). Both of these descriptions really clarify just what the new form of racism is today. It is an invisible, covert form because no one wants to be considered racist since we all know it is wrong. Our colorblind society says we are not supposed to see race, so being so overt about it is sanctioned. Yet there is still racism in our society. So, in order to alleviate this discrepancy, people either do not recognize less overt forms of racism, or they ignore them and ignore or cover up the racism that they might find within themselves.

The line was not as clear with the *Family Guy* clip or the other *Tosh.0* clip because the jokes were delivered as jokes, not simply as rage. They were not overt. In those other clips, participants felt that they could argue over the purpose of the jokes and whether or not they were born from racist sentiment and reinforced racism. This distinction helps show how, for the most part, today's college aged individuals, no matter their race, can easily recognize and reject overt

forms of racist material and deem them unacceptable. However, if it has a shadow of what they perceive as satire or nuance, they are much less clear and much more willing to accept it as progressive humor.

Differences between whites and people of color regarding views on racial humor.

Throughout the discussion of racial humor, while the majority of participants struggled to define a distinct line between the humor shown in the various clips, during both the focus groups and interviews, the white individuals and people of color discussed and illustrated their views on racial humor differently. People of color related to the prompts through their personal experiences while whites did not—with the exception of one white male who did find himself bothered by racial humor when the group was shown the Dave Chappelle white pixie sketch. When discussing racial humor, the participants of color were much more apt to bring their own, personal experiences into the discussion. When asked if he ever hears this sort of racialized humor from his friends, Ricardo, the Latino male participant, said “Yeah. . . I mean all the time, yeah.” During our interview, Eli, the black male, discussed how he had heard about a white individual making a joke and using the N word. He then immediately referenced this incident in terms of how he personally feels about it: “Am I ever going to forget that he said the N word twice? I don’t fucking think so. Cuz that’s the side of the street that I am on” (E). Racial humor is something which both of these participants connect to at a deeply personal level. As Shabaz, another black male participant says, “a topic like this [racial humor]. . . hits home.” These men interpret racial humor through a personal lens rather than as an abstract form of comedy.

White participants, on the other hand, did not really bring in any personal examples of how racial humor affects their lives. Even during the interviews when they were asked directly about their personal experiences, they still discussed racial humor in a much more abstract way.

When discussing the clips, one white female participant, Samantha, described the Dave Chappelle clip as having “definitely an ambiguity.” She goes further and describe how:

It was different to see a different perspective on . . . racial humor [via listening to what the other participants in the group had to say]. And I think that clip also put you in the shoes of . . . because, as someone who is very privileged, you know, and I don’t, racial humor is something that I can, it doesn’t directly affect me. . . privilege prevents me from really experiencing it. So, you know, it was interesting to experience humor with people who could potentially become offended by it.

Samantha does not feel personally invested in the racial humor discussed because she thinks it does not affect her as a white individual. She recognizes this as her privilege, and also as a barrier to better understanding. When asked directly if she has any personal experiences with racial humor being used against her or around her, she says “I feel like I just don’t really though.” Also in regards to the Dave Chappelle sketch, Clutch, the white male participant, confessed that he “hadn’t really thought of racial humor as perpetuating, just perpetuating stereotypes and not really getting anywhere” (Clutch). This highlights how Clutch has not previously thought much about racial humor as a form of racism.

Interestingly enough, this interpretation of racial humor is similar to what provoked Chappelle to quit his show after he aired his *Pixie* skit. Chappelle felt that after seeing one of the white males he works with laughing a little too hard at a joke he had made about blacks, that that man was not critically engaging in any sort of discussion with himself about what that joke was trying to point out about society. It was as if he did not get that the joke was supposed to be considered satirical. As Chappelle himself said, “When he laughed, it made me uncomfortable . . . As a matter of fact, that was the last thing I shot before I told myself I gotta take f_____time out after this. Because my head almost exploded.” Chappelle felt that the man was simply laughing at the joke, which made Chappelle concerned that he had some sort of underlying racism that was perpetuating those stereotypes his jokes were using, and was “not really getting anywhere.”

While it was Chappelle himself who realized that this white man was not understanding the point of his humor, in my focus group, it was Clutch, a white man, who realized and brought up his own ignorance and discussed how he thought they were due to his privilege as a white man, which prevented him from truly understanding the offense in racial humor, like Samantha expressed through her quote. It is interesting how Chappelle, a black man, recognized this perpetuation of stereotypes, but Clutch, a white man, was more unclear. Clutch's perspective is likely related to the fact that he is on the side of privilege where it is thought to not be necessary for him to see the perpetuation of stereotypes because his race or "un-race" protects him from ever being personally affected by those stereotypes. Such thinking allows him to remain ignorant for if he cannot understand, why bother? Later, when Clutch addresses racial humor, he says exactly this:

It's like hard to put myself in those shoes but thinking about it in the sense of like being on the other side of a privilege, I have never really thought about it that way before I guess. It seems like kind of a very basic concept but when you are on, when those kinds of stereotypes don't affect me like negatively on a daily basis—I don't see people thinking a certain stereotype about me and having that be like a negative effect on me versus somebody else like, even if it's not necessarily a very harmful stereotype . . . seeing how that could be a negative impact on somebody's life isn't really something that I had thought about like, coming from just humor in general.

His confusion and lack of personal experiences of racial humor being directed at him illustrate how his discussion of racial humor differed from that of the participants of color. He, like many of the other participants, has not experienced much racial humor because of how being white is so different from being black or being Latino. Whiteness is not considered a race, it is considered the norm (McIntosh, 1988). It is not considered divergent or different, and thus is not joked about because being white is not uncomfortable in our society. It isn't even noticed, and in this way, is privileged. Racial humor directly affects how people perceive their race and the meanings they attach to it, at least for that moment that the joke is being said. The racial

differences I found regarding individuals' perceptions of racial humor is likely due to the fact that racial humor uses the race that these participants identify as, and that our society classifies them by, as the butt of the joke. Therefore, racial humor is interpreted differently based on the audience member's racial position vis-à-vis the subject of the joke. As Eli articulates, "Obviously it [humor] has an effect if you come from a community of color. Obviously it also has an effect on the people that take it in." There is no question as to whether or not racial humor affects them personally, because they are the ones racial humor is using in its construction, they are the ones "that take it in."

Throughout both focus groups, the only time a white individual was affected more intimately by the racial jokes shown and had a reaction was during the Dave Chappelle *Racist Pixies* sketch when Dave Chappelle puts on white face. And, as discussed later, this reaction by the white participant had a palpable effect on one of the people of color in that same group. When asked what the group thought about the sketch, Tat—the white, 24 year old male who majored in business and thus perceived as a fairly stereotypical white privileged male —says:

...as far as anything offending me, the only thing that did, right or wrong, I don't know, but the only thing that did when I initially saw it and was like 'wow that is pretty offensive' is honestly the white face part. I've seen Dave Chappelle do that in other skits and I know it's not so much a hot button issue like black face is but still, I mean, dressing up as if you are in a different race is one thing but I just, for some reason, feel like the altering the skin tone is kind of, should be off limits. Um I would feel completely uncomfortable if I saw a comedian doing blackface, I feel the same way seeing a comedian doing white face. Um like I said, I don't know right or wrong it just is kind of my initial reaction when I saw it.

While Tat does say that he knows white face is not as controversial as black face and that he is "not black, and I don't know what it feels like and what all the historical implications feel like when they are applied to you about things like black face. I don't get that because I've never had to experience it," it is still interesting that, while Tat seems to at least somewhat understand the

historical implication of black face and also how he might not fully understand the impacts given that he is not black, he nonetheless found the white face offensive. Furthermore, he even says that if a white man did blackface, he would find it just as offensive as Chappelle, a black man, doing white face. This sort of sentiment can be seen as representative of a color blind moment that perpetuates the notion of a “post-racist society” because Tat is saying that both of these situations should be regarded as equally offensive, or the same. They should be equally offensive, no matter the history, because in today’s new society, new history, black and white skins are the same, have the same meaning. Thus impersonating both of them for the sake of comedy should carry the same offense. He is saying that history should not come into play with flesh anymore due to how flesh is no longer a site of inequality or oppression. While Tat’s reaction to the Chappelle sketch promoted a color blind, post-racial ideology, his reaction was not shared, especially by the male participant of color.

Color blind or post-race ideology is not only false, but also harmful for everyone, and most obviously harmful for those who do not come from a location of privilege. During the focus group itself Shabaz, the man of color in the same group, stopped talking and did not speak again for the rest of the time. This silence, was enough to make the rest of the group know that something had happened. The silence on behalf of Shabaz reflected the difficulties in talking about race, a consequence of the existence of a colorblind ideology in U.S. society. His silence affected all participants, albeit in different ways. When I asked the participants what they thought about Shabaz’s silence in their personal interviews, they all described it as something very palpable in the room that made them more uncomfortable or concerned. Rain, the 22 year old white female told me in her interview, “it made me worry that I had maybe said something that was offensive, or that I had been stereotyping, and it also made me worry that I was just speaking

a lot about race which as a white woman I don't have those experiences to understand completely." Jack, another white male participant in the same focus group, after I asked him if Shabaz's silence had affected him said "I mean I wasn't worried about it so much as...I guess I kinda was because I mean his, he probably sees his racism, it impacts his life a little bit more than I recognize. It doesn't impact me directly as much being in the majority. And I mean in those focus groups you try not to offend, so maybe when he became more, little bit more quiet, didn't say as much, ya I was a little bit more cautious in what I said" (Jack). Both of these quotes show that although our society tries to perpetuate a culture of color blindness or post race ideology, people do realize that, at least through the lens of racial humor, people of color might find such jokes more offensive because the material the jokes use affects them in reality. They also appear to feel that they need to be more sensitive given how, as white individuals, they may not understand everything a person of color might.

What is interesting here is that, even though the majority of the other participants in the group were trying to be very sensitive and did recognize their privilege, the one comment made about white face was enough to shut Shabaz, the black male participant, down for the rest of the night. In our one-on-one interview, I asked Shabaz why this had happened. I pointed out how his silence seemed to come about right after the white face comment. In response Shabaz said:

I was . . . particularly, not appalled but quite surprised at his umm his ghastly reaction, his... He had this moment of just great offense when he was like, I was APPALLED by Chappelle's white face. And you know, I had this moment where I was like, ok, am I, am I ignorant myself or, cuz I totally didn't anticipate that, it blew my mind. I had a moment where I was just like... Wow, mind blown. Cuz I was just like, one, I didn't think for one second of thinking of it from that perspective, a white person being offended at that, you know? In one hand, I agreed with him, I was like 'O I feel for you, sorry, sorry that Chappelle did that.' And on the other hand, I had the totally opposite reaction where I was just like mmm you know, it's just NOT THE SAME, ok? And I can't help but escape like, I can't help like, I can't escape all the history and all the...ya, you know what bothered me about the focus group? Is because it was like, and you know, once again, I admit that I don't know what's going on in these people's minds. I'm just telling you how

I felt, but it's like, this is something that I have to live every second of the day, you know? And I just got the sense, with some of the comments he was making, it was just like. . .it was just like, you know, you might only be stepping into this little world that we have created to talk about this for about an hour. You know. But I wonder, it's like, what we talk about here, you know, might help me, you know it might bring me one step closer to finally, you know, understanding what's going on, and finally being able to.. interact with this thing that has greatly affected my life. You know? And it's like, when something is of that much importance to you, it's like, ya, it kind of, it doesn't irk you but it just kind of hurts cuz your like, then you don't wanna share because you are like, mmmm I'm not sure if we are really in this.. you don't feel like we are in this together. You know? Cuz once this focus group is over ok well, ok that's great, you know. You still have to go home and battle the stereotype that you know, a well what was that, what did Chappelle do when he was.. O that you have a little dick and blah blah blah blah blah..and it's just like ... Anyway, let me circle back. The point that I was making. Umm I really didn't know what to think about his white face comment. I think that it's a valid point to make, at the same time like I said, its contradictory. I just don't know if I can, cuz there's like no one, I don't like speaking generally like this but...I mean, I have yet to personally see any person of color dress in white face for Halloween or anything. I'm not even saying that that should like stir up something that...[laughs] it's just, you cannot compare the pain that came with minstrelsy and all just the fucked up you know, monkey like depictions that came of that, and then compare that to Chappelle, it's just this moment of just like.. mmm I don't know, it just took me out, you know?

Shabaz tried to understand Tat's point of view and see how any mimicking of race by another race could be considered offensive. This attempt at understanding one another has happened across color lines throughout this research, which is contradictory to white privilege and shows how this generation of individuals in college is at least trying to be more open and embracive. However, the history of blackface, for Shabaz, is what forces him to say it is not the same. There is not that kind of history of oppression with white face. This can be generalized to racial humor. Although there are jokes made about white people, there is no history of oppression behind them, which is why they do not make such an impact or have the same capability to offend. Also, white people are the ones in power, so these jokes are not taking anything away from them. The people who point this out in the focus group are Ricardo, a Latino male, and Eli, a black male. As Ricardo says, "it doesn't really affect the white person, you know? Because the white person is the one who has the power, the one who has the money, the one who has the political

influence, the one, everything. So, it's not really the same thing. . . It's not the same type of discrimination, it doesn't lead to the same type of consequences" (Ricardo). Eli's response echoes these thoughts. As he says, "If you live in the world where there are certain inequalities, and you are on the right side of the inequality, then you don't have to worry about it. You can make jokes about men all day. You can make jokes about white people ALL day you know? Because being white is a good position to be in if you are talking about the racial dynamic." It is our society's power dynamic, where white people have the privilege and people of color live on the wrong side of the inequality, which makes the distinction for both of these men, including Shabaz, as to why it was offensive to him that the white face offended Tat, a white man. Even so, it still seems odd that one comment made by one individual would garner such a poignant response from Shabaz. His silence literally filled up the room. When questioned further about why he was "taken out" of the conversation by that comment, he revealed that it was more than just what was said, it was a certain feeling, an evocation of privilege that Tat was unaware of, which made him feel insecure.

There is something about a white male engaging in this discussion and like sort of... ugh. He sort of had this just like it's just...he seems like a nice guy. . .but there is just something about, I think it has to do with power. There is just something. It's like he is evoking, I'm not blaming him you know? I'm just talking. He is evoking some, yeah. When he talks, he evokes, I think unwilling and unknowingly, he evokes some sort of like white power that just scares the hell out of me. It does, honestly. God honest truth.... he evokes some sort of white power that scared me. So that's what I got.

It is important to note that Shabaz did not simply find Tat's reaction distasteful, but it garnered fear from him. The evocation of privilege and power was strong enough to make him not just annoyed, but fearful. When asked to say more he explained:

It just makes me uncomfortable. There is just something about this dude that makes me uncomfortable. Ya it's just like, you feel it, you feel this like, especially when it's like, there is nothing wrong with. . .I'm not a radical, I don't think there is anything wrong

with celebrating whiteness. But there is this, whenever he takes like this strong defense of just like WHITE, there is just something scary about it. It probably would be the same if I were to all the sudden take like this very strong umm fucking stance on blackness. It would probably make him somewhat uncomfortable. And it's like yep, there you go.

Tat is someone who could fit the stereotypical description of white, middle class male. As Tat himself says "I feel like I'm stereotyped all the time as a very privileged white kid who grew up in the suburbs." Tat, was not afraid to speak up and say what he thought, unlike the other white individual who was present and who, as Shabaz said, "looked more like a schmuck (non-threatening). You know? And just the way he (schmuck) was talking, it's like, maybe he is gentle mannered. You know? See, ya, he had like a ... [mild manner] ahhh I appreciated that. I was just like see I can engage with this guy." Tat, on the other hand, embodied more of the confident American white male norm who represented some sort of white power in that he does not have to think about race, and thus will not be as affected by what is said in the focus group as someone else. However, Tat, as Shabaz clarifies, was not the sole reason for his silence. He simply represented his discomfort with talking about race with a white focus group. Because of how race is defined in our culture as being opposite of white, which is considered the norm, this subject obviously pertains to Shabaz more personally than it does the others in his group. His silence came from how he felt he would be the only one left wondering what the impact of that focus group was. He would be the one who was affected, possibly hurt. The experience was a personal one, but for the others it was more abstract and not as personal. His silence was a way of trying to disengage, to distance himself from that conversation in order to buffer the effects.

These reactions showcase how difficult it is for everyone to talk about race, even when the prompt is supposed to be humorous. It also shows how positionality plays such a big factor in how people respond to one another's understandings about racial humor and race and what is offensive for what reasons. By using the lens of racial humor, the differences between how

people speak about and react to conversations on race more generally became apparent. While the majority of the white participants tended to view the discussion of race as enjoyable, or something that they gained something from, the participants of color felt differently. It was not something they labeled as enjoyable or really something they felt enriched by. For these participants, it was more of a struggle. In these divergences, we are able to see several nuances. For one, it made it more obvious how race is not a burden for white individuals, while on the other hand their enjoyment from discussing race shows how this is something they felt helped them have a broader perspective. They want to discuss race for they recognize their own ignorance or sheltered perspective that they have garnered from growing up in a colorblind society, and from the blindness privilege creates. These distinctions help to further show how race and racial discrimination is still alive and well in our society since it was so uncomfortable for the participants of color to discuss and open up to.

Another difference by race surfaced during responses in one-on-one interviews to the question: “What did you think about the focus group conversation?” The white participants responded by saying things along the lines of: “I thought that it was informative and enlightening,” (Clutch) or “it felt like a very safe environment and it felt like we were actually were discussing real important issues and it felt like everyone had something to contribute” (Samantha). Another white participant responded that he “had the impression that it was a pretty open atmosphere, people could say what they felt um and it was interesting and at some points entertaining I suppose. . .it was kind of fun actually” (Tat). As shown, for the most part, the white respondents felt good about the conversation. They enjoyed how interesting it was and even had fun. One white female respondent, Wall, had slightly different feelings. As she said, “Well, I mean, I’d say in general, it’s always like a little uncomfortable when race comes up. I

mean, I didn't think it was like too bad but there is always going to be umm sort of an element of not being quite sure how things are going to go in a conversation, whenever that gets brought up." She was the only white respondent to, right off the bat, discuss how racial discussions are uncomfortable to have in this day and age, pointing to the clear sense that race is a taboo subject for our color blind society. This was the closest, at least in the very beginning of all the white participants interviews, to sharing the same sort of sentiment as most of the participants of color, that race is not a fun subject to discuss. Nonetheless, Wall goes on to say that "but I mean overall, I didn't feel awkward." Although Wall recognized the potential discomfort and awkwardness, she herself, as a white woman, did not feel it personally—once again drawing a distinct line between the feelings of the white participants and racial discussion, as compared to the feelings of the people of color.

When asked how they felt about the focus group discussion, the participants of color had a different response. As Eli elucidated, "Well generally speaking, the topic is uncomfortable to speak of." Ricardo, the Latino male, described the discussion not as enlightening or informative like some of the white participants, but as "nothing new." Ricardo was not enlightened during the focus group because he experiences race every day, and as he shared, has come into issues regarding racism not only in jokes, but in his lived experience. He shared a story that his friends told him about when they had gone downtown on a party bus:

One time a couple years ago we were, all my friends went to Denver for this concert and they came back on the party bus. I wasn't there but they told me about it after. There was this girl who lost her purse and she was yelling like where is he? There was this one black kid on the bus and she was like, 'He I'm sure, search him, he is the only black guy on the bus.' And like that has happened here in Rocky, two years ago . . . Like there is a bus full of like 30 people and there is one black guy and then she's blaming, she says search him, he is the only black guy on the bus. . . She is sure that the black guy has her purse, like she is sure. . . she does generally think the stereotype is true and that's the problem."

The conversation was nothing new to Ricardo because he has seen how people understand race and react to stereotypes in more serious settings than that of humor.

Shabaz, another participant of color, discussed his discomfort with the discussion. As he said, “when you are talking about things like racial matters and umm people start sort of like... what’s a good way to put it...it it’s like um you start to feel insecure and not insecure like a high school teenage girl feels insecure but you feel this weird sense of insecurity you know?” Not only were participants of color not fulfilled by the conversation, but some even felt unsafe, directly contrasting with a previous comment made by Samantha, one of the white female respondents, where she felt the focus group was a safe environment. Shabaz continues his explanation when he says “it’s not that, no one was personally attacking me, I’m not saying anything like that but...a topic like this that hits home and recalls such painful memories, you know? It’s like you want to really be in that safe space, you know what I mean?” This quote helps highlight some fundamental differences. Shabaz felt unsafe and insecure with the discussion because this sort of conversation has affected his life before, as has the use of racial humor. So, this specific focus group that looked at racial understanding through the lens of racial humor brought back those painful memories. Shabaz recalls a specific example of when “People [were] watching all this Chappelle stuff and all the sudden it’s like in the name of comedy they can do a lot more, they can say and do a lot more that could before. ‘O hey man he’s just making a joke, you know, it’s just funny’” (Shabaz). In his experience, people have used the ruse of comedy to justify discriminatory or racist behavior towards him. Through humor, oppressive behavior can be dismissed due to, once again, how people can play it off as just a joke. Shabaz and the other participants of color did not feel comfortable talking about racial humor or race in general because of how they felt that the white participants simply could not understand because

they had not had the same experiences, and could therefore not understand the history. For the participants of color, such as Shabaz, a black male, it was “very scary you know? It just scares you. Because it’s like, ‘O God.’ It’s not like you literally think, man maybe you know, a few steps too far and he is putting me on a pitch fork, that’s not what you are thinking, but it’s like . . . it scares you because it’s like . . . Hey look...ahah I mean , it’s just history it’s like.....ah it scares you. It just does.” Racial discussion and misunderstanding is not new for the participants of color. It is an old conversation put into new words and ideologies. But for them, it is not simply a discussion, as it is for the white participants. It has resulted in terrible experiences both throughout history and in their own lives. It is not a fun or interesting conversation, but one riddled with old and new fears, mistrust, and hurt.

Divergent reactions to overt racism. As mentioned previously, participants agreed with the characterization of the Richard rant as racist and as an instance of overt racism. However, their reactions to this form of racism differed by race. The white participants were shocked because they thought that this sort of racism no longer existed, while the participants of color were less disturbed because they knew it did. After the clip was shown, as Rain, a white female articulates “it like changed the tone a lot I think. Because everything up to that point, I think we all had found humor somewhere in everything else. And then you see the rant and the apology and there is no humor in it and everyone knows it’s terrible and I don’t think anyone in our focus group would ever do something like that. You know? But it also makes people uncomfortable and it makes me uncomfortable too cuz on some level these are ideas that we have in our minds of like this racial separation kind of.” Even though everyone viewed this as racist and were visibly uncomfortable watching it, there were still divergent reactions to this specific example.

Many of the white participants had never seen it before, and were thus shocked. As Clutch, a white male participant said, “I’ve never seen anything like that before, you know, like in public especially. I have not been exposed to that type of racially motivated anger and so it’s just like. . .” When asked to discuss how he felt about the Richards clip, Tat, a white male participant, explained how “I had never actually seen it. I knew that it had happened, but I hadn’t seen the recording, I didn’t know how terrible it was. . . I couldn’t even believe it. I was shocked. I was like, this guy—I even watched Seinfeld last week and I saw him on the show and I was like this guy is such an asshole, I couldn’t believe it. I was like this guy, he’s just full of hate. It shocked me so much” (Tat). Samantha, a white female, said, “I just couldn’t believe it. That it was happening” (Samantha). Such shock and disbelief illustrates a colorblind ideology because of how unbelievable this portrayal of hate and racism is to these participants. It shows how they have been blind to how racism still exists, for they cannot believe it when it actually occurs and comes surging out. This example of vehement hatred and evocation of racist feeling that our society considered to only now exist in the past disturbed and horrified them because of how they had been living within the ideological realm where “true” racism no longer existed. Richards was terrible proof that such racism rests not far beneath the surface, that it is not dead.

The participants of color, on the other hand, were not surprised after watching Richard’s racist rant. This is due to how, first of all, they had seen the clip before. This in itself points to how race and racial issues are so much better known to people of color because of how it personally affects them. They cannot remain ignorant of such things because these situations affect how race is viewed in this society, which affects how they are viewed. Eli, a black male, describes the first time he saw this clip and how it personally affected him:

I was in high school when that came out. I remember cuz one of my teachers was talking about it the next day and he was like. . . he snapped. As a black man, it’s like Kramer,

you racist piece of shit, (laughs) you know? I went to school the next day and my teacher who is a black man he was like, I can't enjoy Seinfeld anymore. He was like, you robbed me of that. Thank you Kramer, that's real nice of you. But, he [Kramer] was frustrated, it was a hard night, and he snapped. But then, the way he snapped, racializing it in a really ugly way. I literally, when I watch Seinfeld now, I can't laugh when Kramer walks in anymore. It's not funny (E).

Shabaz, a black male, shared a similar story and explained what he had first thought:

Well, you know, I love Seinfeld. And, and it actually was, I have watched every episode like five times. And when that actually happened we all had this moment, we didn't say anything but it was just... you know it's just like... Damn that's Kramer. And I still love the show, but it was just like, not that Kramer was ever an idol you know, Kramer is not an idol but you know, when you watch TV you sort of like umm, you develop this.. you love the characters you know? And so I specifically remember like seeing that video and it brought me back to like that first experience where I was just like, Wow in that moment of like pure rage, this thing just came out and it was like, it was a very ugly thing, you know?

Michael Richards's attack on those men of color in the club felt like an attack to both Shabaz and Eli themselves because he had portrayed such hate against people of their race. During the rant Richards says things like "What are they going to arrest me for calling a black man a nigger?" and "That's what happens when you interrupt the white man, don't you know?" In doing so, he was evoking powerful images of racist U.S. history.

Secondly, their lack of shock was also due to how they see this sort of racism in their own lives. It is not unheard of today either in the jokes they hear or in the way people treat them one-on-one. Eli explains:

The big difference between Michael Richards and most other dudes I know in Rocky is, they don't have a camera on them when they slip up. And people don't know them, don't know them from being famous. You know? Cuz to me when I watch that it's not like an anomaly. It's just bringing the conversation to the forefront. Alright? Because, you know, I mean we all know people in our personal lives, I mean, I don't know, maybe everybody you know is wonderful and a delightful person, I hope so. But I know too many people in my personal life who get mad and say things like, 'He is being such a, you know, N word,' and 'O sorry [E], na I don't mean it like that, you know, I don't'". . . No, I don't know. I don't want to know, keep walking.

Ricardo, the Latino male agreed when he said, “I mean I have heard a lot of racist, sexist things here in Rocky. Like, even to me, really, it would be a lot worse than what we have just watched . . . I just I mean, I can’t really think of many people, not who snap like this, but who haven’t experienced it.” As these quotes show, this sort of hateful, overt racism is not unheard of for people of color. They are not shocked because they live it. As Eli says, “If you live in the world, the world most black people in America live in. . . that goes on. It’s not like, ‘O that’s the first time I’ve ever heard that one come out in that way.’”

The Michael Richards clip helped draw a definite line between what is funny and what is not during the focus groups. It contrasted sharply with the other clips because when in the context of a joke, people can view that racial humor as not a big deal. The context of humor can cover it up better or excuse why they are laughing. But with an example like Richards, who still fits within the context of humor since he is a comedian and this happened at a comic club, one cannot cover up the hate for it is too obvious, too exposed. And this made the white participants really uncomfortable and awkward, especially since they had to watch it with people of color in the room. Such shock and discomfort shows how white people know they are supposed to view racial hatred with disdain, but jokes allow them to think that perhaps some racial sentiment is okay as long as it is covered up with the joke sentiment. However, Richards helped illustrate how quickly overt, ugly racism can surface in a so-called ‘joking’ atmosphere. Given that participants were shown how humor can negatively affect individuals and can be used to cover up overt racist sentiment, during the one-on-one interviews, they were asked if they had or would stand up against racial humor given their new knowledge.

Divergent reactions to the idea of challenging racist humor (being an ally). During the one-on-one interviews, each participant was first asked what the term ‘ally’ means to them and

then, based on that definition, if they have ever been an ally or would ever be an ally in the context of racial humor. In other words, participants were asked if they would ever stand up for someone or to their friends if racial humor were being used, now that, in light of the focus group presentation, they were aware of how racial humor is not always just a joke—it can have pertinent, negative effects. When asked what an ally was, most people, regardless of race, gave the same sort of reply. Jack, a white male respondent defined it as someone “fighting for the same cause that you can rely on.” Samantha, one of the white female respondents said “I think my definition of an ally is just, I don’t know. I think it’s, acting in a way that, you know, that will not . . . continue these bad stereotypes.” And for Eli, a black participant, allies are people who “challenge that shit [stereotypes, racism, homophobia, sexism, etc], all day, every day.” Although most of the participants agreed on what an ally is, there was a distinct divide between the white male and the white female participants’ degree of willingness to be an ally.

When the white male participants were asked if they consider themselves allies, all but one, Jack—the only individual involved in a social justice oriented organization and who travels to other parts of the world where he is not in the majority, said “no.” However, even Jack responded that while he “[thinks] it is important to stand up to jokes like that . . . I think the problem for me is defining that line between poking fun at racism itself and promoting racism through jokes. And sometimes I am not able to distinguish those two.” Tat, the white male participant, responded by saying, “Mmm not typically I suppose. I don’t think that I usually am the type of person who is going to watch any kind of show, whether its *South Park* or *Family Guy* or the *Chappelle Show*, *Tosh.0*, and in the middle of the episode be like, “Hold on guys don’t laugh so quickly because of this..” I’m not the type of person who's going to do that.” Clutch simply said “No. I . . . ya. I probably wouldn’t.” The white male participants also seemed

to view themselves as both not the type to be an ally and also as someone who does not think racial humor is that negative in the context of the groups they hang out in. This can be seen in how, when asked what it would take for them to be an ally in the context of racial humor, Tat said “I think what would have to happen is I would have to agree that what’s being shown or what’s being done is too over the top, it’s too much, it’s too hate fueled, it’s not enough sarcasm fueled, it’s not enough satire fueled. Umm and I think that it actually does take quite a bit to push that boundary in my opinion. . . . But it would just take me feeling like this is too much for me to stand up and tell somebody, ‘Hey before we all laugh at this, lets’ think about it.’” The joke would have to be something that was more overt, that really pushed the boundary of what he, in this instance, considers to be satire. And as Clutch suggests, “One thing that might make me do that you know, is if we were surrounded by people who would be offended that, like, would, where we could be in a dangerous situation because of it. Then I think I might, in out of protection say something, but I mean like, honestly I probably would not be the person to . . .” The joke would have to be creating a situation where there could be the threat of violence. It would have to be, as Jack also suggests, so hateful that it was obviously offensive to the point that someone could be pushed over the edge. In other words, there would have to be a person of color around or be so clearly racist that there is no ambiguity in their minds.

The white, female participants on the other hand, were much more willing to say that they would be willing to try and be an ally if they hadn’t before. One female participant had an example of when she did act as an ally, according to the previous definitions—and no person of color had been present. Wall, when asked if she would become an ally said “I mean I think that is definitely a realistic possibility, and something that I will definitely think about, because of this. This made me more aware that when a joke comes up I could, at least try and engage in

dialogue. Umm and that might, you know, over time, have positive effects.” Rain immediately identified herself as someone who tried to be an ally in order to “[stand] up for that group and understand what issues they face and be able to listen and help them.” And even though at first, Samantha discussed how “for me, sometimes it’s scary in big groups of friends to actually be the one who says something, like ‘guys, it’s not ok.’ And you know that there have been times that you haven’t said it and . . . then you’re like, feel shame, you feel guilt. You didn’t say anything, you just let it happen . . . Because then it’s kind of like, why didn’t you stop that? Why didn’t you say anything?” After saying this and making it seem like she is often too afraid to be an ally, Samantha revealed a story about when she was an ally in a situation that could be considered risky. As Samantha describes:

There was one time when I was on an airplane and these two douchebags, these two guys sitting in the seat in front of me. . . And for so long and they were just watching a TV show on the airplane, just drinking, just making all these comments, you know, and just so loudly. And they were just, every single thing came out of their mouth was something offensive about like every like, gay people , women, black people, Asian, and I was just like in disbelief. You know? And then I was just like, I cannot not say something and like I am the one who can say something like, all these other people are too far away and probably too like scared. So I was so tired so I had no more inhibitions (laughs). I was just like, you need to stop. I felt like very brave and very empowered to do that. They were mad and they called me a bitch. . . at first they like quieted down after that, like they went silent. And then I heard them like being like ‘O this bitch, blah blah blah.’ And I just didn’t care and I just put on my headphones, but it was still, I mean like obviously I cared. It was a very high stress moment where I was like I gotta say something and then I did it and I was just like ‘You guys are just so terrible that I don’t feel bad . . .’ I just kind of leaned forward through the seats and whispered like, ‘Excuse Me.’ And like haha. And afterwards when we landed and they got out of their seats and were like taking their stuff down and they both liked stared me down and I just smiled at them and was just like, ‘I’m never going to see you again.’ But of course I was scared I was going to see them at baggage claim (laughter).

As seen here, this woman felt compelled to speak up, even though there was no person of color around, because she felt the jokes themselves were damaging enough. And although it took her some time to convince herself to do it, the way the two men were using racial humor pushed her

over her edge. As she and, later, Ricardo both explain, racial humor is not necessarily about someone else getting hurt or offended by the joke, it is about what such perpetuation by the joker does to that person, and to anyone who hears it. As Samantha says,

I think that even if there is no victim it's still, you don't wanna have that kind of...and I know these people don't hate, necessarily, but it is, it is, it comes from a hateful place and to make light of it just seems so wrong. And it's hard to exactly pinpoint you know, because when it's a victimless crime. . . But I think that that it doesn't matter because when you are when you're making it seem okay, even with your friends, you might start developing even subconsciously, this kind of like otherness towards other people

During his interview, Ricardo, the Latino male says, continues along the same lines when he says that "the problem is that when you do tell these jokes, it's like a tape that keeps going on. And the stereotypes keep forming. They start forming and the problem is when you aren't able to make the distinction and fit these stereotypes and think about people in these ways when you are by yourself." And this is something the white males seem to not recognize. They seem to see racial humor as something that cannot touch them, only others, when instead they should be viewing their use of it as something negative that they are perpetuating within themselves.

The example of an actual ally, as given by Shabaz, a black male participant, helps highlight the importance and impact such allyship can have on another person, besides even one's self. This narrative was given after being asked the question "what does being an ally mean to you."

O what is an ally? You know it's someone that...you know actually I have this friend [Nancy]. You know? And you know I guess she was an ally because you know I'm uncomfortable, you know when I feel like my personal security is at stake I'm uncomfortable with umm sticking up because I'm just like 'Hey! Today might be the pitchfork day' (laughs). Umm but you know that song, "Damn it feels good to be a gangster. A real gangster ass n----plays his cards right...a real gangster ass n--- The N word. They say that word in every line in this song. So it's just like when that song comes on, I tense up.' O boy here we go again, will they. . .?' And then they start rapping to it. We are in the car it's just three of us. . .They are all white. . .Um so the song starts, they go 'damn it feels good to be a gangster. A real gangster ass nigger plays his cards right.'

And you know it's not even like a big deal, it's like, they just keep going the WHOLE song and I'm just back there, I'm just like (sigh). Man I feel unsafe, insecure, you know? . . . There was not even like a question, you know? It wasn't even like a -hup-. . . Nope none of that. And [Nancy] actually like starts, she was just like 'What?! Whoa.' And SHE was like 'Hey, you guys can't do that.' And SHE was engaging in a debate with them about it. And I just stayed silent, you know?"

When asked if he appreciated that, Shabaz responded:

O I did a lot. A very lot. A very, very lot. I had never thanked her or anything but. You know, now that I think about it, that's an ally. Because like the reason I don't say it is because I feel like umm, you know that's the thing about stereotypes. You feel boxed in, ya. As soon as I start talking it's like, 'O I'm just the black guy who's playing the race card.' And I don't, I do not like my words to be boxed or coined or ah fucking chosen for me. And whenever I feel like that, I shut down. I don't like that. I take myself out of the equation, cuz I will NOT be enslaved to the words of the past (all in emphasis) ok? So you know what, that was an ally.

Nancy's allyship enabled Shabaz to not only feel more secure, like someone was looking out for him and was sensitive to his position in the car at the time, but also allowed him to not have to "play the race card" or be the annoying black guy who always has to bring up race and discrimination, which is viewed very negatively today in our 'post race' society. Her act of standing up impacted him and made him feel less insecure.

Such allyship gives people hope. Our society needs people who, as Shabaz says, are "fighting the good fight." And even though this fight can seem so huge and overwhelming, you "want people even though they are losing." However, as Eli, another black male, points out, becoming an ally and challenging people in situations when, for example, racial humor comes up, is not easy to do. You have to work at it every day and change the very way you interact and critically engage with people on a day to day basis in order to every really challenge anything. It has to be something you choose to do and you feel strongly about. As he describes:

I can't, you can't force somebody to do it. Right? It has to be a self willed thing. In a way. All you can do is present the information and hope they get something out of it. But, I have seen this happen too many times. I'm in classes all the time where people talk about these things and learn and get all this . . . wonderful language to express this stuff

and obviously don't take it seriously. They don't have that self reflexive component. . . Because, it's more comfortable to your life the way it is already. To actually critically look at it, to critically engage in it, in a very honest way, that shit is painful. That shit is painful. I'm just being honest. It's painful, it's uncomfortable. . . It's a process. Because it's going to put you against your parents, it might put you against you're your whole social circle. It might put you against your friends, people who have known your whole life. So, to do that work, is to get up and make that decision for yourself, and you can't force somebody to do that. I don't know how, I wish I could tell you. If I figure out that magic potion, this whole campus would be different. But that's not the world I'm living in. . .

As seen in mainly the white male participants' responses to becoming allies, this is not work that some people want to embark upon, for it is work that requires looking inward in order to change certain aspects about yourself. Such introspection, such self-reflexivity can be painful and, as Eli says, many people simply do not want to do it "Because it's more comfortable to your life the way it is already. To actually critically look at it, to critically engage in it, in a very honest way, that shit is painful." In fact, besides not wanting to do all the work that it takes to become an ally, the white male participants did not even seem to have any qualms about not being an ally, while the women seemed to struggle more ethically with this and experience guilt if they felt they had not spoken up. Furthermore, the white male participants used the so called blurriness or inability to determine when a joke had crossed the line from funny to racist in order to excuse how they admit to not behaving like allies.

A major concern for everyone, including the women, in deciding to challenge the behavior and actions of their friends was that they would ruin the fun or bring down the party. That they would, in essence, be the "Debbie Downer." As Clutch says, ". . . I think it might be like annoying or offensive to those people [to tell them to stop making those jokes]." Wall also feels the same way when she says "we all know when you are like in a social situation it's hard to be the one who's like the annoying one who is like, 'Hey guys, that's not cool.'" Both of these quotes point to the fear or discomfort that goes along with standing up against friends,

family, etc, and being considered lame or too sensitive. They point to a lack of moral courage, especially when it comes to the topic of race, which is already so touchy. Instead of standing up against these potentially dangerous stereotypes that are being made tolerable in young adult's minds through racial humor, it is easier to simply let them go or go along with them. As Clutch, a white male participant, says,

It takes courage to stand up against people's attitudes, in general. Like if somebody is saying something that you don't agree with or that you think is wrong, it's hard, it's easy to just kind of like, pretend that you didn't hear it or something and just kind of like let it pass so that like, it's just like. . . That's a really difficult situation I think to like stand up and say 'Hey that's not right.'"

Most of the participants seem aware of the risks and oppressive nature of racial humor. However, it appears that a combination of both fear to stand up against a group or to not conform to your friends' humor and ways of behaving, as well as the taboo that has been constructed against talking about race, have coalesced to make allyship in the context of racial humor, which does not necessarily have to be overt racism, something that many white individuals lack the courage to undertake.

CONCLUSION

As we have seen throughout this paper, there is an absence of color blindness within our society despite the existence of a color blind ideology. In other words, race still matters. However, because people are supposed to be color blind and no longer see or discuss race, this prevents both white individuals and people of color from having meaningful conversations about race; as a consequence of a colorblind ideology, they lack the discursive and emotional tools to discuss race and address racism. Unfortunately, this even occurs for those who do want to address racism or who are more open to recognizing issues of inequality and privilege. As we saw, the white individuals in this study, in some contexts were partially willing to recognize their

privilege and acknowledge the existence of racism. However, because colorblind ideology has inhibited race talk, they felt they could not ask questions or really discuss issues, for fear of offending and being considered racist. The people of color understood whites' lack of personal experience with being the subject of racism, and thus did not necessarily feel that anything they said would make a difference, or have any real impact. They also recognize that, in order to truly understand and combat racism, a high price would have to be paid, as becoming an ally and discarding unfair privilege requires extensive personal work and may strain relationships between old friends and family members. Some participants of color were also reluctant to participate in racial discussion because of negative past experiences between themselves and other white individuals during discussions of race.

Color blindness, something that has been instilled within our society in order to evade the difficult topic of race, and has recently been given fuel by the election of Barack Obama, has created significant barriers that prevent racial understanding and acceptance. Instead of preventing racism, colorblindness and the notion of a "post race" society has ignored and cloaked the racism that is still prevalent today. It also perpetuates the privilege white people have for if there is no racism, than white privilege is inherent, not constructed. However, the fact that most of the participants within this study were able to recognize some of their privilege shows how they were not buying into the ideology of colorblindness completely, and this may be true for other college aged individuals. But since most were unable or unwilling to change their position or the way they deal with racial issues, they have thus still been hurt by their privilege.

The participants all expressed the desire to understand and appreciate one another's differences. But because they have been taught to not discuss race, and thus can only really talk about race in the context of racial humor—which, on the whole, only perpetuates racist

stereotypes and ideology due to the lack of critical engagement and correct use of satire— damage is done to all peoples. The damage done to whites is that they are not able to live up to their own convictions of being against racism. Because of how, in the context of racial humor, they tend to not speak up in ally type of situations (especially the white males due in part to fears related to peer pressure), this constantly keeps them in a dishonest relationship with themselves. By not standing up for the sort of ideology that they believe in, that racism is wrong, they are not standing up for themselves. People are damaged for having to maintain a contradiction of who they really want to be. Colorblindness also hurts people of color, albeit in a different way. They still must live in a society made up of people who have not taken the steps towards true understanding and equality, and thus, for some, feel unable to open up to the white population.

Such distrust further perpetuates the unease and insecurity that people of color feel about opening up in discussions of race because of how they do not see any real action being taken on behalf of white individuals to truly try to change themselves in order to create a world where difference is the norm. Colorblind ideology continues the norm of white privilege because it makes discussing the racial situation of today taboo, thus making it seem like racism is no longer a problem. As Eli, one of the participants of color, said during his interview;

And that's the problem with this new racism where people will tell you, 'O no, no I like umm Obama,' or 'I like such and such' and what not—this exceptionalism. The exception is just a rule waiting to be borne out. You will be watched every second of everyday until you can fuck up, right? And the problem is, the rule still stands. If you are trying to talk about how to break down the rule, you know, then you talking about centuries of American legacy. And good luck trying to convince people on that. You know? People take their America real seriously and don't want to remember all the ugly shit. So, good luck.

Obama being elected was an exception, not an end to race in America. A black kid who is not caught stealing a purse is an exception in the eyes of many white Americans, not the norm.

As Eli says, as soon as a person of color messes up, their race is the first thing we will know. Just because we claim to be color blind does not mean we are and just because we do not feel comfortable talking about race does not mean that we are not thinking about it. And, as this study shows, the prolific use of racial humor and discomfort with discussing it stands testament to the falsehood and damaging consequences of color blind ideology.

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Appendix

Participant Demographics:

Rain: White, female, age 22

Ricardo: Latino, born in Venezuela, male, age 21

Eli: Black, African born, male, age 22

Wall: White, female, age 22

Samantha: White, female, age 21

Clutch: White, male, 23

Jack: White, male, 22

Shabaz: Black, African born, male, age 20

Tat: White, male, age 24