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More Than “Just a Joke”: The Prejudice-Releasing Function of Sexist Humor

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The results of two experiments supported the hypothesis that, for sexist men, exposure to sexist humor can promote the behavioral release of prejudice against women. Experiment 1 demonstrated that hostile sexism predicted the amount of money participants were willing to donate to a women's organization after reading sexist jokes but not after reading nonhumorous sexist statements or neutral jokes. Experiment 2 showed that hostile sexism predicted the amount of money participants cut from the budget of a women's organization relative to four other student organizations upon exposure to sexist comedy skits but not neutral comedy skits. A perceived local norm of approval of funding cuts for the women's organization mediated the relationship between hostile sexism and discrimination against the women's organization.

Keywords: *sexist humor; hostile sexism; norms; prejudice*

A thousand bawdy, or even blasphemous, jokes do not help towards a man's damnation so much as his discovery that almost anything he wants to do can be done, not only without disapproval but with the admiration of his fellows, if only it can get itself treated as a joke.

—C. S. Lewis (1942, p. 56)

Humor, as a medium of communication, changes the manner in which we interpret a given message. The levity of humor invites us to treat a sentiment, whether

decent or reprehensible, as a matter of play. Sexist humor—the denigration of women through humor—for instance, trivializes sex discrimination under the veil of benign amusement, thus precluding challenges or opposition that nonhumorous sexist communication would likely incur. In the present research, we explored an important social consequence of exposure to sexist humor. We considered the possibility that sexist humor is not simply benign amusement, that it can affect men's perception of the immediate social context and thus promote behavioral expressions of sexism without fears of disapproval of their “fellows.” Specifically, we propose that sexist humor acts as a “releaser” of prejudice, that is, for men who have antagonistic attitudes toward women, sexist humor allows them to express their sexism by replacing the usual nonsexist norms in a situation with a norm of tolerance of sex discrimination. Sexist humor essentially justifies a wider range of negative responses toward women. In this climate tolerant of derision, sexist behavior can be more easily justified as falling within the bounds of social acceptability.

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Social Norms as Releasers of Prejudice

Crandall and Eshleman's (2003) justification-suppression model (JSM) of prejudice suggests that people express prejudice only after engaging in a process of suppression and justification. That is, internal forces (e.g., personal standards, religious beliefs) and/or external forces (nonprejudiced norms) motivate people to suppress the expression of prejudice. As a result, people express prejudice only when it seems legitimate to do so in the particular context. Justifications allow people to express an otherwise suppressed prejudice without feeling self-directed negative affect (e.g., guilt, shame) or fearing negative social sanctions. Accordingly, Crandall and Eshleman refer to justifications as "releasers" of prejudice.

Contemporary models of racism (e.g., Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986) have identified social norms as an important source of suppression and release of prejudice. Gaertner and Dovidio (1986), for instance, suggested that people are most likely to release racial prejudice when the norms in a given context are "weak, ambiguous or conflicting" (p. 66). Under such conditions, discriminatory behavior can be easily defined as tolerable and thus not likely to elicit social reprisals.

The perception that relevant ingroup members share one's attitudes creates a normative standard that, in turn, may be used to guide one's own expressions of prejudice (e.g., Blanchard, Crandall, Brigham, & Vaughn, 1994; Blanchard, Lilly, & Vaughn, 1991; Sechrist & Stangor, 2001; Sechrist, Stangor, & Killen, 2005; Stangor, Sechrist, & Jost, 2001). For instance, Blanchard et al. (1994) exposed participants to a confederate's opinions regarding how their college should respond to certain racist incidents. Participants heard the confederate either condemn or condone the racist incidents. Relative to participants in the control condition (who were not aware of the confederate's responses), participants who first heard the confederate condemn the racist incidents expressed more antiracist opinions of the incidents; participants who first heard the confederate condone the incidents expressed less antiracist opinions.

Sechrist and Stangor (2001) demonstrated that perceptions of social norms also influence overt behavior. Participants who were high or low in racial prejudice were given information that other students at their university either shared or did not share their racial beliefs. Participants were then given the opportunity to sit next to an African American person. High-prejudiced participants sat farther away from the African American target person when they believed their prejudice was consensual—when they perceived a shared prejudiced norm—than when they believed it was not consensual.

Disparagement humor is an important medium through which the norms of the immediate social context can be changed. Humor invokes a conversational rule of levity, that is, humor communicates an implicit message to the receiver that the usual rules of logic and expectations of common sense do not apply. When presented with a joke, people do not evaluate the underlying message with the usual critical, literal mind-set; they abandon the standard serious mode of information processing (Attardo, 1993; Berlyne, 1972; Gruner, 1997; McGhee, 1972; Mulkay, 1988). Berlyne (1972), for instance, stated that

humor is accompanied by discriminative cues, which indicate that what is happening, or is going to happen, should be taken as a joke. The ways in which we might react to the same events in the absence of these cues become inappropriate and must be withheld. (p. 56)

By trivializing the derision of social groups, disparagement humor communicates an implicit norm that it is acceptable to relax the usual critical reactions to discrimination and treat it in a light-hearted, noncritical manner. If the receiver accepts the disparagement as "only a joke," that is, switches to a noncritical mind-set, then he or she tacitly assents to the normative standard that, in this context, it is acceptable to make light of expressions of prejudice (Bill & Naus, 1992; Fine, 1983; Francis, 1988; Khoury, 1985). Bill and Naus (1992), for instance, found that men rated sexist events as "acceptable" and "harmless" when they perceived the incidents as humorous (i.e., when they switched to a nonserious humor mind-set to interpret the events).

The receiver may, however, reject or challenge the implied normative standard of trivialization (Apte, 1987; Attardo, 1993; Francis, 1988; Mannell, 1977; Se'v'er & Ungar, 1997). The receiver's rejection of disparagement humor prevents the emergence of a shared norm of tolerance of discrimination against the targeted group. As a result, the receiver will likely react to other instances of discrimination according to the usual nonprejudiced norms of conduct (Ford, 2000, Experiments 2 and 3).

Norms, Self-Regulation, and Individual Differences in Prejudice

People differentially rely on social norms as guides for regulating their own behavior. People who are high in prejudice tend to have more weakly internalized, nonprejudiced convictions compared to people who are low in prejudice (Monteith, Devine, & Zuwerink, 1993). They are primarily motivated by external forces (social norms) to respond without prejudice (e.g., Devine, Monteith, Zuwerink, & Elliot 1991; Devine,

Plant, Amodio, Harmon-Jones, & Vance, 2002; Plant & Devine, 1998). As a result, the responses of people high in prejudice are more likely to be influenced by social norms (Monteith, Deneen, & Tooman, 1996; Wittenbrink & Henly, 1996). High-prejudiced people suppress prejudice when the norms in a given context dictate restraint; they release prejudice when the prevailing norms communicate approval to do so.

Wittenbrink and Henly (1996) found that people high in racial prejudice reported more prejudiced attitudes on the Modern Racism Scale (MRS) in the context of a prejudiced normative standard (i.e., when they believed other students had given prejudiced responses on the MRS) than in the context of nonprejudiced standards (i.e., when they believed that other students had given nonprejudiced responses on the MRS). Participants low in prejudice, however, were unaffected by the perceived normative standard. In addition, Plant and Devine (1998) showed that people who are primarily motivated by external sources of self-regulation—people who score high on their external motivation to respond without prejudice scale (EMS) and low on their internal motivation to respond without prejudice scale (IMS)—tend to suppress prejudice responses when they perceive that others will disapprove of the expression of prejudice.

Similar to people who are high in other forms of prejudice, people who are high in hostile sexism—antagonism toward women (Glick & Fiske, 1996)—are motivated to suppress prejudice against women to avoid social sanctions rather than because of internalized standards or convictions. Ford and Lorion (2000) found that scores on Glick and Fiske's (1996) hostile sexism scale were related to scores on versions of Plant and Devine's (1998) IMS and EMS, which assessed motivation to respond without prejudice toward women. Hostile sexism was positively related to scores on the EMS and negatively related to scores on the IMS.

Because people who are high in hostile sexism are primarily externally motivated to respond without prejudice, they are more likely to assent to the norm implied by sexist humor that it is acceptable to make light of sex discrimination and not take it seriously in the immediate context. Indeed, research shows that people approve of sexist humor to the extent that they have sexist attitudes (e.g., Butland & Ivy, 1990; Greenwood & Isbell, 2002; Henkin & Fish, 1986; LaFrance & Woodzicka, 1998). Furthermore, people high in hostile sexism should be more responsive to the emergent local norm as a source of self-regulation. In keeping with this hypothesis, Ford, Wentzel, and Lorion (2001) found that upon exposure to sexist jokes, men who were high in hostile sexism were more likely than those who were low in hostile sexism to perceive a norm of tolerance of sexism in the immediate context, and they were more likely to use that

norm to guide their own reactions to a sexist event. When asked to imagine themselves as managers who had made sexist remarks to a new female employee, men who were high in hostile sexism reported feeling less guilt and shame when they had first read sexist jokes than when they had read nonhumorous sexist statements or neutral jokes. This effect was mediated by perceptions of normative tolerance of sexism.

The Present Research: Overview and Hypotheses

Research has demonstrated that for men high in hostile sexism, sexist humor can have important social consequences. To this point, however, research has been limited to examining the effect of sexist humor on perceptions of sexist events or sentiments (e.g., Ford, 2000; Ryan & Kanjorski, 1998) or more recently on self-reported rape proclivity (Viki, Thoma, & Hamid, 2006). The present research, thus, builds on previous investigations by addressing the important question of whether exposure to sexist humor can actually foster sexist behavior among men.

As mentioned earlier, we propose that sexist humor acts as a releaser of prejudice. Accordingly, we conducted two experiments to test the following hypotheses. First, to the extent that men are high in hostile sexism, they should be more willing to express prejudice against women upon exposure to sexist humor but not upon exposure to neutral humor or nonhumorous sexist material.¹ Second, we hypothesized that upon exposure to sexist humor the relationship between hostile sexism and behavioral expressions of sexism is mediated by a perceived local norm of tolerance (approval) of discrimination against women.

Experiment 1 provides an initial test of our first hypothesis using a role-play procedure in which we measured men's hypothetical behavioral responses to a women's organization. Experiment 2 provides a more rigorous test of both hypotheses by examining actual behavior as well as the role that perceived norms play in mediating the relationship between hostile sexism and behavioral expressions of sexism.

EXPERIMENT 1

One approach to the study of expressions of prejudice is through the examination of willingness to help others (e.g., Crosby, Bromley, & Saxe, 1980; Frey & Gaertner, 1986; Gaertner & Bickman, 1971). Frey and Gaertner (1986), for instance, found that White participants' "helping discriminated against Black recipients only . . . when failure to help would not be regarded as particularly inappropriate" (p. 1083).

In accordance with this line of research, we tested our first hypothesis in Experiment 1 by investigating whether men's level of hostile sexism is negatively related to their reported willingness to help a women's organization upon exposure to sexist humor. We asked male participants to imagine that they were members of a work group in an organization. In this context, they either read sexist jokes, comparable nonhumorous sexist statements, or neutral (nonsexist) jokes. They were subsequently asked to report how much money they would be willing to donate to help a women's organization. We expected to find a significant negative relationship between hostile sexism and the amount of money participants would be willing to donate to the women's organization after reading sexist jokes but not after reading sexist statements or neutral jokes.

Method

Participants and design. Seventy-three male undergraduate students enrolled in sociology courses participated in exchange for extra course credit. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions (sexist jokes, sexist statements, neutral jokes).

Procedure. The study was conducted in two phases. In the first phase, we administered a measure of individual differences in hostile sexism using Glick and Fiske's (1996) Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI) to students as they were seated in their classrooms. We introduced the questionnaire as the "Social Attitudes Survey," allegedly designed to assess attitudes about a variety of social issues. The ASI is composed of 22 statements, 11 of which specifically measure hostile sexism—antagonism toward women. For each item, participants indicated their agreement on a 6-point scale (ranging from 0 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). The hostile sexism scale includes statements such as, "women seek to gain power by getting control over men" and "many women are actually seeking special favors, such as hiring policies that favor them over men, under the guise of asking for equality."

The experimenter returned to the participants' classrooms 2 to 4 weeks later to conduct a supposedly unrelated study on perceptions of social interactions that involve communication behavior. Participants were given a booklet containing four vignettes describing interactions among a group of staff members in the distribution department of a local newspaper. Participants were asked to role-play, that is, to imagine themselves in each situation watching the interactions as they occurred. Participants were then instructed to complete their booklet individually.

The first and third vignettes described nonsexist "filler" interactions to reduce suspicion of the true

purpose of the study. The second vignette contained the communication manipulation (sexist jokes, sexist statements, neutral jokes). In each of the humorous communication conditions, the second vignette began with the statement, "After Cindy's story (from the first vignette), the group discussion gave way to a giddy exchange of the staff members' favorite jokes. Here are a few of those jokes."

Participants in the sexist joke condition then read one neutral joke followed by four sexist jokes. The sexist jokes required the recipient to know various female stereotypes or gender role stereotypes to "get" the punch lines (e.g., "How can you tell if a blonde's been using the computer? There's White-Out on the screen!" and "A man and a woman were stranded in an elevator and they knew they were gonna die. The woman turns to the man and says, 'Make me feel like a woman before I die.' So he takes off his clothes and says, 'Fold them!'"). Participants in the neutral joke condition read five neutral (nonsexist) jokes (e.g., "What's the difference between a golfer and a skydiver? A golfer goes whack . . . 'Damn!' A skydiver goes 'Damn!' . . . whack"). Pretest ratings indicated that participants perceived the sexist jokes as more sexist but equally as funny as the neutral jokes (see Ford, 2000).

The vignette for the sexist statement condition began with the statement, "After Cindy's story, the group discussion gave way to an exchange of some rather serious social commentaries. The following statements are excerpts from that discussion." The sexist statement condition also included an additional note that although some of the statements may have been taken out of context, they reflect each person's actual belief or attitude. Participants then read one neutral statement and four sexist statements. Each statement conveyed the same message content as the corresponding sexist joke but in a serious manner (e.g., "I know blonde women are often the subject of jokes but I think it's well deserved. They, women that is, really are less intelligent!" and "I just think that a woman's place is in the home and that it's a woman's role to do domestic duties such as laundry for her man"). Pretest ratings suggest that the sexist statements were perceived as equally sexist but as less funny than the sexist jokes. See Ford (2000) for a description of the pretest ratings.

After reading the vignette, participants answered the following questions: "How humorous is this situation?" and "How offensive are the jokes/statements in this situation?" Responses were made on scales ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very*).

The fourth vignette contained the following description:

The National Council of Women is an organization committed to serving and promoting the political and

social advancement of women and women's issues. It has just released "The ABC's of Women's Issues." The Council is soliciting donations from you and your coworkers in the distribution department.

Participants were again asked to imagine themselves in the context of this newspaper group and to report how much money they would be willing to donate to the National Council of Women. Participants were constrained to donating between \$0 and \$20.

Finally, participants were asked to write at least one sentence indicating their reactions to the study. Based on these responses, no participants expressed suspicion of the true purpose of the study and therefore no data were excluded from analyses.

Results

Previous research on the relationship between hostile sexism and responses to sexist humor has treated hostile sexism as a categorical variable in an analysis of variance based on a median split on the hostile sexism scale (e.g., Ford, 2000; Ford et al., 2001; Greenwood & Isbell, 2002). We, however, followed the recommendations of Aiken and West (1991) and MacCallum, Zhang, Preacher, and Rucker (2002) and treated scores on the hostile sexism scale as a continuous variable in regression analyses (see also Thomas & Esses, 2004). Furthermore, in all of the regression analyses that follow, we standardized hostile sexism scores to guard against multicollinearity with interaction terms (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003).

We hypothesized that there would be a significant negative relationship between hostile sexism and the amount of money participants would be willing to donate to the women's organization after reading sexist jokes but not after reading sexist statements or neutral jokes. To test this hypothesis, we followed the procedures recommended by Jaccard, Turrisi, and Wan (1990). We first created two effect-coded variables to represent the three communication conditions (sexist jokes, sexist statements, neutral jokes). For the first effect-coded variable, we coded the sexist joke condition as "1" and the other two conditions as "-1." For the second, we coded the sexist statement condition as "1" and the other two conditions as "-1." The neutral joke condition was assigned "-1" across both effect-coded variables. Next, we computed interaction terms by multiplying the standardized hostile sexism scores by each effect-coded variable.

Because there were two interaction terms, we tested the significance of the Communication \times Hostile Sexism interaction effect by performing a hierarchical rather than a simultaneous regression analysis (Jaccard et al., 1990). In Step 1 of the analyses, we regressed the amount willing to donate onto the standardized hostile sexism

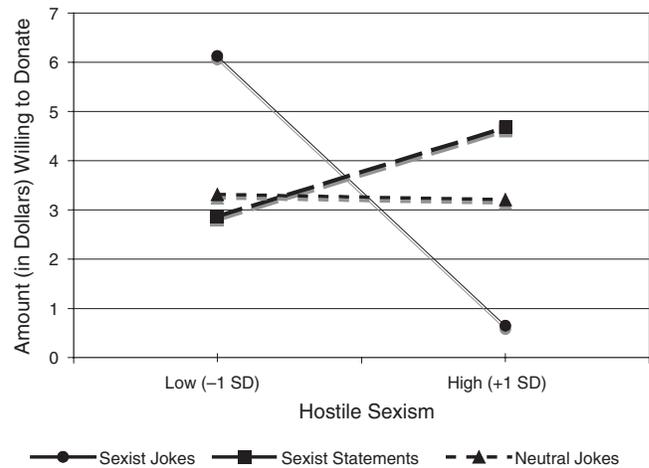


Figure 1 Regression lines predicting the amount of money (in dollars) participants were willing to donate to the women's organization as a function of type of communication condition and standardized hostile sexism scores in Experiment 1.

scores and the two effect-coded variables that represented the three communication conditions. The main-effects-only model was not significant, $R^2 = .03$, $F(3, 69) < 1$. In Step 2, we added the interaction terms. The full model was significant, $R^2_{ch} = .12$, $F(3, 67) = 6.73$, $p < .01$, indicating that there was a significant Communication \times Hostile Sexism interaction effect. Figure 1 illustrates this interaction effect, plotting the predicted means for the amount of money participants reported they would donate to the women's organization as a function of the communication variable at 1 SD above and 1 SD below the mean standardized hostile sexism score.

Supporting our hypothesis, simple slope analyses revealed a significant negative relationship between hostile sexism and amount of money participants were willing to donate to a women's organization in the sexist joke condition ($\beta = -.72$, $t = -4.98$, $p < .01$) but not in the sexist statement condition ($\beta = .23$, $t = 1.06$, $p = .30$) or in the neutral joke condition ($\beta = -.01$, $t = -.07$, ns). The slope in the sexist joke condition was significantly different from those in the neutral joke condition, $t(67) = -2.95$, $p < .05$, and in the sexist statement condition, $t(67) = 3.59$, $p < .01$. Participants reported a willingness to donate less money to a women's organization to the extent that they were high in hostile sexism upon exposure to sexist jokes but not upon exposure to sexist statements or neutral jokes.²

Discussion

The results of Experiment 1 support our first hypothesis. We found a strong negative relationship between

hostile sexism and amount of money participants reported they would donate to the women's organization after reading sexist jokes but not after reading either sexist statements or neutral jokes. Men higher in hostile sexism expressed their sexism by reporting less willingness to help or benefit a women's organization only in the sexist joke condition.

These findings cannot easily be explained as merely a priming effect apart from the role of humor. As described in the Method section, pretest ratings indicated that the sexist jokes and sexist statements communicated a comparable degree of sexism. Thus, if the sexist content of the sexist jokes simply primed negative sentiments or a chronic motivation to behave in a sexist manner, then similar results should have emerged in the sexist joke and sexist statement conditions.

Rather, the findings are consistent with the proposition from Ford and Ferguson's (2004) prejudiced norm theory that for people high in prejudice, humorous disparagement can create the perception of a shared norm of tolerance of discrimination that may be used to guide their own responses in the immediate context. To the extent that people are high in prejudice, they should be more likely to assent to disparagement humor's unique "meta-message" that expressions of prejudice need not be taken seriously and thus perceive a shared prejudiced norm in the immediate context (Ford et al., 2001).

Although the findings of Experiment 1 are consistent with our first hypothesis, they have important limitations. Most notably, the dependent measure was limited to imagined behavior; we did not assess actual donations to the women's organization. Second, we did not measure the performance of negative or harmful behavior. Thus, it is not clear whether the relationship between hostile sexism and behavioral expressions of sexism extends to actual negative acts of sex discrimination. Third, in Experiment 1, we did not address the process or mechanism that mediates the relationship between hostile sexism and expressions of sexism upon exposure to sexist humor. Recall that we hypothesized that the relationship between hostile sexism and the behavioral expression of sexism should be mediated by a perceived local norm of tolerance (approval) of discrimination against women.

EXPERIMENT 2

Experiment 2 was designed to address the limitations of Experiment 1. Specifically, 1 to 2 weeks after completing Glick and Fiske's (1996) hostile sexism scale in their classrooms, male students participated in a laboratory study in which they watched either sexist or non-sexist comedy skits in small groups. We presented sexist

and neutral humor in the form of video clips of stand-up comedy routines and comedy skits rather than in the form of written jokes as was common in previous research (e.g., Ford, 2000; Ford et al., 2001; Greenwood & Isbell, 2002; Ryan & Kanjorski, 1998; Thomas & Esses, 2004). This was intended to reduce the potential threat to construct validity that arises from the use of a single operationalization of a theoretical independent variable across multiple studies (Wells & Windschitl, 1999).

Participants then completed a separate task in which they allocated budget cuts to five student organizations (including one women's organization). We operationalized discrimination against women as the amount of money cut from the women's organization relative to the others. We predicted that in the sexist humor condition (but not in the neutral humor condition) participants would allocate a higher percentage of the total budget cut to the women's organization insofar as they were high in hostile sexism. Second, we predicted that the relationship between hostile sexism and percentage of budget cuts allocated to the women's organization would be mediated by a perceived norm in the immediate social context of approval of cutting the budget for the women's organization.

Method

Participants and design. Thirty male undergraduate students enrolled in sociology courses participated in exchange for extra course credit. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions with type of humor (sexist, neutral) serving as a between-subjects variable.

Procedure. In the first phase of the experiment, we collected a measure of individual differences in hostile sexism using Glick and Fiske's (1996) ASI. As in Experiment 1, we administered the ASI to participants as they were seated in their classrooms, and the experimenter introduced it as the "Social Attitudes Survey," allegedly designed to assess attitudes about a variety of social issues.

Approximately 2 weeks later, we returned to students' classes and recruited male participants to complete a laboratory study in which they would rate the funniness of five comedy skits. We explained that we were examining men's and women's perceptions of the comedy videos separately and that at this time we were recruiting only men.

Male participants arrived at the laboratory in small groups (from three to six). Upon introducing himself and thanking participants for coming, a male experimenter read the following script:

In this session, I would like to invite you to complete two different studies. I'm including them together in the same session because each is relatively brief. I'll give you a brief overview of each study and then invite you to complete each one in turn. The first study is called the video perceptions study. For that study, you will be asked to watch five different comedic video clips. We are pilot testing several different video clips for a study we want to begin running next semester. We need to select funny material for that study so we're asking students this term to view the videos and give us feedback regarding how funny each of them is. So, after you watch each video, I'll ask you to rate its funniness.

Participants then watched five comedic video clips. The sexist humor condition contained four sexist comedy skits and one neutral comedy skit. The neutral skit was included to reduce suspicion of the true purpose of the study. The sexist comedy skits derived humor by depicting women in demeaning, stereotyped roles (e.g., sex objects, subservient housewives, angry feminists). In one skit, for instance, women were humorously portrayed in "wife school" where they learned how to "keep quiet," "stop spending money," and "put their husbands' needs first." The skit included humorous testimonials from both husbands and wives. The neutral humor condition contained five nonsexist comedy skits. Twenty-three pilot participants (12 men, 11 women) who did not participate in the study rated how funny and how sexist each video was using scales ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*). Pretest ratings indicated that the sexist videos were rated as less funny ($M = 4.49$, $SD = 1.05$) than were the neutral videos ($M = 4.98$, $SD = 0.91$), $t(22) = 2.28$, $p < .05$. In addition, the sexist videos were rated as more sexist ($M = 4.34$, $SD = 1.11$) than were the neutral videos ($M = 1.39$, $SD = 0.47$), $t(22) = 15.63$, $p < .01$. Among men only, there was no difference in perceived funniness between the sexist humor videos ($M = 4.96$, $SD = 0.95$) and the neutral humor videos ($M = 4.88$, $SD = 0.99$), $t(11) = 0.49$, *ns*. Also, men rated the sexist videos as more sexist ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 1.04$) than the neutral videos ($M = 1.27$, $SD = 0.32$), $t(11) = 10.08$, $p < .01$.

After participants completed the video perception study, the experimenter invited them to participate in a project designed to determine how the student population believes the university should allocate funding cuts to selected student organizations. Participants were then given booklets containing three pages. The first page introduced the project and provided instructions for allocating budget cuts to the selected student organizations. To ensure clarity, the experimenter read the first page as the participants read along. The first page contained the following passage:

Next year's funding for RSOs [registered student organizations] at WMU [Western Michigan University] have to be cut by 20% (\$24,000) from the 2005-2006 budget of \$120,000. The RSOs that will be affected by the budget cut are listed on the following page. You will be provided with a description of each of those RSOs.

The Western Student Association (WSA), the student governing body, is investigating how the student body believes these funding cuts should be allocated among those organizations. The WSA has commissioned researchers on campus to aid them in determining how the student population wishes the university to allocate the funding cuts. The WSA has given us the form on the next page to be completed by participants in our studies.

Each organization has reported that the 2005-2006 budgets were sufficient in funding their needs. However, each has expressed serious concerns that a 20% decrease will severely curtail their programs and possibly threaten their ability to continue operations.

Your task is to allocate budget cuts so that across the five organizations, the overall RSO budget is reduced by 20% (\$24,000). Allocate budget cuts to the organizations as you see fit. We understand that your budget cuts may not add up to exactly \$24,000. However, please try to match an overall budget cut of \$24,000 as closely as you can. After you complete your budget cut allocations, you will be asked to give your perceptions of how other students might respond.

Keep in mind that your opinions are important. The WSA will use student allocations to make recommendations to the Student Senate, who will represent the student body in the final allocation decisions.

The second page listed five student organizations and their 2005-2006 operating budgets. The names and descriptions of the student organizations were made to sound similar to real registered student organizations on campus. The student organizations and their budgets were listed as follows: Jewish Cultural Collective (\$23,500), Safe Arrival for Everyone (\$22,200), National Student Council of Women (\$24,050), Study Abroad Learning Program (\$26,200), and Michigan Black Student Union (\$24,050). The student organizations were listed in this order for all participants. After allocating budget cuts to each organization, participants were asked to indicate if they were members of any of the organizations and, if so, to indicate which ones. (See the appendix for a complete representation of this page of the booklet.)

The third page contained measures of perceived local norms and perceived general norms of approval of cutting the budget for each organization. To assess local norms, participants were asked, "To what extent do you think *others in the immediate context (those who are joining you in this session)* would approve of cutting funds for each of the RSOs listed below?" For each of the five organizations, participants responded on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disapprove*) to 7

(*strongly approve*). To assess perceived general norms, participants were asked, "To what extent do you think the student population in general would approve cutting funds for each of the RSOs listed below?" Again, for each of the five organizations, participants responded on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disapprove*) to 7 (*strongly approve*).

Finally, participants were probed for suspicion and debriefed. The responses of two participants (one from each condition) indicated suspicion of the true purpose of the study and therefore their data were excluded from analyses.

Results

Budget cut allocations. We predicted that in the sexist humor condition (but not in the neutral humor condition) participants would allocate a higher percentage of the total budget cut to the women's organization insofar as they were high in hostile sexism. We performed a regression analysis to test our prediction. We first effect-coded the humor condition variable (1 = *sexist*, -1 = *neutral*). We then regressed the percentage of the total budget cut allocated to the women's organization simultaneously onto the type of humor variable, hostile sexism, and the Type of Humor \times Hostile Sexism interaction term. This analysis revealed a significant main effect of type of humor ($\beta = -.36$, $t = -2.34$, $p < .05$). Participants in the sexist humor condition did, indeed, allocate a greater percentage of the total funding cuts to the women's organization ($M = 24.22$, $SD = 6.75$) than did participants in the neutral humor condition ($M = 20.42$, $SD = 5.66$). This main effect was qualified by a significant Hostile Sexism \times Type of Humor interaction effect ($\beta = -.35$, $t = -2.07$, $p < .05$). Figure 2 plots the predicted means for the percentage of the total budget cut allocated to the women's organization as a function of the humor condition at 1 *SD* above and 1 *SD* below the mean standardized hostile sexism score.

In the sexist humor condition, hostile sexism scores were positively related to the percentage of budget cuts that participants allocated to the women's organization relative to the others ($\beta = .60$, $t = 2.77$, $p < .05$). In the neutral humor condition, though, hostile sexism did not predict the percentage of the total budget cuts allocated to the women's organization ($\beta = -.12$, $t = -.41$, *ns*).

Finally, hostile sexism was positively related to the percentage of budget cuts allocated to the African American student organization in the neutral humor condition ($r = .58$, $p < .05$). Hostile sexism scores were not significantly related to the percentage of budget cuts allocated to any of the other organizations in either the sexist or neutral humor conditions.

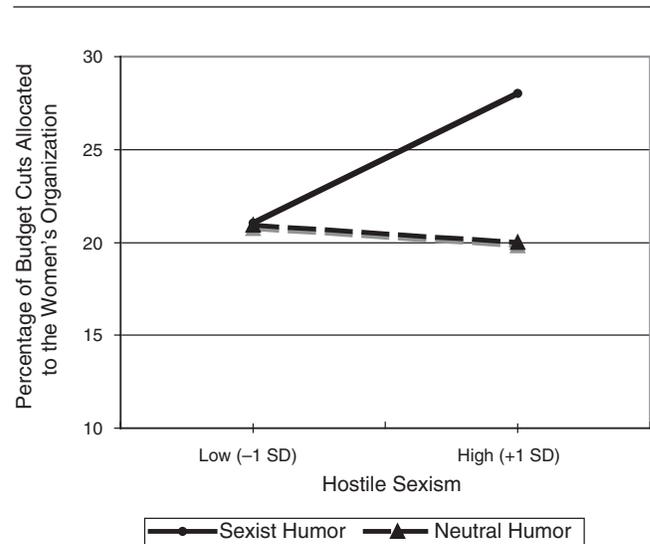


Figure 2 Regression lines predicting the percentage of the total budget cuts allocated to the women's organization as a function of humor condition and standardized hostile sexism scores in Experiment 2.

Perceived budget cut norms. We set out to establish that hostile sexism was positively related to perceptions of a local norm of approval of cutting the budget for the women's organization in the sexist humor condition but not in the neutral humor condition. We regressed participants' perceptions of the degree to which others in the immediate context would approve of cutting the budget for the women's organization onto hostile sexism, the type of humor variable, and the Hostile Sexism \times Type of Humor interaction term. Only the interaction effect was significant ($\beta = -.49$, $t = -2.59$, $p < .05$). Simple slope analyses revealed that in the sexist humor condition, hostile sexism scores were positively related to perceptions of the degree to which others in the immediate context would approve of cutting the budget for the women's organization ($\beta = .63$, $t = 2.83$, $p < .05$). This relationship was attenuated in the neutral humor condition ($\beta = -.34$, $t = -1.27$, *ns*).

We performed the same regression analyses on participants' perceptions of the degree to which the student population in general would approve of cutting funds for the women's organization. There were no significant effects. Hostile sexism scores were not strongly related to perceptions of the degree to which the general student population would approve of cutting funds for the women's organization in the sexist humor condition ($\beta = .11$, $t = .37$, *ns*) or in the neutral humor condition ($\beta = -.15$, $t = -.53$, *ns*).

Together, these results suggest that upon exposure to sexist humor, participants high in hostile sexism perceived a change in the norms of appropriate conduct in

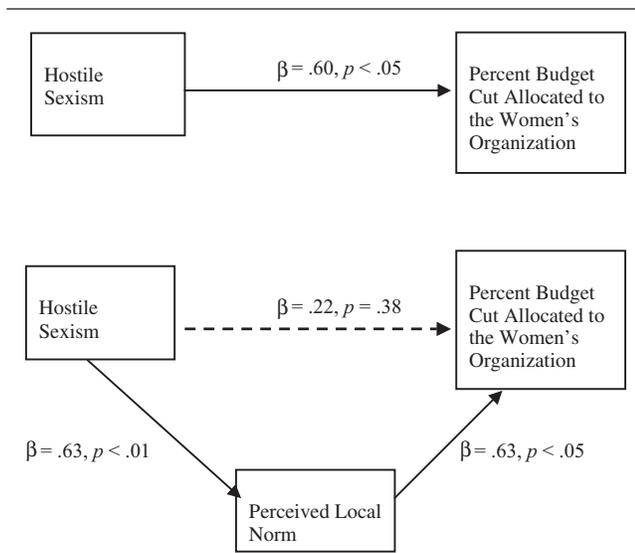


Figure 3 The relation between hostile sexism, perceived local norm of approval of cutting the budget for the women's organization, and the percentage of budget cuts allocated to the women's organization in Experiment 2.

the immediate context. They perceived a local norm of greater approval of cutting the budget for the women's organization. It is noteworthy that exposure to sexist humor did not create a distinct local norm in the immediate context of approval of budget cuts for the four other organizations.

We predicted that to the extent that participants were high in hostile sexism, the perceived local norm would replace the more general norms of appropriate conduct as a guide for regulating personal behavior toward women. That is, in the sexist humor condition, the relationship between hostile sexism and percentage of budget cuts allocated to the women's organization would be mediated by the perceived local norm of approval of cutting the budget for the women's organization. To test this hypothesis, we performed a path analysis for participants in the sexist humor condition following the procedures described by Baron and Kenny (1986; see Figure 3).

We first regressed the percentage of budget cuts allocated to the women's organization onto hostile sexism. This direct effect was significant ($\beta = .60, t = 2.77, p < .05$). We then regressed the perceived local norm variable onto hostile sexism. That path also was significant ($\beta = .63, t = 2.83, p < .05$). Finally, we regressed the percentage of budget cuts allocated to the women's organization onto both hostile sexism and the perceived local norm variable. The path from the local norm variable to percentage of budget cuts allocated to the women's organization was significant ($\beta = .63, t = 2.59, p < .05$). However, the direct path from hostile sexism to percentage of budget cuts allocated to the women's organization was no longer significant

($\beta = .22, t = .92, p = .38$). A Sobel test revealed that the decrease in the direct path from hostile sexism to percentage of budget cuts allocated to the women's organization when the perceived local norm was included in the model (from .60 to .22) was marginally significant ($Z = -1.92, p = .06$). These findings suggest that in the sexist humor condition, the relationship between hostile sexism and budget cuts for the women's organization relative to the others was mediated, at least in part, by a perceived local norm of approval of cutting the budget for the women's organization.

Discussion

The results of Experiment 2 support our hypotheses. First, hostile sexism was positively related to funding cuts for the women's organization relative to others in the sexist humor condition but not in the neutral humor condition. Upon exposure to sexist humor, men higher in hostile sexism discriminated against women by allocating greater relative funding cuts to a women's organization. Second, in the sexist humor condition, hostile sexism was positively related to a perceived norm of approval of cutting funds for the women's organization among people in the immediate context. Third, mediation analyses suggest that the perceived local norm of approval of funding cuts for the women's organization mediated the relationship between hostile sexism and discrimination against the women's organization.

In addition, participants were not asked to role-play and imagine how they would respond to a women's group after being exposed to sexist humor as they were in Experiment 1. Rather, they were given the opportunity to respond to a women's organization in a way that they believed would have real, meaningful, and negative consequences for it. Sexist humor promoted discriminatory behavior among men who have hostile attitudes toward women.

Finally, it is noteworthy that hostile sexism was associated with a higher percentage of budget cuts given to the African American student organization in the neutral humor condition. Glick and Fiske (1996) found that people high in hostile sexism tend to hold prejudiced attitudes toward women and African Americans. The correlation between hostile sexism and budget cuts allocated to the African American student organization might simply reflect this tendency. Although explanations for this correlation are speculative, it is clear that the relationship between hostile sexism and budget cuts allocated to the African American student organization cannot be explained through the same mechanisms as that for the women's organization. Sexist humor facilitated the release of prejudice only against the women's organization by creating a local climate that tolerated discrimination against it.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The findings presented in this article contribute to the literature on prejudice by demonstrating the prejudice-releasing potential of disparagement humor and of sexist humor in particular. Experiment 1 demonstrated that hostile sexism was negatively related to men's willingness to help a women's organization upon exposure to sexist jokes but not upon exposure to neutral jokes or nonhumorous sexist material. Experiment 2 showed that hostile sexism was positively related to the actual performance of negative, discriminatory behavior upon exposure to sexist comedy skits but not neutral comedy skits. Using different designs, procedures, independent variable manipulations, and dependent measures, the findings of our experiments provide convergent support for our hypothesis that sexist humor can promote the behavioral expression of prejudice against women among sexist men. Indeed, sexist humor can serve as a releaser of prejudice.

Experiment 2 also addressed the mechanism by which sexist humor releases prejudice. In the sexist humor condition, hostile sexism was positively related to a perceived norm of approval of cutting funds for the women's organization among students in the immediate context but not among students in the general population. These findings suggest that exposure to sexist humor did not simply create a "false consensus" bias (Ross, Greene, & House, 1977) whereby sexist participants overestimated the prevalence of their sexist attitudes in the general population. Rather, for sexist participants, the sexist humor created a realization of two separate and conflicting norms of appropriate conduct toward women: a general, nonprejudiced norm and a local, prejudiced norm—a norm tolerant of sexism. Sexist participants took advantage of the local prejudiced norm to release their prejudice against women without fears of disapproval from others. Disparagement of women through humor "freed" sexist participants from having to conform to the more general and more restrictive norms regarding discrimination against women.

The Power of Sexist Humor as a Releaser of Prejudice

The popularity of sexist and other forms of disparagement humor in contemporary society is revealed in mass media, workplaces, and informal social interactions. Type the words "sexist joke" into any Web browser and you will have a library of female denigration at your fingertips. The prevalence of disparagement humor in popular culture and its disguise as benign amusement or "just a joke" give it potential to be a powerful and widespread releaser of prejudice in our society.

Sexist humor may derive power to trivialize sexism and foster a sexist normative climate from the ambiguity of society's attitudes toward women. The blatant sexism and open discrimination that existed prior to the civil rights movement of the 1960s and the feminist movement of the 1970s has been largely replaced by subtle, more complex forms of sexism such as "ambivalent sexism" (Glick & Fiske, 1996), "modern sexism" (Swim, Aikin, Hall, & Hunter, 1995), and "neo-sexism" (Tougas, Brown, Beaton, & Joly, 1995). Contemporary models of sexism suggest that attitudes toward women have become ambivalent, containing both positive and negative components. That is, many Americans consciously espouse egalitarian values and nonprejudiced attitudes while possessing negative sentiments toward women.

As a result of ambivalent attitudes toward women, society does not treat sexism as completely unacceptable. On the other hand, society does not treat sexism as being completely acceptable and free to be expressed openly. Sexism is in an in-between state of acceptability; it is what Crandall and Ferguson (2005) refer to as a state of "shifting social acceptability." That is, sexism is gradually shifting from being completely acceptable to being completely unacceptable. Thus, sexism is conditional. It must be suppressed under most circumstances. However, it may be released if immediate social norms justify its expression (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003). In such a context, one can release prejudice and be spared the recognition that he or she has behaved inappropriately (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986). Our research demonstrates that sexist humor creates such a normative context that justifies the release of prejudice against women.

Directions for Future Research

The findings of the present research contribute to both the literatures on prejudice and disparagement humor. However, important theoretical questions remain to be addressed by future research. For instance, it is possible that disparagement humor has the power to release prejudice against only groups for whom society's attitudes are ambivalent—those groups in the in-between state of acceptability against whom the expression of prejudice is dependent on immediate social norms to justify it (e.g., women, African Americans). In contrast, for groups such as criminals or White supremacists, society does not promote a general norm of prejudice suppression. Instead, society treats prejudice against such groups as completely acceptable and free to be expressed openly. Thus, the expression of prejudice against such groups should not be dependent on events such as disparagement humor to create a local norm to justify it. As a result, exposure to disparagement

humor should have little effect on the release of prejudice against them.

Summary and Conclusion

The present research demonstrates that for men who were high in hostile sexism, exposure to sexist humor created conditions that allowed them to release or express those attitudes in their behavior. The present research newly identifies an important negative social consequence of exposure to sexist humor and thus further helps us understand the role that such humor can play in shaping social interaction. Sexist humor is not simply benign amusement; it can have a deleterious effect on men's perception of the immediate social context and thereby promote the behavioral release of prejudice against women.

APPENDIX

Western Student Association Student Government

Student Organization	2005 Budget	Student Proposed Funding Cut	Remaining Budget
Jewish Cultural Collective	\$23,500	_____	_____
Safe Arrival for Everyone (SAFE)	\$22,200	_____	_____
National Student Council of Women	\$24,050	_____	_____
Study Abroad Learning Program	\$26,200	_____	_____
Michigan Black Student Union (MBSU)	\$24,050	_____	_____
	\$120,000	\$24,000	\$96,000

Do you belong to any of these student organizations?

YES NO

If you answered yes, which ones do you belong to?

NOTES

1. We tested our hypotheses using only male participants for two reasons. First, some of our previous studies (e.g., Ford, Ferguson, Fitzgerald, & Kalair, 2004) have found that few women in our student population score high enough in hostile sexism for the effects of it to fully emerge. Second, it is possible that because women score lower on the hostile sexism scale in general, the relationship between hostile sexism and dependent variables of interest upon exposure to sexist humor is likely to be weaker and less consistent for women than for men. This concern is supported by Glick and Fiske's (1996) findings that for women, scores on the hostile sexism scale did not consistently predict attitudes toward women.

2. To compare the effect of exposure to sexist humor on willingness to donate to a women's organization to willingness to donate to a men's organization, we included a sexist humor/male donation target

condition in which participants read the same sexist jokes as the sexist humor/female donation target condition but were asked to donate money to a men's organization. Regression analyses revealed that hostile sexism scores were negatively related to the amount of money men donated to a women's organization ($\beta = -.72, t = -4.98, p < .01$) but not to a men's organization ($\beta = .04, t = .17, ns$).

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