"Hurts Just the Same": How Offensive are acts of racist humor?

## Abstract

Despite our ubiquitous use of humor in various aspects of life, and the growing body of humor research in the social sciences, it appears that academic literature has yet to fully and systematically address the question whether the humorous nature of offensive speech negates its offensiveness, aggravates it, or is irrelevant altogether. The lack of such a discussion is especially conspicuous when dealing with racist or sexist humor.

The present paper questions whether the fact that an instance of racist offensive (hereinafter – "**offensive**") speech contains an element of humor affects the degree of its offensiveness. The paper shows that, as a rule, the element of humor does not have the capacity to diminish the offensiveness of speech.

# 1. Introduction

Human use of humor in various derivations – situational humor, scripted jokes, social satire, etc. – applies to all aspects of life. Professional and academic literature details a variety of different functions performed by humor, including socialization, communication and the transmission of information.[[1]](#footnote-2) Humor can be used as a tool for diffusing tensions and anger, as an outlet for relieving sexual frustration, as a way of coping with traumas, as a mechanism for the airing of social taboos, as a significant factor in the cognitive development of human beings from childhood to adulthood, as a therapeutic-medical implement and as a means of intellectual stimulus.

However, humor can also carry an offensive nature: it can be perceived as insulting or humiliating, both toward individuals or groups (as in the case of racist, sexist or other forms of disparagement humor).

Yet, despite the increasing volume and variety of academic literature dealing with subjects that are directly or indirectly related to humor and its repercussions in the social sciences (such as psychology, sociology, communications, anthropology and folklore studies), it appears that academic literature has yet to combine interdisciplinary research in order to fully and systematically address the question whether the humorous nature of offensive speech negates its offensiveness, aggravates it, or is irrelevant altogether.

This article is therefore intended to answer the abovementioned question.

The discussion will unfold as follows:

The next chapter will include a discussion of whether humor negates, minimizes or aggravates the offensiveness of offensive speech. The discussion will be conducted in two stages. First, I will study the question of whether or not humor can have the effect of negating or minimizing offensiveness, while referring to interpretative and consequentialist theories dealing with offensive humor; and second, I will address the question of whether humor can amplify the offensiveness of offensive speech, while emphasizing the pragmatic aspects of the utterance.

As part of the discussion, I will show that, as a rule, the element of humor does not have the capacity to diminish the offensiveness of speech. [[2]](#footnote-3)

# 2. Does the Humorous Element Affect the Degree of the Implicature's Offensiveness?

## 2.1. Does Humor Neutralize or Minimize the Offensiveness of Speech?

This chapter will examine the question of whether the presence of humor in speech neutralizes or minimizes its offensiveness. There is reason to wonder why someone might make such an assumption in the first place. The answer might lie, for example, in the nature of humor which ostensibly signifies that the humorous statement is not to be taken seriously; or, in the case of offensive humor, the absence of the intention to offend or express an offensive position. Thus, some will argue that offensive humor, unlike a “serious” offensive statement, does not attest to the speaker’s identification with the offensive position. Therefore, the purpose of this subchapter will be to conduct a thorough discussion of the validity of the claim that offensive humor is less offensive than the same offensive proposition (or implicature) uttered in all “seriousness.”

### *2.1.1 Offensive Humor Relies on Offensive Worldviews and is therefore Equivalent to “Serious” Offensive Speech*

In defending the claim that offensive humor is less offensive than “serious” offensive speech, it is possible to argue that, unlike “serious” offensive speech, offensive humor does not express an actual endorsement of offensive positions.

Nevertheless, there are those who object to this assertion. For example, Ronald de Sousa maintains that a person who is amused by humor in which the incongruity is based on offensive presuppositions, must necessarily believe those same presuppositions, otherwise he or she would not find the joke funny.

Briefly, de Sousa’s approach, entitled “Attitudinal Endorsement,” is based on the following logical progression:

1. Understanding a joke requires being aware of what propositions it relies on.
2. Understanding (or “getting”) a joke does not mean that you find it funny.
3. If you have negative attitudes toward the propositions that are required by a joke, it will fail – you won’t find it funny.
4. You cannot hypothetically endorse propositions in such a way that will revivify a joke that is dead for you.
5. Hence, what makes the difference between merely getting a joke and finding it funny must be some positive attitude that you genuinely hold towards the propositions required to understand it.
6. Therefore, if you find a sexist joke funny, and sexist propositions are required for getting the joke, then by virtue of your attitudinal endorsement of these propositions you are a sexist.[[3]](#footnote-4)

De Sousa proposes the following as a clear example of a sexist joke: “Margaret Trudeau goes to visit the hockey team. When she emerges, she complains she had been gang raped… Wishful thinking.” De Sousa argues, in order to find this joke funny, we must accept several sexist presuppositions. The first is that rape is only a variant or a kind of sexual intercourse; the second is that women’s sexual desires are indiscriminate; and the third is that there is something intrinsically objectionable or wrong with a woman being interested in or having lots of sex.[[4]](#footnote-5)

Particularly relevant to our discussion of offensive humor in general is de Sousa’s subsequent claim that the sexist nature of the joke is also evident from the fact that eliminating its gendered aspects, or replacing the woman with a man, would rid the joke of its humor. Thereby, he in fact suggests a kind of “test” through which we can determine whether a joke is sexist or not. In its simplified form, the test is based on a single central principle, which stipulates that in order to laugh at the joke we must accept one or more sexist propositions. Ergo, eliminating the sexist or gendered aspect of the joke, or replacing the women in the joke with men (which would cancel out the aspect of sexism towards women anyway), would also rid the joke of its humor.

As I see it, de Sousa’s argument implies that a joke relying on offensive propositions is no different than an utterance that raises these same propositions in a serious manner. Indeed, there is a separation to be made between the “positions” of the speaker or the person who finds the joke amusing, and the “positions” of the joke.[[5]](#footnote-6) However, if we concede that in order to find the joke amusing one has to accept the offensive positions, this suggests that when the speaker invites the addressee to enjoy offensive humorous speech, this invitation contains the offensive positions required to laugh at it. Therefore, it should be given the same treatment as regular speech containing serious offensive statements. In other words, the deployment of humorous speech contains the implied proposition: “I think this joke is funny; I think you will find this joke funny too,” and this statement is a kind of declaration on behalf of the speaker that he or she has accepted the positions necessary to enjoy the joke.

Nevertheless, de Sousa’s reasoning has its critics. Berys Gaut argues that there is no requirement to wholeheartedly adopt the offensive worldview in order to laugh at the offensive joke; rather, one can simply “imagine” it, “suppose” it, or hold it temporarily for the sake of amusement alone.[[6]](#footnote-7) A similar counterargument is made by both Robert Provine[[7]](#footnote-8) and David Benatar.[[8]](#footnote-9) Benatar opines that there is no need to accept the stereotype latent in the joke in order to laugh at it; it is enough to be familiar with it in order to understand the funny element of the joke.[[9]](#footnote-10) To support his claim, he presents the following joke about a supposedly made-up ethnic group.[[10]](#footnote-11) Here, we shall use the joke using the "made-up" group – the "Xs":

Question: Why do Xs have so many scars round their mouths on Mondays?

Answer: Because they practice eating with a knife and fork on Sundays.

Here, we have no information at all about the made-up ethnic group, including any prejudice or stereotype, and yet we can still find the joke funny thanks to our understanding of the incongruity in the joke, which is what delivers its sting. It also makes it clear to us that the Xs “stereotypically” don’t know how to eat with a knife and fork. Therefore, it is unnecessary to hold any unacceptable positions against a specific ethnic group to enjoy this joke or even to tell it.

To substantiate his claim, Benatar looks at whether we laugh at jokes about our own ethnic group or gender. He maintains that most of us do laugh at jokes that are at least partially directed at our own affiliation group, and he sees this as proof of the fact that it is not necessary to hold a deplorable prejudice in order to enjoy a racist or sexist joke. However, I would argue that Benatar thereby presupposes that we cannot hold prejudices against our own affiliation group. This presupposition is refuted by the fact that not only are we not immune to prejudices against our own affiliation group, but that oftentimes members of disadvantaged groups are not just silently complicit in perpetuating prejudices against their own kind, but wholeheartedly embrace these prejudices and relish propagating them.[[11]](#footnote-12)

It seems then that both de Sousa and his critics leave room for more general criticism. Both sides of the aisle make factual claims that ought to be empirically tested, for these are hypotheses that can be confirmed or debunked empirically using methods from experimental psychology. In addition, there have in fact been studies conducted to test the above claims and therefore the lack of reference to those studies’ findings, or, at the most, dealing with them by pointing out their methodological shortcomings alone, is problematic. As we shall see later on in this article, de Sousa’s claim has been tested for certain types of offensive humor, sexist humor, for instance, and there was a certain, albeit not complete, correlation found between the enjoyment of sexist jokes and agreement with sexist viewpoints.[[12]](#footnote-13)

Another strong argument in the discussion about finding offensive humor amusing is made by Aaron Smuts.[[13]](#footnote-14) According to Smuts, sometimes there is no need to even assume the offensive viewpoint to enjoy the joke, since most jokes contain several funny elements that can be interpreted in a variety of ways. Thus, it is possible to claim that amusement at an offensive joke, or the decision to tell it, isn’t necessarily motivated by the offensive aspect of the joke but by a non-offensive interpretation (which preserves the incongruity) of the joke, or, conversely, by a funny non-offensive element of the joke. For example, regarding the abovementioned joke about Margaret Trudeau, Smuts posits that it is possible for someone to laugh at the joke not because of the sexist presuppositions on which it is based, but simply because they don’t like Trudeau and therefore find any gibe made in her direction amusing.

Granted, this specific example may be problematic;[[14]](#footnote-15) however it is possible to think of examples of offensive humor that is based on several foundations, some offensive and some not. In those cases, it appears that de Sousa’s claim that offensive humor necessarily attests to offensive worldviews, does not hold up, thereby also refuting the argument that the invitation to laugh at humor is “equivalent” to serious offensive speech expressing the presuppositions that make some of the joke’s elements funny.

### *2.1.2. Offensive Humor is as Equally Reprehensible as “Serious” Offensive Speech Because It Constitutes an Objective Expression of Offensive Positions*

As we concluded earlier, it seems that de Sousa’s arguments are not immune to criticism. Therefore, there is room to doubt whether people who tell offensive jokes or laugh at them *necessarily* hold offensive views. However, in my opinion, the main flaw in de Sousa’s claim lies in the fact that it places too much weight on the actual intentions of the utterer/speaker/joke teller (which are inherently difficult to surmise, since, to the best of my knowledge, none of us can read minds) instead of paying attention to the objective offensive statement, which could provide a much more valid justification for sanctioning offensive humor. Similarly, the objective offensiveness of a “serious” statement serves as justification for its legal sanctioning, without any reference to the speaker’s intention, but based solely on the speech itself.

For the sake of illustration, let us assume that a certain person telling an offensive joke doesn’t personally hold offensive views. Even so, the joke itself is still an expression of the implied offensive views. Take, for example, this Dick Cheney joke: “Dick Cheney and his wife go to Paris. While walking down the street, Cheney sees two children talking. Astounded, Cheney turns to his wife and exclaims: ‘By Golly! So young and already fluent in French!’”. The joke doesn’t suggest any factual claims about the verity of the recounted narrative. Nobody thinks that Cheney *actually* said those things to his wife on a trip to Paris. However, the reasonable interpretation of the joke raises the implied proposition that Cheney is stupid; otherwise there is no point in casting him as the protagonist of the joke. The argument that the joke teller doesn’t really believe that Cheney is stupid is equivalent to claiming that a town crier calling out “Dick Cheney is an imbecile,” doesn’t really mean it. Indeed, theoretically, that might be the case; however, the statement must be examined according to its likely meaning considering the circumstances under which it was expressed. Just as we don’t ponder the intentions of a “serious” speaker, so there is no reason to ponder the intentions of a “comic” speaker.

Support for the claim that it is reasonable to interpret offensive humor as expressing offensive opinions can be found in the empirical research that points to a correlation, albeit a partial one, between adherence to offensive views on the one hand, and amusement at and employment of offensive humor, on the other. Since the volume of empirical research dealing with sexist humor is rather large, unlike other kinds of offensive humor, including racist humor, for which research is relatively scarce, let’s take it as an example. Studies in the field of experimental psychology corroborate the assumption of a high probability that a person who enjoys sexist humor also subscribes to sexist opinions.[[15]](#footnote-16) Numerous studies found a high degree of correlation between levels of amusement at “disparagement humor” and levels of negative opinion about the segment of the population at which such humor is directed.[[16]](#footnote-17) In the specific context of sexist humor, Anthony Chapman and Nicholas Gadfield found that both men and women appreciated sexist humorous illustrations in inverse proportion to their level of support for the Women’s Liberation movement.[[17]](#footnote-18) Studies that focused more directly on attitudes towards women showed similar results; namely that, regardless of their own gender, the more negative (sexist) the participants’ views about women, the more likely they were to enjoy sexist humor.[[18]](#footnote-19) Likewise, for men, enjoyment of sexist humor was positively correlated with acceptance of common myths about rape and other forms of sexual violence.[[19]](#footnote-20) Further studies confirm that people are more accepting of sexist humor when they themselves hold sexist positions.[[20]](#footnote-21)

As stated previously, the correlation between enjoyment of sexist humor and the adherence to sexist beliefs may not be a full one. Nevertheless, based on the evidence, it is reasonable to assume that a person telling or enjoying a sexist joke is a sexist, since the existing body of research shows that a large percentage of those who enjoy sexist humor really do subscribe to sexist views. That is enough to shape our reasonable interpretation of sexist humorous speech. If most people who tell sexist jokes are sexists, it is reasonable to interpret these jokes as having sexist implicatures. The same applies to offensive humor in general.

In other words, our argument is that the empirical fact about the correlation between the enjoyment of sexist humor and the possession of sexist attitudes is a circumstance that influences the interpretation of the speech act. This circumstance is one of the whole set of circumstances in which we use the pragmatic interpretation process. Using it as a circumstance is done just as we make assumptions about the typical desires and wishes of a person in different situations to interpret his words.

An example of how we use assumptions about people's desires, thoughts, or wishes to interpret expressions can be this: Suppose we are sitting in a room where the shutter is half open and half closed. The person next to us gestures toward the window and tells us "The shutter…". Such a phrase would have the meaning of "please close the shutter" if it is said in a situation where most people want to close the shutter (for example, when there is too much direct sunlight) and a very different meaning of "please open the shutter" in a room where it is dark so most people will want most light to penetrate.

The same is true in the case of sexist humor - in light of the above, it is likely to be interpreted as having a sexist implicature. The same applies to offensive humor in general. That is, in making the reasonable assumption that offensive humor also has a high correlation between the possession of offensive positions and the enjoyment of offensive humor, the interpretive logic we outlined above can be applied: the assumed correlation between the possession of offensive attitudes and the enjoyment of offensive humor constitutes a circumstance used in the pragmatic interpretation process.

## *2.1.3 Consequentialist Arguments for Comparing Offensive Humor with “Serious” Offensive Speech*

Additional support in favor of the objective approach presented above can be found in the consequentialist analysis of offensive humorous speech. From the research dealing with the effects of offensive humor, we learn that offensive humor erodes its victims’ social status, endorses negative prejudices in their regard, encourages the social ostracism of its targets, promotes tolerance of harmful behavior towards them and causes them mental and emotional distress.

###### 2.1.3.1 Offensive Humor Preserves Social Hierarchies

The research literature shows that some of the hidden aims of using humor include the desire to relieve aggression and express hostility, to preserve the existing social order and to evoke a feeling of superiority in the speaker.[[21]](#footnote-22) It is therefore not entirely surprising that many studies examining the consequences of using offensive humor of various kinds have found that offensive humor often tends to negatively affect the social status of its victims. Thus, for example, in instances where offensive humor was directed at a work colleague, it was perceived as bullying,[[22]](#footnote-23) and in other instances, humor was used to preserve the existing hierarchies in the workplace.[[23]](#footnote-24)

The above is all the more valid when dealing with humor directed at certain groups in society, particularly disadvantaged minorities who already suffer from social discrimination. In these cases, the evidence is even more striking and it appears that offensive humor effectively widens the social status gaps between the dominant group and the weaker group.[[24]](#footnote-25)

Disparagement humor also widens the gaps between groups by excluding members of the disparaged group. Much like schoolyard humor, wherein making fun of differences marks individuals as outsiders to the group as a whole while reaffirming the norm boundaries within the group,[[25]](#footnote-26) sexist humor emphasizes the "otherness" of women and thereby pushes them to the margins of the group.[[26]](#footnote-27) Studies examining disparagement humor directed at minority groups (racist humor) arrived at similar results and conclusions.[[27]](#footnote-28)

Moreover, various studies have found that exposure to offensive humor promoted or preserved negative prejudices against individuals or groups who found themselves the targets of such humor. Thus, for instance, one study showed that under certain circumstances, the very act of reading out an offensive joke directed at a particular group (in the study’s experiment, that group was lawyers), might bolster negative attitudes towards that group.[[28]](#footnote-29) Other studies found that offensive humor directed at a specific group served as a means of circumventing the taboo of expressive negative attitudes about that group.[[29]](#footnote-30)

###### 2.1.3.2 Offensive Humor Promotes Tolerance of Harmful Behavior Towards its “Targets”

A variety of studies have found that disparagement humor encourages discrimination and harmful behavior towards the victims of such humor. Woodzicka and Ford describe how sexist disparagement humor against women trivializes discrimination by disguising it as harmless amusement.[[30]](#footnote-31) In doing so, sexist humor affects attitudes toward women and may increase tolerance of sexist events or sex discrimination.[[31]](#footnote-32) Sexist humor also promotes the behavioral release of prejudice against women,[[32]](#footnote-33) and amplifies self-reported rape proclivity and victim blame.[[33]](#footnote-34)

In addition, Thomas Ford’s and Mark Ferguson’s Prejudiced Norm Theory outlines a process of mediation through which disparagement humor directed at women “releases” prejudice.[[34]](#footnote-35) Furthermore, prejudiced people “restrain” their behavior so long as the norms dictate they must.[[35]](#footnote-36) However, when the norms allow it – for instance in a society replete with disparagement humor which communicates an implied approval of prejudices – they allow themselves to reveal their prejudices.[[36]](#footnote-37)

###### 2.1.3.3 Offensive humor as an instrument of ostracism and exclusion from the centers of power

In the case of disparagement humor aimed at disadvantaged groups, humor is often times used as a tool for ostracizing and excluding these groups from the social centers of power.[[37]](#footnote-38) Whenever an offensive joke is unleashed into the air, the victim is faced with two options: to laugh at the joke or not to laugh, and thereby express dismay at the joke’s content. Either choice is problematic. If the victim of the joke chooses to laugh, she is complicit in her own group’s humiliation, thereby reaffirming the existing social order within which their affiliation group finds itself at the bottom of the hierarchy, as mentioned previously. If she does not laugh then she is a ‘‘spoil sport,’’ someone with no sense of humor who is ostracized from the group, which is most often the dominant group in the given social situation.[[38]](#footnote-39)

###### 2.1.3.4 Offensive humor as strategy for provoking unlaughter

Folklorist Moira Smith raises another ostracizing aspect of humor, as a strategic tool meant to provoke the “unlaughter” of the target, thus emphasizing social divisions and promoting the target's exclusion.[[39]](#footnote-40)

Based on Michale Billig’s definition of “unlaughter,”[[40]](#footnote-41) Smith stresses that unlaughter is not just the absence of laugher, but “a display of not laughing when laughter might otherwise be expected, hoped or demanded.”[[41]](#footnote-42) Accordingly, unlaughter does not attest to a failure to understand the joke (due to a misunderstanding of the incongruity therein, or of the resolution, for example), but to a *disagreement* with the joke. Thus, those who choose to respond to a joke with unlaughter see it as unworthy, inappropriate or perhaps even immoral.

Unlike those who respond with unlaughter, those who find the joke funny, appropriate and moral view the reaction of unlaughter as ridiculous, and therefore consider those who choose to respond in this manner ridiculous as well. Smith adds that the ridiculousness of those who are not laughing is only amplified by the importance placed on having a sense of humor in Western society where humor is perceived, among other things, as an indication of or a “proxy” for the ability to fit in. By Western standards, Smith claims, those who have the ability to laugh at themselves are perceived as having a sense of proportion and the ability to adapt to the bureaucratic order and thereby be a model citizen of industrialized society. Conversely, those who have no sense of humor (i.e. those who react to a joke with unlaughter), show themselves lacking the desirable qualities listed above.

These insights might also explain the propensity of some members of disadvantaged groups to elect to tell offensive jokes directed at their own affiliation group as a social strategy. When such an individual tells a joke at the expense of their own affiliation group, it strengthens their solidarity with the “competing” group, which in most cases is the dominant group. At the same time, they present themselves as having the qualities considered desirable in Western society, especially in comparison to other members of their affiliation group who choose to respond to the joke with unlaughter.

And indeed, the study conducted by Janet Holmes shows that both men and women use humor to enforce gender stereotypes, even though women sometimes challenge humor that presents women as less qualified in the professional sphere.[[42]](#footnote-43) In other words, when the joke has the potential to sabotage the overarching goals of women in the workplace, such as their chances of getting a promotion, etc., it is more likely to be challenged. When the joke enforces misogynist stereotypes but does not go against the aforementioned goals, women tend to cooperate with it.

###### 2.1.3.5 Offensive humor causes malaise and emotional distress

As mentioned previously, exposing employees to offensive humor that targeted them was perceived as bullying, the psychological consequences of which included the victim's anxiety, depression and a feeling of helplessness.[[43]](#footnote-44) The same effects have been recorded for disparagement humor. In a study conducted by LaFrance and Woodzicka, women reported feeling more disgust, anger and surprise in response to sexist jokes than to non-sexist jokes.[[44]](#footnote-45) In addition, their non-verbal responses (such as facial expressions, for example) indicated negative emotional reactions to sexist jokes.

Other studies in the field of experimental psychology revealed that sexist humor might create a hostile and stressful work environment for women, and sometimes even impair their ability to function.[[45]](#footnote-46) An additional study showed that gender-based harassment, which included, among other things, jokes of a sexual nature, caused cumulative damage to women’s mental health. Even low levels of gender-based harassment in the workplace were correlated with a decreased sense of satisfaction with life and psychological security.[[46]](#footnote-47) A qualitative study conducted by Beth Quinn described how women who worked in environments replete with sexist humor burst into tears when discussing the matter, and yet, at the same time, tried to represent themselves as “not taking it personally.”[[47]](#footnote-48)

## 2.2 Does Humor Aggravate the Offensiveness of Speech?

Thus far, we’ve examined the arguments for considering the humorous aspect of speech as neutralizing or minimizing the offensiveness implied in speech. However, we may also consider a series of claims for considering humor as aggravating the offensiveness of speech. The following subchapter is devoted to examining these claims.

### *3.2.1 Offensive humor “Lightens” the offensive positions it expresses, and therefore may be seen as even more reprehensible than a “serious” offensive statement*

According to Merrie Bergmann, offensive humor is flawed not just because it expresses offensive beliefs held by the speaker, but also because it adds insult to the injury of expressing an offensive opinion. [[48]](#footnote-49) Bergmann explains that when people laugh at offensive opinions, it is an insult to the people harmed by such opinions, whether the insult is intended or not. In other words, the problem that Bergmann points to is the idea that offensive opinions, which in and of themselves are damaging to certain people, are something so minor and “light” that one can laugh at them.

The argument Bergmann presents seems to be at least partially based on Superiority Theory, as presented in the writings of Hobbs,[[49]](#footnote-50) which relates laughter to mechanisms of humiliation and derision.[[50]](#footnote-51) Mainly, it would appear that Bergmann adopts Elliot Oring’s claim that humor, by its very nature, inevitably makes any subject to which it is linked trivial and laughable.[[51]](#footnote-52)

Nevertheless, Bergmann’s argument is doubly flawed. First, there is the problem of her initial assumption that people don’t laugh at painful subjects, but only at things that they see as “lightweight.” This claim has been proven factually wrong. There are plenty of instances in which people laugh at subjects that are especially painful to them: Death, loss, and disease are only a few examples of the subjects that figure in what we call “black humor.” Just because people laugh at these subjects doesn’t mean they take them lightly. In fact, the opposite is true. They make jokes on these subjects because of the emotional difficulty inherent in dealing with them.

Another case in which humor that contains offensive elements is not necessarily insulting is the case of irony. In an ironic context, the speaker does not mean things literally; rather, most often, he or she means the exact opposite. Thus, for instance, when telling an offensive sexist joke in an ironic tone, the speaker does not intend to make fun of women, but, on the contrary, to make fun of the sexist positions expressed in the joke. Sometimes, a joke may appear, on the surface, to be offensive (according to the standards defined earlier in this article). However, the external circumstances in which the joke is told, circumstances that can be analyzed using the tools of pragmatics (for instance, tone of voice, specific context, etc.), will determine whether the joke is told ironically in order to make fun of the worldviews expressed therein.

We must therefore ask the question of where does the laughter in a particular display of offensive humor stem from: from derision, from pain or from irony? This question must be examined on a case-by-case basis and its various aspects will be analyzed in later subchapters while trying to distinguish between the differ sub-cases of offensive humor. In any case, it is impossible to make the general claim that under all circumstances, humor that contains offensive elements stems from the perception of offensive positions as trivial.

### *2.2.2 Offensive humor is worse than a “serious” offensive statement because it deploys a strategy of insult that does allow the insulted party to confront the insulter*

Anat Zajdman analyzes the use of humor as a pragmatic-strategic tool in the hands of a speaker interested in insulting his or her peer without having to suffer the “consequences” of issuing an insult.[[52]](#footnote-53) She argues that, similar to hinting, metaphors, rhetorical questions and other linguistic obfuscations, humor too can serve as an “off the record” mechanism, i.e., an utterance or an act to which no one clear communicative intention can be attributed. It is this kind of strategy that leads to the plethora of instances when the listener feels offended by the words (presented as a joke) of the speaker, while the speaker insists that she or he was “only kidding.” In this case, the use of humor, rather than serving as an outright declaration, gives the speaker strategic advantages: namely the removal of responsibility for any possible offense caused to the listener. Hence, the speaker will often preface his or her words with the question “Want to hear a joke?” and if the listener happens to be insulted, will then plead “no offense,” thereby denying the listener the legitimate opportunity to express their outrage.[[53]](#footnote-54)

According to this approach, offensive humor is even graver than an offensive statement uttered in a serious way. In both cases, whether the statement is humorous or serious, the addressee feels insulted and humiliated. However, unlike the case of serious offensive speech, to which the addressee can react by confronting the offender, in the case of humorous offensive speech, the addressee does not even get to enjoy the relief that comes from confronting the offending person. The screen of fog put up around the humorous statement, which, ostensibly, can be interpreted in several different ways, leaves the offended party without real recourse to anger or opportunity to demand an apology.

Nevertheless, Zajdman’s position and its conclusions are open to criticism. It is possible to argue there are advantages to a world where the status of the things we say is not uniform. Certainly, there are things we wish to say confidently and seriously, in such a way as to make their implicatures irrevocable or have very limited revocability. On the other hand, there are also things we wish to say hesitantly, tentatively or provisionally, while retaining the possibility to revoke the implicatures of our words by qualifying them with various stipulations and so on.

Personally, I do not accept this stance. In my view, from the moment we’ve assumed that offensive speech (as defined in this paper) is unacceptable, we cannot consent to a strategy that tests the limits of social tolerance accorded to offensive statements. It constitutes enabling an indirect mechanism for undermining the social taboos placed on offensive speech, perhaps even for the eventual dissolution of these taboos (which we assume are desirable, since if they were not, offensive speech would not be regulated even when serious, not to mention humorous). In any case, even if we did accept the argument in favor of such a boundary-testing mechanism, any benefit afforded by this mechanism in the context of offensive humor is canceled out by the opportunity it affords the utterer to escape responsibility for offending the listener. Thus, at most, the aforementioned justification for this strategy mitigates the aggravating aspect pointed out by Zajdman, but does not make humorous offensive speech less offensive.

# 3. Conclusion

This paper's goal was to conduct a thorough and systematic discussion in the offensive nature of racist humor, that is: Does the humor with which racist speech is delivered neutralizes, aggravates or has no effect on the degree of its offensiveness. The answer that emerges from the above discussion – which may be surprising or counter-intuitive to some – is that when it comes to offensive speech, humor does not decrease the degree of offensiveness, and in some cases it may even increase it – making it, clearly, more than just a joke.

1. For more on the range of functions humor fulfills in human lives, see: John C. Meyer, *Humor as a double-edged sword: Four functions of humor in communication*, 10.3 Communication theory 310 (2000); William h. Martineau, *A model of the social functions of humor*, inThe psychology of humor: Theoretical perspectives and empirical issues 101 (1972); Matthew Gervais & David S. Wilson, *The evolution and functions of laughter and humor: A synthetic approach*, 80.4 The Quarterly review of biology 395 (2005); Elizabeth E Graham, Michael J. Papa & Gordon P. Brooks, *Functions of humor in conversation: Conceptualization and measurement*, 56.2 Western Journal of Communication (Includes Communication Reports) 161(1992). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. It should be noted that there are cases in which an instance of a *prima facie* humorous offensive speech does not attest to racist positions and is therefore voided of any derisive element. These are cases of *irony* and *black humor*. A joke that fits any of these categories is told not as an act of agreement or endorsement of the offensive positions, but as an act of opposition to them (in the case of irony), or as opposition combined with the attempt to deal with the pain they inflict (in the case of black humor). Therefore, these categories are beyond the scope of this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Ronald De Sousa, The Rationality of Emotion (1990). The above precepts were summarized by Aaron Smuts, *The Ethics of Humor: Can Your Sense of Humor Be Wrong?* 13 Ethical Theory and Moral Practice 333 (2010), 336. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. De Sousa, *Id.* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Oliver Conolly & Bashshar Haydar, *The Good, the Bad and the Funny*, 88 The Monist 121, 126 (2005) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Berys Gaut, *Just Joking: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Humor*, 22 Philosophy and Literature 51 (1998) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Robert R. Provine, Laughter: A Scientific Investigation(1987) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. David Benatar, *Prejudice in Jest: When Racial and Gender Humor Harms*, 13 Public Affairs Quarterly 191 (1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. For a similar argument: Aaron Smuts, *The Ethics of Humor: Can Your Sense of Humor Be Wrong?*, 13 Ethical Theory and Moral Practice 333 (2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Unfortunately, this original "made up" group actually exists, and therefore, to avoid any offense, we changed it to "X"s. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. See: Kurt Lewin in *“*Self-hatred among Jews,” *Contemporary Jewish Record* IV 219 (1941); Ariel Levy, Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture (2006) [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Antony J. Chapman & Nicholas J. Gadfield, *Is Sexual Humor Sexist?,* 26 Journal of Communication 141(1976); Mark J. Butland & D.K. Ivy, *The Effects of Biological Sex and Egalitarianism on Humor Appreciation: Replication and Extension*, 5 Journal of Social Behavior and Personality 353 (1990). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Smuts *supra* note 9 at 176. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. It is problematic because not every insult is amusing. When we do find an insult amusing it is likely to stem from an incongruity contained therein–in this case the incongruity relies on sexist principles. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. Chapman & Gadfield *supra* note 12; Butland &. Ivy *supra* note 12; Henkin & Fish *supra* note 12; Moore, Griffiths & Payne *supra* note 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. Joanne R. Cantor & Dolf Zillman, *Resentment Toward Victimized Protagonists and Severity of Misfortunes They Suffer as Factors in Humor Appreciation*, 6 Journal of Experimental Research in Personality 321 (1973) Lawrence La Fave, Kevin McCarthy & Jay Haddad, *Humor Judgments as a Function of Identification Classes: Canadian vs. American*, 85 Journal of Psychology 53 (1973 ( [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. Chapman & Gadfield *supra* note 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. *Id*.; Butland &. Ivy *supra* note 12; Henkin & Fish *supra* note 12 ; Moore, Griffiths & Payne *supra* note 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. Kathryn Ryan & Jeanne Kanjorski, *The Enjoyment of Sexist humor, Rape Attitudes, and Relationship Aggression in College Students*, 38 Sex Roles 743 (1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. Butland &. Ivy *supra* note 12;Dara Greenwood & Linda M. Isbell, *Ambivalent Sexism and the Dumb Blonde: Men’s and Women’s Reactions to Sexist Jokes*, 26 Psychology of Women Quarterly 341 (2002); Marianne LaFrance & Julie A.Woodzicka, *No Laughing Matter: Women’s Verbal and Nonverbal Reactions to Sexist Humor*, in Prejudice: The target’s perspective 61. Likewise, Peter Glick’s and Susan Fiske’s theory of Ambivalent Sexism Inventory, has made possible even more advances in the research examining the correlation between attitudes towards women and the appreciation of sexist humor. See: Peter Glick & Susan T.Fiske, *The Ambivalent sexism Inventory: Differentiating Hostile and Benevolent Sexism*, 70 Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 491(1996); Studies have shown that both men and women who have been found to rank high on the hostile sexism scale tended to appreciate sexist humor more than those ranking low on the scale: Friederike Eyssel & Gerd Bohner, *The Rating of Sexist Humor under Time Pressure as an Indicator of Spontaneous Sexist Attitudes*, 57 Sex Roles 651(2007) ;Thomas E. Ford, *Effects of Sexist Humor on Tolerance of Sexist Events*, 26 Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin 1094(2000); For comparison: Greenwood & Isbell *supra* note 20; LaFrance &. Woodzicka *supra* note 20; Greenwood & Isbell *supra* note 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. Giselinde Kuipers, *The sociology of humor*, *8* The primer of humor research 361 (2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. Stig Berge Matthiesen & Ståle Einarsen, *Bullying in the workplace: Definition, prevalence, antecedents and consequences*, 13 International Journal of Organization Theory & Behavior 202 (2010)*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. Rose Laub Coser, *Laughter Among Colleagues: A Study of the Social Functions of Humor Among the Staﬀ of a Mental Hospital*, 23 Psychiatry 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. Julie A. Woodzicka & Thomas E. Ford, [*A Framework for Thinking about the (not-so-funny) Effects of Sexist Humor*](http://ejop.psychopen.eu/article/view/217), 6 Europe’s Journal of Psychology 174 (2010). And see also: Richard Y. Bourhis, Howard Giles, Henri Tajfel et al., *Context and Ethnic Humour in Intergroup Relations*, It’s a Funny Thing, Humour: Proceedings of The International Conference on Humour and Laughter 261 (Antony J. Chapman & Hugh C.Foot eds., 1976). Thomas E.Ford & Mark A.Ferguson, *Social Consequences of Disparagement Humor: A Prejudiced Norm Theory*, 8 Personality and Social Psychology Review 79 (2004). For more, *see*: Chapman & Gadfield supra note 12; Ann Marie Love & Lambert H. Deckers, *Humor Appreciation as a Function of Sexual, Aggressive, and Sexist Content*, 20.Sex Roles 649 (1989); M. Hemmasi & L. Graf, *Sexual and Sexist Humor in the Work Place: Just ―Good Fun‖ or Sexual Harassment?*, Proceedings of Decision Sciences Institute 455(1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. Joyce O.Hertzler, Laughter: A Socio-Scientific Analysis(1970). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. Jacqueline Watts*, Can’t Take a Joke? Humour as Resistance, Refuge and Exclusion in a Highly Gendered Workplace*, 17 Feminism & Psychology 259(2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. Ford & Ferguson *supra* note 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
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30. Woodzicka & Ford *supra* note 24; Michael A.Johnson, *The “Only Joking” Defense: Attribution Bias or Impression Management?* 67 Psychological Reports 1051(1990). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
31. Ford *supra* note. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
32. Thomas E.Ford, Christie F.Boxer, Jacob Armstrong & Jessica R.Edel, *More than "Just a Joke": The Prejudice-Releasing Function of Sexist Humor*, 32 Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin 159(2007) [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
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42. Janet Holmes, *Sharing a Laugh: Pragmatic Aspects of Humor and Gender in the Workplace*, 38 Journal of Pragmatics 26 (2006) [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
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44. LaFrance &. Woodzicka, *supra* note 20*.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
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51. Elliot Oring, *Arbiters of Taste: An Afterword*, 32 Journal of Folklore Research 165 (1995). [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
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