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Senses of humor, media use, and opinions about the treatment of marginalized groups

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We dedicate this article to the late Dr. Paul D. Skalski, our valued colleague and friend, who loved research and life.

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ABSTRACT

This research examines public opinions toward marginalized groups, applying the notion of multiple “senses of humor” as a filter in the process of opinion formation while controlling for the relative impact of media exposure on such opinions. A sample of 288 students at a large urban university responded to an online survey measuring a variety of public opinions, media use (including traditional, news, and interactive) variables, four senses of humor (disparagement, dark/arousal, incongruity, and social currency), and social locators, including political orientation. Results confirm that, in addition to social locators, senses of humor provide a viable set of predictors of public opinion about marginalized groups, clearly surpassing media use. Further, the senses of humor are found to be linked to political orientation, raising issues of the commonalities and origins of these critical filters of sociopolitical attitudes.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Public opinion

As the United States becomes increasingly heterogeneous, a better understanding of the formation of public opinions toward fractious public topics and toward various marginalized societal groupings is in order. Different conceptualizations of what constitutes “public opinion” make certain distinctions—between basic values and transitory preferences, between organized and unorganized opinions, between the public and private expressions of opinions, and between an aggregate, socially controlling force and a collection of individual opinions (Nimmo, 1978; Nisbet, 1978; Zukin, 1981). One important distinction between opinion expression in private versus public settings is manifested most clearly in the spiral of silence perspective (Noelle-Neumann, 1989). If people believe their views are losing ground, they are seen as less likely to express their opinions in public for fear of negative reactions, and are less likely to share opinions with friends, contributing to an appearance that minority views are held by more people than is the case. According to this perspective, “[p]ublic opinion is based on the unconscious striving of people living in a social unit to arrive at a common view, at the kind of agreement which is required to act and, if necessary, to make decisions” (Noelle-Neumann, 1989, p. 4). However, in a pluralistic society, the reality of a truly “common” view becomes less likely, particularly as “cyber-balkanization” continues to erode mass audiences (Jeffres, Neuendorf, & Atkin, 1999; Jeffres, Neuendorf, Bracken, & Atkin, 2009).

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The increasing pluralism of America's demography is matched by exploding options for information acquisition and variations in media content types. One way to cope with this mountain of messages is through humor, yet research into public opinion has neglected this potential strategy of filtering and coping. And humor can be important for both privately held and publicly expressed opinions in conversations, as well as for processing of mediated messages. The present study examines notions of public opinion and the individual differences that are potentially related to such strategic applications of humor. We focus, in particular, on the notion of multiple "senses of humor" as a filter in the process of opinion formation, while including a consideration of the historically important role of media messages in this process.

1.2. *Public opinion and mass communication*

The influence of mass communication in creating a "common view" of public opinion has been acknowledged for nearly a century, dating back to Walter Lippmann's (1922) seminal work that served as the foundation for agenda setting theory. Since then, numerous agenda setting studies have been conducted, beginning with McCombs and Shaw (1972) and proceeding to the present day (see McCombs & Reynolds, 2009, for a review). This research generally supports the idea that mass media have a strong influence on public opinion, due to an emphasis on certain issues over others. Similarly, cultivation theory (Gerbner, 1969) argues that the mass media (television in particular) present a consistent stream of images that affect audience perceptions of reality, leading to a *mainstreaming* or overriding of differences in perspective and behavior among heavy viewers (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, & Shanahan, 2002). The implication of classic mass communication theories such as agenda setting and cultivation is that heavy media users should have similar perceptions and public opinions reflective of the media presentation of reality, and that media exposure is a primary mechanism by which opinions on public issues are formed.

1.2.1. *Challenges to mass communication: media changes and individual differences*

Traditional notions of mass communication effects have been challenged in recent years due to (a) changes in the media environment and (b) greater attention to individual differences in reception to mass messages. Chaffee and Metzger (2001) recognized that the diffusion of computer and information technologies has fostered more individualized media products tailored to smaller, homogenous audiences rather than an undifferentiated mass. This reality, coupled with the sheer number and diversity of communication channels available to audiences today through cable television and the Internet, challenges the likelihood of true mass communication effects. Instead, it suggests that selective exposure is more likely in the new media environment, with audiences choosing channels and content that reflect their predispositions.

Indeed, a widening body of literature is investigating individual differences in determining media exposure motives and, ultimately, public opinion. Much of this work addresses how one's state may influence media exposure (e.g., Bryant & Zillmann, 1984; Labbé, Schmidt, Babin, & Pharr, 2007; Zillmann, 1988), and other work looks at how one's personality traits determine media attendance and response (e.g., Beatty, Hsim, & Jones, 2001; Finn, 1997; Liebert & Spiegler, 1994; Weaver, 2003). The uses and gratifications framework (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974; Rosengren, 1974) considers the motivations one expresses when selecting and attending to media. It suggests that individuals seek media to manage their emotional state in an effort to achieve an optimal level of arousal (Donohew, Finn, & Christ, 1988; Zillmann & Bryant, 1994). While the emphasis of uses and gratifications is media attendance to achieve a desired state, previous research has also acknowledged that psychological traits may push individuals to use media to achieve specific gratifications (Lin, 1996). When considered together, one's personality traits may determine media habits, which enable individuals to move toward their optimal level of arousal.

In the age of identity-politics, a politician might gain standing with dominant culture constituencies by extolling the ills of "welfare queens," "anchor babies," gay marriage, etc. (e.g., Anastasio, Rose, & Chapman, 2005; Neuendorf, Skalski, Atkin, & Jeffres, 2011). Political discourse has thus become more negative as pundits increasingly use ad hominem attacks and wall-to-wall commercials try to cast doubt on opponents—or perceived "out-groups"—rather than advancing issues or positions (e.g., Bucy, Gantz, & Wang, 2007). Political events and issues seem particularly prone to filtering through various "senses of humor," as evidenced through jokes about political figures such as Barack Obama, stories on Internet news sites such as *The Onion*, and the enduring popularity of television programs like *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*. This investigation considers the role of sense of humor in the formation of public opinion, specifically opinions about marginalized cultural groups.

1.3. *Opinions concerning marginalized groups*

Racial attitudes have been conceptualized at multiple levels, from institutional (Lopez, 2000) to individual, with institutional racism potentially causing or reinforcing attitudes at the individual level. Randall (2008, p. 1) notes that "[i]nstitutions can behave in ways that are overtly racist (i.e., specifically excluding Blacks from services) or inherently racist (i.e., adopting policies that result in the exclusion of Blacks)." At the individual level, despite the widespread belief that blatant racism retreated following passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (e.g., Pew Research Center, 2010; Wilson, 2012), research suggests that stereotypical beliefs persist, although in subtle, implicit or symbolic forms (e.g., Devine & Elliot, 2000; Schuman, Steeh, Bobo, & Krysan, 1997; Sniderman & Carmines, 1997; Wittenbrink, Judd, & Park, 1997, 2001). Such scholarship posits that a symbolic racism—motivated by symbols including welfare, single parenting, crime, affirmative action, and even such specifics as the "birther" movement attack on Barack Obama, as well as the perception that Blacks have gotten more than they

deserve (Sears & Henry, 2005; Shugart, 2006)—has largely replaced the more blatant, “old-fashioned” or overt racist attitudes (e.g., support for segregation). Also forwarded by this research is a personality-based view of prejudice (Grossarth-Maticek, Eysenck, & Vetter, 1989; Richardson, 2005).

Mass media represent an important source of information about cultures for many (e.g., Matabane, 1988; Neuendorf, Atkin, Jeffres, Billman, & Loszak, 2009; Neuendorf, Atkin, Jeffres, Loszak, & Williams, 2000), with ethnic, racial, and other minority stereotyping in television content a consistent finding over the years (e.g., Brown-Givens & Monahan, 2005; Dixon & Linz, 2000; Lind, 2010; Mastro & Greenberg, 2000; Mastro & Stern, 2003; Matabane, 1988; Oliver, 1994). Such stereotypes may lead to stereotyped perceptions by receivers (e.g., Dixon, 2008; Dubriel, 2006; Ramasubramanian, 2011), although as portrayals of specific minorities become more mainstream, humorous portrayals may actually help encourage their social acceptance. Schiappa, Gregg, and Hewes (2006), for instance, found that exposure to a situation comedy like *Will & Grace* can yield positive attitudes toward gay men.

In the realm of news, Mastro, Lapinski, Kopacz, and Behm-Morawitz (2009) found that both the gender of the viewer and the race of the TV news suspect influence subsequent judgments, including attributions about the perpetrator and victim. They also found that “the race of the depicted suspect has a significant effect on attitudes toward Blacks in greater society, beyond the mediated context.” Media coverage thus contributes to audience conceptions about race and race relations, including more implicit forms of symbolic racism, such as lack of support for affirmative action and perceptions about the pervasiveness of discrimination (e.g., Herrnstein & Murray, 1994; Neuendorf, Atkin, et al., 2000; Sniderman & Carmines, 1997). Since racism is now stigmatized and, perhaps consequently, expressed in more subtle forms (e.g., Krysan, 1998), traditional measures of overt racism may yield diminished returns. Scholars (e.g., Tuch & Weitzer, 1997) advocate the development of measures based on less obtrusive response latencies or social desirability norms.

Opinion responses to media coverage about marginalized groups may be filtered via the individual's own relevant social categories. Research on divisive news coverage (Anastasio et al., 2005) has indicated that exposure to media reports of public opinion divided by gender, race, or political affiliation may lead to polarization of audience members' opinions. Further, negative evaluation of Black media images has been related to endorsement of affirmative action among Black respondents (Fujioka, 2005).

1.4. *The senses of humor*

Humor has been proposed to be an additional important filter through which individuals may view and cognitively process issues of importance and contestation (Martin, 2007). Thus, the introduction of humor appreciation to the discussion of opinions about the treatment of marginalized cultural groups may be a fruitful application. The interdisciplinary scholarly literature on humor to date has identified four broad mechanisms of humor apprehension—i.e., ways in which one might find something funny. Each of these four emerges from a body of work that identifies the underlying assumptions of the particular approach to humor, and also provides a reasonable amount of empirical support for its existence (Martin, 2007). While most scholars writing within these literatures take the view that one particular mechanism is paramount (usually to the exclusion of the other mechanisms), it is our view that multiple mechanisms are likely, and that these may come into play simultaneously when a receiver encounters a potentially humorous stimulus (Neuendorf et al., 2011). Further, we contend that any examination of humor must begin with this taxonomy of humor types. The four independent mechanisms are superiority/disparagement, arousal/dark humor, incongruity, and social currency.

1.4.1. *Superiority/disparagement*

Among others, Freud (1960) recognized the aggressive basis in many jokes. As far back as Aristotle (McKeon, 1941), laughter was seen as originating in malice. Seventeenth-century British philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1651/1981) reinforced the notion of humor as derived from a sense of superiority over others. More recently, the superiority mechanism has been validated in work by the theoretic examinations of Gruner (1978) and the quantitative research of Zillmann and Bryant (1974), Zillmann and Bryant (1980) and LaFave, Haddad, and Maesen (1976). Common applications of humor aimed at engaging this mechanism include racist and sexist humor (Ford & Ferguson, 2004; Thomas & Esses, 2004). Attempts to generate a superiority mechanism in response to potentially humorous stimuli include “putdown” humor, satire, sarcasm, self-deprecation, and the display of ridiculous behaviors.

1.4.2. *Arousal/dark humor*

Although early attempts to explicate this possible mechanism for experiencing humor emphasized the humorous response as a simple release of pent-up psychological strain or tension (e.g., the works of writers/philosophers Immanuel Kant and Herbert Spencer; Spencer, 1860), a later articulation by psychologist Daniel Berlyne (1972) posited two arousal-related processes—arousal boost and arousal jag. The arousal boost mechanism operates when a pleasurable increase in generalized arousal results from a humorous stimulus. The arousal jag mechanism comes into play when arousal passes an optimal level, and a punch-line or other resolution successfully reduces arousal to a pleasurable level once again. Arousal-provoking humor may be manifested in a variety of ways, such as dark or death-related humor, sick humor, and, possibly, sexual or naughty humor.

1.4.3. Incongruity

The juxtaposition of inconsistent or incongruous elements is the focus of this oft-mentioned mechanism by which humor might be apprehended. Dating back to articulations by 19th century German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (Martin, 2007), this notion was further elaborated by Arthur Koestler (1964). His concept of bisociation was an attempt to explain the mental processes involved in the humorous resolution of incongruous stimuli, as well as the process of artistic creativity and scientific discovery. Briefly, these theoretical approaches indicate that humor is experienced when two disparate perspectives are simultaneously experienced; the joy of humor derives from the “solving” of the incongruous puzzle. Contemporary empirical support for this mechanism of humor includes a series of studies by Shultz and colleagues (e.g., Shultz & Horibe, 1974) and others (Perlmutter, 2002; Vaid, Hull, Heredia, Gerkens, & Martinez, 2003; Veale, 2004). Particular types of humor intended to generate an incongruity mechanism response include wordplay (e.g., puns), “pure” visual incongruity, absurdity, and sight gags.

1.4.4. Social currency

Although less frequently acknowledged as an independent dimension of humor appreciation, social interaction humor has been studied as a means of building and maintaining relationships (e.g., Chapman, 1983; Fine, 1983; Lamaster, 1975). Humor may be experienced as the pleasure derived from playful interaction (Apter, 1982), the establishment of a functional social construction or hierarchy (Fry, 1963), or the achievement of a sense of group belonging or understanding (Dundes, 1987; Pollio, 1983). Particular behaviors meant to invoke this mechanism include the use of “inside jokes,” joking to fit in, and parody (relying on a shared view of a known form, such as a film genre). These broadly defined mechanisms may be found to manifest in a variety of ways in the mass media.

1.4.5. Validating a taxonomy of senses of humor

Research by the authors of this article and others has established the validity of a multi-dimensional approach to the measurement of the four Senses of Humor (SOH). These humor mechanisms seem to operate independently and particular combinations of relative preferences across the four can constitute SOH “profiles” that vary among demographic groups (Lieberman, Neuendorf, Denny, Skalski, & Wang, 2009; Neuendorf & Fennell, 1988; Neuendorf, Skalski, & Powers, 2004). Most recently, qualitative work inquiring into respondents’ understanding of the deep meanings of the four mechanisms of humor has validated the theoretical dimensionality of these senses of humor with anecdotal exemplars collected from respondents (Neuendorf & Skalski, 2014). Additionally, links between specific SOH profiles and media use patterns have been established (Neuendorf, 2007; Neuendorf & Skalski, 2000; Powers, Neuendorf, & Skalski, 2005). Although some attempts have been made at typologizing mediated humor (e.g., Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2004), there is no consensus as to the number or types of humor utilized in mass media products (Vandaele, 2002), thus making correspondence between sense of humor type and particular media exposure patterns problematic. Nevertheless, validation of the four humor mechanisms against popular mass media products (Neuendorf & Skalski, 2000) has established some criterion validation. For example, in a study of the general population, appreciation of disparagement humor was found to relate to greater enjoyment of the TV programs *The Simpsons*, *Late Night with David Letterman*, and *Hogan’s Heroes*, and lesser enjoyment of *Full House*. Appreciation of incongruity humor was related to greater enjoyment of *Monty Python’s Flying Circus* and *The Tracey Ullman Show*, and lesser enjoyment of *The Cosby Show*.

Initial construct validation of the SOH constructs against social values (Schwartz, 1992, 1994) has been conducted (Neuendorf et al., 2004), finding that attraction to disparagement humor related to greater endorsement of the value of social power, and lower endorsement of the values of equality and helpfulness in a student sample. Those with higher ratings on incongruity humor gave greater endorsement to the values of inner harmony, social power, pleasure, and wisdom, and lower endorsement of the values of national security, preservation of public image, devoutness, and cleanliness. Additional research utilizing a student sample (Skalski et al., 2012) further supported the link between SOH and values, with findings that included robust relationships: between an appreciation of disparagement humor and endorsement of the Schwartz values dimensions of universalism (negative) and achievement (positive); between an appreciation of incongruity humor and the values dimension of universalism (positive); between an appreciation of dark/arousal humor and the values dimensions of achievement (negative) and stimulation (positive); and between an appreciation of social currency humor and the values dimensions of self-directedness (positive) and stimulation (negative). Other past work has noted a link connecting SOH to perceived quality of life (QOL; Neuendorf, Jeffres, Skalski, & Atkin, 2000), finding that, even after numerous statistical controls, affinity for incongruity humor was related to higher neighborhood and city QOL assessments, and enjoyment of disparagement humor was related to a higher national QOL assessment.

And, some evidence has been found of a relationship between general population SOH profiles (using an earlier version of the SOH scales) and reactions to public events such as the O. J. Simpson murder trial and the Bill Clinton/Monica Lewinsky affair (Neuendorf, Skalski, Jeffres, & Atkin, 1999), such that those with a stronger affinity for absurd/incongruous humor were less likely to report a belief that O. J. Simpson was innocent of murder, and those with a stronger preference for social humor were more likely to say that the news coverage of the Lewinsky affair was excessive. And particularly pertinent to the present study, we also found senses of humor to correlate with public opinions about current issues (Neuendorf et al., 1999). Those more strongly endorsing “mean-spirited” (i.e., disparagement) humor were found to be significantly less supportive of government-guaranteed health care, less supportive of continued affirmative action, and more supportive of continued legal abortion. Those more strongly endorsing dark/satiric humor were found to be significantly less supportive

of government-guaranteed health care, less supportive of continued affirmative action, and less supportive of increased gun control. Most of these SOH/public opinion relationships retained their significance after controlling for social locators, including political orientation.

2. Research question and hypotheses

This investigation forwards the notion that senses of humor may operate as trait-based filters for perceptions of the world. The research raises questions about whether SOH will predict opinions, in particular those related to the status of marginalized cultural groups, providing a partial replication and an extension of our earlier work (Neuendorf et al., 1999). Given additional past research that has illuminated the roles of social locators (including, importantly, political orientation) and mass media exposure in the prediction of public opinions, we query whether the senses of humor can provide predictive utility above and beyond the variance accounted for by these historically important construct sets. Thus, we offer the following research question:

RQ: Can individuals' senses of humor predict public opinions toward marginalized groups over and above the prediction by social locators, political orientation, and media consumption?

Further, past literature guides us to examine relationships between particular senses of humor and public opinions on issues related to historically discriminated-against groups in society. Specifically, based on literatures on symbolic racism and disparagement humor (e.g., Ford & Ferguson, 2004), it is expected that liking of disparagement humor will lead to less sensitivity to the current treatment of historically discriminated against cultures and groups of individuals, and less support for human rights initiatives directed toward those cultures and groups. On the other hand, social currency humor preference should relate positively to those public opinion outcomes based on that humor type's emphasis on inclusivity and prosocial communication behaviors (e.g., Chapman, 1983). From the nascent body of literature on these humor types, we pose the following hypotheses:

H1. Affinity for disparagement humor will be related to opinions less favorable toward marginalized groups.

H2. Affinity for social currency humor will be related to opinions more favorable toward marginalized groups.

Finally, this research offers one additional prediction that acknowledges the possibility of a changing role for mass media exposure due to its continued fragmentation and the diffusion of new communication technologies. One might expect distinct effects on public opinion about others as a function of such media use due to their interactivity, including the ability to execute point-to-point communication with vast numbers of others, and the greater control this type of use offers. This research looked at several prominent forms of interactive media, specifically email use, social media use, and web surfing. We anticipate that, since users have greater ability to select content matching their views and are exposed to similar others, interactive media use can help explain public opinion alongside traditional predictors. Polk, Young, and Holbert (2009), for instance, found that people with lower self-efficacy preferred the sarcastic political humor that is found in many alternative news programs such as *The Daily Show*. And, recent research has linked social media use and political activity. De Zúñiga, Jung, and Valenzuela (2012) found that social network activities, in general, were strong predictors of political involvement and participation. And Kim, Atkin, and Lin's (2014) analysis of Pew national survey data revealed that online social network uses for political purposes significantly influenced level of political partisanship and political involvement. Assuming that audiences are selectively attending to messages in line with their political predispositions (e.g., Lin, 2009), it is expected that exposure to social media content among liberal users will differ from conservative users, with liberal users choosing mediated messages that strengthen opinions in favor of expanded rights for historically marginalized groups, and conservative users choosing messages that strengthen their opinions against these positions. This is based in part on the work of Ball-Rokeach, Rokeach, and Grube (1984), who found that liberals were more receptive to appeals emphasizing equality—a core liberal value—than were conservatives. Therefore, we offer:

H3. Social media consumption will statistically interact with political orientation in the prediction of public opinion regarding the treatment of marginalized groups.

3. Method

Study data were collected using an online survey. The instrument was administered to a sample of undergraduate introductory Communication students at a mid-sized urban university. Students received either course credit or extra credit for their participation. A total of 288 students completed the survey, which included a variety of measures tapping public opinion, media use, and senses of humor, along with several social locators (including political orientation).

3.1. Measures

3.1.1. Public opinion

Public opinion, primarily toward historically discriminated against cultures and groups, and issues affecting those groups, was measured using eight items. Most were adapted from questions used by the Gallup organization, available on their

website (www.gallup.com). All addressed the measurement of opinions toward the treatment of marginalized groups from an “implicit” or “symbolic” racial attitude perspective as outlined above. Included were six items asking participants to indicate their satisfaction with “the way various groups in society are treated,” including women, Blacks, Asians, Arabs, Hispanics, and immigrants, and two items focusing on current issues, including belief in (a) the necessity of continued affirmative action, and (b) the legalization of same-sex marriage. All items were administered using a 0–10 scale, with “0” indicating no satisfaction or agreement and “10” indicating complete satisfaction or agreement.

3.1.2. Media use

Items used to measure media use were divided into three sections tapping amount of traditional media use, news media use, and interactive media use. The traditional media use items asked about TV viewing yesterday, radio listening yesterday, number of magazines read regularly, books read in the past six months, theatrical movies attended in the past month, and number of movies watched via DVD/video/DVR in the past month. The news media use items asked about minutes spent listening to news (radio, online) yesterday, minutes spent reading news (newspaper, magazine, online) yesterday, and minutes spent watching news (TV, online) yesterday. Finally, the interactive media use items inquired about number of emails sent yesterday, minutes spent on the Internet yesterday, and minutes spent social networking online yesterday. Each of the three sets of media use items was indexed via addition after standardization of items, creating three scales of media use.

3.1.3. Senses of humor

The Senses of Humor Scale, a 16-item, four-dimensional self-report scale, is derived from a series of investigations by the current authors and others (e.g., Neuendorf, 2007; Neuendorf, Jeffres, et al., 2000; Neuendorf & Skalski, 2000; Powers et al., 2005). The scale includes items tapping the Disparagement, Dark, Incongruity, and Social Currency dimensions of humor appreciation, measured on a 0–10 scale (with “0” indicating “strongly disagree” and “10” indicating “strongly agree”). Four items were used to measure each dimension. The items and their scale construction are described in the results section below.

3.1.4. Social locators

Finally, a variety of social locator measures were included in this study. Participants were asked to indicate their biological sex, age (in years), annual household income (using six categories ranging from under \$25,000 a year to \$150,000 or more), and political orientation (using five categories ranging from strong conservative to strong liberal). An open-ended question asked about their race or ethnicity. Answers to this question were coded into “White” or “non-White” for subsequent analyses.

4. Results

The mean age for the 288 respondents was 22.55 years ($SD=5.94$), and 56 percent of respondents were female. Not surprisingly given the student sample, only 3 percent of participants reported being married; the vast majority were never married/not in a relationship (49 percent) or never married/in a relationship (45 percent). The modal household income was less than \$25,000 (33 percent), with 87 percent falling below \$100,000, and 30 percent of respondents reported being non-White. In terms of political philosophy, 6 percent said they were strongly conservative, 14 percent said they were conservative, 31 percent reported being middle of the road, 30 percent said they were liberal, and 18 percent said they were strongly liberal.

The four public opinion items measuring satisfaction with the treatment of minority groups (i.e., Blacks, Asians, Arabs, and Hispanics) were indexed via addition; the Cronbach’s alpha for these four items was .875. The items measuring satisfaction with the treatment of women, support for same-sex marriage, support for continued affirmative action, and satisfaction with the treatment of immigrants were retained as single-item indicators for subsequent analyses.

A confirmatory factor analysis was conducted on the 16 Senses of Humor Scale items, specifying four factors corresponding to the four theoretical dimensions of the SOH; the factors were allowed to correlate. The construct of Disparagement Humor was defined by the following items: “I like humor that puts down arrogant people,” “I like humor that puts down stupid people,” “I like humor that puts down other racial or ethnic groups,” and “I enjoy humor that criticizes society.” Dark Humor was defined by the items: “I like dark comedy,” “I like humor about death,” “I think it’s funny when other people actually get hurt,” and “I like gross-out humor.” Incongruity Humor had as its components: “Unlikely events seem funny,” “I think it’s funny when things are combined in unexpected ways,” “When something happens that is a ‘one in a million’ occurrence, I find it funny,” and “I think incongruity is funny (i.e., when incompatible elements are put together).” And Social Currency Humor was defined by the items: “I find it amusing when others make reference to things I’m really familiar with,” “I like humor that is shared by a group,” “I find it humorous when I explore common knowledge or experiences with others,” and “I like ‘inside’ jokes (jokes only certain people ‘get’).”

The CFA was conducted via Amos, resulting in a good model fit (Chi-square = 277.208, $df=98$, $p < .001$; CFI = .980; RMSEA = .080). The correlations among the four latent constructs (i.e., Disparagement, Dark, Incongruity, and Social Currency Humor) are shown in Table 1; they range from .01 to .41. Four scales for SOH were constructed via factor scores derived from a principal components factor analysis with oblique rotation. Cronbach’s alphas ranged from .70 to .81, which is appropriate, given current perspectives that call for a counterbalancing of internal consistency reliability and content validity (Bollen & Lennox, 1991; Clark & Watson, 1995).

Table 1
Correlations among senses of humor scales, with social locators, political orientation, and media use.

	Disparagement	Dark	Incongruity	Social currency
Disparagement	1.00			
Dark	.41***	1.00		
Incongruity	.23***	.16*	1.00	
Social currency	.21**	.01	.30***	1.00
Age	-.15*	-.13	-.07	-.02
Income	.02	-.13	-.08	-.01
Gender (female)	-.23**	-.26***	.07	.07
Non-White	-.07	-.22**	.10	.08
Liberalness	-.07	-.01	.20**	.17*
Traditional media use	-.03	.02	.01	-.00
News media use	.03	.04	-.01	-.03
Interactive media use	.03	.08	-.02	.04

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

Correlational, MANOVA, and hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted to test the hypotheses and explore answers to the research question.

Research Question 1 queried how the four senses of humor might relate to public opinions, over and above the contributions of social locators, political orientation, and media exposure. A set of answers to this question may be gleaned from results reported in Tables 2 and 3. Table 2 displays the results for a series of hierarchical multiple regressions that test this hypothesis, using one regression for each of the five public opinion constructs of interest. Block 1 of each regression equation included as controls the social locators of age, income, gender, and race. This block proved to be statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level in all cases but one, that of the prediction of satisfaction with the treatment of immigrants. Social locators that served as individual significant predictors varied across the DVs; zero-order correlations (r 's) and partial regression coefficients are displayed in Table 3. Among social locators, non-White status was shown to be the most robust predictor, with unique predictions of lesser satisfaction with the treatment of minorities, lesser satisfaction with the treatment of women, lesser support for same-sex marriage, and greater support for continued affirmative action.

Not surprisingly, political orientation as its own block provided a significant increment of variance predicted, beyond other social locators, for all five DVs. A more liberal political ideological orientation was related to greater support for both same-sex marriage and continued affirmative action, and to less satisfaction with the treatment of women, minorities, and immigrants.

Block 3 examined the incremental contribution of media exposure, including traditional, news, and interactive media. This block was non-significant for all five DVs.

Table 2 includes the four SOH Scale dimensions as a fourth and final block in each hierarchical multiple regression predicting opinions. Even after controlling for social locators, political orientation, traditional media use, news media exposure, and interactive media use, the senses of humor contribute a significant increment to the variance explained for two of the five DVs: support for same-sex marriage and satisfaction with the treatment of minorities.

Table 2
Hierarchical regressions predicting public opinions.

Dependent variable	Block 1		Block 2		Block 3		Block 4		Total equation	
	Social locators		Political orientation		Media use		Senses of humor		R^2	p
	R^2 ch.	p	R^2 ch.	p	R^2 ch.	p	R^2 ch.	p		
Satisfied with treatment of women	.09	.003	.03	.009	.00	.861	.01	.685	.14	.011
Support for same-sex marriage	.07	.010	.27	<.001	.01	.409	.04	.028	.39	<.001
Support for continued affirmative action	.19	<.001	.04	.005	.00	.900	.03	.154	.26	<.001
Satisfied with treatment of minorities (scale, $k = 4$)	.08	.005	.06	.001	.02	.290	.05	.035	.21	<.001
Satisfied with treatment of immigrants	.04	.116	.06	.001	.02	.375	.03	.176	.15	.004

Note. Block 1 (min $df = 4$, 178), social locators, is comprised of age, income, gender (female), and race/ethnicity (non-White); Block 2 (min $df = 1$, 177), political orientation, is represented by a single indicator of liberalness; Block 3 ($df = 3$, 174), media use, is comprised of three indexes—traditional media use (TV viewing read in past yesterday, radio listening yesterday, number of magazines read regularly, books six months, theatrical movies attended in past month, and number of movies watched via DVD/video/DVR in past month), news media use (minutes spent listening to news (radio, online) yesterday, minutes spent reading news (newspaper, magazine, online) yesterday, and minutes spent watching news (TV, online) yesterday), and interactive media use (number of emails sent yesterday, minutes spent on Internet yesterday, and minutes spent social networking online yesterday); Block 4 ($df = 4$, 170), senses of humor, is comprised of the four factor-created scales—Disparagement, Dark, Incongruity, and Social Currency Humor.

Note. Inspection of collinearity diagnostics (tolerances, condition indices) revealed no problems with multicollinearity. All tolerances exceeded .70, and no condition indices were identified that exceeded 15.0 with more than one item loading at .30 or greater.

Table 3
Correlations and final betas for predictions of public opinions.

	Satisfied with treatment of women		Support for same-sex marriage		Support for continued affirmative action		Satisfied with treatment of minorities		Satisfied with treatment of immigrants		Political orientation (liberal)
	<i>r</i>	Final β	<i>r</i>	Final β	<i>r</i>	Final β	<i>r</i>	Final β	<i>r</i>	Final β	
Block 1: social locators											
Age	-.110 ^a	-.119	-.137*	-.042	.133*	.073	-.159*	-.118	-.086	-.049	-.004
Income	.015	-.056	.014	.021	-.083	.040	.008	-.118	.024	-.072	-.090
Gender (female)	-.112 ^a	-.088	.178**	.105	.133*	.068	.007	.027	-.059	.006	.217**
Non-White	-.202**	-.152 ^a	-.197**	-.239**	.425***	.355***	-.261***	-.179*	-.181**	-.067	.148*
Block 2: political orientation											
Liberalness	-.242***	-.189*	.479***	.499***	.236**	.163*	-.233**	-.263***	-.258***	-.265**	-
Block 3: media use											
Traditional media use	-.064	.041	-.004	-.070	.048	-.029	.000	.135a	.034	.118	.019
News media use	-.034	.027	-.056	-.042	-.017	-.024	-.014	-.010	-.044	-.073	-.039
Interactive media use	-.046	.033	.053	.054	.002	.005	.004	.004	.007	.034	.015
Block 4: senses of humor											
Disparagement humor	.164**	.053	.018	-.064	-.148*	-.147 ^a	.222***	.129	.198**	.121	-.072
Dark humor	.148*	.080	.210**	.157*	-.101	.087	.177**	.025	.216**	.109	-.014
Incongruity humor	-.058	.017	.200**	.095	.129*	.105	.041	.159*	-.085	.009	.196**
Social currency humor	-.080	-.019	.139*	.101	.144*	.099	-.085	-.082	-.144*	-.068	.165*

^a .05 < *p* < .10.

* *p* < .05.

** *p* < .01.

*** *p* < .001.

The patterns of relationships between the four Senses of Humor scales and all five public opinion indicators are shown in Table 3. In addition to patterns related to Hypotheses 1 and 2, which will be discussed below, we may also see additional, unpredicted relationships for the other two senses of humor. A higher level of appreciation for dark humor was found to relate to greater support for same-sex marriage, and at the same time greater satisfaction with the treatment of women, minorities, and immigrants. Further, a greater appreciation for incongruity humor was related to support for both same-sex marriage and continued affirmative action.

Hypotheses 1 and 2 posited relationships between particular senses of humor and opinions concerning the treatment of marginalized cultural groups—H1: Affinity for disparagement humor will be related to opinions less favorable toward marginalized groups, and H2: Affinity for social currency humor will be related to opinions more favorable toward marginalized groups. Simple correlational results in Table 3 show that those with a stronger appreciation for disparagement humor were more satisfied with the current treatment of women, minorities, and immigrants, and less supportive of continued affirmative action. The magnitudes of these relationships dimmed to non-significance after statistical controls via regression, however, leaving Hypothesis 1 with partial support. Correlational results also show that those with a stronger appreciation for social currency humor were more supportive of continued affirmative action and of same-sex marriage, and less satisfied with the treatment of immigrants. These relationships were also reduced to non-significance with the introduction of controls, providing Hypothesis 2 with only partial support.

Hypothesis 3 acknowledged a likelihood of strong selective exposure to interactive media, as motivated by political orientation, and predicted that social media use would statistically interact with political orientation in the prediction of public opinion regarding the treatment of marginalized populations. A 2 × 2 MANOVA was executed, including the five dependent indicators. For the five, a Bartlett's test of sphericity was 421.16 (*df* = 10, *p* < .001) and the KMO measure of sampling adequacy was .665, both confirming the appropriateness of MANOVA analyses. The main effects were the measures of social media use and political orientation, each split at the median. The MANOVA interaction term was non-significant (Pillai's trace = .075, Wilks' lambda = .926, Hotelling's trace = .078, Roy's largest root = .042). Thus, Hypothesis 3 was not supported.

5. Discussion

The present findings suggest that senses of humor are among the more potent predictors of public opinion on a range of issues related to American multiculturalism. Importantly, SOH contribute significantly to the prediction of certain public opinions beyond the contributions of social locators, political orientation, and a wide range of media habits, and even beyond the strongest predictor of public opinions in this investigation, political orientation. This provides some confirmation for a conceptual framework positing long-overlooked linkages derived from the literature, supporting a social-cognitive model that marries one's humor orientations to public opinion views held regarding marginalized groups. And, the study provides further confirmation of the multidimensional nature of the senses of humor (e.g., Neuendorf et al., 2004; Powers et al., 2005), and the differential impact of these humor orientations on opinion formation and expression.

In particular, appreciation of social currency humor is related to "kinder, gentler" orientations toward the marginalized, with greater support for affirmative action and gay marriage, and greater concern over the treatment of immigrants. This

finding is consistent with research documenting that high valuations of equality are related to greater support for minority rights (e.g., Neuendorf et al., 2011; Sears & Henry, 2005). Appreciation for disparagement humor presents nearly the opposite profile, presaging lesser support for affirmative action and greater satisfaction with the current treatment of women, minorities, and immigrants. An affinity for dark humor seems to relate to a type of laissez-faire philosophy—holding the opinion that women, minorities, and immigrants are treated well, while supporting gay marriage. And, an affinity for incongruity humor presents a partial profile of a quintessential liberal—related to positive positions on the issues of affirmative action and same-sex marriage.

While the paths from SOH and political orientation to public opinion are clearly worthy of further investigation, the potential for the role of mass media is murkier. Contrary to the findings of much past research, there is no evidence in this study that media exposure contributes substantially to public opinion. Nor is there an indication that use of social media interacts with political orientation in the prediction of public opinion. A clear implication of the pattern of these findings is that sheer volume of media exposure by itself is not predictive of opinions toward marginalized groups today, consistent with predictions about the death of mass communication as a mainstreaming force (e.g., Chaffee & Metzger, 2001). Additional indirect paths, from senses of humor through content-specific media messages to public opinion, may well exist. The processes circumscribed by these paths are most likely reinforcing—rather than opinion-changing—in nature, given the selective nature of exposure in the contemporary media-rich environment. Linkages found between the diffusion of social media and political activities during the “Arab Spring” of 2011 suggest that emerging media can foster political involvement (e.g., Nowak, Hamilton, Atkin, & Rauh, 2010). Subsequent investigations should expand the range of message exposure measures from the current medium-based and news-specific indicators to include measures of exposure to particular programs, films, web sites, social media trends, etc., to tap this expected extreme selective exposure/opinion reinforcement process.

Drawing from contemporary work showing that like media preferences can stimulate interpersonal discussion about politics—which Scheufele (2002) terms the “soul” of democracy—we can see how the present results have implications for office water-cooler conversations about key issues. Johnny Carson’s humor no longer provides a common cultural reference point as it did in decades past, embodying the once monolithic network structure whose hegemony lasted through the Cold War era (e.g., Newcomb, 2006). The contemporary fragmented late-night environment—replete with its constellation of multicultural entertainers—could inform discussions on political issues along more narrowly based humor and political archetypes.

Exploring this dynamic in the era of narrowcasting, we can posit major implications for theory building to be found in the humor and media exposure archetypes uncovered here. Just as Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert used their TV shows on Comedy Central to catalyze a progressive “Rally to restore sanity” in 2010, we might anticipate that viewers would be motivated to take political action based, in part, on patronage of particular humor types (which lean toward satire, a.k.a., a combination of social currency humor and disparagement humor) (Holbert, Lambe, Dudo, & Carlton, 2007). For instance, Pew (2010) data suggest that political posting activity on social networks is positively related to political involvement and the kinds of “outsider exclusion” activities wherein one might block certain friends from receiving a given posting. Political humor figures prominently into these political activities, particularly as a way to broach sensitive topics in censored environments, where trust in the political consonance of one’s network facilitates such disclosures (e.g., Mou, Atkin, Fu, Lin, & Lau, 2013). The authors cast these online posting behaviors as a “spiral of trust” dynamic—drawing from the spiral of silence dynamic.

Throughout these analyses, the strongest predictor of public opinions toward marginalized groups has been that of political orientation. Along with gender, it is this construct that in key places “steals” the significance from relationships between senses of humor and public opinions. Using exploratory zero-order correlational analyses (see Tables 1 and 3), a more liberal political orientation was found to be significantly related to greater appreciation for both social currency humor and incongruity humor, but not to appreciation for dark humor or disparagement humor. And, past work (Neuendorf et al., 1999) suggests that incongruity is the most “cognitive” of humor types, having also identified a relationship between appreciation for incongruity and liberalism. Taken in tandem with work showing a higher need for cognition (NFC) among liberals (Nowak et al., 2010), this may help probe the role of SOH in public opinion formation. Even further, our previous research (Neuendorf et al., 2004) found associations between certain conservative attitudes and greater appreciation for disparagement humor, a relationship that would be expected under the perspective which views conservatism as implying a moral order that condemns people more for what they are rather than what they do, and tends to ostracize and exclude members of out-groups (Haidt, 2003; Lakoff, 1996).

Reasons for these relationships between SOH and political orientation might emerge from current medical research relating political orientation to particular brain structures and patterns of activity (Schreiber et al., 2013). Importantly, Kanai, Feilden, Firth, and Rees (2011) found that a higher degree of liberalism was associated with greater gray matter volume in the anterior cingulate cortex, while greater conservatism was associated with a higher volume in the right amygdala; the former is related to integration of conflicting information (which seems consistent with incongruity), while the latter is related to threat detection and fear (which may relate to disparagement of others). Combining findings from these various research traditions provides tantalizing hints that both political orientation and the senses of humor might actually stem from common biological sources.

Seventy years ago, Bertrand Russell (1945) commented on the basic foundations of modern liberalism and conservatism. Liberals tend to have an optimistic view of human perfectibility, preferring the greatest possible freedom of the individual, while conservatives have historically taken a more pessimistic view of human nature as essentially selfish, requiring constraints by authority and tradition. This is consistent with evidence that liberals are often driven by empathy and sympathy,

while conservatives are motivated by threat, fear, and anger (Buck, 2014; Haidt, 2003; Lakoff, 1996). Liberals' fondness for social currency humor may be a function of their empathetic tendencies, and also stem from the notion that individuals with lower self-efficacy—a common feature of marginalized groups that make up the political left—are drawn to media content such as *The Daily Show* (Holbert et al., 2007).

As noted at the outset, Chaffee and Metzger (2001) heralded the “end of mass communication” with the recognition of individualized media products tailored to smaller, homogenous audiences rather than a large undifferentiated mass. Instead of thinking in terms of mass communication, the countering view embraces the individual's values and preferences and acknowledges unorganized, private, collective and potentially diverse opinions. This view may be less satisfying to the political scientist, the media scholar examining the audience at large, or the social organizer attempting to identify and reach a specific public. Yet to ignore individual differences, e.g., needs, traits, and readiness to respond (Oliver & Krakowiak, 2009), is to miss an opportunity to identify important filters through which individuals process information about current social events in the formation of opinions. Such filters may be primarily cognitive in nature (Price, 1988), or affective in tone (Feldman, 1987), or set in a social context (e.g., “climates” of opinion as articulated by Jeffres, 1997). Regardless, they can help explain variance that cannot be accounted for through exposure to mediated messages alone. Thus, over time, we might expect to see that growing diversity in new media environments should lead to fragmenting audiences and allow users to tailor and filter the news and other media content in line with their individual interests (Bucy et al., 2007). While emerging outlets for various humor types may build social capital (e.g., Holbert et al., 2007; Putnam, 2000), the specialized “daily me” media use pattern (Lasica, 2002) could result in populations being fragmented into narrow constituencies based on ethnic and/or humor orientation templates, among other factors. In sum, this study's findings highlight the four senses of humor as a set of traits with potential impacts on public opinion formation, possibly via the selective exposure to messages about marginalized groups. The senses of humor may well be some of the more robust cognitive filters through which individuals view their communicative environment and the world at large.

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