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Putting the “self” in self-deprecation: When deprecating humor about minorities is acceptable

Abstract: This study tested how source knowledge affects enjoyment of self-deprecating humor about a minority group. Participants made aware that the source of a message poking fun at people with disabilities was himself disabled had more positive evaluations of the cartoon and author than participants unaware of his disability. Participants initially given no source information judged the author more positively the second time when they were given follow-up source information. Finally, some effects were moderated by the disability status of the message receiver, such that having a disability or knowing someone who does predicted higher liking of the cartoons when the author is disabled but lower liking when he is not. The results suggest a role for self-deprecating humor in intergroup relations, and predict when such humor will be accepted by minority and non-minority group members.

Keywords: humor, political cartoons, self-deprecation, stereotypes

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1 Introduction

Stand-up comedian Josh Blue has Cerebral Palsy, and is not afraid to use his disability for laughs in his comic routines. His act on Comedy Central’s *Last Comic Standing* included the joke (transcribed from Season 4, Episode 2) “I was walking downtown, and the Drunk Tank stopped and picked me up . . . I was like, ‘wait a minute here fellas, there’s a misunderstanding: I’m not drunk, I have Cerebral Palsy!’” This, along with the rest of his self-deprecating comedy poking fun at living with a disability is met with raucous audience laughter, and Josh Blue won

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the 2006 season of *Last Comic Standing*. This implies that many people found his deprecating humor about people with disabilities funny. The question, then, is why? There are many possible reasons, but one important aspect that has yet to be empirically tested is the status of the deprecator as a member of the targeted group, and how this status may give license to the audience to find the deprecation funny rather than offensive.

There is a tendency for scholars to treat humor as monolithic, with little distinction made regarding message types (Holbert and Young 2013). However, it is important to explore differences in humor's influence, because exposure to certain styles of humor may produce different outcomes (Holbert and Young 2013; Holbert et al. 2011; Polk et al. 2009). Additionally, the conditions under which certain topics are humorous and to whom they are humorous are still subject to further investigation. For example, research shows that tragedies are humorous when considered distant from the message receiver, while mishaps are more humorous when perceived as close (McGraw et al. 2012). This work seeks to explore the conditions under which humor directed toward minority groups is considered humorous.

This paper argues that knowledge about the source influences perceptions of message and source in the delivery of self-deprecating humor. The perceived in-group membership of a humorist in a minority group will permit the acceptability of a message lampooning that group. The acceptability or "license" given to the humorist due to his or her in-group membership will also result in more positive evaluations of the humorist. First, we will discuss the importance of humor in communication. We will then explicate self-deprecating humor as a type of message distinct from self-deprecation as it is more generally understood. Self-deprecation will then be situated in the basic triadic model of communication (source, message, receiver), in order to understand what kind of "license" must be permitted in order for the self-deprecating message to work. This work is grounded in expectancy violation theory (EVT), social identity theory, and motivated processing to explain under which conditions humor directed toward minority groups is acceptable and humorous.

2 Humor and the taboo

It should be noted that humor plays an important role in human communication. One use of humor is in reducing anxiety and tension in situations that cause discomfort. Several studies have demonstrated that humor moderates the relationship between stressful experiences and mood disturbance (Martin and Lefcourt 1983; Martin et al. 1993). Joking about taboo topics (e.g. sex, politics, death) in

particular is considered a vehicle for releasing tension regarding those topics (see Little 2008). In addition, the delivery of taboo humor can lead to solidarity between source and receiver because message acceptance relies on shared knowledge (Norrick 1989). The role of humor for both relating to others and coping make it an ideal vehicle for effectively dealing with important-yet-socially-difficult topics, like stereotypes. Research on stereotype threat demonstrates that members of stereotyped groups can often experience anxiety in the face of stereotyping, to the point where task performance suffers (Steele and Aronson 1995). Strategic use of humor is one possible way that minorities could combat the tension associated with stereotyping and prejudice.

3 Self-deprecating humor

Self-deprecating humor has been demonstrated to be used for purposes of engagement with taboo topics, particularly among members of minority groups. Self-deprecation, as it is generally understood, is the act of disparaging oneself. It is associated with helplessness and low self-esteem (Abramson et al. 1978; Owens 1994). However, this is quite different from self-deprecating *humor*, which involves offering salient or criticized aspects of oneself as the target of a joke. These salient aspects could involve topics that are specific to the individual (e.g., physical appearance, intelligence, etc.) or to a group to which the individual belongs.

Previous research has found that minority groups tend to be less aggressive in their use of humor (e.g., they are less likely to use another group as the butt of a joke) than the powerful majority. Instead, the type of humor produced and appreciated by minority groups is more likely to be self-deprecating (Nevo 1984). This use of self-deprecating humor by minority groups could function to reduce tension surrounding the power differentials between groups, and in effect, it could serve to equalize status between the humorist and receiver. Specifically, low-power groups use self-deprecation as a method to transcend stereotypes by utilizing the same stereotypes that serve to marginalize them and gaining power over stigma (Bippus 2007; Gilbert 1997). Therefore, self-deprecation can be seen as an equalizing tool used by members of marginalized, low-power groups, who employ self-deprecating humor as a tool to break down barriers to intergroup interaction by taking ownership of the stereotypes and reducing the tension involved with them. In contrast, high power group members can also use self-deprecation to equalize. For example, politicians use self-deprecation to make constituents see them as more similar to them (Esralew 2012). Although this process of equalization is not the focus of the present study, we recognize

that self-deprecating humor is often used by minority groups to enact this type of effect.

Other research on deprecating humor has focused on negative effects, specifically, that self-deprecation provides consent of the target group for a higher-status group to laugh at them, trivializing stereotyping and stigma (Ford 1997; Ford et al. 2008; Ford and Ferguson 2004). By providing self-deprecating humor, a satirist is implying that the topic is worthy of ridicule. This may be another way that self-deprecating humor makes stereotyping and intergroup conflict seem less taboo, by letting the audience become less concerned with issues of egalitarianism (Ford 1997; Ford et al. 2008; Ford and Ferguson 2004). However, regardless of whether self-deprecating humor reduces tension associated with stereotyping by giving power to or by taking it from the minority group, it is worthwhile to assess empirically whether this type of humor actually influences enjoyment on the part of message recipients.

4 Aspects of the humorous message

Previous research on satire points to a model of message influence in relation to a triad, involving the satirist, the satirized (i.e., the target), and the satiree (i.e., the audience member) at each point of a triangle (Knight 2004). According to Knight (2004), in order to for the satirical message to be successful, the audience must agree with the source that the target of the joke is worthy of humor. Thus, the humorousness of the joke is dependent on this implicit contract between source and audience. While self-deprecating humor also follows this basic triadic model, there is an important distinction worth noting between satire and self-deprecation. The target of a satiric message is generally external (e.g. a politician, government institution, societal norms), as satire is used as a vehicle by which source can criticize or discredit the status quo. Meanwhile, within self-deprecating humor, the target of the message is generally internal to the humorist (e.g., the self-deprecator's personality traits or the assumed persona of the self-deprecator). Following the logic of the triadic model of satire, for self-deprecating humor to be successful agreement must then take place between source and audience regarding whether the quality internal to the source is appropriate to joke about.

Self-deprecation has often been assessed alongside other-deprecating humor, or humor used to criticize an opponent, in order to understand the impact of target on audience source and message evaluations (Bippus 2007; Stewart 2011; Becker 2012; Esralew 2012). But how might the manipulation of information about the *source* influence perceptions? Knowledge about the source as a member

of the targeted group makes that humor self-deprecating, while not having such knowledge of the deprecator instead communicates that the source intends to disparage others. If the audience does not recognize the humorist as part of the targeted group, then the message is no longer self-deprecating humor, but other-deprecating humor (i.e., ridicule). Thus, there are implications for how humorous messages will be perceived, depending on whether the audience has knowledge of the source as a member of the group being joked about. With no knowledge of the source, the audience is less able to make a determination regarding whether the target (in the case of self-deprecating humor, an internal attribute) is worthy of deprecation. This study seeks to specifically manipulate the source component of self-deprecation in order to better understand how the triad of self-deprecating humor works, and what effects this has on message acceptability and perceptions of the source in the case of deprecating humor about the taboo topic of stereotypes of people with disabilities.

5 Hypotheses

In order to understand the potential influence of source knowledge in the evaluation of self-deprecating messages, participants viewed and rated political-style cartoons in which the targets of the jokes are people with disabilities. By manipulating the amount of information participants received about the source we can expect differences in evaluations of both the cartoonist as well as overall evaluations of his cartoons. Each group of participants viewed the same four cartoons in randomized order, but we manipulated the amount of information (low, moderate, and high) provided about the cartoonist in each condition.

One of the major theories of humor is incongruity theory, which stipulates that people are amused by messages that surprise them (Meyer 2000). The incongruity literature mostly speaks to within-message inconsistencies (e.g. schemata used to interpret the message versus an unexpected encounter with new information), however the current work is in need of a theoretical mechanism that explains incongruities between source and message. Expectancy violations theory (EVT) also speaks to what happens when the message recipient is surprised or long-held notions are disrupted, however it broadens the scope to look at incongruities outside of simple intra-message inconsistencies.

According to EVT, people have relatively set expectations regarding communicative acts, which are shaped by societal norms (see Burgoon 1993). When the communicator, context, or message violates these expectations in a negative way, negative evaluations will result. Conversely, when a violation occurs, but is

assessed positively, positive evaluations will result. Poking fun at a low-power group (in this case, physically disabled persons) would most certainly be seen as a breach of social norms, and would likely produce negative evaluations of not only the cartoons, but of the cartoonist as well. However, when the communicator is a member of the targeted group, the target is internal rather than external and it is more likely to be considered appropriate. Thus, the following hypotheses are offered:

H1a: Participants with knowledge of the source's disability will have the most positive and least negative evaluations of the cartoons compared to participants without knowledge of his disability.

H1b: Participants with knowledge of the source's disability will have the most positive evaluations of the cartoonist compared to participants without knowledge of his disability.

There is strong evidence that stereotypes toward people with disabilities exist, affecting perceptions of personality, motivations, and behaviors, and are held globally, so that these perceptions cut across disabilities regardless of whether they are physical or cognitive in nature (see Nario-Redmond 2010 for review). However, despite evidence of consistent and ubiquitous stereotypes, people are highly motivated not to appear prejudiced (Plant and Butz 2006; Dunton and Fazio 1997). Social norms dictate that outright expressions of racial prejudice, for example, are inappropriate in the modern era (Butz and Plant 2009). Whether prompted by external pressures or internal acceptance, when given the motivation and opportunity people will express egalitarian opinions (Fazio 1990; Butz and Plant 2009). Otherwise, if responses are automatically activated rather than controlled, people are more likely to express prejudiced judgments (Fazio and Dunton 1997). This study allows respondents to engage in deliberative analysis of the cartoons, thus controlled responses are expected. Therefore, in order to appear less prejudiced, participants should negatively evaluate the cartoons and the cartoonist when no source information is provided, given that laughing at disabled people should be generally considered to be socially undesirable. When the source of the message is engaging in social undesirable behavior, he should be viewed more negatively. As stated above, the information regarding the source's inclusion in the targeted group, however, would instead motivate participants to see these messages as acceptable, and positive evaluations of the message creator should ensue. Either the source is a mean-spirited person who is making fun of people with disabilities, or he is a fun-loving person with disabilities who is willing to laugh at himself. Given the mechanisms hypothesized to take place, it would be informative to explore whether evaluations of both the cartoonist and the cartoons change as a result of more information being pro-

vided about the source to message receivers. When the source is realized to have self-deprecating rather than disparaging intentions, source perceptions should also be enhanced. Thus, as perceptions about the humorosity of the self-deprecation humor change, so should perceptions of the person who created the humorous message. Therefore, we hypothesize the following:

H2a: Participants originally without knowledge of the source's disability will have more positive and less negative evaluations of the cartoons after receiving more information about the cartoonist as compared to their previous evaluations.

H2b: Participants originally without knowledge of the source's disability will have more positive evaluations of the cartoonist after receiving more information as compared to their previous evaluations.

The relationships hypothesized are based on a lay person's perceptions of a low-power group. However, it is equally important to explore how being a member of the targeted group or having close contact with that group might influence perceptions of both source and message. Social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979) predicts that people categorize themselves into social groups, and prefer to see the groups they identify with in a positive light. Based on social identity theory, without information about the source's self-deprecating intentions, those with close personal contact with people with disabilities might feel maligned by the cartoons. On the other hand, humor used by an ingroup member may be seen as positive, increasing identification with the ingroup (e.g., Gilbert 1997). Therefore, we might expect high source information to be associated with positive reactions from ingroup members. However, even with full information about the source, the cartoonist and cartoons could still elicit negative emotions if group members feel that it is not appropriate to thrust the topic of physical disabilities into the self-deprecating spotlight. Based on these competing possibilities, we offer a research question regarding the role of disability status on perceptions of source and message:

RQ1: How does real-world personal experience with disabilities influence positive and negative evaluations of the cartoons, and evaluations of the author?

6 Method

Participants

Participants were 167 undergraduates who participated for extra credit in their courses. Their median age was 20, and 98 (59%) were female. Sixty-eight of the participants (41%) indicated that they or someone close to them had a disability.

6.1 Design

Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions, in which they all viewed cartoons drawn and written by the late John Callahan, a paraplegic who often included people with disabilities in his cartoons. The low source information condition did not receive any information about the author of the cartoons, but were directed straight to viewing the cartoons after the pre-test. The moderate source information condition was provided with the following information, taken from the author's website: "This is John Callahan. For nearly a decade, this irreverent cartoonist has been shocking America with his own special brand of wicked humor. In the world of Callahan, nothing is sacred, nothing is taboo and nothing is funnier!", along with a photograph cropped to show only the author's face in which it cannot be discerned that he is a paraplegic. This condition was included to rule out the possibility that simply seeing the author's face and/or having any source information caused the difference in evaluations, rather than specific knowledge of his disability. The high source information condition provided the same personal statement but with the full photograph showing the author sitting in a wheelchair. The participants in the low source information condition were contacted to participate in a follow-up in which they were given the high level of source information, and of the 56 participants contacted, 18 (32%) completed the follow-up portion. There were no significant differences on any of the pre-test, post-test, or demographic variables measured in the study between those participants who completed the follow-up and those who did not.

6.2 Measures

6.2.1 Attitudes toward people with disabilities

The Attitudes Toward Disabled Persons Scale was a 22-item shortened version from Yuker et al. (1970). It measures how participants feel about people with disabilities in general, on a one (strongly disagree) to 11 (strongly agree) scale, including, "you should not expect too much from a disabled person" and "most disabled people can take care of themselves (reverse scored)". The scale ($M = 4.95$, $SD = 0.96$) was reasonably reliable at Cronbach $\alpha = .75$. The ATDP and scales similar have been validated by Yuker and colleagues in the decades since the scale was originally published (Yuker and Block 1986; Yuker and Hurley 1987). The ATDP scale was measured as part of the pre-test, and was used as a covariate in all analyses in order to control for attitudes towards people with disabilities in determining any effects of author information.

6.2.2 Contact with disabled people

Contact with people with disabilities was measured by asking participants if they themselves had a disability, if a family member had a disability, and/or if a close friend had a disability. Only one participant indicated themselves as having a disability; therefore, the above questions were collapsed into a dichotomous variable, in which answering “yes” to any of the above three questions was coded as a one and answering “no” to all was coded as a zero. Combining those with a disability themselves and those close to someone with a disability is based on previous research finding that close friends and family members of people with disabilities have highly similar attitudes toward disability issues as people who have disabilities themselves (Makas 1988). Sixty-eight of the participants (41%) indicated that they or someone they knew had a disability. We allowed participants to define for themselves what constituted a disability. While this may have made the measure variable in its interpretation, we contend that it should be the perception that one is a member of the deprecated group that matters for humor reactions, not necessarily one’s actual membership as defined by researchers.

6.2.3 Evaluations of the cartoons

The cartoons were evaluated using a list of adjectives (Oliver et al. 2012) which were judged on a scale from one (not at all) to 11 (extremely). Though not necessarily meant to be used as a scale, factor analysis found that the items worked together as two subscales of positive evaluation (five items, $M = 5.37$, $SD = 2.33$, Cronbach $\alpha = .93$) and negative evaluation (five items, $M = 5.96$, $SD = 1.91$, Cronbach $\alpha = .78$). The positive subscale consisted of “funny”, “humorous”, “amusing”, “happy”, and “cheerful”, and was meant to encompass humor reactions, as well as positive emotional reactions. The negative subscale consisted of “mean”, “rude”, “depressing”, “sad”, “tender”, and was meant to encompass the idea of the cartoons being offensive, as well as negative emotional reactions.

Exploratory factor analysis using Principal Axis Factoring (PAF) and direct oblimin (oblique) rotation was used to obtain the factors. PAF limits the number of factors without actually constraining them, while oblique rotation allows the factors to covary. Selection was based on a combination of the Kaiser-Guttman rule and Scree test. The eigenvalue for the positive factor is 5.17, and it accounts for 47.04% of the variance, while the eigenvalue for the negative factor is 1.88 and it accounts for 17.12% of the variance. The third largest factor had an eigenvalue of 1.01 and accounted for 10.94% of the variance, which according to the

Kaiser-Guttman rule (eigenvalues greater than 1.0) should be kept as a factor (Reagan 2000). However, the cut-off of 1.0 is highly arbitrary, with the difference between 1.01 and 0.99 being likely due to random error (Reagan 2000). Therefore, the scree plot was consulted to determine the fate of the third factor. The “elbow” of the scree plot was clearly situated between the second and third factors, which led to the determination not to include this third factor in analysis. The items loading at higher than 0.40 on each of the two retained factors were combined for use as scales in order to reduce the probability of type I error that comes with analyzing multiple items. The items were provided again to the participants who took the follow-up part of the study, in which it was again broken down into positive evaluation ($M = 5.27$, $SD = 2.66$, Cronbach $\alpha = .92$) and negative evaluation ($M = 5.29$, $SD = 2.49$, Cronbach $\alpha = .92$).

6.2.4 Evaluations of the author

In order to assess evaluations of the author, a 14-item scale was taken from Crocker et al. (1987) in which participants were asked to rate the author on a variety of traits on a one (not at all) to 11 (extremely) scale. The scale ($M = 6.17$, $SD = 1.76$) was reliable at Cronbach $\alpha = .91$. The scale was used again during the follow-up ($M = 6.44$, $SD = 2.19$, Cronbach $\alpha = .91$). Sample items that participants rated the author on include “considerate”, “insensitive (reverse scored)”, and “creative”. This scale was originally created to measure evaluations of outgroup members in an intergroup threat situation, which was deemed analogous to the task at hand. Therefore, the scale was considered to be a valid measure of liking for the author of the cartoons.

6.2.5 Mood

The Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson et al. 1988) was used to rule out any mood effects from exposure to the cartoons. The PANAS has two subscales, positive affect ($M = 4.85$, $SD = 2.06$, Cronbach $\alpha = .91$) and negative affect ($M = 3.47$, $SD = 1.92$, Cronbach $\alpha = .90$). The PANAS was measured again during the follow-up; positive affect ($M = 4.77$, $SD = 2.66$, Cronbach $\alpha = .97$), negative affect ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 2.49$, Cronbach $\alpha = .96$). Sample items for positive affect include “enthusiastic” and “inspired”, and sample items for negative affect include “irritable” and “distressed”. Participants answered on a scale from one (not at all) to 11 (extremely).

6.3 Procedure

This study was conducted entirely online, meaning that participants could access the survey from any computer at their convenience. Participants clicked on a link included in a recruitment flyer for the study, which was described as being about processing of media messages. On the survey website they provided implied consent and were told that the study regarded political cartoons, and that they would fill out a questionnaire covering “a wide variety of topics”. Participants filled out the ATDP scale and contact measures, and were randomly assigned to author information condition before viewing four political-style cartoons involving people with disabilities as the butt of the joke (Figure 1). After 30 seconds, the button to continue to the next screen appeared and participants were free to move on. They were then asked to rate the cartoons and the author, followed by mood

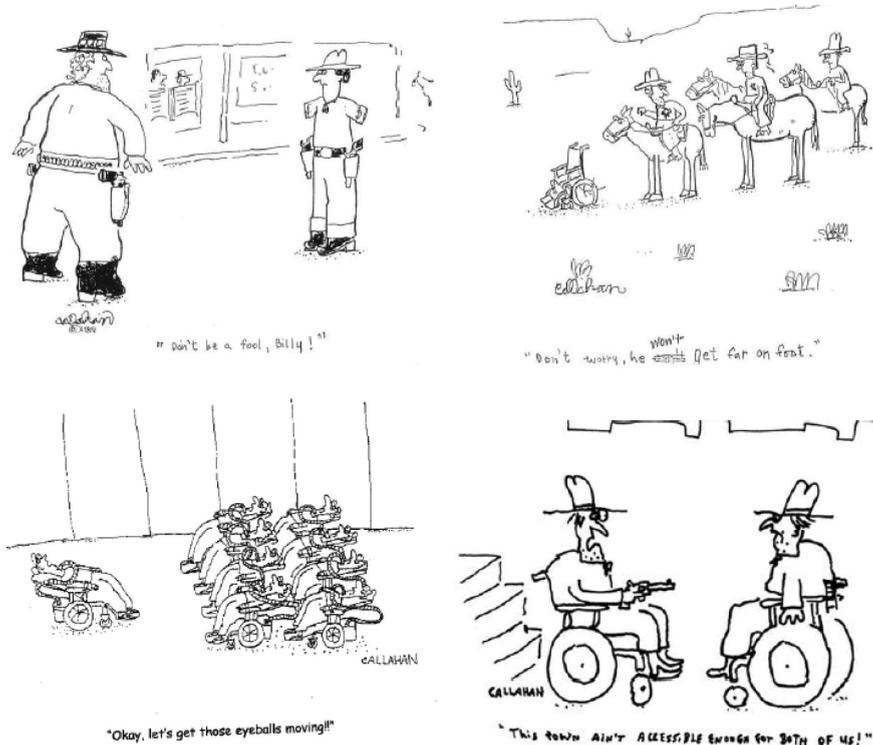


Fig. 1: Cartoon Stimuli. Clockwise starting with top left, captions read: “Don’t be a fool, Billy!”, “Don’t worry, he won’t get far on foot.”, “This town ain’t accessible enough for the both of us!”, and “Okay, let’s get those eyeballs moving!”

measures and demographics. Those who were in the moderate source information and high source information conditions were fully debriefed, while those in the low source information condition were not. Approximately one week later, those who were assigned to the low source information condition were recontacted, under the guise that there had been a survey malfunction that caused them to miss a portion of the study. Those who agreed to participate in the follow-up were shown the manipulation from the high source information condition, and were asked to answer the dependent measures again. They were then fully debriefed, and those who did not participate in the follow-up were emailed with debriefing information.

6.4 Analysis

The data for Hypotheses 1a and 1b were analyzed using Univariate ANCOVA, with attitudes toward disabled people as a covariate, and a Least Significant Differences Test for establishing differences between the three conditions. Change from time one to time two for those participating in the follow-up was assessed using paired t-tests. And finally, univariate ANCOVA with attitudes toward disabled people as a covariate was used in order to test our research question regarding a possible moderating role for having a disability and/or having a family member or close friend with a disability on the effect of condition on the outcome variables.

7 Results

There were no significant effects of condition on mood as measured by the PANAS, positive affect, $F(2, 164) = 0.67, p = .51$, negative affect, $F(2, 164) = 1.77, p = .17$. Therefore, these measures were not included in the analyses. In addition, the Attitudes Toward Disabled Persons scale was included as a covariate in analyses to ensure that prior attitudes toward the deprecated group are not influencing the results. The ATDP was not a significant predictor of any of the three outcomes when in the presence of the predictor variables.

There was a significant effect of source information condition on positive evaluations of the cartoons, $F(2, 164) = 11.66, p < .001, \eta^2 = .13$. A least significant differences post-hoc test found that the difference was driven by the high source information condition ($M = 6.50, SD = 2.00$) being significantly higher in positive evaluations than the low source information condition ($M = 4.54, SD = 2.18$), $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.07$, and also higher than the moderate source information

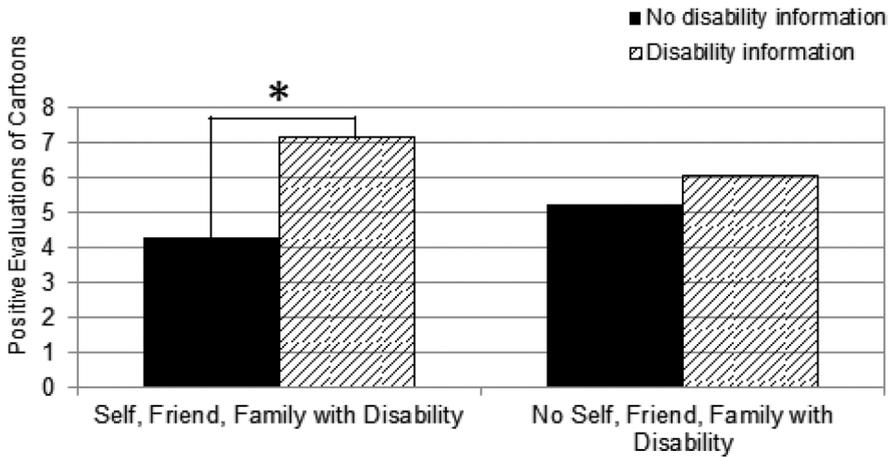
condition ($M = 5.10$, $SD = 2.36$), $p < .01$, Cohen's $d = 0.05$. There was not a significant difference between the low and moderate source information conditions, $p = .18$, Cohen's $d = 0.02$.

A similar pattern was found with negative evaluations of the cartoons, $F(2, 164) = 5.29$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .06$. A least significant differences post-hoc test found that the high source information condition ($M = 5.35$, $SD = 2.06$) was significantly lower in negative evaluations than the low source information condition ($M = 6.50$, $SD = 1.66$), $p < .01$, Cohen's $d = 0.05$, and also marginally lower than the moderate source information condition ($M = 6.01$, $SD = 1.84$), $p = .06$, Cohen's $d = 0.03$. There was not a significant difference between the low and moderate source information conditions, $p = .17$, Cohen's $d = 0.02$. Together with the results for positive evaluations of the cartoons, these results provide support for Hypothesis 1a.

Finally, there was a significant effect of condition on evaluations of the author of the cartoons, $F(2, 164) = 35.34$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .30$. A least significant differences post-hoc test found that the effect was driven by differences between all three of the conditions. The high source information condition ($M = 7.50$, $SD = 1.47$) was significantly higher in evaluations of the author (indicating more positive evaluations) than the low source information condition ($M = 5.20$, $SD = 1.48$), $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.12$, and also significantly higher than the moderate source information condition ($M = 5.84$, $SD = 1.47$), $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.09$. Also, the moderate source information condition was significantly higher in evaluations than the low source information condition, $p < .05$, Cohen's $d = 0.03$, indicating that having some information about the author may increase liking on its own. This provides support for Hypothesis 1b.

According to paired samples t-tests, there was no significant change in positive evaluations of the cartoons after receiving more source information in the follow-up (time one $M = 4.78$, $SD = 2.10$; time two $M = 5.58$, $SD = 2.38$), $t(16) = -1.46$, $p = .16$, nor in negative evaluations of the cartoons (time one $M = 6.20$, $SD = 1.58$; time two $M = 5.60$, $SD = 2.18$), $t(16) = 1.35$, $p = .20$. There was, however, a significant change in evaluations of the author, such that the evaluations became more positive after receiving source information that he is disabled (time one $M = 5.61$, $SD = 1.06$; time two $M = 6.82$, $SD = 1.53$), $t(16) = -3.18$, $p < .01$. Therefore, Hypothesis 2a was not supported, but Hypothesis 2b was supported.

In order to test moderation of the effect of source information on attitudes by disability status, condition was dummy coded with the high source information condition as the comparison condition, and a univariate ANOVA was run. There was a significant interaction effect between condition and the self or someone close having a disability on positive evaluations of the cartoons, when comparing the low to the high source information condition, $F(1, 164) = 6.59$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .04$ (Figure 2), and the moderate to the high source information condition, $F(1, 164) =$



Note: * $p < .001$

Fig. 2: Interaction Between Disability Information and Disability Status

6.31, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .04$. Specifically, the effect of disability source information about the author on positive evaluations of the cartoons becomes stronger when the participant has a disability or knows someone with a disability. With low or moderate source information participants who have a disability or know someone who does evaluate the cartoons as less positive than other participants. However, when the author's disability status is known, participants with a disability or who know someone with a disability evaluate the cartoons as more positive than those who do not have a disability or know someone with one.

There was not a significant interaction effect between source information condition and disability status on negative evaluations of the cartoons, when comparing the low and high source information conditions, $F(1, 164) = 0.16$, $p = .69$, or when comparing the moderate and high source information conditions, $F(1, 164) = 1.80$, $p = .18$. There also was not a significant interaction effect on evaluations of the author, when comparing the low to the high source information condition, $F(1, 164) = 0.91$, $p = .34$, or when comparing the moderate to the high source information condition, $F(1, 164) = 0.38$, $p = .54$.

7.1 Post-hoc analysis

One limitation of this study is the fact that it was run online, meaning that participants may not have been as engaged as they would have been in the laboratory.

Participants could have been multitasking, or interrupted, or a multitude of other issues. Unfortunately, there is not a way with this data collection strategy to tell which participants gave the study their full attention and which did not. However, we may be able to speak to the attention of participants overall. One way to tell that participants were taking the study seriously was in the fact that we unobtrusively timed how long they spent on the page containing the cartoons. As previously stated, all participants had to stay on the page for 30 seconds, after which the “next” button to continue the survey appeared and participants were free to move on. If participants moved on the moment the “next” button became available (after 30 seconds), that would indicate that they were simply going through the motions to get the study done. However, this was not the case. On average, participants stayed on the cartoons page for 43.04 ($SD = 14.66$; median = 38.19) seconds, which is significantly different from 30, $t(165) = 11.36$, $p < .001$. A One-Way ANOVA showed a marginally significant difference between conditions in time spent, such that those spending the most time looking at the cartoons was the moderate source information condition ($M = 46.21$, $SD = 19.35$), those spending the least amount of time was the high source information condition ($M = 40.05$, $SD = 11.90$), and the low source information condition was in the middle ($M = 42.54$, $SD = 10.29$), $F(2, 162) = 2.47$, $p < .09$. A least significant differences test suggested the effect was driven by a significant difference between the moderate source information condition and the high source information condition, $p < .05$, Cohen’s $d = 0.03$. The low source information condition was not significantly different from either the moderate, $p = .18$, Cohen’s $d = 0.02$ or the high source information conditions, $p = .38$ Cohen’s $d = 0.01$.

8 Discussion

The results of this experiment suggest that the line between deprecating and *self*-deprecating humor is essential for enjoyment of the humorous message and for source evaluations. Specifically, participants who knew nothing about the author who deprecated people with disabilities found the cartoons less positive and more negative, and found the author more negative, than participants who knew that the author had a disability. This indicates that source information regarding membership in the disparaged group is important in determining evaluations of the message and the source.

Interestingly, participants who knew some things about the author and had seen his face but did not know about his disability (the moderate source information condition) evaluated the *cartoons* in the same way as those who knew nothing, but when evaluating the *author* were in the middle. This pattern indicates

that there is something to the idea of humor and the taboo, with one potential explanation involving social desirability concerns surrounding taboo topics. Given the controlled analysis of the cartoons, participants likely determined that the topic was too taboo to joke about (hence, the results for the evaluations of the cartoon), but admitted that they actually enjoyed them by rating the author highly. In addition, simple source liking via mere exposure may have played a role in separating the low source information and moderate source information conditions in this regard. Future research may wish to look into these possibilities in more detail.

We further tested the role of source membership in the disparaged group by contacting those participants who received no source information, under the guise of a technical glitch. Those who completed the follow-up changed their evaluations of the author to be more positive after learning more information, but they did not change their evaluations of the cartoons. Given that information about the author's disability mattered for cartoon evaluations in the between-subjects comparisons, this lack of change within participants was intriguing. Previous exposure to the cartoons may have decreased expectancy violation, making them less funny than they were the first time. Regardless of the mechanism, the fact that the author was more liked when he was known to be part of the disparaged group indicates that there is a type of social contract for what is allowable for humor. When he was not known to be a member of the group he was making fun of, he was considered to be not very nice. However, once he was identified as a member of the group it suddenly became more acceptable for him to poke fun at its members. In other words, the jokes themselves were no funnier than they were before, but the author was not as bad a guy as previously.

In addition, an interaction effect emerged between knowledge of the author's disability and whether the participant had close contact with disability issues. Specifically, those who had a disability or knew someone with one had more extreme reactions in evaluating the cartoons depending on the information they had about the author. Those who did not know that the author had a disability evaluated the cartoons even less positively than did those who had no real-life contact with disability. However, they evaluated the cartoons even more positively when they knew the author had a disability than did people who did not have a disability or know someone with one. This supports social identity theory as a mechanism by which those associated with the targeted group evaluate message and source. Specifically, it indicates that members of the disparaged group find *self*-deprecating humor to be extremely enjoyable, as recognition of in-group membership enhances positive distinctiveness and thus acceptance and amusement. However, members are not quite as amused by humor from someone who is an out-group member.

Finally, our post-hoc analysis of time spent reading the cartoons offers some insight into how knowledge of the source influences processing. More time spent viewing the cartoons can be equated with more effortful elaboration and processing (Vonk and van Knippenberg 1995). The moderate source information condition spent the most time viewing the cartoons. For this condition, more time may have been necessary to comprehend the message, because subjects were interacting with competing frames (e.g. potential increases in source liking due to mere exposure to information about Callahan, versus a negative expectancy violation caused by exposure to seemingly disparaging messages). In reconciling the frames, these participants most likely had to engage in effortful processing to determine their judgments about the jokes (Young 2008). Meanwhile, the high source information condition received information that Callahan was a member of the targeted group, which most likely served as a heuristic cue for how to interpret the message. In knowing that Callahan, as a member of that deprecated group, finds it appropriate to joke about disability, participants did not have to exert cognitive effort reconciling incongruous frames. Finally, the low source information condition fell in the middle for time spent viewing the cartoons. For these participants, more time may have been necessary to understand the tone of these messages. However, with no source information given, they may have quickly assumed that the intention was ridicule of a low-power group. Information about the source plays an integral role in the interpretation, processing, and ultimately the acceptance of deprecating messages.

8.1 Limitations and future research

This study advances the empirical study of self-deprecating humor, and helps tease out the role of source in the triangle of self-deprecating humor. However, it was just one incremental step in the area of how humor can affect intergroup attitudes and relations. We did not, for example, measure whether there was any effect of the cartoons on attitudes towards disabled people as a group beyond attitudes toward the author. However, we can point to exemplification (Zillmann 1999) and illusory correlation (Hamilton and Gifford 1976) processes as likely avenues for how attitudes toward the author may translate to attitudes toward disabled people as a group, at least in the high source information condition. The high source information condition is most analogous to a real-world situation, in that the information about the source as a member of the disparaged group is readily available in the information environment. According to exemplification and illusory correlation, attitudes toward an exemplar of a target group should also transfer to the group as a whole. Given that those who

knew that the author was disabled had a more positive opinion of him, these perspectives would suggest that this positivity should transfer to people with disabilities as a group. Perhaps, then, one function of deprecating humor about a minority group may be to bring groups together. However, though we can point to the long history of research on these two topics, this was not tested directly.

On the other hand, the results of the present study do not preclude the possibility that deprecating humor is not also trivializing, as proposed by previous research (Ford 1997; Ford et al. 2008; Ford and Ferguson 2004). It is possible that increased positivity is manifesting precisely because participants were finding it more acceptable to stereotype people with disabilities. If this is the case, then the liking for the cartoons and the author could have a negative effect on overall attitudes toward people with disabilities as a group. Future research on this topic may wish to include this as an outcome variable of interest.

While this research chiefly focused on the source of the self-deprecating message, future research in this topic area may be well served to further explore the message and receiver points on the triadic model. With regards to message, future work may wish to explore the mediating role of perceived social acceptability of the message as the mechanism by which perceptions of source and message are influenced. With regards to receiver, another area ripe for future research is exploring how specific individual differences, such as introversion or extraversion (Vernis 1970), affect message acceptance and enjoyment. The current research explored the role of contact with disabled persons or having a disability oneself in perceptions of source and message, however personality characteristics may be worthy of examination as well.

8.2 Conclusion

Self-deprecating humor is a complex phenomenon with the potential to influence intergroup relations in a variety of ways. Not much is known, however, about the aspects of the humor triangle of source, audience, and target and how they work together in self-deprecation. The present study was a first step in examining the role of source in self-deprecating humor. There are times when the source of a self-deprecating message is not known, turning the message into other-deprecating humor in the view of the audience. This small change in the self-deprecating humor process has implications for not only audience enjoyment of the message, but also their view of the message source. Specifically, when the deprecating message is not known to be *self*-deprecating, the audience seems to indicate that the humorous message is not appropriate, by

reporting lower positivity and higher negativity toward the message and lower positivity toward the source. However, when the “self” aspect is added, the audience deems the message and author as more appropriate and therefore more positive. This pattern is even more pronounced for people who are members of the group being disparaged, indicating that their identity status in the disparaged group makes them even more discerning in their judgments of acceptability. In short, whether or not the source is a member of the disparaged group is tantamount to determining whether joking about a minority group is acceptable.

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