Addressing the Challenges of Confronting Disparagement Humor

Julie A. Woodzicka
Washington and Lee University

Robyn K. Mallett
Loyola University Chicago
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Although humor is correlated with positive intra- and interpersonal experiences, not all humor has positive consequences. Group-based disparagement humor demeans, insults, stereotypes, victimizes, or objectifies a person based on their group membership (LaFrance & Woodzicka, 1998). This unique type of humor is associated with a host of negative effects (Ford, Triplett, Woodzicka, Kochersberger, & Holden, 2014; Woodzicka & Ford, 2010). For example, sexist humor can create distressing, hostile work environments for women (Duncan, Smeltzer, & Leap, 1990; Hemmasi, Graf, & Russ, 1994; Woodzicka & LaFrance, 2005). Sexist humor also affects the ways that men think about women and perceive sexism (Ford, 2000; Ford, Wentzel, & Lorion, 2001; Ryan & Kanjorski, 1998) and increases men’s willingness to engage in subtle sexist behavior (Ford, Boxer, Armstrong, & Edel, 2008). Moreover, sexist humor can increase self-objectification of women (Ford, Woodzicka, Petit, Richardson, & Lappi, 2015) and acceptance of societal sexism (Ford, Woodzicka, Triplett, & Kochersberger, 2013). Likewise, racist humor may reinforce everyday and systematic White supremacy (Perez, 2017). Despite causing myriad negative outcomes, disparagement humor can be easily disregarded as “just a joke” and not worthy of attention (Perez, 2017).

Interpersonal confrontation provides one promising avenue for decreasing the occurrence of group-based disparagement humor. Confronting prejudice and discrimination can reduce prejudicial attitudes and curb future biased behavior (Czopp, Monteith, & Mark, 2006; Mallett & Wagner, 2011). However, interpersonal confrontation comes with well-documented costs (Kaiser & Miller, 2004; Swim & Hyers, 1999) and confronting disparagement humor may carry increased costs for the confronter (Woodzicka, Mallett, Hendricks, & Pruitt, 2015). In this chapter, we review research that examines the challenges of confronting disparagement humor,
along with confrontation strategies that may reduce costs for the confronter. We suggest future research to test lower-cost confrontation strategies that combat group-based disparagement humor. Before turning to the challenges of confronting humor, we review the benefits and costs of confronting bias for both the confronter (i.e., the person who does the confronting), and the confrontee (i.e., the person who is confronted for bias).

**The Benefits of Confronting Bias**

Confronting bias provides benefits for the confronter, the confrontee, and society. At a basic level, confrontation is a powerful tool in combatting interpersonal bias. When White people are confronted for expressing racism, they feel negative self-directed affect and are more likely to reduce their biased attitudes and control their stereotypic responses in the future than when they are not confronted (Czopp et al., 2006). Similarly, if men who are confronted for sexism attempt to make up for their biased behavior and experience mutual liking with the confronter, then they control their future use of sexist language (Mallett & Wagner, 2011). We may measure the effectiveness of a confrontation by its likelihood to reduce discriminatory behavior—either immediately or in the future. Confrontations are most effective at generating concern for controlling future bias when they present clear evidence of bias and its negative consequences. For example, when people learn that their evaluations of a female job applicant showed bias, they report negative self-directed affect, which increases concern about regulating gender bias (Parker, Monteith, Moss-Racusin, & Van Camp, 2018).

When confronted, it may be difficult for confrontees to see any intrapersonal benefits. Many people fear being accused of bias (Tatum, 1999). Although confrontation makes confrontees uncomfortable, it may benefit the confrontee by educating them about the impact of their behavior (Sue, 2015). At times, people are simply unaware that what they have said or
done is offensive, or they may not realize that their behavior diverges from their egalitarian values (Goodman, 2011). Defining a behavior as biased helps the confrontee understand more about the experience of the target group (Sue et al., 2019). Labeling an event as bias is the first step in attitude change. People must become aware of their bias and feel badly about it to change their attitudes and behavior (Monteith, Ashburn-Nardo, Voils, & Czopp, 2002). When the confronter draws attention to the discrepancy between a person’s behavior and their egalitarian ideals, that person may experience dissatisfaction with the self and be motivated to reduce future discriminatory responses (Devine, Monteith, Zuwerink, & Elliot, 1991; Monteith & Voils, 1998). As such, confronting someone for bias has the potential to increase awareness of bias, trigger negative self-directed affect, and motivate regulation of one’s attitudes and behavior.

Confronters may experience both interpersonal and intrapersonal benefits from speaking up against bias. First, confronters may receive positive regard from others who witness their behavior. Ingroup members who confronted (versus ignored) racism were evaluated more positively by Black Americans and Asian Americans who strongly identified with their racial group (Kaiser, Hagiwara, Malahy, & Wilkins, 2009). Similarly, women who confronted (versus ignored) sexism were both liked and respected by women who strongly identified with their gender group (Dodd, Giuliano, Boutell, & Moran, 2001). Confronters are also seen as more authentic (e.g., honest, intelligent, independent) than people who do not confront (Saunders & Senn, 2009). Second, confronters experience intrapersonal benefits from standing up to bias. Targets of prejudice who confront report greater feelings of empowerment and less regret and anger than targets who remain silent (Haslett & Lipman, 1997; Hyers, 2007). Similarly, women who confront sexism report feeling more competent and report higher self-esteem than women who remain silent (Gervais, Hillard, & Vescio, 2010). Confronting might also provide a release
valve for expressing anger and frustration associated with experiencing or observing bias (Hyers, 2007).

When people confront bias, society also benefits because confrontation communicates societal expectations for appropriate behavior. Confrontations often occur in front of a wider audience than the confronter and the confrontee; they may happen at family gatherings, at work, in the classroom, or in social settings (Swim, Hyers, Cohen, Fitzgerald, & Bylsma, 2003). Regardless of whether the confrontee changes their attitudes and behavior, they receive the message that their peers do not approve. Simply witnessing another person publicly (versus privately) label a remark as sexist increases the likelihood that female and male witnesses rate the remark as sexist (Gervais & Hillard, 2014). Similarly, when women read about a teacher who confronted sexism in the classroom, they report less sexist attitudes than when the sexism was ignored (Boysen, 2013). Confrontation may be especially helpful when it labels ambiguous behavior as unacceptable. Czopp (2007) showed participants a video where a racist joke was either ignored, confronted and the confrontee apologized, or confronted and the confrontee lashed out. The racist joke was liked less, rated as less funny, and participants said they would be less likely to retell it when it was confronted and the confrontee apologized for telling it compared to the other conditions. This underscores the power of confrontation to shape shared expectations for behavior.

Public confrontation, whether in person or online, establishes injunctive norms for behavior—that is, how people should behave. When confrontation reinforces egalitarian norms, it helps to reduce prejudice (Blanchard, Crandall, Brigham, & Vaughn, 1994). Paluck (2011) trained high school students to confront their peers’ bias. She found that the effects of the intervention spread to the friends of students who were trained. Although they had not
personally been trained to confront bias, friends of the trained students were better able to recognize bias and were more likely to support collective action in support of lesbian, gay, and bisexual rights than friends of students in the control group. In contrast, ignoring bias reinforces the idea that bias is acceptable (Blanchard et al., 1994) and unintentionally reinforces discrimination (Czopp, 2019).

The Costs of Confronting

Despite the benefits of confrontation, people may choose not to confront if they fear social or economic backlash for doing so (Kaiser & Miller, 2001; 2004; Swim & Hyers, 1999). The more women fear being disliked for confronting, the more they recall remaining silent following discrimination (Good, Moss-Racusin, & Sanchez, 2012). Similarly, women report fewer confrontational responses as perceived interpersonal costs and anxiety increase and as perceived interpersonal benefits decrease (Kaiser & Miller, 2004). For example, Shelton and Stewart (2004) manipulated the costs of confronting by having women imagine that they were interviewing for their dream job in a tough job market against highly competitive applicants (high cost) or that they were just doing the interview to gain experience and they had another job (low cost). When facing high costs for confronting a sexist job interviewer, few women (22%) confronted (Shelton & Stewart, 2004). In comparison, when facing low costs for confronting, most (92%) women called out the biased interviewer, using surprised exclamations or assertively questioning the interviewer.

Fears of backlash are often well founded. Confronters tend to be evaluated more harshly with regards to liking, social distance, and approach-related behaviors than if they remain silent (Czopp et al., 2006). Reports from confrontees and third-party evaluators consistently show that confronters are labeled as over-sensitive and as whiners or complainers (Czopp & Monteith,
Yet, when people remain silent, they may experience intrapersonal costs including rumination and guilt. People who want to confront but choose not to do so may also experience distraction and performance decrements (Shelton, Richeson, Salvatore, & Hill, 2006). As such, there are costs even if one chooses not to speak up.

Choosing not to confront bias also has unintended consequences for one’s own attitudes towards the perpetrator and towards bias more generally. Ignoring bias may create dissonance for people who value social justice. To minimize the extent to which one’s behavior diverges from personal standards of morality, people may bring their attitudes in line with their actions. For example, when women ignore a man’s sexist remark, they later minimize the importance of confronting sexism relative to women who do not have a chance to confront (Rasinski, Geers, & Czopp, 2013). The women who ignore sexism also report liking the man who made the sexist remark more than the women who had no chance to confront him. Women’s attitudes towards sexual harassment are also affected by the decision to confront sexism. Mallett, Ford, and Woodzicka (in press) gave women the opportunity to confront or ignore either a sexist or nonsexist offensive remark that was delivered in a humorous or non-humorous manner. The more women ignored the sexist remark, the more they endorsed sexually harassing attitudes; this was true regardless of whether the remark was delivered in a humorous or serious manner. In a second study, women who imagined ignoring sexism aligned their attitudes with their behavior. Women who imagined ignoring (versus confronting) sexism reported more dissonance and the more dissonance they reported the more they tolerated sexual harassment. Ignoring sexism in any form creates dissonance, but women were less supportive of survivors of sexual harassment when they imagined ignoring sexist jokes compared to sexist statements.

The Challenges of Confronting Disparagement Humor
Everyday prejudice is communicated in many ways including via statements, jokes, memes, and humorous stories (Duchscherer & Dovidio, 2016; Swim, Cohen, & Hyers, 1998). Although disparaging jokes and comments share the underlying message that the disparaged group is lesser, the mode of communication changes the perceived meaning of the biased remark. Compared to non-humorous messages, a humorous message is open to various interpretations. Humor encourages a paratelic state, or a playful state of mind (Apter, 1991), communicating that one need not consider the message seriously (Ford & Ferguson, 2004). While in a paratelic state, the main goal is to enjoy the interaction by refraining from thinking too hard about the message and instead enjoying the humorous context. Humorous messages, including prejudicial ones, signal that the message should not be scrutinized (Bill & Naus, 1992) and are beyond reproach (Attardo, 1993; Gray & Ford, 2013). In support of this, Ford and colleagues (2008) found that a biased incident was viewed as less severe when the bias was framed in a humorous (versus non-humorous) manner.

The justification-suppression model (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003) of prejudice helps explain why humorous messages are perceived as less damaging than non-humorous messages. The model contends that because egalitarian social norms are valued in society, high prejudice individuals learn to suppress their bias to maintain self-esteem. However, they may use humor as a justification to express prejudice under the guise that they are “just joking.” Humor changes the social context, permitting the expression of prejudice without fear of negative consequence because people may claim that they were enjoying an entertaining joke rather than the prejudicial message. Duchscherer and Dovidio (2016) found that pre-existing support of stereotyping facilitated a noncritical mindset toward disparagement humor. That is, people who strongly
endorsed stereotype-supporting beliefs rated a meme depicting disparagement humor to be more socially acceptable than a non-humorous disparaging meme.

Although they may be perceived as less severe, a message couched in humor can be just as, or even more, harmful than a non-humorous message. For example, Ford and colleagues (2008) found that for men high in hostile sexism, exposure to sexist humor (versus a non-humorous sexist comment) increased discrimination against women. These effects are not limited to sexist humor. Rather, other historically disadvantaged groups for whom egalitarian norms have begun to emerge (e.g., Muslims; lesbian, gay, and bisexual people are susceptible to the prejudice-releasing effects of disparagement humor (Ford, Woodzicka, Triplett, Kochersberger, & Holden, 2014). Specifically, among participants who were highly prejudiced against Muslim people and people who are gay, exposure to anti-Muslim and anti-gay jokes resulted in a release of prejudice against those groups (Ford et al., 2014).

Below, we elaborate on research that highlights the way that humor complicates the process of confronting prejudice. Ashburn-Nardo, Morris, and Goodwin (2008) proposed a five-step Confronting Prejudiced Responses (CPR) model to predict when individuals will confront discrimination. Their model asserts that an individual must first detect discrimination (Step 1) and then deem the incident as needing intervention (Step 2). Next, the individual must take responsibility to confront the discrimination (Step 3) and decide how they will confront (Step 4). Despite progressing through the first four steps, several factors may prevent people from actually confronting the perpetrator (Step 5). Framing confronting as five steps instead of one helps explain why confrontation rates are relatively low and why people frequently anticipate confronting more than they actually confront (Woodzicka & LaFrance, 2001). We, like others
(Ashburn-Nardo & Karim, 2019), contend that the five steps are more challenging to navigate when humor is involved.

**Steps 1 and 2**

Subtle or ambiguous bias is difficult to recognize (Swim, Mallett, Russo-Devosa, & Stangor, 2005). Humor creates ambiguity, producing a situation in which a biased message may go unnoticed, creating a barrier to detecting bias (Step 1). Even when a racist or sexist joke is viewed as an act of bias, humor may mitigate the perceived harm and decrease perceptions that the act is confrontation-worthy (Step 2). We tested the first two steps of the CPR model with a scenario study in which participants were randomly assigned to read one of four scenarios that varied in the type of prejudice (racism or sexism) and mode of communication (humorous or non-humorous) (Woodzicka et al., 2015). In the humorous conditions, participants imagined that they were hanging out with a small group of people in the break room at work and one of them told the following joke, “What do you call a woman [Black] with half a brain? Gifted.” This was followed by another joke, “What’s the difference between a woman [Black] and a battery? A battery has a positive side.” The non-humorous conditions contained the same biased sentiments as the humorous conditions but did not use humor. They read, “It doesn’t seem like women [Blacks] as a group are very smart” followed by, “Yeah, overall women [Blacks] don’t have that many positive qualities.” Participants rated how offensive and confrontation-worthy the remarks were. As expected, participants rated non-humorous remarks as more offensive and confrontation-worthy than humorous remarks that expressed the same sentiment. Further, ratings of offensiveness and confrontation-worthiness were positively correlated (Woodzicka et al., 2015).
Supporting the idea that humor allows bias to go undetected, in a different study we examined whether delivering a sexist remark in a humorous versus non-humorous manner tempered perceptions that the speaker was sexist (Mallett, Ford, & Woodzicka, 2016). Women interacted through Instant Messaging with an alleged male partner who made a humorous or a non-humorous sexist remark that expressed the same sentiment. After the interaction, participants rated the extent to which their partner was sexist. As expected, humor changed perceptions of the perpetrator—women were less likely to perceive their male partner as sexist if he expressed sexism in humorous versus non-humorous manner. That is, women were more likely to give their alleged partner the benefit of the doubt and refrain from labeling him as sexist if the sexism was couched in humor. Importantly, as perceptions of his sexism decreased, so did confronting (Mallett et al., 2016).

**Step 3**

After deciding that an act of bias is worthy of confrontation, one must decide if they will take responsibility to confront (Step 3). As reviewed earlier, people both perceive and actually face costs for confronting discrimination. Confronters are perceived by some perpetrators and bystanders as oversensitive and as less likeable than those who stay silent (Czopp et al., 2006; Czopp & Monteith, 2003; Dodd et al., 2001; Parker et al., 2018). A confronter is especially likely to receive backlash for confronting ambiguous bias because the confrontation may be seen as an over-reaction. For example, a Black confronter was rated more negatively for confronting an ambiguously racist comment compared to confronting a blatantly racist comment (Zou & Dickter, 2013). A woman who refused patronizing help from a man was rated less favorably than a woman who accepted the help (Becker, Glick, Ilic, & Bohner, 2011). And a blind person was rated less favorably for confronting patronizing help than for confronting blatantly offensive
behavior (Wang, Silverman, Gwinn, & Dovidio, 2015). Although we are not aware of research that has specifically examined how humor impacts feelings of responsibility for confronting, the ambiguous nature of humor is likely to increase the perceived and actual risks for confronting. The more costs that people anticipate receiving for confrontation, the less likely they may be to accept responsibility for confronting.

**Steps 4 and 5**

If people successfully navigate the first three steps, then they must decide how to confront (Step 4) and actually engage in the confronting behavior (Step 5). Because of the costs associated with confronting disparagement humor, we expect that individuals may prefer confronting in ways that minimize costs. Confronters might prefer strategies that are both effective (i.e., stop the disparagement) and protective (i.e., reduce costs and increase liking). We found variability in the extent to which confrontation strategies are associated with social costs for the confronter (Woodzicka et al., 2015). Participants read one of six scenarios that contained either a racist or a sexist joke. They learned that a co-worker responded to the joke in one of three ways: ignoring it, declaring that the joke was not funny, or labeling the joke as biased (i.e., racist or sexist). Labeling the joke as bias is the most blatant way to confront, followed by saying that it is not funny and ignoring the joke. For racist jokes, we found that labeling the joke as racist and saying that the joke was not funny were both rated as more appropriate than ignoring it. For sexist jokes, saying that the joke was not funny was rated as more appropriate than labeling it as sexist or doing nothing. Further, the confronter was viewed as less likeable when confronting a sexist versus a racist joke. The costs of confronting were steepest in terms of likeability when the confronter labeled the sexist joke as sexist.
People value others who have a sense of humor (Mesmer-Magnus, Glew, & Viswesvaran, 2012). Those who blatantly confront group-based disparagement humor risk being labeled humorless or overly sensitive, especially when confronting types of bias that are considered less serious. For example, taboos against racist behavior are stronger than taboos against sexist behavior (Czopp & Monteith, 2003). Hate speech against Black people is seen as more offensive than hate speech against women (Cowan & Hodge, 1996). And, anti-Black racism is seen as more prejudiced than sexism (Rodin, Price, Bryson, & Sanchez, 1990). Thus, blatantly confronting racism, even racist humor, is deemed more appropriate than blatantly confronting sexism—especially sexist humor (Woodzicka et al., 2015).

Perhaps because of the unique costs associated with confronting disparagement humor, the ways in which participants actually confront humor (Step 5) appear to be somewhat different than how they confront non-humorous statements. In two studies we found that women were less likely to assertively confront a humorous (versus non-humorous) sexist remark (Mallett et al., 2016). In addition, when confronting a sexist joke, women challenged the confronter less and expressed a desire to be liked more than when confronting a sexist statement (Mallett et al., 2016). In sum, humor creates a normative context in which confronting is more difficult because of increased ambiguity and costs. Given that disparagement humor has the power to release prejudice (Ford et al., 2014) and interpersonal confrontation is effective in combating prejudice (Czopp et al., 2006), low-cost confrontation strategies deserve more attention.

**Using Humor to Confront Discrimination**

From studies of real-world confronting, we know that people often choose not to confront sexism (Woodzicka & LaFrance, 2001). When they do confront, they frequently use subtle strategies rather than directly labeling the person or behavior as sexist (Hyers, 2007). For
example, in response to sexism, women often question the sexist confederate, ask him to repeat himself, or ask a rhetorical question (Swim & Hyers, 1999). The assumption is that more subtle confrontations, such as saying “What did you say?” or “Can you repeat that?,” signals disagreement and prompts perpetrators to recognize their bias without the confronter directly labeling the transgression. Participants report that questioning the perpetrator is less risky than directly commenting on his inappropriateness (Swim & Hyers, 1999). Thus, people may use subtle confrontations to minimize interpersonal costs.

Little research has tested the frequency, effectiveness, and protective benefits of confronting with humor. Humor generally diffuses threat (Kuiper, Martin, & Olinger, 1993) and non-threatening forms of confrontation are viewed more favorably. For example, Czopp and colleagues (2006) confronted participants about a stereotypic response using a threatening or non-threatening confrontation style. In the threatening condition, the confronter was called “some kind of racist” whereas in the non-threatening condition, the confronter was asked to think about how “Blacks don’t get equal treatment in our society.” Consistent with the research outlined above, participants liked the non-threatening confronter more than the threatening confronter. Monteith, Burns, and Hildebrand (2019) advise would-be confronters who are concerned with social costs to avoid hostility, aggression, and threat when selecting a specific confrontation style.

Most of us can think of a time we witnessed a discriminatory joke or comment and thought of a fitting response as we walked away. At times, those imagined responses are witty or clever (i.e., humorous). Indeed, online articles with titles such as “The Best Comebacks to Sexist Comments” (Bates, 2013) and “44 of the Best Internet Clapbacks to Racists” (Bar, 2019) advocate the use of humor in confrontation. We have recently begun to test how often
individuals use witty comebacks, whether humorous confrontation is seen as effective and whether it minimizes social costs, and whether witty confronting is better suited for humorous versus non-humorous comments.

Society values people who have a sense of humor (Cann & Calhoun, 2001). A confronter who uses humor may be more likable than a confronter who addresses bias in a non-humorous way. Although witty confronters may be likeable, humorous confrontations may be less effective than non-humorous confrontations (Monteith et al., 2019). Drawing from the persuasion literature, Swim, Gervais, Pearson, and Stangor (2009) argue that people must attend to the message at the heart of a confrontation for it to be effective. If a humorous confrontation is subtle or includes qualifying statements, then the confrontee may not understand that it is intended to challenge biased behavior. As a result, witty confrontations may be less effective than non-humorous confrontations in reducing biased attitudes and behavior. One aim of our research program has been to test how the use of humor in confrontations impacts confronter likeability and perceived effectiveness of the confrontation (Woodzicka, Mallett, & Melchiori, in press).

To explore the frequency with which individuals spontaneously use witty confrontations and how such confrontations are perceived, we asked participants to imagine how they would respond to a scenario where a co-worker told a sexist joke (Woodzicka et al., in press). All participants imagined the following: “You are in the break room at work. You are talking to a male co-worker about the recent internet search that you did. He says, ‘That reminds me of a joke...Is Google male or female? Female, because it doesn't let you finish a sentence before making a suggestion.’” We asked participants, “How would you respond to your co-worker?” Using an open-ended format, most respondents (51%) reported that they would laugh or smile in
response to the joke. Only 35% of respondents stated that they would verbally confront the joke, and 25% imagined responding with a serious confrontation (e.g., “That’s a bit offensive”). Ten percent of respondents spontaneously generated a witty confrontation, and more women (16%) wrote a witty confrontation than did men (4.5%). For instance, some participants wrote, “Don’t quit your day job” and “Wow, so original!” Although overall confrontation rates were low, a substantial percentage of women imagined using a humorous confrontation upon hearing a sexist joke.

To further test whether women and men prefer humorous versus non-humorous confrontations, we asked the same participants to rate the likelihood that they would use two specific witty confrontations (“What? I couldn’t hear you over my eyes rolling” and “I’m pretty sure that sounded funnier in your head”) and two specific serious confrontations (“That’s sexist” and “That’s not funny!”). Women were more likely than men to say they would use the witty, but not serious, confrontations. Humor smooths conflict in interpersonal relationships (Collison 1988; Coser 1959; Mulkay 1988). A witty comeback may allow the confronter to send a message that the sexism is unwelcome, but in a way that minimizes social backlash. Although it may not be a conscious choice, women may favor witty confrontations to circumvent the social costs associated with serious confrontation (Czopp & Monteith, 2003; Gulker, Mark, & Monteith, 2013; Shelton & Stewart, 2004; Swim & Hyers, 1999).

At the end of this same study (Woodzicka et al., in press), participants read about an interaction during which a male friend told a sexist joke and another friend confronted using a witty (“Still single aren’t you?”) or a non-humorous (“You’re not funny”) remark. Participants rated how much they liked and wanted to be friends with the confronter, along with how effective the confrontation would be immediately and in the future in terms of stopping sexism.
As expected, witty confronters were rated as more likeable than non-humorous confronters. Overall, witty confrontations were rated as moderately effective, receiving a 3.70 on a 5-point scale where 5 indicated extremely effective. Although non-humorous confrontations were rated as more effective in-the-moment than were witty confrontations, they were rated as equally effective in decreasing future acts of sexism. In sum, although witty confrontations protect confronters from the social costs that come with non-humorous confrontations, they are perceived to be slightly less effective.

In an unpublished study, we tested a matching hypothesis whereby participants would prefer a witty response to a humorous versus non-humorous sexist remark (Woodzicka, Mallett, & Melchiori, 2018). Participants evaluated a scenario in which a person made a humorous or non-humorous sexist remark that was either not confronted, received a witty confrontation, or received a non-humorous confrontation. As expected, the witty confrontation was rated as more effective in response to a humorous versus non-humorous sexist remark; non-humorous confrontations were rated as equally effective for humorous and non-humorous sexist remarks. Replicating our past work (Woodzicka et al., in press), the non-humorous confrontation was viewed as more effective than the witty confrontation or no confrontation. However, even though witty confrontation was rated as significantly less effective than non-humorous confrontation, mean effectiveness ratings for witty confrontations fell above the mid-point of the scale suggesting at least moderate effectiveness. Replicating our results for likeability, the witty confronter was viewed as significantly more likeable and less of a “complainer” than the non-humorous confronter.

People may confront sexist remarks in many ways, and each type of confrontation has its own costs and benefits (Czopp, 2019). We provide initial evidence that witty confrontation may
reduce bias while providing some protection from the social costs of confrontation. Using humor to confront sends the message that the sexist remark is not welcome, and may be less socially risky for confronters. Our research program is in the early stages and many additional questions need to be addressed. In the next section, we highlight future directions for research on confronting disparagement humor, and more specifically the use of witty or humorous confrontation.

Next Steps

Confronting disparagement humor poses unique challenges. Discrimination couched in humor is seen as less harmful (Ford, 2000; Ford et al., 2008) and as less confrontation-worthy than discrimination conveyed via non-humorous remarks (Woodzicka et al., 2015). As such, confronters may be more effective and experience fewer costs if they broaden their repertoire to include witty strategies for confronting disparagement humor. Our research has focused on using humor to confront disparagement humor, but future work should continue to explore the utility of this strategy and identify additional ways to stop bias and reduce costs to the confronter. Most of our research has tested humorous confrontation in the context of sexism. It is essential to see whether the utility of humorous confrontations generalize to many forms of bias or whether humor works best for confronting bias that society takes less seriously.

Future research should test whether intersectional stereotypes affect reactions to confronters who use humor. Witty confrontation is generally perceived as effective and, importantly, confronters who use humor are viewed as more likeable than confronters who do not. However, the protective nature of humorous confrontation may only extend to confronters with specific social identities. Although we have varied the names of the confronters in our scenarios, most names have been stereotypically White and we have not explicitly manipulated
the ethnicity of the confronter. We know little about whether humor offers the same protection to confronters of various ethnicities, genders, sexual orientations, and so on. For example, the “angry Black woman” stereotype portrays Black women as aggressive, overbearing, and hostile (Childs, 2005; Harrison, Pegoraro, Romney, & Hull, 2019). When the angry Black woman stereotype is evoked, a Black woman’s witty confrontation may be discredited and she may be viewed more negatively than White women who confront in the same manner. This may be especially likely if a Black woman’s witty confrontation is seen as driven by her perceived anger, rather than the perpetrators actions. Currently, we are testing whether the same witty confrontations employed by a Black woman versus a White woman are perceived as motivated by anger, and seen as subsequently less effective. It may be useful to examine how stereotypes concerning warmth and competence affect perceived anger and the likeability of the confronter, along with effectiveness of the confrontation.

It will also be important to test whether sharing a group membership with the confronter shapes the effectiveness and protectiveness of humorous confrontations. We know that ingroup confronters are typically better received than outgroup confronters (Czopp, 2019), but research has yet to test the limits of this effect. For instance, if men are more receptive to being confronted for sexism by a man versus a woman, would a White male confronter be more effective and receive less backlash than a Black male or Asian male confronter? The nature of bias (e.g., sexism, racism, heterosexism) and the perceived threat posed by the target group may be key to understanding the outcomes, with more threatening outgroup identities eliciting more backlash for the confronter and less attitude change from the perpetrator.

Future research should also test the cognitive demands required to generate humorous confrontations and the effect of cognitive load on one’s willingness and ability to use humorous
confrontation. Most people are able to vividly remember a time when they could not think of how to confront bias in the moment, but later thought of the perfect (often witty) confrontation. Ability to produce humor is variable and strongly related to creativity (Clabby, 1980). For some, humor production is easy; for others it is extremely difficult. Generating a witty confrontation may be more difficult than producing a non-humorous confrontation. Further, the stress of experiencing bias taxes one’s cognitive capacity (Shelton et al., 2006), likely making humorous confrontation difficult even for those who are easily able to produce humor.

One way to make it easier for people to use humorous confrontations is to provide people with witty confrontations that can be used on demand. We are beginning to examine whether providing participants with witty confrontations increases the likelihood of confrontation, especially if the response can apply to many biased remarks. For example, humorous confrontations such as “Still single, huh?” “Can you repeat that—I didn’t hear you over my eyes rolling” and “You’re a real charmer” are general enough to be used as a response to most disparagement humor. Research on training people to confront using more general tactics suggests that this is a promising avenue to pursue. Larson, McDonough, and Bodle (2010) found that when students practiced using specific responses they were more likely to confront compared to a control group that did not practice. Perhaps witty confrontation trainings would likewise increase rates of confronting.

We must also determine whether there are differences in the effectiveness and protectiveness of using humor to confront bias in imagined versus actual interactions. Our initial research has relied heavily on analogue studies, which typically ask participants to read a scenario that contains a person making a biased comment in a humorous or non-humorous manner, followed by person responding with humorous or non-humorous confrontation.
Participants then rate the effectiveness of the confrontation and the likeability of the confronter. Sometimes we ask participants how they think they would respond to sexist or racist jokes, with an eye toward capturing spontaneous humorous confrontations. Although these first steps using analogue studies are typical, how people think they will respond rarely mirrors how they actually respond (Swim, et al., 1999; Woodzicka & LaFrance, 2001). We have recently begun to test the effects of witty confrontation during a dyadic interaction where a man or woman confronts male participants for sexism using a humorous or non-humorous confrontation.

Confronting group-based disparagement humor is especially challenging given the ambiguity inherent in humor. Biased messages that contain humor are perceived as less harmful and confrontation-worthy than those that are non-humorous. Thus, the decision to confront disparagement humor is more complex and those who do confront may incur more social costs than those who confront non-humorous remarks. The most successful confrontations will stop the discrimination, let bystanders know that such behavior is not acceptable, and mitigate the interpersonal costs associated with confronting. We focused on one strategy, witty confrontation, that shows initial promise in terms of both effectiveness and protection. Given that interpersonal confrontation may decrease bias, continued research on low-cost and effective confrontation strategies is justified.
References


