

Comedy and Racial Discourse

For this assignment, I chose to look into and discuss the role comedy (and especially stand-up and sketch comedy) plays in racial discourse in the United States. The first peer-reviewed article I chose is titled “*Speaking Fluent ‘Joke’: Pushing the Racial Envelope Through Comedic Performance on Chappelle’s Show*” (Bell-Jordan, 2010). Chappelle’s Show needs very little introduction – it is a sketch comedy show co-created by comedian Dave Chappelle and ran for two seasons. It kept the record for most DVD’s sold for several years after the show stopped airing. It weaves politics, gender-relations and even drug use into the satire. However, the most dominant theme in the show is race. According to Bell-Jordan, it “reminded the viewers of the naked truth about prejudice and intolerance, and it openly ridiculed people convinced that race no longer matters in America.”

The article also mentions that the show brought into full view race issues that normally hover just below the surface of every day interactions between people of different races. The overall methodology of the paper seems to be interpretive. It looks at seven specific sketches and examines what they bring to light, which makes it hard to cross-examine. However, besides conducting a social study where people watch the sketches and are interviewed afterwards, it is difficult to find a more systematic way to determine the cultural impact the show had. The author discusses criticisms that the show perpetuates black stereotypes but rejects those claims by maintaining that the show in fact does the opposite, which is, communicate the idiocy of those stereotypes “by bringing it to our collective face” (Bell-Jordan, 2010). As someone who was not in the US when the show came out (or even old enough to watch the show), I can neither agree

nor disagree with the impacts the author believes the show had. However, it definitely must have struck a chord with the public because it remains popular to this day.

The second paper I chose is titled “*The Impact of Comedy on Racial and Ethnic Discourse*” (Linders, 2016). It takes a more systematic approach to understanding the impact of comedy on race issues by interviewing people of different races and extrapolating the major themes from those groups. The researchers showed participants different stand up comedy routines centered around race by both black and white comedians. The participants were then asked if a joke was funny or offensive, and why, among other exploratory questions (Linda, 2010). This methodology is more likely to present more accurate results to the question of what impact comedy has on race discourse, and the findings are interesting. White and black participants responses aligned with the relief theory of comedy, which is the theory that comedy’s appeal is that it allows people to overcome inhibitions and tap into thoughts that they normally neglect or restrain (Lowe 1986). In other words, comedy makes the topic of race more approachable. Both black and white participants however had their inhibitions about racial comedy as well – black participants feared that laughing along with jokes that present stereotypes will perpetuate those stereotypes and white ones feared appearing racist if they laugh at those same jokes. The paper also concludes that despite the above reservations, almost all participants agreed that racial comedy is a great way to promote racial understanding. I agree almost completely with the results of this paper, and expected the findings. It is important to laugh about difficult topics, and yet there is some concern - I have observed among my white friends – that they will appear racist if they laugh at certain jokes. Regardless, humor has been our most powerful tool to

bridging the gap and helping each other understand our different experiences as well as view points.

The third article I chose is titled “*When The Truth Hurts, Tell A Joke: Why America Needs Its Comedians*”, which uses examples from several comedians’ stand-up routines and sketches to make the point that beneath the comedy, there is honest, unfiltered social commentary that is essential. It is also mentioned in the article that comedy can bridge the gap and facilitate conversation between black and white people. In an interview with a New York stand-up comedian, the article quotes, “*Ninety-five percent of white people and ninety-five percent of black people live on different planets. They don’t speak the same language. They don’t interact. They’re not comfortable around one another. That’s f**ed up.*” (Cohen et al., 2006). Yet humor can, the comedian points out, bring us together in an honest way.

The article then goes on to discuss whether some subjects are off-limits . The authors ask the same comedian that question and his response was that if something is funny, it should never be off-limits. A counter-argument to that is mentioned further down the article, which points out that some bits from Chris Rock’s stand-up have a dedicated thread in the website Stormfront.org, the world’s largest white nationalist website (Cohen et al., 2006). However, the authors note that these are only likely to affect people who are already deeply rooted in their beliefs. The authors argue that any sensible person should be able to distinguish that jokes are not meant to be an accurate depiction of reality and that most sensible people know that no race is homogenous. The article in my opinion brings up many good points in that it mentions the roles comedy plays in facilitating racial discourse while also pointing out potential down-falls. It is also mainly interpretive.

The overall impression I got from the above three articles/papers is that even though racial comedy is viewed through different lenses by different races, as well as different reservations, it can be a powerful means of communicating experiences and views across races.

Bibliography

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