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Taking a Joke Seriously: When Does Humor Affect Responses to the Slurring of People with Intellectual Disabilities?

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Abstract: The use of humor may affect how bystanders respond to slurs. Undergraduates (N = 192) completed a measure of prejudice towards people with intellectual disabilities and were randomly assigned to read a scenario in which a peer uses a slur either as part of a joke (humor condition) or a statement (control condition). Participants responded to measures of intent to assertively respond and their evaluation of the speaker. Humor inhibited intent to nonverbally disagree and to verbally confront. Bystanders’ own prejudicial attitudes moderated the effects of humor on intent to verbally confront and negative evaluation. In the humor condition, compared to those with lower prejudice, those with higher prejudice showed less intent to confront and less negative evaluations. In the control condition, intent to confront, and negative evaluation were high, regardless of prejudice. These results suggest that humor inhibits assertive responses to slurs, particularly among people without highly favorable attitudes about the targeted social group.

Keywords: bystander, intellectual disability, intergroup bias, prejudice & discrimination

1 Introduction

People with intellectual disabilities (ID) show limited intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior in relation to peers in a given community and cultural context (Schalock et al. 2007). Unfortunately, people with ID are often devalued and mistreated (Rose et al. 2015). In a review of studies on school-aged children who experienced bullying, those with a cognitive disability were more than three times
likely to experience harassment and bullying than children without a cognitive disability (Carter and Spencer 2006). In research with adolescents, 62% of those with ID experienced bullying or harassment compared to only 41% of those without ID (Christensen et al. 2012). More generally, people with ID are commonly derogated by slurs. For example, in 2018, comedian Tom Segura released a comedy special in which he complained about being unable to use a slur to refer with people with ID (Diamnet 2018; Kessler 2018). Soon afterwards, fraternity members used this same slur to mock individuals with disabilities in a skit and later defended themselves as “only joking” (Helm 2018). These anecdotes illustrate the view that joking prejudice, including slurs, should be accepted by others rather than dismissed as hurtful. Given the prevalence of bullying and harassment of individuals with ID, and given that the slurring of such individuals has been justified using humor, research is needed to address whether and under what conditions the use of humor promotes the social acceptability of slurs.

Prejudicial speech, including the use of derogatory slurs, functions to normalize expressions of prejudice. A slur is the use of a taboo word or phrase that derogates others by referencing emotionally evocative and pejorative descriptors. Commonly, those who are slurred are reduced to an animal, a body part, or a deviant stereotypical attribute (Croom 2013). For example, calling a woman a “slut” implies she is sexually active, which violates gender role expectations for sexual purity and chastity (Fasoli et al. 2015). Likewise, calling a man a “fag” implies he is sexually attracted to other men, which violates gender role expectations for men’s negativity towards sexual minorities (Levant et al. 2016). Exposure to slurs promotes prejudice against those who are targeted. For example, subliminal priming with the slur “fag” led heterosexual adults to endorse more negative stereotypes about people who are gay (Carnaghi and Maass 2007).

Slurs are perceived to be more offensive and less socially acceptable when a higher status outgroup member uses a slur to target a person or group of lower status (e.g., O’Dea et al. 2015). For example, slurs used against people who are White are seen as less offensive than slurs used against people who are Black; this same pattern holds even in experimental research where status is manipulated rather than based on existing sociocultural hierarchies (Henry et al. 2014). Importantly, slurring outgroup members with less social status reinforces the group’s lower social status, which in turn functions to increase risk for additional prejudice and mistreatment. Fortunately, when bystanders observe a person using a slur to refer to lower status outgroup members, assertive responding can challenge the social acceptability of this type of prejudicial speech. For example, White Twitter users who expressed racial slurs were less likely to do so again after perceiving that they were being confronted by a White person of high status (i.e., with many followers) as compared to a Black person of any status (Munger 2017).
Overall, observers report greater willingness to assertively respond to prejudicial speech if they perceive the speech to be harmful or offensive. Among mostly White college men and women, sexist and racist comments that were perceived to be more offensive were also perceived to be more worthy of confrontation (Woodzicka et al. 2015). Similarly, the more offended that a non-target observer was by a peer’s racist comments, the more likely that observer was to confront a peer who expressed racism (Dickter and Newton 2013). This same pattern seems to affect responses to slurs specifically. For example, in a predominantly heterosexual college student sample, those who felt greater negative affect in response to a peer’s use of an antigay slur also reported greater intent to confront the peer (Crosby and Wilson 2015). Yet overall rates of actual confrontation were low, which suggests the need to identify other barriers to assertive responding.

One potential barrier to assertive responding may be the use of humor. Both slurs and disparaging humor share descriptive and expressive functions. Like slurs (Croom 2013), disparaging humor involves describing people in pejorative ways in order to foster an emotional reaction. Disparaging humor involves comments “(intended to) elicit amusement through the denigration, derogation, or belittlement of a given target” (Ferguson and Ford 2008, p. 284). Because humorous speech implies that such speech is not meant to be interpreted seriously (Ford 2000), humor allows people to express prejudicial ideas while denying malicious intent. Nonetheless, exposure to disparagement humor is associated with the perpetuation of prejudice and discrimination. For example, although White shoppers rated jokes that disparage Black people as more offensive than neutral jokes, compared to those who heard neutral jokes, those who heard disparaging racial jokes also reported more negative stereotypical attitudes about people who are Black (Saucier et al. 2018, Study 1). Because humor is valued and serves positive functions, joke tellers may enjoy psychological cover when they characterize others in terms of negative stereotypes (Ford 2000). Yet to date, studies have not examined whether humor also provides psychological cover for those who slur lower status target groups.

The available research suggests that the use of humor inhibits assertive responding to prejudicial speech. College women were less likely to label a male speaker as sexist and were less likely to assertively respond to the male perpetrator if he made a sexist joke compared to a sexist statement (Mallett et al. 2016). Importantly, this same pattern has been shown among outgroup members. More specifically, White students were less likely to confront a White peer who made a racist joke than a racist statement disparaging the intelligence of people who are Black (Katz et al. 2019). Although humor introduces ambiguity of intent on the part of the speaker, slurs express devaluation of the target group in a non-ambiguous
way. To our knowledge, observers’ assertive responses to a blatant slur used within the context of a joke have not been investigated.

Assertive responses to slurs may be understood in light of prejudiced norm theory, which describes the psychological processes that explain how humor may increase tolerance for prejudice and discrimination (Ford and Ferguson 2004). Humorous contexts allow people to switch from a serious mindset to a more relaxed one, and in a more relaxed context, people are less likely to consider how a comment may function to promote discrimination. Furthermore, this theory suggests that a person’s own prejudicial attitudes affect responses to disparagement humor. That is, prejudice towards specific social groups allows those exposed to humor disparaging these groups to assume a norm of tolerance for prejudice and to respond with prejudice-consistent behaviors. Consistent with this theory, Ford et al. (2013) found that college students with higher anti-Muslim prejudice discriminated more against Muslims after exposure to anti-Muslim jokes compared to neutral jokes (Study 2), and those higher in antigay prejudice discriminated more against individuals who identified as gay after exposure to antigay jokes compared to neutral jokes (Study 3).

Drawing upon prejudiced norm theory, bystanders with more prejudicial attitudes about people with ID were expected to show inhibited assertive responding towards a peer who humorously slurs people with ID. Theoretically, people with more prejudicial attitudes towards specific social groups respond to humor targeting these social groups in prejudice-consistent ways (Ford and Ferguson 2004). Assertive responding is not a prejudice-consistent behavior. This prediction also matches with past research showing those college students’ beliefs about how appropriate it is to express racially prejudicial attitudes predict how offensive they perceive a racial slur to be (O’Dea et al. 2015). As such, bystanders with more prejudicial attitudes about people with ID also were expected to less negatively evaluate a peer who humorously slurs people with ID, because negative evaluations are also not prejudice-consistent.

The current research investigated the effect of humor on college students’ responses to a peer who refers to people with ID by using a slur. This research extends past studies showing inhibited assertive responding to jokes as compared to statements that express sexism (Mallett et al. 2016) and racism (Katz et al. 2019). Similarly, in the current study, responses to slurring of people with ID were expected to vary based on whether or not the slur involved humor. Specifically, the use of humor to express a slur was expected to elicit less intent to nonverbally disagree (Hypothesis 1), less intent to verbally confront the speaker (Hypothesis 2), and less negative evaluations of the speaker (Hypothesis 3). Furthermore, consistent with prejudice norm theory (Ford and Ferguson 2004), prejudicial attitudes about people with ID were expected to moderate these relationships. In
particular, the lowest levels of assertive responding and least negative evaluations of a speaker who expressed slurs were expected for bystanders who had more prejudicial attitudes about people with ID and who were exposed to slurs in the presence rather than absence of humor.

2 Method

2.1 Participants

Participants were 192 undergraduates (76.5% women) at a public liberal arts college in Western New York. Ages ranged from 17 to 25 ($M = 19.02, SD = 1.12$). First year students (28.6%) sophomores (45.3%), juniors (18.8%), and seniors (7.3%) were represented. Most self-identified as White/European American (78.5%), Asian/Asian American (12.4%), Black/African American (7.0%) or other (2.1%), and about 9.7% self-identified as Latinx/Hispanic.

2.2 Manipulation

Participants were randomly assigned to read one of two situations in which a peer expresses prejudicial attitudes about people with ID:

You and a couple of friends are grabbing lunch in between classes. Your friend’s TV is on, and the popular comedy Last Comic Standing is on in the background. The comedian is telling jokes about how society is on the decline: “Dumb people f–k like rabbits, so we have all these dumb rabbit kids running around, eating Tide pods and just ruining schools for the rest of us with all of their special needs.”

Someone you don’t know very well comes into the room. “Hey Don,” says your friend. “What’s up?” Don smiles. “I love this show. Yeah, special needs, so special.”

The two scenarios ended differently. In the humor condition, the scenario concluded with Don saying, “Hey, let me ask you this—What did the retard get on his test?” He pauses, grinning, “Drool.” In the control condition, the scenario concluded with Don saying, “Hey, let me ask you this—”Why do retards even go to school?” He pauses, grinning, “What a waste.”

As a manipulation check, pilot data were collected from a sample of 92 undergraduate students; each was randomly assigned to either the humor ($n = 47$) or control condition ($n = 45$), and was asked about their perceptions of the speaker’s intent: a) “to what extent was the remark intended as a joke versus a serious remark about people with disabilities?” (1 = joke, 7 = serious remark), and b) “to what
extent was the guy expressing harmless amusement versus a hurtful criticism?" (1 = harmless amusement, 7 = hurtful criticism). Responses to these two items were averaged and showed an acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.73$). There was a significant mean difference in perceptions of the speaker’s intent, $t(90) = -2.93, p = 0.004$. On average, perceived intent within the humor condition was neutral ($M = 4.37, SD = 1.51$) and more positive than the perceived intent within the statement condition ($M = 5.26, SD = 1.37$). These results suggest that, compared to the speaker in the humor condition, the speaker in the control condition was seen as providing a more serious remark/a more hurtful criticism.

2.3 Measures

2.3.1 Prejudicial attitudes

Our non-manipulated predictor variable, attitudes towards individuals with ID, was assessed with fifteen items from the Mental Retardation Attitude Inventory-Revised (Antonak and Harth 1994). Both the integration/separation and social distance subscales were administered. Sample items from each include, “The child who has intellectual disabilities should be integrated into regular classes in school,” and “I would be willing to go to a competent barber or hairdresser who has an intellectual disability.” In the current study, items were modified so that the phrase “are mentally retarded” was replaced by “has (an) intellectual disability(ies)” to match contemporary terminology (e.g., Schalock et al. 2007). Respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement with each item on a 4-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 4 = strongly agree). Studies have shown that the MRA-R is a reliable and valid scale among college students in China (Sam et al. 2015) and high school students in the U.S. (Krajewski and Flaherty 2000). Following Krajewski and Flaherty (2000), responses were averaged so that lower scores reflect less positive attitudes about integration and more comfort with social contact. The estimate for internal consistency in the present sample was acceptable (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.81$).

2.3.2 Assertive responding

Intent to assertively respond to a peer who used a slur against people with ID was assessed with self-report items from LeMaire and Oswald (2016). Participants were asked how likely they would be to enact each behavior on a 7 point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Intent to nonverbally disagree was assessed with four items: a) “laugh/smile” (reverse scored), b) “nod your head in
agreement” (reverse-scored), c) “give a disapproving look,” and d) “shake your head no in disagreement.” The estimate of internal consistency was good (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.89$). Intent to verbally confront was assessed with two items: a) “tell the guy that you disagree” and b) “ask the guy to stop making comments like that.” Again, the estimate of internal consistency was good (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.92$). Responses were coded and averaged so that higher scores reflected greater behavioral intent. LeMaire and Oswald (2016) reported evidence for reliability for both types of intent to assertively respond in a similar U.S. college sample.

2.3.3 Negative evaluation

Perceptions of the peer who slurred people with ID were assessed with four self-report items also adapted from LeMaire and Oswald (2016): a) “How much do you approve of the guy who was talking?” b) “How much do you like the guy who was talking?” c) “How likely are you to be friends with the guy who was talking?” and d) “How likely are you to avoid the person in the future?” Responses were made on a 7 point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). The positively worded items were reversed before responses were averaged so that higher scores reflected more negative evaluations of the peer (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.80$).

2.3.4 Manipulation check

Perceptions of the comments expressing a slur against people with ID were assessed with bipolar indicators adapted from past research (Hodson et al. 2010; Rattan and Dweck 2010). Participants were asked to complete bipolar ratings on a seven point scale of the peer’s comments as funny (1 = not funny, 7 = funny) and offensive (1 = peaceful, 7 = offensive) to test whether the humor condition was perceived to be both more humorous and less offensive than the control condition.

2.3.5 Social desirability

A 13 item version of the original Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale (Crowne and Marlow 1960; Marlow and Crowne 1961) was used to assess and control for participants’ tendencies to present themselves in a positive light. Items are true/false statements that relate to social approval and acceptance. The total number of responses showing concern about social approval was summed. Higher scores reflect greater concerns about appearing in a manner consistent with social expectations.
2.3.6 Demographics

Participants responded to questions regarding their age, gender, year in school, and their racial and ethnic self-identification.

2.4 Procedure

Undergraduate students were recruited through a voluntary human participant’s pool for an anonymous study of “Talking with Peers with Different Attitudes and Learning Styles.” Data were collected online. Participants signed up for a specific data collection period. At this time, they were asked to take their laptop to a private location, check their email, access the study webpage, and complete the questions within the next 60 min. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions by receiving one of two different links. They completed the measure of prejudice about people with ID and some filler items to disguise the focus of the current study. Next, they read and responded to a scenario in which a peer makes prejudicial comments about people with intellectual disabilities, referring to such individuals with a slur. Participants earned credit for a psychology course for their time. Detailed instructions on how to earn credit while maintaining anonymity were provided. All procedures were approved by the IRB.

3 Results

About half the sample (50.5%, n = 97) was assigned to the humor condition; others were assigned to the control condition (49.5%, n = 95). Univariate comparisons showed no significant differences between these conditions in age, gender, year in school, race, or ethnicity, which suggested that random assignment produced comparable groups.

Responses to the manipulation checks showed that participants assigned to the humor condition reported the comment involving a slur was more funny (M = 2.14, SD = 1.71) than those assigned to the control condition (M = 1.64, SD = 1.20), t(190) = 2.35, p = 0.02. In contrast, a comment involving a slur was not perceived to be less offensive in the humor condition (M = 6.35, SD = 1.05) than the control condition (M = 6.34, SD = 1.03), t(188) = 0.70, p = 0.94). Because these ratings were made on a 7-point scale, these results indicate that slurring was offensive regardless of whether or not humor was used, but slurs using humor were perceived as funnier than those without humor.
As reported in Table 1, participants reported low levels of prejudice towards people with ID. Because the range of observed scores was 2.07 to 4.00, with a median of 3.53, participants identified in the current sample as having stronger prejudicial attitudes did not report high absolute levels of prejudicial attitudes. Participants across conditions reported a high level of intent to nonverbally disagree with a peer who used a slur and highly negative evaluation of this peer. Intent to verbally confront the peer was moderately high. Bivariate correlations showed that both forms of intent to assertively respond were associated with less prejudicial attitudes about people with ID and with a more negative evaluation of the speaker. Social desirability was positively associated with intent to verbally confront but was unrelated to intent to nonverbally disagree and negative evaluation of the peer.

The use of humor to express a slur was expected to inhibit intent to nonverbally disagree (Hypothesis 1), intent to verbally confront (Hypothesis 2), and negative evaluations of the speaker (Hypothesis 3). In addition, prejudicial attitudes were expected to moderate these effects such that participants with more prejudicial attitudes would show the least assertive responding and the least negative evaluation of the speaker. To test these hypotheses, hierarchical linear regression analyses were conducted. Predictor variables were the use of humor (manipulated) and prejudice against people with ID (not manipulated), both as main effects and in interaction, after also controlling for social desirability. Separate regressions were conducted for each outcome variable. In the linear regression models, block 1 predictors included social desirability, humor, and prejudice, and block 2 added the humor × prejudice interaction to the main effect predictors from block 1.

In block 1 predicting intent to nonverbally disagree, there was no significant effect of social desirability ($b = 0.02$, $SE = 0.06$, $p = 0.76$). The significant beta weight for humor ($b = -0.43$, $SE = 0.17$, $p = 0.014$) suggested lower intent to nonverbally disagree among participants assigned to the humor condition versus the control condition. This finding supported Hypothesis 1. In addition, the
significant beta weight for prejudice ($b = 1.47, SE = 0.23, p < 0.001$) suggested that participants with less prejudice toward people with ID showed more intent to nonverbally disagree, full model $F(3, 188) = 16.64, p < 0.001$, adj $R^2 = 0.20$. In block 2, there was no significant humor × prejudice interaction ($b = 0.61, SE = 0.46, p < 0.001$), full model $F(4, 187) = 13.21, p < 0.001$, adj $R^2 = 0.20$. These results suggested that both the type of situation (use of humor) and type of individual (level of prejudice) were independently associated with level of intent to nonverbally disagree.

When intent to verbally confront was the outcome variable, in block 1, there was a significant effect of social desirability ($b = 0.16, SE = 0.08, p = 0.046$). This finding suggested that participants who presented themselves in a more positive light also reported greater intent to confront. In addition, there were significant main effects for both humor ($b = -0.58, SE = 0.25, p = 0.018$) and prejudicial attitudes ($b = 1.35, SE = 0.32, p < 0.01$), full model $F(3, 188) = 9.17, p < 0.001$, adj $R^2 = 0.11$. Again, the significant beta weight associated with humor suggested that intent to verbally confront was lower among participants assigned to the humor condition versus the control condition, which supported Hypothesis 2. In addition, the significant beta weight associated with prejudicial attitudes suggested that intent to verbally confront was higher among those with less prejudice. However, in block 2, there was a significant humor × prejudice interaction effect ($b = 1.33, SE = 0.65, p = 0.042$), suggesting that these main effects were not independent, full model $F(4, 187) = 8.48, p < 0.001$, adj $R^2 = 0.13$.

To probe this interaction effect, a simple slopes analysis was conducted to test the relationship between humor and intent to verbally confront for participants endorsing different levels of prejudice. Results showed a significant negative association between humor and intent to confront when participants’ level of prejudice was either one standard deviation above the mean ($b = -1.11, SE = 35, p = 0.002$) or at the mean ($b = -0.60, SE = 0.24, p = 0.01$). In contrast, there was no association between humor and intent to confront when participants’ level of prejudice was one standard deviation below the mean ($b = 0.01, SE = 0.34, p = 0.78$). As depicted in Figure 1, these results suggest that humor was associated with less intent to verbally confront for participants who endorsed levels of prejudice that were either at the average or higher than average within this sample.

Finally, negative evaluation of the speaker was the outcome variable in the last set of linear regressions. In block 1, there was no main effect of social desirability ($b = 0.00, SE = 0.05, p = 0.92$), nor was there a main effect of humor ($b = -0.23, SE = 0.14, p = 0.11$). Therefore, Hypothesis 3 was not supported. The only significant main effect was for prejudice ($b = 0.72, SE = 0.18, p < 0.001$), suggesting that participants with less prejudicial attitudes reported a more negative evaluation of the peer who used a slur, full model $F(3, 188) = 6.53,$
p = 0.002, adj $R^2 = 0.08$. In block 2, however, the humor × prejudice interaction also was significant ($b = 0.48$, $SE = 0.24$, $p = 0.047$), full model $F(4, 187) = 6.08$, $p < 0.001$, adj $R^2 = 0.10$.

To probe this interaction, another simple slopes analysis was conducted to test the relationship between humor and negative evaluation for participants endorsing different levels of prejudice. There was a significant negative association between humor and negative evaluation when prejudice was one standard deviation above the mean ($b = −0.56$, $SE = 0.21$, $p = 0.01$). This suggested that for participants with the highest observed levels of prejudice, those who were exposed to a slur in the presence of humor evaluated the speaker less harshly than those exposed to a slur in the absence of humor. In contrast, there was a non-significant trend for an association between humor and negative evaluation for participants who endorsed levels of prejudice at the mean ($b = −0.25$, $SE = 0.15$, $p = 0.09$), and no significant association for participants at one standard deviation below the mean ($b = 0.06$, $SE = 0.21$, $p = 0.76$). As shown in Figure 2, for participants who endorsed higher than average levels of prejudice within the sample, humor attenuated their negative evaluation of a peer who slurred people with ID.

4 Discussion

We investigated whether and in what ways the use of humor affects responses to the slurring of people with intellectual disabilities (ID). Overall, participants reported less intent to respond assertively to a peer who used a slur in the context of a joke rather than a statement. These findings converge with the broader literature.
on disparaging humor that suggests that onlookers avoid actively responding to joking expressions of prejudice, often due to fears about being a “killjoy” (Hodson and MacInnis 2016, p. 63). In contrast, most participants negatively evaluated a peer who used a slur, regardless of whether humor was used, although evaluations varied depending on participants’ own prejudicial attitudes about people with ID.

Participants reported less intent to assertively respond, both nonverbally and verbally, to the slurring of people with ID when this slur was presented in a humorous way. These results align with previous studies in which White students were less assertive in responding to racist jokes than racist statements (Katz et al. 2019) and women were less assertive in responding to sexism expressed via jokes than statements (Mallet et al. 2016). The current research extends these previous studies to suggest that humor also inhibits assertive responses to more blatant expressions of prejudice involving the use of a slur. Overall, the available data suggests that regardless of whether prejudicial speech involves sexism, racism, or ableism, and regardless of how flagrant the expression of prejudice is prejudicial speech offered in a humorous way inhibits assertive responding.

Beyond this main effect of humor, the current results also suggested that participants’ own prejudicial attitudes about people with ID affected their intent to confront. That is, participants who favored greater separation rather than integration and greater social distance from people with ID reported less intent to verbally confront a speaker who used a slur in humorous way. As posited by prejudice norm theory (Ford and Ferguson 2004), humor loosens social norms for tolerable expressions of prejudice, allowing those individuals who privately devalue the targeted group act in prejudice-consistent ways. Consistent with this theory, participants with stronger prejudicial attitudes about ID tended to report lower levels of intent to confront a peer who slurred people with ID when the peer made a joke. In contrast,
when the peer did not make a joke, participants tended to report higher levels of intent to confront the peer, even if they had stronger prejudicial attitudes.

Importantly, moderating effects of bystanders’ own prejudicial attitudes about people with ID also emerged for negative evaluations of the peer who used the slur. Although the peer was negatively evaluated across conditions, participants with the strongest prejudice within this sample were less negative in their evaluations of a peer who used a slur in the context of a joke rather than a statement. This finding matches with prejudiced norm theory (Ford and Ferguson 2004). Furthermore, this finding indicates that people without highly favorable attitudes towards specific social groups feel more justified in giving a speaker who derogates these groups the benefit of the doubt if the derogation involves humor.

In contrast, for bystanders with more favorable attitudes towards people with ID, the speaker who used a slur were negatively evaluated regardless of whether the speaker used humor. Overall, most participants did not report less negative evaluations of a peer who slurred people with ID by using humor; rather, across conditions, a peer who used a slur tended to be negatively evaluated. This finding diverges from the findings of past studies of responses to expressions of prejudice that did not use slurs. More specifically, in these past studies, college students tended to be less negative in their evaluations of people who expressed joking prejudice than those who expressed non-joking prejudice (Katz et al. 2019; Mallet et al. 2016).

The discrepancy between these past studies (in which humor directly affected negative evaluations) and the current study (showing no direct effect of humor on negative evaluations), may be due to the use of slurs in the current study. Possibly, speakers who use humor are more likely to be negatively evaluated if they express prejudice directly, such as with a slur. This possibility matches with past research by Tao et al. (2017), who showed that college students rated a White professor as more hostile, less likeable, and more biased after overtly insulting a student as opposed to a more indirect insult. Our finding that a peer who slurred others tended to be negatively evaluated regardless of the use of humor expands upon Tao et al.’s findings showing more negative evaluations of speakers using direct insults. At the same time that humor may create ambiguity about the perpetrator’s intentions for speaking (Hodson and MacInnis 2016), a direct comment such as “those [slur]s” may seem more blatantly prejudicial than a more indirect comment such as “those people.” We speculate that at the same time using humor increases ambiguity about intent/why the comment is made, using a slur decreases ambiguity about the speaker’s negative underlying attitudes about a social group. Future research is needed to compare responses to expressions of prejudice that both do and do not involve both humor and slurs. Based on our speculations, the least ambiguous type of comment likely involve the absence of humor and the presence of a slur, whereas the most ambiguous type of comment likely involves
the presence of humor and the absence of a slur. The effects of ambiguity on intent to assertively respond and negatively evaluations of speakers who do and do not use humor and slur also should be investigated.

The current findings contribute to the broader literature on disparagement humor by showing that humor inhibits intent to assertively respond to jokes that slur people with ID. At the same time, the current results should be interpreted in light of several study limitations. First, the degree to which the current results generalize to more diverse samples and beyond the college population is unknown. Second, participants read a hypothetical scenario and completed self-report measures of their responses, but their experiences of the situation and their perceptions and behavioral intent may differ in a more naturalistic setting using observational rather than self-report assessments. To remedy this issue while still standardizing the scenario, perhaps future studies could consider presenting the hypothetical scenario in a video format, as was done by LeMaire and Oswald (2016) and Tao et al. (2017). Third, overall levels of prejudice against people with ID were low in the current sample, suggesting that even those with the most prejudicial attitudes did not endorse strong negative attitudes about people with ID. This restriction of range may underestimate the effects of prejudice observed. Finally, our manipulation check data were based on single items that did not have consistent anchors, and the high levels of offensiveness across situations may have merely reflected similarities across conditions.

Future studies are needed to investigate responses to slurs that target other social groups as well as humorous comments about people with ID that do not necessarily involve this specific slur. Future studies might also examine contextual factors that affect responses to slurs used in the context of humor. For example, because White students perceived racial slurs as less offensive, particularly when the slurs were exchanged by friends (O’Dea et al. 2015), beliefs about the tolerability of slurs and other prejudice may vary depending on relational context. Assertive responding also may vary based on whether a member of the group being slurred is present and overheard the slur. In addition, future research is needed to examine other individual difference variables beyond prejudice that affect responses to disparaging humor. For example, cavalier humor beliefs (CHB) reflect a “lighthearted, less serious, uncritical, and nonchalant approach toward humor that dismisses potential harm to others” (Hodson et al. 2010, p. 680). Because individuals who endorse CHB disregard the potential negative consequences of disparaging humor, people who endorse such beliefs may show low levels of assertive responding to disparaging humor. Furthermore, to the extent that people with greater CHB tend to hold more prejudicial attitudes about socially devalued groups, such attitudes may explain why some CHB inhibits assertive responding to disparaging humor.
Overall, these results suggest that disparaging humor serves as a mechanism that blocks assertive responding. Humor also allows people with stronger prejudicial attitudes about a target group to feel less negatively about others who slur that target group. This inhibition of assertive responding is disadvantageous for individuals and for an inclusive society. In the absence of prosocial responses to disparaging humor, discrimination against targeted social group members is likely to continue. The current findings support the need for educational interventions to help promote greater inclusion for individuals across levels of ability. In order for people who encounter prejudice to confront it, they have to recognize joking prejudice as a form of prejudice. As such, across various settings such as schools and workplaces, individuals may benefit from educational efforts focused on critical thinking about disparaging jokes and the underlying messages about the social groups being targeted. Several researchers have shown the utility of implementing a critical mindset when analysing disparaging humor involving sexism (Ford 2000) and racism (Saucier et al. 2015, Study 2). To the degree that educational programs help to curtail the use of disparaging humor and promote assertive responding to such humor, communities have a much greater chance of creating a sense of belonging for all.

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