Race/Ethnicity, Religion and Stereotypes: Disparagement Humor and Identity Construction in the College Fraternity

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Abstract

The college fraternity is a socially complex organization on which comparatively little empirical research has been performed. The present study analyzes racial/ethnic and religious disparagement humor as used by the members of such a group of men. While previous explanations of these forms of humor in general American society emphasize self-censorship in diverse (culturally, ethnically, racially, religiously) settings, our findings show that the opposite seems to be true within the context of the fraternity studied here. In any given interaction amongst fraternity members, the more complex the racial and religious identity makeup of the participants, the more likely some form of disparagement humor will enter the conversation. Through an ethnography of communication approach, it is demonstrated that labeling and self-labeling of identity play a role in how this process is carried out, internal heterogeneities being highlighted as a means for (re-)creating the fraternity’s overarching homogeneous identity.

1. Introduction

(1) Paying Bills

1 DARREN: (addressing Chapter^1^) So I’m handing out bills today.
2 MATT: The pot of gold at the end of the rainbow is drying up!
3 CHAPTER: (laughter)
4 DARREN: If people still haven’t paid by this Monday...
5 JOHN: [The Jew comes with the claw!]
6 CHAPTER: (laughter)

If your reaction to the exchange above is one of shock and outrage, you are most likely not a current member of a college fraternity. Those same feelings of shock and outrage may be further amplified as you discover that, for those living within the walls of a fraternity, interactions involving various forms of ethnic or religious disparagement humor take place on a daily basis. But when so many studies (Akiba and Miller, 2004; Leveen, 1996; Rankin, 2001; Turnbull, 1992; amongst many others) stress the high degree of American male self-censorship

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^1^ When all of the members of a fraternity are assembled in one place – at the weekly meeting, for example – the group is referred to as the Chapter.
regarding racial/ethnic/religious humor in culturally mixed settings, why does fraternity social interaction seem to show the opposite?

The present study takes a classical ethnography of speaking approach (Hymes, 1962) in describing the everyday presence and performance (Hymes, 1971) of disparagement humor amongst members of an American university fraternity. Specific examples of individuals are presented in an attempt to illustrate concretely the social meaning behind the frequent deployment of such humor in this community of practice. In short, we aim to explain how it is that this sort of typically “risks” humor can run so rampant and be “successful” (cf. Robinson and Smith-Lovin, 2001) amongst these culturally diverse individuals, and what, if anything, constrains its usage.

2. Types of humor in interaction: who gets to joke and when?

Given that humor is a quintessentially social phenomenon, since every joke requires both a teller and an audience” (Robinson and Smith-Lovin, 2001: 123), its uses are complex and multifaceted, changing from joke to joke, group to group and setting to setting. In this section, we briefly review some of the literature on the use(s) of humor in various communities of practice as a base with which we can later compare fraternity humor.

Joking has long been correlated with social solidarity and power dynamics. In an early study on the social functions of laughter in a hospital setting, Coser (1959) found a divide between higher-status individuals and lower-status individuals, the former group targeting the latter in its joking. Various more recent studies on humor in the workplace2 have described similar patterns: those with more authority using humor to define and/or demonstrate that authority (Holmes, 2000; Holmes and Marra, 2002; Smeltzer and Leap, 1988) as well as establish/maintain obedience from those lower on the totem pole of power (Dwyer, 1991). Furthermore, Robinson and Smith-Lovin (2001), quoted above, show that higher-status individuals joke more frequently and are more successful in doing so compared to lower-status individuals in task-oriented group discussions. While using humor to create and maintain these social divisions is widely reported, it is crucial to note its unifying abilities as well: joking has been shown to enhance social relationships through creating intimacy/rapport (Billig, 2005; Cohen, 1999; Hay, 2000). Referencing these as well as other authors, Goftly (2012) comments that “They all stress the empathetic, solidarity, and communicative enhancement functions of humor, with Attardo himself (1994) suggesting the role of decommitment in softening criticism and mitigating face threats.”

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2 See Romero and Cruthirds (2006) for a concise overview of the use of various types of humor in the workplace.

Specifying our discussion now to race/ethnicity in humor, Billig (2005) claims that the use of racial/ethnic stereotypes for joking purposes may be tied to power relations such as those described above. In other words, one race targeting another with its humor could reflect the former’s supposed or perceived superiority over the latter; and this, in turn, can serve to simultaneously divide the two groups as well as unify in solidarity the members within each separate group.

Note that humor is a somewhat more socially ‘acceptable’ way of displaying these opinions of superiority, particularly in today’s ‘politically correct’ (PC) American society. As Billig (2001: 285) explains, “If today there are taboos against the outward expression of racism, then the racist joke becomes a way of saying the unsayable”. We cannot forget, though, the in-the-moment social situating of joking processes. Leveen (1996) emphasizes the importance of context in stating that “While joke texts may be retold, joke acts are specific to a given context of time, place, joke teller, and joke listener” (31, emphasis added). Consequently, the same joke text can have various levels of acceptability given the co-participators present (each individual representing not only his/her race(s)/ethnicity(-ies), but also his/her religion, political beliefs, etc.), the location, the environment, and so on. Leveen goes on to remind us that the joke teller can be part of or outside the target (“butt”) of the joke, and the same can be said for each of the listeners: “In each permutation, the stakes change and so does the power relationship,” the more complex all of these factors are, the more “volatile” the joke act may become (33, 35). Furthermore, since many Whites believe that Blacks often perceive comments that were not meant to be racist as racist (Jaret, 1999: 405), Whites often try to “play it safe” with regard to ethnic humor in multicultural contexts. Hirji (2009: 570) comments that:

This is what makes an analysis of ethnic humor so complex: is there ever a point at which the joke can be certified as absolutely non-offensive? Probably not. The potential to offend, to hurt, lies underneath the surface of many types of humor, even if the majority of the audience sees with laughter and enjoyment.

Again, we see how questions of race/ethnicity are inseparable in joking contexts from the questions of power used to open this section.

Getting even closer to the objectives of the present study, Tamale (1996: 490) looks at racism in the American college context and explains that “Race indeed holds a salient position in the day-to-day life of students and shapes their behavioral interactions”. The underlines the subtle (and not so subtle) ways that students are able to ‘do racism’ (in the ethnomethodological sense of the phrase) in everyday interactions. In an experiment conducted by Alcoa and Miller (2004), the researchers argue that when White male college students are
in the perceived presence of at least one Black individual, they show "cultural sensitivity," but considerably less so in the absence of a person of color. The study's design also revealed that this was the case both when the White participants were told that they would have to discuss their opinions with others as well as when they were told that their thoughts would remain private. Therefore, it does not appear that public political correctness is the reason behind White self-censorship, as previously proposed (Rankin, 2001; Turnbull, 1992). Instead the authors argue that "the mere presence of a person of color prompts European American individuals not only to publicly act in a culturally sensitive manner but to privately feel that way" (Akiba and Miller, 2004: 637, emphasis in original).

The infinite intersections between race/ethnicity, power and solidarity among joke producer(s) and recipient(s) are no stranger to academic pursuits. While space restrictions prevent an exhaustive review of past research on these interdisciplinary topics, our goal thus far has been an illustration of the intricate framing in which racial/ethnic humor operates in American society.

3. Present context and methodology

As we now enter the present research, it is necessary to transition from "general" American society into a very small subculture therein, namely that of the college fraternity, and give some background on this rather specific setting.

An individual, all-male fraternity is part of a larger community known at American universities as "Greek life," consisting of other fraternities on campus as well as their all-female counterpart, called sororities. These organizations are called "Greek" due to the fact that their names are generally made up of letters from the Greek alphabet: Phi Sigma Psi or ΦΣΨ, in our case, for example. Each university chapter is part of its own national or international general network of chapters as well. In other words, there can be a Phi Sigma Psi chapter at the University of X, another at the University of Y, and so on. Still, each of these individual chapters at different schools shares the same secrets, lore, motto, etc. as one another due to the fact that they are all under the same (inter)national fraternity or sorority.

Typically depicted as drunk party animals ("frat boys") in popular culture references such as the film Animal House, actual members see themselves somewhat differently. Most fraternities have a motto which describes the ideal fraternity man as a respected community and campus leader and philanthropist who excels in his academics as much as he does in extracurricular/social arenas. As in any organization, adherence to the official dictum varies from member to member and chapter to chapter; nonetheless the prescribed goal of the college fraternity is to produce well-rounded young men, generally mandating strict grade-point average and community service requirements to be able to participate in the other, more 'social' activities.

Access to Greek life organizations differs from access to other clubs on campus due to the week-long process at the beginning of each academic term known as Rush, described in detail in Kiesling (2001). Rush is synonymous with recruitment for the Greek system: it is a time when the organizations take on new members. During Rush, one does not simply sign up for membership — on the contrary, the Chapter must ask an individual to join by a unanimous vote amongst the members and extending what is called a bid (an offer). The Rusher is then free to accept or decline the bid, but may accept to only one chapter (e.g. Phi Sigma Psi and no others) during the entirety of his college career. After a potential member receives and accepts a bid, he becomes a probationary member of the organization called a Pledge for the length of one academic term. This time is spent learning the secrets of the fraternity and serving the Actives (or full-fledged members) of the group. Contrary to the Pledge process of the fraternity that Kiesling describes in his studies, Phi Sigma Psi does not participate in any form of physical hazing, as such practices are severely prohibited and regulated against by the general fraternity (and at the university) in question. Pledges are, however, required to serve the Actives in various ways such as: cleaning the physical residence where 50 of the Brothers live, setting up for parties and events, memorizing the history and lore of the fraternity, and being able to recite several passages by heart when asked to do so by any Active member. When Pledges are finally initiated into the fraternity at the end of this ten-week period, they too become Actives, or, more intimately, Brothers. While hierarchy definitely still exists amongst the initiated Actives, all have equal rights to participate in all aspects of fraternity life as full-fledged members, and each considers the others his "Brothers".

The specific fraternity chapter that we will be looking at is based on a campus of approximately 25,000 undergraduate students. The university is public, located in the southwestern United States. More than 1 in 10 of the university's undergraduate students hold membership in one of the over 50 different fraternity/sorority chapters found on campus. Phi Sigma Psi currently has about 100 members, approximately half of whom are White, and the other half including

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4 Hazing is the practice of using harassment, abuse and/or humiliation as a means of initiating an individual into a group. In Greek life organizations, hazing is often associated with acts such as: forced consumption of large amounts of alcohol, physical and sexual abuse and torture, branding, etc.
men of Asian, Black, Middle Eastern and Latino origin. While each member does pay monthly dues to the organization, the group is financially diverse, with multiple Brothers working and/or receiving some form of financial aid to assist with their education costs.

Despite the enormous wealth of information that could be learned from such an exclusive, all-male club, the inherent secretiveness of the organization has made it difficult to study. Actually, until Scott Kiesling's (1996) dissertation Language, Gender, and Power in Fraternity Men's Discourse, available research on this type of group was quite scarce; and the only reason he was able to gain access to the fraternity was due to his membership in the same national organization as an undergraduate (Kiesling, 1997: 70). Finding myself with a similar level of access to the group of men, this ethnography is the result of over six years of participant observation in this community, including various formal and informal meetings, philanthropy and social events, etc. Audio-recording in several settings was possible as well, in addition to numerous informal interviews with the Brothers. This mélange of methods patterns with Duranti's (1997) explanation of an ethnography of communication, the basis for which is classical sociolinguistic research such as Hymes (1962).

4. Disparagement humor between Brothers

Every member of Phi Sigma Psi is made fun of by his Brothers for something: Rob is too skinny, so everyone calls him "Bones"; Tyler must have Turret Syndrome because he rubs his face way too much; and Geoff can't get a girl to save his life. Furthermore, on top of individualized jokes, every Brother is, of course, subject to homosexual/homoerotic mocking in accordance with the hypermasculine, heterosexual norm of the organization (Raymond, 2012). With the exception of the homosexual taunting, the disparagement jokes about individual Brothers are born out of the Chapter's perception of that individual's identity, triggered by a personality trait, a physical feature, an elected position in the organization, or any variety or combination of factors. And when that identity perception coincides with a racial/ethnic or religious stereotype, the door to all sorts of racial/ethnic and religious disparagement humor is opened, and the jokes don't stop until graduation.

4.1 Some individual cases: to play or not to play the stereotype

The list of examples is endless, but Brothers divide into two main groups in how they respond to this sort of humor being directed at them. Although one might presume that the division lies between those who accept the jokes through laughing and those who do not, nearly all members have come to accept that this form of disparagement humor is a constant in fraternity life. After all, for most, exposure to it began while they were Pledges, and thus they have effectively been socialized into this norm, the occasional dissatisfied Pledge simply dropping out if he found the interactional norms of the organization were not to his liking. Instead of laughing vs. not laughing, the line with regard to jokes' receptions is drawn between those who actively play along with the comedic act, embracing and exemplifying it - a quite literal interpretation of Hymes's (1972) concept of performance - , and those who do not. Here we exemplify these two interactional styles through the cases of Darren, Carlos, Martin and Blaine.

**Darren**

The interaction involving Darren, cited in the Introduction, is an illustration of how this Brother does not embody his assigned stereotype. We repeat the excerpt below.

(1) Paying Bills

1 DARREN: (addressing Chapter) So I'm handing out bills today.
2 MATT: The pot of Jew-gold at the end of the rainbow is drying up!
3 CHAPTER: (laughter)
4 DARREN: If people still haven't paid by this Monday...
5 JOHN: [The Jew come with the claw! ((accents)]

6 CHAPTER: (laughter)

Darren, the Chapter's treasurer, happens to be Jewish. Due to the plethora of historical stereotypes surrounding Jews and money, his "personalized" jokes, assigned by the rest of the Chapter, have consisted of nothing but disparagement humor about his being Jewish. When asked his opinion on this form of comedy directed constantly at him, Darren's response was indifferent, brushing it off by saying that he was just so used to it that it was "no big deal". Darren also commented on the mutual understanding of disparagement humor usage within the fraternity: "How can I expect to be able to make fun of Durka" for living on Baka-Laka-Daka Street if he can't make fun of my Jew god?". We therefore classify Darren as one who accepts the Jewish humor directed at him as a reality but does not actively encourage it through any sort of embodied performance of 'Jewishness'.

The opinions that Darren vocalizes in informal interviews parallel how he deals with this sort of humor in real-time interactions, such as in (1) above. Note firstly the context in which the disparaging outbursts in lines 2 and 5 occur. At this point in the weekly meeting, Darren has been given the floor to make his
treasurer-related announcements to the Chapter (regarding bills, payments, etc.). Thus, his identity not just as a Brother, but also as a treasurer is made salient in the situated context, and Matt and John capitalize on that enhanced, in-the-moment identity to perform their humor, evoking Darren’s Jewish identity as well, in the co-presence of other Brothers. It is this context-specific lamination of identities which makes the humor so successful (i.e. achieve laughter).

When these Jewish comments arise, Darren pauses while the Chapter laughs, and he even giggles quietly to himself before continuing on with his treasurer announcements. He pauses and giggles again when another comment is thrown out in line 5. He does not show any signs of anger, nor does he attempt to curtail the laughter by continuing to speak over the outbursts or shush the audience. Rather, he allows parts of his identity to be the target of joking by creating an interactional space – in a very literal sense – for it (and the subsequent laughter) to occur. This is Darren’s way of participating in the humor directed at him.

Now let us contrast Darren’s reactions with those of Carlos, Martín and Blaine. Carlos is Mexican-American, Martín is Chinese, and Blaine is White. These Brothers enthusiastically and intentionally participate in the (re-)creation and performance of their racially stereotypical, (self-)labeled identities within the Chapter.

Carlos Carlos’s elected position in the fraternity is House Custodian. As such, he is in charge of all repairs to the physical house in which the Brothers live, as well as its overall general cleanliness. Elected to this position during his second year as a member of the fraternity, Carlos commented, “No one ever joked or said anything about my Mexican-ness before I became House Custodian... and neither did I”. The North American stereotype of Latinos often working in the housekeeping and/or repair industries was not activated until Carlos himself attained a similar position within the fraternity. Once Brothers began to engage in this type of humor with him, Carlos embraced and even encouraged its usage, going beyond simply ‘allowing’ it to happen as we saw above with Darren. At one meeting, for example, Carlos announces that he needs to call his “tía” (aunt) to come and clean the bathrooms because the house needs to be presentable for potential new members during Fall Rush. Let us break down the various levels of this single-word joke so that the reasoning behind the subsequent laughter by the Chapter (and Carlos) is more apparent.

At the most basic level, Carlos uses Spanish. This code-switch – “utterance-internal juxtaposition, in unIntegrated form, of overt linguistic elements from two or more languages, with no necessary change of interlocutor or topic” (Pullum, 2004: 589) – in and of itself already represents an overt ‘tapping in’ to his Latino identity, particularly given that race/ethnicity and linguistic ability are often correlated in the U.S. context (cf. Hill, 1999, 2008). Here, the selected moment of code-switching is a simple- and common-enough word in Spanish that most of the Chapter is capable of understanding its meaning. That is, “tía” acts as a contextualization cue which the Brothers interpret through conversational inference, “the situated or context-bound process of interpretation, by means of which participants in an exchange assess others’ intention, and on which they base their responses” (Gumperz, 1982: 152). Recipient design (Sacks, 1992) is thus especially crucial here because of the linguistically diverse audience: confusion as to the meaning of the word/phrase used would have distracted from the potential humor of the utterance. It is the fact that the other non-Spanish-speaking Brothers can co-participate in the understanding of “tía” that allows the code-switch to create a specific social situation (Auer, 1998), namely one in which disparagement identity humor can be performed and be effective.

Through his use of Spanish, Carlos also evokes a host of stereotypes about Latinos in the United States, for example: a lack of English-speaking ability, the ‘Mexican cleaning woman’ (Romain, 2011), etc. Furthermore, his identification of the woman as part of his family – even though it is commonly known to the Brothers that the cleaning woman is in no way actually related to him – purposefully and personally connects him to this stereotype in addition to another, namely that all Latinos are related to one another in some way or another (because Latina women reproduce so repeatedly, or so the stereotype goes). Again, this higher level of stereotyping being involved in the joke is only available to the Brothers because it has been designed in a particular way, through a code-switch which they are able to understand. That is, an entire tapestry of stereotypes is instantaneously evoked, enacted and incorporated into multiple, laminated identities just through the use of a single word – and this gets a roar of laughter out of the Chapter audience as well as out of Carlos himself.

After his term as House Custodian had ended, Carlos could be heard rolling his r’s and yelling “¡Ay! ¡Ay!” up and down the hallways. We can see that the Chapter’s use of the Latino stereotype elicited Carlos’s similar use, which then expanded and continued after what originally instigated the joke (his elected position) was no longer present. Carlos chose to use these progressive comedic exchanges as means of creating a new fraternity identity and of establishing close friendships with many of his Brothers.

Martin Martin first became humorously identified with being Asian as Recruitment Chairman, in charge of attracting new potential members to rush/join the fraternity. He was known for his famous motto: “No nerdy Asians!” Given that the popularity of one fraternity over another is judged by how ‘cool’ the Brothers are perceived to be from the outside, Martin’s real objective was the simpler race-indiscriminant slogan: “No nerds.” The comedic specification of
“Asian nerds” was available for joking because Martin himself coincided with the stereotype in many ways: an engineering major, exemplary grades in his academic courses, good with technology and on-line games, etc., all of which was common knowledge to the other members of the fraternity. Asking the Chapter, “Do we really need another Asian playing Counter Strike all day?” called to mind all the stereotypes of young, hyper-intelligent, anti-social Asian males and applied them in the context of fraternity popularity to create the humor in the joke. And, the irony that Martin himself admittedly exemplified the stereotype he was campaigning against made the joke even more humorous. Although it was Martin himself who initiated the humor, the other Brothers followed his example and permanently classified him – in jest – as a nerdy Asian who was too busy playing on the computer to attend social events, was lacking in social skills, and so on.

It is important to stress, yet again, that this created identity has little to do with Martin’s true personality which is actually quite social and outgoing. The disparaging persona is consistently re-invoked for humor (and, as we will see, solidarity) purposes rather than as a method of actual disparagement of an individual’s true identity.

**Blaine** From the cases explained thus far, it may seem as though the so-called average White male is exempt from racial disparagement humor in the fraternity. As we look at Blaine, however, we see that racial/ethnic humor targeting Whites is as fair game as that which stereotypes any other race. Blaine comes from Newport Beach, California, and attended the high school after which the well-known television show The O.C. was designed. The show (inaccurately) depicted nearly everyone from the area as White, rich, arrogant and ignorant. Beginning during Blaine’s first week as a Pledge, when the Chapter initially became aware of his origin in this particular region of Orange County, Brothers of all ethnicities began imitating him as if he were of the same socioeconomic class and intelligence level as the characters on the program, even though Blaine’s reality and that of the show’s characters had little to nothing to do with one other. Brothers constantly ask Blaine about his Mercedes, hismaids and butler and his summer homes in Beverly Hills, Palm Springs and the Hamptons – all of which are fictional. He is also consistently asked about surfing conditions, how good the waves are, the temperature at the beach, etc. With a stereotypical, Newport Beach/Orange County airhead, burn-out surfer tone, Blaine responds with key phrases like “Extreme!” and “Totally righteous, Bra!”, per-

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7 Counter Strike is a tactical first-person shooter video game, played on-line, which is very popular in certain groups in the United States and is generally known by name by most college-aged individuals.

sonifying the (negative) stereotype despite it having little to do with his actual personality, dialect or personal activities. (He has actually never been surfing.) While this geographical identity initially had no correlation with Blaine’s reality, it grew to become part of his fraternity identity through his very membership in the fraternity.

Although one may posit that this stereotype is different from the others because it can be viewed as mocking positive traits (e.g. wealth, high social status for Whites) rather than negative ones (e.g. poverty, low social status for Latinos, for example), this is not the case. Firstly the low intelligence and high ignorance stereotypes of the Whites in this area, of which the humor makes use, are plainly negative. But in addition, huge wealth and social status are traits that would cause just as significant a division between the members of the organization as would poverty and low status. Therefore, as we will see later, the Brothers use disparagement humor to neutralize any such barrier-creating differences that may be present due to the stereotypes related to an individual’s identity.

4.2 Requirements for use

These cases allow us to clarify the requirements for the use of racial/ethnic/religious disparagement humor in the fraternity. It is not enough to simply be a member of a group associated with certain stereotypes: there has to be something that triggers the usage of that fact within a joking context. For example, the simple fact that Darren is Jewish, Carlos is Latino, Martin is Asian, and Blaine is White is not sufficient to license the Chapter to use this form of humor with regard to these individuals. There are half a dozen Jews in the Chapter, but only Darren is reminded of that fact through humor on a daily basis. The same can be said about Latinos and Asians. And about half the House is White, but only Blaine receives jokes about being a wealthy surfer. In a Chapter of 100 Brothers, why are these particular individuals singled out as recipients of this form of humor? The idea of the perception of the individual acts at the necessary spark, giving “consent” for racial/ethnic/religious humor to be used concerning that particular Brother: the Jewish Brother is also the Chapter treasurer; the Mexican-American is also the House Custodian; the White guy also hails from a supposedly wealthy area. These triggers do not have to last in order for the joke to continue over the years, but they do need to be initially present to give way to the humor’s launch.

5. Launching: where can I find some new material?

Just as was the case with Carlos’s use of the word “tía”, anything that is shared knowledge to the members of the fraternity can be used in launching and/or
maintaining disparagement humor, the most obvious source being popular culture outlets, mainly movies. Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan, Larry Charles's 2006 mockumentary starring Sacha Baron Cohen, houses a massive amount of slurs directed toward Jews, all of which could be acceptably used in the fraternity context when targeting a Jewish Brother. The "Jew claw" image included in our first example comes from this film. Brothers use another expression from the film – a jingle which says "Throw the Jew down the well" – from time to time in group meetings when there is a difference of opinion expressed by a Brother licensed as a recipient of Jewish disparagement humor.

Another film which deals with cultural differences is Team America: World Police, written by Trey Parker, Matt Stone and Pam Brady, the producers of the animated series South Park, and released in 2004. Set predominantly in the Middle East, the movie contains various stereotypes that American's hold about Middle Easterners. The terrorists in the film talk to one another with simple variations of the nonsense phrase "Durka durka durka, Mohammad Jihad," in attempts to stereotype Middle Eastern languages, intelligence and religious fanaticism. Within the fraternity, one Brother with a Middle Eastern ethnic background is referred to as "Durka" so regularly that when someone from outside the fraternity asks about "John," members pause to think about whom the speaker is referring to. In addition to Middle Eastern references, the movie also depicts the former leader of North Korea, Kim Jong-Il. The marionette playing the North Korean leader sings a song entitled "I'm So Ronery" (<em>I'm So Lonely</em> in Standard American English) which makes fun of the stereotypicized, accented English of Korean speakers: confusion of English's two liquid consonants, /l/ (lateral) and /r/ (rhotic). Tom, a Brother of Korean origin (coincidentally also a Linguistics major) constantly swears his /r/ and /l/ as do other Brothers when speaking with him, despite the fact that he was born and raised in the United States and possesses a completely Standard American English phonology. A common salutation to Tom within the fraternity walls would thus include some form of mimicked Korean English pronunciation and film reference, such as in (2), uttered as Tom approaches the table where Carl and a few other Brothers are already seated:

(2) Tom enters Monday Night Meeting
1 CARL: Oh, hero, Mishura Jong, feeling lonely today?
2 ((cf. Oh, hello, Mister Jong. Feeling lonely today?))

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8 The /r/ vs. /l/ sibilant distinction is also known to be difficult for non-native English speakers of Korean origin, as Korean only possesses a single phoneme which lies somewhere between /r/ and /l/.

3 TOM: Not now that you're heel with me, Ruver.
4 ((cf. Not now that you're here with me, Lover.))
5 ALL: (laughter)

Based on a history of such discourses, this humor needs no introduction and can open a new interaction without prompting. Such interactions form part of a speech chain (Agha, 2003, 2007; see also Bakhtin, 1986) which serves to consistently re-create these humoristic identities for the parties involved. Note how other joking - namely homoerotic - combines with this racial/ethnic humor to create a layered, multi-identity joking interaction. The result is laughter from Tom and Carl, as well as from those other Brothers already sitting at the table with Carl upon Tom's arrival.

Other major events considered to be common knowledge can contribute to new material for this form of humor as well. For example, a news story which made national headlines a few years ago reported that on another college campus, a minority student had been tased by campus police after refusing to leave the library late one night. The student then accused the White police officers of racism and threatened to sue the university. After word (and accompanying video footage) of this incident circulated, any disagreement in the fraternity involving a non-White Brother included a joking threat that he would be "tased" for his noncompliance. The response from the non-White Brother would be a variation of "Don't tase me, Bro!" as was uttered by the victim in the original incident.

These movies and events can be viewed as forms of trigger in a slightly different way than earlier discussed. Saying "durka" or "ronery" or "taser" would not have been available to include in joking without popular culture or news headlines making the expressions known to the members of the fraternity. The emergence of such events in the lives of the Brothers acts as a license for racial/ethnic and religious disparagement humor to be used in combination with other, Brother-specific identity traits (having an elected office such as House Custodian, for example). We therefore see an evolving and layering of identities - from various sources - that all work in tandem to create the overarching, as well as the moment-by-moment, "fluid" (cf. Cameron, 1997; Kiesling, 2001) identities of the members of this organization.

6. So anything goes, right? Wrong.

When we compare the present study of racial/ethnic/religious disparagement humor to others which look at its use in other circles of the American public, we find that the fraternity framework appears to apply its own set of local norms which trump those in place in more commonplace arenas of general society.
Nevertheless, one rule which does exist in this specific system seems to be that the humor *must* be public, seen by other Brothers – the more the better. Darren, Carlos and Tom, who, as discussed, are often the butts of stereotype jokes, agree that they very rarely, if ever, experience ethnic/racial/religious disparagement jokes in one-on-one situations with Brothers. "Larry" never says anything about "Jew gold" if it's just me and him alone, but he says it at least ten times at each and every Monday night meeting." Darren comments. When questioned as to why this is, Brothers respond with overwhelming unanimity that the joke would obviously be "racist" rather than in jest if there were no audience present to witness it and co-participate through laughter (cf. Kothoff, 2000). Rather than promoting actual racial tensions between individuals, as may happen amongst non-members of a fraternity, these public comments serve to build and reaffirm positive relationships in fraternity settings.

Fraternity interaction, while agreeing with the importance of the joke act as a whole, shows us the opposite of the findings discussed earlier for the general American populous while simultaneously reaffirming it. Given that fraternity ethnic/racial and religious disparagement humor requires a public (brotherhood) audience, the joke act actually becomes more acceptable, as opposed to more "volatile," in more complex and larger groups of listeners. This is why many of the examples presented above occurred during the fraternity's weekly meeting at which all members of the organization are present. There is an increased opportunity to make more individuals join in on the laughter at the joke if there are more listeners present. Therefore Brothers want to do the opposite of 'play it safe' at a culturally diverse Chapter reunion and shout out comments throughout the meeting's proceedings. Simultaneously, though, the fact that Brothers refrain from such humor in intimate interactions does show strict adherence to the general norms of greater U.S. society, which have previously been detailed in the above-cited studies. The fraternity context itself must therefore be relevantly evoked - as in multi-Brother interactions such as at general meetings, for example - in order for such humor to be legitimized. This represents a culture of public teasing amongst the Brothers, performances of which racial/ethnic/religious disparagement humor is only one aspect.

7. Why this type of humor?

Self-disparagement is often used within groups to exhibit pride and show commonality and solidarity, emphasizing that all parties present have membership in the group being made fun of. Given that the fraternity is a multi-ethnic, multi-

cultural and multi-religious organization, disparagement is used to create the same sense of commonality across general society's ethnic/racial/religious groupings and divisions.

A Jewish Brother allowing a non-Jewish Brother to engage in disparagement humor toward Jews, for example, shows two things. Firstly, the Brother who is actually Jewish is, in essence, making the other Brother an honorary Jew for the interaction, since this humor is normally only 'acceptable' when the joke is Jewish – otherwise it is offensive. This licensing both erases differences and establishes commonality at the same time. Moreover, the fact that the non-Jewish Brother is actively attempting to engage in Jewish humor with his Jewish Brother shows his desire to erase those differences and create that commonality. This interaction is therefore composed of both the non-member's (of the disparaged group) want to open the line of communication with the group's true member, as well as the true member's acceptance of the humor, and by extension, of the non-member as an equal. Rather than furthering a power relationship, the racial/ethnic and religious humor serves instead to equalize the playing field between individuals and allow deeper friendships to be built on that level foundation.

Since this multi-layered disparagement is plainly occurring across so many different ethnic/racial and religious lines within the organization, the fraternity is effectively creating its own racial/ethnic/religious identity which encompasses those of all of its members. It serves the same purpose as the general disparagement within the Brotherhood – everyone disparaging everyone for everything except that it highlights race/ethnicity and religion. By acknowledging and setting aside, through humor, as many of the inter-Brother differences as possible, Brothers are permitted to maintain (and even create) their diverse individual identities while simultaneously conforming to the homogenous identity of the fraternity as a whole.

8. Conclusions, outside consequences and future research

While some may feel that it is unacceptable that members of such an organization interact in this way, Randy concisely comments the following in an informal interview with five other Brothers:

(3) Randy's summary  
1 RANDY: We joke just for us, just for our little community. So who cares if it's not  
2 'P.C.?' I mean, like even though it may not seem like it from the outsider's  
3 point of view, we're Brothers and we all know we love each other.  
4 (0,5)  
5 No ho[mo].  
6 TOM: [GAY. (laughs)
This culture of teasing is born out of the supposed homogeneity of the college fraternity: because all of the co-participants are members of the same homogeneous “Brotherhood,” policing fun at any sort of heterogeneity that exists amongst the members – be it racial/ethnic, religious, concerning sexual orientation, etc. – is fair game whenever the fraternity context is tapped into. Evoking these diverse, individual personas – authentic, imagined or invented – through humor gives individual identities their place while at the same time playfully breaking down the barriers that such diversity could potentially cause. The result is solidarity (Ziv, 1984), in this case a homogenous fraternity identity that is defined by the very teasing out of its inner heterogeneities.

Looking at how this humor works within the fraternity begs the question as to what happens when Brothers interact with non-Brothers. Do they apply the fraternity rules to non-fraternity contexts, or are members able to style switch (cf. Bell, 1984) into and out of different sets of social rules based on their environment? Hobden and Olson (1994: 79) argue that “disparagement humor can be the source of dissonance-motivated attitude change,” meaning that it can cause people to discriminate subconsciously more frequently. Some Brothers report feeling that they have been desensitized and sometimes accidentally use fraternity-style humor in non-fraternity interactions, but no Brother claims that he is actually more discriminative or intolerant of others resulting from the racial/ethnic and religious humor used inside the fraternity walls. The goal of the humor is to establish inter-Brother relationships, not to create animosity and prejudice. This is why, in most cases, the presence of a non-Brother will disallow the use of this type of humor – because a non-Brother co-participant fails to create the fraternity context required for its usage; rather, this necessitates conformation to general society’s norms as opposed to Brotherhood-internal ones.

Studying more systematically these ‘switches’ into and out of Brother-speech vs. non-Brother-speech given the co-participants in interaction represents an interesting prospect for future investigation, in addition to continued research on fraternity interaction in general.

Further studies on the topic of disparagement humor rules in groups might look into how they play out in other organizations, both collegiate and non-collegiate. Do these same norms apply given other all-male but non-“Greek” fraternity contexts? In sororities (all-female)? In mixed-sex/mixed-race/mixed-religion student organizations? The social and hierarchical disparagement humor constructions used in gangs (e.g. Mendoza-Denton, 2008) or in sports teams, for example, may be very similar or very different. Future research may take these (and other) contexts into consideration to investigate the establishment of homogeneous identities through the explicit teasing out of internal heterogeneous identities.

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Jugendsprachen
Stilisierungen, Identitäten, mediale Ressourcen
Inhalt

Vorwort .................................................................................................................. 7

Helga Kotthoff / Christine Mertzluft
Einleitung zum Band Jugendsprachen: Stilisierungen, Identitäten,
mediale Ressourcen ...................................................................................................... 9

I. Kulturelle Stilisierungen

Christine Bierbach / Gabriele Birken-Silverman
Zwischen siciliano und Kiezdeutsch: Sprachgebrauch
und Selbststilisierung bei italienischen Jugendlichen in Mannheim .................. 35

Vanessa Siegel
Präpositionalphrasen ohne Präpositionen?
Zur syntaktischen Reduktion im 'Türkendeutschen' .............................................. 67

Chase Wesley Raymond
Race/Ethnicity, Religion and Stereotypes: Disparagement
Humor and Identity Constructions in the College Fraternity ............................... 95

Kari Dako/Richard Bonnie
'I go SS; I go Vas'
Student Pidgin: A Ghanaian Youth Language of Secondary
and Tertiary Institutions .......................................................................................... 115

Jos Swanenberg
Youth Language in the Netherlands
A Focus on Geographical Diversity .................................................................. 127

Daniel Steckbauer / Nils Bahlo / Norbert Dittrmar
und Bernd Pompino-Marschall
„... erzähl mal das mit dem Insulanser...“
Formale, funktionale
und prosodische Aspekte jugendsprachlicher Narrationen ....................... 137

II. Medialen Textwelten und ihre Ressourcen

Janet Spreckels
„Alles hab ich meiner kleinen Schwester zu verdanken“ –
Humoristisch-subversive Medienaneignung Jugendlicher ................................ 163
Vorwort


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Wir widmen diesen Band Jens Normann Jørgensen, einer Forscherpersönlichkeit, die wegbereitend für die Jugendspracheforschung war. Nicht nur sein brillanter Plenarvortrag auf der Freiburger Tagung wird uns allen im Gedächtnis bleiben.

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Helga Kotthoff und Christine Mertzluft