

The ethnic joke at its best media essay



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Ethnic jokes aren't funny anymore. In fact, nearly one million adults in the tri-county area stated they personally experienced ethnic jokes, racial slurs, or verbal abuse. That's not funny. Let's get serious. We can change that statistic. With a little more caring, understanding and compassion, we can all laugh with each other not at each other." (Schutz, 1989). Ethnic and Racial Jokes has been the subject of a very controversial debate for quite a long time. As time progressed, people's theories and attitudes towards ethnic jokes have evolved. The value of humor in the joke is more evident and the importance of this humor can be appreciated. Ethnic jokes, made in the right context, are acceptable in society pertaining to the particular place, time and surroundings of the person telling the joke. As human beings, we understand the gravity of the word 'respect'; we have to respect every other living thing on this planet and no person or law or anything for that matter can change that fact. The idea behind the joke is not to offend people, cause disrespect and purposefully induce harm but to lighten up a dark ambience in a room - it's only a joke. I feel the need to emphasize the point that every ethnic joke should start with a look over your shoulder. (Wikipedia)

Ethnic jokes make use of stereotypes, which is one of the gravest aspects that deter people from using them. Those not in favor claim that using stereotypes in the jokes can endorse a society in which negative ethnic stereotypes become socially acceptable making almost everyone racist. (Billig, 2001). Each person in society is afraid, even ashamed of being branded as a racist, which is one of the reasons why people have a very negative and wary attitude towards these jokes. People want to be able to laugh at race-based jokes without having to feel the guilt that plagues their

conscience every time a giggle escapes their lips. This is still possible, if people try to become more mature and tolerant in accepting ethnic jokes and look at it in a more positive light - somewhat like constructive criticism - then everyone can have a guilt-free laugh at ethnic jokes. It is often said that 'Laughter is the best medicine'; in the case of ethnic humor, this is true.

Laughter reduces the tension during conversations and this can never be a bad thing. Laughter can bridge the gap between people from different ethnicities allowing them to understand the flaws of each other's background as well as their own and interpreting these in a humorous manner will bring people closer together as friends. In his book, Peter Woods (1983) contends that " Humour is power. It provides the strength that enables the individual to adapt to situations and, on occasion change them." (p. 112). Marty Beckerman, an author, journalist and humorist also sees the benefit; these jokes he admits are " making people feel more comfortable with one another so they can get past their prejudices" (Beckerman, 2008). A few studies have observed the relation of ethnic humor towards society. One such study is called 'The Joke Project' - a sociology professor in Rice University, Texas conducted a survey among his students on this subject. In The Joke Project, each student was told to ask a student from his/her own ethnicity to tell them a joke. 90% responded with jokes out of which 42% of the responses had been racial or ethnic jokes. The remaining 48% who hadn't used ethnic jokes were asked whether they had recently heard a racial joke. 73% of these responded with racial jokes. (Davidson, 1987). The above evidence illustrates that ethnic jokes are used often in diverse multi-cultural places, especially in places like universities, since it helps bring people closer together; it helps when one has to make friends in a new place. Obviously,

one does not want to insult anyone when trying to make friends, on the contrary one tries to show that his understanding of another person's culture is deeper than the jokes with racial stereotypes make it out to believe.

The opponents to this argument believe that racial and ethnic jokes are the cause for racial discrimination because ethnic jokes, in all their humor, present a severe reminder of past follies and struggles that people from various places in the world have faced over the years; in the words of Marty Beckerman (2008) "poured salt into centuries-old wounds with cheap punch lines". The opposition suggests that these reminders are like adding cement to a wall that already divides us into different racial entities. On the other hand, the memories can help people. Memories can teach us what we need to know through our experiences. Remembering past struggles are not linked solely with recounting ethnic jokes, every history book has a story of past wars and conflicts, so then begs the question- why not stop reading history books? Answer, simply because it is illogical to do so. Professor Christie Davies (2000) says "To become angry about such jokes and to seek to censor them because they impinge on sensitive issues is about as sensible as smashing a thermometer because it reveals how hot it is." (p. 116). In other words, just because something is out of favor with the general population, does not mean that one has to bar them entirely. Avoiding the past will not provide solutions to breaking down the metaphorical wall; with care and compassion and humor - when we share the effects of past disputes using jokes, humorous stories and tales - we can weaken that wall and join together to overcome issues of earlier times letting bygones be bygones.

Racial jokes are insulting and demeaning claim the opposition for they employ the use of seemingly derogatory terms. In this case it is necessary to distinguish between racist jokes and jokes with race-based humor. There is a line between the two, albeit the line gets obscured and is hard to distinguish every now and then - at these times extra caution is advised. The difference lies in the fact that jokes need not necessarily involve the defamation of a group; and merely because the joke contains references to a different ethnicity does not make it racist. There are several comedians such as Russell Peters, Maz Jobrani, Chris Rock and many others who have made successful careers making use of ethnic jokes. Their own success and the kaleidoscopic variety of people that turn up for their shows is proof of the effectiveness of these jokes. The entire people laugh together with each other at jokes about different ethnicities, there is no indication of any one race being singled out as superior or inferior. This demonstrates that people are closer together at these shows and that for a joke to be an ethnic joke; it does not have to utilize offensive terms.

Racism is a terrible thing but is forbidding the use of ethnic jokes really a way to put an end to it? There are good things as well as bad about ethnic humor. Ethnic jokes never did anyone harm on their own - they are just jokes. We cannot blame the jokes but we can assume that the people who feel strongly disapproving about them as well as those who use them with complete disregard for others are the ones who need to change their perception. The solution depends entirely on perspective; the choice to be tolerant and to see the positive things can make all the difference. Imagine a

world where people were not easily upset by ethnic jokes, a lot more smiles and laughter with less bickering and strife.