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Thomas E. Ford, Hannah S. Buie, Stephanie D. Mason, Andrew R. Olah, Christopher J. Breeden & Mark A. Ferguson

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ARTICLE

Diminished self-concept and social exclusion: Disparagement humor from the target’s perspective


*Department of Psychology, Western Carolina University, Cullowhee, USA; \( ^{b} \)Department of Psychology, University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, USA; \( ^{c} \)Department of Psychology, University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, Stevens Point, USA

ABSTRACT
Two experiments (Total N = 393) demonstrated that disparagement humor can trigger a social identity threat for members of the targeted group resulting in perceptions of a diminished possible self and feeling socially excluded. Experiment 1 (N = 278) revealed that, upon exposure to humor disparaging one’s political in-group (versus political out-group disparagement humor or non-political disparagement humor), both conservatives and liberals perceived a social identity threat manifested in more negative representations of their possible selves and feelings of social exclusion. Experiment 2 (N = 97) provided a conceptual replication of these findings showing that women exposed to sexist humor experienced social identity threat exhibited in a more negative representation of their possible selves and feelings of social exclusion.

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KEYWORDS
Disparagement humor; social identity; devaluation; discrimination

Incidents of disparagement humor are a common occurrence in the workplace and other social settings; they seem to be a part of what most people would consider a typical social interaction. For instance, a female colleague of one of the authors reported an incident of sexism she experienced as an assistant professor. During a faculty meeting, one of her more senior, male colleagues humorously commented about her youthful appearance and jokingly made a motion that she bake cookies for future faculty meetings. This “joking” was met with awkward laughter and playful remarks as nobody seemed to know how to respond.

Notwithstanding their prevalence, such seemingly harmless incidents of joking can actually elicit detrimental consequences for social interaction. Indeed, disparagement humor adversely affects how people think about and respond to members of the disparaged group. By disguising denigration as benign amusement or “just a joke,” disparagement humor fosters a social climate that permits people to express their prejudice against the targeted group without fears of social sanctions (see Ford, Richardson, & Petit, 2015 for a review). Thus, in the context of our illustration above, sexist men might feel freer to express those sentiments in the context of their colleague’s joke.
In the present research we address the consequences of disparagement humor from a different perspective, the perspective of those targeted by the humor (e.g., female faculty members present in the illustration above). Most empirical research on the consequences of disparagement humor from this perspective has been limited to people’s reactions to the humor itself. Consistent with LaFave, Haddad, and Maesen (1976/1996) vicarious superiority theory, people generally view disparagement humor as less funny and more offensive when it targets a social in-group than when it targets a relevant out-group (e.g., LaFave, 1972; LaFave, McCarthy, & Haddad, 1973; Love & Deckers, 1989).

The present research builds on these investigations by addressing how in-group disparagement humor affects the way people view themselves in relation to others in a given social context. We propose that in-group disparagement humor triggers a social identity threat; it communicates to people that they are at risk of being devalued, rejected, or of becoming the target of discrimination because of their group membership. We further propose that a social identity threat induced by disparagement humor can manifest in a diminished self-concept and feelings of social exclusion in the immediate social context.

**Social identity threat**

People categorize stimuli (events, objects, people, etc.) in their environment into discrete groups in order to simplify and make sense of it (Cohen & Lefebvre, 2005; Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel, Flament, Bilig, & Bundy, 1971; Taylor, Fiske, Etcoff, & Ruderman, 1978). Importantly, social identity theory contends that people also make sense of themselves in social contexts through categorization. People derive self-definitions – group identities – from their subjective identification with social categories that distinguish themselves from others in a given context (Tajfel, 1982; Oakes, 2002; Turner & Oakes, 1989; Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994). A social identity represents that part of one’s self-concept derived from subjective identification or affiliation with a social group (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). People derive social identities from groups that have objective boundaries (e.g., ascribed demographic categories or groups people voluntarily join) as well as from “psychological groups” based on more abstract categories (e.g., political ideology) that represent meaningful self-definitions in a social context (Devine, 2015; Huddy, 1997; Oakes, 2002; Tajfel, 1982).

A social identity becomes a salient and meaningful way of defining the self when it helps differentiate ingroup members from outgroup members (Turner et al., 1994). Given that people are members of many different social groups, the social identities that become salient and relevant depend on the intergroup context (Turner & Reynolds, 2001; Turner, Reynolds, Haslam, & Veenstra, 2006). For instance, the sexist joking in the scenario described above likely made gender identity salient and relevant for our colleague and other female faculty members present (Marques, Yzerbyt, & Rijsman, 1988).

The theory further suggests that social identities affect how one evaluates the self (Hogg & Abrams, 1990; Tajfel & Turner, 1986); a social identity can enhance or diminish how positively one evaluates the self, depending on whether the in-group compares favorably or unfavorably to relevant out-groups (Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, &
Doosje, 1999; Duck, Terry, & Hogg, 1998). Furthermore, people are motivated to achieve or maintain a positive social identity, that is, to feel pride in belonging to the in-group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Consequently, in intergroup settings, people try to favorably distinguish their in-group from relevant out-groups. People experience social identity threat when they suspect or fear that they will be devalued, discredited, or rejected because of their group membership (Adams, Garcia, Purdie-Vaughns, & Steele, 2006; Hunger, Major, Blodorn, & Miller, 2015; Logel et al., 2009; Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002). It appears that subtle cues or events that even raise the possibility that one’s in-group could be devalued in a given setting are sufficient to trigger a social identity threat (e.g., Inzlicht & Ben-Zeev, 2000; Purdie-Vaughns, Steele, Davies, Ditlmann, & Crosby, 2008). Adams, Garcia, Purdie-Vaughns, and Steele (2006), for instance, demonstrated that women can experience a social identity threat in a school setting if someone else merely suggests that their instructor could be sexist.

**Disparagement humor and social identity threat**

Disparagement humor inherently diminishes its target and defines those affiliated with it as members of an inferior out-group, set apart from others in the immediate context (Abrams, Bippus, & McGaughey, 2015; Ferguson & Ford, 2008; Gockel & Kerr, 2015; Hodson & Maclnnis, 2016; Martineau, 1972). Thus, disparagement humor should be either identity enhancing or identity threatening, depending on whether it targets an out-group or one’s in-group. Research has shown that out-group disparagement humor can, indeed, enhance social identity (Abrams et al., 2015; Siebler, Sabelus, & Bohner, 2008; Thomae & Pina, 2015). In fact, Bourhis and Giles (1977, p. 261) proposed that “anti-out-group humour can, through out-group devaluation and denigration, be a creative and potent way of asserting in-group pride and distinctiveness from a dominant out-group.”

We propose that disparagement humor can have the opposite effect on members of the targeted group, making them feel at risk of being devalued, rejected, or of becoming the target of discrimination because of their group membership. That is, disparagement humor can trigger a social identity threat. Indeed, empirical research has demonstrated that sexist humor can create social identity threat for women in the form of self-objectification (Ford, Woodzicka, Petit, Richardson, & Lappi, 2015). Ford, Richardson, et al. (2015) found that women (but not men) reported greater state self-objectification and engaged in more self-monitoring of their appearance following exposure to sexist comedy clips than neutral comedy clips. Women viewed themselves as social objects through the demeaning and trivializing lens of the sexist humor. Furthermore, given that disparagement humor diminishes and excludes its target, we propose that disparagement humor can trigger a social identity threat that specifically involves a diminished view of one’s self and feelings of social exclusion.

**Diminished self-concept: A possible selves perspective**

Markus and Nurius (1986) introduced “possible selves” as a general construct describing people’s representations of the different identities they might derive in a given context, and also of the associated emotional states. Thus, possible selves are the ideal selves we aspire to become; they are also the dreaded selves we fear becoming along with the affective reactions to those possibilities. One ideal possible self for a doctoral student
working on her dissertation might be “a professor and researcher at a major university.” A dreaded possible self might be “an unemployed Ph.D. forced to reconsider her career goals.”

People derive possible selves from their sociocultural and historical context, and from their immediate social experience (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Nurius & Markus, 1990). As a result, their possible selves are responsive to contextual identity threats (Brown, 1998). For instance, if an African-American college student fears that an instructor views him through a lens of prejudice (social identity threat), he might construct a negative possible self in the context of that class. He might thus experience lower performance expectations, negative perceptions of his academic ability, lower performance motivation, and heightened negative emotions associated with this diminished representation of self. That same student, however, might construct a quite positive possible self in a different class taught by a professor he trusts as egalitarian and non-biased (Brown, 1998).

Social exclusion
People innately need and attempt to cultivate meaningful connections or relationships with others (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Blackhart, Nelson, Knowles, & Baumeister, 2009; Lieberman, 2013). Broadly defined, social exclusion results from perceived threats to social relationships; it refers to the real or perceived experience of physical or psychological isolation from others (Blackhart et al., 2009; Riva, Eck, & Riva, 2016). Importantly, social exclusion has a profound impact on subjective well-being. It has been shown to result in a number of negative psychological experiences such as feelings of pain, threats to one’s sense of belonging, control, meaningful existence, and self-esteem (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995; MacDonald & Leary, 2005; Wesselmann et al., 2016).

Social experiences can signal social exclusion directly through explicit rejection (Blackhart et al., 2009; Wesselmann et al., 2016), or indirectly through subtler “rejection cues” such as exclusionary language (Richman & Leary, 2009; Wesselmann et al., 2016), mockery (Kerr & Levine, 2008) or hurtful laughter (Klages & Wirth, 2014). In one study relevant to the present research, Klages and Wirth (2014) asked participants to recall a time when they had experienced others’ laughter that made them feel excluded or included, or to recall a typical day. Participants reported feeling more excluded during “exclusive laughter” versus “inclusive laughter” on a typical day.

Whether through explicit rejection or subtle “rejection cues”, social experiences can foster exclusion by making one feel “relationally devalued” and disconnected from others. Accordingly, one should perceive experiences that threaten social identity, such as in-group disparagement humor, as socially-excluding.

The present research
We conducted two experiments to test the hypothesis that disparagement humor targeting one’s in-group triggers a social identity threat (fear that others in the immediate context will devalue, reject or discriminate against a person because of their group membership) resulting in a diminished representation of one’s possible self, and increased feelings of social exclusion. We conducted both experiments using Mechanical Turk, a web service sponsored by Amazon.com that allows people to
complete studies posted online. We limited our samples to residents of the United States. Mechanical Turk has been shown to be as reliable as traditional face-to-face methods of data collection (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011; Casler, Bickel, & Hackett, 2013). Further, samples gathered from Mechanical Turk are more demographically diverse than college samples (Miller, Crowe, Weiss, Maples-Keller, & Lyman, 2017) and provide personality data more representative of the general US population (McCredie & Morey, 2018).

**Experiment 1**

In Experiment 1, we tested our hypothesis by exposing participants to disparagement humor designed to threaten their political identities. Political psychologists propose that people derive important social identities from identification with a political ideology (e.g., conservative, liberal) as well as a political party (e.g., Republican, Democrat; Deaux, Reid, Mizrahi, & Ethier, 1995; Huddy, 2001). Ideological categories represent meaningful bases for social and self-categorization in a wide variety of contexts where political distinctions are relevant (e.g., Abrams, 1994; Deaux et al., 1995; Huddy, 2001; LaMarre, Landreville, & Beam, 2009; Lin, Haridakis, & Hanson, 2016). Thus, in the present research, we conceptualized political identity as affiliation with the ideological categories, conservative and liberal.

Political humor is a form of disparagement humor that comes in a number of varieties or comic styles identified by Ruch, Heintz, Platt, Wagner, and Proyer (2018) including wit, sarcasm, irony, and satire (Becker & Haller, 2014; Hoffman & Young, 2011; Holbert, 2013; Polk, Young, & Holbert, 2009). Regarding content and purpose, such humor mocks or ridicules individual politicians, political groups or positions on controversial issues (Niven, Lichter, & Amundson, 2003; O’Connor, 2017). We propose that political humor makes one’s political identity salient based on ideology (conservative, liberal), and that humor disparaging one’s political in-group triggers a social identity threat.

To test our hypothesis, we asked participants to complete a role play exercise in which they imagined they had recently started a job in a consulting firm, and that their supervisor had emailed them a brief orientation video from a staff member in human resources. In the video, the staff member told three jokes that disparaged either conservatives, liberals, or Florida drivers. We predicted that upon exposure to humor disparaging one’s political in-group, both conservatives and liberals would report having more negative possible selves (revealed by negative perceptions of one’s own competence, lower performance motivation and a more negative affective state) and greater feelings of social exclusion in the context of their new job. We further predicted that these effects of the humor target manipulation would be mediated by a perceived social identity threat – a concern that others in their work environment would devalue and discriminate against them because of their political affiliation.

**Method**

**Participants and design**

We analyzed data from 278 residents of the United States who participated through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk in exchange for 40¢. Of the 278 people, 160 were men, 116 were women, one identified as transgender, and one identified as “other.” Participants’
age ranged from 18 to 74 ($Mdn = 34$, $M = 36.34$, $SD = 10.88$). Participants consisted of 209 (75%) Caucasians, 36 (13%) African-Americans, 10 (3.6%) Asians, 16 (5.8%) Hispanics, 4 (1.9%) American Indians and 7 (2.5%) mixed ethnicity. Finally, 150 participants self-identified as Liberal and 128 as Conservative. We randomly-assigned participants to one of three conditions in which they watched a video that featured jokes that disparaged conservatives, liberals or Florida drivers.

**Procedure**

Upon accessing a link to the study through Mechanical Turk, participants provided demographic information in an ostensibly separate study. Importantly, we measured participants’ identification with a political ideology using two response options, “Lean Liberal,” or “Lean Conservative.” We treated political affiliation as a categorical variable rather than as a continuous variable because self-categorization and identification with a group, not the extremity with which one endorses political ideas, creates a social identity and the motivational and cognitive processes that follow from it (Devine, 2015; Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel, 1978; Oakes, 2002).

Next, participants completed a role play exercise in which they imagined they had recently started a job as an associate marketing specialist in a consulting firm. Further, as part of orientation, their supervisor had sent them a brief orientation video (2 min. in duration) made by a staff member in Human Resources. The Human Resources staff member began the video by introducing himself and welcoming the participant to the organization stating that, “Our whole department is very excited about your decision to accept our offer of employment. My name is Jamie, and my job is to help smooth your transition to working at our company.” Jamie then described the organizational philosophy and culture emphasizing the importance of connection between managers and employees and stated that they often use humor to make employees feel more comfortable in the work environment.

Jamie then told three disparaging jokes that we obtained from previous research (Hodson, Rush, & Maclnnis, 2010). We manipulated the target of disparagement by varying the referent of the joke (conservatives, liberals or Florida drivers). The first joke was, “What’s the difference between Bigfoot and an intelligent liberal/conservative/Florida driver? Big Foot has been spotted several times!” The second was, “Why do only 10% of liberals/conservatives/Florida drivers make it to Heaven? Because if they all went, it would be Hell!” The third joke was, “A smart liberal/conservative/Florida driver is a lot like a UFO; you keep hearing about them, but you never see one!” Jamie concluded the video by saying that, “If you have any questions, please feel free to email or call me. We really look forward to working with you.”

After watching the orientation video, participants first indicated their agreement with the following three statements designed to assess social identity threat operationalized as anticipated devaluation and discrimination based on political affiliation: “I anticipate that my manager and coworkers at this company might treat me unfairly because of my political views,” “I anticipate that my manager and coworkers at this company might think negatively of me because of my political views,” and “My manager and coworkers at this company could unintentionally make the work environment uncomfortable for me, as a conservative/liberal.” Participants responded on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly
We averaged responses to the three items to represent an aggregate measure of social identity threat. Cronbach’s alpha for this measure was .93.

Next, participants responded to eight adjective pairs adapted from Brown (1998) assessing two components of their possible selves in the context of their imagined work environment: (a) perceptions of self-competence (unqualified vs. well-qualified, incompetent vs. competent, unprepared vs. prepared, not motivated to do well vs. motivated to do well, and the wrong person for the job vs. the right person for the job) and (b) perceptions of self-directed affect (scared vs. confident, anxious vs. calm, uncomfortable vs. comfortable). We presented each adjective pair on a five-point scale with the negative end point represented by 1 and the positive end point by 5. Cronbach’s alpha for the 8-item scale was .92.

Participants then completed a measure of social exclusion (Williams, 2009) related to the context of their work environment. We presented participants with 23 statements describing feelings of social exclusion (e.g., “I feel excluded,” “I feel like an outsider”). Participants indicated the degree to which they anticipated having each feeling on a scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely). Cronbach’s alpha for the 23-item measure was .94.

Finally, participants were prompted to write a sentence or two describing their reactions to the study. We excluded data from 16 participants whose responses to this measure indicated suspicion of the true purpose of the study, or who failed our “attention check” by providing nonsensical answers to open-ended demographic questions. Also, it is noteworthy that participants could not complete the study unless they provided a response for every question for each measure. Consequently, we did not have any missing data.

**Results**

We first present descriptive statistics for the measures of social identity threat, possible selves and social exclusion. Then, we present analyses designed to test our hypothesis. We tested our hypothesis by subjecting each measure to a 3 (humor target: conservatives, liberals, Florida drivers) x 2 (political affiliation: conservative, liberal) analysis of variance (ANOVA). We then performed mediation analyses to examine whether social identity threat mediated the effect of humor target on possible selves and social exclusion. Also, preliminary analyses revealed no significant effects involving participant gender, thus we collapsed analyses across gender.

**Descriptive statistics**

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for the measures of social identity threat, possible selves and social exclusion collapsed across the political affiliation and humor target variables. The correlations revealed that the measures of the three variables are distinct but strongly related to one another.

**Social identity threat**

We hypothesized that upon exposure to disparagement humor targeting one’s political ingroup, participants would perceive a social identity threat. Thus, as expected, the $3 \times 2$ ANOVA revealed a significant humor target x political affiliation interaction effect, $F(2, 272) = 45.25$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .250$ (see Figure 1(a)).
Simple effects tests further supported our hypothesis. Conservatives perceived greater social identity threat in the conservative target condition \( (M = 4.05, SD = 1.11) \) than in the liberal target condition \( (M = 2.42, SD = 1.15) \), \( t(125) = 6.66, p < .001 \) or the non-political target condition \( (M = 2.58, SD = 1.11) \), \( t(125) = 6.66, p < .001 \). Similarly, liberals perceived greater social identity threat in the liberal target condition \( (M = 3.91, SD = 1.26) \) than in the conservative target condition \( (M = 2.29, SD = 1.19) \), \( t(147) = 6.81, p < .001 \) or the non-political target condition \( (M = 2.23, SD = 1.45) \), \( t(147) = 7.06, p < .001 \).

### Table 1.
Descriptive statistics for the measures of social identity threat, possible selves and social exclusion collapsed across political affiliation and humor target in experiment 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Social Identity Threat</th>
<th>Possible Selves</th>
<th>Social Exclusion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Possible Selves</td>
<td>−.53**</td>
<td>−73**</td>
<td>−</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Exclusion</td>
<td>73**</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>0.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>2.97</td>
<td>3.71</td>
<td>2.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>1.40</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>0.91</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** p < .01

![Figure 1](image.png)

**Figure 1.** Mean scores on the measures of (a.) social identity threat, (b.) possible selves, and (c.) social exclusion as a function of political affiliation and target of disparagement humor.

Simple effects tests further supported our hypothesis. Conservatives perceived greater social identity threat in the conservative target condition \( (M = 4.05, SD = 1.11) \) than in the liberal target condition \( (M = 2.42, SD = 1.15) \), \( t(125) = 6.66, p < .001 \) or the non-political target condition \( (M = 2.58, SD = 1.11) \), \( t(125) = 6.66, p < .001 \). Similarly, liberals perceived greater social identity threat in the liberal target condition \( (M = 3.91, SD = 1.26) \) than in the conservative target condition \( (M = 2.29, SD = 1.19) \), \( t(147) = 6.81, p < .001 \) or the non-political target condition \( (M = 2.23, SD = 1.45) \), \( t(147) = 7.06, p < .001 \).

**Possible selves**

We expected that, upon exposure to humor disparaging one’s political in-group, participants would report having more negative possible selves in the context of their new job. Supporting our hypothesis, the \( 3 \times 2 \) ANOVA revealed a significant humor target \( \times \) political affiliation interaction effect, \( F(2, 272) = 12.01, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .081 \) (see **Figure 1(b))**.
Providing further support for our hypothesis, simple effects tests revealed that conservatives reported having more negative possible selves in the conservative target condition (M = 3.24, SD = 0.95) than in the liberal target condition (M = 3.95, SD = 0.96), t(125) = 3.53, p < .001 or the non-political target condition (M = 3.87, SD = 0.90), t(125) = 3.16, p < .001. Similarly, liberals reported having more negative possible selves in the liberal target condition (M = 3.36, SD = 0.98) than in the conservative target condition (M = 3.94, SD = 0.84), t(147) = 3.33, p < .001 or the non-political target condition (M = 4.03, SD = 0.83), t(147) = 3.85, p < .001.

**Social exclusion**
We predicted that upon exposure to in-group disparagement humor, participants would report feeling more socially excluded in the context of their new job. Supporting our hypothesis, the humor target x political affiliation interaction effect was significant, F(2, 272) = 30.64, p < .001, ηp² = .184 (see Figure 1(c)). As expected, simple effects tests revealed that conservatives reported feeling more socially excluded in the conservative target condition (M = 3.40, SD = 0.82) than in the liberal target condition (M = 2.49, SD = 0.84), t(125) = 5.36, p < .001 or the non-political target condition (M = 2.63, SD = 0.68), t(125) = 4.61, p < .001. Similarly, liberals reported feeling more socially excluded in the liberal target condition (M = 3.30, SD = 0.94) than in the conservative target condition (M = 2.36, SD = 0.72), t(147) = 5.73, p < .001 or the non-political target condition (M = 2.40, SD = 0.77), t(147) = 5.49, p < .001.

**Mediation analyses**
We hypothesized that in-group disparagement humor triggers a social identity threat, which in turn, induces a diminished representation of one’s possible selves and feelings of social exclusion. Thus, we predicted the effect of the humor target manipulation (humor disparaging conservatives, liberals or Florida drivers) on participants’ possible selves and on feelings of social exclusion would be mediated by perceived social identity threat. Furthermore, this effect should be moderated by participants’ political affiliation. We tested this moderated mediation hypothesis separately for the measures of possible selves and social exclusion using Hayes’ PROCESS macro for SPSS 20.0 (Hayes, 2017, Model 8. See Figure 2).

We conducted a bootstrapping analysis (with 5,000 resamples) to test whether political affiliation moderated the effect of the humor target manipulation on perceived social identity threat and thus participants’ possible selves and feelings of social exclusion. The bootstrapping analysis provides the 95% confidence interval for the population value of the indirect effect (the path from the humor manipulation to the measure of possible selves through anticipation of bias). If zero is not included in the 95% confidence interval, the indirect effect is significant at p < .05 (Preacher & Hayes, 2004). Table 2 presents the standardized beta coefficients and 95% confidence intervals for the moderated mediation analysis.

As expected, the moderated mediation was significant for the measure of possible selves, β = −0.60, SE = 0.10, CI95 = (−0.80, −0.42) and for the measure of social exclusion, β = 0.74, SE = 0.09, CI95 = (0.56, 0.93). This indicates that humor target manipulation affected participants’ possible selves and feelings of social exclusion through perceived identity threat differently for conservatives and liberals. We more closely examined this significant interaction effect by conducting mediation analyses on the possible selves and social
exclusion measures separately for conservatives and liberals. For conservatives, the indirect effect was significant on the possible selves measure, CI\textsubscript{95} = (−0.41, −0.19) and on the social exclusion measure, CI\textsubscript{95} = (0.24, 0.48). For liberals, the indirect was also significant on the possible selves measure, CI\textsubscript{95} = (0.19, 0.42) and on the social exclusion measure, CI\textsubscript{95} = (−0.51, −0.26). Participants perceived a social identity threat in response to humor disparaging their political in-group resulting in a diminished representation of possible selves and feelings of social exclusion.

**Discussion**

The results of Experiment 1 support our hypothesis. Upon exposure to humor disparaging one’s political in-group, both conservatives and liberals perceived a social identity threat – they felt concerned that others in their work environment would devalue and discriminate against them because of their political affiliation. Thus, they constructed more negative representations of their possible selves and felt more socially excluded in the context of their work.

**Experiment 2**

Experiment 2 provided a conceptual replication of Experiment 1 by exposing women to sexist humor designed to threaten their social identities as women. Sexist humor devalues women by reducing them to sex objects, depicting them as a caricature of traditional gender roles, or playing upon specific sexist stereotypes of inferiority (Bemiller & Schneider, 2010; Ford et al., 2015; Greenwood & Isbell, 2002). Thus, sexist humor communicates diminishment and devaluation of women. Therefore, we propose that social settings involving sexist humor, like our colleague’s faculty meeting in the example mentioned
earlier, can trigger a social identity threat for women. It can make women feel at risk of being discredited or of becoming the target of discrimination because of their gender. Thus, we designed Experiment 2 as a second test of the hypothesis that humor disparaging one’s in-group triggers a social identity threat resulting in a diminished representation of one’s possible self and feelings of social exclusion.

We tested our hypotheses by recruiting women to complete a role play task in which they imagined themselves as college students about to take a course with a graduate student instructor. Participants watched a brief video of their instructor describing his teaching philosophy in which he made either three sexist humorous remarks or three neutral (non-disparaging) humorous remarks. After watching the video participants completed the measures of social identity threat, possible selves and social exclusion from Experiment 1. On the basis of our hypothesis, we predicted that in the context of the role play task, participants in the sexist humor condition would experience greater social identity threat, construct more negative representations of their possible selves and feel more socially excluded than participants in the neutral humor condition.

### Method

**Participants and design**

We recruited 100 women living in the U.S. through Mechanical Turk to participate in the study in exchange for 45¢. To ensure that participants could engage in this scenario and adopt a student mindset we included only participants age 40 or under, and who had completed at least “some college.” We deleted three eligible participants who indicated suspicion of the true purpose of the study, or who failed our attention check by providing nonsensical answers to open-ended demographic questions. The remaining sample consisted of 97 women. Participants’ age ranged from 20 to 40 years old, with a median of 34 and a mean of 32.55 ($SD = 5.29$). There were 76 Whites (78%), 6 African-Americans (6.2%), 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paths</th>
<th>Social Exclusion</th>
<th>Possible Selves</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Humor Target → Social Identity Threat</td>
<td>-2.52 (0.27)</td>
<td>-2.52 (0.27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Affiliation → Social Identity Threat</td>
<td>0.18 (0.15)</td>
<td>0.18 (0.15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humor Target x Political Affiliation →</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Identity Threat</td>
<td>1.67 (0.18)</td>
<td>1.67 (0.18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Identity Threat → Response</td>
<td>-0.32 (0.16)</td>
<td>0.08 (0.21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humor Target → Response</td>
<td>0.44 (0.03)</td>
<td>-0.36 (0.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Affiliation → Response</td>
<td>0.06 (0.08)</td>
<td>-0.01 (0.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humor Target x Political Affiliation →</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response</td>
<td>0.21 (0.11)</td>
<td>-0.08 (0.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humor Target x Political Affiliation →</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Social Identity Threat → Response</td>
<td>0.74 (0.09)</td>
<td>-0.60 (0.10)</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paths</th>
<th>95% CI</th>
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<tr>
<td>Humor Target x Political Affiliation →</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social Identity Threat → Response</td>
<td>[0.56, 0.93]</td>
<td>[-0.80, -0.42]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect Effect at two levels of Political Affiliation</td>
<td>[0.24, 0.48]</td>
<td>[-0.41, -0.19]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservatives</td>
<td>[-0.51, -0.26]</td>
<td>[0.19, 0.42]</td>
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<td>Liberals</td>
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Asians (3.1%), 5 Hispanics (5.2%), 6 (6.2%) who self-identified as mixed race and one person who identified as “other.” We randomly assigned participants to one of two conditions with type of humor (sexist, neutral) serving as a between-subjects variable.

Procedure
Participants accessed a link to the study through Mechanical Turk. After completing a consent form and demographic measure they read a brief introduction for the first role play task and then the following instructions:

Please imagine that you are a college student and that you are about to take a class in which you will work closely with and be graded by a graduate student instructor over the course of the semester. You will watch a short video of your instructor, David. The purpose of the video is to familiarize you with David’s personality and teaching style.

The video clip lasted approximately 2 minutes and 20 seconds. In the sexist humor condition, David jokingly made the following sexist quips (depicted in bold font) while discussing his teaching style:

I always start each semester with the same joke, “Intelligence is important if you are going to work in this field. What do you call a woman who has lost 95% of her intelligence? DIVORCED!!” That one always gets a good laugh. I once had a student comment with his own joke on the first day of class that was better than mine! Let’s see if I can remember it, I think it was, “What do you call a woman with two brain cells? Pregnant!” The whole class appreciated that joke. … I believe all of my students can succeed … except for the blonde women- they are better off in the kitchen, where the only math they have to learn are the numbers on the outside of the microwave!”

In the neutral humor condition, we replaced the sexist humorous remarks with non-disparaging ones (depicted in bold font):

I always start each semester with the same joke, “My dog used to chase people on a bike a lot. It got so bad, I finally had to take his bike away.” That one always gets a good laugh. I once had a student comment with his own joke on the first day of class that was better than mine! Let’s see if I can remember it, I think it was, “What did the pirate say on his 80th birthday? Aye Matey,” The whole class appreciated that joke. … I believe all of my students can succeed … even the student who joked, “What’s the stupidest animal in the tropical rainforest? The polar bear!”

To ensure that participants perceived the sexist and neutral humor conditions as we had intended, we recruited 85 pilot participants through Mechanical Turk who did not participate in the study (54 men, 31 women ages 22–72 with a mean age of 36.25, \( SD = 10.78 \)) to respond to the following questions about the instructor’s remarks: “To what extent do you think David intended his remarks to be funny?”, and “To what extent do you think David’s remarks came off as sexist?” Participants responded to each question using a scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely).

We subjected each question to a participant gender x humor type (sexist, neutral) ANOVA. There were no main or interaction effects for perceptions of the instructor’s intentions to be funny. Importantly, the main effect of humor type was not significant, \( F(1, 81) = 1.30, p = .257, \eta_p^2 = .016 \), suggesting that participants did not differentially perceive the instructor as trying to be funny in the sexist humor condition (\( M = 3.95, SD = 1.08 \)) versus the neutral humor condition (\( M = 4.10, SD = 0.89 \)). Finally, regarding how sexist participants
perceived the instructor’s remarks, there was only a main effect of humor type, $F(1, 81) = 113.08, p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .583$. Both men and women perceived the remarks as more sexist in the sexist humor condition ($M = 4.30, SD = 1.11$) than in the neutral humor condition ($M = 1.68, SD = 1.15$).

After watching the video, participants first completed the measure of social identity threat adapted to this role play task: “I anticipate that my instructor might treat me unfairly because of my gender,” “I anticipate that my instructor might think negatively of me because of my gender,” and “My instructor could unintentionally make the class environment uncomfortable for me, as a woman.” As in Experiment 1, participants responded on 5-point scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Cronbach’s alpha for the aggregate measure was .98. Participants then completed the measures of possible selves and social exclusion from Experiment 1. Cronbach’s alpha was .90 and .97 respectively.

**Results**

**Descriptive statistics**

Table 3 presents descriptive statistics for the measures of social identity threat, possible selves and social exclusion collapsed across the type of humor manipulation. As in Experiment 1, the correlations revealed that the measures of the three variables are distinct but strongly related to one another.

**Hypothesis tests**

We tested our hypothesis by subjecting responses on each dependent measure to a one-way ANOVA with type of humor (sexist, neutral) serving as a between-subjects factor. The means on each measure are displayed in Figure 3.

![Diagram](Figure 3. The indirect effect of the humor target manipulation on the measures of possible selves and social exclusion through social identity threat, moderated by political affiliation.)
Supporting our hypothesis and conceptually replicating the findings of Experiment 1, the effect of type of humor was significant for all three dependent variables: social identity threat, $F(1, 95) = 71.77, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .430$, possible selves, $F(1, 95) = 15.35, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .140$, and social exclusion, $F(1, 95) = 50.26, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .346$. Women reported perceiving a greater social identity threat, more negative possible selves and greater social exclusion in the sexist versus neutral humor conditions.

**Mediation analyses**

As in Experiment 1, we tested the role of social identity threat as a mediator of the relationship between the type of humor manipulation and the measures of possible selves and social exclusion in two separate models. We conducted bootstrapping analyses (with 5,000 resamples) using Hayes’ PROCESS macro for SPSS 20.0 (Hayes, 2017, Model, p. 4). Supporting our Hypothesis, there was a significant indirect effect of type of humor on possible selves through social identity threat, $\beta = 0.74, SE = 0.16, CI_{95} = (0.44, 1.05)$. The indirect effect of type of humor on social exclusion through social identity threat also was significant, $\beta = -1.21, SE = 0.19, CI_{95} = (-1.58, -0.85)$. Participants perceived a social identity threat in response to sexist humor resulting in a diminished representation of possible selves and feelings of social exclusion.

**Discussion**

The findings of Experiment 2 supported our hypotheses and conceptually replicated the findings of Experiment 1. In the context of a college class, women experienced a greater threat to their social identity as women – they feared their male instructor would devalue and discriminate against them because of gender – when he made sexist (versus non-sexist) jokes. This social identity threat in turn led women to construct more negative representations of their possible selves and to feel more socially excluded in the context of their class.

**General discussion**

Two experiments converge to make the novel discovery that disparagement humor targeting one’s in-group triggers a social identity threat resulting in a diminished representation of one’s possible self and feelings of social exclusion. In Experiment 1 we found that, when others in a workplace engage in humor disparaging one’s political in-group, conservatives and liberals experienced a social identity threat – they feared others would devalue and discriminate against them because of their political affiliation. As a result, they constructed more negative representations of their possible selves and felt socially excluded. Similarly, in Experiment 2, women perceived a greater threat to their gender identity in the context of a college class when their male instructor made sexist jokes; they feared he would devalue and discriminate against them based on gender. This, in turn, led women to construct more negative representations of their possible selves and to feel socially excluded in the context of their class.

The present research contributes to the literature on disparagement humor by identifying different ways that it represents a source of distress and challenge for its targets. A diminished representation of self can have a significant effect on behavior (e.g., Anderman, Anderman, & Griesinger, 1999; Oyserman, Gant, & Ager, 1995;
Oyserman & Markus, 1990). Anderman et al. (1999), for instance, demonstrated that students’ representations of possible selves (positive versus negative) affects academic performance, effort and motivation. They found that students with a positive, academic possible self (i.e., described themselves as “good students”) exhibited greater academic improvement throughout a school year compared to those with a negative, academic possible self. Another line of work on self-efficacy, people’s judgments about their ability to accomplish a given task (Bandura, 1988), has also shown that one’s view of self in a given setting predicts performance on a variety of cognitive and physical tasks (Bandura, 1988; Maddux, 1995; Schunk, 1989). It follows that, by triggering a diminished view of one’s potential in a given setting, in-group disparagement humor could undermine performance on a wide variety of tasks. Also, as mentioned earlier, social exclusion has a profound impact on subjective well-being, resulting in pain, loss of control and lower self-esteem (e.g., Eisenberger, Lieberman, & Williams, 2003, Wesselmann et al.,). Thus, by inducing social exclusion, in-group disparagement humor might have a detrimental impact on one’s subjective well-being.

Collectively, the present experiments illuminate new social psychological consequences of disparagement humor, in general. Individually, they also have implications for understanding how sexist humor and political humor, in particular, might function in social interaction. The findings of Experiment 1 contribute to a growing body of research on the consequences of political humor. There is mounting evidence that, unless it is misunderstood, political humor, like that featured on late-night comedy shows, can have “message-consistent” effects on people’s political attitudes (Baumgartner, 2013). For instance, watching late-night political humor can negatively affect attitudes toward presidential candidates (e.g., Baumgartner, 2007, 2008; Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Becker, 2012; Morris, 2009; Young, 2004), foster a cynical view of political institutions more generally (Baumgartner, 2013; Baumgartner & Morris, 2008; Hart & Hartelius, 2007), and reduce tolerance of partisan views different from one’s own (Stroud & Muddiman, 2013). For a review, see O’Connor (2017). The findings of Experiment 1 add to this literature suggesting that political humor can have divisive consequences in social interaction, negatively affecting how people view themselves in relation to others in the immediate social context.

The findings of Experiment 2, that sexist humor undermines women’s view of themselves, has far-reaching implications for women, particularly in the workplace where sexist jokes and teasing (like our female colleague experienced in a faculty meeting) are the most commonly experienced types of sexual harassment (e.g., Fitzgerald, Weitzman, Gold, & Ormerod, 1988; Gruber & Bjorn, 1986; Pryor, 1995). The findings of Experiment 2 suggest that women in the workplace might be frequently burdened by social identity threats from sexist humor that make work-related tasks and relationships more difficult and stressful.

By demonstrating that in-group disparaging humor trigger social exclusion and diminished possible selves, the present experiments inspire questions for future research about other ways people might experience social identity threat in response to disparagement humor. For instance, stereotype threat is a form of social identity threat induced by an expectation that people might judge a person according to negative stereotypes about their social group (Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Steele et al., 2002). It can be stressful enough to impair performance on tasks for which one’s group is
negatively stereotyped (see Schmader, Johns, & Forbes, 2008; Steele et al., 2002 for reviews). Thus, it is possible that in-group disparagement humor could impair people’s performance on tasks for which they are negatively stereotyped. Future research could test this possibility using the paradigm established in the present studies by adding a measure of performance on a task for which people are stereotypically expected to do poorly or not.

**Limitations**

Although the findings of our experiments make important contributions, they do have limitations. First, the experimental manipulations and dependent measures occurred in imaginary social settings. Asking participants to anticipate how they would respond to in-group disparagement humor might be problematic considering that cues surrounding how the humor is delivered and experienced by others could be critical in determining how one perceives it. Thus, future research could extend our findings by considering the effect of disparagement humor on people’s actual emotional and behavioral responses in real social interactions.

Second, the disparagement humor in the scenarios for both experiments was rather direct and blatantly disparaging. Thus, it is not clear from our studies, whether more subtle forms of disparagement humor (like that experienced by the female faculty member in our illustration at the beginning of the paper) would also induce social identity threat resulting in feelings of social exclusion and diminished possible selves. Although future research is required to address this question directly, previous research suggests that the effects would not be limited to blatant forms of disparagement humor. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, subtle social cues can trigger social identity threat (e.g., Adams et al., 2006; Inzlicht & Ben-Zeev, 2000; Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2008). Furthermore, subtle acts such as an averted eye gaze and facial expressions influence feelings of social exclusion (Leng, Zhu, Ge, Qian, & Zhang, McCredie & Morey, 2018).

Finally, in the role play scenarios of both experiments, a person in a relational position of power (supervisor in Experiment 1, teaching assistant in Experiment 2) initiated disparagement humor. Thus, it is possible that participants reported diminished possible selves, and social exclusion, not simply because disparagement humor induced a social identity threat, but rather because they felt their supervisor or TA used their status intentionally to intimidate or bully them. According to this explanation, disparagement humor was incidental, not instrumental in inducing social exclusion and diminishing possible selves. The key factor was the supervisor’s or TA’s intentional use of power to bully participants. Future research that manipulates the status of the humorist is necessary to directly test this possibility.

**Conclusion**

A growing body of work has begun to raise a “warning flag” showing that instances of disparagement humor are more than benign amusement or horseplay (e.g., Ford & Ferguson, 2004; Romero-Sánchez, Durán, Carretero-Dios, Megías, & Moya, 2010; Thomae & Pina, 2015; Thomae & Viki, 2013). Our research adds to this warning by addressing the social psychological consequences of disparagement humor from the
target’s perspective. Two experiments demonstrated that it can have detrimental effects on the way people view themselves in relation to others in the immediate social context.

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**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

**References**


