

2015

Stand-Up Comedy and Self-deprecating Humor

Amelia M. Bell

Virginia Commonwealth University, bellam5@vcu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/uresponse>

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

© The Author(s)

Downloaded from

Bell, Amelia M., "Stand-Up Comedy and Self-deprecating Humor" (2015). *Undergraduate Research Posters*. Poster 134.
<http://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/uresponse/134>

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program at VCU Scholars Compass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Research Posters by an authorized administrator of VCU Scholars Compass. For more information, please contact libcompass@vcu.edu.



Stand-Up Comedy and Self-Deprecating Humor

Amelia Bell, Mentored by Jessica Gordon

Introduction

Self-deprecating humor is a form of humor where the comedian pokes fun at his or herself, and it has recently become more incredibly popular in today's society. Stand-up comedians like Louis C.K. have risen to newfound popularity by using self-deprecating humor almost completely in their sets. I am investigating the question of why audiences respond so positively to stand-up comedians who use self-deprecating humor. I have found that there are several reasons for this, including how self-deprecation is trending in other aspects of society and how self-deprecating humor rises and falls in popularity but always remain present in American humor. However the audience also feels more comfortable laughing directly at the comedian than at a certain demographic or minority, and although it is the comedian's performance, by using self-deprecating humor, the comedian relinquishes some of his/her authority and power on stage to the audience because the audience has the power to decide whether to participate by laughing.

Psychologically

Self-deprecating humor has been found to have several psychological effects on the audience:

- The audience feels more comfortable with self-deprecating humor than say a racist or some other offensive joke.
- The audience may feel less threatened by the self-deprecating humor because it is solely directed at the comedian.
- The comedian creates a emotional/psychological connection with the audience members who have had similar situations as the comedian.
- The comedian's use of ethos, pathos, logos, and kairos to retain the audience's attention and participation.
- The comedian has to relinquish a certain amount of power to the audience, because the audience gets to make the decision to participate or not.
- The audience is conditioned by pop culture to like self-deprecating humor and thus find it comfortable to have a comedian to use the same technique.

Historically

Jesters in medieval courts would make fun of themselves to amuse kings and queens.

-Fast forward a few centuries to 1955 and Phyllis Diller is popularizing what we know today as self-deprecating humor through her stand-up comedy on being a woman.



- Comedians like Louis C.K. now come immediately to mind nowadays when mentioning self-deprecating humor (hence the background picture of this poster).

- There are other comedians, less famous than Louis C.K., like Mike Birbiglia, Conan O'Brian, etc. who also use self-deprecating humor extensively.

So What?

Why does all of this matter? Well:

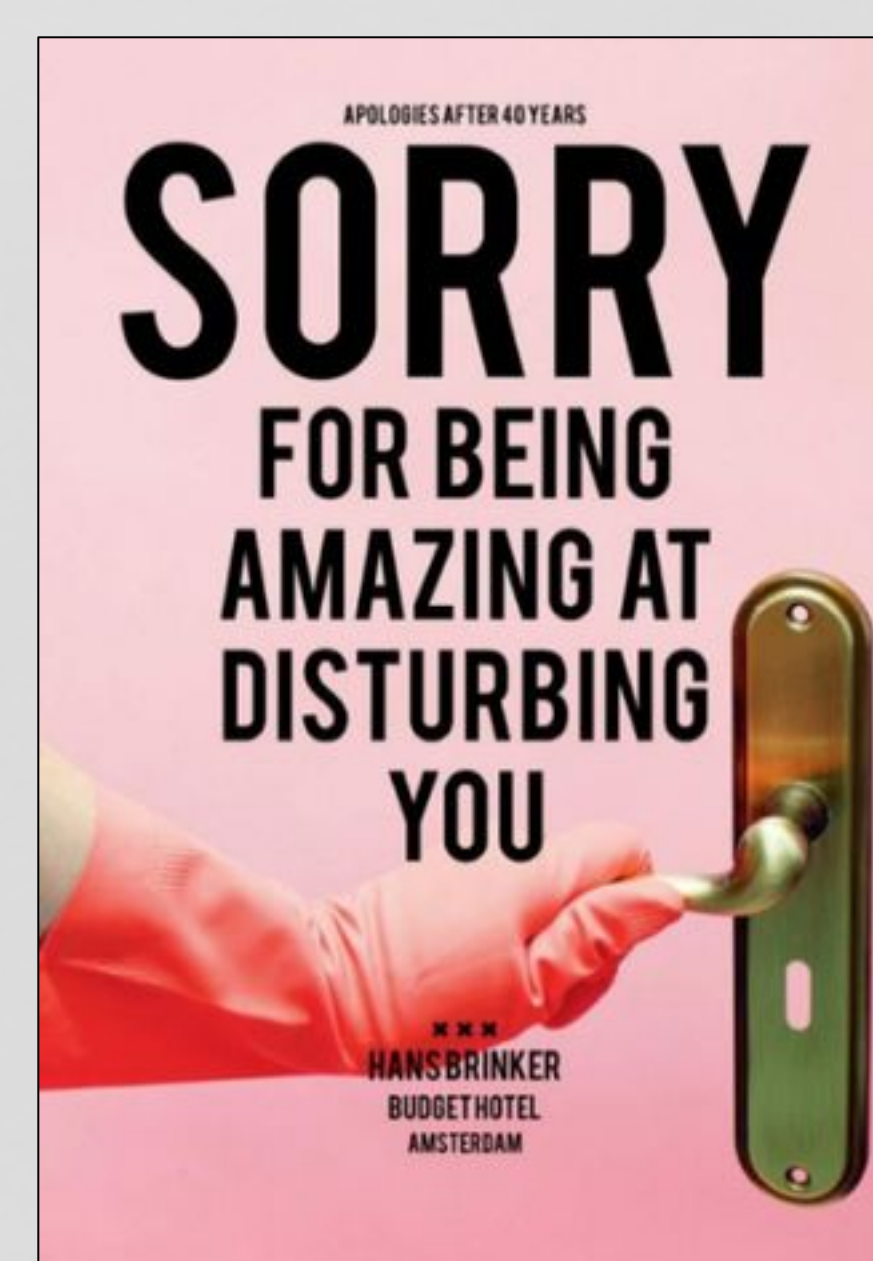
- Self-deprecating humor may be funny but it degrades the fact that these stereotypes the comedians are making fun of still exist. These stereotypes are not challenged by the humor, they are secretly perpetuated through the humor. Although the humor is not as upfront as racist and offensive jokes, in reality the self-deprecating humor is just making it easier for the audience just to accept the stereotype as fact.
- This rise in popularity of self-deprecation may reflect a serious psychological shift inside our minds. Seeing self-deprecating humor in ads, movies, TV shows, and comics has conditioned us mentally, we need to be aware of these trends and how it affects us psychologically.

To be clear: I am not saying we cannot enjoy self-deprecating humor or any humor for that matter, I am just saying we need to become aware of the effects of these jokes being made.

Trending

Self-deprecating humor can be found in several other fields, including...

- Ads
- Movies
- TV Shows
- Comics
- Everyday Conversation



List of References:

Andeweg, B. & Gagstein, S. & de Jong, I. & Wackers, M. (2011). "Poke fun at yourself": the problem of self-deprecating humor. *SEFZ Conference Global Engineering Recognition, Sustainability and Mobility*, 759-764. <http://www.sefz.be/wp-content/papers/2011/714/19.pdf>

Greenbaum, A. (1999). Stand-up comedy as rhetorical argument: An investigation of comic culture. *Humor*, 12, pp. 33-46. <http://www.jallegrenonmorin.com/media/files/stand-up-comedy-as-rhetorical-argument-an-investigation-of-comic-culture.pdf>

Greenberg, G. & Martin, R.A. & Miller, G. (2012). Personality traits, intelligence, humor styles, and humor production ability of professional stand-up comedians compared to college students. *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*, 6, 74-82. doi:10.1037/a0025774

Jones, L.M. & Olson, J.M. (2010). Is it you or is it me? Contrasting effects of ridicule targeting other people versus the self. *European Journal of Psychology*, 6, 46-70. <http://ejop.psychopen.eu/index.php/ejop>

Mintz, L.E. (2013). *American humour and the spirit of the times*. In A. J. Chapman, & H. C. Foot (Eds.), *It's a Funny Thing: Humour: Proceedings of The International Conference on Humour and Laughter 1976* (pp.17-21). Elmsford, NY: Pergamon Press, Inc.

Restak, R. (2013). Laughter and the brain. *The American Scholar*, 82, pp.18-27. <http://movieweattle.it/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/The-American-Scholar-Laughter-and-the-Brain-Richard-Restak.pdf>

Russell, D. (2007). Self-deprecatory humour and the female comic: self-destruction or comedic construction?. *Thirdspace: A Journal of Feminist Theory & Culture*, 2. <http://journal-01.ca/thirdspace/index.php/journal/index>

Acknowledgements:

I would like to thank my UNIV 200 teacher, Jessica Gordon for recommending I apply to be a part of this Symposium. I'd also like to thank all the stand-up comedians out there for keeping the world a humorous place.