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Apples versus oranges, normative claims, and other things we did not mention: a response to Purser and Harper (2023)

Abstract: In a previous article, we observed that system justification was positively associated with the appreciation of humor targeting low-status groups (Baltiansky, Craig, & Jost, 2021). We are pleased to learn that other researchers took interest in our study, reanalyzing the data set we made publicly available and writing a commentary. We are also pleased that, using Bayesian statistical analyses, Purser and Harper (2023) reached the same conclusion we did based on frequentist analyses, namely that low system-justifiers found jokes targeting low-status groups to be less funny than high system-justifiers did. However, we object to the commentators' use of value-laden language in characterizing the pattern of results and to several unsubstantiated insinuations and allegations of an ideological nature that they make about our motives and opinions about "cancel culture" and the deplatforming of professional comedians.

1 Introduction

Question: Why are "dumb blonde" jokes so short?
Answer: So men can remember them.

Baltiansky et al. (2021) published a study showing that individual differences in general system justification predicted humor ratings of stereotypical jokes made at the expense of high-(vs. low-) status groups. Our major conclusion was that high

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system-justifiers found jokes targeting low-status groups (such as women, poor people, and racial/ethnic minorities) to be funnier than low system-justifiers did (see pp. 375, 385, and 386 of Baltiansky et al. 2021). We are pleased that Purser and Harper (2023) were sufficiently interested in our study to dig more deeply into the data that we made publicly available and to write a commentary on our original article. Having read their piece, we are a bit perplexed as to why Purser and Harper (2023) felt it necessary to publish their re-analyses of our data, for they appear to have reached the same general conclusion we did, although they prefer to frame the effect of system justification in the opposite direction than we did. That is, their primary conclusion is that low system-justifiers found jokes targeting low-status groups (e.g., women, poor people, racial/ethnic minorities) to be less funny than high system-justifiers did.

Astute readers will realize that their conclusion is logically identical to ours. Purser and Harper (2023) defend their switch of frame based on the results of additional tests, which suggested that, among other things, low system-justifiers may have differed more than high system-justifiers in how funny they found jokes that "punch down" (vs. "punch up"). While this is an interesting empirical question, as we describe in more detail below, our study design was not intended to test these comparisons neatly. Therefore, the results of our study cannot sustain the strong conclusions that Purser and Harper reach.

Moreover, Purser and Harper (2023) take the opportunity provided generously by HUMOR: International Journal of Humor Research to make a few ideological points that they seem to think follow from their inversion of our conclusion. We disagree that these points do indeed follow from their re-analysis. We are also concerned about the ways in which they mischaracterize what we wrote; ironically, given their insinuations about ideological bias, these mischaracterizations may belie their own ideological motivations. For example, while it is true that we duly noted (as a logical consequence of our findings) that regular disparagement of low-status groups could serve to perpetuate an unequal status quo, we did not make claims that it was either "good" or "bad" to laugh at high-status or low-status groups in general and did not ascribe "malevolence" to high system-justifiers, as Purser and Harper (2023, p. 7) imply. For the purposes of this response, however, we will refrain from speculating about other social scientists' motivations and focus instead on the substance of their reanalysis and the (in) appropriateness of the conclusions drawn.

2 Did we hypothesize a "cross-over" interaction pattern?

Purser and Harper (2023) suggest that we hypothesized a "cross-over interaction" such that (a) high system-justifiers would prefer jokes targeting low-status groups over those targeting high-status groups, whereas (b) low system-justifiers would prefer jokes targeting high-status groups over those targeting low-status groups. We did not use this language at all in laying out our hypotheses. As stated on pp. 378 and 380 of our original article, we investigated two simple main effect hypotheses, namely that (c) system justification (measured as a continuous variable) would be positively associated with enjoyment of jokes targeting low-status groups (H1), and (d) system justification (measured as a continuous variable) would be negatively associated with enjoyment of jokes targeting high-status groups (H2; see Baltiansky et al. 2021).

We can see, however, why Purser and Harper derived a crossover prediction based on our general theoretical logic.[1] Low system-justifiers may not only find "dumb blonde" jokes less funny than high system-justifiers do; it is also possible that they would rather make fun of sexist men than "dumb blondes." The main problem is that it would only be appropriate to test the cross-over hypothesis in an experimental setting if the jokes targeting high-status versus low-status groups were in all other respects identical (or, at minimum, identically funny). This was not the case in our study, because we were not attempting to test the cross-over hypothesis. Rather, we selected different jokes targeting high-status and low-status groups, in accordance with the assumption that the context of social status differences between groups is relevant to how funny the joke (as constructed) actually is (in reality). As a result, testing the hypothesis that low system-justifiers would prefer jokes that target high-status groups over those that target low-status groups (and vice versa for high system-justifiers) would require comparing ratings of qualitatively different jokes (which were not matched on perceived funniness or anything else)— basically, apples and oranges.

Indeed, there is reason to think that the jokes targeting high-versus low-status groups were not equivalently funny, for we obtained a significant main effect (in addition to the interaction effect) in our study. In general, participants rated jokes classified as targeting high-status groups as funnier than jokes targeting low-status

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1 Although it is beyond the scope of this reply, Rosnow and Rosenthal (1989) argued that every interaction effect is in fact a "cross-over" interaction—if one statistically removes all main effects from the model. From this perspective, Purser and Harper (2023) are correct that the logic of our interaction hypothesis matches the cross-over pattern (if we ignore or correct for the main effect of target group status), but this statement would then apply to all interaction hypotheses, not just ours.

groups (Baltiansky et al. 2021, p. 385). At this point, we do not know if these differences are unique to the (non-random) sample of jokes we selected or the (non-random) sample of participants in our study—or if it is generally true that most people prefer to laugh at the hoi oligoi than the hoi polloi.

This should explain why we focused our analysis on comparing apples to apples and oranges to oranges. That is, we investigated the effect of system justification on the perceived funniness of the same set of jokes targeting low-status groups (H1), and the effect of system justification on the perceived funniness of the same set of jokes targeting high-status groups (H2). We obtained consistent support for (H1) but not (H2), as stated clearly on p. 385 of Baltiansky et al. (2021). This is precisely what Purser and Harper's (2023) re-analyses indicate as well. Thus, we are not in dispute about the fundamental pattern of results produced by our study.

However, we do dispute their repeated characterization of our analysis as "misleading" and subject to "potential biases." We simply felt that it was more appropriate to confine our comparisons of apples to apples and oranges to oranges rather than testing the "cross-over" interaction hypothesis that Purser and Harper ascribe to us. This is because the latter hypothesis—in the context of our methods and procedures—would have required us to compare apples to oranges. If our commentators feel confident drawing such comparisons, they are welcome to do so, as imprudent as we think it is.

3 Inappropriate normative conclusions drawn on the basis of Purser and Harper's (2023) statistical re-analyses

We are, sadly, not experts in Bayesian statistics, so perhaps we are not in the best position to judge whether Purser and Harper (2023) have contributed anything important to the discussion of our research program by including this alternative analytic strategy in their commentary. Our general sense is that they reached precisely the same conclusions that we reached above, namely that "individuals who scored with a high system justification motivation found jokes made at the expense of low-status groups to be funnier than did individuals who scored lower on system justification" (p. 7).

We do have a few concerns about the decisions they made in conducting their analyses. First, by dichotomizing levels of system justification, which we measured as a continuous variable, Purser and Harper (2023) are clearly losing information and measurement precision. Second, if our commentators are interested in making

claims about people who are high or low in system justification in an absolute sense (which is not something that we sought or attempted to do), then it would be more appropriate to compare those who are in strong agreement or disagreement with system-justifying statements, rather creating high- and low-justifying groups that are primarily comprised of people who are close to the middle of the scale (see Purser and Harper 2023, Figure 2).

It is also notable that—despite Purser and Harper's (2023, p. 7) claims—we did not attempt to draw "group-based" categorical inferences about the respondents. Rather, we considered the possibility that reactions to stereotypical jokes targeting groups of different social status would covary with individual differences in system justification (see Baltiansky et al. 2021, p. 386). We did not seek to draw qualitatively different conclusions about high and low system-justifiers as discrete categories of people, as our critics claim (p. 7). We are not, for that matter, essentialists about high and low system-justifiers as groups. Rather, we used the shorthand of "high system-justifiers" and "low system-justifiers" simply as a heuristic to distinguish between people who scored higher versus lower on a continuous dimension (see also Jost 2020).

Another problem is that Purser and Harper seem to assume that whichever "group" deviates the most from the central tendency is wrong about what is funny, but this does not follow logically. For instance, they write:

> Importantly for these reanalyses, the association between system justification motives and judgments of jokes about low-status groups might primarily be down to the very highest system justifiers finding these jokes hilarious, with everyone else rating them around the middle of the funniness scale. Alternatively, everyone in the sample might have rated them as being averagely funny, except the very lowest system justifiers who rated them very unfunny. The group-based inferences that follow from these two scenarios are, obviously, very different. That is, the framing of conclusions in the first case might legitimately be rooted in the apparent malevolence of high system justifiers, while the second case might speak to a degree of sensitivity among low system justifiers (p. 7, emphasis added).

Malevolence? This is not a word that showed up in our original article, and for good reason. No conclusions about malevolence can be drawn based on our study (or the re-analyses provided by Purser and Harper). We have no objection to the interpretation that people who are lower in system justification are more "sensitive" than those higher in system justification to disparagement humor targeting low-status groups. However, our study cannot speak to whether this "sensitivity" should be thought of in favorable terms (such as appropriately acknowledging the mean-spirited abuse of power) or unfavorable terms (such as seeing social harms where none exist at all).

A bigger problem is that Purser and Harper (2023) mischaracterize our argument in several ways, tossing in evaluative qualifiers that do not appear in our own published work:

> Baltiansky et al. (2021) argued that the data reflect a tendency among high system justifiers to find disparaging jokes about low-status groups excessively funny, comparative to low system justifiers. Although this is an accurate portrayal of the relationship between system justification and judgments of the funniness of these jokes, the framing of this argument is misleading. The direction of this regression gradient, as we have shown via Bayesian analyses of the relationship within high and low system justifier groups, was driven not by exaggerated funniness judgments among high system justifiers, but by exaggerated judgments of their lack of funniness among low system justifiers (p. 10, emphasis added).

We appreciate our critics' acknowledgement of the fact that we provided an "accurate portrayal of the relationship between system justification and judgments of the funniness of these jokes," because this was the major goal of our article. However, their insertion of value-laden language such as "malevolence," "excessively," and "exaggerated" is extremely problematic, and Purser and Harper end up committing the very same infractions that they falsely ascribe to us. The passage above portrays low system-justifiers as overly sensitive individuals who are unable or unwilling to take a joke. Such an interpretation goes well beyond the scope of our study and, ironically, shows that Purser and Harper (2023) are the ones seeking to draw unwarranted conclusions of a normative nature.

4 Our research neither legitimizes nor delegitimizes "cancel culture"

Purser and Harper (2023) worry explicitly about an "overtly politically correct culture … driven by leftist concerns about offending historically low status groups" (p. 3). They go on to write:

> A logical extension of Baltiansky et al.'s (2021) work, on the basis of their hypotheses, would be that the ideologically motivated nature of humor perception may be intricately tied to judgments of offensiveness, with the claim of 'this comedian is not funny' being used at face value as a legitimate reason to remove a platform, in cases where humor targeting historically marginalised groups might otherwise be defended on the basis of it being satirical or otherwise intended nonliterally (p. 3, emphasis added).

Now, this is overreaching and plainly false. Our research simply does not speak to normative questions about whether deplatforming is "legitimate" or, normatively desirable. Our work provides empirical data that might help to explain why low

system-justifiers do not find certain kinds of disparagement humor to be funny, but this has no logical implications whatsoever for whether specific comedians do or do not deserve to perform in public. If Purser and Harper want to conclude that low system-justifiers should find jokes targeting low-status groups to be funny, that is certainly their prerogative. In this case, however, they would be drawing inappropriate normative conclusions based on purely descriptive results.

Likewise, Purser and Harper accuse us of "a potential bias in painting those who [are high] on the system justification motive… in a bad light" (p. 5), but this, too, is based on a misreading of our work. Although we believe it is true that system justification can produce several lamentable social consequences, such as victim-blaming, denial or downplaying of social assumptions about which jokes in our sample people should (or should not) find funny. Strangely, however, Purser and Harper go out on a limb to suggest that low system-justifiers ought to be chided, merely because they appear to be "driving" the effect and "most of the activity in relation to altered perceptions of joke funniness [was] found among those who score low on the system justification motivation (who are typically ideologically liberal)" (p. 5, emphasis added).

5 Concluding remarks

Purser and Harper (2023) close their commentary by claiming, quite falsely and without a shred of evidence, that we sought to "pathologize" political conservatism and "valorize" ideological progressivism (p. 14). In the same breath, Purser and Harper warn us about "the need for caution when interpreting such data in the area of political psychology" (p. 11). If they had taken their own advice and remained cautious, they might have eschewed value-laden language such as "excessively," "exaggerated," and "malevolence"—words we simply did not use—when describing what people find funny. And if they had been more cautious, they certainly would not have made baseless assumptions about our personal opinions concerning "cancel culture" and the deplatforming of comedians. Finally—as a note to the field as a whole—we would like to offer one final remark. Rather than spending time and energy on efforts to "expose" liberal bias in academia through name-calling and insinuation, we call on scholars in the social sciences to conduct theory-driven research that will advance solutions to the very real social problems that many people in contemporary societies are facing. We submit that this, rather than ideological innuendo, is what researchers owe the general public.

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Bionotes

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