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Moral judgment of disparagement humor

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Abstract: The aim of the present study was to analyze the link between the five moral codes proposed in the Moral Foundations Theory and moral judgment of disparagement humor. We presented racist, sexist, homophobic, religion-disparaging and neutral jokes to a group of 108 participants, asking them whether they found laughing at a particular joke moral or immoral. Additionally, participants rated the level of amusement and disgust evoked by each joke. We also measured participants' moral foundations profiles (Care, Fairness, Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity). The results confirmed that Care and Fairness were significantly linked to moral judgment of racist, sexist and homophobic jokes, whereas Loyalty, Authority and Sanctity were associated with moral judgment of religion-disparaging jokes. Moreover, these relationships were mediated by emotional responses of amusement and disgust (except for racist jokes, for which we observed no mediating role of amusement).

Keywords: disparagement humor, Moral Foundations Theory, moral judgment, amusement, disgust

1 Introduction

Disparagement humor elicits amusement through the denigration, derogation, humiliation, victimization, or belittlement of individuals, social groups or ideologies (Ferguson and Ford 2008; Zillmann 1983). Typical examples of such humor can be found in sexist, racist and anti-gay (homophobic) jokes (e.g. Ford and Ferguson 2004; Kochersberger et al. 2014; O'Connor et al. 2017).

The use of disparagement humor is often justified by the simple “only joking” catchphrase (Johnson 1990), and is therefore not perceived as a wrongdoing. Studies suggest, however, that telling jokes that disparage a certain social group

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can cause the formation of negative attitudes (Hobden and Olson 1994), reinforce stereotypes (Maio et al. 1997), or even facilitate and normalize prejudice and harassment towards that group (Ford and Ferguson 2004; Woodzicka and Ford 2010). Moreover, although humor is primarily expected to amuse, disparagement humor goes beyond amusement and adds in feelings of embarrassment, disgust, guilt, anger, or frustration (Ferguson and Ford 2008). This emotional ambivalence could stem from the fact that some people may perceive disparagement jokes as *immoral*, that is, hostile, hurtful, and threatening to social life.

2 Moral Foundations Theory

People vary greatly in what they consider right or wrong, as proposed by the Moral Foundations Theory (MFT), which is best known for explaining moral disagreements across the political spectrum (see Graham et al. 2009). The theory was introduced by Haidt and his colleagues (Haidt and Graham 2007; Graham et al. 2013) and has been gaining popularity among psychologists interested in morality ever since. The MFT holds that there are at least five different foundations of morality. These foundations are: Care, Fairness, Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity. The foundation of *Care* is triggered by compassion for those who experience distress and suffering. *Fairness* emphasizes the need for cooperation, reciprocal interactions, equality, and social justice; it also increases sensitivity to cheating and unfairness. The *Loyalty* foundation is expressed through valuing, trusting, and making sacrifices for one's own group (the betrayal of which is particularly despised), while distrusting and competing with the outgroup. *Authority* refers to obeying and respecting hierarchies, while questioning hierarchies is viewed as antisocial. Finally, the *Sanctity* foundation is triggered by the feeling of disgust, which helps people recognize all that is contaminated and impure, not only in physical, but also religious and spiritual senses (Graham et al. 2013; Haidt and Graham 2007). Care and Fairness are referred to as the *individualizing foundations* and are often linked to liberal political views, whereas Authority, Loyalty, and Sanctity are called the *binding foundations* and are typically endorsed by conservatives (Haidt and Graham 2007; Graham et al. 2009).¹

¹ Although the liberal-conservative dichotomy may not work the same for all countries (e.g. economic and cultural aspects of these views might be mutually exclusive; Czarnek et al. 2017),

According to Saroglou (2014), humor violates all five major foundations proposed by the MFT. For instance, *Care* might be threatened by hostile humor, *Loyalty* and *Authority* – by rebellious humor, and *Sanctity* – by joking in a disgusting, sexual, or blasphemous manner. Saroglou also suggests that humor can trigger the foundation of *Fairness* because it violates the common rules of human communication. Yet, despite the apparent logic of these ideas, prior studies neglected possible links between the MFT and various types of disparagement humor. To the best of our knowledge, the only exception is the study by Kruschke and Vollmer (2014) which provided some initial evidence for the link between people's moral foundations profile and the perceived funniness of jokes targeting these foundations. The study's main focus was to test the Benign-Violation theory (McGraw and Warren 2010), which explains the circumstances under which moral violations (e.g. selling one's virginity on eBay in order to pay off family debts) are seen as humorous. One of the implications of the theory is that funniness is an inverted U-function of perceived severity of a certain violation (McGraw et al. 2012). Put differently, for the jokes to be funny, their severity should be neither too strong (because too much threat impedes laughter) nor too mild (because too little threat means the joke is no longer seen as a violation). In Kruschke and Vollmer's study, people's five moral foundations served as the indicators of people's perceived severity of violations of those moral foundations. Therefore, prior to rating the funniness and aversiveness of 25 jokes targeting different moral foundations, participants completed the Moral Foundations Questionnaire (Graham et al. 2011). The results supported the inverted U-shaped relationship between the funniness of a joke and people's moral sensitivity. They also showed that aversiveness ratings of jokes targeting specific moral foundations increased with people's sensitivity to these foundations. According to Kruschke and Vollmer, this suggests that moral psychology and humor share a common ground because people's moral foundations can be reflected in their sense of humor. In other words, the judgment of whether a particular joke is funny or aversive seems to be a moral one.

they seem to share the same core elements. For instance, conservatism, defined as an opposition to change and acceptance of social inequality (Jost et al. 2003), is usually linked to xenophobia, homophobia and traditional views on family and women's role in society (Holubec and Rae 2010). The universality of the liberal-conservative dimension may also be visible in shared moral foundation profiles of Polish and American liberals and conservatives (Macko 2012).

3 Emotions and moral judgments

For many years, it was believed that making moral judgments is mostly a cognitive process based on reasoning and reflection (e.g. Kohlberg 1973). As an alternative, Haidt (2001) proposed a Social Intuitionist Model (SIM) which holds that moral judgment is reached through quick, automatic evaluations (intuitions) of a social, cultural, and evolutionary origin and is often accompanied by emotions that directly cause and shape it. According to the SIM, reasoning is just a post hoc construction that follows the formation of the judgment. Greene and Haidt (2002) compare moral judgment to an aesthetic one – our approval or disapproval of a certain thing comes naturally, effortlessly and instantly. People are therefore more likely to justify actions and judgments after they happened, rather than deliberately and reasonably seek for answers to their moral dilemmas. For instance, people asked to reach a judgment on a brother and a sister engaging in incest are mostly driven by an overwhelming disgust and the intuitive feeling of “wrongness” of the act – even if it is stated that no child would be conceived from the intercourse and that the siblings fully accept and enjoy it without guilt or distress (Haidt 2001). This indicates that moral judgments are based on emotions. The most prototypical examples of such *moral emotions* are anger, elevation, guilt and compassion. Less prototypical, but also mentioned examples are gratitude, shame, embarrassment, disgust and contempt (Haidt 2003).

4 Moral foundations and types of disparagement humor

Disparagement humor appears, by definition, as a rather homogenous category. However, as the jokes may target different social groups, it is possible to distinct subtypes of disparagement humor, e.g. homophobic/anti-gay (O'Connor et al. 2017), racist (Cundall 2012), sexist (LaFrance and Woodzicka 1998; Kochersberger et al. 2014), or blasphemous/anti-religious (Saroglou 2014; Schweizer and Ott 2016). These subtypes seem to be differently related to moral foundations because the use of the five moral codes and one's attitude towards various social groups are linked. For instance, people who score higher on the binding foundations (Loyalty, Authority and Sanctity) tend to be less accepting of homosexuals, while those who lean towards the individualizing foundations (Care and Fairness) report lower homonegativity (Rosik et al. 2013). Moreover, the endorsement of the

Sanctity foundation is a particularly strong predictor of disapproval for same-sex relationships and same-sex marriage (Koleva et al. 2012). Moral foundations have also been examined in relation to racist tendencies. Loyalty, Authority and Sanctity have been found to be positively associated with outgroup hostility and support for discrimination (specifically against Muslims, foreigners, and immigrants), whereas Care and Fairness have been shown to be negatively linked to xenophobic attitudes (Kugler et al. 2014). Studies also point to the roles of Authority and Fairness in determining sexist behaviors and beliefs – while the former is positively related to gender inequality and male domination over women, the latter is negatively associated with sexist attitudes (Vecina and Piñuela 2017). Finally, religious views are particularly intertwined with the binding foundations of Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity, which establish the so-called “religious morality” and bind religious people into “moral communities,” based on these three foundations (Graham and Haidt 2010, see also LaBouff et al. 2017). Specifically, members of these communities are expected to comply with certain moral obligations that correspond to each of the binding foundations. These obligations include (1) showing loyalty for the religious ingroup, as well as helping and trusting co-practitioners (Loyalty foundation); (2) paying respect to authority figures and religious institutions that are of special importance to the ingroup (Authority foundation); (3) maintaining purity of the ingroup through food, clothing, or sexual restrictions (Sanctity foundation). Previous research also suggests that Sanctity is linked to the endorsement of banning blasphemous artworks (Dunkel and Hillard 2014).

Taken together, moral foundations seem to reflect people’s political orientation and attitudes towards social groups, concepts and ideologies. Thus, disparagement humor and its potential to generate controversy and normalize prejudice and intolerance (Ford and Ferguson 2004) might correspond to different moral foundations, especially when treated as a heterogeneous concept. Accordingly, people’s reactions towards the aforementioned subtypes of disparagement humor can be predicted based on their moral foundations profiles. Specifically, the individualizing foundations of Care and Fairness seem to promote negative reactions to sexist, racist, and homophobic jokes, whereas the binding foundations of Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity seem to promote negative reactions to religion-disparaging jokes (which might be seen as an attack not only on one’s established set of values but also on one’s religious ingroup).

In summary, even though humor is rarely mentioned in relation to psychology of morality (Kruschke and Vollmer 2014), these two areas are inextricably intertwined. Moreover, previous research indirectly suggests that people’s emotional responses to various types of disparagement humor may explain the link between moral foundations and moral judgments. The aim of the current study was thus to provide more direct evidence for this claim.

5 The present study

In the present study we addressed the link between the five moral codes proposed in the MFT (Haidt and Joseph 2004; Haidt and Graham 2007; Graham et al. 2013) and the moral judgement of disparagement humor (“morality of laughing” at various types of disparaging jokes). Our study provides an important extension of Kruschke and Vollmer’s (2014) research because instead of targeting specific moral foundations, we exposed participants to four different types of disparagement humor, which were carefully selected from a large pool of jokes. This enabled us to test our predictions in relation to four separate categories of disparaging humor.

Based on Haidt’s (2001) Social Intuitionist Model, which underlines the role of moral emotions and intuitions in moral reasoning, we tested whether amusement and disgust could act as “moral emotions” and thus influence the perceived “immorality” of disparaging jokes. Following the reasoning outlined above, we hypothesized that the assessed morality of laughing at a particular joke would depend on one’s moral foundations and that this relationship would be mediated by the emotional response evoked by disparagement humor (see Figure 1). We also predicted that sexist, racist, and homophobic jokes would most likely trigger the “liberal” foundations (Care and Fairness), whereas the

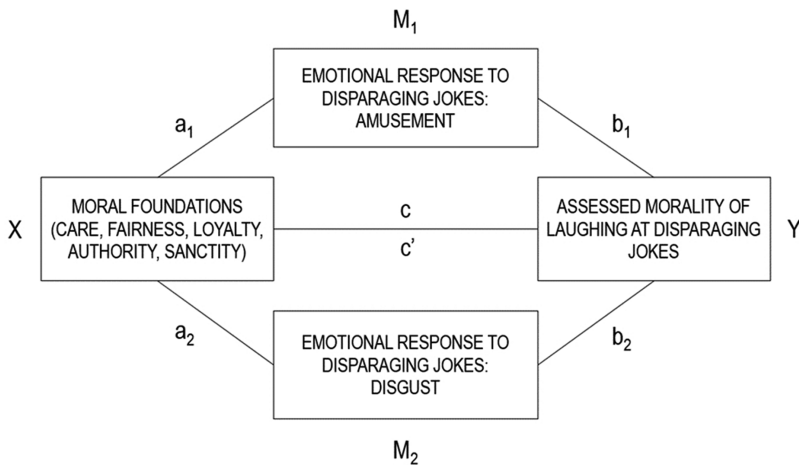


Figure 1: Relationships of moral foundations, emotional responses, and perceived immorality of disparaging jokes.

Note. M₁, M₂ – mediators, X – independent variable, Y – dependent variable, c – total effect of X on Y, c' – direct effect of X on Y.

blasphemous, religion-disparaging jokes would not be approved by those who score high on Authority, Sanctity, and Loyalty.

6 Method

6.1 Participants

The sample comprised 108 voluntary participants (Polish citizens, 59.3% females, mostly students and their acquaintances) aged 18–35 ($M = 23.76$, $SD = 3.67$). We recruited them via social networks and word-of-mouth advertising. Specifically, we created a list to collect the volunteers' e-mail addresses. Shortly after signing up, they received a link to the survey.

6.2 Stimulus preparation

An initial set of 180 pictures was retrieved from the internet to serve as examples of various types of disparagement and non-disparagement humor. The set included mostly visual material (e.g. short comic panels, manipulated photographs, “memes”) as well as written jokes with or without additional illustrations.² The pictures were later run through a two-stage selection process performed by two groups of independent judges (senior psychology majors). The first group of four judges (two males, two females) was asked to sort the pictures into five categories of jokes: sexist, racist, homophobic, disparaging religion, and “neutral,” i.e. showing no signs of disparagement. We provided the judges with the definitions for each category (see Table 1). The definitions were based on dictionary entries (retrieved online from the *Dictionary of Polish Language* based on the *Dictionary of the 100,000 words you need* (Bralczyk 2005) on “sexism,” “racism,” and “homophobia,” as well as the definition of “religious offense” as stated in Polish law (Kruczoń 2011). While the first half of each definition gave a general idea about the term it was related to, the second half provided the judges with more specific descriptions of jokes that could be representative for each category (according to our extensive observations of internet trends). The neutral jokes were defined as contradictory to the above, i.e. generally non-disparaging and free of any foul language.

² A complete set of jokes is available from the first author upon request.

Table 1: Definitions and examples of the selected jokes.

| Joke category | Definition | Example |
|----------------------|--|---|
| Sexist | Jokes that are discriminatory against people of the opposite gender, most likely women, who are ridiculed by men and led to believe they are inferior to them. The inferiority of women could be expressed by objectifying them, making them appear less valuable, less intelligent, or born only to serve others. | A frame from the 1950's <i>Cinderella</i> film captioned: <i>If you watch Cinderella backwards, it's a story about a woman who learns her place.</i> |
| Racist | Jokes that are based on the belief that human races are not equal in their biological, social and intellectual value, and that one race is superior to others. The most common example is white supremacy over the people of other races. For example, there are still a lot of stereotypical views held by society about Black individuals being unintelligent and likely to commit crimes. | A picture of a Black man captioned: <i>This picture would be racist, if only the blacks could read.</i> |
| Homophobic | Jokes that express aversion, distrust, or even hatred and hostility towards gay men and lesbians, leading to their eventual discrimination. People joking in this manner tend to perceive gay men as mentally disturbed and their relationships as deviant and less valuable than straight relationships. The form of sexual intercourse between two men is often ridiculed, as well as the STDs that are believed to spread due to their unrestrained sex life. | A photo of a Polish campaign poster against homophobia, saying: <i>Hatred hurts</i> . A piece of paper attached to the poster says: <i>Isn't your rectum hurting as well?</i> |
| Disparaging religion | Jokes that could appear as offensive to people's religious sensibilities. In our cultural setting, it is mostly expressed by ridiculing, profaning, or disparaging everything that is considered sacred to Roman Catholics and other Christians, such as places, symbols, and key figures of worship (Jesus and his mother, the saints, the beatified etc.). | A photo of Pope John Paul II holding up a large loaf of sacramental bread, captioned: <i>Hawaiian pizza for everyone!</i> |

(continued)

Table 1: (continued)

| Joke category | Definition | Example |
|---------------|--|---|
| Neutral | Jokes that do not fall under the categories presented above (racist, sexist, disparaging religion, or homophobic). Moreover, there is no foul language and no signs of disparagement present in them. These are mostly based on benign plays on words (so-called “puns”) or simply serve as a humorous commentary to various everyday life events. | A picture of a chair lacking the back part, captioned: <i>What a wonderful chair – you simply can’t resist!</i> (Polish: <i>Co za wspaniałe krzesło – wprost nie można się oprzeć!</i>). The key to understanding the joke is noticing the ambiguity: the Polish word “oprzeć” means both “to resist” and “to lean against.” |

For the second stage of selection we only left the jokes that indicated 100% agreement among the judges, meaning that all of them assigned a particular joke to the same category. In total, 101 jokes (22 sexist, 18 racist, 16 homophobic, 17 religion-disparaging and 18 neutral ones) were left for the second stage of selection. In this stage, another group of nine judges (four males, five females) rated the extent to which the remaining jokes met the given definitions. Specifically, for the disparaging jokes we asked: “To what extent is this joke sexist (racist/homophobic, etc.), according to the definition displayed above?” For the neutral category we asked: “To what extent is this joke offensive/disparaging, according to the definition displayed above?” Ratings were made on a 100-point slider scale, ranging from *not at all* to *a great extent* (Kendall’s $W = 0.62$, $p < 0.001$). Five of the highest-rated (or lowest-rated, in the case of neutral) jokes in each category were chosen for the final set of 25 jokes used as visual stimuli in the study (see Table 2).

Table 2: Mean ratings for the jokes included in the final set (from highest-rated to lowest-rated).

| Sexist jokes | Racist jokes | Homophobic jokes | Jokes disparaging religion | Neutral jokes |
|---------------|---------------|------------------|----------------------------|---------------|
| 87.33 (9.33) | 88.56 (7.29) | 88.89 (10.31) | 81.00 (14.22) | 0.89 (1.69) |
| 85.44 (18.56) | 85.22 (13.36) | 88.56 (11.50) | 75.44 (19.24) | 0.67 (1.32) |
| 83.89 (14.62) | 83.22 (17.25) | 85.89 (15.55) | 73.11 (22.39) | 0.67 (1.41) |
| 81.33 (14.00) | 80.67 (12.94) | 78.44 (14.17) | 68.78 (20.59) | 0.33 (0.50) |
| 79.78 (14.01) | 79.33 (17.67) | 72.78 (21.56) | 67.78 (20.89) | 0.11 (0.33) |

Note. *SDs* are given in parentheses.

6.3 Procedure

We collected the data via an internet-based survey. To avoid any biased answers (due to guessing that the questions about the jokes and the moral codes were somehow related), we led participants to believe that they would participate in two unrelated short studies. Specifically, we informed them that in the first study (called “humor perception study”) we would show them a set of jokes and ask some questions regarding these jokes, whereas in the second study (presented as the study on “attitudes towards lawyers”), we would ask them whether they found certain legal professionals (attorneys, court bailiffs and judges) honest or dishonest.

In the “first study,” we presented participants with the selected jokes which appeared on the screen in a random order. We used all five categories of jokes to determine if disparagement humor could be differentiated from non-disparagement (i.e. “neutral”) humor based on participants’ moral judgment and emotional reactions. Having viewed each joke, participants answered three questions. In the first two questions, they indicated whether or not they felt amused (by responding *yes* or *no*) and disgusted (also responding *yes* or *no*).³ We assigned a value of 1 to each *yes* response, and a value of 0 to each *no* response. These values were later summed up to obtain two overall scores for each category of jokes (one for amusement, $M = 1.71$; $SD = 1.05$; and one for disgust, $M = 1.50$; $SD = 1.10$). Both scores ranged from 0 (none of the five jokes in a given category evoked amusement/disgust) to 5 (all five jokes in a given category evoked amusement/disgust). The last question asked participants whether they found laughing at a particular joke moral or immoral. The answers were given on a 100-point slider scale ranging from *extremely immoral* to *completely moral* ($M = 51.38$; $SD = 15.36$). Demographic items preceded the rating of the jokes.

After rating the jokes, participants were thanked for completing the “first survey,” and invited to participate in the “second study.” To lend credence to the cover story, according to which this study concerned attitudes towards lawyers, we asked participants to answer questions regarding not only their moral foundations but also their attitudes towards attorneys, court bailiffs and judges.

³ This method was previously used by McGraw and Warren (2010). We selected these two emotions because (1) amusement is a typical response to humor; (2) disgust serves as a particularly notable emotion in moral psychology literature where it is referred to as *embodied moral judgment* because of the unpleasant bodily sensations it may trigger (Schnall et al. 2008). Disgust that is evoked by moral offenses can be specifically referred to as *moral disgust*, as it does not necessarily need to involve physical discomfort (Rozin et al. 2000).

To measure participants' moral foundations profiles, we used the Moral Foundations Questionnaire (MFQ; Graham et al. 2011; Polish adaptation by Jarmakowski-Kostrzanowski and Jarmakowska-Kostrzanowska 2016). The MFQ is a 30-item self-report measure designed to assess the extent to which people prioritize five moral codes (Care, Fairness, Loyalty, Authority, Sanctity) in moral judgement and decision-making. The scale consists of two parts. In the first part, called "Moral relevance," participants are given a list of fifteen moral concerns they might consider relevant to judging someone's behavior (e.g. *whether or not someone cared for someone weak or vulnerable* for Care, or *whether or not someone acted in a way that God would approve of* for Sanctity) and rate them using a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all relevant*) to 6 (*extremely relevant*). The second part, "Moral Judgments," deals with specific moral judgment statements (e.g. *Men and women each have different roles to play in society* for Authority, or *I am proud of my country's history* for Loyalty), which are rated on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). An overall score for each moral foundation is calculated from both parts of the MFQ (see Table 3). Higher scores indicate greater significance of certain codes in moral judgment and decision-making.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics and Cronbach's alphas for the MFQ scales.

| Foundation | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | α |
|------------|----------|-----------|----------|
| Care | 4.91 | 0.71 | 0.74 |
| Fairness | 4.75 | 0.50 | 0.44 |
| Loyalty | 3.52 | 0.74 | 0.67 |
| Authority | 3.34 | 0.75 | 0.61 |
| Sanctity | 3.40 | 0.98 | 0.79 |

7 Results

7.1 Morality judgments and emotional responses across joke categories

To test the effects of different categories of jokes on their assessed morality, we ran a repeated measures ANOVA. As predicted, the assessed morality of laughing at the presented jokes differed significantly across the five categories, $F(4, 428) = 150.26$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.58$ (see Table 4). Post hoc comparisons using the Bonferroni

Table 4: Results of the repeated measures ANOVA and Bonferroni pairwise comparisons.

| | 1. Homophobic jokes | | 2. Racist jokes | | 3. Sexist jokes | | 4. Jokes disparaging religion | | 5. Neutral jokes | | Bonferroni pairwise comparisons |
|----------------------------|---------------------|-----------|-----------------|-----------|-----------------|-----------|-------------------------------|-----------|------------------|-----------|---|
| | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | |
| Assessed morality of jokes | 38.45 | 23.61 | 38.89 | 23.13 | 42.68 | 23.45 | 48.22 | 25.68 | 88.66 | 13.05 | 1 < 5 ($p < 0.001$) 1 < 4 ($p = 0.024$) 2 < 4 ($p = 0.009$) 3 < 5 ($p < 0.001$) 4 < 5 ($p < 0.001$) 2 < 5 ($p < 0.001$) |
| Amusement with jokes | 1.08 | 1.41 | 1.52 | 1.68 | 1.47 | 1.57 | 1.85 | 1.73 | 2.63 | 1.60 | 1 < 5 ($p < 0.001$) 2 < 5 ($p < 0.001$) 3 < 5 ($p < 0.001$) 4 < 5 ($p = 0.007$) 1 < 3 ($p = 0.032$) 1 < 4 ($p = 0.001$) 1 < 2 ($p = 0.028$) |
| Disgust with jokes | 2.07 | 1.87 | 1.82 | 1.80 | 1.83 | 1.79 | 1.73 | 1.79 | 0.06 | 0.30 | 1 > 5 ($p < 0.001$) 2 > 5 ($p < 0.001$) 3 > 5 ($p < 0.001$) 4 > 5 ($p < 0.001$) |

correction revealed significant differences between the assessed morality of neutral jokes and all of the remaining categories. Moreover, religion-disparaging jokes were rated as more moral than homophobic and racist jokes.

Next, we ran similar ANOVAs for emotional responses evoked by each category of jokes. The analyses confirmed that the categories differed significantly in terms of both amusement, $F(4, 428) = 19.93, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.16$, and disgust, $F(4, 428) = 40.54, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.28$ (see Table 4). Post-hoc comparisons using the Bonferroni correction indicated that neutral jokes were evaluated as significantly more amusing than all the remaining categories. Moreover, homophobic jokes were rated as significantly less amusing than sexist, religion-disparaging, and racist jokes. Lastly, we found that neutral jokes were evaluated as significantly less disgusting than homophobic, racist, sexist, and religion-disparaging jokes.

7.2 Mediation analyses

Finally, we tested our main hypothesis that the assessed morality of laughing at disparagement jokes would depend on one's moral foundations and that this relationship would be mediated by the emotional response to disparagement humor (see Figure 1). For this purpose, we used PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes 2013). The number of bootstrap samples for bias corrected confidence intervals was 10,000.

We conducted a series of mediation analyses for the assessed morality of laughing at each joke category as an outcome variable (X), five moral codes as independent variables (Y), and the emotional response of amusement and disgust as mediators (M_1 and M_2). This resulted in 20 models (five moral codes x four joke categories; see Table 5). As already mentioned, we predicted that emotional responses would explain the mechanisms behind the influence of each moral foundation on the assessed morality of laughing at the presented jokes. Put differently, we expected that the initial relationship between X and Y (c path in Figure 1) would be reduced or would become non-significant in the presence of the mediator(s) (c-prime path in Figure 1) (MacKinnon et al. 2000; Preacher and Hayes 2004). We confirmed these predictions for each category of jokes but, as expected, the role of particular moral codes differed across these categories. Specifically, the foundations of Care and Fairness were associated with racist, sexist, and homophobic jokes, while the foundations of Authority, Loyalty, and Sanctity were linked to religion-disparaging jokes.⁴

⁴ We have also run additional mediation analyses on the neutral humor. The total, direct and indirect effects did not reach significance in these models, thus suggesting that moral foundations are not related to perceptions of non-disparaging types of humor.

Table 5: Results of the mediation analyses (Model 4).

| Joke category | X | a ₁ moral foundation → amusement | | | a ₂ moral foundation → disgust | | | b ₁ amusement → moral judgment | | | b ₂ disgust → moral judgment | | | c | | | c' | | |
|----------------------|-----------|---|------|---------|---|------|---------|---|------|---------|---|------|---------|--------|------|---------|-------|------|---------|
| | | b | SE | p | b | SE | p | b | SE | p | b | SE | p | b | SE | p | b | SE | p |
| Homophobic | Care | -0.65 | 0.18 | 0.001 | 0.69 | 0.25 | 0.006 | 5.43 | 0.18 | < 0.001 | -7.05 | 0.87 | < 0.001 | -10.39 | 3.07 | 0.001 | -1.99 | 2.13 | 0.351 |
| | Fairness | -0.73 | 0.26 | 0.007 | 1.13 | 0.34 | 0.001 | 5.51 | 1.16 | < 0.001 | -6.93 | 0.88 | < 0.001 | -15.30 | 4.30 | 0.001 | -3.44 | 2.97 | 0.249 |
| | Loyalty | 0.50 | 0.18 | 0.006 | -0.32 | 0.24 | 0.198 | 5.22 | 1.17 | < 0.001 | -7.16 | 0.86 | < 0.001 | 8.27 | 3.00 | 0.007 | 3.37 | 1.97 | 0.091 |
| | Authority | 0.26 | 0.18 | 0.143 | -0.40 | 0.24 | 0.096 | 5.64 | 1.15 | < 0.001 | -7.10 | 0.87 | < 0.001 | 5.41 | 2.99 | 0.074 | 1.08 | 1.91 | 0.573 |
| | Sanctity | 0.13 | 0.14 | 0.342 | -0.26 | 0.18 | 0.165 | 5.70 | 1.15 | < 0.001 | -7.16 | 0.87 | < 0.001 | 2.39 | 2.34 | 0.308 | -0.21 | 1.47 | 0.885 |
| Racist | Care | -0.50 | 0.22 | 0.029 | 0.67 | 0.24 | 0.010 | 1.21 | 1.14 | 0.291 | -8.47 | 1.07 | < 0.001 | -5.88 | 3.11 | 0.062 | 0.42 | 2.35 | 0.859 |
| | Fairness | -0.57 | 0.32 | 0.078 | 1.09 | 0.33 | 0.001 | 1.19 | 1.13 | 0.297 | -8.37 | 1.09 | < 0.001 | -10.53 | 4.34 | 0.017 | -0.73 | 3.34 | 0.829 |
| | Loyalty | 0.20 | 0.22 | 0.366 | 0.03 | 0.24 | 0.907 | 0.95 | 1.12 | 0.398 | -8.57 | 1.04 | < 0.001 | 4.03 | 3.02 | 0.185 | 4.08 | 2.15 | 0.061 |
| | Authority | 0.34 | 0.21 | 0.109 | 0.01 | 0.23 | 0.969 | 1.00 | 1.15 | 0.385 | -8.53 | 1.06 | < 0.001 | 2.16 | 2.97 | 0.470 | 1.89 | 2.16 | 0.383 |
| | Sanctity | 0.02 | 0.17 | 0.901 | 0.02 | 0.18 | 0.919 | 1.19 | 1.13 | 0.296 | -8.43 | 1.05 | < 0.001 | -0.29 | 2.30 | 0.901 | -0.16 | 1.64 | 0.923 |
| Sexist | Care | -0.53 | 0.21 | 0.013 | 0.56 | 0.24 | 0.021 | 3.29 | 1.08 | 0.003 | -8.72 | 0.95 | < 0.001 | -4.08 | 3.18 | 0.203 | 2.52 | 2.05 | 0.221 |
| | Fairness | -0.69 | 0.30 | 0.021 | 1.06 | 0.33 | 0.002 | 3.17 | 1.08 | 0.004 | -8.78 | 0.97 | < 0.001 | -8.86 | 4.44 | 0.048 | 2.68 | 2.94 | 0.365 |
| | Loyalty | 0.37 | 0.20 | 0.070 | -0.12 | 0.23 | 0.598 | 2.91 | 1.09 | 0.009 | -8.64 | 0.95 | < 0.001 | 4.09 | 3.06 | 0.184 | 1.94 | 1.94 | 0.321 |
| | Authority | 0.20 | 0.20 | 0.317 | -0.29 | 0.23 | 0.212 | 3.10 | 1.08 | 0.005 | -8.58 | 0.96 | < 0.001 | 3.17 | 3.00 | 0.294 | 0.08 | 1.89 | 0.965 |
| | Sanctity | -0.04 | 0.16 | 0.808 | -0.05 | 0.18 | 0.789 | 3.07 | 1.08 | 0.005 | -8.62 | 0.95 | < 0.001 | -0.63 | 2.33 | 0.788 | -0.92 | 1.48 | 0.526 |
| Disparaging religion | Care | -0.61 | 0.23 | 0.010 | 0.37 | 0.24 | 0.127 | 2.74 | 0.98 | 0.006 | -10.20 | 0.93 | < 0.001 | -4.65 | 3.48 | 0.185 | 0.82 | 2.15 | 0.705 |
| | Fairness | -0.22 | 0.33 | 0.515 | 0.24 | 0.34 | 0.486 | 2.72 | 0.95 | 0.005 | -10.26 | 0.92 | < 0.001 | 2.08 | 4.94 | 0.675 | 5.14 | 2.90 | 0.079 |
| | Loyalty | -0.48 | 0.22 | 0.035 | 1.00 | 0.22 | < 0.001 | 2.65 | 0.96 | 0.007 | -9.86 | 1.00 | < 0.001 | -12.93 | 3.14 | < 0.001 | -1.80 | 2.19 | 0.413 |
| | Authority | -0.50 | 0.22 | 0.025 | 0.87 | 0.21 | < 0.001 | 2.47 | 0.91 | 0.008 | -9.13 | 0.92 | < 0.001 | -16.52 | 2.89 | < 0.001 | -7.36 | 1.98 | < 0.001 |
| | Sanctity | -0.65 | 0.16 | < 0.001 | 1.14 | 0.14 | < 0.001 | 2.38 | 0.93 | 0.012 | -8.54 | 1.08 | < 0.001 | -16.51 | 1.99 | < 0.001 | -5.21 | 1.88 | 0.010 |

Note. All models in which indirect effects were statistically significant are in bold.

For homophobic jokes, we observed significant indirect total effects of Care ($b = -8.40$, $SE = 2.63$, 95% CI: $[-13.74, -3.35]$) and Fairness ($b = -11.86$, $SE = 3.48$, 95% CI: $[-18.94, -5.23]$). The relationship between Care and the assessed morality of laughing at homophobic jokes was mediated by both amusement ($b = -3.51$, $SE = 1.60$, 95% CI: $[-7.46, -0.98]$) and disgust ($b = -4.88$, $SE = 1.77$, 95% CI: $[-8.58, -1.59]$). The same was true for Fairness, such that its relationship with assessed morality was also mediated by both amusement ($b = -4.01$, $SE = 1.77$, 95% CI: $[-8.35, -1.18]$) and disgust ($b = -7.85$, $SE = 2.69$, 95% CI: $[-13.59, -3.05]$).

For racist jokes, we also observed significant indirect total effects of Care ($b = -6.30$, $SE = 2.29$, 95% CI: $[-10.92, -1.87]$) and Fairness ($b = 9.81$, $SE = 2.92$, 95% CI: $[-15.88, -4.42]$). The relationship between Care and the assessed morality of laughing at racist jokes was mediated by disgust ($b = -5.71$, $SE = 2.07$, 95% CI: $[-9.89, -1.68]$), but not amusement. The same was true for Fairness, such that its relationship with assessed morality was also mediated by disgust ($b = 9.13$, $SE = 2.68$, 95% CI: $[-14.90, -4.24]$), but not amusement. Moreover, although the path between Care and amusement (path a) was significant, the path between amusement and moral judgment of racist humor (path b) was not significant. For Fairness, both a and b paths did not reach significance.

Indirect total effects of Care ($b = -6.60$, $SE = 2.59$, 95% CI: $[-11.56, -1.36]$) and Fairness ($b = -11.53$, $SE = 3.25$, 95% CI: $[-18.39, -5.64]$) were also significant in the case of sexist jokes. The relationship between Care and the assessed morality of laughing at sexist jokes was mediated by both amusement ($b = -1.74$, $SE = 1.10$, 95% CI: $[-4.61, -0.14]$) and disgust ($b = -4.86$, $SE = 1.98$, 95% CI: $[-8.62, -0.82]$). The same was true for Fairness, that is, its relationship with assessed morality was also mediated by both amusement ($b = -2.19$, $SE = 1.31$, 95% CI: $[-5.66, -0.28]$) and disgust ($b = -9.34$, $SE = 2.73$, 95% CI: $[-15.17, -4.51]$).

Finally, in the case of religion-disparaging jokes, we observed significant total indirect effects of three moral foundations: Loyalty ($b = -11.13$, $SE = 2.26$, 95% CI: $[-15.63, -6.68]$), Authority ($b = -9.16$, $SE = 2.09$, 95% CI: $[-13.56, -5.27]$), and Sanctity ($b = -11.30$, $SE = 1.52$, 95% CI: $[-14.64, -8.59]$). The relationship between Loyalty and the assessed morality of laughing at religion-disparaging jokes was mediated by both amusement ($b = -1.26$, $SE = 0.75$, 95% CI: $[-3.26, -0.17]$) and disgust ($b = -9.87$, $SE = 2.05$, 95% CI: $[-14.26, -6.07]$). Similarly, the relationship between Authority and the assessed morality was also mediated by both amusement ($b = -1.23$, $SE = 0.73$, 95% CI: $[-3.10, -0.18]$) and disgust ($b = -7.93$, $SE = 1.91$, 95% CI: $[-12.25, -4.63]$). The same was also true for Sanctity, such that its relationship with assessed morality was also mediated by both amusement ($b = -1.54$, $SE = 0.76$, 95% CI: $[-3.34, -0.31]$) and disgust ($b = -9.76$, $SE = 1.52$, 95% CI: $[-13.16, -7.12]$).

8 Discussion

Our aim was to provide empirical evidence for the possible relationship between moral codes proposed in the Moral Foundations Theory (Haidt and Graham 2007) and moral judgment of disparagement humor (i.e. the assessed morality of laughing at a particular set of jokes). Specifically, we expected that the individualizing foundations (Care and Fairness) would be linked to the assessed morality of laughing at sexist, racist, and homophobic jokes, while the binding foundations (Loyalty, Authority and Sanctity) would influence the assessed morality of laughing at religion-disparaging jokes. Importantly, we hypothesized that these relationships would be mediated by emotional responses of amusement and disgust to each category of jokes, additionally supporting the Social Intuitionist Model of moral judgment.

The repeated measures ANOVAs revealed that, consistent with our predictions, neutral jokes were perceived as more amusing, less disgusting, and more moral than all of the remaining categories. Homophobic, racist, sexist, and religion-disparaging jokes evoked mixed emotions in participants. These results are consistent with Ferguson and Ford's (2008) suggestion that the reactions to disparagement humor may go beyond amusement and evoke other feelings such as disgust. They also indicate that disparagement humor forms a separate class of humor that can easily be differentiated from neutral jokes based on the emotional reactions it evokes.

The results of mediation analyses also closely corresponded to our predictions. The individualizing foundations of Care and Fairness were significantly linked to moral judgment of racist, sexist, and homophobic jokes, whereas the binding foundations of Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity were associated with moral judgment of religion-disparaging jokes. This might be related to the fact that Black individuals, women, gay men, and lesbians are among the most negatively stereotyped and stigmatized groups (Crocker and Major 1989). These groups are often the target of unfair and hurtful treatment that puts their physical and mental health at risk (Franklin et al. 2006; Budge et al. 2017; Vasquez et al. 2018). Therefore, disparagement humor targeting these groups may trigger Care and Fairness because these foundations originate from the first, dualistic concept of morality, defined as not causing harm and protecting justice (for a review, see Haidt 2008; Graham et al. 2013). In other words, sexist, homophobic, and racist jokes often depict everything that is oppressive to women, gay men, lesbians, and Black individuals (e.g. abuse, objectification, and contempt they might be faced with), which might be interpreted as harm and unfairness and thus trigger the foundations of Care and Fairness.

Roman Catholics, on the other hand, are usually not considered an oppressed group, which is a possible explanation for the lack of relationship between the individualizing foundations and the moral judgment of religion-disparaging humor. At the same time, religion-disparaging jokes triggered the three remaining foundations – Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity – that put emphasis on ingroup binding, duty, self-control, chastity, traditional institutions, and hierarchies, as well as staying away from anarchists, revolutionaries, atheists, and hedonists (Graham et al. 2009; Graham and Haidt 2012). The blasphemous nature of religion-disparaging jokes violates all of these notions, especially those related to religiosity and spirituality, with particular role of the Sanctity foundation. Moreover, these jokes might be perceived as an attack on one's religious ingroup, creating moral concern based in particular on the Loyalty foundation.

Notably, as expected, the influence of moral foundations on moral judgment was mediated by emotional responses of amusement and disgust, which may suggest that disparagement humor was judged through emotional evaluations. This observation is in line with the Social Intuitionist Model. At the same time, however, we should stress that the exact sequence of psychological processes occurring in the current study remains uncertain. We may only speculate about the possible primacy of emotions over the moral judgment based on the fact that we measured the level of amusement and disgust prior to letting our participants indicate how moral or immoral the jokes were. Interestingly, we observed no mediating role of amusement in the case of racist jokes. This may be explained by the fact that our sample might have consisted of participants particularly high in implicit prejudice against people of color (recent findings suggest that Eastern European countries score highly on implicit racism; Stafford and George 2017). Thus, they might have not perceived their amusement with racist humor as immoral. This finding is in line with the Prejudiced Norm Theory (Ford and Ferguson 2004) which holds that exposure to disparagement humor facilitates and normalizes discrimination, acting as a source of self-regulation to people who are already high in prejudice. Thus, future research would benefit from controlling for variables related to prejudice and social group attitudes.

The present study also suggests that disparagement humor can trigger people's moral intuitions, which then influences their judgment. At first sight, it seems discordant with the “non-serious” and “light-hearted” humor mindset people are believed to adopt when interpreting humorous messages or events (Gray and Ford 2013; Ford 2015). Such mindset seems to leave no room for ethical deliberation or criticism. Yet, given that moral judgment comes naturally, automatically, and effortlessly (Haidt 2001), participants' responses probably relied on their personal set of intuitive ethics rather than ethical deliberation.

Notably, disgust played a much larger role in mediating the relationship between moral foundations and perceived morality of the jokes than amusement. One explanation, unrelated to the (im)morality of a joke, could be that some participants simply did not find particular jokes to be funny (e.g. the jokes did not make sense to them). Another explanation could lie in the fact that disgust is a highly prototypical moral emotion, whereas amusement is not. For instance, Haidt (2003) argues that many positive emotions (including amusement) cannot be considered moral ones because they do not meet two crucial criteria (i.e. they are mostly motivated by self-interest and do not increase one's tendency to engage in actions that benefit others). We found, however, that amusement increased perceived morality of laughing at disparaging jokes. This finding is in line with the notion that the list of moral emotions can be supplemented with other positive emotions, including emotions related to humor. For instance, mirth has been previously reported to increase permissiveness for deontological moral violations (e.g. killing one person in order to prevent a trolley from killing several other people), because it is associated with irreverence and removes the gravitas of otherwise serious ideas (Strohinger et al. 2011). Similar effect might have occurred in our study, when one was faced with disparagement humor, but evaluated it as moral (through amusement, which attenuated the joke's offensiveness). Thus, future research should further examine the effects of mirth and amusement on moral decision-making, as well as determine possible significance of other affective responses to disparagement humor, such as aversiveness (see, e.g. Romero-Sánchez et al. 2010; Kruschke and Vollmer 2014) anger (LaFrance and Woodzicka 1998), guilt, or embarrassment (Ferguson and Ford 2008).

We should also note that the jokes used in our study did not evoke much amusement, obtaining relatively low scores with very large SDs, which poses a question as to what factors might have influenced their perceived "funniness." Staying within the Benign-Violation theory of humor, one might speculate that the jokes selected for our study were highly typical of their type of humor and thus too severe to be funny. On the other hand, it is possible that less typical jokes would not be severe enough to trigger one's moral foundations (that is, they would be seen as a benign violation of an endorsed moral value). Thus, although we cannot be entirely sure of how the severity of the jokes was perceived by participants (as we did not measure it in the current study), we believe that controlling for the severity of the presented material might be beneficial for any future joke selections.

Although the present research contributes to the literature on both disparaging humor and morality, it is not without limitations. First, given the large number of analyses run on the data, we relied on a rather low number of

participants. Thus, future research might benefit from expanding the sample size. Second, one of the MFQ scales, Fairness, had very low reliability ($\alpha = 0.44$). The authors of the MFQ (Graham et al. 2011) as well as the authors of the Polish version of the questionnaire (Jarmakowski-Kostrzanowski and Jarmakowska-Kostrzanowska 2016), found Fairness to be similarly problematic (Cronbach's α s ranged from 0.60 to 0.66 and were lower than those observed for the four remaining scales). Possible explanation may lie in the fact that there are different ways of understanding terms like “fairness” and “justice.” Specifically, the judgments of whether something is fair or not may be based on different principles that are not clearly distinguished by the MFQ Fairness items (Koleva et al. 2014). For instance, the *equality* principle holds that rewards should be shared equally in society, while the *equity* principle, also referred to as *deservingness*, holds that rewards should be proportional to contributions (Steiner et al. 2006). Therefore, when completing the MFQ, participants might have referred to these different conceptualizations of fairness and, as a result, responded inconsistently to the Fairness items. A relatively small sample in our study could have additionally contributed to low reliability of the scale (Charter 2003), although we found the remaining scales to be satisfactory in terms of internal consistency. Due to the low alpha of the scale, results of mediation analyses run on the foundation of Fairness call for a more cautious interpretation. Third, we addressed only two emotional responses evoked by disparagement humor: one positive (amusement) and one negative (disgust). Measurement of these emotions was directly adapted from McGraw and Warren's (2010) series of experiments, in which moral violations elicited both amusement and disgust (see footnote 2). Yet, as previously stated, future research might address the role of other affective responses to disparagement humor. Finally, even though the study confirmed the link between the individualizing foundations (endorsed by liberals), the binding foundations (endorsed by religious people and conservatives) and different types of disparagement humor, it did not include actual measures of neither political orientation, nor religiosity of the participants, as we were focused on the emotional responses to homophobic, racist, sexist and religion-disparaging jokes. However, given that both political and religious orientations are related to moral foundations (Graham et al. 2009; Graham and Haidt 2010), future research may expand on the current findings by testing a more general model of the relationships between religiosity, liberal and conservative views, reactions to disparagement humor and five moral codes.

Overall, despite these limitations, the present study adds to the research of both psychology of disparagement humor and psychology of morality. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study addressing the link between the

Moral Foundations Theory and different subtypes of disparagement humor. Not only did we find these subtypes to be distinguishable from neutral jokes and from one another, but also linked to moral foundations. This new direction in research on humor opens new possibilities in exploring the role of people's intuitive ethics in determining their reactions to racist, sexist, homophobic, and religion-disparaging jokes.

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