

Bigger, Longer, and Racist? Examining the Complexity of Racial and Ethnic Humor in  
South Park

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## **Bigger, Longer, and Racist? Examining the Complexity of Racial and Ethnic Humor in South Park**

### **Introduction**

Comedy in the United States has historically contained an abundance of racial and ethnic humor, especially in the realm of animated cartoons. Black and Jewish ethnic jokes have provided the foundation for contemporary American humor (Lowe, 1986, pg. 439). Cartoons have received little scholarly attention, despite being direct descendents of this tradition (Chaney, 167, 2004). For example, Warner Brothers cartoons starring uncontroversial characters such as Bugs Bunny also included stereotyped characters such as Speedy Gonzales and a number of other stereotyped characters that appeared in only one or two instances. This trend of using ethnic/racial stereotypes in cartoon comedy continues to this day, and with the ubiquity of the mass media is at its greatest reach in history. Comedy Central is a cable network that in recent years has relied on a number of shows that rely primarily on stereotypical ethnic/racial humor. Ford recognized that shows on the network warranted serious examination (1997, pg. 273). South Park was probably the first and most notable show to include stereotypical humor, but was later joined by such successful shows as The Chappelle Show and Mind of Mencia, although the latter two do not cover as broad a range of topics as South Park. Each show does make an abundant use of racial and ethnic humor. Dave Chappelle expressed his concern for the impact of his racial and ethnic humor on the Oprah Winfrey show. A particular sketch in which Chappelle appeared in black face forced the comedian to reevaluate the content of his material. A situation occurred during the filming of the third season of his

show in which he began to feel that perhaps he was being a bit socially irresponsible. Chappelle recognized that while some people understood the message he was attempting to send with his racially charged comedy, others got the wrong idea (Oprah, 2006). To quote the cliché, “There is a thin line between love and hate.” Well, according to most scholars and laypeople there is a thin line between making socially relevant points through racial and ethnic humor, and perpetuating those same harmful attitudes and viewpoints. This study will attempt to determine whether or not South Park reinforces ethnic/racial stereotypes, or mocks those who hold stereotypical views of minority groups. The media, television in particular, are very efficacious in the social construction of reality. The social construction of reality is the theory that will be applied as the theoretical background for the study. Social construction of reality is a phenomenological concept developed by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (Trepagnier 2006: 113). Allen Johnson (2000) defines social construction of reality as occurring through interaction among individuals that use symbols to interpret interactions and assign meaning to perceptions and experience (p. 226). These facts underscore the importance of this issue, and why a program such as South Park merits scholarly analysis. The structure of the program is one of social critique through often-bawdy humor. In this light, South Park is no different from Shakespeare in its incorporation of vulgarity and cogent social and philosophical criticism. South Park even won a Peabody Award in 2006 due to its willingness to criticize intolerance.

### **Literature Review**

Almost every scholar who addresses South Park rather unimaginatively prefaces their article by saying that South Park is vulgar most of the time, but at other times makes

socially cogent arguments. There were no scholars who incorporated any quantitative data in analysis of *South Park*, though there were a few that addressed the subject matter in different media forms and programs. Most of the literature that directly addressed *South Park* was from disciplines in the humanities such as philosophy, and relied on strictly qualitative approaches.

While examining the extant literature it became clear that there are two main camps of scholars, those who argue that stereotypical media portrayals do reinforce these stereotypes, and those who feel the structure of shows like *South Park* mitigate any harmful effects or that those effects are benign. One scholar chose not commit to either side of the argument, but discussed the possibilities of both outcomes.

Only one scholar that argued stereotypical representations are harmful directly addressed the use of that type of humor in *South Park*. Dubin conducted a qualitative analysis of stereotypical Black representations in material objects such as saltshakers to golf tees. He argued that these stereotypical cultural texts can contribute to a sense of social superiority within the dominant racial group (Dubin, 1987, pg. 132). Ford conducted an experimental study in which that examined how stereotypical television portrayals affect person perception. He exposed subjects to comedy skits that used stereotypical humor involving Blacks, and then had the subjects read a description of an assault. Half of the descriptions were of a White person and half were of a Black person. The subjects rated whether or not they thought the offender was guilty of the assault. He found that when Whites are exposed to negative portrayals of Blacks they are more likely to make negative judgments of Black individuals (Ford, 1997, pg. 271). Ford stated that his study demonstrated the power of ostensibly benign comical television portrayals of

ethnic/racial minorities in the way we think and respond to members of those groups (1997, pg. 271). Davenport found that Black representations within comic books have reverted to depressing state. He also acknowledged that representations were frequently offensive and unrepresentative of Blacks (1997, pg. 20,27). Chaney conducted a qualitative analysis of *Static Shock*, and *South Park*, and specifically accused *South Park* of binarizing positions according to the hegemonic system it seemed to be critiquing, but actually critiqued only in part (2004, pg. 175).

Lowe detailed and outlined the history of ethnic humor, and also described various theories regarding ethnic humor. He points out that ethnic humor has long has a long history in literate societies that predates even the first Athenian jibe at a Spartan (1986,pg. 445). He further pointed out that opinions about stereotypes, even those held by social scientists frequently lack empirical evidence (Lowe, 1986, pg. 449). Thibodeau conducted a content analysis of *New Yorker* cartoons that spanned forty-two years of cartoons. She acknowledged the ambiguity of whether or not stereotypical representations were harmful, and so outlined the possibility that to some groups these portrayals can be found offensive while others may not find them to be so.

Those scholars who found *South Park*'s use of stereotypical ethnic/racial humor to be benign were significantly more abundant than those on the other side of the issue. This literature lacked the social scientific approach of the alternate position, and was primarily from a qualitative perspective. Most of this literature came from the discipline of Philosophy. Arp called *South Park* the most important series on television specifically because it is unafraid to ridicule fanatics associated with any social, political, ethical, economic, and religious views (2007, pg. 1). He recognized the value of shocking people

in order to get them to think critically about a given topic. Cantor concurred that South Park is the most philosophical show to ever air on television (2007, pg. 98). Curtis and Erion agree that a sophisticated social criticism lurks beneath the surface of inane cartoons (2007, pg. 112). He added that the series properly offends everyone by design and in doing so reminds us that it's a good idea to be tolerant (2007, pg. 118). Young stated that much of the criticism of *South Park* is strikingly similar to that which has been leveled at against Western philosophy since its inception (2007, pg. 5). He points out that many episodes address how outsiders are berated and subjected to racist slander, and that this verbal sparring, when so understood, need not lead to violence or exclusion. This does not justify such speech, but creates a space in which hostility can be interpreted and analyzed (2007, pg. 14-15). Yu furthers this argument as she recognized that the show plays on racist attitudes for many of its characters, but that to find such portrayals amusing one need only be aware of the particular stereotypes are in attendance and use that information to adopt relevant attitudes (2007, pg. 27). Murtagh adds that most who find the humor in *South Park* to be offensive probably do not watch the series, and that he is skeptical about the extent to which the humor in the context of the episodes promotes insensitivity and intolerance, especially given that the positive aspects of the show counteract any negative influences that may exist (2007, pg. 38). Cantor illustrated this by stating that even as South Park stereotypes homosexuals, it displays sympathy for them and their right to live as they see fit (2007, pg. 101). Johnson-Woods accedes by mentioning that ethnic humor has liberating consequences and that ethnic jokes confront the stereotype and, in so doing, challenge the dominant culture. She illustrates this by pointing out that the character of Chef (voiced by Isaac Hayes) draws attention to the

marginalized and clichéd role of Blacks (2007, pg. 216). She argues that the racist characters in *South Park* are the most despised, stupid, and least admirable characters in the series; pointing out that their offensiveness is offensiveness of the ignorant (2007, pg. 220). Fagin also acknowledged that it is good to make fun of those who believe stupid things (2000, pg. 41).

Feinstein and Scanlan found that stereotypical images in *The Simpsons*, which set the mold in which shows like *South Park* later followed, were not reinforced and perpetuated, but critically assessed (2000, pg. 137). *The Simpsons* used the technique of hyper-irony in its stereotypical content, and this technique deflected the criticisms of racism (Dobson, 2006, pg. 60). Dobson acknowledged that *The Simpsons* spurred a re-birth of animated comedy aimed at adult audiences that was led by *South Park* and *King of the Hill* (2006, pg. 49). In his analysis of *The Simpsons*, that to portray stereotypical depictions as racist would be an oversimplification, and that the humor of *The Simpsons* is far more complex. Dobson further argued that *The Simpsons* fit the model of the carnivalesque that Mikhail Bakhtin applied to the work of French poet Rabelais (2006, pg. 56).

Based on the above discussion, it is hypothesized that *South Park* does not reinforce ethnic/racial stereotypes.

### **Methodology**

The study was conducted using a mixed method approach. The quantitative portion utilized objective, coded indicators, and a subjective analysis was included due to the fact that humor often arises from context. Humor is a complex concept, and thus it

was important to analyze contextual subtleties. The qualitative section supplemented the gaps in the quantitative data, and created a more accurate answer to the hypotheses.

In order to determine whether or not South Park perpetuates ethnic/racial stereotypes, a content analysis was conducted. The sample consisted of seven episodes from the most recent available season of the series, season ten. As the most recent season, it was used to gauge whether the show's most current content reinforced stereotypical portrayals, due to the fact that the show has changed its content a bit from the beginning of the series. As the show progressed it evolved from simple stories to timely critiques of newsworthy trends of events that were important at the time of a given season. For example, the episode entitled "A Million Little Fibers," aired shortly following an incident in which a non-fiction book by a drug addict Oprah Winfrey had chosen for her book club turned out to be fictional. Seven episodes were chosen at random to create a constructed week sample.

Two undergraduate males were chosen as coders. They quantified the number of ethnic/racial slurs, the number of ethnic/racial characters central to the action, the number of ethnic/racial background characters, the number of ethnic/racial characters that behave stereotypically, the number of crimes committed by ethnic/racial characters, and the number of non-criminal violent acts committed by ethnic/racial characters. Each of these indicators was counted on a per episode basis. Each coder watched the exact same sample episodes. The Holsti formula was used to calculate inter-coder reliability. Coders were trained by watching the episodes from season ten that were not included in the sample, and quantifying the indicators listed above. As previously stated, due to the

complex nature of humor a qualitative analysis of the episodes was also included to ground the quantitative data in context.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* could be accused of stereotyping an ethnic group, but most recognize the poignant satire at the heart of the work. The same holds true for *South Park*. Magic Bullet theory was shown to be seriously flawed. Viewers are not passive receptacles that accept every single attitude put forth by the mass media.

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