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Why Are We Laughing at Stereotypes?

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ISSUE EXPLANATION

Thinking under the influence (TUI) refers to how we think with the "dominant belief systems and stereotypes" (Allen, 2011, p. 9). Race and gender are both socially constructed identities that come from the dominant group's way of thinking. We grow up hearing different values, beliefs, and stereotypes from our families, friends, media, and school experiences. One of the common struggles for people of the minority race and gender is pay disparity in the workplace. According to Toutkashian, Bellas, and Moore (2007), men are paid 4.6% more than women within most race/ethnic categories – at least among higher education faculty (p. 583). Another place where gender and race/ethnicity can be a problem for individuals is in seeking mental health assistance. A study conducted by Gonzalez, Alegria, and Prihoba (2005) showed that attitudes toward mental health treatment in young adult males are the most negative of all groups. Results also show that minorities may not be similar to Anglos populations (pp. 617-618).

The process of learning these stereotypes and generalizations is called socialization (Allen, 2011). It is important to know these terms and their definitions in order to understand how we get these identities and develop our sense of self. These ideas are really the root of all discrimination and stereotyping of minority groups, because they are the processes in which the dominant group tells us as a society what to think and how to act. Our research will demonstrate how we act, or don't act, based the dominant beliefs instilled in us.

METHODS

During our research we are using participation observation to collect our data. Participation observation "connects the researcher to the most basic of human experiences" (Guest el al pg.75). It also shows why humans act the way they do through them participating in different scenarios.

We gave 18 classmates two separate surveys about race and gender. Allowing the class to focus on one identity at a time. The questions on the survey were open-ended and based on how someone acts in a racist situation, such as hearing negative comments about race. There are similar questions on the second survey about gender.

We grouped the similar answers into categories by open coding: "chunks of texts that suggests a category" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 219). We also put our findings to the following questions in a table and a pie chart.
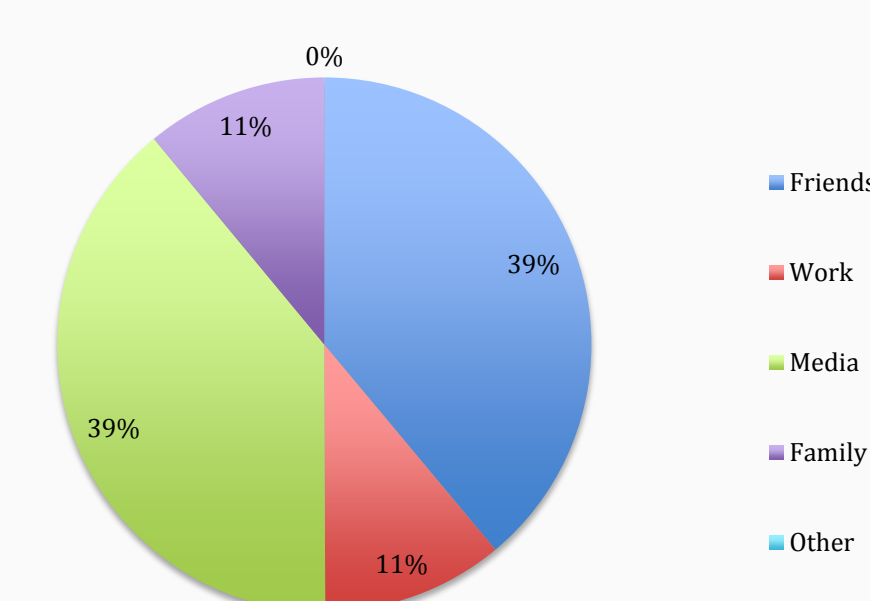
RESULTS

Table 1 - for Gender: We found that participants' answers to question one clustered around the theme of stereotyping and generalizations with derogatory terms (see Table 1). Answers to question two centered on the theme of speaking up by making an argument or staying quiet. Finally, answers for question three focused on the theme of laughing it off when told that their comment was inappropriate, and getting defensive when confronted.

For Race: We found that participants' answers to question one clustered around the theme of stereotyping and generalizations with derogatory terms. Answers to question two centered on the theme of speaking up by making an argument against a comment and staying quiet. Finally, answers to question three focused on the theme of laughing the confrontation off with getting defensive about the confrontation coming in second.
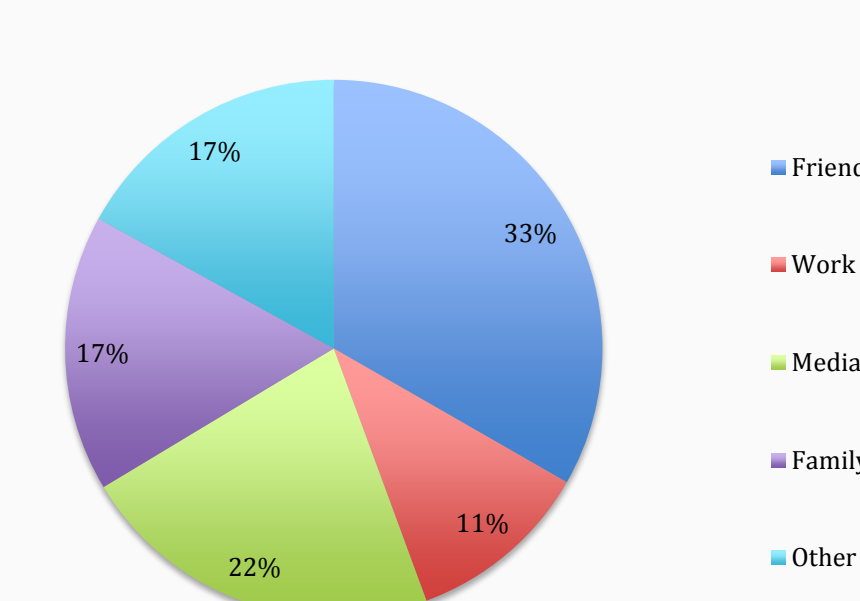
Gender:

Categories and Descriptions/Frequency	Examples
1. Types of Negative Comments:	
• Jokes – 7	"Make me a sandwich"; "Women's rights"
• Derogatory Terms/Comments – 11	"Don't be a pussy/faggot/gay"; Men label other, "weaker" men as feminine
• Stereotypes/Generalizations – 12	"Women can't drive; Men don't cry"; Men are bumbling idiots
2. Speaking Up:	
• Make an argument – 3	"That mindset isn't welcome here… keep thoughts to yourself"
• Witty comment – 2	"How? A woman can't be strong too?"
• Defensive comment – 5	Saying the language used/comment made isn't appropriate; "That's really rude/ that's messed up"; "Let's not talk about it"
2. Staying Quiet – 5	Not knowing what to say/agreeing with the comment or joke
3. Responses:	
• Get quiet – 2	Don't have a response, surprised, embarrassed
• Get defensive – 6	"I do not actually have anything against [gender], you're just being a little girl"
• Laugh it off – 9	"I was just joking/kidding"
• Keep going – 1	"They dismissed what I was saying and kept making comments"

Race:

Categories and Descriptions/Frequency	Examples
1. Types of Negative Comments:	
• Jokes – 6	Racial jokes – Can you even see? (Asian joke); Black men don't want to be fathers
• Derogatory Terms/Comments – 8	The "N" word, white trash, cracker, etc.; racial slurs
• Stereotypes/Generalizations – 10	Blacks can jump/are athletic; Mexicans are illegal; Arabs are "terrorists"; Asians are smart; Indians work at 7/11s
2. Speaking Up:	
• Make an argument – 5	"White, Asian, Hispanic people do this also…"; "We're all the same no matter what skin color we have"; educate people
• Witty comment – 2	"Because that wasn't unnecessarily racist?" (sarcastically); "reel it in a bit"
• Defensive comment – 4	"What you said was "wrong and completely uncalled for"
2. Staying Quiet – 5	Ignoring the comment made
3. Responses:	
• Get quiet – 3	Nothing to say to back up the comment; surprised; shocked; change the subject
• Get defensive/angry – 5	Denying what they said was wrong; "You know what I mean"; "I'm not racist"; "That's not what I meant"
• Laugh it off/blow it off – 9	"It was just a joke"
• Keep going/stand by the comment – 2	To cover up how uncomfortable they are with the confrontation
• Apologetic – 1	"I didn't mean to offend anyone"

Places for Negative Gender Comments

Places for Negative Race Comments

*Other includes: School, classroom, fellow students, public places, and generally "other"

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DISCUSSION

Our research showed that people tend to be insensitive about what they say when it comes to comments about race and gender. The research also shows that people speak up by making an argument and stay silent equally in these kinds of situations. Finally most people, when confronted about negative comments, tend to laugh off or play off the situation with statements like, "I'm just kidding," and "It's just a joke," or the like.

Allen says that, "regardless of intentions, one's behaviors can have a negative impact" (Allen, 2011, p.196). It is important to note this, because we need to realize that our words and actions can still effect other people whether we mean them or not. Understanding how to communicate across cultures and groups means that we are aware and mindful of this when speaking and interacting with others.

References

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