

The Issues of Black Racial Stereotype and Race Relationship Used in the Transcript of
Chris Rock's Standup Comedy Entitled Never Scared

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Abstract

This research aims to discuss how the issues of Black racial stereotype and race relationship are used to create laughter in the Chris Rock's standup comedy entitled Never Scared. The issues of Black racial stereotype and race relationship are examined in the context of African-American living in US as represented by Chris Rock, an influential American Black comedian. This research is a descriptive qualitative research which applies Arthur Asa Berger's theory of techniques of comedy as an approach. Finding shows that living in US as Black people is likely to get exposed to racial violence involving White people as the perpetrator. It also continually signifies how Black people are still considered as inferior race in US society which then leads to the mentioning of racial discrimination towards Black people, despite

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Racism has been giving much dark memories to American multicultural society. There are always new kind of racial issues emerge in the U.S. time by time. Since Black people is a race which has the strongest bound (slavery to be more specific) with America, it tends to face most of the racial issues instead of any other races such as Asian, Hispanic, Indian, and so on. With the existences of Black racial stereotypes as one of those racial issues, the U.S. society is considered treating white people better than Black people in almost every aspect of life. It can be in the workplace, public, healthcare, education, and so on. As time goes by, people start using Black racial stereotypes as a material to mock one another. They use it as a joke in order to sound 'funny' rather than to offense in public (Pérez, 2013). Facilitated by the emergence of standup comedy¹ which cannot be separated from the development of *Minstrel Show*², Black racial stereotypes contained within racist jokes eventually become widely spread in US.

First of all, it all began with Minstrel Show extended itself by mocking abolition, suffrage, political corruption, city life, country life and westward expansion (Jefferson, 1993). As Minstrel Show became popular, it spread through new media (radio, television airwaves, and theatre) in which an image of distorted features and cultures of Black people (looks, language, dance, and character) were presented (Blackface: The Birth of An American Stereotype, 2017). These innovations were related to US society's restlessness at that time: there was opposition between the industrial north with its wage labor and the agrarian south with its slave labor, economic fluctuation which sent women into workplace and jobless men back to the home, immigrants who were disturbed by longtime inhabitants considered themselves as the "real"

Americans, and how woman fought their suffrage. Since the audiences were mostly working-class men, these comedic themes were intentionally chosen so that it was easy for them to relate the show to what happen in their daily life.

Furthermore, the idea of Black people that Blackface performer has presented is based on Black people they watch in the plantation. Eric Lott (1993) in his book *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and American Working Class* has stated that Black performance exercised by Blackface performer is precisely “*performative*,” a cultural invention, it is not an authentic essence installed in Black bodies, and for better or worse it is often a product of self-commodification (1993). Moreover, Chinua Achebe³ explains that stereotype is considered as “*to simplify*,” the image of lazy, ignorant, superstitious, hypersexual, and likely to do thievery and cowardice are generally labeled to Black people. In other words, Minstrel Show indirectly function to ridicule the explorations of race and ethnicity, utterances of taboo languages, and confessions involving an unusually intimate relationship (Daube, 2009) of which happen to the working-class audiences’ everyday life. Thus, Minstrel Show has a big part in pervasively making stereotypes of Black people which give big effects to US Society until today (Blackface: The Birth of An American Stereotype, 2017). As a result, one of those big effects is the use of Black racial stereotypes and race relationship in Standup Comedy.

There are some previous researches related to the use of race-related jokes in comedy. Those previous researches are categorized into two categories, pros in using racist joke and cons in using racist joke. Pro racist joke researches discuss how the genre of comedy privileges a reading of racial stereotypes as harmless, despite the potential negative consequences of such representations (Park, Nadine, & Ariel, 2006). They find that race can be used to entertain people when it is mixed with comedy and movie making. Agree or not, Bowes (1990) and King

(2002) have mutual statement that stereotypes are important in comedy because not only do they help to maintain quick recognizable character types but such character uniqueness and stereotype-based jokes also constitute a source of humor (cited in Park et al., 2006). As it is clearly explained, one advantage of racist jokes shows that it can be positive in entertainment purpose such as movie, TV show, talk show, and so on. Moreover, Stereotyping, as the main point of racist jokes, emerges in various contexts to serve particular functions necessitated by those contexts (Hilton & von Hippel, 1996). However, considering how humor could easily be absorbed in people's mind due to its nuance of entertainment played gradually in the media, it is unfortunate that Black racial stereotypes might also be indirectly constructed in people's mind as well through standup comedy.

Cons racist joke researchers state that the links between humor and hatred are topics which are often ignored by researchers of prejudice (Billig, 2001). They find that there is a connection between hatred and humor by using racist joke as disguise. In addition, Sartre (1948) adds cons in using racist jokes by suggesting in his essay, *Portrait of the Anti-Semite*, that bigots take pleasure in "the joy of hating" as it is found in the standup comedy (cited in Billig, 2001). Moreover, the downside of racist joke shows that humor can be delivered with additional extreme racist bigotry to make the humor easily make people laugh. Since Davies (1990) argues that the structure and content of a joke should not be taken as necessarily reflecting the joke-teller's state of mind (cited in Billig, 2001), people tend to hide behind the phrase "it is just a joke." Furthermore, Billig (1999) assumes that the excuse of "only" or "just" in joking are often used in rhetorical defense against an accusation of something bad i.e. being racist (cited in Billig, 2001). In other words, these racist comedians barely deny that they are racist, meaning that they are real racists (Billig, 2001). At the end, it is concluded that there are integral links between

extreme hatred of racial issue and violent humor in a racist jokes. Therefore, it is obvious that some previous researchers have big concern on the connection between hatred and comedy.

Unfortunately, those researches have not come to an explanation on how a comedian, specifically an American comedian, uses racial issues such as Black racial stereotype and race relationship to produce jokes in a standup comedy performance. Therefore, this research aims to explore about how Black racial stereotype and race relationship issues are being used in Chris Rock's standup comedy entitled *Never Scared*.

Never Scared (2004) is one of many standup comedies performed by influential African American comedian Chris Rock. *Never Scared* explores the gap between social groups in making profit in US. Moreover, it also discusses how slavery that happened long time ago still has had effects on US daily life. Regarding the title of the standup comedy, *Never Scared* signifies that Black people are ready to fight back racism that they experience in their daily life.

The main concern of this research is on how Chris Rock depicts Black and White people in his standup comedy. Considering Chris Rock's characterization of Black and White people and the intention of continuing the previous research, this research attempts to argue that Chris Rock's use of Black racial stereotype and race relationship to present his jokes indirectly leads to perpetuate racism in US society. Since standup comedy culture gives almost absolute freedom to discuss whatever topic the comedians want, most of sensitive jokes made by comedians have desensitized American people from giving respect one another. Therefore, this article uses the standup comedy entitled *Never Scared* to support the arguments in examining Chris Rock's idea on Black racial stereotype and race relationship.

Methods

This research is a descriptive qualitative research. Therefore, the main concern of this research is the social context that the data brought to the society. This research uses the transcript of Chris Rock's standup comedy entitled *Never Scared* as the source of data. Rakhmat (2004) explains that a descriptive research only analyses phenomenon and event. Meanwhile, as a qualitative research, it is a research without neither undergoing calculation nor statistic procedure (cited in Julita, 2010). In summary, qualitative research is employed to gain deeper comprehension about the racial issues happened in US society (Imaniar, 2014).

In an effort to obtain an explanation and information about how a comedian uses racial issues such as Black racial stereotype and race relationship leading to jokes in a standup comedy performance, this research needs the source of the data. Therefore, this research chooses the transcript of Chris Rock's standup comedy entitled *Never Scared*, a source of the data in the form of words and sentences related to the topic of the research. Later on, this data are considered as this research's primary data. Meanwhile, when the research needs the live video aspect to analyze the data more deeply, this research considers elements of the video of Chris Rock's standup comedy entitled *Never Scared*, which are in the form of Chris Rock's intonation, Chris Rock's facial expression, and audiences' responses, as the secondary data.

The data of the research are analyzed using Arthur Asa Berger's techniques of comedy. In his book *The Art of Comedy Writing*, Berger (2011) proposes 45 techniques to write a decent joke that laughable by people. He divides those techniques into four categories: involving *Logic* (*Absurdity, Accident, Analogy, Catalogue, Coincidence, Comparison, Disappointment, Ignorance, Mistakes, Repetition, Reversal, Rigidity, Theme/Variation, Unmasking*), involving *Language* (*Allusion, Bombast, Definition, Exaggeration, Facetiousness, Insults, Infantilism,*

Irony, Misunderstanding, Over literalness, Puns, Repartee, Ridicule, Sarcasm, Satire) involving *Identity (Before/After, Burlesque, Caricature, Eccentricity, Embarrassment, Exposure, Grotesque, Imitation, Impersonation, Mimicry, Parody, Scale, Stereotype)*, and involving *Action (Chase, Slapstick, Speed)*.

Thus, the first step in analyzing the data is by preparing the materials for analysis i.e. the transcript of Chris Rock's standup comedy entitled *Never Scared*. Secondly, this research identifies the issues of Black racial stereotype and race relationship in the transcript of Chris Rock's standup comedy entitled *Never Scared* obtained from those materials. Thirdly, this research analyzes the obtained data based on Arthur Asa Berger's techniques of comedy in figuring how the issues of Black racial stereotype and race relationship are being used in the transcript of Chris Rock's standup comedy entitled *Never Scared*, especially in using the techniques of *Absurdity, Analogy, Comparison, Ignorance, Theme/ Variation, Definition, Exaggeration, Insults, Irony, Ridicule, Sarcasm, Satire, Impersonation, Mimicry, and Stereotype*. Then, this research considers Chris Rock's intonation, Chris Rock's facial expression, and audiences' laughter obtained from the video of Chris Rock's standup comedy entitled *Never Scared* to understand the context of the jokes more deeply. Next, this research interprets the obtained data to conclude a result. Finally, this research draws the conclusion of this research after the questions of this research is answered.

Result

When it comes to race-related comedy material, mainstream American standup comedy performances usually take Black and White people as their main topic. Moreover, the plotline of each of the performances are somehow identical from one to another, that those kind of performances always discuss about Black people as the victims and White people as the villains.

From the analysis of Chris Rock's standup comedy entitled *Never Scared*, three findings that signifies the issues of Black racial stereotypes and race relationships are found and those are exposing racial violence between Black and White people, signifying Black people as inferior race, and mentioning racial discrimination on Black people.

Exposing Racial Violence between Black and White People

In discussing about racial violence, it is important to know first about what racial violence actually is. Most of the racial violence definitions are based on the perpetrator's intention. For example, White mob attacks a group of Black people during racial equity movement is simply considered as racial violence, however, medical malpractice by White doctor towards Black patient does fall to such category. Yet, it seems that this type of definition does not cover institutionalized racial violence which unfortunately is often subtle and hidden. Therefore, Kathleen M. Bee (2005) offers a reconceptualization of racial violence as to "acts with violence consequences in which victims are racially fungible." Bee highlights two main criterions in her definition which are: a) the consequences to victims and b) the fungibility of the victims. Other than the perpetrator's intent, Bee puts victims' experiences and understandings into account to emphasize what establishes racial violence is more of politic contestation rather than set of actions. Meanwhile, the fungibility of the victims is necessary to make sure that the victims are not harmed due to their personal characteristic but more to their race.

Taking the information into account, this research has found several tendencies of racial violence issues in the transcript of Chris Rock's standup comedy entitled *Never Scared* (2004). These racial violence issues cover how White people establish White supremacy. In other words, Chris Rock has depicted racial violence between Black people and White people by narrating how White people have killed smart Black slaves in the past that led smart Black slaves

pretending to be stupid to survive. That action then leads to the making of 'Affirmative Action' which is intended to decrease racial discrimination between Black and White people in US. By showing how smart Black people have been treated during the slavery, to hide the racial violence intention, Chris Rock seems to propose showing how US society has had dark history about Black people that must never have happened again in the future.

Signifying Black People as Inferior Race

Researchers believe that stereotypes are more than just descriptions of a particular social group. In fact, Hamilton (1981) with other several researchers consider stereotypes as a form of cognitive structures affected by perception, attention, and memory (cited in Dovidio, Nancy, & Richard, 1984). Meanwhile, Dovidio, Nancy, & Richard (1984) have found out that the more closely associated character of a person to the stereotype, the quicker reaction one has referring to that stereotype. In other words, someone would quickly refer Black stereotypic words to Black people rather than White people. Similarly, someone would quickly refer White stereotypic words to White people rather than Black people.

Scrutinizing the narrative which Christ Rock presents for his standup comedy, this research has identified several uses of Black racial stereotype in the transcript of *Never Scared*. He plays with some expressions mentioning Black racial stereotypes which in his opinion is to cover the cognitive structure of US society regarding to Black people on three characteristics: ignorant, criminal, and athletic.

In showing ignorant Black people, Chris Rock produces some expressions on how Black people are money-wasting for spending money to something they do not need instead of investing money for their future. By showing that Black people are money-wasting, it can be

interpreted that Chris Rock attempts to persuade them to be wiser in spending their money, only for something they need.

Chris Rock also presents some jokes about the relation between Black people and criminals by expressing sentences on how a Black rapper would be in jail just for singing “gun” and rhyming it with “fun.” By showing people’s belief on how close Black people to criminal action, Chris Rock demands Americans to no longer judge people by the color of their skin, yet by the content of their personality instead. Then, Chris Rock explains the reason why Black people have good skills at physical activities. He states that the reason is because the way White people have used to breed strong Black slaves for plantation in the past. By considering how Black people are really good at physical activities, it seems that Chris Rock intends to cheer Black people that they can use that advantage to have better life in US.

Mentioning Racial Discrimination on Black people

Different from racial violence, Feagin & Eckberg (1980) define racial discrimination as “practices and actions of dominant racial and ethnic groups that have a differential and negative impact on subordinate racial and ethnic groups.” However, Feagin & Eckberg’s definition of racial discrimination does not include the motivation, or the source, of the discrimination. Yet, it covers the mechanisms of racial discrimination, negative effects of those mechanisms, and the relation between those mechanisms and its effects (Feagin & Eckberg, 1980). From the data, this research has also identified several racial discrimination issues in Chris Rock’s jokes through the presentation of how Black people make profit and gain wealth in US. In other words, Chris Rock compared what Black people experience and what White people experience to show how racial discrimination exists in US. In his standup comedy, Chris Rock has given an example of how White cigarettes tycoon can be so wealthy because they are White. Also, Chris Rock has given

an example of how a Black and White student with an exact level of intelligence might have different path in their life. Even though there is this fact that they have equal skill and capability, there is a big chance that White student would have a better life than Black student. By comparing what Black and White people's effort in pursuing success in US, Chris Rock demands US society to no longer let racial discrimination exist in every aspect of Americans life.

In relation to the video aspect of Chris Rock's standup comedy entitled *Never Scared*, Chris Rock employs raising and falling intonation when giving an issue of racial violence. Chris Rock uses upward inflection to enlist the racial violence, which can be interpreted that he is asking the audiences' attention to the issues and then he finishes his list by using downward inflection to close but at the same time also to soften the racial violence issues. Therefore, the video shows how Chris Rock raises up his voice to start the list and then drops down his voice to end the list when saying, "...*A lot of people think it's to do with the '60s, the back of the bus, separate lunch counters. No. when you see footage of the '60s, see black people, see us getting sprayed down, dogs getting sicked on us, little girls getting burnt up in the churches, that's just white people being nice.*" It is interesting that he closes with the word "*that's just White people being nice*". This expression in some way is bitter and ironical but with the way he plays with intonations, his audiences do not recognize the bitterness and the irony of his words, rather the joke of laughing to ourselves' mistakes.

Furthermore, Chris Rock states Black inferiority by using falling and circumflex intonation. In using falling intonation, Chris Rock uses upward inflection to mention Black inferiority i.e. ignorant, criminal, and athletic as statements. The use of the falling intonation can be interpreted that he is highlighting the issues to ensure the audiences understands that the issues have big impact to the US society. Meanwhile, Chris Rock uses circumflex intonation

when he indicates to the audience that he has not finished what he says yet. When Chris Rock says, “*Maybe – now just maybe – maybe if we didn’t spend all our money on rims we might have some to invest,*” Chris Rock’s voice goes up, down, up, and then down again when it ends. Chris Rock uses circumflex intonation when he says “*Maybe-now just maybe*” to stress out that what he says next is debatable. In other word, Chris Rock himself is not sure that his statement “*maybe if we didn’t spend all of our money on rims we might have some to invest*” is correct due to the ignorance of Black people.

Furthermore, Chris Rock states racial discrimination by using falling and raising intonation. In using Falling Intonation, Chris Rock uses upward inflection to mention racial discrimination related to Black and White relationship. The upward inflection works to make racial discrimination that Chris Rock mentioned sounds important to be discussed. Meanwhile, Chris Rock uses raising intonation in order to give question to the audience. When Chris Rock asks, “*Shit, could you imagine if the Philip Morris family was a bunch of jheri-curled niggers from Mississippi. Do you know how illegal a pack of cigarettes would be? You would get 60 years for a pack of Newports,*” Chris Rock’s voice goes upward at the end of the questions. The raising intonation let the audiences to give more attention to the issue, so that Chris Rock’s punch at the end can works effectively and get much laugh from the audiences.

In a matter of facial expression, Chris Rock shows smile, giggle, and frown during his performance. Most of Chris Rock’s smiles and giggles are intended to indicate the punch of the jokes. After Chris Rock says “*Shaq is rich. The white man that signs his cheque is wealthy. Here you go, Shaq. Go buy yourself a bouncing car.*” *Bling-bling!*,” he indicates that it is the time for the audiences to laugh. In other word, Chris Rock’s smiles and giggles is a sign for the audiences to laugh louder because the joke turns out to be less funny than he expected.

Meanwhile, most of Chris Rock's frown appears when he discusses about racial discrimination as a sign of disapproval and confusion. When Chris Rock shows his frown after saying "*White man makes guns, no problem. Black rapper says "gun", Congressional hearing. Like, "My God, that nigger said gun! "And he rhymed it with fun!,*" it can be interpreted that Chris Rock is confuse with the logic behind that statement. In other word, Chris Rock disagrees on the fact that White man is able to make gun yet a Black rapper cannot even say "gun" in his song.

Lastly, most audiences' responses towards Chris Rock's standup comedy are laughing, cheering, and clapping. Audience's laughing is a response of pleasure to Chris Rock's jokes. When Chris Rock's says "*that's just White people being nice,*" it triggers the audiences' laughs because the audiences think that Chris Rock would say something like White people being evil, yet he surprisingly says the opposite.

Meanwhile, audiences' cheering and clapping are a response of agreement and appreciation to Chris Rock's statement. One of many audiences' cheering and clapping can be found after Chris Rock says "*For instance, during slavery, they used to take the biggest, strongest slaves and breed them and try their best to make big, strong super-slaves, ok? That's right. And there's evidence of that today. Like the NFL, for instance. NFL stands for Nigger Fucking Large. They bred the slaves, and this is why black people dominate every physical activity in the United States of America. We're only 10% of the population, we're 90% of the Final Four, ok? We fucking dominate all this shit, ok? Basketball, baseball, football, boxing, track, even golf and tennis. As soon as they make a heated hockey rink, we gonna take that shit too.*" By cheering and clapping, the audiences agree that the reason why Black people dominate every physical activity in US is because White peoples used to breed biggest and strongest

slaves. Also, the audiences appreciate Chris Rock on how he compliments Black people who are able to dominate every physical activity in US.

Conclusion

After conducting an analysis towards the transcript of Chris Rock's standup comedy entitled *Never Scared*, people might see that there is a perpetuate racism in Chris Rock's idea of Black racial stereotype and Race relationship. It is clear that Chris Rock still uses sensitive topic, such as racial stereotype and race relationship issues, in his standup comedy performance. *Never Scared* becomes one of many proofs that standup comedy has a big role in delivering racism to the US society. By illustrating old classic depiction of Black people as the victim and White people as the villains, it looks like that it becomes the formula for Chris Rock to present racial issues in his standup comedy performance. At the end, the Chris Rock's persistence on illustrating that old classic depiction could be interpreted as his way in taking advantages of Black racial stereotype and race relationship issues happened in US.

This article shows that Chris Rock's depiction of Black and White people can be found in Chris Rock's standup comedy entitled *Never Scared* through three important findings, and those are: the way Chris Rock exposes racial violence between Black and White people, signifies Black people as inferior race, and mentions racial discrimination on Black people. It can be concluded that the Chris Rock's idea about Black racial stereotype and racial relationship issues is present to make Black people can always play victim to whatever racial issues happens to them which involves White people as Black people's long-lasting villain Thus, this research attempts to argue that Chris Rock's idea of Black racial stereotype and race relationship may desensitize American people from giving respect one another through that perpetuate racism he builds in his idea of black racial stereotype and race relationship. As a result of conducting this

research, it would be fruitful to pursue further research about comedians who desensitized people from being kind one another by telling sensitive jokes. This is important for our society because our society is no longer need another perpetuation of sensitive issues such as racism.

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¹Standup comedy describes an encounter between a single, standing performer behaving comically and/or talking funny things directly to an audience, unsupported by very much in the way of costume, prop, setting, or dramatic vehicle (Mintz, 1985).

²It is also called *Minstrelsy*, it is an American theatrical form that using racial stereotypes to perform comic action. The performance is about a combination of singing, dancing, Negro dialect speaking, and instrumental music played on the banjo, violin, bone castanet, and tambourine (Koenig, 1994) acted by non-Black performers in Black face to represent Black person.

³ A Nigerian novelist