Taking Offense Seriously: Using (Visual) Humor to Demarcate Social and Symbolic Boundaries

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"When someone offends me, I think it's a gift from Allah."

Apocryphal, attributed to Ibn Taymiyyah, c. 1300

Abstract

While humor has a long résumé as a "window into the unconscious," the *boundaries* it strikes against are understudied. Are people offended in particular, predictable ways? This online survey (N=1,178) that gathers demographic, biographic, and psychological data in combination with responses to 22 wordless cartoons, reveals distinct social patterns in offendability. With reference to anthropological, psychological, philosophical and neuroscientific traditions, "offendability" is conceptualized in cultural sociological terms, by which "offense" is read as the "striking against" of a symbolic boundary (separating profane from the too-sacred-to-play-with). As such, offense is proposed as a supremely meaningful metric in defining groups in terms of what they believe most deeply. With attention both to marginal groups and to liminal identities, analysis crystalizes an intriguing trend, namely: the significance of *micro* (individual) level factors (e.g., age, gender, psychological characteristics) and *macro* (social) factors (e.g., ethnicity, nationality) in predicting sensitivity to offense, in comparison to the seeming irrelevance of the *meso* (interactional). This builds on major sociological work (Klinenberg 2012; Putnam 2000) that cites the increasing solitariness of modern life; here, "sacred" boundaries are seen to be individually determined, in combination less with lived experience than with membership in abstract, often innate groups. Regression models explore meaningful variables in greater detail. Of particular note: sexual preferences were the greatest predictor of sensitivity to offense, with women attracted to women reporting the highest sensitivity. Across the board, those who were uncomfortable before disclosing particular information (e.g., sexual, political preferences) were disproportionately from

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the groups who were more sensitive to offense (e.g., "queer," right-leaning): identity discomfort manifests as symbolic discomfort.

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1. Introduction

On an April Saturday during the second year of Donald Trump's presidency, comedian Michelle Wolf stepped into a now-prestigious position as host of the White House Correspondents' Association dinner. To the assembled journalists, pundits and politicians, Wolf made a roast of Democrats, Republicans, news channels of every ilk, peppered with jokes about abortion, a recent death on an airplane, and pudendal grooming. The media reaction was swift and pronounced: offense, taken heavily, across boundaries of ideology and group membership.

For all intents and purposes, the jokes were offensive by nature—designed to shame most everyone in the room, to discomfit, to shock. ("Yeah, shoulda done more research before you got me to do this," said Wolf early on.) But in the punditry aftermath it was hard to separate sincere offense from agendas supported—hard to distinguish *you shouldn't mock a woman's eye makeup* from *you shouldn't mock a woman in my party's eye makeup*. "You make the very people you're lampooning sympathetic figures," worried Joe Scarborough on the editorially liberal network MSNBC. On the other side, the chairman of the American Conservative Union had this interaction with CNN host Alisyn Camerota:

> ACU Chairman: Her monologue was dead focused on mocking people like [Trump administration senior staffers]....
> Camerota: Maybe you're being overly sensitive.

These debates about the media's offendability were so extensive that they even drowned out coverage of severe journalist fatalities after a bombing in Kabul on the same day. "Offense" has meaning, and sensitivity to offense is intertwined with identity and ideology. Now, with the rise of what has been deemed "outrage culture" or "victimhood culture" (Campbell and Manning 2014), a sociological idea has entered mainstream discourse: that people may declare their *distinctions* (here: in terms of what injures them symbolically) for instrumental reasons. Whether

or not the "offense" is interpreted as genuine, these declarations are clear assertions of identity: *this is what I stand for, because this what I stand against.*

And still, true offense is hard to measure when it is already connected to an agenda. If we want to understand identity and group boundaries in a meaningful way, a question remains: when jokes have no particular target and no intent to offend, *what are people's default proclivities for offense?* Does this symbolic "sensitivity" follow measurable patterns?

The following survey project presented 1,178 respondents with 22 wordless cartoons and registered their reactions on two axes: *funny*, and *offensive.* Because humor is a space where "the social, the physical, the emotional, snap into alignment" (Douglas 1975: 6), it is a perfect arena for the "study of the interplay of symbolic and social boundaries… to highlight the similar analytical concerns of a vast body of research" (Lamont and Molnar 2002: 186). And while humor taps into the unconscious, it is *offense* that indicates its most basic allergies, its rejections, the boundaries it defends. Humor invokes entire webs of meaning; *offense* takes place at its borders, where the meanings made on either side are categorically different enough to affect the shape of society. This study uses the comic to access the offensive—a Trojan horse into the agora before a mapping of the city walls.

In contemporary sociological terms, senses of humor and of offense reflect *symbolic boundaries* (review: Lamont, Pendergrass, and Pachucki 2015)[2], outlining group memberships and the intricate sociolinguistic meaning systems that define them. In a world of "imagined communities" (Anderson 1983), of fluid "national" identities as real as citizens believe them to be, a shared joke is like a common passport flashed.

But "communities have been defined by their internal segmentation as much as by their external perimeter" (Lamont and Molnar 2002: 181; Durkheim 1912)—and "offense" marks this perimeter. Etymology may help: *offendere,* Latin for "to strike against." Here, offense is analyzed as a *striking against*, delineating a boundary between *okay* and *too far*, between the profane and the too-sacred-to-play-with. Distinctions in reactions to humor have typically been studied along particular axes (gender, e.g., see Kuipers 2006), and "offense" has typically been within the

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[2] "'Symbolic Boundaries' are the lines that include and define some people, groups, and things while excluding others…. These distinctions can be expressed through normative interdictions (taboos), cultural attitudes and practices, and patterns of likes and dislikes" (Lamont et al. 2015: 850).

psychologists' purview. Here, we are able to examine distinctions across diverse axes, exploring *sensitivity to offense* on demographic, biographic, and psychological levels. This is essentially a new space: understanding offense in a cross-cultural context.

The objects of that offense are selected with the aim of cultural nonspecificity (see *Sec. 3.2*). By asking *who is offended? who recognizes the offensive?* we allow ourselves a unique window into the formation (and potential dissolution) of groups at their most sensitive level. When jokes have no particular target and no intent to offend, *what are people's default proclivities for offense?* Are certain groups simply more sensitive than others?

And while this is relatively uncharted territory, a general hypothesis is possible. Take the assumptions and conclusions of phenomenological sociology (Schutz 1932; Husserl 1931)— primarily that "social processes," as Berger and Luckmann (1967: 68) lay out most simply, "produce the self in its particular, culturally relative form." These processes take place within a structure, and that structure is not unchanging. Coleman (1986: 1320) summarizes the 20th century shift: "a growing structural asymmetry in Western society, with large corporate actors (corporations, government) on one side and individuals (not communities, not neighborhoods, not families) on the other, linked together by mass media rather than direct communication." We might predict, then, that individuals' sensitivities will manifest in domains where the self is most under construction — in arenas where mass media is more relevant (on the scale of nationality, e.g.) than interpersonal communication, where large actors *matter* more than small ones.

Reading "sensitivity to offense" as an indication of meaningful interaction (i.e., boundary-making) between self and society, the empirical findings presented here can be interpreted as an exploration of *what matters* in the social construction of self. In fact, Coleman's mass linkages do stand out: macro (e.g., ethnicity) and micro (e.g., age; psychology) factors emerge as meaningful; variables at the scale of "direct communication"— those community-, neighborhood-, family-level interactions—do not.

2. Theory

2.1. The Joke as Rosetta Stone

"It has often been alleged that one is 'truly' a member of a group when one is able to joke easily with other members and able to understand and share the jokes that these others tell," writes Michaela De Soucey with career humor scholar Gary Alan Fine (2005). The range of humor

scholarship is interdisciplinary and historic: linguists and neuroscientists, Freud (1905) and Kierkegaard (1844) and Plato in *Philebus*, have seized on the unparalleled importance of humor in organizing—and creating—social life. (For an interdisciplinary overview, see Raskin 2009.) The central takeaway from this sparse and omnivorous history: that a solid understanding of *what's funny and why* is a kind of fMRI for Durkheim's *conscience collective* (1893). "The decoding of the humorous metaphor is a decoding of the meaning structure of the social system in which it is embedded" (Fine and De Soucey 2005: 4; Douglas 1968).

To fully understand a joke is to understand every symbol and interpretation the joke touches—but to *react* as another does is to take up a similar position and *orientation* in that tangled meaning-web. Joyce Hertzler (1970): "some of what the social entity laughs at, and most of what it laughs against... indicates what is not acceptable to it, what is not in conformity with its principles and standards of social order and well-being."

Of course, "the social entity" is an array of fractures, and exploring humor is an exquisite way to understand those salient group boundaries, i.e., divisions that *matter*. If humor is a window into the entire meaning structure—a web of meaning—an analysis of the off-limits is needed first to explore where those webs end. As Douglas paraphrases Freud, when a joke hits: "For a moment the unconscious is allowed to bubble up without restraint" (1975: 149). Letting the metaphors out again: we might trade Durkheim's collective conscience for Carl Jung's "collective unconscious" (also known, all too fittingly, as the "cultural unconscious"). Methodologically, this relaxing of "restraint" may give unfiltered responses a greater chance of coming to the surface. More importantly, in aggregating "unconscious" trends, we enter an ideal domain for investigating fundamental social distinctions at the level where they are most individually embedded, most engrained (and perhaps most susceptible to change once brought to light).

2.2 Investigating Offense

William Ian Miller (2009) forcefully argues that self-conceptions *depend* on reactions to "disgust." Our internal boundaries are policed by our reactions to external stimuli, and our disgust for the external is affected by how we conceptualize ourselves. This study continues in that vein: offense should be interpreted as a close member of the disgust family—symbolic disgust, perhaps, or intellectual disgust.

If we subscribe in the slightest to Durkheim's framework that a group's boundaries "coincide with those delimitating the sacred from the profane" (Lamont 2001; Durkheim 1912), we should pay close attention to the act of transgressing, of crossing from one side to the other. Garfinkel's "breaching experiments" (1963, 1967) operated by a similar premise, that we can better (or, only) understand norms by breaking them. In fact, the social sciences have taken a long interest in the restrictions against such transgression— "taboos"—as powerful cultural insight (Sahlins 1981; Bataille 1962; Durkheim 1897). Here, the focus is on respondents' *sensitivity* to taboos[3]: do they register the presence of a taboo or not? That is to say: has a boundary been struck against?

We have to acknowledge the fundamental threat carried within humor, whether or not we believe the content is "taboo": "The joke merely affords opportunity for realizing that an accepted pattern has no necessity" (Douglas 1975: 150). Poetic and spot-on, Douglas says jokes are a "play upon form" (ibid). To play with meanings fixed in a respondent's pattern of social life and self-identification can be unsettling, especially when this arbitrary-making "produces no real alternative" (ibid: 151). Freedom without order; and if the reader wonders how such simple jokes might trigger measurable offense, we look to Kierkegaard: "anxiety is the dizziness of freedom" (1844: 61). A joke offers a chance for an outside perspective of the otherwise deeply internalized— a version of the double-consciousness that wasn't, to Du Bois, a delight.

Visual cartoons are especially useful here because they are interpretable largely outside of context, providing an opportunity for a wide survey pool to express comparable reactions. (See Grady 1996 on the powers of visual sociology; for cartoons specifically: Tavory 2014; Kris and Gombrich 1938.) This is true of taboo symbols in many forms, down to the basic building blocks of language: communication requires certain conditions to be "felicitous" (Austin 1962). But in the case of "verbal taboos," they "may become so essentialized that their performativity comes to rest on few if any felicity conditions" (Fleming and Lempert: 2011: 5). They "have their context coiled tight inside' (ibid: 7). Words are complex, but *dirty* (or sacred) words are simpler, reduced to an essence. A respondent's reaction is felt, as Jack Katz describes criminals' most transcendent emotions, "as soul" (1988: 25). Something deeply embodied and yet imminently identifiable, this

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[3] The conflation of *taboo* and *offense* is deliberate: to promote common understanding with minimal complication, the term "offense" was not given supplementary explanation. (Credit to Salvatore Attardo for advice on this approach to construct validity.)

is material that both offers insight into the "cultural unconscious" *and* remains able to be consciously unpacked.

3. Methods

The lion's share of data for this survey was gathered through the crowdsourcing platform Amazon Mechanical Turk (mTurk), using small payments (0.1 to 0.3 USD) to recruit voluntary respondents. Soon after its inception in 2005 as a platform largely for machine learning and data entry, mTurk was adopted by social scientists as a fruitful method for convenience sampling (Mason and Watts 2010; Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz 2012). While American samples of mTurk are considered more diverse than other crowdsourced samples (Paolacci and Chandler 2014), they still suffer unrepresentativeness along multiple axes,[4] all of which are included in the survey, and will serve as predictors in the model. (For more on the motivational context of "Turkers," see: Schmidt 2015). And while there always exists a risk for participants in online methods of "self-selecting into studies that interest them" (Casey et al. 2017), respondents' "interest" was mitigated in part by the blinded description of the experiment: as one centered around cartoon "funniness," as opposed to "offensiveness."

In short, across the social sciences, mTurk has been accepted as an incredibly generative resource (Mason and Suri 2012). We don't have to agree fully with the economists who wrote that online experiments "can be just as valid—both internally and externally—as laboratory and field experiments"; it is simply enough to take from the fields of political science (e.g., Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz 2012), psychology (Tosti-Kharas and Conley 2016), sociology (Nishi, Christakis, and Rand 2017) to use this data as a fruitful stepping stone out into the largely uncharted waters of humor and offense research.

3.1 Surveyed Information

3.1.1. Subject data

Three primary categories of personal information were gathered: 1) *Demographic*, 2) *Biographical*, 3) *Psychological.* (Mary Douglas's categories—social, physical, emotional—fit the survey nearly as well.)

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[4] Compared to the general population, as in Casey et al. 2017: younger, more educated; more educated, more liberal; less married; more likely to identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual.

The *demographic* variables are the initial targets: controlling for patterns in life course and psychological factors, *are there trends in sensitivity to offense along basic social axes?* The survey gathered information about age, gender, ethnicity (freely described by the respondent), and income, in addition to information about citizenship, native language, sexual preferences, and occupation. Educational data was not gathered; for these purposes income and occupation can serve as a preliminary, if imperfect, proxy. Additionally: we capture information about alternative sources of income (e.g., government support, or inheritance) to examine financial interactions in greater detail.

Biographical data consists of potentially significant details from respondents' lives after birth. Survey questions gathered information about relationship status, and relocation status; that is, whether the respondent had moved from the country or city where they grew up, and if so, the length of time in their new hometown/home country. "Immigrants are also likely to transport symbolic boundaries from one cultural context to another," (Lamont and Molnar 2002: 186). Along with questions about multilingualness and sexual preferences, this data is geared towards a greater understanding of "outsiders" (Becker 1963), elaborated below. To note, it is less important to categorize "sexual preference" as a demographic or biographical variable than to acknowledge the scope of gathered data: seeking to encapsulate objective distinctions equally visible to individual and public (here: demographic), and meaningful variations in life course (biographical).

Self-reported *psychological* data is gathered as an important anchor, to allow further distinction between micro and macro factors. Since the scope here is extremely broad, basic standard measures at the psychological level are sufficient. Building on more than half a century of factor analysis, psychologists have developed a taxonomy of traits known as the "Big Five." The goal was not to account for all human variation in five traits, but to develop a simple set of umbrella-like traits with predictive power. Only later christened the "Big Five" (Goldberg 1990), the traits were originally enumerated as follows:

(I) Extraversion or Surgency (talkative, assertive, energetic)

(II) Agreeableness (good-natured, cooperative, trustful)

(III) Conscientiousness (orderly, responsible, dependable)

(IV) Emotional Stability versus Neuroticism (calm, not neurotic, not easily upset)

(V) Culture (intellectual, polished, independent-minded) (Norman 1963)

In later iterations including the TIPI, "Culture" has been rebranded as "Openness to Experiences." No matter what: the effects of *culture* are linked to one's own experiences, and openness in processing them. In this cultural sociological study, "openness" (and exposure) to multiple frames of experience (see Goffman 1974) is of special concern; the biographical and psychological data aim to capture this at separate, connected levels. If experience is not so simply organized into simple frames—a version of what Goffman calls "frame ambiguity" (1974: 302-8)—are there any notable differences in reactions to taboo? Can personal frame ambiguity affect the rigidity of sacred social frames?

For this study, participants answered Gosling, Rentfrow, and Swann's (2003) Ten Item Personality Inventory (TIPI), a self-reported, seven-point Likert test. Each of the five traits is measured by a pair of oppositely oriented questions; e.g., "Extraversion" is measured by adding "Extraverted, enthusiastic" to the reverse-coded response for "Reserved, quiet." At first blush, this will allow claims-making about demographic differences controlling for basic differences in individual personalities.

Finally, the survey also included four measures of "discomfort," along axes considered central to this study: sexual preferences, ethnicity, income, and political preferences. Before the detailed question in each domain, the survey asked *Will it make you uncomfortable to answer a question about* [that domain]*?* If "no," an open-ended question followed immediately. If they clicked yes, the next screen acknowledged the discomfort but offered an extra prompt; for example:

> *We understand entirely — this question is not required.*
> *All information provided, of course, is greatly appreciated for research purposes.*

Many respondents provided an answer following the second prompt, offering us rich and rare data (*Sec. 4.4*). Measuring discomfort in this way allows for a further link to be drawn between identity and offense, between personal sensitivities and abstract sensitivities to comic content.

3.1.2. Response data

Possible responses to cartoons: not funny and I don't like it, not funny but I like it, funny, very funny, extremely funny—or *I don't understand*. On the next screen, respondents were given the option to mark offense: "offensive to me" or "offensive to the general public" (subsequently *personal* and *general* offense). These options were given as a forced choice, prompting a respondent to identify the pressure point of his or her offense, but making it impossible to select both.

Across the 22 cartoons, the number of participants who registered personal offense ranged from 4.9 to 17.6% (among those who understood); general offense followed a similar pattern at a higher rate, ranging from 3.5 to 51.1%. Aggregated scores: from 8.9 to 68.6%. To note (as a first finding): *general* and *personal* metrics yielded very similar rankings—offensive in one dimension was offensive in the other. (**Table 1**) Greater variation in rankings at the "least offensive" end is partly explicable by a low volume of positive responses; regardless, low in one category trends low in the other, high trends high (r=0.87).

Because of the two-pronged approach, a survey iteration allowing multiple responses will be required to explore the nature of the gap between personal and general offense. But first, we should examine where boundaries are even felt, and along what axes that feeling varies. For this reason, the study will measure "offensiveness" in the aggregate, both offense responses summed for each cartoon. As such, the primary outcome variable is taken to indicate a *sensitivity to offense*.

Completion rates were extremely high: 1155 of 1178 respondents (98.0%). This is largely due to the incentivized nature of the platform, although high rates of response to an optional, open-ended "comments" space also indicate solid engagement.[5]

3.1.3. Concern with the outside and the in-between.

A study of offense is a study of the inappropriate; at its most basic, it is a way to gain an analytical grip on distinctions between sacred and profane, dirty and pure (see Douglas 1978). Becker writes: "Social rules define situations and the kinds of behavior appropriate to them, specifying some actions as 'right' and forbidding others as 'wrong.'" But, he says, "the person who is thus labeled

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[5] 53.2% input something; appx. 28% substantive (i.e., not including "n/a," "thank you," etc.).

an outsider may have a different view of the matter" (1963: 1). For that reason, this survey pays special attention to potential markers of outsiderness.

Worth mentioning, lest the neck-hairs-of-potential-offense are already prickling, this is not to equate those who identify as something other than sexually "straight" with the drug users and criminals at the heart of Becker's research. "Outsiderness" is taken here in general, to refer to facets of identity that are objectively in the minority of a larger population. The hypothesis being: if someone is aware of their label as an outsider, do they react in any significantly different way to material that is *symbolically* outside? We're following up on Becker's first page question: *do outsiders*, conceived generally, *have a different view?*

This concern with "outsiderness" can be connected to a further interest in liminality (Turner 1966; Van Gennep 1909). How could we explore the meaning of *outside* and *inside*, without paying some attention to the *in between*? One may be "outside" the plurality —in terms of sexual orientation, or non-binary gender identity, or by being unemployed. But it is possible also to exist in states that are in flux or unsettled: "betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (Turner: 1966: 95). The biographical questions — relationship, citizenship, and relocation status — serve to capture this phenomenon.

3.2 Cartoon Selection

Howard Becker subtitled an essay (1995) on visual sociology: "It's (almost) all a matter of context." Here, the goal of the selection process was for context to matter little for the decoding of the cartoon's meaning, and even less for the feelings evoked. Reducing contextual relevance at the level of the cartoon should allow for variations at the individual and social levels to shine. As a scholar of Assyrian jokes put it: "Humor often relies upon specific contemporary references, word meanings, contrasts or social understandings which are easily missed by outsiders" (Strand 1980: 39). Well warned, I parsed the entirety of *The New Yorker* cartoon archives[6] for wordless cartoons with the fewest cultural referents; that is, with minimal popular/historical/linguistic knowledge needed to decode the joke. *The New Yorker* itself, with slow-changing editorial positions through which the cartoons are filtered (see Yagoda 2000), provides a concise pool to draw from despite the half-century gap between this survey's oldest and youngest cartoon prompts.

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[6] Mankoff (2004) for 1924-2004, individual collections for each year after through 2018.

All this quickly narrows down the extensive catalog. In total, 18 cartoons were selected from *The New Yorker*. Also added: four images by the Syrian artist Ali Farzat, who chaired the most celebrated outlet for cartoons in Syria between 2000 and 2003 before it buckled under censorship from Bashar al-Asad's regime.[7] Farzat's cartoons serve as a point of comparison, to investigate the possibility that the *New Yorker* "brand" was contributing any particular bias. After analysis, there is no evidence to indicate particular trends in meaning coming from the (internally diverse) American collection. (The most "offensive" cartoons both from Syria and from America confront identical subject matter; see *sec. 4.1*.)

The images selected here are all "gag cartoons," i.e., cartoons with a joke premise, as opposed to purely stylistic caricatures. Cartoons or "comics" can have multiple panels; here, all are single-panel. This focuses the moment surveyed on a single act of framing, a single visual joke. It also allows the survey to travel more widely, to places where the comic strip is perhaps less familiar or carries additional connotations; at its most basic, the cartoon is a picture for which all have the tools of interpretation. (***Fig. 1***)

More importantly, cartoons are often captioned. All cartoons selected here are wordless,[8] for the reasons above, and to further limit variation on linguistic and cultural grounds. This includes cartoons with captions and cartoons with any writing or lettering as part of the drawing.[9] Confronting the potentially endless possibilities for understanding, wordless images help keep the lid on—here misunderstanding will be purely visual, and not the result of interaction between visual and linguistic. (See *Appx. A* for all cartoons.)

4. Findings

4.1 Sex and Death: Simple Trends Among the (In)sensitive

The superlative cartoons (most offensive; funniest) reveal the potency of certain cross-cutting meanings: As Georges Bataille claimed, "it is clear from the outset that the two primary taboos

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[7] Farzat continued to work, and was later attacked and beaten by security forces thought to be allied with the regime.

[8] In the case of Cartoon 7, the in-panel words *TALIBAN DE SOLEIL* were removed, leaving only the visual joke of a covered figure sunbathing. Cartoon 11: the superfluous caption "Carl! No!" was removed, leaving *snowman suicide-by-hairdryer*. Artist signatures were digitally removed.

[9] Cartoon 20 included with the International Symbol of Access (aka. "Handicap Symbol"). Permitted because of its international, ubiquitous presence.

affect, firstly, death, and secondly, sexual functions" (1962: 42). Empirically, our data bolsters this theoretical history: of the four most offensive, three (*20*, *16*, *14*) involve or refer to the death of human beings. The fourth centers on sex — the sole cartoon to reveal a naked torso. Only three other cartoons involved sex or death, sixth, eighth and ninth in these rankings respectively: in Cartoon 8 (28.0%)*,* an executioner prepares to shoot a man off a mountaintop plank that he himself is balanced on, too — the butt of the joke is the killer and not the killed, perhaps muddling visceral reactions to death by treating the endangered body as more prop than human; in Cartoon 11 (21.4%), a snowman threatens to melt himself with a hairdryer; in Cartoon 2 (19.4%), a corkscrew and wine bottle are relaxing together in bed (21.1% for women; 19.6% for men).

Clearly, "there does remain a connection between death and sexual excitement" (Bataille 1962: 11), but the data reveals some distinction in empathetic/visceral/disgusted responses to these two primary taboos along one major axis: human/non-human. Sex between metal and glass still trips the taboo wire—behind only death, human sex, marriage, and a sunbathing figure in a burka. The rate of offense, however, is less than half (44.5 v. 19.4%). Equivalently, there are two cartoons we could categorize as *incongruous suicide* jokes: in Cartoon 16, a man plugs his ear with a finger, unenthusiastic about the noise from shooting himself in the head; in Cartoon 11, a snowman lurches to stop a desperate snowman friend from melting himself with a gun-to-the-head hairdryer. The jokes operate differently, but *suicide* is still equally at play. Still, the man's impending death registers as three times more offensive than the snowman's (63.8% v. 20.7% aggregate). A man's suicide made for the single most offensive cartoon; a snowman's suicide made for the single funniest.

This may seem a small claim, that taboos are not inseparable from human context, but it suggests that taboos *can* be pulled apart and treated in various ways, addressed through mitigating metaphors. The human/non-human gap also reinforces the claim that the boundaries demarcated by offense are are not disconnected from self-conceptions: the self is continuously invoked to forge symbolic boundaries.

It is meaningful that along an axis of increasing total offense, the offense ratios of both example sensitive groups descend to even. (*Fig. 2*) That is: it is a difference of quantity, not quality. In symbolic terms, this seems not to suggest that a boundary exists where it otherwise wasn't— i.e. a taboo unique to the group — but instead that the same boundaries, more rigid or less porous, have a stronger visceral reaction when struck against. And at the most reactive end of the

spectrum, there is evidence that even that difference dissolves entirely.[10] As such, "boundaries are conditions not only for separation and exclusion, but also for communication, exchange, bridging, and inclusion" (Lamont and Molnár 2002: 181).

4.2. Offense Coefficients: Regression Analysis

The regression analysis provides a descriptive look at offense in practice. The outcome coefficient represents the predicted percentage that offense would be taken for a given cartoon. The calculation averages the total count of "offensive" responses (personal and general) over the total number understood (i.e. "did not understand" answers do not count towards the average), graduated to a 100-point scale. Even a 3-point increase or decrease, if statistically significant, is interpretively very significant. Coefficients with a magnitude near 10 or higher deserve special attention. *(Fig. 3)*

As a quick note on comprehension: when respondents didn't understand the cartoons — ranging globally from 2.8% (*Cartoon 11;* see *Appx. A*) to 31.3% (*22, 18*)— they were "incomprehending" the same thing; this holds true across differences of gender, nationality, and native/non-native English knowledge. (See supplemental materials for finer detail.) Most importantly, comprehension is accounted for in the models.

Age has a negative association with sensitivity, significant from middle-age category onwards. The oldest cohort (65+) is extremely desensitized to offense, with the second largest coefficient across all categories. Coefficients suggest that sensitivity continues to decrease through life, but without a longitudinal element to this study, we have yet to answer: does sensitivity decrease over the course of a single life, or/and do generational cohorts possess distinct characteristics in their own right?

Gender matters. Female respondents demonstrate approximately 6 points higher sensitivity, ceteris paribus, than non-female respondents. This follows the basic findings of "objectification theory" (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997; Roberts and Gettman 2004; see De Beauvoir 1949), that women are more likely to see themselves as objects, as an "other" through others' eyes. A recent

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[10] In terms of enjoyment, we see that the sensitive show higher rates of "funniness" at the very top end of the offense spectrum: for those who are sensitive and unoffended, the most taboo cartoons may carry extra comic weight. (See supplement.) Perhaps these groups are relatively "oversensitive" to uncommon concerns, but are more equanimous in the face of universal issues. As Turner put it: "liminality is frequently likened to death" (1966: 95).

genome-wide association study (GWAS) of more than 46,000 participants (Warrier et al. 2018) also supported a "significant female advantage on the EQ [Empathy Quotient]," without finding a specific genetic link. The gendered difference exists in this domain, but its roots so far are social ones. And empathy could certainly be a key factor affecting sensitivity to general (if not personal) offense.

The present models of offendability suggest an expansion of theories of objectification and empathy to include seemingly disparate factors: *dual citizenship* claims a similar effect to gender (minimized mildly by the addition of more detailed variables). Perhaps these could be both considered contributors to a Duboisian double consciousness, a practice in seeing the self through the eyes of something *other*, thereby remaining sensitive to the potential transgressions of others' sacred boundaries. And following Du Bois (1909), a *non-majority ethnicity* is a predictably good predictor of sensitivity—one that actually grows slightly more meaningful when controlling for psychological variables and distinctions in senses of humor; even with more in the mix, ethnicity matters. (While largely consistent, the effects are not identical across ethnicities; while "black" and "Latino" categories demonstrated higher rates of offense, "Jewish" respondents registered significantly lower than average. A broad minority/majority, outsider/insider framework is helpful at first, but a finer comb is needed to pull out exactly how specific identities are realized in the context of offense.)

This sensitivity is evidenced again, amplified, in *sexual orientation* coefficients: non-straight respondents were powerfully more sensitive on average, although differences emerge examining groups in greater detail. While women attracted to women and men attracted to men demonstrated high rates of sensitivity to offense, respondents of any gender with other patterns of attraction showed no greater sensitivity than the majority "straight" population. Considering the LGBTQ identity crudely, this data suggests the rigidity of the *LG* identities, but the flexibility, perhaps, of the *B* and *Q*. Socially confirmed outsider status may increase sensitivity, but the liminal/cross-category space of bisexuality —if it can be interpreted as such—does not. Thinking about meaningful group boundaries, then, identities under this acronym may be more distinct than similar. Regardless, in this global model, the "lesbian" identity is the most powerful predictor of sensitivity to offense. The indication is that this identity is especially salient in the construction of symbolic boundaries.

Citizenship distinctions are also salient, especially for Indian respondents. While there is no particular reason the word "offensive" (Hindi: *apmaan*) in a survey taken in English would be different for Indian nationals, there is a possibility that the cartoon form has a special priming power from its national history: in recent years, politically-charged controversies have erupted in India over the use in textbooks of (half-century old) cartoons, thought unflattering to particular leaders (NDTV 2012a). This initial framing could be a major cause in raising the expectations for offense in the otherwise inoffensive. In this exploration of *imagined community*-type "nationalities," this reinforces the continued meaningfulness of concrete political nationalities.

Physical liminal spaces do not appear significantly meaningful, as in the cases of intra- or international relocation. But categories that capture kinds of *emotional* liminality —in which potentially meaningful factors in social life are defined by "ambiguous and indeterminate attributes (Turner 1966: 95; Alexander 1990: 19)—do. The clearest example is the surprising significance of being *in a new relationship*, a factor which predicts increased sensitivity unlike any other relationship status, and supports a claim that *the unsettled are sensitive*.[11]

By the opposite token, the stabilizing effects of *income*—if not directly meaningful according to this data—are indirectly visible through the variables that explain financial standing: *employment* and *outside sources of financial support*. In short: access to money predicts greater sensitivity. This framework is supported by the insignificance of *spousal assistance*, and the desensitizing effects of drawing on one's own *personal savings*: while employer pensions and government pensions and inheritance (all higher sensitivity) are lifelines to something large and stable, connections from within ones own closest relationships add no further flexibility. Perhaps this is the kind of stability that interferes with Coleman's "direct communication," say by limiting the impact of the family-unity.

Political preferences are also extremely meaningful, but only in one direction: participants registered much higher offense rates, as compared to center, if they identified on the "right" end of the political spectrum. This provides a symbolic (abstract) counterpart to the more physical studies of "disgust sensitivity" (Inbar et al. 2012; Smith et al. 2011) —with very sympathetic

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[11] The "joking relationships" most famously studied by Radcliffe-Brown—"modes of organizing a definite and stable system of social behaviour" (1940: 200) in otherwise ambiguous social territory—suggest a possible justification: if humor helps reduces ambiguity, then ambiguity could be seen to require humor's help, or at least to make a person more receptive to it. In that case, perhaps a joke's offense would be allayed by its other services.

conclusions. In one such study, measuring changes in skin conductivity and heart rate, the political scientist authors "demonstrate that individuals with marked involuntary physiological responses to disgusting images, such as of a man eating a large mouthful of writhing worms, are more likely to self-identify as conservative" (Smith et al. 2011: 1). And while Crawford (2017) also argues that conservatives are more sensitive to *physical* threats, he finds that political identity does not affect responses to "meaning threats." Our data suggests otherwise.

As such, the present study may be read as an abstraction of the neuroscientific claim that "disgust is often considered the most visceral of all basic emotions" (Harrison et al. 2010: 12782). *Offense* is symbolically analogous to disgust; the neuroscientifically visceral is transposed here into a sociological context. Then, just as "physiological responses to the experience of disgust are more carefully studied" (ibid) than any other emotion, examination of the experience of symbolic offense should claim similar status in the eyes of social scientists.

Conscientiousness, among the two pillars of the psychological Big Five salient here, predicts desensitivity to offense. This also suggests that the offense registered by participants is felt, at least in part, personally — that it is not simply a projection of potential offense. (Otherwise, the conscientious respondent's simple recognition-of-others'-offense should raise the count.) Interpreting this variable on the 14-point TIPI scale, the difference between 5th and 95th percentile *conscientious* would predict a difference in sensitivity equivalent to the gap between "gay" and "straight" (appx. 10 points). Here, the gap may indicate either that potential offense has not registered, or: that it has registered, but is found inoffensive. Briefly, because "conscientiousness" is an unlikely marker of identification (e.g., "I am from the conscientious group"), the latter interpretation appears more likely in line with traditions of social construction. Most important here is the impact of this variable, and its undeniable salience in boundary construction.

The significance of experiential *openness* maps easily onto symbolic boundary imagery: those with more open boundaries are less likely to feel that a boundary, crossed at a point, has been broken. Or: a flexible boundary is less likely to snap. Remembering the twentieth-century taxonomy of the Big Five, where "Openness" was styled "Culture," we see further evidence that *more culture* may indicate a porousness of symbolic boundaries.

The "Funny Index," in which categories reflect aggregated responses to the cartoons, reflects similar boundary dynamics: the funnier a person finds jokes on average, the less offended they are in general. If psychological factors represent "pores" in a kind of cultural cell membrane, through

which potentially transgressive material can enter discourse without being rejected outright, a sense of humor might be viewed as a kind of change in boundary thickness.

4.3. Offense Trends: Addressing the Hypothesis (Meta Analysis)

Hazarding a bold summary in light of the regression models: the data points to a pattern that social identities are constructed both at the nuclear, extremely local level, *and* at the most diffuse layers of social interaction. Psychological and demographic variables emerged as terrifically powerful, but biographical variables hardly at all. The *micro,* personal, proves its importance in social boundary-making—sexual preferences, age, gender, psychology; the *macro* does as well, invoking the largest scale (sub "species") of social groupings — nationality, ethnicity (political leanings might also be in this category). The most concrete and most abstract facets of identity are relevant in demarcating what is too sacred to play with. In the building of boundaries, the micro and macro *matter,* but the *meso*—all that happens in between, where interaction *with others* is most relevant— is weak.

This confirms our early hypothesis, following Coleman: contemporary (and increasing) structural asymmetry is reflected in contemporary symbolic boundaries. This echoes the solitude-highlighting work of Putnam (2000) and Klinenberg (2012), in which previously communal arenas of social life (bowling, living) are revealed as acceleratingly solitary. The connection may not be immediately transparent, but the joint salience here of the demographic and the psychological, against the seeming irrelevance of the biographical, reflects the technological moment where connections are fastest increasing direct from the individual to the collective. Old middles are cut out, and the self is constructed alone and in conversation with something very large.

4.4. Personal Sensitivity Manifests as Symbolic Sensitivity

Across national categories, a robust trend in categories of discomfort emerges. In order: people are increasingly uncomfortable revealing information about their sexual orientation, ethnicity, income, and political preferences. (In India, ethnicity and income gently trade places.) Noticing growing political polarization in America (Bridges 2017; Baldassarri and Gelman 2008), for example, it follows that political identities would be a leading source of discomfort; an identity that once signaled milder "otherness" now signifies greater distinction to a larger segment of the population.

Prompting respondents had a powerful effect—a sort of *three-quarters rule*, by which three-quarters of a population answered an "uncomfortable" question after a simple additional request to answer. In all domains but one, exactly three-quarters (73-75%) of all participants who registered discomfort answered the question after the prompt. (**Table 2**) Resistance to this "rule"—as with income, where only 40% of the uncomfortable chose to answer—suggests a source of discomfort on a different order, perhaps an element of identity not so easily rebranded to suit a constructive purpose (see: Lorde 1984). That is: an outsider identity may be repurposed against its stigma (Hannerz 2016; Hebdige 1979) —the segregating label "black" turned into Black Power, "queer" turned Queer turned into Milo Yiannopoulos' "Dangerous Faggot"—but poverty, perhaps, is harder to transform with counternarratives of any kind. If nearly all concepts are categorized by "fine lines" (see: Zerubvael 1993), resistance to the *three-quarters-rule* may indicate the socially and symbolically thickest among them, differences that are hardest to turn into strengths.

By examining the respondent pools among those who answered *despite registered discomfort*, we can examine whether or not the "sensitive" identities are overrepresented among the uncomfortable. In very short: yes. In less short: salient factors in sensitivity to offense *are* reflected by a sensitivity regarding the disclosure of those factors themselves. (**Table 3**)

Those who were uncomfortable were disproportionately from the groups who were more sensitive to offense: discomfort with identity manifests as sensitivity to discomfort at symbolic boundaries. Politically right-leaning respondents were more uncomfortable disclosing their political preferences. "Lesbian" and "Gay" respondents were strongly uncomfortable disclosing sexual preferences, as were the "bisexual" to a lesser degree. Perhaps surprisingly, those very overrepresented among the income-uncomfortable were wealthier, with incomes of 1.5 times and upwards more than their compatriots.

This suggests thinking about discomfort and social outsiderness in a way that reflects "horseshoe theory" (Faye 1996)—as a spectrum in which seemingly "opposite" ends bend toward one another (if not touch). It's a cutesy metaphor, one that political scientists are loath to instrumentalize (Hamad 2017), but which offers a useful way to reconsider symbolic interactions. If outsiders' (social) survival requires learning "how to make common cause with those others identified as outside the structures" (Lorde 1984: 112), the argument here is that "outsiderness" be considered, at least in part, in terms of discomfort. The discomfort becomes sensitivity, and the

sensitivity—especially if felt "as soul"—may help actualize the boundaries outsiders seek to dissolve.

5. Discussion

One attempt here is an elevation of "offense" (and humor) to, call it sacred status, among sociologists interested in the boundaries of social groups at their most meaningful level. This is an approach that allows for collaboration across religious, political, sociological fields.

> A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden (Durkheim 1912: 44).

To find offense—the struck against—is to identify where there is even a boundary to strike. And while *sensitivity* to offense is not the same as being offended, this investigation is a first step in acknowledging "religious" boundaries in their plainest form.[12]

If we entertain Brubaker, accepting "religion and nationalism, along with ethnicity and race, as *analogous* phenomena" (2011: 2), we can use this conceptual interchangeability to great advantage. "Humour is not faith but is prior to faith," as Kierkegaard contended;[13] socially then, a shared sense of humor imitates religious bonds, and compatriot bonds by analogy. We should incorporate the language of nationalism and the sociology of religions into humor scholarship, and vice versa, to revitalize the study of group membership and the organization of everyday life.

Humor indicates a toying with the meaningful, a willingness to free the sacred from its form (if only for a moment)—offense indicates a choice, a firming. If humor is prior to faith, a declaration of offense is a credo. At risk of dead-horse-beating: the specific *pure* or *dangerous* label matters less than the mere existence of a label—an incorporation of something into the religious system. (Apathy being, as fortune cookies are right to notice, the opposite of either extreme.) A pro-pork luau on Oahu and a pork-free block party in Jerusalem are similarly connected. While actions are opposite, meaning is made at the same spot.

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[12] Luckmann (1967) would locate these as religions of the *institutionally diffuse* type, as opposed to *institutionally specific*.

[13] And even this is a lukewarm view of humor. Alluding to the Hegelian tradition, Kierkegaard distinguishes himself: "In modern scholarship humour has become the highest *after* faith" (1846: 244).

By this approach, the sacred/profane split is captured under the umbrella of "meaning," pitted against *meaningless* in the prime binary. This allows us to continue in Douglas's humorous tradition that fused Freud and Durkheim, while acknowledging critiques of Western orthodoxy: "from its earliest reception the duality of the sacred and profane in Elementary Forms has been seriously questioned" (Coleman and White 2006: 72). Masuzawa (2005) levied the critique that the Academy has used this largely Christian binary in a systematic misclassification of religions that don't revolve around it. But: if we acknowledge *offense* as a boundary that indicates *meaning* first and foremost, we remain open to engagement with any culture that makes it. "Jokes are usually categorized according to the boundary they touch upon," (Kuipers 2006: 121), and every boundary, from all sides, has meaning.

More work is pressing in several directions. First: multilevel models that would allow for the nation and other concrete groupings to be treated separately. Second: comparing identities across local and relocated groups: Americans in and outside of America, e.g., or the Tamil population in Tamil Nadu and in the diaspora. And most importantly: a repeat of this study without forced choice, allowing respondents to choose either or both categories of offense. A key focus: dissecting the gaps (mismatches) where offensive is assumed generally without being felt personally.[14]

6. Conclusion

Offense matters. The comedian Stephen Fry once said "It's now very common to hear people say… 'I find that offensive.' It has no meaning; it has no purpose; it has no reason to be respected as a phrase." But he's wrong: there is so much sociologically valuable meaning bleeding out of its every utterance. For social scientists, *I find that offensive* is a gift — a way to measure the meaning-making that structures (and is structured by) society at its roots.

The central findings of this study are the magnitude of individual coefficients, indicators of patterns of offense sensitivity along demographic and psychological boundaries. Grouping the significant coefficients, there is evidence for individual-centric findings à la Putnam and Klinenberg: symbolic boundaries appear to be forged less by social interactions than by personal

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[14] Some info exists in the open-ended comments section, e.g., "The reason I thought the Superman going through the buildings might be offensive to the public was because it looked too much like planes hitting the World Trade Center." (American attorney, midwest, 39, female.)

history, psychology, and by membership in groups at the most abstract level (e.g., ethnicity, nationality). The data points to the salience of the individual (micro) and diffuse social (macro), and the relative weakness of the *meso,* in constructing symbolic boundaries. And even these abstract, diffuse group memberships that predict offendability are identities that must be mediated by the individual. Bowling alone meant there was no one to share your strikes and spares with, no community to collectively effervesce around the trivial things. Bowling alone may also mean that there is no one to spare you from offense, from interpreting any symbol as a strike against an unmediated self.[15]

Strengthening this argument, this survey also reveals a powerful connection between two kinds of sensitivity: to offense in general (our central outcome variable here), and to elements of one's own identity. Politically right-leaning respondents, sexually non-"straight" respondents, ethnically non-majority respondents—members of each of these categories were more uncomfortable than average in disclosing this facet of their identity. And each of these categories demonstrates significantly higher levels of sensitivity to offense. Wealthier respondents also registered greater discomfort in disclosing their incomes; and while the income coefficient was not significant, related factors— employment and outside financial support—also covaried with sensitivity to offense. Personal sensitivity and symbolic sensitivity are deeply connected – a connection between the discomfort in revealing some facet of personal identity and the heightened overall sensitivity of the group marked with that label.

Preliminarily suggested: that high levels of offense may impact funniness (shock value), especially among sensitive groups, as may high levels of general incomprehension among those who do understand (niche value).

To investigate the offensive is to take something *felt* subconsciously, but *named* consciously—a perfect access point for work on the collective (un)conscious. There is a connection between the emotional and the rational (and by extension: emotional and rational participation in social life) that we can access just by exploring visceral reactions to a preoccupied superhero, or a suicidal snowman.

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[15] Writing alone often means there is no one to save you from attempted puns.

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