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## **RACISM, RACIST LANGUAGE AND RACIST TIRADES**

*Statements by Hulk Hogan (Terry Bollea) recently revealed by the [National Enquirer](#), and the actions taken by the [WWE](#) in response, have cast a new spotlight on celebrity incidents involving racism, racist language, and racist tirades. Noted psychiatrist [David M. Reiss, MD](#) shares his opinions and provides a guide for understanding and evaluating these incidents.*

*When is humor by a comic – black or white – considered racist?*

*Can someone really “slip” and make a racist statement?*

*Does anger or intoxication excuse a racist tirade?*

*Should people in the public eye be held accountable for statements in private?*

In my personal opinion, expressions of racism and racist language are never acceptable or appropriate other than within the context of legitimate education about the history of racism or within the context of intentional and announced artistic expressions that depict the history and/or horror of racism.

We can never know “what lies in the heart” of any man or woman. We must judge by behavior and communication. Any speculation regarding unconscious motivations is just that – speculation. Perhaps at times there is an “educated” speculation or a speculation that is based upon some degree of “evidence”; perhaps at times the speculation is, indeed, accurate. However, it can never be known with certainty if such speculation is accurate or inaccurate – either by another person or even at times by the individual him/herself who, by definition, may be in denial of unconscious motivations.

That said, while I condemn all expressions of racism, racist language and (in particular) “racist tirades”, that does not imply that all such incidents are of equal “merit”/offense or deserve an equal response. The incident must be viewed in the context of the situation, the offending person and the “audience” to whom the communication is directed.

It is therefore important to look at some of the most common situations in which these incidents occur.

### 1) Intentional Humor

All humor, by definition, “has an edge.” Humor inherently involves laughing at that which we fear (physically or emotionally) or that which causes revulsion (physically

or emotionally). To be so “Politically Correct” as to avoid any sense of fear, revulsion or affront would reduce humor to nonsense – in essence, literally, nothing more than making fun of that which makes no sense because it is “funny” to tweak our own ignorance. A limited, bland and empty humor that would be.

On the other hand, the fact that humor is intended to have an edge does not imply that there should be no boundaries. If the audience is not “in” on the joke, if there is not an implicit agreement to accept being “tweaked” about fear, revulsion, or affront – it is purely insult and not humor.

There may be very different opinions as to what is “acceptable” and what is “over the line” and there is a large “grey area” where there is no objectively-definable “right or wrong.” However, most people would agree that there are bounds of basic decency that put some topics, at some points in time, “off limits”. More significantly, any humor that is not promulgated without at least the tacit consent of a significant portion of the audience strays into malignant insult, as opposed to humor.

Specifically regarding the use of “the N-word” - in my opinion, it is not a matter of being “Politically Correct” that it is no longer considered a valid or appropriate form of humor. This is not because of any authoritarian dictum, but rather because the generally-accepted bounds of common decency have changed whereby it is basically accepted that the word conveys such a vile connotation and implication that it is simply beyond common decency to consider it “humorous.”

The questions arises as to whether it may be reasonable for a black comic to use the term, but unreasonable for a non-black comic to use it. That is not a trivial argument. As the meaning would be different depending upon the person using it, there could be a situation where, within a specific context, a black comic might use the term and it would not necessarily convey the same degree of insult as if a white comic used it. This is simply because with a black comic, there is minimal chance of an underlying repressed or unconscious hatred, or true racism, attached to the term. However, if a black comic is using the term in a manner that implies self-hatred, in my opinion, that is not appropriate or humorous.

In my personal opinion, even by black comedians, it would be best avoided other than in the most pointed situations – I consider off-hand use by *anyone* inappropriate – but I can respect a difference of opinion in that regard.

There is also the issue of “bad humor” and “dated humor.” Some attempts to use insults, racial or otherwise, may just not be funny, may fall flat and may come across as mean-hearted and insulting (or just plain “stupid”) even if not intentionally so (and regardless of the race of the comedian). This is another reason why care should be taken in using such inflammatory language under *any* circumstances.

“Dated humor” would be to view a comic from a different era, when the definition of “common decency” may have been different. The fact that norms were different in the past does not mean that the comment is inoffensive, but it provides a context for understanding the history of such humor. With awareness of that context, essentially as a learning experience, it could be considered reasonable to view (and even laugh at) that type of humor.

Of course, if humor is only used as an “excuse” for spewing racism – that is detestable and unacceptable. Period.

## 2) The “Angry Slip”

At times, in a state of anger, rage – or intoxication – a person may come out with a statement that is truly atypical for them and inconsistent with their calm, collected, sober persona. In my opinion, that is still inappropriate and demands apology and reconciliation. However, there are circumstances that may constitute very different contexts and may call for different responses.

For example, a person who perhaps grew up in an environment where that language was accepted or typical, or a person who once harbored racist feelings but truly progressed beyond that state of mind, could, conceivably, given sufficient acute anger, rage, or intoxication, “slip” into an archaic way of talking. It could be argued that such a “slip” represents an unresolved issue of racism – and that may be true; but from a psychological point of view, it is also possible that it is just what it appears to be – a slip that is neither intentional nor indicative of “true” thoughts, but rather an unintentional “cognitive slippage” that does not convey a “deeper meaning.” In that regard, since unconscious motivations can never be definitively determined, the “slip” must be seen in the context of the person’s current life, attitudes, relationships and behaviors.

For some, a sincere apology and making amends may truly be sufficient; for others, an ugly underbelly may be revealed that is not easily resolved or excused. Different friends or acquaintances may see the situation differently based upon their experiences with the person, and perhaps the totality of those responses would be most telling (i.e., whether the person in question is merely “on good behavior” under certain circumstances or whether they have truly overcome their past).

On the other hand, if a person who does not come from a background where hatred or a racially-hostile attitude had to overcome and “unlearned”, yet he or she is prone to a “slip” – in my opinion, that would be more significant evidence of an underlying unresolved hatred or racism, a situation much more inflammatory and inexcusable.

3) The Racial Tirade

From a psychological point of view, if someone goes on a “racial tirade” – i.e., not a simple one-word slip – that is a very different and problematic<sup>[G1]</sup> situation. Even if provoked by “momentary rage” or intoxication, the public typically demands that the perpetrator of a protracted tirade must somehow prove and redeem that what was verbalized does not represent a repressed racism.

In my opinion, within reasonable probability, the person who unleashes a “tirade,” at his or her core, probably does associate the ideas with hatred, demonization and/or dehumanization. I would find a racial tirade inexcusable and not easily redeemed.

4) People “in the Public Eye”

If a person is a position to be held out as a “role model” of any sort, then whether it is “fair” or not (i.e., whether a statement is surreptitiously recorded, “leaked”, etc.), he or she has a responsibility to be appropriate at all times and must be held accountable. The reality is that if you are a media figure, considering current technology, *anything* you say, *at any time and under any circumstances*, may become public.

Thus, if information that involves inappropriate statements comes to be public knowledge, there must be accountability. Just “having friends vouch for me” is insufficient. Specifically, a role model for children cannot rely on “friends vouching for me” to maintain his or her stature.

For individuals who are role models, whether meant for public consumption or not, an inappropriate statement will – and should – have consequences.

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**About Dr. Reiss**

David M. Reiss, MD, is an internationally acclaimed psychiatrist and lecturer. He has been recognized for expertise in character and personality dynamics, frequently giving invited lectures for clinical, legal, sport and entertainment audiences, as well as lay groups. His numerous publications include academic journals and newsletters.

Dr. Reiss is often interviewed and quoted in the print, Internet and radio/TV media, nationally and internationally on issues including personal development, medical and mental health treatment, PTSD, the psychology of socio-political systems and social phenomena (non-partisan), and specific psychosocial issues related to the sports and entertainment industries.

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