Twitter Thread by Jason P. Steed



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1. I wrote my PhD dissertation on the social function of humor (in literature & film) and here's the thing about "just joking."

2. You're never "just joking." Nobody is ever "just joking." Humor is a social act that performs a social function (always).

3. To say humor is social act is to say it is always in social context; we don't joke alone. Humor is a way we relate/interact with others.

4. Which is to say, humor is a way we construct identity - who we are in relation to others. We use humor to form groups...

5. ...and to find our individual place in or out of those groups. In short, joking/humor is one tool by which we assimilate or alienate.

6. IOW, we use humor to bring people into - or keep them out of - our social groups. This is what humor *does.* What it's for.

7. Consequently, how we use humor is tied up with ethics - who do we embrace, who do we shun, and how/why?

8. And the assimilating/alienating function of humor works not only only people but also on *ideas.* This is important.

9. This is why, e.g., racist "jokes" are bad. Not just because they serve to alienate certain people, but also because...

10. ...they serve to assimilate the idea of racism (the idea of alienating people based on their race). And so we come to Trump.

11. A racist joke sends a message to the in-group that racism is acceptable. (If you don't find it acceptable, you're in the out-group.)

12. The racist joke teller might say "just joking" - but this is a *defense* to the out-group. He doesn't have to say this to the in-group.

13. This is why we're never "just joking." To the in-group, no defense of the joke is needed; the idea conveyed is accepted/acceptable.

14. So, when Trump jokes about assassination or armed revolt, he's asking the in-group to assimilate/accept that idea. That's what jokes do.

15. And when he says "just joking," that's a defense offered to the out-group who was never meant to assimilate the idea in the first place.

16. Indeed, circling back to the start, the joke *itself* is a way to define in-group and out-group, through assimilation & alienation.

17. If you're willing to accept "just joking" as defense, you're willing to enter in-group where idea conveyed by the joke is acceptable.

18. IOW, if "just joking" excuses racist jokes, then in-group has accepted idea of racism as part of being in-group.

19. Same goes for "jokes" about armed revolt or assassinating Hillary Clinton. They cannot be accepted as "just joking."

20. Now, a big caveat: humor (like all language) is complicated and always a matter of interpretation. For example, we might have...

21. ...racist humor that is, in fact, designed to alienate (rather than assimilate) the idea of racism. (Think satire or parody.)

22. But I think it's pretty clear Trump was not engaging in some complex satirical form of humor. He was "just joking." In the worst sense.

23. Bottom line: don't accept "just joking" as excuse for what Trump said today. The in-group for that joke should be tiny. Like his hands.

Link to dissertation (for those asking): https://t.co/CVbWnplCq7

P.S. Some people seem to think this thread supports legal restrictions on jokes. No! This is about ethics (see tweet #7). We don't want to restrict humor, because sometimes it's ethically *good* to use humor to alienate or ostracize certain people or ideas (like Nazis or racism).