

## **Gender, Attitudes Towards Women, and the Appreciation of Sexist Humor**

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*According to the dispositional theory of humor, females should enjoy female-disparaging jokes less than male-disparaging jokes because the recipient of the disparagement in the former situation is a member of the respondent's reference group. Several studies have shown, however, that both men and women often prefer female-disparaging humor. In the present study, attitudinal disposition was measured using Spence and Helmreich's Attitudes Toward Women Scale. Participants were then asked to rate the funniness of sexist and nonsexist jokes. Although sexist jokes were, in general, rated funnier than nonsexist jokes, joke type interacted with attitudinal disposition such that males and females with less traditional views of women's roles showed reduced preference for sexist humor, compared to their more traditional counterparts.*

Disparagement humor involves the notion that mirth is a spontaneous reaction of jubilation resulting from a favorable comparison of the self to others. The degree of humor experienced in situations where people suffer disparagement may depend in large part on the affective disposition toward these persons. A disposition theory of humor posits, among other things, that the "more intense the negative disposition toward the disparaged entity, the greater the magnitude of mirth" (Zillman, 1983, p. 91). Sometimes affective dispositions are closely aligned with group affiliations. In the case of ethnic humor, for example, it is often the case that disparagement of members from one well-defined social group is enjoyed by members of another well-defined group (Nevo, 1985). Disposition theory also posits that the more intense the positive disposition toward the disparaged entity, the smaller the magnitude

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of the mirth. According to this proposition, females should enjoy sexist humor that disparages females less than male-disparaging humor because the recipient of the disparagement in such jokes is a member of the respondent's reference group. While there are some data consistent with this prediction (Priest & Wilhelm, 1974) other studies have demonstrated greater enjoyment of female-disparaging humor by both males *and* females (Cantor, 1976; McGhee & Duffey, 1983; Losco & Epstein, 1975). Zillman and Stocking (1976) found that females enjoyed the self-disparagement of a female far more than did males.

Why do females not respond in the direction predicted by disposition theory? The answer involves examining the means by which reference group membership is determined. Biological sex may not be the most valid indicator of reference-group affiliation. As Zillman (1983) has suggested, "the perplexing findings concerning gender might be resolved by attitudinal assessment concerning gender. It is conceivable that gender would fail to emerge as the salient reference group it is presumed to be" (p. 90). This notion finds some support in a study by Chapman and Gadfield (1976) in which the investigators assessed the extent of agreement with women's liberation ideology (WLI), and then had respondents rate the funniness of various sexist cartoons that disparaged women. For women, the enjoyment of blatantly sexist cartoons was negatively correlated with the strength of endorsement of the women's movement. The effect, however, was much less noticeable among males. To the extent that males who are more supportive of women's liberation ideology are less negatively disposed to women than males unsupportive of the movement, appreciation of female-disparaging humor should correlate negatively with their WLI scores. Of the four relevant sexist cartoons involved, male WLI scores correlated negatively with humor ratings for only one; two others showed nonsignificant negative correlations, and the third was positive but nonsignificant. It is noteworthy that the one cartoon that *did* yield a correlation between funniness ratings and male WLI scores failed to show the effect with females. Thus, while the Chapman and Gadfield (1976) study may be taken as evidence that reference group attitudes influence humor reactions, it does not provide particularly strong support for the dispositional theory. Male funniness ratings were consistent with dispositional predictions for one of four cartoons, and female ratings were consistent for two of the four. It is possible that had more respondents been used, stronger support for the predictions would have been obtained—particularly since there may not have been much variability in the males' WLI scores.

Two other studies are often cited as demonstrating that if attitudinal assessments concerning women are taken into account, females *do* show humor preferences consistent with disposition theory. One, described by LaFave (1972), has not been published. Females sympathizing with the

women's movement found profemale-antimale jokes funnier than pro-male-antifemale jokes. Unfortunately, we are not provided with any information about women not sympathetic to women's liberation, nor about the relationship, if any, between males' attitudes and their humor reactions. Disposition theory could predict that females not sympathetic to the movement would favor antifemale over antimale jokes, or at least show no preference one way or the other. Similarly, the theory could predict that male sympathizers would find antifemale jokes less funny than male nonsympathizers. Without these additional data, however, LaFave's findings are not too persuasive. Similarly, Grote and Cvetkovich (1972) selected students on the basis of their high positive attitudes toward the women's rights movement, and then obtained humor ratings to material in which women were the brunt of the jokes. This material was rated as less funny than material that did not have women as the target of the humor. McGhee and Lloyd (1981) state that the latter two studies demonstrate that a general preference for self-disparaging humor "holds only for women with more traditional sex-role values." This conclusion is patently unwarranted, since neither of the studies in question included more traditional women in their samples.

Brodzinsky, Barnet and Aiello (1981) used Bem's (1974) Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) to determine gender identity for male and female college students. For females, gender identity was related to humor appreciation. Masculine and androgynous females preferred sexual humor that portrayed females as opposed to males as the brunt of the joke. This latter finding is somewhat unexpected. Differential socialization patterns have typically been invoked to account for females' preference for female-disparaging humor. Women may be implicitly "trained" to accept a subordinate social role, and are thus freer to laugh at their own expense (McGhee, 1979). McGhee and Lloyd (1981) found no significant humor preference among girls for girl-victim vs boy-victim jokes, and McGhee and Duffey (1983) found a definite preference for low-income girls to enjoy humor victimizing girls more than humor victimizing boys. If girls and women are socialized to perceive themselves as inferior, then a preference for antifemale jokes would be expected. However, women's humor preferences should change as they adapt less traditional role identities. While the Chapman and Gadfield (1976) study is consistent with this prediction, Brodzinsky et al.'s (1981) findings seem to contradict it. One possibility is that gender identity as measured by the BSRI is not synonymous with role identity. Moreover, the latter study, as well as Chapman and Gadfield's (1976), employed stimuli that were not merely sexist but also sexual in nature. The sexuality dimension may introduce an element that confounds or complicates the influence of sexism per se. Sexual themes in Chapman and Gadfield's study were particularly explicit (rape, masturbation, etc.).

According to disposition theory (Zillman & Cantor, 1976) humor enjoyment varies inversely with the favorableness of the disposition toward the person being disparaged, and varies directly with the favorableness of the disposition toward the person doing the disparaging. If biological sex is used to define reference-group membership, the data for females fail to support disposition theory (Cantor, 1976; Zillman & Stocking, 1976; Losco & Epstein, 1975; McGhee & Duffey, 1983). However, if certain personality traits (i.e., dominance and subordination) and/or sex role orientation can be divorced from gender as such it is possible that disposition theory can be salvaged. Zillman (1983) has recommended attitude assessment as a possible means of explaining why members of apparent social aggregates can hold negative sentiments toward their group. Of the four studies attempting this approach, one (Chapman & Gadfield, 1976) obtained marginal support for disposition theory, two (LaFave, 1972; Grote & Cvetkovich, 1972) used inadequate controls, and thus have no bearing one way or the other, and the fourth (Brodzinsky et al., 1981) yielded data that are at best ambiguous with respect to dispositional predictions. The findings of McGhee and Duffey (1983) could be interpreted to be consistent with dispositional theory because the girls in that study who showed a preference for humor victimizing girls were from low-income families. Social class is inversely related to the strength of traditional sex role attitudes (Canter & Ageton, 1984).

In the present study we sought to obtain a measure of attitudinal disposition to women that would be general enough to be suitable for both males and females. Furthermore, we manipulated sexist and nonsexist humor in such a way that the sexual component of the sexist jokes was either minimal or altogether absent. If the differential socialization explanation of why females find female-disparaging jokes funnier than male-disparaging jokes is correct, then females with less traditional, stereotyped views of women's roles should enjoy sexist humor less than their counterparts who hold more traditional views. Moreover, this prediction should hold for both males and females, since nontraditional males should be expected to hold less negative attitudes toward females than traditional males.

## METHOD

### *Subjects*

Participants consisted of 30 males and 30 females enrolled in an introductory psychology course who volunteered to take part in the experiment.

### *Materials*

A pool of 34 cartoons was selected from a variety of sources, including *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Playboy*, *The New Yorker*, and a collection of James Thurber cartoons. About half the cartoons in the original pool were considered sexist (i.e., antifemale) by the authors. All 34 cartoons were put on slides and presented to 104 raters who were asked to make a judgment about whether each cartoon was or was not sexist. The raters, none of whom were used in the subsequent part of the study, were members of an introductory psychology class who volunteered to act as judges. The specific instructions were as follows:

In a moment we will be showing you a sequence of cartoons which will be projected onto the screen at the front of the room. We're interested in your opinion as to whether or not each of the cartoons is anti-female. That is, does the point of the humour depend upon women (or the woman in the joke) being portrayed in a derogatory way—for example as a sex object, as foolishly gullible, or as a simpleton? You will find some of the cartoons sexist, and some not. There are no right or wrong answers. When making your decision, do not take the funniness of the cartoon into consideration.

Cartoons were defined as antifemale if they were judged to be antifemale by at least 80% of the respondents. Nonsexist cartoons were defined as those judged antifemale by 15% or fewer of the raters. Males and females did not differ in their judgments. A final pool of 11 cartoons of each type were used in the subsequent portion of the study (see Fig. 1 for examples).

### *Procedure*

The 22 cartoons were arranged in 11 blocks of two slides each—one sexist and one nonsexist cartoon per block. The within-block order was determined randomly. Each subject received the same order of slides. Slightly more than half the participants were run individually, while the remaining subjects were tested in small groups of four or five students each. Subjects were informed that they were taking part in a study of humor appreciation, and that they would be asked to rate the funniness of a number of cartoons on a scale from 1 (*least funny*) to 5 (*most funny*). Each cartoon was displayed for seven seconds, with a four-second intertrial interval. Subjects who were run individually responded verbally and the experimenter recorded the responses. Subjects in the small groups indicated their ratings by circling a number of 1 to 5 on a scoring sheet. In order to acquaint subjects with the procedure, six practice slides, the responses to which were not used in the final analysis, preceded the 22 experimental cartoons. After rating the car-

A



B



Fig. 1. Exemplars: sexist humor (panel A), nonsexist humor (panel B).

toons, participants were asked to fill out the short version of the Attitudes Toward Women Scale (AWS; Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1973). All testing was conducted by the same female experimenter.

## RESULTS

Thirty-four participants were run individually so that response latencies could be obtained for the funniness ratings of the sexist and nonsexist jokes. We had initially hypothesized that traditional subjects would not only find sexist cartoons funnier than nontraditional subjects, but that they would make their ratings more quickly than nontraditional subjects. This hypothesis was derived from some research findings on gender schema (Bem, 1981; Judd & Kulik, 1980; Moore & Hood, 1983), where sex role attitudes and stereotypes were found to influence the speed with which respondents processed various kinds of information about male and female attributes. A voice key connected to a timer permitted accurate recording of the duration between each joke's onset and the verbal response indicating the subject's funniness rating. A preliminary analysis of the data revealed that latencies were affected by neither joke type nor subject type, nor were there any interactions of interest. Consequently, we discontinued the monitoring of latencies, and for convenience tested subsequent participants in small groups. The variability in reading times across the pool of cartoons may have masked any influence of joke type or subject type on rating latency. Ratings from subjects who were tested individually did not differ from those tested in groups.

For the main analysis, participants were divided into traditional and nontraditional groups on the basis of a median split on the distributions of AWS scores. Separate distributions were constructed for males and females. For each participant the means for the 11 sexist and the 11 nonsexist cartoons were calculated and entered into a  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  analysis of variance, with sex, attitudes towards women, and sexist nonsexist jokes as the independent variables, and funniness ratings as the dependent measure.

The results are portrayed in Fig. 2, and confirm the prediction that attitudes towards women would influence the perceived funniness of sexist jokes. There were no overall differences between males and females [ $F(1, 56) = 2.51, p > .11$ ], nor did sex interact with any of the other variables. Sexist jokes were, in general, rated as funnier than nonsexist jokes [ $F(1, 56) = 3.79, p < .001$ ]; however, the finding of greatest interest was that traditionality interacted with joke type such that, for those holding nontraditional views of women, the difference between sexist and nonsexist jokes was greatly reduced compared to the more traditional subjects [ $F(1, 56) = 5.24, p < .03$ ].

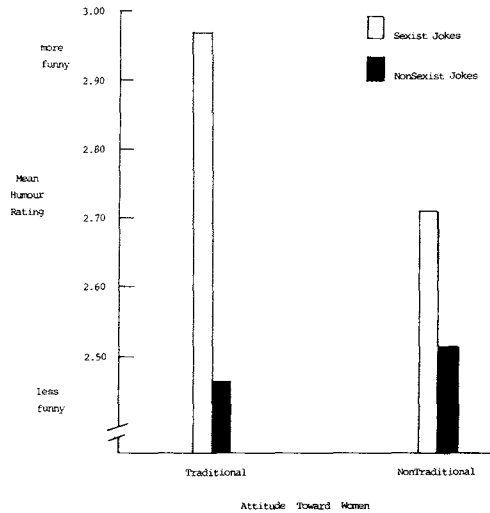


Fig. 2. Mean humor ratings of sexist and nonsexist jokes as a function of attitude toward women.

No other main effects or interactions were significant. In order to explore the nature of the Attitude  $\times$  Joke type interaction, difference scores were calculated for each subject by subtracting the mean funniness rating for the nonsexist jokes from the mean rating for the sexist jokes. The mean difference score for the traditional group was significantly greater than that of the nontraditional group's [ $t(58) = 2.31, p < .05$ ]. While the higher order interaction was not significant, inspection of the data revealed that the interaction portrayed in Fig. 2 was somewhat more pronounced for females than for males. None of the traditional females found nonsexist jokes funnier than sexist ones, whereas six of the nontraditional females had higher mean ratings for nonsexist jokes [ $\chi^2(1, N = 30) = 7.5, p < .01$ ].

## DISCUSSION

The results of the study were consistent with the hypothesis that both females and males with less traditional views of women's roles would enjoy sexist humor less than their counterparts who hold more traditional views. These data offer support for the dispositional theory of humor (Zillman & Cantor, 1976) that posits that as the degree of positive disposition toward the disparaged entity increases, the magnitude of mirth decreases. The results are also in keeping with other studies that have utilized attitude assessment measures as a means of explaining why members of apparent social aggregates



may enjoy self-disparaging humor (Chapman & Gadfield, 1976; Henkin & Fish, 1986; McGhee & Duffey, 1983). Some earlier studies that used biological sex to define reference-group membership failed to support disposition theory (Cantor, 1976; Losco & Epstein, 1975; Zillman & Stocking, 1976). It would appear that attitudinal disposition is a more crucial influencer of mirth than nominal group membership.

While the measurement of attitudinal disposition has received some attention in the research literature, its application in the area of female-disparaging humor has been infrequent, and for reasons outlined in the introduction, the data have been ambiguous. Brodzinsky et al. (1981), using the BSRI (Bem, 1974), showed that gender identity was a factor in the appreciation of sexist humor. However, if one assumes that androgyny is accompanied by more favorable attitudes towards women, then Brodzinsky et al.'s data are not consistent with disposition theory. It is probable that gender identity as measured by the BSRI, and role attitude as measured by the AWS, are relatively independent constructs (Spence & Helmreich, 1980). Although our use of the AWS yielded data consistent with a disposition theory of humor, Jean and Reynolds (1984) have suggested that the AWS is subject to social desirability effects. According to them, both males and females are able (and inclined) to present themselves as "liberal"—in keeping with an increased societal endorsement of equal rights issues. It is possible that the use of a female experimenter biased subjects' behavior, both in completing the AWS and in rating the cartoons.

While social desirability may have had some effect on the results, there is also the possibility that the findings reflect the effects of the feminist movement in reducing prejudice toward females on the part of both males and females. The acceptability of viewing women as "fair game" in put-down humor may be on the decrease. Janus (1981) reports that male comedians who include female-disparaging humor in their routines are playing to hissing audiences. While it is unlikely that sexist jokes will become unfunny as a result of changes in traditional definitions of masculinity and femininity, it is possible that the preferential bias for female-disparaging jokes will eventually disappear and the use of male-disparaging jokes will increase. The content of female comedians' routines that has in the past relied heavily on female disparagement (Levine, 1976) may shift to more frequent use of male-disparaging humor which has become popular with some feminists (Neitz, 1980). Neitz views gender-related humor as a means of easing the tension inherent between men and women in a male-dominated culture. She suggests that true egalitarianism might ultimately be reflected in a nation's humor "when men and women can both tell jokes, and can both laugh together with neither needing to assert superiority over the other through their jokes, or in other patterns of interactions" (Neitz, 1980, p. 222). We speculate, however, that the preferential bias for female-disparaging jokes will erode more quickly

among females than males. Indeed, our data suggest this. The traditional masculine ideal of dominance and infallibility may make it more difficult for males to laugh at their own expense.

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