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# The Effects of Sex of Subject and Sex of Target on the Perceived Humor of Male and Female-Targeted Jokes

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## Introduction

Humor is integrated into many aspects of our lives. We use humor when we are happy, angry, grieving, or experiencing other emotions. We pursue humor in a variety of ways such as reading joke books or watching sitcoms and movies. Each year Americans invest millions of dollars and hours on such humorous entertainment. A good sense of humor is commonly listed among the most desirable characteristics for friends and romantic partners (Allport, 1961). Most people consider themselves to have a good sense of humor even if they do not (Hassett and Houlihan, 1979). Humor is emotionally soothing in the sense that it reduces anger and aggression (Baron and Ball, 1974). Laughter is also said to be the best medicine (Goldstein & McGhee, 1972) and has been demonstrated to promote muscle relaxation (Prerost and Ruma, 1987). Possessing a good sense of humor has a positive impact on overall life satisfaction (Kuiper, Martin, and Dance, 1992).

Due to the importance of humor, there has been a long history of speculation on the topic (see Goldstein, 1976, for a review of the literature). This speculation can be divided into three historical phases. The first phase, pre-theoretical, revolved around philosophical speculation and lasted until the 1940's. During this phase, research focused on correlational studies of laughter. The second phase of humor research was psychoanalytic in nature. Researchers

theorized that humor was an attempt to vent negative and aggressive sentiments. This phase of humor research began to decline during the 1960s and 1970s.

The third phase of humor research deals with "cognitive foundations" of humor interpretation. For example, Eysenck's early research in this area suggested that there are three ways to interpret sense of humor (Eysenck 1972). The first is a quantitative sense that gauges the ease with which people are amused. The second way is a productive sense that gauges people's ability to amuse others. The third is the conformist sense that examines the similarity of various people's responses to humorous stimuli. Research during the third phase typically has taken one of two methodological forms (Martin and Lefcourt, 1984). The first method involves correlational studies attempting to relate sense of humor to various personality characteristics. The second method involves noting the effect of manipulating environmental variables of humor ratings.

Drawing on Eysenck's early description of humor, contemporary researchers have noted that the sense of humor is a construct with multiple correlates. According to Thorson and Powell (1991), having a sense of humor is related to an individual's ability to appreciate humorous people and situations as well as to an overall sense of playfulness. Sense of humor additionally deals with an individual's ability to recognize humor in personal life situations and to produce humor. Individuals with a sense of humor also have the ability to use humor as an adaptive mechanism and to achieve social goals. Individuals vary in their response to humor for temporal reasons; people also have some stability in their overall humor style and would be expected to show some consistency in their typical humor preferences (Ruch, 1996).

Structurally, humor has both meaning and timing (Berger, 1976). The meaning involves incongruous relationships while the timing involves a sudden presentation. Additionally, there are two main processes

involved in humor (Ruch, 1992). The first of these is incongruity resolution. Perceivers first recognize some incongruity that is presented in the humorous stimuli. The perceivers are then given more information that allows complete resolution of the incongruity. The pleasure that people associate with the perception of humor is caused by the physiological arousal that results from resolving such modest incongruity (Kuhlman, 1985). The second main process is perception of nonsense humor (Ruch, 1992). Again, the perceivers first recognize some incongruity presented in the humorous stimuli. However, in this form, complete resolution of the incongruity is not possible. Rather, perceivers either find no resolution, partial resolution, or still more incongruities (Ruch, 1992). Recognizing this leads to the physiological arousal related to the pleasure of humor perception (Kuhlman, 1985).

In sum, humorous stimuli have both structure and process. Perception of humorous stimuli also involves the perceiver. The cognitive balance model attempts to include the role of the perceiver in its explanation of humor perception (Heider, 1958). According to this model (Goldstein, 1976), a person perceives a joke that targets some group. If the joke implies something negative about the targeted group and the person holds negative attitudes toward the targeted group, the person will perceive the joke as humorous (Zillman and Cantor, 1976). Additionally, if the joke implies something positive about the targeted group and the person holds positive attitudes toward the targeted group, the person will perceive the joke as humorous. However, if the joke implies something negative about the targeted group and the person holds positive attitudes toward the targeted group, the person will not perceive the joke as humorous. Finally, if the joke implies something positive about the targeted group and the person holds negative attitudes toward the targeted group, the person will not perceive the joke as humorous.

An exception to the cognitive balance model is self-deprecating humor (Goldstein, 1976). In self-deprecating humor, the joke implies something negative about the targeted group to which the person belongs and holds positive attitudes toward, yet the person perceives the joke as humorous. Goldstein suggests that there are three possible reasons for this. The first reason is that the person is attempting to differentiate themselves from a subgroup of the targeted group. Another proposed reason is that through joking, stereotyped inadequacies appear non-credible. Finally, self-deprecating humor may allow the person to temporarily transcend their situation.

Males and females differ in their appreciation of self-deprecating humor (Zillman and Stocking, 1976). Males rate a male disparaging himself as significantly less humorous than a male disparaging another male. Females rate a male disparaging himself as significantly more humorous than a male disparaging another male. Males rate a female disparaging herself as less humorous than a female disparaging another female. Females rate a female disparaging herself as more humorous than a female disparaging another female. Females rate a male disparaging himself as more humorous than males do. Females also rate a female disparaging herself as more humorous than males do. Females rate a female disparaging herself as equally humorous as a male disparaging himself. However, males rate a female disparaging herself as less humorous than a male disparaging himself.

In light of group membership theory, these findings are unexpected (Sherif and Sherif, 1969). In-groups are composed of individuals that identify with one another in terms of one or more attributes; out-groups are composed of other individuals that in-group members do not identify with in terms of one or more attributes (Strauss, 1953). Humorous stimuli portraying in-group members disparaging out-group members are generally rated funnier than humorous stimuli that portray out-group members

disparaging in-group members (Lafave, Haddad, and Marshall, 1974). Preference for out-group targeted humor has been established for race, nationality, and religion (Lafave et. al, 1974). In short, research has shown that some people tend to identify and take sides with the characters in jokes (Zillman and Cantor, 1976).

The literature has not been consistent in regard to out-group humor preference and sex differences. Some researchers have found that males tended to rate female-targeted jokes as funnier than did females (Priest and Wilhelm, 1974). These researchers have also found that in those instances where male-targeted humor has been utilized, females rate the jokes as more humorous than males do. Other researchers have found that females, in a similar fashion as males, rate female-targeted humor higher than male-targeted humor (Cantor, 1976).

Some research has, however, found that female preference for female-targeted humor was only true for females with traditional sex-role attitudes (Brodzinsky et al., 1981). Females with traditional sex role attitudes may have a female membership group and a male reference group. Females with non-traditional sex-role attitudes (female membership group and female reference group) demonstrate expected preferences for male-targeted humor (Chapman and Gadfield, 1987; Gachenbach and Auerbach, 1975). Regardless of their sex-role attitudes, males have been found to demonstrate a preference for female-targeted humor or no preference for either female-targeted or male-targeted humor (Gachenbach and Auerbach, 1975).

Other research suggests that it is not membership group that determines reaction to out-group targeted humor but attitudes about the targeted group (Goldstein, 1976). Henkin and Fish (1974) suggest that it is stereotypical attitudes about the sexes that predict appreciation of sex-targeted humor regardless of the sex of the perceiver. Males and females with stereotypical attitudes about the sexes enjoy sex-targeted humor more than their same sex counterparts with

less stereotypical attitudes about the sexes. Males with traditional sex role orientations tend to side with male protagonists in jokes; female supporters of feminist policies tend to side with female protagonists (Lafave, 1972).

Thus, attitudes about the sexes may also influence responses to humor about the sexes. One possible attitude about the sexes is overt sexism. Overt sexism is open, unequal treatment of the sexes (Benokraitis and Feagin, 1986). In the literature, overt sexism is typically presented in the form of traditional sexism, "a prejudicial attitude or discriminatory behavior based upon the presumed inferiority or difference of women as a group" (Cameron, 1977, p. 340). The "Attitudes Toward Women Scale" was designed to measure beliefs about behaviors that are traditionally dichotomized by sex (Spence and Hahn, 1997). The Attitudes Toward Women Scale is commonly used in the literature to measure overt sexism (Swim and Cohen, 1997).

Cultural attitudes toward women's rights have changed a great deal after the scale's creation and this change is reflected in subjects' scores (Spence and Hahn, 1997). Twenge (1997) conducted a meta-analysis of studies from 1970-1995 that used the Attitudes Toward Women Scale. Twenge found that since the scale's creation, females' scores have consistently reflected increasingly liberal attitudes toward women's rights. Males' scores also reflect increasingly liberal attitudes toward women's rights. For males, this increase was smallest during the early 1980s and most pronounced in the early 1990s. The early 1980s also saw the greatest sex differences in scores that then grew more similar during the 1990s.

The meta-analysis results on the Attitudes Toward Women Scale may indicate a decline in the scale's ability to distinguish subjects with favorable or unfavorable attitudes toward women (Twenge, 1997). Subjects are unlikely to admit to holding traditional sexist beliefs due to the current political zeitgeist (Sears,

1988). The items on the Attitudes Toward Women Scale reflect the era it was created in rather than contemporary equity issues. The scale only deals with traditional sexism.

Some researchers have argued that the name of the scale is a misnomer (Eagly and Mladinic, 1989). It does not measure attitudes toward women so much as it measures attitudes toward women's rights. The Attitudes Toward Women Scale confounds traditional sex-role attitudes with unfavorable attitudes toward women and non-traditional sex-role attitudes with favorable attitudes toward women. Recognition of this confound led the way for scales with better psychometric properties to be developed.

The Attitudes Toward Women Scale is not useful for identifying individuals with subtle sexist attitudes toward the sexes (Swim and Cohen, 1997). Subtle sexism is unequal treatment of the sexes that is perceived to be normal behavior (Benokraitis and Feagin, 1986). Subtle sexism is typically in the form of modern sexism and is based upon three issues (Swim and Cohen, 1997). The first issue is a denial that there is discrimination against women. The second issue is a resentment concerning complaints about discrimination. The third and final is resentment of feminist political policies aimed at reducing inequalities between the sexes. Individuals with subtle sexist beliefs may actually be in favor of sexual equality. However, they may not perceive as much prejudice and may consider others to be too sensitive to prejudice.

Neosexism is "a manifestation of a conflict between egalitarian values and residual negative feelings toward women" (Tougas, Brown, Beaton, and Joly, 1995). The "Neosexism Scale" is used as a measure of modern sexism (Campbell, Schellenberg, and Senn, 1977). By considering sex-related public policy issues, the scale can measure subtle sexism without requiring subjects to espouse blatant sexist beliefs (Campbell et al., 1997).

Egalitarianism is another possible attitude about the sexes. Sex role egalitarianism is a value of rights and roles independent of a person's sex (Beere, King, Beere, and King, 1984). Unlike other scales, which only measure attitudes toward the rights and roles of women, the "Sex-Role Egalitarianism Scale" also addresses attitudes toward the rights and roles of men. This scale is not as value laden as the Attitudes Toward Women Scale or the Neosexism Scale (King and King, 1985). That is, scores on the Sex-Role Egalitarianism Scale indicate traditional or non-traditional sex role attitudes toward males and females rather than sexist or pro-feminist attitudes toward females. Unlike the Attitudes Toward Women Scale, it does not confound sex-role attitudes with attitudes toward women. In addition to measuring egalitarian attitudes, the Sex-Role Egalitarianism Scale can also detect biases for or against one sex (Beere et al., 1984).

The scale can detect a radical male bias that males can do most things better than females. This is similar to the overt sexism that shows up on other scales. The scale can also detect a radical feminine bias that females can do most things better than males. The ability to detect a radical female bias is unique to the Sex-Role Egalitarianism Scale. It illustrates that sexism can be targeted at males as well as females. It also indicates that support for feminist public policies is not the same thing as support for egalitarianism (Beere et al., 1984).

A review of the literature allows several hypotheses to be made. It was hypothesized that males will rate female-targeted jokes as more humorous than male-targeted jokes. Similarly, females will rate male-targeted jokes as more humorous than female-targeted jokes. It is also predicted that males with favorable attitudes toward women, as measured by the Attitudes Toward Women Scale, will rate female-targeted jokes as less humorous than males with unfavorable attitudes toward women. Females with favorable attitudes toward women are

predicted to rate female-targeted jokes as less humorous than females with unfavorable attitudes toward women. Males with favorable attitudes toward public policies aimed at reducing inequalities between the sexes, as measured by the Neosexism Scale, are predicted to rate female-targeted jokes as less humorous than males with less favorable attitudes toward those public policies.

Likewise, females with favorable attitudes toward public policies aimed at reducing inequalities between the sexes are predicted to rate female-targeted jokes as less humorous than females with less favorable attitudes toward those public policies. Additionally, males with egalitarian sex-role attitudes, as measured by the Sex-Role Egalitarianism Scale, are predicted to rate both male and female-targeted humor as more humorous than males with either traditional or nontraditional sex-role attitudes. Finally, females with egalitarian sex-role attitudes are predicted to rate both male and female-targeted humor as more humorous than females with either traditional or nontraditional sex-role attitudes.

## Methods

### Participants

The participants in this study were recruited from the University of North Florida's undergraduate subject pool. Participants received extra credit rather than monetary compensation for their participation. The American Psychological Association's Ethical Principles and Code of Conduct was adhered to in all aspects of participant interaction.

A total of 116 participants were recruited to participate in this study. The sample included 59 males and 57 females. Participants were typically 18 to 23 years of age. Of the participants, 84% were between the ages of 18 and 23, 8% were 24 to 29 years of age, 4% were 30 to 35 years of age, 2% were 36 to 41 years of age, and 2% were

over the age of 41. Although the majority of the participants were Caucasian (82%), 10% of the participants were African American, 4% of the participants were Asian or Pacific Islanders and another 4% were Hispanic.

Concerning level of education, 37% were freshmen, 18% were sophomores, 31% were juniors, and 14% were seniors. Although the majority of the students were located in the College of Arts and Sciences (53%), 27% of the participants represented the College of Health and 9% of the participants were from the College of Business. Additionally, 7% of the participants were from the College of Education, and 5% were from the College of Computing Sciences and Engineering. Part-time students comprised 10% of the sample while 90% were full-time students. Concerning employment, 50% of the participants worked part-time and 12% worked full-time, while 38% were unemployed.

### Procedure

Before beginning the study, all participants were given oral and written information concerning the purpose and procedures of the study. They were informed that participation was voluntary, that they had a right to withdraw without penalty, and that their responses would remain confidential. They were also informed that there were no anticipated risks for participating in the study. The participants were allowed to keep a copy of the informed consent for their future reference.

The participants were given instructions in small groups of no more than five people. Each individual was then escorted to a separate room and given the study materials. All participants received a survey booklet containing jokes and several individual difference measures. All of the jokes were selected from a larger list of jokes that were found in commercially available books. From the larger list, jokes that were not considered funny by a majority of participants were eliminated after pretesting.

The participants were randomly assigned to one of two versions of the survey booklet. One version contained jokes targeting female dumb blondes while the other version contained the same jokes in which the target was switched to male dumb jocks. For example, the joke "She is such a blonde that she sold her car for gas money" is transformed into "He is such a jock that he sold his car for gas money." The combination of sex of subject and sex of target created four conditions: 1) females reading female-targeted jokes, 2) females reading male-targeted jokes, 3) males reading female-targeted jokes, and 4) males reading male-targeted jokes.

The participants read a total of nine jokes. After reading each joke, the participants rated the joke on a variety of items from the evaluative dimension of the "Semantic Differential Scale" (Osgood, Suci, and Tannenbaum, 1957). Using a 5-point scale, participants made bipolar ratings including serious versus humorous, pleasing versus annoying, sensitive versus insensitive, beneficial versus harmful, unfair versus fair, kind versus cruel, progressive versus regressive, absurd versus thoughtful, boring versus interesting, and severe versus lenient. The Semantic Differential Scale has a test-retest correlation coefficient of 0.85 (Osgood et al., 1957). Adding all ratings for each joke and then summing the scores across all nine jokes obtained a total score for this measure. This was done to control for the individual nuances of each joke. Higher scores were indicative of greater perceived humor.

All participants then completed several individual difference measures. Subjects first completed the "Self-Esteem Scale" (Rosenberg, 1965). Answers to the Self-Esteem Scale were made on a 4-point Likert-type scale. The response options were "strongly agree," "agree," "disagree," and "strongly disagree." The items of the scale are counterbalanced to reflect both high and low self-esteem. That is, agreeing to some items was indicative of high self-esteem while agreeing to others was indicative of

low self-esteem. Example items include "I feel I have a number of good qualities" and "I wish I could have more respect for myself." The possible range of scores was 10-40. High scores are indicative of higher self-esteem while low scores are indicative of lower self-esteem. Using coefficient alpha, the internal reliability of the "Self-Esteem Scale" is 0.88 (Fleming and Courtney, 1984). The Self-Esteem Scale also has good convergent validity (0.72) with the "Lerner Self-Esteem Scale" (Savin-Williams and Jaquish, 1981).

After completing the Self-Esteem Scale, the participants then completed the Neosexism Scale (Tougas, F., Brown, R., Beaton, A. M., and Joly, S., 1995). The Neosexism Scale measures "modern" sexism. While "old-fashioned" sexism is based upon more blatant, stereotypical attitudes, modern sexism is related more to political attitudes tied to gender discrimination. To examine this, the Neosexism Scale measures attitudes toward feminist political policies aimed at reducing inequalities between the sexes.

The answers for the Neosexism Scale were made on a 5-point Likert-type scale. The response options include "strongly agree," "agree," "uncertain / undecided," "disagree," and "strongly disagree." The items of this scale were counterbalanced in order to decrease the likelihood of participants answering in response sets. Thus, agreeing with some items was indicative of sexist beliefs while agreeing to others was indicative of non-sexist beliefs. Example items include "Due to social pressures, firms frequently have to hire under-qualified women" and "In a fair employment system, men and women would be considered equal." The total score for this measure is a sum of responses to all the eleven items, taking into account that some items are reversed scored. The possible range of scores was 11 -55. Higher scores are indicative of more sexist beliefs while lower scores are indicative of less sexist beliefs. Using coefficient alpha, the internal

reliability of the Neosexism Scale is 0.76 (Tougas et al., 1995).

The participants then completed the "Social-Interpersonal-Heterosexual Roles Subscale" of the "Sex-Role Egalitarianism Scale Form K" (Beere, King, Beere, and King, 1984). This 19-item scale makes use of the same response options as the Neosexism Scale. The total score for this measure is a sum of all nineteen items. The possible range of scores is 19-95 with higher scores reflecting more egalitarian sex-role attitudes and lower scores reflecting less egalitarian sex-role attitudes.

Unlike most sexism scales, which only measure attitudes toward women, the Sex-Role Egalitarianism Scale also addresses attitudes toward men. Specifically, it measures males' attitudes about males and females as well as females' attitudes about males and females. The "Social-Interpersonal-Heterosexual Roles Subscale" measures attitudes of respondents toward relationships between the sexes. Example items include: "Women are generally more sensitive to the needs of others than men are" and "Men are more able than women to get along with different types of people."

Using coefficient alpha, the average internal consistency of the Sex-Role Egalitarianism sub-scales is 0.87 (King and King, 1993). The Sex-Role Egalitarianism Scale also has good convergent validity with the "Revised Attitudes Toward Women Scale" (Spence, Helmreich, and Strapps, 1973) and the "MacDonald Sex Role Survey" (MacDonald, 1974).

The participants also completed the Revised Attitudes Toward Women Scale (Spence, Helmreich, and Strapps, 1973). This scale is composed of 22 items and makes use of the same response options as the Neosexism Scale and the Sex-Role Egalitarianism Scale. Items reflecting more sexist attitudes are reverse scored. The possible range of scores was 22-110. Higher scores reflect more egalitarian attitudes toward women while lower scores reflect less egalitarian attitudes toward women. Example items include: "Women should

worry less about being equal and more about becoming good wives and mothers" and "Women should have completely equal opportunities as men in getting jobs and promotions." The average coefficient alpha of the scale is 0.84. This measure has also been shown to significantly discriminate between women's and men's scores (Spence, et al., 1973).

Finally, participants completed a brief demographic questionnaire. Items covered sex, age, and race. There were also items concerning their college status (year in school, part-time versus full-time, college that their major is located in) and employment status. The aim of these questions was to determine the representation of the sample. Finally, there were items concerning natural hair color and athletic status. The purpose of these items was to determine if some participants were biased against the jokes due to their own personal characteristics (i.e., blondes upset by dumb blonde jokes or athletes upset by dumb jock jokes).

## Results

### Preliminary Analysis

Preliminary analyses of the data were conducted to examine the degree of correlation between the predictor variables. Pearson Product Moment Correlations were calculated for the full range of scores on the Attitudes Toward Women Scale, the Neosexism Scale, and the Sex-Role Egalitarianism Scale. A moderate positive correlation (.60,  $p < .01$ ) was detected between scores on the Attitudes Toward Women Scale and the Neosexism Scale. There was also a moderate negative correlation (-.65,  $p < .01$ ) between scores on the Attitudes Toward Women Scale and the Sex-Role Egalitarianism Scale. A statistically significant but small negative correlation (-.35,  $p < .01$ ) was detected between the scores on the Neosexism Scale and the Sex-Role Egalitarianism Scale.

A series of one-way ANOVAs were conducted in order to examine the effect of sex of subject on the scores of the Attitudes Toward Women Scale, the Neosexism Scale, and the Sex-Role Egalitarianism Scale. A difference existed between males ( $M=81.13$ ,  $SD=11.96$ ) and females ( $M=91.45$ ,  $SD=10.58$ ) with respect to scores on the Attitudes Toward Women Scale,  $F(1,114) = 24.16$ ,  $p < .01$ . Higher scores on the Attitudes Toward Women Scale indicate more egalitarian attitudes toward women while lower scores indicate less egalitarian attitudes toward women.

There was also a significant difference between males ( $M = 34.45$ ,  $SD = 5.35$ ) and females ( $M = 41.29$ ,  $SD = 4.42$ ) with respect to scores on the Neosexism Scale,  $F(1,114) = 56.02$ ,  $p < .01$ . Higher scores on the Neosexism Scale reflect more sexist beliefs while lower scores reflect less sexist beliefs. Finally, a significant difference existed between males ( $M = 44.08$ ,  $SD = 44.08$ ) and females ( $M = 39.91$ ,  $SD=8.86$ ) with respect to scores on the Sex-Role Egalitarianism Scale,  $F(1,114) = 6.78$ ,  $p < .01$ . Higher scores on the Sex-Role Egalitarianism Scale indicate less egalitarian attitudes while lower scores indicate more egalitarian attitudes.

This pattern of findings suggests that there is multicollinearity among the measures of the constructs being used. Multicollinearity suggests that the measures are not assessing independent concepts. The lack of independence among measures means the results involving these measures are somewhat redundant.

### Primary Analysis

It was hypothesized that the interaction of sex of subject and sex of target would impact humor ratings. Specifically, male subjects were expected to rate female-targeted jokes as more humorous than male-targeted jokes. Conversely, female subjects were expected to rate male-targeted jokes as more humorous than female-targeted jokes. It was further hypothesized that the interactive effect of sex of subject and sex of

target in humor perception would be affected by attitudes toward women, neosexism, and sex-role egalitarianism.

Specifically, the interactive effect was expected to be stronger for individuals with unfavorable attitudes toward women than for individuals with favorable attitudes toward women. Similarly, the interactive effect was expected to be stronger for individuals with unfavorable attitudes toward public policies aimed at reducing inequalities between the sexes than for individuals with favorable attitudes toward those public policies. Finally, the interactive effect was also expected to be stronger for individuals with non-egalitarian sex-role attitudes than for individuals with egalitarian sex role attitudes.

The original intention was to conduct a series of three-way ANOVAs (sex of subject versus sex of target versus individual differences). The plan was to use a median split to dichotomize scores on the Attitudes Toward Women Scale and the Neosexism Scale respectively into favorable or unfavorable attitudes toward women and favorable or unfavorable attitudes toward public policies aimed at reducing inequalities between the sexes. Similarly, using a median split, scores on the Sex-Role Egalitarianism Scale were to be dichotomized into egalitarian or unegalitarian attitudes toward the sexes.

However, the planned analysis was not conducted due to the previously detected multicollinearity. Instead, a two-way ANOVA examining the interaction of sex of subject and sex of target was conducted. It can be reasonably assumed that sex of subject and sex of target are not confounded due to the near equal numbers of male and female subjects and the random assignment of sex of target.

Contrary to our hypothesis, there was no significant interaction between sex of subject and sex of target,  $F < 1$ . Instead, the results of the ANOVA revealed a main effect of sex of subject  $F(1,112) = 3.77$ ,  $p < .05$ , and a main effect of sex of target  $F(1,112) = 11.38$ ,  $p < .01$ . In general, jokes

were rated funnier when raters were male ( $M = 252.18$ ,  $SD = 40.38$ ) than when the raters were female ( $M = 237.89$ ,  $SD = 41.77$ ). Male-targeted jokes ( $M = 257.71$ ,  $SD = 34.12$ ) were also rated as more humorous than female-targeted jokes ( $M = 233.03$ ,  $SD = 44.60$ ).

## Discussion

It was hypothesized that sex of subject and sex of target would interact to affect perceived humor ratings of jokes. Specifically, it was predicted that males would rate female-targeted jokes as more humorous than male-targeted jokes. Similarly, females were predicted to rate male-targeted jokes as more humorous than female-targeted jokes. Although the results did not substantiate the predictions, two other effects were observed. The first effect was that males rated both sets of jokes as more humorous than did females. The second effect detected was that both males and females considered jokes about males to be more humorous than jokes about females.

There are several possible reasons why the predicted reactions to the male and female-targeted jokes were not found. Potentially, the reactions to the jokes may have been hampered by a novelty effect. Participants may have been previously exposed to “dumb blond” jokes because they are relatively common. “Dumb jock” jokes on the other hand are more novel. This novelty may have enhanced the perceived humor of the “dumb jock” jokes. However, a novelty effect does not seem likely because the exact same jokes were used for each condition. The only aspect that was manipulated was sex of target. Future research should examine the interaction of sex of subject and sex of target using different jokes. Finding similar results from male and female-targeted jokes not centered on “jocks” and “blondes” would further reduce the possibility that results were impacted by a novelty effect.

Another reasonable explanation for the

lack of predicted reactions to the male and female-targeted jokes is the current political zeitgeist. College students may be more sensitive to the issue of sexual harassment of females and may be inclined to view all jokes targeting women as inappropriate (Krener, 1996). This belief may have impacted the participants' perception of humor of the female-targeted jokes. A non-college student sample may be more representative of the attitudes held by the general public about males and females. Using such a sample may produce different results because the general public may not be biased against jokes targeting women.

Perhaps the method of presentation of the jokes also impacted the humor ratings. People are typically exposed to jokes told in social situations; it is more unusual for people to read joke books (Hassett and Houlihan, 1979). The atypical presentation of the jokes in this study may have lessened the perceived humor of some of the jokes more than others. The written presentation lacked the social cues (e.g., intonation, nonverbal behavior) that are present when jokes are told in social situations. The perception of humor of male and female-targeted jokes should be examined with auditory and social presentation of the jokes.

It was also hypothesized that attitudes toward women, neosexism, and sex-role egalitarianism would affect the humor ratings of male and female-targeted jokes. However, this hypothesis could not be explored due to the multicollinearity among scores on the Attitudes Toward Women Scale, the Neosexism Scale, and the Sex-Role Egalitarianism Scale. Multicollinearity suggests that the measures were not assessing independent concepts and the effect of the constructs could not be assessed. This study could be conducted again using more distinct measures of the desired constructs. It is also possible that other individual differences (e.g., intelligence, aggressiveness) may have more of an impact on the perceived humor of male and female-targeted jokes (Chapman and Gadfield, 1976; Groch, 1974; Terry and

Ertle, 1974). It would therefore be helpful to conduct additional research examining the relationship between these constructs and perceived humor of sex-targeted jokes.

While minimal research has been done on sex-targeted humor, previous research has shown that males and females differ in several other areas of humor appreciation. Consistent sex differences have been found in the areas of absurd, sexual content, and aggressive humor (Groch, 1974). Females typically have greater appreciation of absurd humor than do males (Chapman and Gadfield, 1976). This is particularly true for females with lower general intelligence (Terry and Ertle, 1974). Males, on the other hand, typically have greater appreciation of sexual content and aggressive humor than do females (Groch, 1974). This is particularly true of group-dependent males (Terry and Ertle, 1974).

In regard to humor with sexual content, humor ratings vary depending on the sex of the target (Brodinsky, Barnet, and Aiello, 1981; Chapman and Gadfield, 1976). Males rate jokes with sexual content targeting males as significantly less humorous than jokes with sexual content targeting females. In contrast, females rate jokes with sexual content targeting males and jokes with sexual content targeting females as equally humorous. Males and females rate jokes with sexual content targeting males similarly. However, males rate jokes with sexual content targeting females as significantly more humorous than do females.

The focus of the current study was specifically the sex of the target rather than humor with sexual content. Although no predictions about sex differences in overall humor ratings were made in the current study, sex differences were nevertheless found. In general, males rated the jokes as more humorous than did females. One possible reason for this difference may be that females are more discriminate in their perception of humor than are males (Alington, Leaf, and Monaghan, 1992). However, males were not totally

indiscriminate in their humor ratings in that they rated male-targeted jokes as more humorous than female-targeted jokes. It is, therefore, less plausible that the difference in males and females ratings was due strictly to sex differences in discrimination.

Sensitivity to political correctness is another possible explanation for the sex differences in humor perception. Individuals that are sensitive to political correctness may be more in tune with the current political zeitgeist regarding women. It is possible that males are less sensitive to political correctness than are females (Coats and Smith, 1999). However, males rated female-targeted jokes as less humorous than male-targeted jokes. It is therefore unlikely that this explanation is responsible for the findings of the present study.

Yet another possible explanation for the sex differences in humor perception is that males may be less easily threatened than are females (Magnusson, Stattin, and Iwawaki, 1983). In fact, males did rate humor targeting their own sex as more humorous than humor targeting the other sex. In contrast, females rated humor targeting their sex as less humorous than humor targeting the other sex. It is therefore plausible that males were less threatened by humor directed at their own sex than were females.

There are ample instances in the available literature in which males have rated various forms of humor as funnier than did females (Chapman and Gadfield, 1976; Hassett and Houlihan, 1979; Terry and Ertle, 1974). Consistent with the previous research, the current study found that male subjects rated all the jokes as more humorous than did the female subjects (Hassett and Houlihan, 1979). Males may have a greater appreciation for a wider range of types of humor. In contrast, women may have a greater appreciation for fewer types of humor. Future research is needed that explores sex differences in the perception of other forms of humor such as puns, slapstick, and satire.

The sex differences found in the current study have implications for interactions

between the sexes. The primary implication is in regard to verbal sexual harassment. Although physical sexual harassment is typically easier to interpret, verbal sexual harassment is more common and can be more difficult to decipher (O'Donohue, Downs, Yeater, 1998). Sexual harassment is the creation of a hostile environment through unwanted verbal or behavioral sexual attention and/or coercion (O'Donohue, Downs, Yeater, 1998). While females may perceive female-targeted humor as an attempt to harass, males may simply appreciate a wider breadth of humor topics. The fact that males rated male-targeted jokes as more humorous than female-targeted jokes suggests a lack of malicious intent. Perhaps it is also important for individuals to differentiate between jokes that target a particular sex and jokes that are of a sexual nature.

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