

THE ROLE OF IDENTIFICATION WITH A JOKE TARGET IN PERCEPTIONS OF
DISPARAGING HUMOR

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Psychology.

By

Annie Owens Kochersberger

Director: Dr. Thomas E. Ford
Professor of Psychology
Psychology Department

Committee Members: Dr. Deborah Racey, Psychology
Erin Myers, Psychology
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ABSTRACT

IDENTIFICATION WITH A JOKE TARGET AND PERCEPTIONS OF DISPARAGING HUMOR

Annie Kochersberger, M. A.

Western Carolina University (2012)

Director: Thomas E. Ford

In the present research I focus on identifying the variables that affect women's perceptions of sexist humor. Previous research and theory have identified attitude toward women as the critical predictor of amusement with sexist humor; I propose that the degree of dis-identification with women as a social category is also an important predictor. I conducted two studies to investigate the role that dis-identification with women plays in predicting women's perceptions of sexist humor. In support of my hypothesis, results of Study 1 showed that more dis-identification with women predicted more amusement with sexist humor. Further, in addition to gender attitudes, degree of dis-identification with women mediated the effect of gender on amusement with sexist humor. In Study 2 I found that hostile sexism was related to dis-identification with feminists to a greater degree than with women in general or housewives, and that insofar as women are high in hostile sexism, they interpret the message of humor disparaging feminists less critically than humor disparaging other subgroups of women. Overall, my findings provide support for the hypothesis that women perceive sexist humor more positively to the extent that they dis-identify with women as a social category.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Female-disparaging sexist humor is a prevalent subject of social exchange in the United States. As of this draft, typing “sexist jokes” into Google produces over a million hits. The consequences of sexist humor are unpredictable. Because its message of denigration is delivered in an atmosphere of levity, how the message should be interpreted can be ambiguous.

In 1993 Miller Brewing Company executive Jerold MacKenzie referenced an episode of the TV show *Seinfeld* in which Jerry couldn't remember an ex-girlfriend's name (Dolores), only that it rhymed with a body part (Neil & Thompson, 1998). A female coworker interpreted MacKenzie's comments as harassment and he was fired from his position. MacKenzie sued Miller Brewing Company for wrongful termination and the female coworker sued Miller for sexual harassment. In the end, the settlement cost Miller Brewing Company \$26.6 million. In contrast, stand-up comedian Jimmy Carr joked in 2008 that “Ninety-nine percent of women kiss with their eyes closed, which explains why it is so difficult to identify a rapist,” and was met with laughter and applause, not a summons.

Both examples demonstrate the denigration of women through the use of humor, and that one inspired laughter while the other (arguably the milder of the two) inspired a lawsuit illustrates that how women interpret sexist humor is ambiguous. To understand potential social repercussions of sexist humor, it is necessary to investigate the variables

that influence how people—especially women—perceive it. As in the examples, women’s interpretations of sexist messages cloaked in comedic phrasing can be unpredictable.

In the present research I focus on identifying the variables that affect women’s perceptions of sexist humor. Previous research and theory have identified attitudes toward women as the critical predictor of amusement with sexist humor. However, I propose that the degree of dis-identification with women as a social category is also an important predictor of women's amusement with sexist humor. I conducted two studies to investigate the role that dis-identification with women plays in predicting women's perceptions of sexist humor.

Amusement with Disparaging Humor: Hobbes’ Superiority Theory as a Starting Point

The origin of Hobbes’ (1651) superiority theory—the idea that laughter and amusement are derived from observing the misfortunes of others—dates back to the classical Greek philosophers. The strict hierarchical structure of ancient Greece lent itself to status-based ridicule, and Plato and Aristotle both remarked on the pleasure people take in laughing at less fortunate others. Hobbes (1651) too emphasized the hierarchical structure of society, but more explicitly addressed the psychological function that disparaging humor serves for the individual. He proposed that humor was inspired by a moment of “sudden glory,” in which a person perceives the infirmities or misfortunes of another and experiences a feeling of victory. The “downward social comparison” (Wills, 1981), made possible by someone else’s bad lot, results in a pleasurable feeling of superiority thereby producing mirth or amusement.

Gruner (1997) also emphasized the role of victorious feelings in his extension of Hobbes' superiority theory. He proposed that humor is "playful aggression." According to this theory, humor's evolutionary roots are in physical fighting and can be seen in modern man as social sparring or in children at aggressive play. Laughter, according to Gruner, originated in the "roar of triumph" following victory in a physical fight. We now use language instead of battery to express our superiority over others. Finding humor in something is the result of vanquishing someone who has been shown to be in some way inferior. He proposed that "we laugh at the misfortune, stupidity, clumsiness, moral or cultural defect suddenly revealed in *someone else*, to whom we instantly and momentarily feel 'superior' since *we* are *not*, at that moment, unfortunate, stupid, morally or culturally defective" (p. 6).

In the context of superiority theory, people find amusement in sexist humor and other forms of disparaging humor because it allows them to suddenly feel good about their own abilities, attributes or virtues compared to the target of the humor that is presented as inferior. Exposure to sexist humor enhances self-esteem by providing a downward social comparison to women that are depicted as inferior in some way.

Disparaging Humor and Affiliation with Social Groups

Wolff, Smith and Murray (1934) proposed a moderator of amusement to superiority theory: it is not just the misfortune of any other person that inspires amusement, but specifically the misfortune of target with whom one does not affiliate. Affiliated objects and people (e.g., groups to which one belongs) are experienced as an extension of the self. Wolff and colleagues proposed that the disparagement of objects or people not connected with the self enhances self-esteem whereas disparagement of

affiliated targets decreases self-esteem. People should find more amusement in humor that disparages unaffiliated targets (e.g., social out-groups) than humor that disparages affiliated targets (e.g., one's in-group).

Support has been found for Wolff et al's (1934) affiliation hypothesis. Zillman and Cantor (1996), for instance, presented participants with cartoons depicting professor-student scenarios wherein one disparaged the other (for example, during a graduation ceremony, a professor hands a student a diploma and then, instead of shaking his hand, throws a pie in the student's face). Students found a student pie-ing a professor funnier than a professor pie-ing a student. Students identified with the joke's protagonist as a fellow ingroup member and were therefore amused by the protagonist's triumph over the professor.

The affiliation hypothesis also has been supported in the context of sexist humor. Research has consistently revealed sex differences in amusement with sexist humor (Brodzinsky, Barnet & Aiello, 1981; Duncan, Hemmasi, & Leap, 1990; Hemmasi, Graf, & Russ, 1994; Priest & Wilhelm, 1974; Smeltzer & Leap, 1988). For instance, Brodzinsky et al. (1981) showed that males found jokes disparaging women much funnier than jokes disparaging males. Similarly, Priest and Wilhelm (1974) showed that women enjoy humor that disparages men more than humor disparaging women.

The Role of Attitudes toward the Disparaged Target

Contemporary superiority theories (La Fave, Haddad, & Maesen, 1996; Zillmann & Cantor, 1996) have expanded Wolff et al.'s concept of affiliation to represent one's attitude toward a social group rather than membership in that group. These models suggest that one's attitude toward a group targeted by disparaging humor is a more

important predictor of amusement than whether one actually belongs or does not belong to the group (La Fave et. al, 1996; Zillmann & Cantor, 1996).

La Fave et. al's vicarious superiority theory (1996) introduced the concept of identification class (IC) as a predictor of amusement with disparaging humor. An IC is defined in terms of both group membership and attitude toward social group. A positive IC is group to which one either belongs or for which one has a positive attitude. Conversely, a negative IC is a group to which one does not belong or for which one has a negative attitude. La Fave proposed that people find amusement in humor that disparages a negative IC or esteems a positive IC. Supporting this hypothesis, La Fave, McCarthy, and Haddad (1973) demonstrated that Americans with pro-American attitudes enjoyed Canadian-disparaging jokes more than American-disparaging jokes, and Canadians with pro-Canadian attitudes enjoyed American-disparaging jokes more than Canadian-disparaging jokes.

Zillmann and Cantor's (1996) disposition theory extended vicarious superiority theory by conceptualizing attitude as a continuous variable and, like La Fave et. al (1996), de-emphasizing the role of affiliation defined as group membership. However, in contrast to LaFave's proposition that attitudes have only a positive or negative valence, Zillmann and Cantor (1996) proposed a model in which attitudes fall along a dispositional continuum that goes from extreme negative affect to indifference to extreme positive affect. Disposition theory predicts that amusement with disparaging humor increases as negative attitudes toward the joke target increase. Seeing a much-disliked neighbor back his car into his mailbox, for instance, would strike a person as more amusing than seeing a mildly disliked neighbor or a friend back into a mailbox.

In the context of sexist humor, there is ample empirical evidence supporting the hypothesis that regardless of sex, people enjoy sexist humor to the extent that they have sexist attitudes toward women (Bill & Naus, 1992; Brodzinsky et al., 1981; Chapman & Gadfield, 1976; Henkin & Fish, 1986; Ford, 2000; Greenwood & Isbell, 2002; Moore, Griffiths & Payne, 1987; Thomas & Esses, 2004). It is important to note that sexist attitudes are confounded by gender—men generally have more sexist attitudes than women. Chapman and Gadfield (1976) tested the theory that sexist attitudes predict amusement with sexist humor by assessing attitudes toward women's liberation and measuring amusement with sexist jokes. In accordance with disposition theory, more support of women's liberation corresponded to lower amusement ratings for sexist jokes among both male and female participants. Similarly, Henkin and Fish (1986) and Moore, Griffiths and Payne (1987) found that both men and women who reported pro-feminist attitudes reported less amusement with sexist jokes.

Early scales used to assess attitudes toward women either measured conservative-traditional attitudes or explicit support of feminist ideology—or an undifferentiated mixture of the two. In contrast, Glick and Fiske's (1996) Ambivalent Sexism Inventory measured two conceptually distinct dimensions of sexism: benevolent sexism and hostile sexism. Benevolent sexism is defined as a subjectively positive attitude including protectiveness, idealization, and affection towards women in traditional roles; for example, a man assuming that a woman will be unable to carry a heavy bag and doing it for her. Expressions of benevolent sexism may appear ambiguous because, although this sexism is associated with helping or protecting women, it also restricts women to stereotypical roles (Glick & Fiske, 1996). Hostile sexism, on the other hand, is defined

as an antagonistic attitude towards women. This flavor of sexism connects to the belief that women exaggerate the existence of sexism, that male-female relationships are characterized by power struggles, and that women use positive discrimination to gain an unfair advantage over men and use sexual relationships to control men. The ASI has been shown to correlate with earlier measures of sexism, such as the Attitudes Toward Women Scale (Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1973) and the Modern Sexism Scale (Swim, J. K., Aikin, K. J., Hall, W. S., & Hunter, B. A. (1995)

Hostile sexism—but not benevolent sexism—has been found to be a consistent predictor of amusement with sexist humor. Thomas and Esses (2004), for instance, found that male participants were more amused and less offended by sexist jokes to the degree that they scored high in hostile sexism. In addition, Ford (2000) found that people high in hostile sexism were more likely to interpret sexist humor in a light-hearted, non-critical “humor mindset” than those low in hostile sexism; in contrast, benevolent sexism did not predict reactions to sexist humor. Similarly, a study by Greenwood and Isbell (2002) used the ASI to assess sexist attitudes as predictors of amusement with sexist jokes. The higher participants scored on the measure of hostile sexism, the more they were amused by the jokes, regardless of gender. This study also failed to find a relationship between amusement with sexist humor and benevolent sexism.

Understanding what influences reactions to sexist humor to this point has emphasized gender attitudes alone—vicarious superiority and disposition theory both assert that differences between men and women in amusement with sexist humor can be explained by differences in gender attitudes. Recent research, however, suggests that gender attitudes are *not* sufficient to account for gender differences in amusement with

sexist humor. In a re-analysis of data from Gray and Ford (2011), results showed that even when controlling for hostile sexism, men still found sexist jokes funnier than women. A gender difference in amusement with sexist jokes remained even after statistically "equalizing" gender attitudes between men and women. Further, new analyses of data collected by Ford (2000) found that, across three studies, there were no significant differences between women high versus low in hostile sexism in funniness of sexist jokes. Hostile sexism was not related to *women's* appreciation of sexist humor. Collectively, these findings suggest that variables in addition to gender attitudes determine how people perceive sexist humor.

Importance of Dis-identification: Social Identity Theory

According to social identity theory, part of our identity—our social identity—is derived from membership in social in-groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Social out-groups are groups from which individuals dissociate or “dis-identify.” That is, out-groups do not contribute to one’s self-definition. Social identity theory emphasizes the importance of positive distinction, defined as the favorable comparison of one’s ingroup to a relevant outgroup. When a relevant outgroup is disparaged by a joke, it contributes to positive ingroup distinction (likewise, when an ingroup is disparaged, it contributes to negative distinction).

Social identity theory provides a unique framework for explaining amusement with disparaging humor. From this perspective, people are amused by disparaging humor because their ingroup is favorably distinguished from an out-group (Bourhis, R. Y., Gadfield, N. J., Giles, H., & Tajfel, H., 1977). Social identity theory, like superiority theories, proposes that amusement with disparaging humor results from self-enhancement

through social comparison (Ferguson & Ford, 2008). There are important differences, however, in how the theories conceptualize self-enhancement. Superiority theories conceptualize self-enhancement in terms of *personal identity*—as a boost to one’s self-esteem or as a personal sense of triumph over a disliked other (Hobbes, 1651; Gruner, 1997; La Fave et al., 1996). In contrast, social identity theory conceptualizes self-enhancement in terms of *social identity*—as a boost in esteem associated with membership in a social group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Amusement with disparaging humor still arises from a sense of victory, but social identity theory frames it as a group victory rather than as an individual victory.

Another aspect of social identity is *psychological identity*. A person can belong to a particular social category without strongly identifying with it—and conversely, a person may strongly identify with a social category in which she lacks membership (Spears, Doosje, Ellemers, 1997). When considering psychological identity, people will be amused by disparaging humor to the degree that they psychologically dis-identify with the joke’s target. Wolff et al. (1934), supports this hypothesis. He presented Jew and Scot-disparaging jokes to both Jews and Gentiles. Jokes that disparaged Jews were, as predicted, more amusing to Gentiles than to Jews. However, jokes that disparaged Scottish people were also less amusing to Jews than they were to Gentiles. Wolff explained this latter finding by suggesting that Jewish participants were also less amused by Scot-disparaging jokes because they did not view the Scottish targets as an out-group; rather, they saw the Scots as a group with whom they identified. Wolff et al. suggested that they felt an “affiliation by similarity” that inhibited appreciation of anti-Scot jokes.

Like Jews, Scots in the jokes were depicted as miserly—a stereotypical portrayal also associated with Jewish people.

Similarly, Middleton (1959) showed anti-Black jokes to both Black participants and White participants. Middleton found that middle-class Blacks were equally amused by the jokes as Whites. Lower-class Blacks, however, were not amused by the jokes. Middleton argued that middle class Blacks dis-identified with the lower-class Blacks depicted in the jokes. That is, they defined the Blacks depicted in the jokes as an out-group with whom they did not psychologically identify, and the disparaging humor enhanced their social identity by creating a social comparison that positively distinguished them from the out-group.

Women and Amusement with Sexist Humor: Importance of Dis-identification

Unlike men, women have the dual status of both the audience and the target of sexist humor (Greenwood & Isbell, 2002). Therefore, understanding amusement with sexist humor is necessarily more complicated for women than it is for men. Sexist humor negatively distinguishes women from men and thus threatens women's social identity. Bergmann (1986) suggested that since women are often the targets of such humor, they do not always interpret it as mere harmless fun. Rather, they interpret it as a threat to their social identity. Accordingly, Love and Deckers (1989) found that women rated sexist jokes as less funny than men did specifically *because* they identified with and felt sympathy for the target.

Women, like the Black participants in Middleton's (1959) study, have to psychologically dissociate or dis-identify with the humor target to find sexist humor amusing. LaFrance and Woodzicka (1998) found that women's amusement with sexist

jokes was related to the degree to which they dis-identified with women as a general social category. As the level of dis-identification with women increased, amusement with sexist jokes increased. Consistent with social identity theory, amusement with the sexist jokes resulted from a downward social comparison to the psychologically dis-identified ingroup target.

The role of dis-identification might account for some other findings on women's reactions to sexist humor. Greenwood and Isbell (2002) found that when a joke targeted a "dumb blonde," men and women rated the jokes as equally funny, regardless of their degree of hostile sexism. Perhaps the women in the study did not identify with this particular target and therefore were able to maintain positive distinctiveness. A possible explanation is that the women compared themselves to the target of the jokes on a relevant dimension—intelligence—and felt positive distinction as members of the category of intelligent people. Brodzinsky's (1981) findings are also in keeping with this interpretation. Though overall results for women's amusement with sexist humor were inconsistent, they did show that some women, namely those scoring highly in a measure of masculinity, found sexist jokes funnier than more feminine women. Perhaps this finding reflects that more masculine women did not identify with that particular target of humorous disparagement.

Collectively, the research conceptualized in the framework of social identity theory suggests that dis-identification with women is an important variable in predicting women's amusement with sexist humor. Thus, I propose that gender attitudes and dis-identification with women together affect how people—and women in particular—perceive sexist humor.

Hostile Sexism and Dis-identification with Feminists

Feminists are a subgroup of women that many women in the larger social category dis-identify with. In an implicit attitudes study (Jenen, Winquist, Arkkelin, Schuster, 2009) participants (both male and female) were quicker to associate negative words and slower to associate positive words with “feminist.” The reverse effect was shown for “traditionalist.” Further, Liss, O’Connor, Morosky, and Crawford (2001) reported that though most women endorse the ideology of feminists, few self-identify as such. For women already high in hostile sexism, feminists may be simply beyond the pale. They not only dis-identify with the label “feminist” as do many women, but their attitudes are additionally hostile to feminist ideology. In an unpublished data set by Woodzicka (2011), hostile sexism was highly negatively correlated with identification with feminists and moderately negatively correlated with identification with women in general. Thus, feminists may generally be viewed negatively, especially as compared to more traditional women.

If women high in hostile sexism dis-identify with feminists more than other sub-groups of women that do not challenge traditional gender norms, then they should find sexist jokes that target feminists funnier than sexist jokes targeting women in general or other “non-norm challenging” sub-groups of women (e.g., housewives).

The Present Research: Hypotheses and Overview

By communicating denigration of women through levity, sexist humor makes ambiguous whether women are likely to perceive the humor as harmless fun or a form of harassment. I propose that both attitudes toward women and the degree of (dis-) identification with women are critical variables that affect women’s perceptions of sexist

humor. Accordingly, the present research is designed to expand upon the existing literature by demonstrating the importance of dis-identification with women as a determinant of women's perceptions of sexist humor. I conducted two studies to test the hypothesis that women perceive sexist humor more positively insofar as they dis-identify with women as a social category. Jokes used were taken from previous studies (e.g., Ford, 2000; Ford, Boxer, Armstrong & Edel, 2008). In Study 1 I examined whether dis-identification with women is positively correlated with women's funniness ratings of sexist jokes, and whether gender differences in funniness ratings of sexist jokes are mediated by dis-identification with women above and beyond attitudes toward women. In Study 2 I examined whether women high in hostile sexism are more amused (expressed by funniness ratings) and less offended by jokes that disparage feminists (a subgroup of women with whom they particularly dis-identify) than by jokes that disparage women in general or housewives (a subgroup with whom they should not particularly dis-identify).

CHAPTER TWO: STUDY 1

Study 1 tested my hypothesis in two phases. In Phase One, participants rated sexist and neutral (nonsexist) jokes; in Phase Two, participants were assessed on hostile sexism and dis-identification with women. I examined whether dis-identification affects perceptions of sexist humor above and beyond attitudes toward women by running a sequential regression analysis on a measure of funniness sexist jokes. I treated gender, hostile sexism, and dis-identification with women as predictor variables entered sequentially into the analysis. If, as Zillman's (1996) disposition theory predicts, attitude toward women is the only critical determinant of how people perceive sexist humor, gender differences should be nullified when hostile sexism alone is entered into the equation. However, I predicted that only when hostile sexism *and* dis-identification with women were held constant, there would not be a significant difference in funniness ratings of sexist jokes between men and women.

Method

Participants. Fifty-three men and 92 women over 18 and residents of the United States were recruited using MTurk, an online survey tool that has been shown to obtain comparable results to traditional sampling methods (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011). Ages ranged from 18 to 67, with a mean age of 36 and a standard deviation of 13. MTurk participants were paid twenty cents in return for their participation. Data was collected via Qualtrics, an online survey tool provided by the university. I included a

check in MTurk in order to eliminate participants who did not appear to be supplying honest, spontaneous answers. Among the items of the ASI was a statement reading, “It is important that respondents read each item carefully. For this item, mark ‘disagree slightly.’” Eleven participants were excluded for failure to answer this question correctly.

Procedure. Study 1 was presented as two separate studies administered at the same time because each was short. In Phase 1, participants signed a consent form (see Appendix A for a sample consent form) then gave ratings for eight jokes: four sexist (e.g., If a woman is in the forest, talking to herself, with no man around, is she still complaining?), and four neutral (e.g., Q: Why was the leper stopped for speeding? A: He couldn’t take his foot off the accelerator!). Participants rated each joke on four dimensions: funniness, amusement, liking, and offensiveness. Responses were made on a seven-point scale ranging from 1-Not at all to 7-Very much. See Appendix B for a complete list of jokes.

Phase Two was introduced as a separate study, which included its own consent form to reinforce the cover story that Phases One and Two were separate and independent. In Phase Two, I measured both hostile sexism and identification with women under the guise of giving a separate and unrelated survey on “social attitudes.” For the measure of hostile sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996), participants were given the following instructions: “You will be asked to indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with 22 statements regarding your attitudes and beliefs toward a variety of issues in contemporary society.” The hostile sexism subscale of the ASI includes 11 items (e.g., “Many women are actually seeking special favors, such as hiring policies that favor them

over men, under the guise of asking for ‘equality’” and “Women seek to gain power by getting control over men”). Responses were made on a six-point scale ranging from 1-Strongly disagree to 7-Strongly agree. The present research includes only hostile sexism, which is a better predictor of amusement in response to sexist humor (e.g., Ford, 2000). Glick and Fiske (1996) found that, across six samples, alphas for hostile sexism ranged from .80 to .92. See Appendix C for the complete ASI (hostile sexism items are noted).

Next, participants were given the following instructions for completing the identification with women survey: “You will respond to 13 items assessing the degree to which you identify with women.” Questions were developed using items from Gurin and Markus’ (1989) measure of identification with women (i.e., I often think about what I have in common with women), and from Brown, Condor, Mathews, Wade, and Williams’ (1986) measure of identification with groups (i.e., I feel strong ties with women). I also added exploratory questions of my own (i.e., Most of my friends are men). Responses were made on a seven-point scale ranging from 1-Strongly agree to 7-Strongly disagree. See Appendix D for the complete dis-identification with women survey. After completing the study, subjects were thanked for their participation and debriefed.

Results

Dis-identification with women as a predictor of amusement. An aggregate measure of funniness for the jokes was created by averaging the ratings of funniness, amusement, and liking for each joke. Alphas for each joke on these three dimensions ranged from .96 to .98. Jokes were then meaned by joke type to form a mean funniness score of sexist jokes and a mean funniness score for neutral jokes for all participants.

I first explored the relationship between dis-identification with women and amusement with sexist and neutral jokes for both men and women. As predicted, there was a significant positive relationship between dis-identification with women and funniness ratings of sexist jokes, $r = .29$, $p < .001$, $N = 145$. There was no relationship between dis-identification and funniness ratings for the neutral jokes, $r = -.10$, ns , $N = 145$. Furthermore, using the method described by Steiger (1980) for comparing correlation coefficients within a single sample, I found that there was a significant difference between these two correlations, $t(142) = -4.37$, $p < .01$.

When analyzing the data of women only, a similar pattern of results emerged; for sexist jokes there was a significant positive relationship between dis-identification and funniness ratings, $r = .21$, $p = .05$, $N = 92$, and for neutral jokes there was no relationship, $r = -.07$, ns , $N = 92$. Finally, these correlations were significantly different from one another, $t(89) = 2.40$, $p < .05$. Collectively, these results show that dis-identification with women as a social category is related to amusement with sexist jokes but not neutral jokes. The more participants dis-identified with women as a social category, the funnier they rated sexist jokes.

Hostile sexism and dis-identification with women. The 11 items in the ASI assessing levels of hostile sexism were averaged to form an index of hostile sexism ($\alpha = .69$). Consistent with previous research (e.g., Bill & Naus, 1992, Thomas & Esses 2004), I found a gender difference on levels of hostile sexism, with women exhibiting lower levels ($M = 2.67$, $SD = .91$) than men ($M = 3.10$, $SD = .71$), $F(3, 152) = 4.35$, $p < .05$. A similar pattern of results was found for dis-identification with women

($\alpha = .83$), with women showing lower levels of dis-identification ($M = 3.26$, $SD = .86$) than men ($M = 3.93$, $SD = .78$), $F(3, 152) = 7.72$, $p < .05$.

Gender differences in amusement with sexist jokes. To test my prediction that both hostile sexism and dis-identification with women together account for gender differences in amusement with sexist humor, I used a sequential regression analysis in SPSS. I first regressed funniness onto gender, finding a difference in funniness ratings for sexist jokes; women rated the sexist jokes as less funny ($M = 2.21$, $SD = 1.20$) than men ($M = 3.00$, $SD = 1.49$), $B = -.28$, $t = -3.51$, $p < .005$. In step 2, I regressed funniness ratings onto both gender and hostile sexism. This model revealed a significant R squared change (R squared change = .12, F change (1, 142) = 21.65, $p < .005$). Also, contrary to the prediction of disposition theory, the effect of gender remained significant, $B = -.19$, $t = 2.44$, $p < .05$. In the final model, I regressed funniness ratings onto dis-identification with women, hostile sexism, and gender, rendering the gender difference nonsignificant, $B = -.15$, $t = -1.80$, *ns*, though the R squared change was nonsignificant, (R squared change = .02, F change (1, 141) = 2.96, $p > .05$). Though dis-identification with women accounted for only a small amount of variance in funniness ratings of sexist jokes by itself (3%), its inclusion in the model rendered gender differences in funniness ratings nonsignificant.

Discussion

Study 1 tested whether dis-identification with women is a critical moderator of women's perceptions of sexist humor. I first found a significant predictive relationship between dis-identification with women and amusement with sexist humor. More dis-identification with women predicts more amusement with sexist humor. Further, in

addition to gender attitudes, degree of dis-identification with women mediated the effect of gender on amusement with sexist humor. It is necessary to control for both hostile sexism *and* dis-identification with women to account for gender differences in amusement with sexist humor. This finding supports my prediction that identification with women is an important variable in predicting reactions to sexist humor. When an ingroup with which one psychologically identifies (women) is threatened by disparaging humor, the humor is perceived as less amusing than it is to an outgroup (men).

CHAPTER THREE: STUDY 2

Study 2 extends the findings of Study 1 by testing whether women high in hostile sexism, who particularly dis-identify with feminists, perceive jokes disparaging feminists more positively than jokes disparaging women in general or housewives. As in Study 1, Study 2 was presented as two phases. In Phase One, participants were randomly assigned to one of three humor conditions: anti-feminist, anti-woman, and anti-housewife. Each joke was rated on funniness and offensiveness. In Phase Two, participants were assessed on hostile sexism. I also measured dis-identification with feminists, women in general, and housewives.

In Study 2 I measured perceived offensiveness of sexist jokes in addition to funniness. Offensiveness is a distinct construct from amusement; Hodson, MacInnis, and Rush (2010) suggest that low offensiveness ratings of disparaging humor reflect a dismissal of the potentially harmful message. Further, Gray and Ford (2011) suggested that lower offensiveness ratings suggest a more favorable, less critical interpretation of the joke.

Method

Participants. Eighty-one women who resided in the United States were recruited using MTurk and were paid \$.25 in exchange for their participation. Ages ranged from 18 to 58 with a mean of 36 and a standard deviation of 13. Data was collected via Qualtrix, an online survey tool provided by the university. Following the “check”

procedure of Study 1, three participants were excluded from the analysis for failing to answer correctly and three were excluded for failing to enter an age or entering an age less than 18. Two participants who did not complete the surveys were also excluded.

Procedure. After giving their consent, participants completed the study in two phases. Participants first responded to several jokes, which were ostensibly being piloted for a future study. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions with joke type (feminist-disparaging, woman-disparaging, or housewife-disparaging) serving as a between-subjects variable. Each condition contained five female-disparaging jokes and five neutral jokes. All female-disparaging jokes were the same jokes with just the target changed by condition—for example, the joke “If a feminist is alone in the woods with no one to hear her, is she still complaining?” in the feminist condition was changed to “If a woman is alone in the woods with no one to hear her, is she still complaining?” in the women in general condition. Subjects rated the jokes on funniness and offensiveness on a scale of 1-Not at all funny/offensive to 7-Very funny/offensive. See Appendix E for the complete list of jokes.

In Phase Two, participants filled out the ASI, again under the guise of a “social attitudes survey,” and a brief demographic questionnaire. They also answered three identification items: “How much do you identify with feminists/women/housewives?” that was answered on a scale from 1-Not at all to 7-Very much. Upon its completion, they were thanked for their participation and debriefed.

Results

Hostile sexism and dis-identification with feminists and women in general.

The 11 items in the ASI assessing levels of hostile sexism were averaged to form an index of hostile sexism ($\alpha = .84$). I first tested the assumption that women high in hostile sexism dis-identify more with feminists than with other subgroups of women. Consistent with the findings of Woodzicka 2011, I found a significant negative relationship between hostile sexism and identification with feminists ($r = -.64, p < .001, N = 29$). There was no relationship between hostile sexism and identification with women in general ($r = -.05, ns, N = 24$) or with housewives ($r = .07, ns, N = 28$). To the extent that women were high in hostile sexism, they identified less with feminists than with women in general ($z = -2.41, p < .05$), or housewives ($z = -2.96, p < .005$). Means and standard deviations for identification with feminists, women, and housewives can be found in Table 1.

Table 1

Mean Scores of Identification with Feminists, Women, and Housewives

Joke type	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Feminists	3.26	(1.59)
Women in general	5.77	(1.36)
Housewives	3.85	(2.07)

Funniness Ratings. Jokes were first averaged by joke type to form a mean funniness score of sexist jokes and a mean funniness score for neutral jokes. To ensure that there was no effect of hostile sexism or condition on *neutral* jokes in the three conditions, I conducted a regression analysis on the funniness ratings of the neutral jokes with joke type and hostile sexism serving as predictor variables. There was no significant

interaction, $F(2, 75) = .17$, *ns*, nor was there a main effect of hostile sexism or condition, $F(1, 75) = .48$, *ns*, and $F(2, 75) = .10$, *ns*, respectively.

I next conducted a regression analysis on the funniness ratings of the *sexist* jokes with joke type, and hostile sexism serving as predictor variables. There was a significant main effect of hostile sexism, $F(1, 75) = 22.74$, $p < .001$. Hostile sexism predicted funniness ratings of all three joke types: feminist-disparaging, $r = .44$, $p < .05$, $N = 29$; woman-disparaging, $r = .47$, $p < .05$, $N = 24$; and housewife-disparaging, $r = .56$, $p < .005$, $N = 28$. To the extent that women were high in hostile sexism they were more amused with each type of sexist joke.

The predicted joke type x hostile sexism interaction effect was not significant, $F(2, 75) = .18$, $p = .84$. Contrary to my prediction, the relationship between hostile sexism and amusement with sexist jokes was not moderated by joke type. Figure 1 displays the predicted means for funniness ratings as a function of joke type at one standard deviation above and below mean hostile sexism score.



Figure 1. Predicted means for funniness ratings as a function of joke type at one SD above and below mean hostile sexism score.

Offensiveness Ratings. Jokes were first averaged by joke type to form a mean offensiveness score of sexist jokes and a mean funniness score for neutral jokes. Using the General Linear Model in SPSS, I conducted a regression analysis on the offensiveness ratings of *neutral* jokes with joke type and hostile sexism serving as predictor variables. As expected, there was no significant interaction, $F(2, 75) = 1.0, ns$, and no main effects of hostile sexism or condition, $F(1, 75) = .22, ns$ and $F(2, 75) = .80, ns$.

Next, I conducted a regression analysis on the offensiveness ratings of the sexist jokes with type of joke and hostile sexism serving as predictor variables. There was a significant main effect of hostile sexism, $F(1, 75) = 6.25, p < .05$. To the extent that women were high in hostile sexism, they were less offended by each type of sexist joke. The predicted hostile sexism x joke type interaction failed to reach the conventional level of significance, $F(2, 75) = 2.51, p = .09$. However, consistent with my prediction, there was a strong negative correlation between hostile sexism and offensiveness ratings for

feminist-disparaging jokes $r = -.59, p < .005, N = 29$. The correlations between hostile sexism ratings and offensiveness ratings of women-disparaging jokes and housewife-disparaging jokes were nonsignificant, $r = -.12, N = 24$ and $r = -.09, N = 28$, respectively. Hostile sexism was more negatively associated with offensiveness ratings of feminist-disparaging than woman-disparaging ($z = -1.9, p = .06$) and housewife-disparaging jokes ($z = -2.1, p < .05$). To the extent that women were high in hostile sexism, they interpreted anti-feminist jokes in a non-serious humor mindset. Figure 2 displays the predicted means for offensiveness ratings as a function of joke type at one standard deviation above and below the mean hostile sexism score.



Figure 2. Predicted means for offensiveness ratings as a function of joke type at one standard deviation above and below the mean hostile sexism score.

Discussion

I predicted that women higher in hostile sexism would perceive jokes disparaging feminists more positively than jokes disparaging women in general or jokes disparaging housewives. This prediction was predicated on the assumption that women higher in

hostile sexism dis-identify more with feminists than they do women in general or housewives. Supporting my assumption I found that hostile sexism was indeed related to dis-identification with feminists to a greater degree than to disidentification with women in general or housewives.

Results on the funniness ratings failed to support my prediction. Hostile sexism was not differentially related to amusement with feminist-disparaging, woman-disparaging, or housewife-disparaging jokes. It may be that because most women do not identify with feminists (Jenen, Winqvist, Arkkelin, Schuster, 2009), the unique effects of hostile sexism were washed out. It also may be that “housewives” is too dated a term for modern women to feel identified with, even those supportive of traditional gender roles.

Results on the offensiveness ratings, however, were consistent with my hypothesis. Amusement ratings may be skewed by having heard a joke before or a joke’s just really not being funny. Relative to amusement ratings, offensiveness ratings may capture whether the message of the joke is being interpreted critically. To the extent that women were high in hostile sexism they perceived feminist-disparaging jokes as less offensive than jokes disparaging other subgroups of women. Women higher in hostile sexism interpreted the degrading message of feminist-disparaging jokes more in the vein of “harmless fun” compared to women lower in hostile sexism (Hodson, MacInnis, and Rush, 2010). This relationship was attenuated for anti-women jokes and anti-housewives jokes.

CHAPTER FOUR: GENERAL DISCUSSION

Sexist humor communicates a degrading message about women, and the theoretical accounts of whether this message is likely to inspire laughter or a lawsuit has to this point been incomplete. Past theory on disparagement humor has attributed all variation in responses to disparaging humor to differences in attitudes, though attitudes alone are unable to completely account for women's amusement with sexist humor. In support of my hypothesis, results of Study 1 showed that more dis-identification with women predicted more amusement with sexist humor. Further, in addition to gender attitudes, degree of dis-identification with women is a critical variable in explaining the effect of gender on amusement with sexist humor.

Study 2 was predicated on the assumption that women high in hostile sexism dis-identify more with feminists than with women in general. I found that hostile sexism was related to dis-identification with feminists to a greater degree than with women in general or housewives, and that to the degree that women are high in hostile sexism, they interpret the message of humor disparaging feminists less critically than humor disparaging other subgroups of women. Overall, my findings provide support for the hypothesis that women perceive sexist humor more positively insofar as they dis-identify with women as a social category.

Using different research designs, procedures, and measures, the findings of the two studies provide convergent support for my hypothesis that women perceive sexist

humor more positively to the extent that they dis-identify with women as a social category.

Humor as a threat to social identity

An important aspect of understanding how people react to ingroup-disparaging humor is whether or not the humor threatens social identity. The degree to which a person identifies with an ingroup is an important variable in predicting how people react to ingroup threat. High identifiers, who derive more of their personal identity from membership in a group than low identifiers, must develop defensive strategies for protecting their group (and thus themselves) when it is threatened (Doosje, Ellemers, & Spears, 1995). According to Spears, Doosje, and Ellemers (1997), degree of group identification interacts with ingroup bias: those higher in group identification are more likely to develop ingroup-favoring bias under threat than those lower in group identification.

Following this line of research, it is possible that in-group disparaging humor represents a threat to social identity to the degree that one strongly identifies with an ingroup. Therefore, to the extent that a person is highly identified with an ingroup, he should show more ingroup bias when exposed to ingroup-disparaging humor than neutral or outgroup-disparaging humor.

Construal level theory

According to construal level theory, more abstractly construed groups—that is, more broadly inclusive groups (e.g., Asians, women, the elderly) are more likely to be thought of in terms of stereotypic traits and generalizations than more concrete groups (e.g., a church congregation, one's co-workers) (Brown, 1958). Women higher in hostile

sexism may generally perceive the superordinate group of women more abstractly than women lower in hostile sexism, making insults targeting women feel less immediate and personal. Women who are not high in hostile sexism or who are highly identified with women may perceive their membership in the superordinate category of women as more concrete, and so interpret the insults more personally.

A construal level hypothesis in the context of humor might be that thinking abstractly causes ingroup-disparaging humor to be perceived as funnier and less offensive than thinking concretely. A test of this hypothesis would prime participants to process information either abstractly or concretely and see if this mediates reactions to humor disparaging their ingroup. My prediction is that when people are primed to think abstractly, they will be more amused and less offended by humor disparaging an ingroup. Conversely, when primed to think concretely, I expect that people will find ingroup-disparaging humor less funny and more offensive.

Sexist humor and changing norms

The norms of how we think about women at the societal level have been changing. Not so long ago, it was acceptable to openly disparage women without even cloaking the message in the guise of humor. Over the past several decades, however, open declarations of negative attitudes toward women have become to be considered inappropriate (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003). Expressing these negative attitudes now violates social norms—but it doesn't change the fact that some people still hold prejudiced attitudes toward women and other groups toward whom society's attitudes are ambivalent.

According to the normative window theory of prejudice (Ferguson & Crandall, 2006), certain groups in society occupy a place of “shifting acceptability.” Whereas groups like nurses and firefighters occupy a position where prejudice is never justified and groups like terrorists and rapists occupy a position where prejudice is always justified, those in the position of shifting acceptability (or who are in the “normative window”) are groups for whom the norm is unstable. Women, racial minorities, and the LGBT community are all normative window groups. Given the instability of the norm of prejudice against these groups, they are often the targets of disparaging humor, which some people still see has a safe vehicle for expressing prejudice. As we can see, the norms about sexist humor have lagged behind the norms for thinking about women—though people know it’s against the rules to insult women directly, some don’t acknowledge that sexist humor can be more than harmless fun.

Future Directions

A possible limitation of these studies was that in both cases, all participants received their materials in the same order, and all in a brief, single session. It is possible this had the effect of diluting the independent variable manipulation (or inflating it). For instance, in Study 1, each participant saw the jokes, then the ASI, then the identification with women measure. A potential problem might be that taking the ASI sensitized people to their thinking about women, causing demand characteristics to influence responses on the identification with women measure. A future study might take these limitations into consideration by counterbalancing the order of measures or even using implicit measures of sexist attitudes and identification with women. Future replications of this finding might also use different humor manipulations (humorous video clips, for

instance) or groups other than women (like political party or religion). We may find that the size and inclusiveness of the group moderate how much a person psychologically identifies with a particular ingroup.

My studies provided support for my hypothesis that how much a person identifies with a group is an important consideration in determining how he or she will react to humor disparaging an ingroup. The assumption that a person can always get away with disparaging jokes is a dangerous one; as the lawsuit at Miller Brewing Company illustrates, the negative social consequences can be extreme—and expensive. By considering degree of identification with the group being disparaged, my study added a new piece to the puzzle of what makes disparaging humor harassment to some people, and to others, “just a joke.”

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APPENDIX A

Sample Consent Form

Here are some questions you might have about this study.

What is the purpose of this research?

This research is intended to learn about a few things. It's actually two separate studies that we're including together since they're both so short.

First, we want to learn about how funny you find a set of jokes being piloted for a future study. Some of the jokes may be considered mildly disparaging and some people might find them offensive. The jokes are used for research purposes only and do not reflect the views of the researchers.

Secondly, you'll be completing a social attitudes survey, where you will be asked to indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with 22 statements regarding your attitudes and beliefs toward a variety of issues in contemporary society.

What will be expected of me?

First of all, you must be 18 or older to participate. If you are under 18, please exit the survey at this time.

How long will the research take?

It should about 10 minutes.

Will my answers be anonymous?

Yes.

Can I withdraw from the study if I decide to?

Absolutely.

Is there any harm that I might experience from taking part in the study?

There is no potential harm from participating in this research.

How will I benefit from taking part in the research?

After completing this survey, you will receive compensation through the MTurk payment system. Though there are no direct benefits, you will have the satisfaction of knowing you've participated in research that we hope will contribute to the body of knowledge in social psychology. Your input will also help us to design future studies.

Who should I contact if I have questions or concerns about the research?

If you have any questions, you may contact Anne Kochersberger at aokochersberger1@catamount.wcu.edu or Dr. Thomas Ford at tford@wcu.edu. Also, if you have any concerns about how you were treated during the experiment, you may contact the office of the IRB, a committee that oversees the ethical aspects of the research process. The IRB office can be contacted at 828-227-7212. This research project has been approved by the IRB.

APPENDIX B

Study 1 Jokes

Responses were made on a seven-point scale ranging from 1-Not at all to 7-Very much on funniness, amusement, liking, and offensiveness

Sexist jokes:

1. If a woman is in the forest, talking to herself, with no man around, is she still complaining?
2. Three women were granted one wish each by a genie. The first woman said, "I wish I were the smartest woman in the world." And POOF, it came to be. The second woman said, "I wish I was ten times smarter than the smartest woman in the world." and POOF, it came to be. The third woman said, "I wish I were twenty times smarter than the smartest woman in the world."And POOF, she was a man!
3. Did you know there are female hormones in beer? You drink a lot of beer and you get fat, you talk too much and don't make sense, you cry and you can't drive a car.
4. Why haven't any women ever gone to the moon?
It doesn't need cleaning yet!

Neutral jokes:

1. Psychiatrist: What's your problem?
Patient: I think I'm a chicken.
Psychiatrist: How long has this been going on?
Patient: Ever since I was an egg!
2. "Armstrong!" the boss said, "I happen to know you weren't sick yesterday and the reason you didn't come to work was that you were out playing golf."
"That's a rotten lie!" protested Armstrong, "And I have the fish to prove it!"
3. Q: What's the difference between a golfer and a skydiver?
A: A golfer goes...whack! "Damn!" A skydiver goes, "Damn!"....whack.
4. Q: Why was the leper stopped for speeding?
A: He couldn't take his foot off the accelerator!

APPENDIX C

Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Glick & Fiske, 1996)

Hostile Sexism items are marked with an asterisk

Below is a series of statements concerning men and women and their relationships in contemporary society. Please indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with each statement using the following scale:

	0
	1
	2
	3
	4
	5
disagree	disagree
disagree	agree
agree	
agree	
strongly	somewhat
	slightly
	slightly
	somewhat
	strongly
_____	1.
No matter how accomplished he is, a man is not truly complete as a person unless he has the love of a woman.	
* _____	2.
Many women are actually seeking special favors, such as hiring policies that favor them over men, under the guise of asking for "equality."	
_____	3.
In a disaster, women ought not necessarily be rescued before men.	
* _____	4.
Most women interpret innocent remarks or acts being sexist.	
* _____	5.
Women are too easily offended.	
_____	6.
People are often truly happy in life without being romantically involved with a member of the opposite sex.	
* _____	7.
Feminists are not seeking for women to have more power than men.	
_____	8.
Many women have a quality of purity that few men possess.	
_____	9.
Women should be cherished and protected by men.	

- * _____ 10. Most women
- * _____ 1
1. Women seek to gain power by getting control over men.
_____ 1
2. Every man ought to have a woman whom he adores.
_____ 1
3. Men are complete without women.
* _____ 1
4. Women exaggerate problems they have at work.
* _____ 1
5. Once a woman gets a man to commit to her, she usually tries to put him on a tight leash.
* _____ 1
6. When women lose to men in a fair competition, they typically complain about being discriminated against.
_____ 1
7. A good woman should be set on a pedestal by her man.
* _____ 1
8. There are actually very few women who get a kick out of teasing men by seeming sexually available and then refusing male advances.
_____ 1
9. Women, compared to men, tend to have a superior moral sensibility.
_____ 2
0. Men should be willing to sacrifice their own well being in order to provide financially for the women in their lives.
* _____ 2
1. Feminists are making entirely reasonable demands of men.
_____ 2
2. Women, as compared to men, tend to have a more refined sense of culture and good taste.

APPENDIX D

Dis-Identification with Women Measure

Responses were made on a seven-point scale ranging from 1-Strongly agree to 7-Strongly disagree.

1. I often think about what I have in common with women.
2. I consider women an important group.
3. I identify with women.
4. I feel strong ties with women.
5. What happens to women in general in this country affects what happens in my life.
6. What happens in my life affects what happens to women in general.
7. Most of my friends are male.
8. I don't fit in well with other women.
9. I think of myself as "one of the guys".
10. I fit in better with men than with the women I know.
11. I don't share many common interests with women.
12. I prefer to work with men on group projects.
13. When someone criticizes women, it feels like a personal insult.

APPENDIX E

Study 2 Jokes

Subjects rated the jokes on funniness and offensiveness on a scale of 1-Not at all funny/offensive to 7-Very funny/offensive on funniness and offensiveness.

Sexist Jokes:

1. If a feminist/woman/housewife is alone in the woods with no one to hear, is she still complaining?
2. How many feminists/women/housewives does it take to change a light bulb?
Trick question, feminists can't change anything!
3. Feminists like silent men; they think they're listening
4. What's the difference between a feminist and a battery? A battery has a positive side.
5. How is a feminist like a laxative?
They both irritate the crap out of you.

Neutral Jokes:

1. What's the difference between an oral thermometer and a rectal thermometer?
The taste.
2. What did the limestone say to the geologist?
Stop taking me for granite!
3. What did the leper say to the prostitute?
Thanks...you can keep the tip.
4. Two goldfish are in a tank and one says to the other, "Do you know how to drive this thing?"
5. How does the blind parachutist know when he's getting close to the ground? The leash goes slack.