

THE ROLE OF CONTEXT IN THE INTERPERTATION OF SEXIST HUMOR

By

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ABSTRACT

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL CONTEXT IN THE INTERPERTATION OF SEXSIT HUMOR

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Humor researchers have emphasized the role that sex differences and attitudes toward women play in moderating amusement with sexist humor. In-group/out-group conflict and the adherence to hostile sexist attitudes have been shown to accurately determine the evaluation of sexist humor. The present research contributes to this literature by addressing the role that the *social context* plays in determining whether people adopt a humor mindset versus a serious mindset for interpreting sexist humor. We hypothesized that the norms of some social contexts (office) *discourage* the adoption of a non-serious "humor mindset" for interpreting sexist humor, leading people to perceive the humor as offensive. In contrast, the norms of other contexts (comedy club) *encourage* the adoption of a non-serious humor mindset, causing people to perceive the humor as less offensive. One hundred eighteen women and 84 men were prompted to imagine themselves in a comedy club, office or neutral setting and then asked to rate both sexist and neutral jokes in terms of offensiveness. It was found that imagining oneself in a comedy club significantly reduces offensiveness ratings of sexist humor. The office context had the opposite effect, where offensiveness ratings increased. Thus the adoption of a non-critical humor mindset can be manipulated by social context. The evaluation of sexist humor is not merely a function of gender in-group/out-group differences or attitudes towards women. The social context in which the jokes were told is also an influential piece to the puzzle.

INTRODUCTION

In 1993 executive Jerold Mackenzie referenced an episode of TV show Seinfeld wherein Jerry's character could not remember the name of an ex-girlfriend (Dolores), only that her name rhymed with a female body part (Neil & Thompson, 1998). During a stand-up routine Jimmy Carr said "99% of women kiss with their eyes closed, which explains why it is so difficult to identify a rapist." Mackenzie's comments were construed as sexual harassment by his coworker Patricia Best. He was fired from his position at Miller Brewing Company for sexual harassment. Mackenzie sued for wrongful termination and Best sued for sexual harassment. The settlement of these cases ended up costing the Miller Brewing Company 26.6 million dollars. However, Jimmy Carr was met with thunderous applause. Carr and Mackenzie both made offensive jokes, yet the aftermath of their jokes was completely different. This example shows that while joke content is certainly important to audience reactions, the social context in which a joke is told can determine whether people interpret it as benign amusement or the height of offensiveness and bad taste. Accordingly, this study seeks to address the role of social context in the evaluation of sexist humor.

Sexist humor demeans, insults, stereotypes, victimizes, and/or objectifies a person on the basis of his or her gender (LaFrance & Woodzicka, 1998). Importantly, women are more frequently the target of aggressive humor and the object of sexual humor than are men (Cantor & Zillmann, 1973). While some may become offended by the content of television shows such as Seinfeld, many people see it as harmless attempts at amusement. Whether people consider the sexist depiction of women as an offensive expression of sexism depends on the degree to which

they are willing to overlook or excuse the underlying sentiment and adopt a playful or non-critical "humor mindset" for interpreting the humor material.

Historically, humor researchers have emphasized the role that sex differences and attitudes toward women play in moderating amusement with sexist humor. This research contributes to this literature by addressing the role that the *social context* plays in determining whether people adopt a "humor mindset" versus a serious mindset for interpreting sexist humor. I contend that social norms of certain contexts discourage the adoption of a humor mindset for interpreting sexist humor, whereas the norms of other contexts encourage the adoption of the humor mindset. Specifically, sexual harassment issues and the professional nature of the office workplace should cue participants to interpret sexist humor in a critical way. In the workplace, sexist humor should be dissected and analyzed. Conversely, a comedy club setting should cue participants to view sexist humor non-critically and to disregard offensive material as simply an attempt at harmless fun. Accordingly, this study examines the effect of the setting in which sexist jokes are told on the degree to which people interpret the jokes in a serious, critical manner (i.e., the degree to which they find the jokes offensive).

THE HUMOR MINDSET

Humor as a medium of communication is unique. Messages are interpreted differently when presented in a humorous rather than a non-humorous manner (Mulkay, 1988). Humorous messages provide cues that inform an individual that the message is not to be interpreted seriously (e.g., Attardo, 1993; Berlyne, 1972; Kane, Suls, & Tedeschi, 1977; Mannell, 1977; Mulkay, 1988; Zillmann, 1983, 2000). Mere exposure to these cues can elicit a non-critical mindset in which a careful or detailed assessment is discouraged. Psychologically, the distinction

between critical and non-critical mindsets is that a non-critical mindset involves a lowered need for logic and resolution in the statements assessed (Ford & Ferguson, 2004). Conversely the critical mindset encourages people to think deeply, apply logic and counter-argue if necessary (Martin, 2007). A product of the non-critical mindset is that oftentimes the joke teller is not questioned and thus has a wider range of topics at his or her disposal. A comic is allowed to delve into taboo topics and use harsher language that would otherwise be considered socially unacceptable. In essence humor affords greater freedom of speech

Researchers have investigated the neurological, cognitive and social underpinnings of the humor mindset and thus amusement with humor material. In the following sections, I briefly review theory and research related to each.

Neurological Underpinnings

There is neurological evidence that critical and non-critical brain processes are distinct. Bartolo, Benuzzi, Nocetti, Baraldi, and Nichelli (2006) found that specific brain areas are active when processing humorous cartoons versus non-humorous cartoons. They found that the inferior frontal and middle temporal gyri of the left hemisphere were more active during humor detection. During humor comprehension the right inferior frontal gyrus, left superior temporal gyrus, left middle temporal gyrus, and left cerebellum are more active. The emotional aspects of humor appear to be produced in the left amygdala and cerebellum. Thus, humor material is detected, processed and evaluated in a way that is neurologically distinct from non-humorous statements. These fMRI results may show the physical characteristics of the non-critical humor mindset.

Cognitive underpinnings

Psychologically, the distinction between critical and non-critical mindsets is that a non-critical mindset involves a lowered need for logic and resolution in the statements assessed (Ford & Ferguson, 2004). The non-critical humor mindset is activated by subtle cues that are distinct to humorous material. As Berlyne puts it, “Humor is accompanied by discriminative cues, which dictate that what is happening or going to happen, should be taken as a joke. The ways in which we might react to the same events in the absence of these cues become inappropriate and must be withheld.” (p. 56.). Humor need not come to a logical conclusion, and often does not. Humor is a form of cognitive play and thus people are encouraged to not look too deeply into the content of the jokes. Conversely the critical mindset encourages people to think deeply, apply logic and counter-argue if necessary (Martin, 2007). Mulkay (1988) argued the humor cues provide a frame with which to view the material. This frame is similar to the way in which people view art. The usual rules of logic and acceptable behavior are suspended. When the three stooges violently beat each other, the audience feels no need to stop the violence or even feel sympathy. The violence is perceived as unreal and the audience feels psychologically distant from the victims.

McGhee (1975) argues that humor contains an unreal or fantasy aspect. He contends that humor is processed through fantasy assimilation as opposed to reality assimilation. This theory maintains that expectancy violations are either processed as real or unreal. If an expectancy violation is processed as real, then the normal rules of logic apply and the individual struggles to fit the incongruity into their notions of how the world works. If the expectancy is processed as unreal, then the incongruity is not a puzzle to be solved, but a fantasy to be experienced. This unreal aspect makes the surprising incongruity comical rather than threatening.

Cognitive models place expectancy violations or incongruity at the heart of humor processing. Wyer and Collins (1992) argue that the typical joke format starts with the set-up that activates an initial schema. The punch line activates a second contradictory schema that plays off of the first. Jokes with moderate amounts of interplay or juxtaposition between schemas are perceived to be funnier. Martin (2007) calls this juxtaposition process bisociation. In bisociation, the two contradictory schemas play off each other until some resolution is found. The resolution to the incongruity releases tension and produces mirth. Martin claims this process is thought to be an automatic expert skill that involves interpretation of non-literal language and pseudo-logic. Similarly, Attardo (1993) argues that jokes are noticeably different from other forms of speech in that they violate typical conversational rules. Ironic statements are understood through their unstated meaning rather than their literal meanings. Conversations norms are suspended and a unique process kicks in to find the non-literal meaning in order to resolve the incongruity.

Social Underpinnings

An interesting new theory, posited by McGraw and Warren (2010), argues that all humor arises from benign violations of social norms. That is to say, humorous material challenges or violates a given notion of how the world ought to be, but does so in a manner that falls short of offensiveness.

This benign violation hypothesis states that three factors make humorous material distinct. A situation must be appraised as a violation, as benign, and these two appraisals must happen simultaneously. Thus humor is a delicate balance between positive and negative. If the violation is too strong the audience is more likely to be disgusted or offended than amused. If the violation is too benign then the audience is more likely to be bored or uninterested than amused. McGraw and Warren argue that there are three ways in which this balance is maintained: the

violated norm must be coupled with an alternative norm which suggests the situation is acceptable, the audience must only be weakly committed to the violated norm, and the audience must be psychologically distant from the violated norm. It is important to note here that humor is dependent on social norms, which are fluid and malleable.

As a society grows and changes, social norms wax and wane in popularity. New norms come into existence and old ones fade away or adapt. Thus, what is funny to one population can be offensive to another. Zijderveld (1968) argues that humor has often been a means of altering social reality. That is to say, one can use humor to challenge a societal norm while remaining relatively non-threatening. Humor is socially constructed and relies on the violation of social norms (Lynch, 2002; McGraw & Warren, 2010). While the joke itself dictates what social norm is violated, the alternative norm, commitment to the violated norm, and distance from the violated norm may vary. An individual preparing for her "women's studies" class might be particularly attuned to norms of gender equality and political correctness, and therefore interpret a sexist joke in a serious, critical mindset and find it highly offensive. In contrast, an individual reading literature arguing that sexual harassment is exaggerated may feel more psychologically distant from the norms of gender equality and political correctness. Since social norms are malleable, it may be possible to manipulate humor reactions by altering the available social norms or the psychological distance from the violated norm. This study was designed to investigate that possibility.

GENDER DIFFERENCES AND THE HUMOR MINDSET

Males and females prefer different types of humor. There are a substantial number of studies showing that males prefer sexual humor and females prefer absurd humor (Brodzinsky,

Barnet, & Aillo, 1981; Chapman & Gadfield, 1976; Love & Deckers, 1989; Mundorf et al., 1998; Neuliep, 1987; Ryan & Kanjorski, 1998). It has also been shown that men like more hostile jokes and cartoons more than women do (Mundorf et al., 1998). Furthermore, men are less offended by sexist humor than women; they are more likely to interpret it in a non-serious humor mindset (Chapman & Gadfield, 1976; Love & Deckers, 1989; Neuliep, 1987, Priest & Wilhelm, 1974). Love and Deckers (1989), for instance, found that women rated sexist cartoons as more offensive and less funny than men did because they identified with the female cartoon victim.

Gender is unlike other forms of identity in that it includes biological as well as social components. While biological sex is predetermined, the social components of gender are more transitory. Social identity theory posits that individuals derive and maintain a social identity from their membership in social groups (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Ferguson & Ford, 2008). Social identity differs from personal identity, which is relatively permanent and is based on individual characteristics (e.g., biological sex, height, or hair color). This social identity serves two purposes. It allows the individual to categorize others into manageable chunks. It also helps the individual define the self in the social environment/collective and develop a sense of belonging. Social identity relies on comparisons (e.g. male versus female, black versus white, liberal versus conservative). Thus people tend to choose to identify with social groups that are more dominant, privileged or enjoy a higher status, groups that compare favorably to relevant out-groups. Once an individual adheres to a social identity then he or she shares in their group's perceived successes and failures. People prefer that their in-groups be positively distinct and seek to promote their groups' status among the collective.

Humor that disparages an out-group is a typical and easily accessible way to maintain the in-group's positive distinctiveness. Disparaging humor is often cited as an efficient way to construct in-group solidarity by stressing the importance of shared background knowledge and values (Archakis & Tsakona, 2005; Meyer 1997; 2000). This is particularly true of gender due to the moderate level of intergroup conflict (Priest & Wilhelm, 1974). Severe intergroup conflict, such as Israeli versus Palestinian, is more likely to produce violence than humorous retorts. Mild intergroup conflict, such as cricket fan versus baseball fan, is not likely to threaten social identity at all. There is suitable tension between the genders to allow sexist humor to create positive or negative distinctiveness and thus enhance or threaten social identity. In accordance with this theory, it has been consistently found that men prefer jokes that disparage women, whereas women prefer jokes that disparage men (Chapman & Gadfield, 1976; Love & Deckers, 1989; Neuliep, 1987, Priest & Wilhelm, 1974).

ATTITUDES TOWARD WOMEN AND THE HUMOR MINDSET

Current theory suggests that gender attitudes are a better predictor of amusement than gender as a category (Sev'er & Ungar, 1997). La Fave and Mannell (1976) argue that there is a direct relationship between enjoyment of humor that disparages women and negative attitudes towards women as an identification class (Ferguson & Ford, 2008; La Fave, Haddad, & Maesen, 1996). Zillmann and Cantor's (1972) disposition theory treats attitudes towards a given gender as a continuous variable (Ferguson & Ford, 2008). Zillmann and Cantor (1972) proposed that amusement could be determined by the participant's attitudes toward the joke victim and aggressor. They argue that there is a direct relationship between negative attitudes towards a group and the degree of amusement derived from humor that disparages that group. Consistent

with disposition theory, several studies show that men who are high in hostile sexism—antagonism toward women (Glick & Fiske, 1996) are less offended by and more amused by humor that disparages women (Greenwood & Isbell, 2002; Thomas & Esses, 2004).

Participant's views of sex roles also affect the likelihood that the non-critical humor mindset will be activated. Brodzinsky et al. (1981) found that humor amusement was predicted better by participants' adherence to gender roles than their actual gender. Participants who hold nontraditional views of women or hold pro-feminist views are less likely to be amused by sexist or sexual humor (Henkin & Fish, 1986; Moore, Griffiths, & Payne, 1987). People with nontraditional views of women should thus be more offended by sexist humor—less likely to adopt a non-critical humor mindset.

SOCIAL CONTEXT AND THE HUMOR MINDSET

A context, or setting, informs an individual as to what behavior is expected or acceptable. According to Jacobson, Cialdini, and Mortensen (2010) this occurs in two ways. A social context provides descriptive norms, which inform people how others in the context typically behave. The context also provides injunctive norms, which inform people of how they ought to behave. Thus, it possible that manipulating the context wherein one encounters or imagines encountering sexist jokes could prime different descriptive and injunctive social norms for how to interpret the jokes and thus differentially foster the adoption of a critical versus non-critical mindset for interpreting sexist jokes.

A comedy club context should foster the adoption of a non-critical humor mindset and thus establish a norm that sexist humor is appropriate. A comedy club brings to mind small densely packed rooms, alcohol consumption, loud laughter and spotlighted comedians. All these

factors are conducive to the non-critical humor mindset. It has been shown that as room size decreases and group size increases, people laugh more (Aiello, Thompson, & Brodzinsky, 1983). It has also been shown that alcohol consumption has a positive correlation with laughter (Weaver, Masland, & Kharazmi, & Zillmann, 1985). Canned laughter is often inserted into comedy programs to facilitate audience laughter. Comedians are often expected to push the envelope and add shock value to their routines. This increases arousal, which facilitates humor processing (Cantor, Bryant, & Zillmann, 1974). The activities associated with a comedy club prime an audience to think less critically about the material they are taking in.

An office context should foster the adoption of the critical mindset and thus establish a norm in which sexist humor is inappropriate. While the comedy club is a place of recreation, the office is a place for work. It is a place where serious problems must be solved and deadlines met. The critical mindset is associated with a need for logic and comprehension. Thus an office context should encourage the adoption of a critical mindset. Humor is not absent from the office, but it takes a different form. On one hand office humor can facilitate communication, improve employee health, mediate disputes, maintain power hierarchies, and unite workers (Lynch, 2002; Martin, 1998; Martin & Lefcourt, 1983; Meyer, 1997; Meyer, 2000). On the other hand, when taken too far, office humor borders on sexual harassment.

Humor can benefit the office, but it can also turn the workplace hostile. It has been shown that females tend to use cohesion-building humor while males prefer humor that differentiates people (Robinson & Smith-Lovin, 2001). Men are more likely to find sexual humor amusing and appropriate (Frazier, Cachran, & Olson, 1995). Men are also more likely to make sexual jokes when they are placed in an environment where they feel safe to joke (Mitchell, Hirschman, & Angelone, 2004). This combined with the fact that women are much more likely to be the

victims of sexual harassment shows that humor in the office can be dangerous. Frazier et al. (1995) reported that 74% of the women they surveyed considered sexual jokes and teasing to be harassment, whereas only 47% of the men felt the same. In the case of the Miller Brewing Co., both victim and perpetrator had grounds for legal action against the company. The prevalence of sexual harassment cases around the early 1990's increased the need for businesses to enforce stricter regulations on what kinds of behaviors were appropriate for the office environment (Neil, Thompson, 1998). This injunctive norm should be very salient to anyone who has worked in an office or almost any other professional business. An office context should inform an individual that sexist humor is not to be tolerated.

THE PRESENT STUDY: HYPOTHESES AND OVERVIEW

The primary hypothesis of this study is that the social context in which sexist jokes (but not neutral jokes) are told will encourage or inhibit the adoption of a non-critical humor mindset for interpreting the jokes. To test this hypothesis, I asked participants to role-play (to imagine they were part of either an office meeting, a member of the audience at a comedy club, or given no context). Participants then read and listened to a series of sexist and neutral jokes exchanged among people in the imagined context. I included a control condition in which participants simply read and listened to the sexist and neutral jokes. Participants rated the offensiveness of each joke to assess the adoption of a non-critical humor mindset. In addition participants rated the funniness of each joke.

In keeping with the hypothesis, I predicted a context x joke type interaction effect. Participants should rate sexist jokes as more offensive in the context of the office setting, where implicit norms dictate that such jokes are inappropriate, than they would in the "no context"

control condition. In contrast, Participants should rate sexist jokes as less offensive in the context of the comedy club setting, where the implicit norms dictate that such jokes should be taken lightly as harmless fun, than they would in the "no context" control condition.

Offensiveness ratings of the neutral jokes should not vary as a function of context manipulation.

In order to connect the present research to the current models, two secondary hypotheses were also tested. It has been shown that the gender of the participant affects their interpretation of sexist humor (Chapman & Gadfield, 1976; Love & Deckers, 1989; Neuliep, 1987, Priest & Wilhelm, 1974). Thus, this study's second hypothesis is that males will find the sexist jokes less offensive and funnier than females. It has also been shown that an individual's degree of hostile sexism is associated with lower offensiveness ratings and higher funniness ratings of sexist humor (Glick and Fiske, 1996; Greenwood & Isbell, 2002; Thomas & Esses, 2004). This study's third hypothesis is that, collapsed across gender, hostile sexism would be correlated to lower offensiveness ratings and higher funniness ratings of sexist jokes.

METHOD

Participants and Design

This study gathered data from 259 participants accessed through Mturk (181) and the WCU undergraduate participant pool (78). This study included two manipulation checks. First, participants were timed and any participant who completed the survey less than 10 minutes was removed from analysis. Secondly, this survey included two items that read, "Please mark 5 on this question," and, "Please mark 0 on this question." Data from 57 participants who did not enter 5 or 0 for these items were excluded. Thus the final analysis included 202 participants. The

participants were majority female (118). The average age of the participants was 30.04. Participants were majority White (53.5%) and Asian (35.1%).

Participants were randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions in a 3 (social context: office, comedy club, control) x 2 (joke type: sexist, neutral) mixed model design with social context serving as the between-subject variable and joke type serving as a within-subject variable.

Procedure

All participants completed an online survey created using Qualtrics. Participants from the WCU participant pool were seated at individual computers with the survey already loaded on it. They were also given headphones so that each participant could work at their own pace. Participants that were accessed through Mturk completed the survey from their own computers. All participants were prompted with an informed consent sheet prior to beginning the survey. See Appendix A for a description of a sample consent form.

Experimental conditions were determined by exposure to one of three short vignettes. Each participant read a single vignette. Participants in the comedy club context were asked to imagine themselves as part of a comedy club audience and prompted with a picture of a comedy club stage. Participants in the office context were asked to imagine themselves in an office meeting and prompted with a picture of an office meeting. Participants in the neutral context were not prompted with a vignette or picture. See Appendix B for a description of the experimental conditions.

Participants were then asked to evaluate eight jokes. Each joke was presented in both text and audio form. WCU graduate students recorded themselves reading each joke in a conversational manner from a script. In the comedy club condition, bar noises were added to the

background. In the office condition, office noises were added to the background. No extra noises were added to the neutral condition. Four of the jokes contained content that disparaged women such as, “Why do men pass gas more than women: Because women don’t shut up long enough to build up pressure.” The other four jokes contained neutral content such as, “You know you’ve been at college too long when you enjoy doing the laundry at home.”

One hundred fifty three pilot participants who were not included in the present study rated all eight jokes on funniness and offensiveness. Each joke was rated on a Likert scale from 0 (not at all funny/not at all offensive) to 10 (extremely funny/extremely offensive). Reliability analyses showed that the Cronbach’s alphas for the offensiveness ($r = .870$) and funniness ($r = .837$) ratings of the sexist jokes were well within acceptable parameters. In addition, the Cronbach’s alphas for the offensiveness ($r = .777$) and funniness ($r = .663$) ratings of the neutral jokes were also within acceptable parameters. A paired-samples t-test on the offensiveness and funniness ratings of the selected jokes were run to determine if the sexist and neutral jokes had equally funny content and unequally offensive content. The sexist jokes ($M = 4.58$, $SD = 2.71$) were rated significantly more offensive than the neutral jokes ($M = 0.88$, $SD = 1.37$); $t(148) = 18.09$, $p < .001$. However, there was no significant difference between the sexist ($M = 4.88$, $SD = 2.48$) and neutral ($M = 4.76$, $SD = 2.08$) jokes on funniness, $t(150) = 0.47$, $p = .638$.

Participants were then presented with all eight jokes. After each joke was presented, participants were prompted with the following questions, “How funny is this joke?” “How amusing is this joke?” and “How likely to you feel you are to repeat this joke?” Responses were made on 6-point rating scales ranging from 0 (not at all) to 5 (very much so). Participants were then presented with the same eight jokes for a second time and prompted with the following questions, “How offensive is this joke?” “How appropriate is this joke?” “How seriously should

this joke be taken?” and “How socially acceptable is this joke?” Again, responses were made on 6-point rating scales ranging from 0 (not at all) to 5 (very much so). See Appendix C for a complete description of the jokes and rating form.

When participants were finished rating the jokes they were told that that the study was over and another unrelated study was about to commence. Participants were presented with another informed consent sheet. All participants were told that they would participate in a survey that measures their attitudes about gender and gender roles. Participants completed the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Glick & Fiske, 1996). This is a 22-item scale that measures hostile and benevolent sexism. The scale measures participant’s agreement with hostile sexist statements such as, “The world would be a better place if women supported men more and criticized them less.” The scale also measures participant’s agreement with benevolent sexist statements such as “Women, as compared to men, have a more refined sense of culture and taste,” on a 5 point Likert scale from 1 (Disagree strongly) to 5 (Agree strongly). Glick and Fiske (1996) reported that the Cronbach’s alpha for the hostile sexism scale ranged from .80 to .92 across six different samples. Similarly, the Cronbach’s alpha for the benevolent sexism scale ranged from .73 to .85 across six samples. See Appendix D for a complete description of the ASI.

Finally, participants were presented with a short demographics questionnaire. The questionnaire asked participants to indicate their race, gender, and year of study. Upon completion of the questionnaire packet participants was thanked and debriefed.

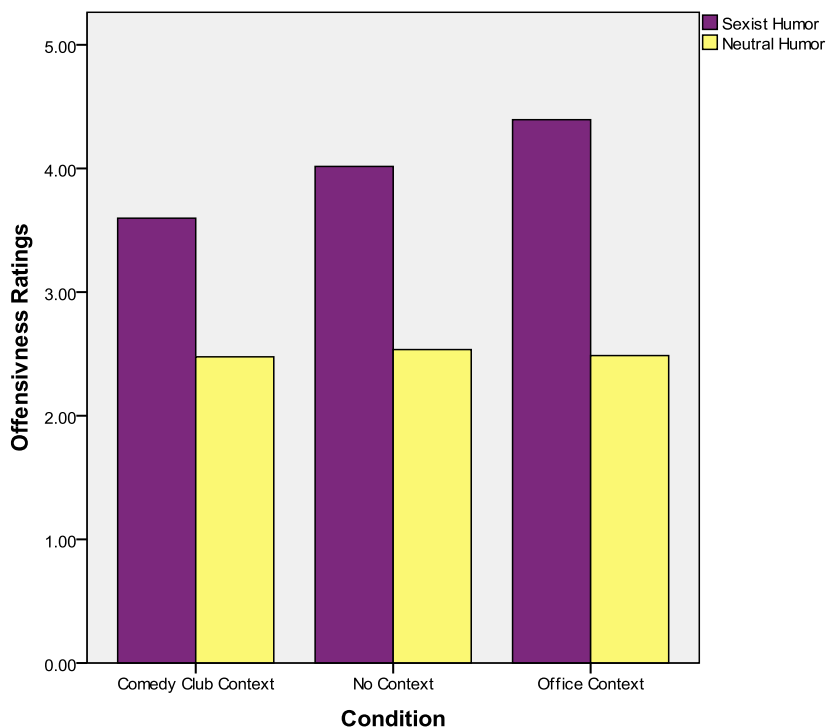
RESULTS

Primary Hypothesis: Effect of Context on Offensiveness Ratings of Sexist Jokes

An aggregate measure of offensiveness was formed by averaging the responses to three items: “How offensive is this joke?” “How appropriate is this joke?” (reverse-scored) and “How socially acceptable is this joke?” Lower offensiveness ratings suggest that participants had interpreted the joke in a more light-hearted, non-critical humor mindset (Hodson, Rush, MacInnis, 2010). A reliability analysis showed that the mean inter-item correlations of the sexist (.573) and neutral (.389) jokes were within acceptable parameters. The item, “How seriously should this joke be taken?” was removed due to bad fit.

I predicted a context x joke type interaction effect. Participants should rate sexist jokes as most offensive in the context of the office condition and least offensive in the context of the comedy club condition. Offensiveness ratings of the neutral jokes should not vary as a function of context manipulation. Accordingly, I subjected the offensiveness ratings of the sexist and neutral jokes to a 3 context (comedy club, neutral, office) x 2 joke type (sexist, neutral) x 2 sex of subject) analysis of variance (ANOVA) with repeated measures on the joke type factor. The predicted context x joke type interaction effect was significant, $F(2, 195) = 6.50, p = .002, \eta^2 = .061$. As shown in Figure 1, social context affected offensiveness ratings of sexist jokes but not neutral jokes. The means for this interaction effect are displayed in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Mean offensiveness ratings as a function of context and joke type



As shown in Figure 1, the social context manipulation affected offensiveness ratings of sexist jokes but not neutral jokes.

In order to probe this interaction further, I performed a one-way ANOVA on the offensiveness ratings of the sexist jokes with social context serving as the between-subjects factor. As predicted the effect of social context on the offensiveness ratings of sexist jokes was significant, $F(2, 199) = 12.81, p = .000, \eta^2 = .114$). In keeping with our hypothesis, participants in the office context rated the sexist jokes as more offensive ($M = 4.39, SD = .892$) than participants in the control condition ($M = 4.02, SD = .908$), $F(1, 130) = 5.80, p < .05$. Participants in the comedy club context rated the sexist jokes as less offensive ($M = 3.60, SD = .921$) than participants in the control condition ($M = 4.02, SD = .91$), $F(1, 137) = 7.23, p < .05$.

Thus, the inclusion of a social context to sexist humor alters the perceived offensiveness of the jokes. As expected there was no effect of the context manipulation on the offensiveness ratings of the neutral jokes, $F(2, 199) = .094, p = .911, \eta^2 = .001$. The social context manipulation did not affect the perception of offensiveness in jokes that have no disparaging content.

Second Hypothesis: Gender Differences in Funniness and Offensiveness Ratings of Sexist Jokes

My second hypothesis was that males would rate the sexist jokes (but not neutral jokes) less offensive and funnier than females. To test this hypothesis I first subjected offensiveness ratings of sexist and neutral jokes to a 2 (joke type: sexist, neutral) x 2 (sex of participant) ANOVA with repeated measures on the joke type factor. As predicted, there was a significant joke type x sex of subject interaction effect, $F(2, 195) = 7.39, p = .007, \eta^2 = .036$. In order to probe this interaction, a one-way ANOVA was conducted with sex of the participant as the between-subjects factor. The data showed a significant effect of sex of the participant on sexist humor offensiveness ratings of sexist jokes, $F(1, 199) = 10.41, p = .001$. In keeping with previous research females rated the sexist jokes as more offensive ($M = 4.17, SD = .959$) than males ($M = 3.74, SD = .912$). There were no significant gender differences in the offensiveness ratings of neutral humor, $F(1, 199) = .244, p = .622, \eta^2 = .001$.

A parallel analysis was run on funniness ratings and sex of the participant. Funniness was operationalized as the combined score from the "How funny is this joke?" "How amusing is this joke?" and "How likely to you feel you are to repeat this joke?" items. A reliability analysis showed that the mean inter-item correlations of the sexist (.834) and neutral (.877) jokes were within acceptable parameters.

This study hypothesized that males would rate sexist humor higher in funniness than females. I tested this hypothesis by subjected funniness ratings of sexist and neutral jokes to a 2 (joke type: sexist, neutral) x 2 (sex of participant) ANOVA with repeated measures on the joke type factor. As predicted, there was a significant joke type x sex of subject interaction effect, $F(1, 199) = 45.73, p = .000, \eta^2 = .187$. Males ($M = 3.38, SD = 1.12$) rated the sexist jokes significantly higher in funniness than females ($M = 2.35, SD = 1.01$), $F(1, 199) = 45.73, p = .000, .187$. Males ($M = 3.05, SD = 1.12$) also rated the neutral jokes higher than females ($M = 2.71, SD = 1.04$) in funniness, $F(1, 199) = 4.77, p = .03, \eta^2 = .023$.

Third Hypothesis

Disposition theory predicts that people will be less offended and more amused by sexist jokes insofar as they have negative attitudes toward women. In order to test this prediction several bi-variate correlations were run between hostile sexism and the funniness and offensiveness ratings of sexist and neutral humor. There was a significant correlation between hostile sexism and funniness ratings of sexist humor ($r = .52, p < .01$). As expected, the more a person holds hostile attitudes towards women, the more they enjoy humor that disparages women. There was also a significant correlation between hostile sexism and offensiveness ratings of sexist humor ($r = -.39, p < .01$). This effect is also in keeping with previous literature. As hostile sexism increases, the likelihood of being offended by sexist humor decreases. It is likely that individuals higher in hostile sexism agree more with the disparaging undertones of the sexist humor and so are not offended. Strangely, there was a significant correlation between hostile sexism and funniness ratings of neutral jokes ($r = .25, p < .01$). This may be because the neutral and sexist humor was presented together; individuals higher in hostile sexism enjoyed the routine better overall.

DISCUSSION

Jerold Mackenzie was fired for referencing an episode of Seinfeld where Jerry's character could not remember the name of an ex-girlfriend (Dolores), only that her name rhymed with a female body part. Yet, Jimmy Carr received thunderous laughter for saying, "99% of women kiss with their eyes closed, which explains why it is so difficult to identify a rapist." The drastic difference between content and reaction of these two situations shows that what is appropriate is highly determined by the context of the joke. These results of the present study show that social context does indeed affect the interpretation of sexist humor. Jokes told in an office context are under a higher level of scrutiny. Jokes told in a comedy club context are afforded more leniencies.

This study posited three hypotheses. Primarily, it was predicted that social context affects the adoption of a non-critical humor mindset. A comedy club context informs the audience that the jokes being told are not to be taken seriously due to the fact that even sexist humor is harmless fun. An office context informs the audience that sexist material should be scrutinized due to the fact that sexual harassment is a serious issue. It was also posited that social context could have an effect on funniness ratings, differences being the comedy club should encourage laughter and the office context should inhibit it. It was also predicted the gender of the audience should affect how offensive the sexist jokes are perceived. Women should be more sensitive to jokes that disparage women than men. Finally, it was predicted that the audience's inner prejudice, namely hostile sexism, should be correlated with higher funniness ratings and lower offensiveness ratings for sexist humor.

The primary hypothesis of this study was confirmed. Social context does appear to have an effect on the evaluation of humor. It is not merely the content of the joke that matters; the

context in which the joke was told also contributes to how well the joke is received. Comedians such as Lenny Bruce and George Carlin have pushed the limits of what is acceptable speech and suffered legal battle because of it. Due to their efforts comedians have been afforded a greater freedom of speech with their acts. The social context of the comedy club informs the audience that the jokes are not to be taken seriously. Thus, disparaging jokes told in a comedy club are interpreted in a non-critical mindset where offensive material is overlooked. As women have joined the workforce more and more, they have encountered sexism and harassment. The resulting legal battles have increased sensitivity to sexist comments and activities in the workplace. The social context of the office is one where sexist infractions are strongly discouraged and carefully monitored. Thus, disparaging jokes told in an office are interpreted with a critical mindset where any offensive material has the possibility to create a hostile work environment.

The second and third hypotheses were also confirmed. Both of these hypotheses were drawn from previous literature (Chapman & Gadfield, 1976; Glick and Fiske, 1996; Greenwood & Isbell, 2002; Love & Deckers, 1989; Neuliep, 1987, Priest & Wilhelm, 1974; Thomas & Esses, 2004). This study has replicated those results. Women were more offended than men by humor that disparaged women. Men were not as offended by material that enhanced their positive distinctiveness. Whereas women, who had their positive distinctiveness threatened, were more likely to be offended. Attitudes toward women were also an important factor. The more an individual harbors prejudicial attitudes toward women the more they enjoy humor that disparages women. Individuals higher in hostile sexism were also more prone to adopt a non-critical mindset. It is likely that individuals who agreed with the underlying sexist message of the jokes were less likely to see anything to be offended by. In a strange turn, hostile sexism was related to

enjoyment of neutral jokes. It is unlikely that hostile sexism is related to enjoyment of all humor. It may be the case that including sexist jokes into the routine could bleed over into the neutral jokes. This may be a case of transferred excitation; however, this study was not set up to test that particular hypothesis.

One unusual aspect of this study is its mixed participant pool. The majority of the participants were drawn from Mechanical Turk. Mturk is a relatively new source of research participants. It greatly increases the scope of participants in terms of age, race, and nationality. While this diversity is helpful, Mturk is new and thus needs to be tested further. It may be the case that Mturk could significantly alter the way in which social psychologists collect their data.

Future research into the effect of social context on humor evaluation should proceed along two lines. The first is to test other social contexts. This study only included two contexts. Humor is ubiquitous. It can be found in almost any human interaction. Thus there are many other social contexts that need to be explored. A church setting may produce more robust findings than an office. An outing with friends may produce more robust findings than a comedy club. Secondly, this model may also be applicable to different types of disparaging humor. That is to say, the joke target could be manipulated. It is likely that switching sexist humor with racist humor will yield similar results. Other group differences such as liberal/conservative, northerner/southerner, or atheist/religious may also be manipulated by social context.

CONCLUSION

Previous research into sexist humor has yielded a two part model. It has claimed that humor evaluation can be determined by gender of the participant and attitudes toward the joke target. This study posits that there is an important third variable that is being left out. Both

genders attempt to preserve their positive distinctiveness, thus they gain a kind of vicarious superiority when they disparage the opposite gender. Individuals with greater hostile attitudes towards a group will be more disposed to enjoy humor that disparages that group. A social context provides a frame in which disparaging jokes are viewed. It informs the audience as to how lighthearted or seriously a given joke's content is to be taken.

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Appendix A: Informed Consent

Western Carolina University
Department of Psychology

Title of Project: Humor Study
Principal Investigator: Jared Gray

You are invited to participate in a research project entitled “Humor Study.” This study is being conducted by Jared Gray and Professor Thomas Ford from the Department of Psychology at Western Carolina University.

This study is comprised of one questionnaire. It should take approximately 15-20 minutes to complete.

Participation in this project will count as one research credit toward fulfillment of the research participation requirement for Psychology 150 students. Keep in mind that your participation is completely voluntary and you may stop participating at any point without penalty. You may stop participation at any time. There is no penalty for stopping participation. However, you must complete both phases in order to receive credit toward the research participation requirement. If you choose to discontinue your participation at any time you may simply exit the on-line study. You must be 18 years or older to participate. If you are under 18, please exit the survey at this time.

The following questionnaire contains of a series of jokes. This survey is comprised of items designed to assess your evaluation of situational humor and humor in general. The survey will take approximately 15 minutes to complete.

Your participation in each phase is voluntary. You may withdraw at any time or decline to answer any question you choose without penalty. Also, please keep in mind that your responses are completely anonymous and will be held strictly confidential. Completion of the survey indicates our consent to use the responses you supply and that you are at least 18 years old.

Finally, there are also no immediate benefits to you for participating in this study. If you have any questions, you may contact Jared Gray at jagray@catamount.wcu.edu or Professor Ford at 227-2109 (or tford@email.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 dimensions of the research process. The IRB office can be contacted at 227-3177. This research project has been approved by the IRB.

If you would like to receive a summary of the results, once the study has been completed, please enter your email address in the space below.

Appendix B: Description of Context Manipulation

Comedy Club Vignette

Instructions: In this study we will ask you to role play. Please imagine that you are a member of a comedy club audience. You are watching a number of very funny comedians. Performing at this club is a comedy troupe called the laughter bandits. During an intermission between comics a female junior-equipment technician is having trouble getting the microphones to work. This prompts the troupe to laugh and tell a few jokes to make the time pass. The following are a few jokes taken from that set.

Again, imagine that you are part of this comedy club audience watching this performance and are experiencing these jokes as they happen. Please try to react and interoperate jokes as you would as a member of this audience in this situation. Read each joke and rate the joke as to its funniness. Circle a number from 0 – 10 on each rating scale below the joke.

Office Vignette

Instructions: In this study we will ask you to role play. Please imagine that you are a member of the marketing staff at INDISCO. You are attending a staff meeting with other members of the marketing department. The purpose of this meeting is to present and discuss the expense report for the fiscal quarter. During a meeting a female junior-analyst is having trouble getting the PowerPoint projector to work. This prompts other staff members to laugh and tell a few jokes in order to pass the time. The following are a few jokes taken from that meeting. (maybe include time)

Again, imagine that you are part of this office and this meeting and are experiencing these jokes as they happen. Please try to react and interoperate jokes as you would as a member of this office in this situation. Read each joke and rate the joke as to its funniness. Circle a number from 0 – 10 on each rating scale below the joke.

Neutral Vignette

In our research we are collecting people's reactions to a series of jokes. You will be asked to read 8 jokes and react to them given the scales provided.

Appendix C: Jokes and Rating Form

1. **Phil:** What was that joke you were telling to Doug yesterday.

Pam: Oh ya, I remember, it was. Two men were talking at a party when one commented on how ugly the woman at the bar was. "That's my wife," replied the second man. Blushing and stuttering, the first man managed to say "I'm sorry."

"Not as sorry as I am," replied the other guy.

0	1	2	3	4	5
Not					Extremely
Funny					Funny
0	1	2	3	4	5
Not					Extremely
Amusing					Amusing
0	1	2	3	4	5
Not Likely to					Extremely Likely to
Repeat					Repeat

2. **Rose:** Ok I've got one. How many men does it take to open a beer?

Jeff: How many?

Rose: None it should be opened already when the wife brings it to me.

Jeff: Right!

0	1	2	3	4	5
Not					Extremely
Funny					Funny
0	1	2	3	4	5
Not					Extremely
Amusing					Amusing
0	1	2	3	4	5
Not Likely to					Extremely Likely to
Repeat					Repeat

3. **Pam:** Ok, I got this one from an email. You know you've been at college too long when you enjoy doing the laundry at home.

0	1	2	3	4	5
Not					Extremely
Funny					Funny
0	1	2	3	4	5
Not					Extremely
Amusing					Amusing
0	1	2	3	4	5
Not Likely to					Extremely Likely to
Repeat					Repeat

4. **Phil:** Oh here's and old one. Why do men pass gas more than women?

Rose: This is gonna be a little gross isn't it.

Phil: Because women don't shut up long enough to build up pressure.

Rose: I was right.

0	1	2	3	4	5
Not					Extremely
Funny					Funny
0	1	2	3	4	5
Not					Extremely
Amusing					Amusing
0	1	2	3	4	5
Not Likely to					Extremely Likely to
Repeat					Repeat

5. **Jeff:** Hey Pam, how do you know when a woman is going to say something intelligent?

Pam: I'm walking into this one, I don't know how.

Jeff: When her first words are "A man once told me.."

0	1	2	3	4	5
Not					Extremely
Funny					Funny
0	1	2	3	4	5
Not					Extremely
Amusing					Amusing
0	1	2	3	4	5
Not Likely to					Extremely Likely to
Repeat					Repeat

6. **Rose:** What did one snowman say to the other?

Phil: What did he say?

Rose: "That's so funny, I smell carrots too."

0	1	2	3	4	5
Not					Extremely
Funny					Funny
0	1	2	3	4	5
Not					Extremely
Amusing					Amusing
0	1	2	3	4	5
Not Likely to					Extremely Likely to
Repeat					Repeat

7. **Jeff:** So how about this. Why do you need a driver's license to buy liquor when you can't drink and drive?

0	1	2	3	4	5
Not					Extremely
Funny					Funny
0	1	2	3	4	5
Not					Extremely
Amusing					Amusing
0	1	2	3	4	5
Not Likely to					Extremely Likely to
Repeat					Repeat

8. **Pam:** Ok so this prisoner says to the prison doctor, "Doc, you've removed my spleen, tonsils, adenoids, and one of my kidneys, all I wanted was for you to get me out of this place." And the doctor just says, "I am, bit by bit."

0	1	2	3	4	5
Not					Extremely
Funny					Funny
0	1	2	3	4	5
Not					Extremely
Amusing					Amusing
0	1	2	3	4	5
Not Likely to					Extremely Likely to
Repeat					Repeat

9. Please indicate how you feel about this performance as a whole.

0	1	2	3	4	5
Not					Extremely
Funny					Funny
0	1	2	3	4	5
Not					Extremely
Amusing					Amusing
0	1	2	3	4	5
Not Likely to					Extremely Likely to
Repeat					Repeat

1. **Phil:** What was that joke you were telling to Doug yesterday.

Pam: Oh ya, I remember, it was. Two men were talking at a party when one commented on how ugly the woman at the bar was. "That's my wife," replied the second man. Blushing and stuttering, the first man managed to say "I'm sorry."

"Not as sorry as I am," replied the other guy.

0	1	2	3	4	5
Not					Extremely
Offensive					Offensive
0	1	2	3	4	5
Not					Extremely
Appropriate					Appropriate
0	1	2	3	4	5
Not					Extremely
Serious					Serious
0	1	2	3	4	5
Not					Extremely
Acceptable					Acceptable

2. **Rose:** Ok I've got one. How many men does it take to open a beer?

Jeff: How many?

Rose: None it should be opened already when the wife brings it to me.

Jeff: Right!

0	1	2	3	4	5
Not					Extremely
Offensive					Offensive
0	1	2	3	4	5
Not					Extremely
Appropriate					Appropriate
0	1	2	3	4	5
Not					Extremely
Serious					Serious
0	1	2	3	4	5
Not					Extremely
Acceptable					Acceptable

Pam: Ok, I got this one from an email. You know you've been at college too long when you enjoy doing the laundry at home.

0	1	2	3	4	5
Not					Extremely
Offensive					Offensive
0	1	2	3	4	5
Not					Extremely
Appropriate					Appropriate
0	1	2	3	4	5
Not					Extremely
Serious					Serious
0	1	2	3	4	5
Not					Extremely
Acceptable					Acceptable

3. **Phil:** Oh here's and old one. Why do men pass gas more than women?

Rose: This is gonna be a little gross isn't it.

Phil: Because women don't shut up long enough to build up pressure.

Rose: I was right.

0	1	2	3	4	5
Not					Extremely
Offensive					Offensive
0	1	2	3	4	5
Not					Extremely
Appropriate					Appropriate
0	1	2	3	4	5
Not					Extremely
Serious					Serious
0	1	2	3	4	5
Not					Extremely
Acceptable					Acceptable

4. **Jeff:** Hey Pam, how do you know when a woman is going to say something intelligent?

Pam: I'm walking into this one, I don't know how.

Jeff: When her first words are "A man once told me.."

0	1	2	3	4	5
Not					Extremely
Offensive					Offensive
0	1	2	3	4	5
Not					Extremely
Appropriate					Appropriate
0	1	2	3	4	5
Not					Extremely
Serious					Serious
0	1	2	3	4	5
Not					Extremely
Acceptable					Acceptable

5. **Rose:** What did one snowman say to the other?

Phil: What did he say?

Rose: "That's so funny, I smell carrots too."

0	1	2	3	4	5
Not					Extremely
Offensive					Offensive
0	1	2	3	4	5
Not					Extremely
Appropriate					Appropriate
0	1	2	3	4	5
Not					Extremely
Serious					Serious
0	1	2	3	4	5
Not					Extremely
Acceptable					Acceptable

6. **Jeff:** So how about this. Why do you need a driver's license to buy liquor when you can't drink and drive?

0	1	2	3	4	5
Not					Extremely
Offensive					Offensive
0	1	2	3	4	5
Not					Extremely
Appropriate					Appropriate
0	1	2	3	4	5
Not					Extremely
Serious					Serious
0	1	2	3	4	5
Not					Extremely
Acceptable					Acceptable

7. **Pam:** Ok so this prisoner says to the prison doctor, "Doc, you've removed my spleen, tonsils, adenoids, and one of my kidneys, all I wanted was for you to get me out of this place." And the doctor just says, "I am, bit by bit."

0	1	2	3	4	5
Not					Extremely
Offensive					Offensive
0	1	2	3	4	5
Not					Extremely
Appropriate					Appropriate
0	1	2	3	4	5
Not					Extremely
Serious					Serious
0	1	2	3	4	5
Not					Extremely
Acceptable					Acceptable

8. Please indicate how you feel about this performance as a whole.

0	1	2	3	4	5
Not					Extremely
Offensive					Offensive
0	1	2	3	4	5
Not					Extremely
Appropriate					Appropriate
0	1	2	3	4	5
Not					Extremely
Serious					Serious
0	1	2	3	4	5
Not					Extremely
Acceptable					Acceptable

Appendix D: ASI Scale

Instructions: 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
Strongly Disagree					Strongly Agree

No matter how accomplished he is, a man is not truly complete as a person unless he has the love of a woman.

0	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree					Strongly Agree

Many women are actually seeking special favors, such as hiring policies that favor them over men, under the guise of asking for "equality."

0	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree					Strongly Agree

In a disaster, women ought not necessarily be rescued before men.

0	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree					Strongly Agree

Most women interpret innocent remarks or acts being sexist.

0	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree					Strongly Agree

Women are too easily offended.

0	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree					Strongly Agree

People are often truly happy in life without being romantically involved with a member of the opposite sex.

0	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree					Strongly Agree

Feminists are not seeking for women to have more power than men.

0	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree					Strongly Agree

Many women have a quality of purity that few men possess.

0	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree					Strongly Agree

Women should be cherished and protected by men.

0	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree					Strongly Agree

Most women fail to appreciate fully all that men do for them.

0	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree					Strongly Agree

Please mark 5 on this question.

0	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree					Strongly Agree

Women seek to gain power by getting control over men.

0	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree					Strongly Agree

Every man ought to have a woman whom he adores.

0	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree					Strongly Agree

Men are complete without women.

0	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree					Strongly Agree

Women exaggerate problems they have at work.

0	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree					Strongly Agree

Once a woman gets a man to commit to her, she usually tries to put him on a tight leash.

0	1	2	3	4	5
---	---	---	---	---	---

Strongly Disagree

Strongly Agree

When women lose to men in a fair competition, they typically complain about being discriminated against.

0	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree					Strongly Agree

A good woman should be set on a pedestal by her man.

0	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree					Strongly Agree

There are actually very few women who get a kick out of teasing men by seeming sexually available and then refusing male advances.

0	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree					Strongly Agree

Women, compared to men, tend to have a superior moral sensibility.

0	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree					Strongly Agree

Men should be willing to sacrifice their own well being in order to provide financially for the women in their lives.

0	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree					Strongly Agree

Please mark 0 on this question.

0	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree					Strongly Agree

Feminists are making entirely reasonable demands of men.

0	1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree					Strongly Agree

