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Sexist Humor and Beliefs that Justify Societal Sexism

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ABSTRACT

Research suggests that sexist humor creates a context that justifies the expression of prejudice against women. The present research investigates whether sexist humor has broader social consequences related to societal sexism. An experiment supported our hypothesis that men higher in hostile sexist attitudes express beliefs that justify the gender status-quo to a greater degree after exposure to sexist humor versus neutral humor or non-humorous sexist material.

Specifically, male participants higher in hostile sexism reported greater acceptance of current gender relations and greater acceptance of societal devaluation of women after reading sexist jokes than after reading neutral (nonsexist) jokes or non-humorous sexist material.

INTRODUCTION

A woman wants to be taken seriously in a male-dominated society. She finally feels like she's achieving that. Then they make a joke about her going back to the kitchen where she belongs—and now what? If she doesn't laugh, she's obviously just an overly sensitive woman who can't be taken seriously.... But if she does laugh, she's saying that oppression of women is somehow funny. Whether she

realizes it or not, she's discrediting the feminist movement: she is submitting to the masculine ideology that women's rights are not important enough to be taken seriously.

(Blog: The Lady Doth Protest Too Much)

The author of the above quote suggests that the effects of sexist humor extend beyond the immediate social context of specific protagonists, targets and witnesses. The author suggests that sexist humor sets back the progress of women's movements that seek to establish gender equality and respect for women at the societal level. In the present research, we explored the possibility that sexist humor propagates the endorsement of beliefs that justify societal sexism, beliefs that might inhibit collective action against societal gender inequalities. We propose that sexist humor creates a context in which men with sexist attitudes can defend the gender status quo, a social system of gender relations that disadvantages women, by providing a "safe" climate for expressing "system-justifying" beliefs.

Glick and Fiske (1996) introduced two conceptually distinct dimensions of sexism: hostile sexism, characterized by antagonistic attitudes toward women, particularly those who defy traditional gender roles and benevolent sexism, which consists of positive attitudes toward stereotypical traits of female "goodness." A growing body of research suggests that sexist humor encourages the release of prejudice against women among men high in *hostile* sexism but not *benevolent* sexism (Ford, Wentzel, & Lorion, 2001; Romero-Sanchez, Duran, Carretero-Dios, Megias, & Moya, 2010). Therefore, we investigated the possibility that men higher in hostile sexism will express beliefs that justify the gender status-quo to a greater degree after exposure to sexist humor versus neutral humor or non-humorous sexist material.

Sexist Humor and Expressions of Prejudice against Women

Ford and Ferguson's (2004) prejudiced norm theory consists of four propositions that delineate the mechanisms by which sexist humor encourages the expression of prejudice against women. First, humor activates a conversational rule of levity, to switch from the usual literal, serious mindset for interpreting a message to a non-critical "humor mindset" that trivializes its subject (Berlyne, 1972; McGhee, 1972). Thus, sexist humor communicates an implicit meta-message (Attardo, 1993) that, in this context, one can treat discrimination in a less serious, more lighthearted manner. Bill and Naus (1992), for instance, found that male participants

considered incidents of sex discrimination harmless and acceptable when they perceived the incidents as humorous.

Second, sexist humor evokes a shared understanding of its meta-message only if the recipient approves of it, that is, switches to a non-critical humor mindset to interpret it (Kane, Suls, & Tedeschi, 1977). Recipients who switch to a non-serious humor mindset tacitly assent to a shared understanding (a social norm) that it is acceptable in this particular context to make light of discrimination against women (Emerson, 1969; Khoury, 1985; Meyer, 2000). Supporting this proposition, Ford (2000) found that sexist humor increased tolerance of a sexist event, and this effect was attenuated when participants were instructed to interpret the humor as they would a serious, non-humorous message.

Third, consistent with disposition theory (Zillmann & Cantor, 1996), people should be more likely to interpret sexist humor in a non-critical humor mindset insofar as they have sexist attitudes. Indeed, there is substantial evidence that people interpret sexist humor in a non-critical mindset insofar as they have sexist attitudes toward women (e.g., Greenwood & Isbell, 2002; LaFrance & Woodzicka, 1998).

Finally, since sexist people are especially likely to interpret sexist humor in a non-critical humor mindset, they are more likely to perceive and assent to an emergent prejudiced norm in the immediate social context, and use that norm to guide their own responses toward women (Ford & Ferguson, 2004; Viki, Thomae, Cullen & Fernandez, 2007; Viki, Thomae & Hamid, 2006). Viki et al. (2006), for instance, found that men higher in hostile sexism reported higher rape proclivity upon exposure to sexist (vs. non-sexist) jokes. In addition, Ford, Wentzel and Lorion (2001) found that men high in hostile sexism reported greater tolerance of a sexist event upon exposure to sexist humor. When asked to imagine themselves as managers who had made sexist remarks to a new female employee, they reported feeling less badly about themselves when they had first read sexist jokes than when they had read non-sexist jokes or non-humorous sexist statements. This effect was mediated by an emergent prejudiced norm (the perception that others in the immediate context tolerated the sexist remarks).

Sexist humor derives power to foster expressions of prejudice against women from the ambivalence of society's attitudes toward women (Ford, Triplett, Woodzicka, Kochersberger, & Holden, 2013). Since the feminist movement of the 1970s sexist norms have increasingly given way to norms of gender equality and acceptance of women (Deaux & Emswiller, 1974; Klonis, Plant & Devine, 2005; Tougas, Brown, Beaton & Joly, 1995). Hence, women are in a precarious social position of shifting

acceptability characterized by conflict between emerging nonsexist, egalitarian norms and lingering support of a status quo in society of gender inequality (Crandall & Eshlemann, 2003). Because emerging egalitarian norms have created pressure to be non-prejudiced (Klonis et al., 2005), people who hold lingering sexist attitudes generally suppress their prejudice; they cannot openly express those attitudes without risking social reprisals or experiencing self-directed negative affect such as disappointment and shame (e.g., Devine, Monteith, Zuwerink, & Elliot, 1991). They express prejudice only when they feel free from such constraints or threats (e.g., in a context of sexist humor).

Justification of Societal Sexism

System justification theory proposes that people are motivated to defend the status quo in society, including social inequalities (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004; Napier, Thorisdottir & Jost, 2010). Perceiving existing social arrangements as just or legitimate minimizes uncertainty and threat (Napier et al., 2010). Thus, sexist people could minimize the threat and uncertainty created by emerging nonsexist social norms through beliefs that justify gender inequalities at a societal level (e.g., "In general, relations between men and women are fair," Jost & Kay 2005, p. 501). Furthermore, because emerging egalitarian norms create pressure to appear nonsexist, sexist people might typically censor or conceal their system-justifying beliefs, and express them only when they perceive minimal risk of social reprisals.

The Present Research

Research has demonstrated that sexist humor can have deleterious social consequences. To this point, however, research has focused on the effect of sexist humor on the release of prejudice against individual women or specific groups of women (e.g., Ford et al., 2008; Romero-Sanchez, et al., 2010). The present research builds on previous findings by investigating a broader, more macro level question: does sexist humor encourage the expression of beliefs that justify societal gender inequalities among men who have hostile sexist attitudes?

A body of qualitative research suggests that sexist humor does indeed promote the justification of societal sexism. Bergmann (1986), for instance, proposed that sexist jokes serve a social/political purpose by expressing resistance to women's rights and gender equality. Similarly, Montemurro (2003) argued that sexist humor strengthens a social system that trivializes and promotes sexism. Further, Crawford (2000) and others (Bemiller & Schneider, 2010) have theorized that sexist humor helps to maintain a sexist social order.

Accordingly, we conducted an experiment to test the hypothesis that men higher in hostile sexism will report greater acceptance of current gender relations, the gender status quo, after reading sexist jokes than after reading neutral (nonsexist) jokes or non-humorous sexist statements. Prior to the experiment, we report the results of a preliminary factor analysis to provide an empirical rationale for establishing a measure of acceptance of the gender status-quo.

We conducted the preliminary factor analysis study and the experiment using Mechanical Turk, a web service sponsored by Amazon.com that allows people to complete studies posted online using their own computers. In both studies, we limited our sample to residents of the United States. Mechanical Turk has been shown to be as reliable and trustworthy as other sampling methods for collecting survey data (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011).

PRELIMINARY FACTOR ANALYSIS

Jost and Kay (2005) developed a measure of "gender-specific system justification" by rewording questions from Kay and Jost's (2003) general system justification scale to focus on gender inequality. Their measure contained the following eight opinion statements: (1) *In general, relations between men and women are fair*, (2) *The division of labor in families generally operates as it should*, (3) *Gender roles need to be radically restructured*, (4) *For women, the United States is the best country in the world to live in*, (5) *Most policies relating to gender and the division of labor serve the greater good*, (6) *Everyone (male or female) has a fair shot at wealth and happiness*, (7) *Sexism in society is getting worse every year*, and (8) *Society is set up so that men and women usually get what they deserve*.

Jost and Kay (2005) found that the Cronbach's alpha for the whole scale was rather low, .65, suggesting that the measure possessed questionable internal consistency across the eight items (Cortina, 1993; Kline, 1999; Nunnally, 1978), and raising the possibility that the items tap multiple constructs. Therefore, we conducted an exploratory factor analysis on the eight items comprising Jost and Kay's (2005) scale. We administered the 8-item questionnaire to 91 men living in the United States solicited through Mechanical Turk who did not participate in our main experiment. Participants responded to each statement using a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Items were coded so that higher scores indicated greater endorsement of beliefs that justify the gender status-quo. Like Jost and Kay (2005), the Cronbach's alpha for the whole scale in our study was .65.

We subjected the eight items of Jost and Kay's (2005) scale to a factor analysis. Following the recommendations of Costello and Osborne (2005), we used a principal components method of factor extraction and a promax rotation method. A scree test indicated that two distinct factors (accounting for 49 percent of the total variance) should be extracted. Factor 1, comprised of items 1, 2, 5, 6 and 8, had an eigenvalue of 2.46 and accounted for 31 percent of the total variance. Factor loadings ranged from .53 for item 6 to .79 for item 8. Factor 2, comprised of items 3, 4 and 7 had an eigenvalue of 1.46 and accounted for 18 percent of the total variance. Factor loadings ranged from .62 for item 4 to .79 for item 7.

We subjected the five items of Factor 1 and the three items of Factor 2 to separate reliability analyses. The Cronbach's alpha for the items of Factor 1 was .70 and could not be increased by omitting any of the items. The Cronbach's alpha for the three items of Factor 2 was a meager .47 and could not be increased by omitting any of the items. Because the items loading on Factor 2 possessed such poor internal consistency, we included only the five items loading on Factor 1 to represent our measure of acceptance of the gender status quo (current gender relations) in our experiment.

METHOD

Participants and Design

Eighty male participants (ages ranged from 18 to 65, $M = 31$, $SD = 10.67$) completed the experiment in exchange for \$0.20. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions with type of communication (sexist jokes, sexist statements, or neutral jokes) serving as a between-subjects variable.

Procedure

Upon accessing the experiment through Mechanical Turk, participants read a brief introduction of three different and allegedly unrelated tasks they would be asked to perform. For the first task, participants completed the "Social Attitudes Survey," allegedly designed to assess attitudes about a variety of social issues. The Social Attitudes Survey actually consisted of the 11-item Hostile Sexism subscale of Glick and Fiske's (1996) Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (e.g., "women seek to gain power by getting control over men."). For each statement, participants indicated

their agreement on a six-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). Cronbach's alpha for the hostile sexism scale was .86.

The second task was a role-play exercise designed to create an imagined social context in which to examine the effects of sexist humor. Participants read three vignettes describing the interactions among a group of staff members at a local newspaper (see Ford, 2000). Participants imagined they were in each social situation watching it as it happened. The first and third vignette described nonsexist "filler" interactions to reduce suspicion of the true purpose of the study. The second vignette contained the communication manipulation (sexist jokes, sexist statements or neutral jokes).

In the sexist joke and neutral joke conditions, the second vignette stated the following, "After Cindy's story (from the first vignette), the group discussion gave way to a giddy exchange of the staff members' favorite jokes. Here are a few of those jokes." Participants in the sexist joke condition then read the same five jokes used by Ford (2000) and Ford et al. (2008). The first joke was neutral and the remaining four were sexist. Participants in the neutral joke condition read five nonsexist jokes. A pilot study by Ford (2000) indicated that people perceived the sexist jokes as more sexist but equally funny as the neutral jokes.

The vignette for the sexist statement condition began with the statement, "After Cindy's story, the group discussion gave way to an exchange of social commentaries. The following statements are excerpts from that discussion." The sexist statement condition also included a note that although some of the statements may have been taken out of context, they reflect each person's actual belief or attitude. Participants then read one neutral statement and four sexist statements that conveyed the same message as the sexist jokes, but in a serious manner. Ford (2000) demonstrated that the sexist statements were perceived as equally sexist but less funny than the sexist jokes. See Appendix A for a description of the jokes or statements for each condition.

Finally, participants were asked to complete a survey about the "current state of gender relations and sex role divisions" as part of the same imagined social context. Participants completed the 5-item measure of acceptance of the gender status quo derived from our factor analysis. Cronbach's alpha was .76.

RESULTS

Hostile Sexism

The overall mean hostile sexism score was 3.63 ($SD = .77$). Mean hostile sexism scores were 3.55 ($SD = .99$) in the sexist jokes condition, 3.68 ($SD = .71$) in the sexist statements condition and 3.65 ($SD = .55$) in the neutral jokes condition. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) on the hostile sexism scores with condition serving as a between-subjects factor revealed no effect of experimental condition, $F(2, 77) < 1$.

Acceptance of the Gender Status Quo

We predicted that hostile sexism would more strongly relate to acceptance of the gender status quo in the sexist joke condition than in the other conditions. Because our predictions call for specific a priori comparisons between the sexist joke condition and the other two conditions, we represented the three communication conditions (sexist jokes, sexist statements, neutral jokes) with two orthogonal contrasts (Rosenthal, Rosnow, & Rubin, 2000). The first contrast, C1, compared the sexist joke condition, coded as 1, to the other two conditions (the sexist statement condition and the neutral joke condition), coded as -1. The second contrast, C2, compared the neutral joke condition, coded as 1, to the two sexist communication conditions (the sexist joke condition and the sexist statement condition), coded as -1. We computed interaction terms by multiplying the standardized hostile sexism scores by the two contrast-coded variables. We then regressed the measure of acceptance of the gender status quo onto C1, C2, the standardized hostile sexism score and the two interaction terms.

There was a significant main effect of hostile sexism, $\beta = .34$, $SE = .10$, $t = 2.35$, $p < .05$. Overall, participants higher in hostile sexism reported stronger acceptance of current gender relations. This main effect was qualified by the predicted C1 x hostile sexism interaction effect, $\beta = .29$, $SE = .08$, $t = 2.36$, $p < .05$. This suggests that the relationship between hostile sexism and beliefs about current gender relations was different in the sexist joke condition than in the neutral joke condition and the sexist statement condition. Simple slope analyses revealed that the relationship between hostile sexism and acceptance of the gender status quo was positive and significant in the sexist joke condition, $\beta = .66$, $SE = .09$, $t = 4.31$, $p < .001$ but not in the sexist statement condition, $\beta = -.01$, $SE = .16$, $t = -.04$, $p = .97$, or the neutral joke condition, $\beta = .08$, $SE = .19$, $t = .42$, $p = .68$.

DISCUSSION

The results of our experiment supported our hypothesis. To the extent that

participants had hostile sexist attitudes, they reported greater endorsement of beliefs that justify societal sexism (acceptance of the gender status quo) upon exposure to sexist jokes than upon exposure to neutral jokes or non-humorous sexist statements. These findings cannot be easily explained apart from the unique effects of humor as a medium for communicating disparagement. If exposure to sexist humor simply functioned to prime chronic motivation to respond in a sexist manner among people high in hostile sexism (e.g., Bargh & Barndollar, 1996), then exposure to non-humorous sexist statements also should have increased endorsement of beliefs that justify societal gender inequalities.

The present study did not address the process by which exposure to sexist humor affected the reported acceptance of the gender status quo among those high in hostile sexism. However, on the basis of previous research guided by Ford and Ferguson's (2004) prejudiced norm theory, we propose that participants high in hostile sexism censored beliefs that justify societal sexism in the neutral joke and sexist statement conditions and responded in accordance with nonsexist norms. Further, we propose that participants high in hostile sexism expressed acceptance of gender status quo in the sexist joke condition because they could express their beliefs without concern of social reprisal among those in the context of the role play task (Ford, et al., 2001).

The present findings make a unique contribution to existing research by demonstrating that the prejudice-releasing effects of sexist humor extend beyond responses to an individual woman or specific group of women. Sexist humor also encourages the expression of pernicious beliefs that justify a social system of gender inequality among those high in hostile sexism. Sexist humor thus not only influences interactions at an interpersonal level; it also contributes to shaping the larger social structure (Martineau, 1972).

Sexist humor objectifies and trivializes women, which contributes to a hierarchical position of women as subordinate to men in society (Montemurro, 2003). In her classic study of gender composition in organizations, Kanter (1977) examined the experiences of women who had token status (i.e., one in which women comprised no more than 15% of the employees) at an organization described by the pseudonym, "Indsco." In the presence of token women, Indsco men engaged in "boundary heightening," that is, they exaggerated their common qualities as men (the in-group) as well as the ways in which women (the out-group) deviated from them. For example, men told sexist jokes as a way of excluding and isolating women. Through sexist humor, men simultaneously degraded women and created a broader social (organizational) structure that asserted their dominance and power

over women. The present research suggests that sexist humor aids in the establishment of such gender imbalances by tacitly affirming beliefs that justify a social system that disadvantages women. Indeed, Korsmeyer (1977) argued that sexist jokes undermine sympathy for women and women's rights and dismiss them as not deserving consideration.

Directions for Future Research

Future research could further test the role of sexist humor in promoting endorsement of a sexist social system by investigating whether sexist humor affects people's willingness to support social policies designed to ensure gender equality. Based on the findings of the present research, we hypothesize that insofar as people are high in hostile sexism, they would be less supportive of such policies upon exposure to sexist humor. In the context of sexist humor people who have sexist attitudes should feel free to express their prejudice by opposing policies that promote gender equality. Future research could also investigate the long-term effects of exposure to sexist humor. It is possible that more exposure to sexist humor over time leads one to more fully endorse sexism justifying ideologies.

Summary and Conclusion

The present research expanded upon previous investigations on the prejudice-releasing effects of sexist humor. The results our experiment demonstrated that prejudice-releasing effects of sexist humor extend beyond the treatment of individual women. Participants high in hostile sexism reported greater endorsement of beliefs that justify societal sexism after reading sexist jokes but not after reading neutral jokes or non-humorous sexist material.

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APPENDIX A: JOKES AND STATEMENTS

Sexist Joke Condition

David: ... I have a joke for you.

Q: What did Jeffrey Dahmer say to Lorena Bobbit?

A: "Are you going to eat that?"

Paula: ...laughter... That's disgusting! Okay, I got one.

Q: What did the right breast say to the left breast?

A: If we get any lower, people are gonna think we're nuts!

Michael: ... laughter... Okay, have you heard this one?

Q: How can you tell if a blonde's been using the computer?

A: There's white-out on the screen!

Donna: ...laughter... all right, here's another one.

Q: Why did the woman cross the road?

A: Who cares? What the hell is she doing out of the kitchen?

Cindy: ... laughter... Okay, here's one.

A man and a woman were stranded in an elevator and they
knew they were gonna die. So, the woman turns to the
man and says, "Make me feel like a woman
before I die." So he takes off his clothes and says,
"Fold these!"

Sexist Statement Condition

David: ... Our society has deteriorated over the past several decades.

Grotesque crimes involving disfigurement, like those
committed by Jeffrey Dahmer, Lorena Bobbit, and others
seem to be in the news these days than ever before.

Paula: ... Regarding men and women, I don't think women age as well
as men— their bodies change more as they get older than
men's do.

Michael: ... Yeah, that's true. Also, I know Blonde women are often the
subject of jokes. But I think its well deserved. They, women that is,
really are less intelligent!

Donna: ... Have you noticed how marriage changes people? Women, for instance often become less attractive and more nagging because they not longer have to “get” a man.

Cindy: ... I agree, and I still say that a woman’s place is in the home and its a woman’s role to do domestic duties such as laundry for her man.

Neutral Joke Condition

David: ... I have a joke for you.
Q: What did Jeffrey Dahmer say to Lorena Bobbit?
A: “Are you going to eat that?”

Donna: ...laughter... That’s disgusting! Okay, I got one.
Q: What’s the difference between an oral and a rectal thermometer?
A: The taste!

Michael: ... laughter... Okay, have you heard this one?
Q: How do you know when elephants have had sex in your house?
A: The trash can liners are missing!

Paula: ...laughter... Alright, have you heard this one?
Q: Why was the leper stopped for speeding?
A: He couldn’t take his foot off the accelerator.

Cindy: ... laughter... Okay, here’s one.
Q: What’s the difference between a golfer and a skydiver?
A: A golfer goes whack ... “Damn!” A skydiver goes “Damn!” ... whack.

APPENDIX B: CORRELATION MATRIX

Measure

Total Sexist Sexist Neutral

Measure	Sample		Joke Condition		Statement Condition		Joke Condition		
	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2	
1. Hostile Sexism	---		---		---		---		
2. Acceptance of the Gender Status Quo		.31**	---	.66**	---	-.01	---	.08	
	M	3.64	3.99	3.54	4.05	3.68	3.83	3.69	4.08
	SD	.77	.71	1.00	.79	.73	.62	.55	.72

* = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$

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