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Is it really just a joke? Gender differences in perceptions of sexist humor

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Abstract: Benign violation theory suggests humor mocking normative values is funny if the humor is non-threatening. Research suggests sexism toward women (versus men) is particularly threatening due to inequalities in social power. In Study 1, we examined whether men and women differ in how amused and offended they were by sexist humor. We predicted men would perceive sexist humor as more funny and less offensive than women would. In Study 2, we examined whether perceptions of threat were related to perceptions of sexist jokes. We predicted women would perceive more threat than men from sexist humor, which would lead to lower amusement and greater perceived offensiveness. Across both studies, jokes targeting women were perceived to be less funny, more offensive, and more sexist than jokes targeting men. Additionally, greater perceptions of threat were related to greater perceptions of jokes as offensive and sexist. However, women were not more threatened than men by sexist jokes. While these findings were not entirely consistent with our hypotheses, our findings suggest disparagement humor targeting lower-status groups is perceived more negatively than disparagement humor targeting higher-status groups and these perceptions may be inextricably rooted in threat posed to lower-status groups.

Keywords: sex differences, sexism, threat, stereotypes, humor

1 Literature review

Disparaging humor is typically meant to denigrate, belittle, or vilify a social group (e. g. women, Black people; Janes and Olsen 2000), and has the potential to reinforce status hierarchies between groups (Rappoport 2005; Saucier et al.

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2016). While disparagement humor may be used toward individuals belonging to any social group, disparagement has been shown to be perceived as more threatening to people belonging to historically-oppressed groups (e. g. women) than toward people of historically-privileged groups (e. g. men; Schneider et al. 2002). This additional threat experienced by targets of humor that “punches down” by disparaging historically-oppressed groups may cause those groups to interpret the humor as more offensive and less funny, while targets of humor that “punches up” by disparaging historically-privileged groups might interpret humor that disparages them less severely (i. e. more funny and less offensive) because those privileged groups might experience less threat in the social hierarchy. Our goal in the current studies is to examine how men (a historically-privileged group) and women (a historically-oppressed group) interpret gender-based disparaging humor differently, and how threat experienced in response to disparaging humor might affect those interpretations.

1.1 Potential harmful effects of disparaging humor

The harm disparaging humor potentially poses to historically-oppressed groups is well documented (e. g. Ford et al. 2013; Saucier et al. 2016). According to prejudiced norm theory, disparaging humor contributes to a normative culture of prejudice, which then creates a tolerance for discriminatory acts (Ford and Ferguson 2004; Ford et al. 2008). For example, sexist humor has been shown to foster the release of explicit micro-assaults against women (Ford and Ferguson 2004; Ford et al. 2008; Romero-Sanchez et al 2010; Ryan and Kanjorski 1998). Disparaging humor can also increase individuals’ endorsement of expressions of prejudice. For example, when individuals interpret a racial joke as disparaging, they are more likely to endorse stereotypes about Black individuals (Saucier et al. 2018). Therefore, through disparaging humor, stereotypes about stigmatized groups can be reinforced through the normative nature of humor. Through disparaging gender-based humor, language can justify sexist attitudes by disguising them as socially acceptable “jokes.” Research has shown when sexism is justified through humor, men higher in hostile sexism will express beliefs justifying the gender status-quo to a greater degree than if they had been exposed to non-humorous sexist material (Ford et al. 2013). Moreover, Ford (1997) found that comedy skits disparaging Black people elicited more stereotypical judgments than did neutral comedy skits among White participants. Ford (2000) revealed those higher in hostile sexism were significantly more tolerant of sexist events upon exposure to sexist humor. Taken together, this evidence suggests that disparaging humor can activate a norm of discrimination tolerance

due to perceptions that disparaging humor is more socially acceptable than more direct forms of disparagement.

The potential for disparaging humor to be harmful and threatening to women has been shown to be quite extreme. For example, exposure to sexist humor can influence the amount of money men would cut from hypothetical women's organizations (Ford et al. 2008). When men are exposed to sexist jokes, they subsequently rate sexist workplace remarks as less offensive (Ford 2000; Ford et al. 2001). While past research has demonstrated that women find sexist jokes targeting men funnier than jokes targeting women (e. g. Abrams et al. 2015), it has also been shown that sexist jokes harm women's feelings of gender-group positive distinctiveness (Tajfel and Turner 1986), with negative consequences for domain identification, motivation, and performance. In each of these domains, sexist humor can instigate self-objectification in women and cause them to engage in more body surveillance than neutral humor (Ford et al. 2015). Over time and repetition, this self-objectification can create a stable, chronic third-person perspective for perceiving the self, and sexist humor has been shown to induce state self-objectification (Bemiller and Schneider 2010; Greenwood and Isbell 2002; Ford et al. 2015). Additionally, research has shown, after exposure to a sexist joke, women could exhibit discriminatory behaviors against other women while men would not exhibit discriminatory behavior against other men under the same conditions (Abrams and Bippus 2014). At an extreme level, exposure to sexist humor has been shown to increase acceptance of rape myths, victim-blaming, violence against women, and even men's self-reported rape proclivity (Ryan and Kanjorski 1998; Romero-Sanchez et al. 2010; Strain et al. 2016; Thomae and Viki 2013; Thomae and Pina 2015). Taken together, this evidence demonstrates that sexist humor can threaten women's financial and social status, self-image, credibility, and physical safety. However, there is, to our knowledge, little consensus on the relationship between a joke's power to threaten and enjoyment of the joke. Some research suggests humor targeting historically oppressed groups is seen as less funny and more offensive by third-party observers (e. g. Strain et al. 2015) while other research suggests third-parties enjoy humor targeting lower-status groups more than that targeting higher-status groups (e. g. Cantor 1976; McGhee and Duffey 1983; Losco and Epstein 1975). It is possible these conflicting findings are due to differing natures of the jokes used. Therefore, in Study 1, we sought to determine perceptions of sexist humor targeting men and women using either gender-specific stereotypes or interchangeable stereotypes.

While sexist humor may threaten women, it might not be socially acceptable to confront sexism presented as humor. For example, though similar in nature, it has been shown to be more socially acceptable to label racist humor as "racist"

than it is to label sexist humor as “sexist” (Woodzicka et al. 2015). Further, people confronting racism are rated as more likeable than people confronting sexism (Woodzicka et al. 2015). This lack of acceptable avenues for confronting sexist humor may cause women to feel more threatened because they feel they are not allowed to fight the prejudiced behavior. Because the American social hierarchy has historically favored men over women, and because sexism against women is still rampant in various forms, women may experience more threat from humor that disparages women than men experience from humor that disparages men. This might affect interpretations of gender-based disparaging humor such that women will find such humor more offensive and sexist and less funny than will men.

1.2 Perceptions of humor disparaging historically-oppressed groups

Benign violation theory suggests people may find humor that mocks normative values funny as long as the humor is non-threatening (McGraw and Warren 2010). Some evidence suggests that disparaging humor targeting historically-oppressed groups is less socially acceptable than disparaging humor targeting historically-privileged groups (e. g. Schneider et al. 2002). For example, men who make anti-women jokes on social media are rated less positively than both men who make anti-men jokes and women who make any kind of gender-based jokes (Strain et al. 2015). Henry and colleagues (2014) found that slurs directed toward members of lower-status groups were perceived as more offensive than slurs directed at higher-status groups, and it has been shown that memes featuring stereotypes of historically-oppressed groups (e. g. Black people, women) were perceived as less funny and more offensive than memes featuring stereotypes of historically-privileged groups (e. g. White people, men; Meza et al. in preparation). This evidence suggests disparaging humor that “punches down” targeting historically-oppressed groups is perceived more negatively than humor that “punches up” targeting historically-privileged groups. We posit this may be because privileged groups experience less threat in the current social hierarchy when targeted by disparaging humor than do historically-oppressed groups. Taking together benign violation theory and past research (e. g. Schneider et al. 2002), it is possible the reason humor that “punches down” at more historically oppressed groups is perceived as more offensive and less funny is that it is more threatening to those groups. In the current studies, we explore this possibility.

2 The current studies

We designed the current studies to test our hypotheses about how men and women perceive gender-based disparaging humor differently and how threat experienced in response to disparaging humor affects those perceptions. We were particularly interested in perceptions of threat in response to disparaging humor because this type of humor has been shown to foster prejudiced behaviors and beliefs, including endorsements of violence. In two studies, we measured reactions to disparaging gender-based humor that targeted both men and women. In Study 1, we measured perceptions of jokes that contained stereotypes unique to each gender (e. g. women are attracted to money, men are aggressive) and stereotypes that are interchangeable between genders (e. g. men/women are stupid), and in Study 2, we measured potential threat posed to target group (i. e. men or women) by the jokes that contained interchangeable stereotypes in order to empirically examine the possibility the disparities in perceptions of jokes targeting men and those targeting women were due to perceived threat to those respective groups. We predicted that disparaging humor targeting women would be perceived as less funny, more offensive, and more sexist than humor targeting men (Studies 1 and 2). Further, we predicted the relationship between participant gender and perceptions of the joke would be mediated by threat, such that women would perceive more threat from jokes targeting them than would men, which would lead to lower amusement and greater perceived offensiveness of the joke (Study 2). Our present studies build upon previous research on group-based disparaging humor (Ford and Ferguson 2004) and have the potential to contribute to understanding of why men and women differ in perceptions of gender-based humor. Both men and women may understand this type of humor is sexist, but they may differ in perceptions of such humor as either harmless or threatening.

3 Study 1

3.1 Method

3.1.1 Participants

Our participants were 98 college students (68.7% identified as White/Caucasian, 10.1% African American, 2% Asian, 11.1% Latinx, 1% Native

American, and 7.1% Other; 55.6% identified as female; ages 17 to 25, $M = 19.28$, $SD = 1.18$) enrolled in introductory psychology courses at a large Midwestern university who completed the study for research credit.

3.1.2 Materials

3.1.2.1 Disparaging jokes

We identified jokes that targeted men or women based on stereotypes unique to that gender, and jokes that targeted men or women based on stereotypes that were interchangeable across genders. The research team, consisting of content-matter experts who have published on various forms of group humor, selected these jokes from a pool gathered and created by their undergraduate research collaborators. The stereotypical jokes were selected because the researchers agreed the primary intention of the joke was to disparage either men or women with negative stereotypes. The interchangeable jokes were selected because the researchers agreed the primary intention of the joke was to target a gender in a way that could also fit the other gender. Jokes in each stereotypical set were selected to represent a broad range of well-known negative stereotypes about each gender and care was taken to make sure the jokes were similar in text length and had the potential to be humorous, even if the content was offensive. These jokes are presented in Table 1. All participants read each joke based on stereotypes unique to each gender in a within-subjects design. Participants also read each interchangeable joke once (for either men or women) in a between-groups design. Therefore, each participant read a total of 30 jokes. For each joke, participants responded to the items below.

3.1.2.2 Perceptions of humor

We created items to measure perceptions of each joke as funny (“*This joke is funny*”), sexist (“*This joke is sexist*”), and offensive (“*This joke is offensive*”). Participants responded on 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*very much*) Likert scales for each item for each joke. Composite scores were calculated for how funny, sexist, and offensive participants rated each type of joke by averaging across participants’ assessments of each of the jokes such that higher scores indicated greater perceptions of the jokes as funny, sexist, and offensive respectively (*alphas* available in Table 2).

Table 1: Jokes used in study.

Targeting both genders interchangeably

1. What's the difference between a knife and an argumentative man(woman)? A knife has a point.
 2. Why does a man(woman) have a clear conscience? Because it's never used.
 3. I have received hundreds of replies to my ad for a husband(wife) and they all say the same thing – "Take mine."
 4. What should you do if your man(woman) walks out? Shut the door and celebrate.
 5. What do you call a man(woman) with half a brain? Gifted.
 6. Why do only 10% of men(women) make it to heaven? Because if they all went, it would be called hell.
 7. What do you call a man(woman) with an opinion? Wrong.
 8. What's the smartest thing a man(woman) can say? Anything that starts with, "My wife (husband) says..."
 9. How many men(women) does it take to screw in a light bulb? One – he(he) just holds it up there and waits for the world to revolve around him(her).
 10. What do you call a man(woman) who's lost 95% of his(her) intelligence? Divorced.
-

Targeting men based on stereotypes unique to men

1. Why shouldn't you let a man's mind wander? Because it's way too little to be out all alone.
 2. Why did God make Adam before Eve? Everyone needs a rough draft before they make the final copy.
 3. You might as well go for a younger guy. Why? They never mature anyway.
 4. Why do little boys whine? Because they're practicing to be men.
 5. How come it's so hard to make a fool out of a man? Because most of them are the DIY type in that way.
 6. Why can't men get mad cow disease? Because they are pigs.
 7. Why can men read maps better than women? Cause only the male mind could conceive of one inch equaling a hundred miles.
 8. Why are all dumb blonde jokes one-liners? So men can understand them.
 9. How can you know if a man is faithful? If his options are.
 10. Why do men play on artificial turf in sports? To keep them from grazing.
-

Targeting women based on stereotypes unique to women

1. I'm not sexist, because being sexist is wrong and being wrong is for women.
 2. Why do men die before their wives? They want to.
 3. What's the difference between a woman and a rain puddle? A puddle goes away after the sun comes up.
 4. If your dog is barking at the back door and your wife is yelling at the front door, who do you let in first? The dog of course...at least he'll shut up after you let him in.
 5. What is the difference between a battery and a woman? A battery has a positive side
 6. What do elephants have over women? Intelligence, loyalty, and genuine kindness.
-

(continued)

Table 1: (continued)

Targeting both genders interchangeably

7. Why is it a bad idea to ask Siri “What do women want?” She has been talking nonstop for the last two days.
 8. If I had a dollar for every girl that found me unattractive, what would happen? They would eventually find me attractive.
 9. How are the office of the President and Tolkien’s book *The Hobbit* alike? Neither had a girl in them and neither should.
 10. What is the difference between a wife and a mistress? One is cheating on you, the other is cheating with you.
-

3.1.3 Procedure

Participants were recruited via the Sona Systems Software at a large Midwestern state university. Participants first provided informed consent and demographic information, then read each joke provided in Table 1, and responded to three one-item measures assessing perceptions of the joke as funny, sexist, and offensive. Participants were then debriefed and thanked.

4 Results and discussion

Correlations between measures of perceptions of the jokes are presented in Table 2. Predictably, perceptions of the jokes as offensive and sexist were strongly, positively correlated, and these evaluations were weakly to moderately negatively correlated with how funny the jokes were perceived to be. There are several possibilities as to why these perceptions are correlated, but one of the more intriguing possibilities is that it is not socially acceptable to disparage historically-oppressed groups via sexist humor, and therefore people report finding such humor less funny, and more offensive and sexist.

4.1 Gender-unique stereotype-based jokes

To test our main hypotheses, we conducted planned contrasts to test whether female participants perceived humor targeting women to be less funny, and more offensive and sexist than male participants perceived humor targeting men to be, because the main effects and simple effects of a factorial analysis would not allow us to make

Table 2: Bivariate correlations between perceptions of jokes (Study 1).

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.
Stereotype-Based												
Target: Men												
1. Funny	(0.92)											
2. Offensive	-0.33*	(0.97)										
3. Sexist	-0.28*	0.88***	(0.96)									
Stereotype-Based												
Target: Women												
4. Funny	0.56***	-0.32**	-0.36**	(0.93)								
5. Offensive	-0.28**	0.60***	0.66***	-0.38***	(0.96)							
6. Sexist	-0.17	0.55***	0.66***	-0.26*	0.83***	(0.96)						
Interchangeable												
Target: Men												
7. Funny	-0.02	-0.12	-0.22	0.81***	-0.17	-0.18	(0.94)					
8. Offensive	-0.03	0.35*	0.32	-0.32	0.89***	0.71***	-0.32	(0.96)				
9. Sexist	0.11	0.20	0.26	-0.06	0.66***	0.91***	-0.20	0.73***	(0.95)			
Interchangeable												
Target: Women												
10. Funny	0.67***	-0.56***	-0.58***	0.66***	-0.68***	-0.62***	-	-	-	(0.91)		
11. Offensive	-0.38**	0.78***	0.72***	-0.43***	0.80***	0.70***	-	-	-	-0.48***	(0.93)	
12. Sexist	-0.25	0.63***	0.75***	-0.27	0.71***	0.80***	-	-	-	-0.46***	0.79***	(0.94)

Note. Cronbach's alphas appear in parentheses in the diagonal.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

these direct comparisons. Consistent with our hypotheses, female participants perceived the jokes targeting women to be less funny, $t(88)^1 = 2.43$, $p = 0.02$, $d = 0.50$, more offensive, $t(86) = -5.49$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 1.17$, and more sexist, $t(85) = -5.55$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 1.20$, than male participants perceived the jokes targeting men (see Figure 1 for the cell means).

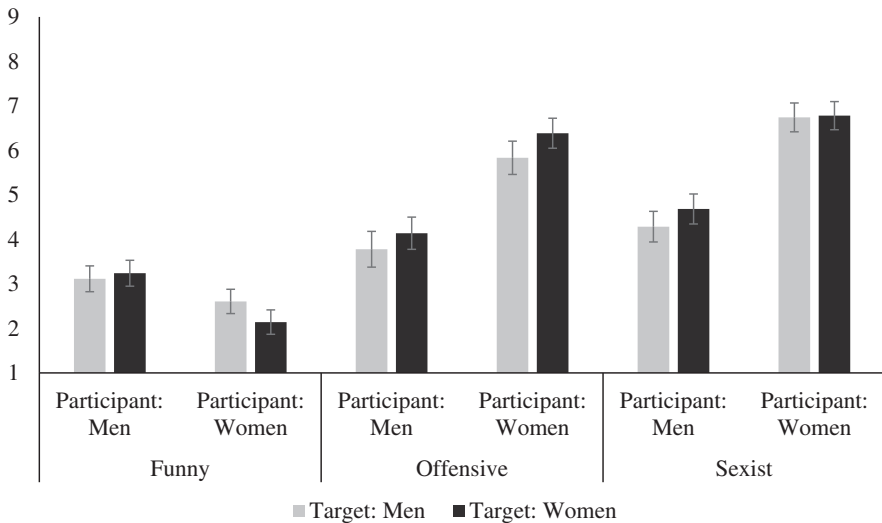


Figure 1: Perceptions of stereotype-based jokes (Study 1).

To assess whether the above results were due to the effects of participant gender, joke target, or the interaction between the two, we conducted 2 (joke target: men/women) \times 2 (participant gender: men/women) mixed analysis of variance (ANOVA) models with repeated measures on the joke target for each of our three dependent measures of perceptions of the gender-unique stereotype-based jokes (see Table 3 and Figure 1). We found a main effect of participant gender, such that female participants perceived the jokes to be less funny, more offensive, and more sexist than did male participants. We found no main effects of joke target and no gender \times target interactions. In sum, female participants perceived the gender-unique stereotype-based jokes to be less funny, and more offensive and sexist than did male participants. Additionally, perceptions of gender-unique stereotype-based humor did not significantly differ depending on whether the humor targeted men or women. These additional analyses suggest that female

1 We used pairwise deletion to handle missing data from participants in both Study 1 and Study 2. Thus, our degrees of freedom are variable.

Table 3: The effects of participant and target gender in perceptions of sexist humor (Study 1).

Dependent Measure	Participant Gender	Target Gender	Participant X Target
Stereotype-Based Jokes			
Funny	$F(1, 83) = 5.25^*$	$F(1, 83) = 0.80$	$F(1, 83) = 2.41$
	Partial $\eta^2 = 0.06$	Partial $\eta^2 = 0.01$	Partial $\eta^2 = 0.03$
Offensive	$F(1, 80) = 22.34^{***}$	$F(1, 80) = 3.16$	$F(1, 80) = 0.14$
	Partial $\eta^2 = 0.22$	Partial $\eta^2 = 0.04$	Partial $\eta^2 = 0.002$
Sexist	$F(1, 79) = 30.41^{***}$	$F(1, 79) = 1.00$	$F(1, 79) = 0.67$
	Partial $\eta^2 = 0.28$	Partial $\eta^2 = 0.01$	Partial $\eta^2 = 0.01$
Gender-Interchangeable Jokes			
Funny	$F(1, 86) = 6.69^{**}$	$F(1, 86) = 8.97^{**}$	$F(1, 86) = 0.27$
	Partial $\eta^2 = 0.07$	Partial $\eta^2 = 0.09$	Partial $\eta^2 = 0.003$
Offensive	$F(1, 86) = 23.66^{***}$	$F(1, 86) = 35.61^{***}$	$F(1, 86) = 5.16^*$
	Partial $\eta^2 = 0.22$	Partial $\eta^2 = 0.29$	Partial $\eta^2 = 0.06$
Sexist	$F(1, 86) = 9.75^{**}$	$F(1, 86) = 17.10^{***}$	$F(1, 86) < 0.001$
	Partial $\eta^2 = 0.10$	Partial $\eta^2 = 0.17$	Partial $\eta^2 < 0.001$

Note. $^*p < 0.05$, $^{**}p < 0.01$, $^{***}p < 0.001$

participants perceived gender-unique stereotype-based jokes targeting women as less funny, and more offensive and sexist than male participants perceived the jokes targeting men because female participants perceive humor making fun of either gender as less funny, and more offensive and sexist than do male participants. This could be because women are more socially threatened by sexism than are men because of their traditionally lower social status.

4.2 Gender-interchangeable jokes

For the gender-interchangeable jokes, we conducted planned contrasts comparing male participants' perceptions of gender-interchangeable jokes targeting men to female participants' perceptions of gender-interchangeable jokes targeting women. Consistent with our hypotheses, female participants perceived the jokes targeting women to be less funny, $t(39) = 4.27$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 1.29$ ($M_{\text{women}} = 2.12$, $SD_{\text{women}} = 1.32$; $M_{\text{men}} = 4.44$, $SD_{\text{men}} = 2.18$), more offensive, $t(40) = -8.22$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 2.63$ ($M_{\text{women}} = 7.07$, $SD_{\text{women}} = 1.67$; $M_{\text{men}} = 2.55$, $SD_{\text{men}} = 1.77$), and more sexist, $t(40) = -6.41$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 1.94$ ($M_{\text{women}} = 7.71$, $SD_{\text{women}} = 1.18$; $M_{\text{men}} = 4.73$, $SD_{\text{men}} = 1.83$), than male participants perceived the jokes targeting men.

As with the gender-unique stereotype-based jokes, we conducted 2 (target of humor: men/women) x 2 (participant gender: male/female) between-groups ANOVAs for each of our three dependent measures of perceptions of the gender-interchangeable jokes (see Table 3 and Figure 2). The significant main effects of participant gender paralleled our findings above, such that female participants perceived the gender-interchangeable jokes as less funny, and more offensive and sexist than did male participants. We also found main effects for gender targeted by the gender-interchangeable jokes, such that jokes targeting women were perceived to be less funny, and more offensive and sexist than jokes targeting men. Only for perceived offensiveness did we find a significant gender x target interaction. Probing this interaction revealed that male participants perceived a greater difference in offensiveness between jokes targeting men and jokes targeting women ($p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.26$) than did female participants ($p = 0.01$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.08$). Interestingly, the effects are stronger for interchangeable jokes than for stereotype-specific jokes. This may be because the interchangeable jokes tend to target core traits such as competence (e. g. *What do you call a man/woman with half a brain? Gifted.*) that may be perceived as especially threatening, particularly in a workplace. Many of the stereotype specific jokes target more antiquated stereotypic traits, such as talking a lot for women (e. g. *Why is it a bad idea to ask Siri “What do women want?” She has been*

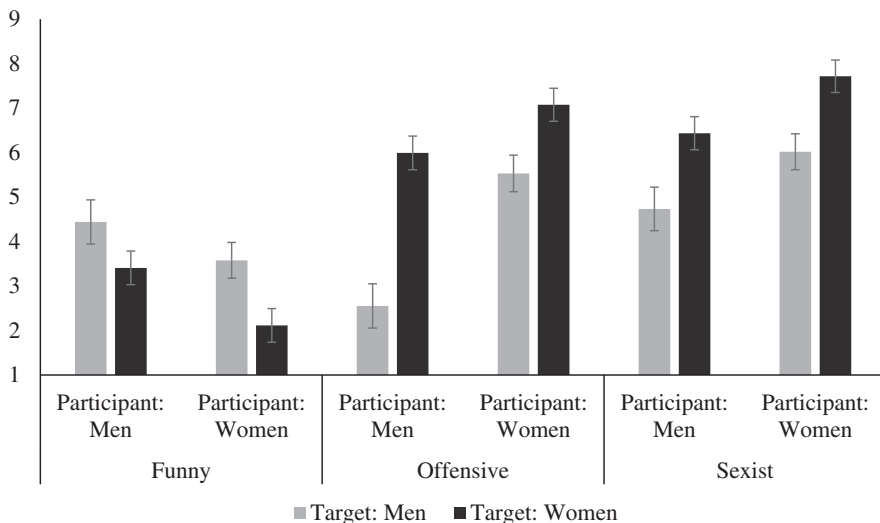


Figure 2: Perceptions of gender-interchangeable jokes (Study 1).

talking nonstop for the last two days.). Therefore, it is possible that the interchangeable jokes as a whole were seen as more threatening than the stereotype-specific jokes. However, the interchangeable results are consistent with our analyses of the gender-unique stereotyped jokes and, taken together, they could demonstrate that women are more threatened than are men socially by sexism itself rather than by specific stereotypes associated with being a woman. This is possibly a result of women's historically lower place in the status hierarchy compared to men, which may condition modern women to be more wary of sexism for fear of being pushed down socially. Study 2 examines the possibility that the disparities in perceptions evidenced in Study 1 were due to differences in perceived threat from sexist humor.

5 Study 2

5.1 Method

5.1.1 Participants

We recruited participants using Amazon Mechanical Turk ($N = 259$, 56.1% identified as White/Caucasian, 5.4% African American, 26.1% Asian, 3.9% Latinx, 0.4% Native American, and 8.1% Other; 45.8% identified as female; ages 19 to 69, $M = 35.40$, $SD = 11.91$).

5.1.2 Materials

5.1.2.1 Jokes

Participants read the 10 jokes that could target either men or women interchangeably used in Study 1 (e. g. What's the difference between a knife and an argumentative man(woman)? A knife has a point).

5.1.2.2 Perceptions of the jokes as funny, sexist, and offensive

Participants completed the same three one-item measures assessing their perceptions of each of the jokes as funny, sexist, and offensive used in Study 1. Again, higher scores indicated greater perceptions of the jokes as funny (*alphas* provided in Table 5).

5.1.2.3 Perceptions of jokes as threatening to men and women

We also created items to examine how threatening male and female participants perceive sexist humor targeting men and sexist humor targeting women to be toward the targeted gender. This scale included 7 items (i. e. This joke harms a man's[woman's] sense of self. This joke demeans men[women]. *This joke devalues men[women]. This joke creates a negative perception of men[women]. This joke attacks manhood[womanhood]. This joke threatens the social standing of men [women]. This joke threatens the way men[women] are viewed.*), to which participants responded using 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*very much*) Likert scales. Participants' ratings on these items were averaged for each of the jokes targeting men and each of the jokes targeting women to form composites in which higher scores indicated greater threat to men ($\alpha = 0.99$) and women ($\alpha = 0.99$) generally.

5.1.3 Procedure

Participants were recruited via Amazon's TurkPrime software and accessed our study on Qualtrics survey software. After providing informed consent and demographic information, participants read the same 10 jokes that targeted men and women interchangeably in a counterbalanced order. That is, each participant saw 5 jokes targeting men and 5 targeting women, with no joke being repeated for a particular participant. Each joke was presented as targeting men half the time and targeting women half the time. Participants indicated their perceptions of each joke as it was presented as funny, sexist, offensive, and threatening to men or women generally depending on the target of the joke. Participants were then debriefed and thanked for their participation.

6 Results and Discussion

6.1 Perceptions of the jokes

We conducted planned contrasts comparing male participants' perceptions of gender-interchangeable jokes targeting men to female participants' perceptions of gender-interchangeable jokes targeting women (see Figure 3 for the cell means). Consistent with our hypotheses and our results from Study 1, female participants perceived the jokes targeting women to be less funny, $t(254) = 5.59$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.69$. However, inconsistent with our hypotheses, there were no

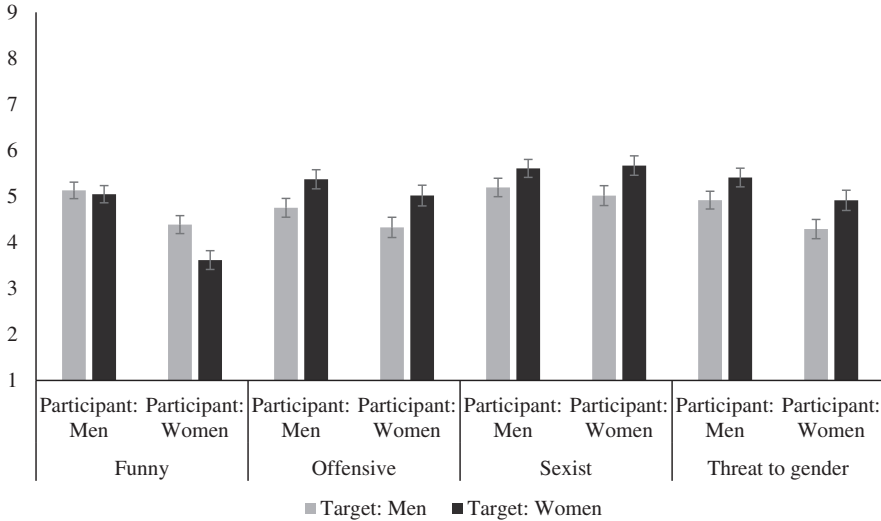


Figure 3: Perceptions of gender-interchangeable jokes (Study 2).

significant differences in perceived offensiveness, $t(255) = -0.89$, $p = 0.38$, $d = 0.10$, perceived sexism, $t(255) = -1.62$, $p = 0.11$, $d = 0.21$, or perceived threat to targeted gender, $t(255) = 0.02$, $p = 0.98$, $d = 0.004$. While this may mean that women do not generally perceive greater threat from sexist jokes targeting women than men perceive from jokes targeting men, it is possible that women perceive greater threat across the board than men, or that men agree that sexist jokes targeting women are more threatening to women than similar jokes are to men.

As in Study 1, we conducted 2 (target of humor: men/women) x 2 (participant gender: male/female) mixed ANOVAs with repeated measures based on the target of the humor (i. e. men or women) for each of our three dependent measures of perceptions of the gender-interchangeable jokes (see Table 4 and Figure 3). For all of our measures of perceptions of the jokes, we found main effects of target gender, such that jokes targeting women were perceived as less funny, and more offensive and sexist than jokes targeting men. Additionally, jokes targeting women were perceived as more threatening to women than jokes targeting men were perceived as threatening to men. This demonstrates that, though women do not perceive greater threat from jokes targeting women than men perceive from jokes targeting men, people generally agree that jokes targeting women are more threatening than jokes targeting men. This may imply that jokes “punching down” at women are less acceptable than jokes “punching up” at men. For perceptions

Table 4: The effects of participant and target gender in perceptions of sexist humor (Study 2).

Dependent Measure	Participant Gender	Target Gender	Participant X Target
Funny	$F(1,252) = 18.42^{***}$ Partial $\eta^2 = 0.07$	$F(1,252) = 20.19^{***}$ Partial $\eta^2 = 0.07$	$F(1,252) = 13.13^{***}$ Partial $\eta^2 = 0.05$
Offensive Partial $\eta^2 = 0.01$	$F(1, 254) = 1.82$ Partial $\eta^2 = 0.01$	$F(1, 254) = 50.40$ Partial $\eta^2 = 0.17$	$F(1, 254) = 0.15$ Partial $\eta^2 = 0.001$
Sexist Partial $\eta^2 < 0.001$	$F(1, 254) = 0.04$ Partial $\eta^2 = < .001$	$F(1, 254) = 39.32$ Partial $\eta^2 = 0.13$	$F(1, 254) = 1.97$ Partial $\eta^2 = 0.008$
Threat to Gender Partial $\eta^2 = 0.02$	$F(1, 254) = 3.97^*$ Partial $\eta^2 = 0.02$	$F(1, 254) = 55.09^{***}$ Partial $\eta^2 = 0.18$	$F(1, 254) = 0.78$ Partial $\eta^2 = 0.003$

Note. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

of how funny the jokes were, we found a main effect of participant gender, such that male participants perceived the jokes as funnier than did female participants, but also a participant gender by target gender interaction. Probing this interaction revealed that female participants perceived a greater difference in funniness between jokes targeting men and jokes targeting women ($p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.11$) than did male participants ($p = 0.52$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.002$). We also found a main effect of participant gender in perceptions of threat to the targeted gender such that male participants perceived more threat than did female participants. This could be because men, in their place of privilege, perceive there is more to lose when one's gender is threatened than do women, who are already lower on the status hierarchy.

6.2 Role of perceived threat

We initially wanted to test whether perceived threat mediated gender differences in perceptions of how funny, offensive, and sexist the jokes were. Due to a lack of significant gender differences (aside from perceptions of funniness), it was not appropriate to test these models. However, the correlations between our measures of participants' perceptions of the jokes (Table 5) revealed threat to the targeted gender was strongly and positively correlated with perceived sexism and offensiveness. This is partially consistent with our prediction threat would be related to perceptions of offensiveness and sexism and implies that jokes posing a social threat may be deemed too offensive to be appropriate. Given

Table 5: Bivariate correlations between perceptions of jokes (Study 2).

Target: Men	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.
1. Funny	(0.89)							
2. Offensive	0.13*	(0.93)						
3. Sexist	0.08*	0.76***	(0.91)					
4. Threat to Gender	0.16*	0.94***	0.77**	(0.99)				
Target: Women								
5. Funny	0.76***	0.25**	0.15**	0.28***	(0.92)			
6. Offensive	0.02	0.82***	0.69***	0.81***	0.07	(0.94)		
7. Sexist	-0.02	0.63***	0.83***	0.65***	0.01	0.83***	(0.91)	
8. Threat to Gender	0.01	0.82***	0.70***	0.87***	0.09	0.95***	0.82***	(0.99)

Note. Cronbach's alphas appear in parentheses in the diagonal

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

people generally perceived jokes targeting women as more threatening, this may explain why targeting historically-oppressed groups is less acceptable than targeting historically-privileged groups. Humor disparaging historically-oppressed groups, such as women, is seen as more threatening and therefore less acceptable.

7 General Discussion

Across two studies, we examined men's and women's reactions to sexist humor which included both gender-unique stereotypic and gender-interchangeable jokes. We hypothesized that women would generally perceive disparaging sexist humor as less funny, more sexist, more offensive, and more threatening than would men. Additionally, we predicted these effects would be stronger for sexist humor targeting women, regardless of whether it was stereotype-specific or interchangeable. In Study 1 we showed that women perceived sexist humor targeting both men and women as less funny, more offensive, and more sexist than men did. These effects held for both gender-unique stereotypically-based sexist humor and gender-interchangeable sexist humor. More importantly, our results showed that women find sexist humor

targeting women to be less funny, more offensive, and more sexist than men find sexist humor targeting men. This could be because women are more socially threatened by sexism than are men because of their traditionally lower social status.

In Study 2 we attempted to replicate the previous findings by examining whether participant gender, gender targeted by the sexist joke, and their interaction predicted differences in perceptions of sexist jokes as funny, offensive, and sexist. We then extended these findings by examining participants' perceptions of the jokes as threatening to the gender targeted. Study 2 results, surprisingly, showed that women generally perceived sexist humor to be less threatening than did men. However, sexist jokes targeting women were generally perceived to be more threatening than sexist jokes targeting men. Higher perceptions of threat were associated with significantly greater perceptions of jokes as offensive and sexist. Given that people generally perceived jokes targeting women to be more threatening, this may explain why targeting historically-oppressed groups is less acceptable than targeting historically-privileged groups. Humor disparaging historically-oppressed groups, such as women, is seen as more threatening and therefore potentially less acceptable.

Interestingly, our findings were not fully consistent between Studies 1 and 2. In Study 1, women consistently evaluated the humor as less funny, more offensive, and more sexist than men did. However, in Study 2, this relationship emerged only for how funny participants perceived the jokes. Instead, men found the jokes to be more threatening than did women, but men and women did not differ on how sexist or offensive they perceived the jokes to be. This finding is interesting and we wonder if these differences might be attributable to the age of the sample being tested. Study 1 examined a sample of undergraduate students with an average age of 19, while Study 2 examined a community sample of participants with an average age of 35. It is possible that, due to generational differences, older men are more sensitive to threats to their privileged place in the status hierarchy than younger men are because older men may have had more experience being privileged and may feel that recent progress in gender equality is jeopardizing that privilege. Admittedly, this is speculation based on the critical evaluation of two studies, but future research should examine the possibility for generational differences in men's and women's responses to sexism, with older generations potentially embracing traditional gender roles more than younger generations and being more sensitive to threats to their position in the status hierarchy.

7.1 Limitations and future direction

The current study findings have some notable limitations, but these inspire future avenues of research which are important to better understand the role of threat in men's and women's responses to sexist jokes. These were conducted using students from a general psychology subject pool as well as Amazon's TurkPrime software, and may not be representative of the general population. Additionally, it is possible that simply asking participants to rate how sexist a joke is may trigger an emotional or psychological response because the participant may feel primed to think of the joke as sexist. In the future, more covert measures of perceived sexism should be used, and the possibility of simply asking participants about perceived threat, offensiveness, and humorousness without mentioning sexism should be explored.

Furthermore, it is possible that some of the jokes used in the stereotype-based sets may not have been based on stereotypes per se, but were instead simply jokes that were not interchangeable for another reason. For example, in the group of jokes targeting men, the joke "*Why did God make Adam before Eve? Everyone needs a rough draft before they make the final copy*" is not based on a stereotype about men, but cannot be interchangeable because the Biblical creation story involves Adam (the "rough draft") being made first. In the future, research should explore the effects of jokes more clearly linked to gender stereotypes rather than jokes that are not interchangeable for other reasons.

Because the studies used written jokes with no social context, there was a lack of ability to show rapport, facial expressions, tone of voice, and setting that may be present when someone tells a sexist joke. Although sexist jokes are increasingly perceived as inappropriate in modern society, especially with the recent #metoo movement, these forms of attempted humor continue to be used toward both men and women (e. g. Ford et al. 2013, Ford et al. 2015). Some may claim these forms of humor are less offensive and sexist and more funny when used by a close friend in private, compared to being used by a boss in the workplace, and/or these forms of humor may be reappropriated by the groups they were originally meant to target as a means of affiliation and subversion rather than derogation (see Bianchi 2014; O'Dea and Saucier in preparation; O'Dea and Saucier in press; O'Dea and Saucier submitted a; Rappoport 2005; Saucier et al. 2016, Saucier et al. 2018; Spotorno and Bianchi 2015). Instead, men and women may adopt the use of sexist humor targeting their own group as a way to inoculate themselves or their group from the sting of the jokes when used by outgroup members (see theoretical discussion by Rappoport 2005).

Therefore, future research should provide context when presenting participants with sexist jokes. While it is likely the current findings would not

generalize to situations in which ingroup members use sexist jokes typically targeting their own group affiliatively and as a means of inoculation from prejudice or discrimination, providing context that enhances the derogative nature of the sexist jokes may enhance the findings of the current studies. For example, if participants are given a news story or other form of short story that describes a male manager at a company using a sexist joke toward a woman who has previously filed a sexual misconduct claim against him, individuals would likely attribute greater threat to the situation and perceive the joke as less funny, more offensive, and more sexist than when humor is used in reappropriated ways. Thus, providing extra context, facial expressions, tones of voice, or details about setting may extend the findings of the current studies. It is reasonable to expect the results of the current study may not generalize situations of reappropriation, especially if there is no perceived threat in such a situation. That said, the results may be stronger if individuals are presented with context in which the sexist jokes are used in disparaging ways.

The cross-sectional nature of the current studies also limits our abilities to test the role of threat in predicting participants' responses to the sexist humor. Future studies on this topic should manipulate threat and examine whether this manipulation impacts individuals' perceptions of, and responses to, sexist jokes. Building on previous research (e. g. Tajfel and Turner 1986; Ford et al. 2015), it is likely that men and women may experience different types of threat when confronted by sexist humor based on their position in the existing status hierarchy. Recent research has begun to examine the difference in perceptions of harm and offensiveness of hate speech directed at higher status versus lower status group members (e. g. O'Dea and Saucier submitted b; O'Dea et al. submitted; Smith et al. in preparation). It is likely that, while men's and women's responses to sexist humor are inextricably rooted in their experiences of threat, they would have different responses to the threat. Each of these responses theoretically lead to similar outcomes.

On one hand, men who experience threat from sexist humor may seek to engage in behaviors that bolster their position in the status hierarchy (e. g. Ford et al. 2008; Romero-Sanchez et al. 2010). These behaviors may include men becoming more polarized in their attitudes toward women and perceiving enhanced justification for prejudice toward women. Thus, sexist humor targeting men may ironically reinforce prejudice and discrimination toward women. On the other hand, women may perceive sexist humor as a sword being wielded against them to keep them from advancing in the status hierarchy. Discrimination against lower status groups is perceived as more harmful and offensive and has longer-lasting impacts (Schneider et al. 2002), and because of this, women may experience heightened negative emotions following being targeted by sexist humor (Brandt and Henry 2012; Kremin 2017; Mendoza-

Denton et al. 2002; Schneider et al. 2002). This may call to mind negative stereotypes about their group (Blakemore 2014; Jeshion 2013; Merskin 2010). Literature on stereotype threat suggests that when negative stereotypes about groups are made salient, such as those made by sexist jokes, individuals are more likely to perform poorly on complex tasks due to greater experiences of stress (e. g. Steele and Aronson 1995). Thus, if women experience sexist humor in the workplace, this could inhibit their performance on complex work-related tasks, reinforcing negative perceptions from others in the workplace. This is consistent with findings from Greenberg and Pyszczynski (1985) showing that overheard derogatory remarks can have lasting negative perceptions for targets of discrimination in the workplace from bystanders. Admittedly, at the present time, these hypotheses are based on the findings of two studies and recent research on intergroup relations. Thus, future research should further examine the effect of threat on men's and women's responses to sexist humor.

8 Conclusion

Across two studies we examined whether men and women differ in the extent to which they perceive disparaging humor targeting someone based on their gender as funny, offensive, sexist, and threatening. We predicted that women would perceive disparaging humor as more negative than would men generally, and that women would perceive disparaging humor targeting women to be more negative than men would perceive disparaging humor targeting men. Our results generally supported these hypotheses. Specifically, across both studies, humor targeting women was rated more negatively than was humor targeting men. Interestingly, in Study 2, men generally rated sexist humor as more threatening than did women. Furthermore, sexist humor targeting women was rated by both men and women as being more threatening to women than sexist humor targeting men was rated as being threatening to men. This may explain why disparaging historically-oppressed groups is generally less acceptable than targeting historically-privileged groups. Humor disparaging historically-oppressed groups, such as women, is seen as more socially threatening and therefore potentially less acceptable. Therefore, humor that “punches up” at historically-privileged groups, such as men or White people, is more socially acceptable and may be found funnier than humor that “punches down” at historically-oppressed groups, such as women or people of color. Jokes that target genders may have unequal consequences that mirror the traditional inequalities reinforced by the traditional gender hierarchy.

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