

The Enjoyment of Sexist Humor, Rape Attitudes, and Relationship Aggression in College Students¹

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The current study tested Freud's (1905/1960) theory that sexist humor may be associated with hostility toward women and extended previous research showing a link between hostile humor and aggression. College students (N = 399 - approximately 92% white, 5% African American, and 3% other minorities) rated 10 sexist jokes on their perceived funniness. Results showed that the enjoyment of sexist humor was positively correlated with rape-related attitudes and beliefs, the self-reported likelihood of forcing sex, and psychological, physical, and sexual aggression in men. For women, the enjoyment of sexist humor was only positively correlated with Adversarial Sexual Beliefs and Acceptance of Interpersonal Violence. Women also found the jokes to be less enjoyable, less acceptable, and more offensive than the men, but they were not significantly less likely to tell the jokes.

The current study extends prior research showing attitudes are an important predictor of sexual aggression in men. It also builds on theory and research on motives underlying sexist and hostile humor. It does so by exploring the relationship between the enjoyment of sexist humor and rape-supportive attitudes, sexually coercive behavior, and courtship violence in college men and women.

¹This article was based on Jeanne Kanjorski's Honors project. It was presented at the 22nd Annual Meeting of the Association for Women in Psychology, Pittsburgh, PA, March, 1997. We would like to thank Kim Weikel for her assistance in running the study and Gene Sprechini for his advice on the statistical analyses. We would also like to thank Kim Weikel and anonymous reviewers for comments on an earlier version of the manuscript.

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Attitudes are an important predictor of sexual aggression in men. The most commonly-studied attitudes are Rape Myth Acceptance, Acceptance of Interpersonal Violence, Adversarial Sexual Beliefs (Burt, 1980), and Hostility toward Women (Check, Malamuth, Elias, & Barton, 1985). All of these attitude measures have been positively correlated with college men's estimates of their own likelihood of forcing sex and self-reported sexual aggression (e.g., Christopher, Owens, & Stecker, 1993; Koss & Dinero, 1988; Muehlenhard & Linton, 1987; Malamuth, 1988). In addition, traditional attitudes toward women and gender have been associated with sexual aggression in college men (e.g., Byers & Eno, 1991; Koss, Leonard, Beezley, & Oros, 1985; Lisak & Roth, 1990). And, hostile attitudes and Adversarial Sexual Beliefs have been associated with courtship violence in college men (Bookwala, Frieze, Smith, & Ryan, 1992; Malamuth, Sockloskie, Koss, & Tanaka, 1991). However, because all of the research is correlational, we cannot be sure whether sexist and rape-supportive attitudes predict sexual aggression or whether the use of sexual aggression promotes sexist and rape-supportive attitudes. Nevertheless, it appears that there may be a danger in young men holding such attitudes and beliefs. In a study of Roman humor, Richlin (1992, pp. xxviii) noted that, "cultures where rape is a joke are cultures that foster rape." An unobtrusive measure of rape-supportive and sexist attitudes may be found in young men's enjoyment of sexist humor.

Freud (1905/1960) believed that humor can express hostility, especially hostile and sexist humor. Freud described two varieties of humor: non-tendentious and tendentious. Non-tendentious humor includes "innocent" jokes that involve word play, substitution, absurdity, and the like. In contrast, tendentious humor has a particular aim, usually sexual or hostile. Sexual jokes may be used to test the waters with potential sex partners. They may be used to express repressed desires. Or, they may be used in a hostile manner. "By making our enemy small, inferior, despicable or comic, we achieve in a roundabout way the enjoyment of overcoming him-to which the third person, who has made no efforts, bears witness by his laughter" (p. 103). Thus, hostile jokes may be used simultaneously to attack one person or group while affiliating with another person or group. In this manner, the audience becomes an essential component of tendentious humor. By laughing, the audience affirms the point of view expressed in the joke. Obscene jokes can reinforce the norms of a group (Fine, 1976). Hostile humor can be used to reject and exclude people (Hertzler, 1970). Sexist humor can be "a token of camaraderie among coworkers" (Pryor, 1995a, p. 160) or it may reflect a discourse of power and an expression of patriarchy (Richlin, 1992). Humor can be used to express power and dominance in a group (Coser, 1960). Finally, sexual teasing, jokes, and remarks are the most common form of sexual harassment (Pryor, 1995a, 1995b).