

Press release

Julius-Maximilians-Universität Würzburg

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07/05/2023

<http://idw-online.de/en/news817309>

Research results
Psychology
transregional, national



Men's humour is different

How do men react to jokes that make fun of them? Researchers at the Universities of Würzburg and Kaiserslautern-Landau investigated this question. The result surprised them too.

"If a blonde comes to a petrol station ..." There are many jokes of this kind - in any case, a Google search for "blonde jokes" yields around 511,000 hits. It is rather unlikely that women are amused by them. This kind of humour seems to be a rather male domain.

But what happens in the reverse case, when men become the target of mockery and derision? This is what the psychologist Dr Silvana Weber investigated together with Dr Sven Kachel (University of Kaiserslautern-Landau). Weber has been a research assistant at the Department of Psychology of Communication and New Media at Julius-Maximilians-Universität Würzburg (JMU) since April 2017; the media representation of gender and diversity as well as the effects of media communication of stereotypes are the focus of her research.

Jokes threaten masculinity

For her current project, the psychologist had men and women listen to different jokes in a series of experiments and then recorded their reactions. "We were particularly interested in whether jokes that are contemptuous of men can cause a threat to masculinity," Weber explains. This threat is closely linked to the precarious manhood theory, which states that masculinity is difficult to achieve and easy to lose and must be constantly proven.

The results of the study, however, do not support this conclusion: "Our results indicate that women do perceive misogynistic jokes as a threat, especially when they are told by a male speaker," says the psychologist. However, this effect does not occur with men - not even when the joke is told by a woman.

"Apparently, male-disparaging jokes do not pose a threat to men, regardless of who tells them," says Weber. One explanation for this could be that men in principle have a higher status and greater power in society and therefore do not see their status threatened by a joke.

How the study was conducted

The study participants were given a total of 20 different jokes to listen to. These could be assigned to five categories:

Neutral jokes such as: "How do you put an elephant into a refrigerator? You open the fridge door, put the elephant inside, and close the door."

Male-disparaging jokes that refer to male stereotypes: "Why do little boys whine? Because they're practicing to be men."

Male-disparaging jokes without reference to male stereotypes: "What do you call a man with half a brain? Gifted."

Female-disparaging jokes with reference to female stereotypes: "Why is it a bad idea to ask Siri 'What do women want?'" She has been talking nonstop for the last two days."

Misogynistic jokes without reference to female stereotypes, such as, "What do you call a woman with an opinion? Wrong."

These jokes were each performed by six semi-professional speakers. The jokes were recorded at the sound studio of the Dr. Herbert Brause Media Competence Centre at the University of Würzburg. Afterwards they were professionally edited so that the jokes only differed in one factor: the vocal gender of the joke teller.

Women find jokes generally less funny

In a first round with a total of 198 participants, 74 of them female, they were told 20 jokes in random order. Within each category, they heard two jokes told by a female speaker and two jokes told by a male speaker.

"This confirmed our hypothesis that women generally find jokes less funny than men," says Silvana Weber. In addition, women rated female-deprecating jokes as less funny compared to male-deprecating or neutral jokes, while there was no such difference among male participants.

Furthermore, women rated female-disparaging jokes more discriminatory when they were delivered by a man. This was not the case for the male participants in the study.

Men react differently than women

In a second round with a total of 226 exclusively male participants, Weber and her team investigated the question of whether male-disparaging jokes trigger the feeling in listeners that their masculinity could be threatened and encourage them to "restore" their masculinity. "One of our hypotheses was that in this case, men would show stronger devaluation tendencies and more anger, if the jokes were told by a woman," says the psychologist.

In fact, none of the previously established hypotheses could be confirmed in this experiment: Neither the content of the jokes nor the gender of the teller or their interaction had any influence on the reaction of the study participants. "This suggests that men do not react to gender discriminatory humour in the same way as women".

For now, however, these results are preliminary. Weber and her team are currently working on a publication. In order to further investigate possible threat effects of gender-discriminatory humour in women and men, they are also planning further studies with the material produced in this project.

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