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Exposure to Sexist Humor and Rape Proclivity: The Moderator Effect of Aversiveness Ratings

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to explore the effect of exposure to sexist humor about women on men's self-reported rape proclivity. Earlier studies have shown that exposure to this type of humor increases rape proclivity and that funniness responses to jokes are a key element to consider. However, the role of aversiveness responses has not been studied. In a between-group design, 109 male university students are randomly exposed to sexist or nonsexist jokes. Participants are asked to rate the jokes according to their degree of funniness and aversiveness. Participants' levels of hostile and benevolent sexism were also measured. Results about the relationship between sexist attitudes and sexist humor and the relationship between sexist attitudes and rape proclivity are consistent with those of earlier studies. However, exposure to sexist humor affects rape proclivity only when aversiveness shown to this type of humor is low. The results are discussed in the light of the prejudiced norm theory.

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humor appreciation, sexism, rape proclivity, disparagement humor

Humor makes it possible to convey information in a given social interaction. It can modify the way messages are interpreted because of its specific characteristics as a form of communication. The subtlety of this type of communication allows us to express negative attitudes and emotions as a “game.” Some types of humor undervalue and denigrate individuals or social groups by using so-called disparagement humor (Zillmann, 1983). According to the prejudiced norm theory (Ferguson & Ford, 2008; Ford & Ferguson, 2004), exposure to disparagement humor toward a group brings about a conversational rule of levity that tends to make prejudiced people feel comfortable expressing their prejudice toward that group. This rule of levity may also result in a lesser rejection or greater acceptance of the discriminating information included in the joke and implies that the people involved are not necessarily prejudiced against the disparaged group.

A special case of disparagement humor is sexist humor or woman disparagement humor, which may contribute to propagating and maintaining gender-based inequality and discrimination. Disguising sexual harassment, the inequality of women in the workplace and physical, psychological, and sexual abuse as humorous events may lead to interpreting them as innocent and less harmful and thus escape social criticism. According to Ford, Boxer, Armstrong, and Edel (2008), sexist humor can trivialize gender-based discrimination by assuming that it is a harmless type of amusement. This prevents the changes or opposition elicited by nonhumorous sexist messages. In fact, some studies have found that men adopt a noncritical approach when they interpret sexist jokes and perceive a norm of tolerance of sexism in the social context because of this. For example, Ford, Wentzel, and Lorion (2001) found that men were more tolerant of sexist events (e.g., sexual harassment) after being exposed to sexist humor.

One factor that could be related to how people react to sexist humor is sexist ideology. Glick and Fiske (1996) developed the concept of *ambivalent sexism* to refer to sexist attitudes. Ambivalent sexism distinguishes between two types of sexist attitudes: hostile sexism (HS) and benevolent sexism (BS). HS is defined as an attitude of prejudice or discriminating behavior based on women’s supposed inferiority or difference as a group (Cameron, 1977); BS, however, refers to “a set of interrelated attitudes toward women that are sexist in terms of viewing women stereotypically and in restricted roles but that are subjectively positive in feeling tone (for the perceiver) and also tend

to elicit behaviors typically categorized as prosocial (e.g., helping) or intimacy seeking (e.g., self-disclosure)” (Glick & Fiske, 1996, p. 491).

It has recently been proposed that exposure to sexist humor may also enhance the tangible expression of discrimination through negative behavior trends toward women. One of these trends is rape proclivity, which can be defined as men’s self-reported likelihood of raping under hypothetical circumstances in which they are assured that they would not be discovered (Malamuth, 1981). One of the most reliable measures to measure proclivity is that developed by Bohner et al. (1998). It is based on five scenarios where various date rapes are described, without using the term “rape.” Participants’ self-reported rape proclivity is obtained by asking them whether they would have behaved in the same way as the male character in each scenario.

In a series of three studies, Viki, Thomae, and Hamid (2006) recently showed that exposure to sexist humor (compared to nonsexist humor) leads to an increase in the levels of men’s self-reported rape proclivity. In these studies, participants were exposed to sexist and nonsexist jokes and asked to rate the jokes according to their degree of funniness and sexism. After the jokes were assessed, participants’ rape proclivity levels were measured. The authors found that exposure to sexist jokes increased rape proclivity. This effect was greater in participants with high scores in HS. No significant moderating relation was found for BS. Similarly, participants high in HS (compared to those with low HS scores) perceived sexist jokes as being funnier. This relation was not found in the case of BS. The authors explain these results according to the prejudiced norm theory (Ferguson & Ford, 2008). They argue that exposure to sexist humor brings about a conversational norm in which men—especially those with high levels of hostile sexist attitudes—feel comfortable expressing hostility toward women.

The aim of our study was precisely to explore the relationship between exposure to sexist jokes and rape proclivity. We decided to verify whether this relation was influenced in some way by the level of aversiveness elicited by jokes as well as the degree of amusement and the HS of participants. In the literature about disparagement humor, the aversiveness generated by jokes in the perceiver is considered to be independent of the amusement they cause (Ruch, 2001). Studies carried out to date on sexist humor have not taken into account that funniness and aversiveness responses toward humorous stimuli do not form one single category, even though they are negatively but moderately related to each other. This correlation is greater when the humor category is not neutral, as happens in the case of sexual humor (around $r = -.40$; see Ruch & Hehl, 2007, for a review).

Consequently, two jokes that are considered equally funny may generate different degrees of aversiveness. However, as we mentioned earlier, studies on sexist humor have not measured the influence of aversiveness on the effect of jokes on the various types of discriminatory behavior assessed. Yet the assessment of aversiveness is not only methodologically justified—as we have already explained—but is also theoretically necessary. To obtain empirical evidence supporting the postulates of the prejudiced norm theory (Ford et al., 2008), it would be essential to ask individuals exposed to some type of disparagement humor to assess the degree to which they reject this type of humor. For this reason, we exposed two groups of participants to sexist versus nonsexist jokes in our study. We assessed the impact of the jokes on rape proclivity, considering not only the role of ideological variables (participants' HS and BS) but also the funniness and aversiveness elicited by the jokes. We expected that exposure to sexist versus nonsexist jokes would influence rape proclivity (Hypothesis 1), and, as for Hypothesis 2, this effect would be moderated by the degree of aversiveness elicited by the jokes but not by their funniness. We assumed that sexist jokes would increase rape proclivity only if they were not rejected by the participants, regardless of their degree of funniness and that hostile sexist attitudes of the participants would also play a moderating role between the type of joke (sexist vs. nonsexist) and rape proclivity (Hypothesis 3). We believed sexist jokes would increase rape proclivity only—or especially—in participants high in HS and did not expect BS to have a significant moderator effect.

Method

Participants and Procedure

A sample of 109 male university students of the University of Granada, Spain, participated in this experiment voluntarily. The age of the sample ranged between 18 and 33 years ($M = 22.81$, $SD = 2.86$).

We used a between-group factorial design with type of joke as a directly manipulated independent variable (sexist jokes vs. nonsexist jokes) and levels of HS and BS as indirectly manipulated independent variables. Participants' self-reported levels of rape proclivity were the dependent variable. We also measured the funniness and aversiveness responses to the jokes. Once the students agreed to participate, they were randomly assigned to one of the two experimental conditions (sexist jokes or nonsexist jokes). In the sexist joke condition, the participants were handed a booklet that included—in this order—the Spanish version of the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI;

Expósito, Moya, & Glick, 1998; Glick & Fiske, 1996), a series of four sexist jokes about women for each participant to assess their degree of funniness and aversiveness, and an instrument designed to assess rape proclivity (Bohner et al., 1998; see the section on materials and instruments). In the nonsexist joke condition, the arrangement of the tests was the same as in the sexist joke condition, with the exception that the four jokes presented had a nonsexist content. Finally, participants were thanked for their participation and were given summarized information about the aims of the study and how to access its final results.

Material and Instruments

Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI; Glick & Fiske, 1996). This is a 22-item instrument formed by two 11-item subscales aimed at assessing each of the two independent although related components of ambivalent sexism: HS and BS. In this study, we used the Spanish version of the ASI (Expósito et al., 1998), which has adequate and similar psychometric properties to the original version. All the items of the Spanish version are answered with a 6-point Likert scale from 0 (*totally disagree*) to 5 (*totally agree*). Cronbach's α for HS subscale in this study was .85 and .83 for the benevolent subscale.

Rape proclivity. To assess rape proclivity, we used the instrument developed by Bohner et al. (1998) as a reference. It involves exposing the participants to a written account of five fictitious scenarios that end in rape. Participants are asked to imagine themselves in place of the man described in the scenario. After each of the scenarios, the participants are asked three questions: "How sexually aroused would you have felt in the above situation?," "Would you have behaved like this in this situation?," and "How much would you have enjoyed getting your way in this situation?" The first question is answered with a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *not sexually aroused*, 5 = *very much sexually aroused*). Following Bohner et al., it is treated as a distractor item. The other two questions are aimed at obtaining participants' self-reported level of rape proclivity. This is done by obtaining the so-called rape proclivity index, which is the mean score of the answers to these questions in the five scenarios in a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *completely*). Internal consistency of this instrument was adequate in this study (Cronbach's α = .86).

Jokes. The jokes used in each of the experimental conditions (four in the sexist joke condition and four in the nonsexist joke condition) were taken from the *Escala de Apreciación del Humor*, EAHU (Humor Appreciation Scale; Carretero-Dios, Pérez, & Buéla-Casal, 2009). The EAHU is a scale with 32 items (jokes or graphic cartoons), which are answered using two

5-point Likert scales from 0 (*not funny/no aversiveness*) to 4 (*very funny/strong aversiveness*). This scale has adequate psychometric properties to assess six empirically isolated factors (Carretero-Dios et al., 2009). For the present study, we selected the four items that form the woman disparagement humor factor in the EAHU for the sexist joke condition (funniness Cronbach's $\alpha = .59$, aversiveness Cronbach's $\alpha = .72$). For the nonsexist condition, we selected four other elements among the items that represent neutral content jokes in the EAHU (funniness Cronbach's $\alpha = .69$, aversiveness Cronbach's $\alpha = .59$). We selected these four items with the intention of equaling the amusement caused by both experimental conditions. To make these calculations, we considered the sample of male university students ($n = 281$, mean age = 22.27, $SD = 2.83$) used to construct and validate the EAHU (Carretero-Dios et al., 2009). Once all the jokes had been selected, it became clear that there were no statistically significant differences between the amusement caused by the sexist joke condition ($M = 8.29$, $SD = 3.66$) and the nonsexist joke condition ($M = 8.05$, $SD = 3.71$), $F(1, 280) = .19$, $p = .74$.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

No statistically significant differences were found, $F(1, 107) = .21$, $p = .65$, between funniness scores in the sexist joke condition ($M = 8.33$, $SD = 3.76$) and the nonsexist joke condition ($M = 8.01$, $SD = 3.79$). However, in the sexist joke condition, aversiveness scores were significantly higher ($M = 7.75$, $SD = 3.92$) than those found in the nonsexist joke condition ($M = 2.04$, $SD = 2.45$), $F(1, 107) = 81.36$, $p < .001$. A statistically significant negative correlation, $r(57) = -.39$, $p < .01$, was found between the funniness and aversiveness scores in the sexist joke condition. A negative correlation between funniness and aversiveness, $r(52) = -.25$, $p = .07$, was also observed in the nonsexist joke condition, although it was not statistically significant. This highlights the importance of considering both response scales when studying humorous contents.

The correlation analysis between HS and BS revealed a statistically significant correlation between both variables, $r(106) = .42$, $p < .001$, which agrees with the results of earlier studies (Expósito et al., 1998; Glick & Fiske, 1996; Masser, Viki, & Power, 2006).

To clarify the relation between sexist attitudes and funniness and aversiveness scores, we ran various multiple regression analyses distinguishing between sexist and nonsexist jokes. The results of the first analysis, using the amusement caused by jokes as the criterion variable, showed that neither

HS nor BS predicted funniness scores significantly either in the nonsexist condition, HS: $\beta = .09, t = 0.57, p = .57$; BS: $\beta = .20, t = 1.33, p = .19$; or the sexist-joke condition, HS: $\beta = .04, t = 0.26, p = .81$; BS: $\beta = -.08, t = -0.52, p = .61$.

When the aversiveness scores of sexist jokes were used as the criterion variable, HS—but not BS—was found to predict the scores in a statistically significant way, HS: $\beta = -.29, t = 1.99, p < .05$; BS: $\beta = -.04, t = -0.28, p = .78$. However, in the nonsexist joke condition, neither HS nor BS predicted aversiveness scores, HS: $\beta = -.02, t = -0.14, p = .89$; BS: $\beta = -.15, t = -0.95, p = .35$.

Rape Proclivity

To verify our Hypotheses 1 and 2, we ran a hierarchical multiple regression analysis using proclivity as the predicted variable. In the first step, we introduced the condition of sexist jokes versus nonsexist jokes as well as the degree of funniness and aversiveness of jokes as predictive variables. In the second step, we analyzed the interaction between the type of joke and each of the latter two variables. In the first step, we found marginally significant effects of type of joke, $\beta = .23, t = 1.89, p = .06$, and the funniness variable, $\beta = .16, t = 1.71, p = .09$ but not of the aversiveness variable, $\beta = -.13, t = -1.01, p = .31$. Rape proclivity shown by participants exposed to the sexist joke condition ($M = 1.73, SD = 0.70$) was higher than that shown by those exposed to the nonsexist condition ($M = 1.51, SD = 0.54$); likewise, rape proclivity was higher the greater the amusement caused by the joke. However, we found a significant interaction between type of joke and aversiveness, $\beta = -.73, t = -2.57, p < .05$, in the second step of the regression analysis; however, the amusement caused by the jokes did not modulate the main effect of type of joke, $\beta = -.03, t = -0.21, p = .83$.

The analysis of the interaction between type of joke and aversiveness did not show a significant effect of aversiveness responses on rape proclivity in the nonsexist joke condition, $\beta = .22, t = 1.56, p = .13$. However, we found a significant relationship between aversiveness and rape proclivity in the sexist joke condition, $\beta = -.30, t = -2.16, p < .05$. This interaction is represented in Figure 1, taking +1SD and -1SD as reference values.

As shown in Figure 1, the effect of sexist jokes on rape proclivity is moderated by the level of aversiveness they elicit. In fact, proclivity only increases when the jokes cause a low level of aversiveness. However, in nonsexist humor, no relation was found between rape proclivity and aversiveness.

To verify our Hypothesis 3, we ran a hierarchic multiple regression analysis using rape proclivity as the criterion variable. In the first step, the BS scores of the participants were introduced as a control measure; in the second



Figure 1. Interaction between levels of aversiveness to sexist jokes and type of humor

step, HS and the variable type of joke were introduced; and in the third step, the interaction between both was added. Among the results obtained, besides the main effect of the type of joke mentioned above, it is worth highlighting that, as expected, we found a significant effect of the HS scores of participants on rape proclivity, $\beta = .33$, $t = 3.32$, $p < .01$. However, contrary to our expectations, these scores did not interact with the variable type of joke, $\beta = .01$, $t = 0.03$, $p = .97$.

Discussion

The main objective of our study was to explore the effect of exposure to sexist humor on men's rape proclivity. We also intended to determine whether this relation is moderated by funniness responses and particularly aversiveness responses that form humor appreciation. We also considered the possible influence of participants' sexist ideology both on the appreciation of sexist humor and rape proclivity with the aim of corroborating findings of earlier studies.

Our first hypothesis explored whether exposure to sexist humor (woman disparagement jokes) increases men's self-reported rape proclivity compared to exposure to neutral humor, as has been found in earlier studies (Viki et al., 2006; Viki, Thomae, Cullen, & Fernández, 2007). Our findings supported this first hypothesis: Participants exposed to woman disparagement jokes reported higher levels of rape proclivity. A possible explanation follows the same lines as the conclusions of Ford and Ferguson (2004; also Ferguson & Ford, 2008):

Exposure to sexist jokes creates a context in which men feel comfortable expressing negative ideas about women (negative behaviors).

Our second hypothesis was aimed at exploring whether the effect of sexist jokes is moderated by humor appreciation responses (funniness and aversiveness) of participants to sexist jokes. Our hypothesis was that the effect of exposure to sexist humor on participants' reported rape proclivity would be moderated by their aversiveness responses—but not their funniness responses—to the jokes. Our data supported this second hypothesis, as indicated by the interaction shown in Figure 1 between type of humor (sexist vs. neutral) and aversiveness responses to jokes. When participants were exposed to neutral jokes, their aversiveness responses to these jokes had no effect on men's self-reported rape proclivity. However, when participants were exposed to woman disparagement sexist jokes, their aversiveness responses to jokes had a great influence on rape proclivity: Men who showed low aversiveness to sexist jokes reported higher levels of rape proclivity. On the contrary, participants who had been exposed to sexist jokes but showed high aversiveness to their content reported lower levels of rape proclivity.

These results are a further step with respect to earlier studies in which only responses with a positive valence (funniness) were considered. Our assumptions were based on the evidence of the relationship between personal attitudes and values and aversiveness responses toward humor with nonneutral content (Ruch, 2001). As expected, the effect of funniness responses—more related to the esthetic appearance of the jokes—disappeared when the aversiveness responses to the jokes were taken into account. In these cases, the importance of aversiveness responses to jokes became very clear.

Finally, the third hypothesis was aimed at verifying whether hostile sexist attitudes of participants had a moderating role between type of joke (sexist vs. nonsexist) and rape proclivity. Recent studies on exposure to sexist humor and rape proclivity have shown that participants with high levels of HS who are exposed to sexist jokes report higher levels of rape proclivity than those with low levels (Viki et al., 2006). Our results did not support this third hypothesis. Participants with higher HS scores reported higher levels of rape proclivity. However, no interaction was found between this variable and type of joke; that is, sexist ideology did not have a moderator effect on the influence of sexist humor.

Our study has a few limitations that should be recognized. One of them is related to the degree of honesty of participants' responses. When faced with sensitive issues, such as expressing the likelihood of committing sexual assault, participants may have given responses that do not totally reflect their intended behavior. As other authors have argued (e.g., Viki et al., 2007), it is worth considering the confidence with which we can state that exposure to

sexist humor can lead to “an increase in cases of sexual assault.” This study only proves that men who have been exposed to woman disparagement humor report higher levels of intention to commit sexual assault, considering the existence of various variables discussed above (sexist attitudes, aversion, or funniness assessments, and so on). In this sense, future research on this topic with experimental designs should be improved with a debriefing phase afterward, giving some educative material to participants on sexual aggressions or offering them some way of engaging in some proactive behavior to reduce the risk of sexual assault.

In spite of these limitations, our study has allowed us to draw conclusions that shed some light in the study of the influence of sexist humor on rape proclivity. It corroborates the findings of various studies carried out in different countries on the influence of sexist humor and hostile sexist attitudes on men’s self-reported rape proclivity. However, the most important contribution of our study is that it highlights the influence of humor appreciation responses—particularly aversiveness responses toward nonneutral humor—on rape proclivity.

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Bios

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