THE EFFECT OF MISOGYNISTIC HUMOR ON THE PERCEPTION OF WOMEN

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INTRODUCTION

The influence humor has on a social atmosphere is palpable, particularly since exposure to media begins at young ages. Research has found sexist humor to profoundly affect perception of women. Among women, it decreases self-esteem and acceptance of violence among women; among men, it increases sexist views, tolerance of discriminatory events, and rape proclivities (Bill & Naus, 1992; Ryan & Kanjorpski, 1998; Tommasi & Viki, 2013; Thomas & Essex, 2004).

BACKGROUND

The study drew from the Social Learning Theory, which explains behaviors with modeling: learning by observations (Bandura, 1971). The Prejudiced Norm Theory (Ford & Ferguson, 2004) builds on Bandura’s work to explain how misogynistic humor creates a social norm, making it acceptable to laugh at sexism. The theory proposes a lack of negative reaction or a positive reaction, such as canoodlevideo laughter following a sexist joke, allows the viewer to believe this is an appropriate reaction. This normalizes degrading and objectifying attitudes toward a target group.

This study examined the relationship between short-term/long-term exposure and preference to sexist humor and the perception of women, including reinforcement of gender norms, heterosexual views, and traditional femininity. It was hypothesized that men and women exposed to sexist humor would hold more sexist views.

PARTICIPANTS

A total of 1,096 students from a four-year university participated, with 561 in the experimental group and 535 in the control group. The majority of students were female (n = 811, 75%), identified as White (n = 634, 57.8%) or Hispanic (n = 185, 16.9%), and were between the ages of 18 to 62 (M = 20.38; SD = 4.64).

RESULTS

Correlations conducted to determine significant relationships between variables examined indicated a positive correlation between age and nonsexist TV preference, a negative correlation between gender and sexist TV viewing, nonsexist TV viewing, and nonsexist TV preference, and a positive correlation between year in college and nonsexist TV viewing. See table 1.

A series of analysis of variance (ANOVA) conducted to determine if exposure to sexist humor impacts participants’ level of sexism did not find significant differences between those who viewed sexist humor in clips and those who did not view the video clips on any of the dependent measures.

Linear regressions analyses conducted to determine how media viewing habits related to level of sexism revealed five measures were found significant; three were not. See table 2.

DISCUSSION & FUTURE RESEARCH

Sexist views did not significantly differ between the experimental and control group, indicating immediate exposure to sexist humor did not make a difference in sexist views. This is consistent with previous research that until a social context is established and the humor in the clips is not approved by one’s peers, it may not be accepted (Ford & Gray, 2013). The results suggest that watching isolated clips of TV shows to which one does not have previous exposure or peer approval is more likely to be subject to critical examination.

Participants who reported long-term exposure and preference to inequally-promoting TV shows in the media viewing habits questionnaire had higher levels of sexism, particularly in dependency/preference, purity, caretaking, benevolent sexism and, hostile sexism. These results suggest exposure to sexist media must be continuous, in line with Prejudiced Norm Theory (Ford & Ferguson, 2004) and it must be preferred in order to have an effect on personal beliefs. Tolerating and enjoying sexist humor, therefore, is learned over time and cannot be appropriately measured by immediate exposure to brief clips. A much better indication of media portrayals impacting sexist views comes from long-term exposure with those who have one peer approval. This will eventually result in the creation of a social context in which one accepts and even actively promotes sexism. Future studies should examine:

- compare long and short-term exposure/preference to sexist humor in controlled setting.
- larger variety in television shows and interpretation of show clips.
- the presence of studio/canned laughter on the perception of sexist humor.
- more diverse sample size, particularly more males and races other than White/Hispanic.
- updated scales to measure levels of sexism.

REFERENCES


Modern Sexism Scale

Levant, Richmond, Cook, House, & Aquino (2011) assessed expectations of how women should act in 5 categories: stereotypic images and activities, dominance and gender stereotyping, dependency, and equality. The sample represents participants aged 18-62.

Table 1: Scale of Sexual & Prejudice Scale

Table 2: Scale of Sexual & Prejudice Scale

1 = Dependency/Defiance; 2 = Purity; 3 = Caretaking; 4 = Benefecial Sexism; 5 = Hostile Sexism

6 = Modern Sexism; 7 = Stereotic Images/Activities; 8 = Emotionally

Participants divided into two groups, control and experimental, with three clips of sexist humor prior to questionnaire as measure for short-term exposure asked about media viewing habits, specifically exposure and preference to TV shows as measure for long-term exposure.

mentally degrading intelligence/abilities physically objectifying or shaming sexual agency blaming women’s relationships perpetuation of misogyny by men

Table 1: Scale: y = 0.1, y = 0.5

Character analysis considered: age, body size, race, religion, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, mental health, femininity etc

Sexist: The Big Bang Theory, Family Guy, How I Met Your Mother Non-sexist: Community, Parks and Recreation, The Simpsons

Table 2: Scale: y = 0.1, y = 0.5

- Hostile Sexism
- Hostility
- Nonsexist TV Preference
- Preference
- Nonsexist TV Viewing
- Viewing
- Sexist TV Preference
- Preference
- Sexist TV Viewing
- Viewing

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