**Why Offensive Jokes Affect You More Than You Realize**

*Do humor and sexism mix? Should they?*

Post published by [Scott Weems Ph.D.](https://www.psychologytoday.com/experts/scott-weems-phd) on Sep 11, 2014 in [What’s So Funny?](https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/what-s-so-funny)

*What do blondes and beer bottles have in common? They're both empty from the neck up.*

*Why haven't any women ever gone to the moon? It doesn't need cleaning yet.*

Did you [laugh](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/laughter)? For some people, these are a pair of laugh-out-loud jokes, the kind to share with friends at parties. For others, they're remnants of an embarrassingly sexist era we'd like to forget. Others fall somewhere in between.

But while everyone would that these jokes are sexist, what do they really say about our attitudes and prejudices? A fascinating study by Annie Kochersberger published last month by the International Journal of [Humor](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/humor) Research might answer this question. She asked more than 100 men and women to rate the funniness of several sexist jokes, as well as somewhat more neutral examples (What's the difference between an oral and rectal thermometer? The taste). Subjects also answered questions intended to uncover any potentially hostile sexist views—for example, agreeing with the statement, "Women seek to gain power by getting control over men." Lastly, subjects were asked how well they psychologically identified with women.

Her results showed that liking sexist humor has nothing to do with [gender](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/gender), at least once views toward women are taken into consideration. Women are just as likely to enjoy sexist jokes as men, particularly when they hold sexist views themselves.

This is interesting because it suggests that anyone can be sexist, and that liking sexist humor may say something unfortunate about our deeper beliefs.

There's a long history of research pertaining to sexism and humor, though the most interesting finding—in my opinion, at least—belongs to Thomas Ford, who was also one of Kochersberger's co-authors in the recent study. His earlier study, "More Than Just a Joke," asked subjects to read sexist jokes immediately before deciding how much money to donate to a fictional women's organization. Subjects didn't even have to give actual money; they only had to imagine themselves doing so.

Subjects in that study rating high on measures of hostile sexism contributed almost nothing to the women's organizations after reading sexist jokes, a drop of about 80% compared to "donations" made following neutral jokes. But those who didn't rate high on sexism didn't show the effect: Instead they donated more after reading the sexist jokes, about twice as much, compared to "donations" following after [priming](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/priming) with neutral jokes.

So, if we're not sexist to begin with, these jokes don't have much effect. They don't make us more [prejudiced](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/bias). In fact, it's just the opposite.

What should we make of these findings? One supposes that if we shared more sexist jokes, it could prod those who aren't sexist to take action and help make the world a better place. Or maybe sexism in the form of stupid jokes is sexism in its most dangerous form, because it subtly changes our behavior in ways difficult to recognize.

Or maybe, the problem isn't the jokes themselves, but the attitude that "a joke is just a joke." Jokes have power—great power. When our intent is to malign, a joke becomes more than an offhand remark; it becomes a weapon.

Kochersberger, A., Ford, T. Woodzicka, J., Romero-Sanchez, M., and Carretero-Dios, H. (2014). The role of identification with women as a determinant of amusement with sexist humor. Humor, The International Journal of Humor Research, 27(3), 441-460.

Ford, T., Boxer, C., Armstrong, J., and Edel, J. (2008). More Than “Just a Joke”: The Prejudice-Releasing Function of Sexist Humor, [Personality](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/personality) and Social Psychology Bulletin, 34(2), 159-170.

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