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Sex and gender differences in humor

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Published in:

Humor

DOI:

[10.1515/humor-2020-0005](https://doi.org/10.1515/humor-2020-0005)

Publication date:

2020

Citation for published version (APA):

Greengross, G. (2020). Sex and gender differences in humor: Introduction and overview. *Humor*, 33(2), 175-178. <https://doi.org/10.1515/humor-2020-0005>

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Sex Differences in Humor: Introduction and Overview.

Guest Editor: Gil Greengross.

The topic of sex differences is often viewed as controversial, where both academics and laypeople debate whether men and women differ in their behaviors, abilities, preferences, and other attributes. The debates are wide-ranging from basic disagreements on what these differences are, if they even exist, how important they may be, and to what is the best way to explain them.

The field of humor research is not exempt from such controversies, with researchers arguing about whether men and women differ in their uses and experiences of humor, and what might be the underpinning causes of such differences, if true. Perhaps the most divisive topic in humor research is sex differences in humor ability, where Christopher Hitchens once famously claimed that “women are not funny” and went on to explain why that may be (Hitchens 2007). Such an outrageous proposition is clearly untrue, and may promote culturally pervasive stereotypes about women. (For those interested in a more nuanced view on the topic and a systematic review of sex difference in humor ability, see: Greengross, Silvia & Nusbaum 2020).

One of the reasons that the subject of sex differences is so contentious stems from disagreements about the very definition of sex itself. People often confuse sex with gender, and use them interchangeably (some of the authors in this special issue use the term sex, while others use gender). However, while not always explicitly discussed, the distinction between sex and gender is important and should be clear. Sex is a biological term, defined by the reproductive organs of males and females and applied to all species in the animal kingdom that reproduce sexually. Gender, on the other hand, typically refers to the set of behaviors, characteristics, or stereotypes that are associated with each sex (Torgrimson & Minson 2005). While sex, by definition, includes only two forms, gender, as a social construct, can take many shapes and is much more flexible, ever changing and developing. (Facebook, for example, allows people to define their gender in 58 different ways.)

Whether it is controversial or not, sex (in its biological sense) and gender are both important and of interest to many, and should be openly discussed and debated. If nothing else, the controversies surrounding sex differences highlight the need to have more research in this area to help us better understand such differences, or their absence. So when I got the invitation from the editor to serve as guest editor for a volume of HUMOR, I seized the opportunity and thought it would be great to publish the most up-to-date research on sex differences as they pertain to humor. The studies published in this special issue advance our understanding of sex differences in many humor domains, giving us a clearer view on the possible sources of such differences, or why they may not exist.

We received many submissions, and the selection of the articles was difficult. Researchers offered a wide range of topics within the humor purview with various theoretical and methodological approaches. I tried to include as diverse a mix of articles as possible, with an emphasis on rigorous scholarship.

This special issue includes eight articles on sex/gender differences on various facets of humor. While the articles offer a good snapshot of the research currently conducted by humor

researchers as it relates to sex and gender, by no means do these studies represent a comprehensive list of all possible research in the field. It is impossible to cover the vast amount of research on sex differences in humor in one issue - after all, any humor phenomenon could be studied through the lens of sex or gender - but the articles in this special issue represent a good sample of the most up-to-date research undertaken by current humor scholars. I hope you will find the collection of articles interesting, and that it will facilitate discussion and further research on this topic.

The first two articles consider possible environmental and biological influences on humor. Bergen's article reviews the age when sex differences in humor initiation and appreciation emerge, in order to understand whether the observed sex differences among adults are due to environmental or biological causes. Her finding that sex differences emerge only late in elementary school, lead her to conclude that environment plays a bigger role in developing such differences. Her study is also a reminder that lack of sex differences (in this case, in early childhood), are as important and telling as the existence of such differences among adults.

Ross and Hall demonstrate how both evolutionary and environmental influences can be incorporated to explain the role humor plays in courtship. They show that both men and women share similar traditional views on the importance of humor in courtship, specifically associating humor ability with masculinity, and appreciation of humor with trait femininity. These views are consistent with the evolutionary explanation that men try to signal their mate value using high quality humor, while women are using such humor to evaluate men's mate value. This study illuminates how the interaction between culture and biology are both important in our humor experiences.

Several articles tested hypotheses regarding sex differences in relation to sexist humor. These articles illustrate how by studying sex differences, one can elucidate larger issues related to humor. Sometimes, the question of sex differences may not be the center of the theory, but nonetheless can be used as a moderator, further explaining other humor phenomena.

Woodzicka, Mallett, and Melchiori examine how men and women respond to sexist jokes. They find that while both sexes were equally likely to respond with serious confrontation, women are more likely to confront the joke-teller with witty repartee, while men are more likely to smile or laugh at the joke. Strain, Sanborn, Saucier, and Martens also tested reactions to sexist humor, and found that a man telling sexist jokes to a woman is viewed more negatively by women, while men perceive the situation in a more benign way. These perceptions may change depending on how the woman reacts to the sexist humor.

Greenwood and Gautam look at the moderating effect of sex, in response to antifat sexist humor on Twitter. They find that men, especially high on hostile sexism, are more likely to favorite and retweet such jokes. This study highlights not only the dark side of humor, but also the power and potential perils of social media in spreading disparaging humor.

Lawless, O'Dea, Miller, and Saucier examined how men and women react to sexist jokes targeting both men and women. Their findings, that women find jokes targeting women as more offensive and more sexist than men's reaction of sexist jokes targeting men, exemplify how women feel more socially threatened by sexist humor than men. They also find in a

further study that the more threatening the jokes are, the more offensive and sexist they are perceived, by both sexes.

Sillars, Nicolaides, Karan, Wright, Robbins, and Davis test sex differences in adaptive and maladaptive humor styles, and how men's and women's different strategies to regulate their emotions relate to the various humor styles. Kosiara, Katz, and Saturn also examine sex differences in various coping humor styles, and how they relate to compassion for oneself and others. Their study suggests that women's humor experiences are more related to compassion for oneself and others, while men's humor experiences are correlated with compassion toward the environment.

The varied topics in this special issue represent not only the latest studies on sex differences in relation to humor, but also some of the most important issues humor researchers are trying to study. It was a thrill to see both familiar and established humor researchers contributing to the special issue, as well as emerging new faces that I am sure we will hear from more in the future. I hope you will find the articles as stimulating and thought provoking as I did.

Lastly, on a more solemn note, I would like to dedicate this special issue to Christie Davis. As many of you know, Christie has written and commented on sex and gender in his various works. Christie was working on a manuscript for this special issue, but unfortunately his untimely death prevented him from completing the manuscript.

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Bionote

Gil Greengross is an evolutionary psychologist in the department of psychology at Aberystwyth University in Wales. His interdisciplinary research bridges traditional fields of study such as psychology, anthropology, and biology. His studies focus on evolutionary explanations for humor and laughter, mainly in the context of sexual selection and mating.

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