

Manuela Thomae* and Afroditi Pina

Sexist humor and social identity: the role of sexist humor in men's in-group cohesion, sexual harassment, rape proclivity, and victim blame

Abstract: Jokes have been recognized as ways in which negative attitudes and prejudice can be communicated and enacted in hidden ways (e.g., Allport 1954; Freud 2004 [1905]). In this paper, we review the existing literature on the functions and effects of sexist humor, using Martineau's (1972) model on the social functions of humor as well as Tajfel and Turner's (2004 [1986]) Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Turner et al.'s (1987) Self Categorization Theory. Within these frameworks, we particularly focus on sex as an intergroup context and on the way sexist humor functions to a) enhance male in-group cohesion (sexist humor as a predictor) b) serves as a form of sexual harassment (sexist humor as an outcome) and c) amplifies self-reported rape proclivity and victim blame (sexist humor as a moderator). The paper concludes by highlighting gaps in the existing literature and providing directions for future research.

Keywords: sexist humor, social identity approach, in-group cohesion, sexual harassment, rape proclivity, victim blame

DOI 10.1515/humor-2015-0023

1 Theoretical background

In his seminal chapter, 'A Model of Social Functions of Humor', Martineau (1972) outlined a group-based theoretical model of the functions of humor. Martineau delineates the following variables which impact on these social functions: the individual or group initiating the humor (the actor), the audience or recipient of the humour, the target of the humor, the judgment of the humor (esteeming or

*Corresponding author: **Manuela Thomae**, Department of Psychology, University of Winchester, Sparkford Road, Winchester, Hampshire SO22 4NR, United Kingdom, E-mail: manuela.thomae@gmail.com

Afroditi Pina, School of Psychology, University of Kent, Keynes College, Canterbury, Kent, CT2 7NZ, E-mail: a.pina@kent.ac.uk

disparaging) and the cultural context and social positions of the involved parties. According to Martineau (1972), humor shapes human interactions in three different group settings: intragroup situations, intergroup situations and intergroup interactions. This paper particularly focuses on intragroup situations and intergroup interactions. Intragroup humor is humor exchanged solely within the in-group and can have either an in-group or an out-group as target. In contrast, intergroup humor impacts on the interaction between the groups.

Our emphasis here is on disparagement humor, a form of humor that ‘refers to remarks that (are intended to) elicit amusement through the denigration, derogation, or belittlement of a given target’ (Ferguson and Ford 2008: 283). In particular, our focus will be on sexist humor, a form of disparagement humor that derogates and belittles women as a group (humor target), often initiated by men (actors). We will focus on intragroup situations, in which sexist humor strengthens the cohesion of the male in-group at the expense of the female out-group. We will also investigate the evidence with respect to intergroup interactions between women and men, where sexist humor is linked to hostile dispositions and negative behavioral tendencies towards women as the disparaged group. In Martineau’s (1972) words, we will discuss sexist humor as a social lubricant for the male in-group and as a social abrasive in intergroup relations between women and men.

To explain the existing evidence we use the Social Identity Approach (e.g., Tajfel and Turner 2004 [1986]; Turner et al. 1987). Although Martineau’s work provides some basic hypotheses on the functions of sexist humor, the social identity approach can provide further theoretical justifications for these hypotheses, as well as a framework for generating new hypotheses. We aim to integrate Martineau’s (1972) model with a Social Identity Approach (Tajfel and Turner 2004 [1986], Turner et al. 1987). We will focus on the psychological functions sexist humor serves for men, treating sexist humor as a predictor, an outcome and a moderator of intra- and intergroup behavior.

Ferguson and Ford (2008) review the literature on disparagement humor, focusing particularly on psychoanalytic theory, superiority theories and Social Identity Theory. In their use of Social Identity Theory, Ferguson and Ford propose a theoretical model, according to which social identity threat is counteracted via the use of disparagement humor, resulting in positive distinctiveness and, hence, amusement. We complement and extend the work by Ferguson and Ford (2008) in several important ways: Firstly, our focus will be specifically on the intergroup context of biological sex. Secondly, we will expand Ford and Ferguson’s argument using the full Social Identity Approach (e.g., Hornsey 2008), including both, Social Identity Theory and Self Categorization Theory. Finally, we hope to widen the focus of this paper beyond positive distinctiveness, including other psychological

mechanisms such as categorization, stereotyping and the legitimacy and stability of the status/power hierarchy between groups.

1.1 The social identity approach

The Social Identity Approach is a meta-theory that incorporates a broad framework of more specific theories (see Hornsey 2008). The two most prominent theories within this framework are Social Identity Theory (SIT; Tajfel and Turner 2004 [1986]) and Self Categorization Theory (SCT; Turner et al. 1987). SIT focuses on intergroup relations and on group members' attempts to obtain or maintain a positive social identity. SCT, in contrast, emphasizes intragroup processes, explaining phenomena like group polarization and cohesiveness via cognitive categorization mechanisms. SIT and SCT are based on the same meta-theoretical and ideological perspective and share most of their underlying assumptions and methods (see Hornsey 2008).

Social Identity Theory (SIT) proposes that a person's identity exists on a continuum between personal identity and social identity. The latter is based on social group membership (e.g., sex, race, profession, sports team). The salience of this social identity depends on context and can lead to behavior disadvantaging out-group members, even when group membership is based on minimal or irrelevant criteria (Tajfel et al. 1971). Social groups tend to compete not only for material resources but also for positive distinctiveness. Positive distinctiveness denotes a feeling of superiority by members of a group on dimensions relevant to their group. Yet, if the in-group performs poorly in an intergroup comparison, social identity becomes threatened and people will attempt to restore positive distinctiveness. One way to achieve this is via disparagement humor. By allowing for social comparisons to relevant out-groups, disparagement humor can provide positive distinctiveness to the in-group. In turn, re-establishing positive distinctiveness will allow the formerly threatened in-group member to perceive the disparagement humor as funny and to enjoy it (Ferguson and Ford 2008).

Self Categorization Theory (SCT) refines the cognitive components of SIT, focusing on categorization processes. According to SCT, people tend to maximise differences between categories and minimize differences within categories (meta-contrast principle). Furthermore, category (or group) members will perceive themselves less as individuals and more as interchangeable exemplars of the group prototype. This mechanism is called depersonalization and drives in-group cohesion, conformity to in-group norms, deindividuation and out-group stereotyping. Disparagement humor from an SCT perspective facilitates the communication of group norms (see Ford and Ferguson 2004) and reveals information about the prototypical group member (see also Hogg and Reid 2006).

Martineau's (1972) model and the Social Identity Approach converge in their assumptions about the functions of disparagement humor: Both theories predict that humor disparaging an out-group a) serves to enhance the morale and cohesion of the in-group and b) introduces or fosters a hostile disposition towards the out-group. Biological sex can be defined as an in-group, allowing for a female versus male intergroup context of lifelong relevance and with the potential of intergroup conflict, derogation and hostility (see Allport 1954). Therefore, this paper focuses on the abrasive impact sexist humor has on the treatment of women as the out-group and the lubricating functions of sexist humor for the male in-group. Specifically, we will concentrate on the role of sexist humor in male in-group cohesion, and out-group discrimination including sexual harassment, self-reported rape proclivity and victim blame.

2 Sexist humor and in-group cohesion

There has been much debate about suitable definitions of group cohesion (see Hogg 1993). Here, we define cohesion as “the total field of forces which act upon a member to remain in the group” (Festinger et al. 1950: 164). Cohesion has also been conceptualized as positive attitudes among in-group members (e.g., Lott 1961) and as attraction between in-group members (e.g., Forsyth 1983). These definitions emphasize that cohesion is a process relevant to intragroup situations. In-group cohesion functions to facilitate the evaluation of intergroup situations, in-group conformity, and communication, but also the expression of intergroup aggression (Hogg and Reid 2006; Tajfel 1982).

Self Categorization Theory incorporates ideas such as in-group cohesion, in-group norms, prototypicality concerns, and out-group stereotyping (see Hornsey 2008; Turner et al. 1987). These ideas fit well with Martineau's (1972) descriptions of the functions of disparagement humor in intragroup situations: Disparagement humor targeting an out-group can increase in-group morale and solidify the in-group while, in parallel, introducing and/or fostering hostile attitudes towards the out-group.

2.1 Sexist humor as a predictor of in-group cohesion

The idea of strengthening in-group bonds by disparaging out-groups is not new and jokes have long been identified as vehicles to communicate hostility in disarming and less socially sanctioned ways (e.g., Allport 1954; Freud 2004

[1905]). In the intergroup context of biological sex, women and men display in-group favoritism by rating jokes about the other sex as funnier than jokes about their own sex (Abrams and Bippus 2011; Greenwood and Isbell 2002). Moreover, sexist jokes targeting the other sex have been found to serve as an in-group bonding mechanism in women (e.g., Boxer and Cortés-Conde 1997) and men (e.g., Kehily and Nayak 1997; Lyman 1987).

Using ethnographic evidence, Kehily and Nayak (1997) investigated the role of humor in young men's school cultures. In line with SCT, these authors concluded that intragroup humorous exchanges assisted the male humor initiators in reinforcing their heterosexual masculine identities. Jokes helped these young men to establish a heterosexist status hierarchy, occasionally blurring the line between humor and harassment. These findings suggest that sexist humor can be used by men as a way of establishing (masculine) prototypicality, as well as behavioral norms, while simultaneously treating the targeted out-group – women – as a homogeneous entity, to whom the male in-group responded with negative attitudes disguised as humor.

Lyman (1987) conducted group interviews with fraternity men and sorority women following a supposedly humorous intergroup incident. In these interviews, the fraternity men reported how they used different forms of humor, including sexist and racist humor, to further male friendship bonds while simultaneously keeping these friendships free of close romantic bonds with women. Most of the men perceived meaningful romantic relationships with women as a threat to their personal freedom as well as to their male friendships, and used crude humor as a way of releasing tension and to protect the fraternal bond. This research indicates men's tendencies to negatively stereotype women while simultaneously strengthening in-group cohesion via the use of sexist humor.

2.2 Responses to sexist humor as a function of gender attitudes

Research suggests that the enjoyment of disparaging jokes is linked to pre-existing attitudes, including sexist attitudes (e.g., Eyssel and Bohner 2007; Hunt and Gonsalkorale 2014). Several studies demonstrate that individuals high in hostile sexism enjoy sexist humor significantly more than individuals low in hostile sexism (Greenwood and Isbell 2002; LaFrance and Woodzicka 1998, Thomae and Viki 2013) and are more willing to repeat female-disparaging jokes to friends (Thomas and Esses 2004). These findings comfortably fit with Ford and Ferguson's (2004) and Woodzicka and Ford's (2010) conceptualization of sexist humor as a releaser of prejudice.

Using a staged recorded conversation between two male confederates, Greenwood and Isbell (2002) found that highly hostile sexist participants of both sexes found sexist jokes funnier and less offensive than participants low in hostile sexism. Similarly, Thomas and Esses (2004) demonstrated that hostile sexism positively correlated with the perceived funniness and negatively correlated with the perceived offensiveness of sexist jokes, as well as men's likelihood to repeat female disparaging jokes. Irrespective of their own sex, participants who held pro-feminist attitudes showed lower appreciation for sexist cartoons, independently of whether the target of the disparagement was male or female (Henkin and Fish 1986). Similarly, women and men low in traditional gender attitudes towards women (i.e. sexist attitudes) displayed a smaller preference for sexist over non-sexist cartoons than highly traditional participants (Moore et al. 1987). These findings indicate that the perceived funniness and offensiveness of sexist humor are closely linked to pre-existing gender attitudes and amplify ('release') such attitudes.

Pre-existing gender attitudes further contribute to sexist discrimination following exposure to sexist humor. People high in hostile sexism show greater tolerance of sex discrimination (Ford 2000) and greater tolerance of a sexist event (Ford et al. 2002) after being exposed to sexist humor. Highly hostile sexist people were also less willing to donate money to a women's organization and were more likely to recommend budget cuts following the exposure to sexist jokes (Ford et al. 2008). Highly hostile sexist men approve of sexist humor, thereby consenting to the implied normative standard. Following the exposure to sexist humor, these men also experience less self-directed negative affect after imagining behaving in a sexist manner (Ford et al. 2001).

The above findings also support the idea of disparagement humor as a releaser of prejudice (Ford and Ferguson 2004; Woodzicka and Ford 2010). This releaser function of sexist humor converges with Martineau's (1972) model and Social Identity Theory: Disparagement of the out-group establishes positive distinctiveness for the in-group. If shared in an intergroup interaction, these sexist jokes may simultaneously undermine the female out-group (see Martineau 1972) by threatening women's social identity as women. Sexist humor here then concurrently functions to 'lubricate' in-group ties by fostering cohesion and reducing threat, and 'abrade' the relationship with the out-group.

2.3 Summary

Under the definition of cohesion as in-group attraction (see Lott 1961), the assumption that negative attitudes towards the out-group constitute the flipside

of in-group cohesion seems sensible (but also see Brewer 1999). In the specific case of sexist humor, negative attitudes toward women, such as hostile sexism, may partially be the result of the threat women pose to the existing gender hierarchy. Based on predictions from the Social Identity Approach, we argue that with more women than men completing higher education and high numbers of women entering the workforce, it is possible that men perceive their social and economic status as threatened and respond with misogynist attitudes and sexist discrimination. From the social identity perspective, discrimination becomes more likely if a group's place in the status and power hierarchy is perceived as illegitimate and/or unstable (Hornsey et al. 2003; Tajfel and Turner 1979; Turner and Brown 1978). Viewing sexist humor as a form of intergroup discrimination helps to explain the relationship between feelings of threat, sexist attitudes and the use of sexist humor.

In the evidence reviewed here, men appear to also use sexist humor to maintain and strengthen the cohesion of the male in-group. In parallel, this humor functions as a way of stereotyping women and fostering potential intergroup conflict (see Tajfel 1982). This evidence supports the in-group bonding function of disparagement humor proposed by Martineau (1972) but also lends itself to an interpretation based on the Social Identity Approach. In particular, sexist humor in this context seems to serve as a means of establishing positive distinctiveness from the female out-group as well as reducing threats to male friendship bonds and to masculine norms.

3 Sexist humor as sexual harassment

Maintaining the perspective of men as initiators of sexist humor and women as humor targets, we now enter into the discussion of 'intergroup interactions' (Martineau 1972) by discussing male-to-female sexual harassment in the form of sexist humor. A unified definition of sexual harassment has long been problematic. Sexist humor usually falls under the umbrella of hostile environment harassment. Hostile environment harassment refers to a situation in which female employees are subjected regularly to offensive, gender-related or sexual comments, and unreciprocated sexually related behaviors that may not be relevant to job-related outcomes (e.g., Fitzgerald 1993). Many contemporary researchers now define verbal comments, requests, and non-verbal behaviors as sexual harassment (e.g., European Commission 2010; Fitzgerald and Shullman 1993). Yet, often behaviors such as staring, whistling, sexual and sexist jokes, and sexual innuendoes are perceived as natural and expected interactions between the sexes (Roiphe 1993).

This highlights the insidious nature of some forms of sexual harassment as they contain an element of ambiguity in terms of how the target should interpret and react to them (Boxer and Ford 2010; Montemurro 2003).

Research demonstrates that men engage in sexually harassing acts (such as sexist joke telling) because of the ambiguity regarding the appropriateness of that behavior (Fiske and Glick 1995), and because they have contact with others who accept or engage in similar behaviors (Gwartney-Gibbs et al. 1987). These findings indicate that in-group norms appear to play an important role in the expression of sexist humor in intergroup settings. We now review the evidence on sexist humor as an outcome of in-group threat and in-group norms.

3.1 Sexist humor as an outcome of in-group threat and in-group norms

Siebler et al. (2008) tested the relationship between proclivity to sexually harass, sexism and actual harassment behavior. Using a modified computer harassment paradigm these authors gave students the opportunity to send sexist jokes to a computer-simulated female and tested whether information about the female would affect the number of jokes sent (Siebler et al. 2008). Men high in likelihood to sexually harass (LSH) who endorsed hostile sexism sent more sexist jokes to the female than men low in LSH. Moreover, when the target female was portrayed as holding feminist (as opposed to traditional) beliefs, she was more likely to be harassed. These findings indicate that sexual harassment, including sexist jokes, can be a response to male identity threat and a way to re-establish the intergroup hierarchy.

Angelone et al. (2005) tested the effect of peer interaction in college students under the guise of a project on humor. Male students told more sexually oriented jokes to a female confederate if they were exposed to a peer engaging in similar behavior. Furthermore, Angelone et al. found that when students were exposed to a peer that was verbally sexist towards a female confederate, they told more sexually oriented jokes than when they were exposed to a non-sexist peer (Angelone et al. 2005).

Finally, Hunt and Gonsalkorale (2014) investigated whether men's gender harassment is motivated by efforts to reaffirm male in-group bonds following a threat to masculinity. Masculinity threat here was operationalized via false feedback, which randomly informed male participants that they either scored above or below the average on a scale measuring 'a collection of thoughts, behaviors and emotions that are more commonly associated with men than with women' (Hunt and Gonsalkorale 2014:19). In-group norms were operationalized

via a male confederate either encouraging or discouraging the sending of sexist jokes to a fictitious female confederate. Hunt and Gonsalkorale's results indicate that men who interacted with an in-group member who encouraged sexist harassment were most likely to send sexist jokes to the fictitious female following a masculinity threat.

3.2 Summary

The research reviewed in this section supports the idea that in-group norms can impact on the initiation of sexist humor, making sexist humor an outcome of in-group cohesion. We argue that sex categories will be very salient in intergroup situations in which sexist humor is used as a form of sexual harassment. Sexist humor then provides men with comparative fit with the male in-group, emphasizing in-group similarities and intergroup differences. Moreover, sexist humor enhances positive distinctiveness by making the content of the normative fit positive: The in-group is superior since the out-group is the butt of the in-group's jokes and/or the recipient the in-group's sexist discrimination.

These findings also support Ferguson and Ford's (2008) proposition that disparaging humor particularly serves to reduce feelings of in-group threat. The Social Identity Approach offers two possible avenues, which may explain how high versus low status groups respond to a threat to the intergroup status and power hierarchy. Firstly, dominant groups who perceive their superiority as legitimate may display discriminatory behavior if the out-group attempts to change the intergroup setting and context. This explanation seems to fit the above findings: In times when gender equality are high on political and social agendas (e.g., European Commission 2014), men who feel an unjust threat to their privileged group position may resort to sexual harassment (including sexist humor) to reduce threat and simultaneously stabilize the status quo by undermining women in the work place and creating a hostile environment. In particular, we hypothesize that this strategy will be adopted by men who are highly identified with the male in-group and/or hold highly sexist attitudes or strong masculine ideologies.

The second explanation of the above findings arises from the possibility that the advantaged group feels threatened by a disadvantaged out-group because either or both groups perceive the existing status and power hierarchy as unstable (see Brown 2000; Reicher et al. 2010; Tajfel and Turner 2004 [1986]). In the case of biological sex, group boundaries are largely impermeable, leaving women (the disadvantaged group) only socially creative strategies, such as evaluating the in-group on more flattering dimensions or redefining what in-group membership means to them. Women and men alike may find it

conceivable that the status hierarchy between the sexes can be changed. Due to lack of alternatives, this strategy may be very attractive to women, who strive for positive distinctiveness. On the flipside, acknowledging the existence of this strategy may pose a threat to men, which men counteract by using sexist discrimination (i.e., telling sexist jokes).

4 Sexist humor, rape proclivity, and victim blame

Relying on a social identity based intergroup interaction perspective, we now examine the evidence on sexist humor as a moderator of the relationship between sexist attitudes, rape proclivity and victim blame. As it is not possible to conduct ethical research testing actual sexually aggressive behavior, all studies reviewed below use self-report measures assessing participants' likelihood to rape. In keeping with Malamuth's (1981) definition of rape proclivity, we define rape proclivity here as "the relative likelihood to rape under various conditions that may or may not actually occur" (Malamuth 1981: 139).

This section expands Martineau's (1972) model on the social functions of humor from negative out-group attitudes to self-reports of potentially violent behaviors. The research conducted with reference to rape proclivity largely treats sexist jokes as moderators of the relationship between pre-existing sexist attitudes and rape proclivity. Arguably, the literature on the impact of sexist humor on rape proclivity and victim blame fits the social identity approach less well than the literatures on male in-group cohesion and sexual harassment. Therefore, we need to expand on some of the definitions used within the Social Identity Framework. To explain the findings below, we need to accept a definition of sexist attitudes as a form or consequence of high male in-group identification. In particular, we need to assume that in-group members who highly identify with their group are prone to conduct out-group discrimination. If sexist humor functions to increase in-group cohesion, helps to communicate in-group norms and amplifies out-group discrimination, then sexist men, as opposed to non-sexist men, should be more influenced by sexist jokes when reporting on their rape proclivity and victim blame.

4.1 Sexist humor as a moderator of rape proclivity and victim blame

Recent research (Romero-Sánchez et al. 2010; Thomae and Viki 2013, Viki et al. 2007) indicates that the combined effects of sexist attitudes and sexist jokes may

be devastating. Hostile sexism has been found to predict self-reported rape proclivity in men, particularly in response to acquaintance rape scenarios (Abrams et al. 2003; Masser et al. 2006; Viki et al. 2006). Benevolent sexism, in contrast, has been linked to increased levels of victim blame (Abrams et al. 2003; Viki and Abrams 2002). Four studies (Ryan and Kanjorski 1998; Romero-Sánchez et al. 2010; Thomae and Viki 2013; Viki et al. 2007) provide data on the relationship between sexist humor and rape proclivity.

Ryan and Kanjorski (1998) explored the relationships between rape attitudes, relationship aggression and enjoyment of sexist humor. Although correlational in nature, Ryan and Kanjorski (1998) demonstrate clear links between men's enjoyment of sexist humor and their rape myth acceptance, self-reported likelihood of forcing sex and psychological, physical and sexual relationship aggression. The higher the men in the sample rated the funniness of ten sexist jokes, the higher were their self-reported rape attitudes and relationship aggression.

Using quasi-experimental designs, Viki et al. (2007) and Thomae and Viki (2013, Study 1) replicated and extended this pattern of findings. Based on earlier research (Abrams et al. 2003; Masser et al. 2006), Viki et al. (2007) distinguished between stranger and acquaintance rapes. Participants exposed to sexist (as opposed to non-sexist) jokes and confronted with an acquaintance rape scenario (as opposed to a stranger rape scenario) indicated the highest rape proclivity, followed by participants exposed to non-sexist jokes and the acquaintance rape scenario. Viki et al. (2007) conclude that the likelihood of acquaintance rape can be amplified following the exposure to sexist jokes. Similarly, Thomae and Viki (2013) found a significant effect of joke condition on men's self-reported likelihood to commit acquaintance rape. Following the exposure to sexist jokes, these men reported higher rape proclivity than the men who were exposed to non-sexist jokes.

Romero-Sánchez et al. (2010) exposed male participants to either sexist or non-sexist jokes and measured their hostile and benevolent sexism, perceived funniness, and aversiveness of the jokes, and rape proclivity. Men exposed to sexist jokes reported significantly higher levels of rape proclivity than men exposed to non-sexist jokes. Furthermore, there was a significant interaction effect, such that aversiveness and rape proclivity correlated significantly and negatively in the sexist, but not in the non-sexist joke condition. The authors concluded that sexist humor only impacts on rape proclivity when the aversiveness shown in response to the sexist humor remains low.

Finally, Thomae and Viki (2013; Studies 2 and 3) established a significant interaction effect between men's hostile sexism and their exposure to sexist (as opposed to non-sexist) jokes on self-reported rape proclivity. In both studies

there was a stronger link between hostile sexism and rape proclivity in the sexist joke condition than in the non-sexist joke condition. These findings further corroborate the existence of an interaction between person variables (hostile sexism) and situational variables (sexist jokes) and their combined impact on self-reported rape proclivity.

The exposure to sexist jokes also encourages victim blame. Viki et al. (2007) demonstrated that men reported the highest levels of victim blame for an acquaintance rape victim (as opposed to stranger rape victim) following the exposure to sexist (as opposed to non-sexist) jokes. Moreover, the men in this experimental condition perceived the seriousness of the rape as lower than the men in all other experimental conditions and recommend the lowest number of years for the perpetrator in a prison sentence.

4.2 Summary

This section focused on the interaction of person variables (hostile and benevolent sexism) and situational variables (sexist jokes) on self-report measures of male rape proclivity. In line with Martineau's (1972) model on the social functions of humor and the social identity approach (Tajfel and Turner 2004 [1986]), we demonstrated that sexist humor can function to not only belittle or denigrate the out-group but also as a tool for social control via self-reported inclinations to commit sexual violence against the out-group. This latter interpretation of the literature extends Martineau's model as well as the idea of disparagement humor as a releaser of prejudice (Ford and Ferguson 2004; Woodzicka and Ford 2010): Pre-existing prejudice in combination with hostile humor can conspire to have maximum negative impact on women as the disparaged out-group.

Brown (2000) points out that if the intergroup status hierarchy appears unstable, highly identified group members often respond with heightened intergroup differentiation, discrimination and intergroup conflict. If we interpret high levels of sexist ideology as a form of, or related to, in-group identification, we can further our understanding of the above findings using the Social Identity Approach: The intergroup context interacts with in-group identification to a point at which personal and situational variables conspire to release hostile responses against the out-group. As Reicher et al. (2010) points out, the social context shapes the expression of social identities. In line with Malamuth's (1981) definition of rape proclivity, the context presented by the experimental rape vignettes may have allowed expressions of intergroup hostility, particularly in the light of anonymity and lack of repercussions.

5 Future directions

In this paper, we reviewed the literature on sexist humor in the light of Martineau's (1972) model on the social functions of humor and the Social Identity Approach. We particularly focused on sexist humor as a predictor of male in-group cohesion, as an outcome in the context of sexual harassment and as a moderator of the relationship between sexist humor and rape proclivity/victim blame. Each of these literatures appears to use its own research paradigm and the literatures do not seem to draw much upon one another. This final section of the paper therefore makes recommendations for future research, including concrete suggestions on how to test new hypotheses.

Firstly, the evidence on sexist humor as a predictor of in-group cohesion seems to stem from a largely qualitative paradigm. While Lyman (1987) reports on data from a group interview, Kehily and Nayak (1997) use ethnographic evidence to support their ideas. One problem of this literature is that qualitative approaches do not permit drawing firm conclusions about the direction of the causal link between sexist humor and in-group cohesion. Even though we argued here that sexist humor predicts in-group cohesion, it is conceivable that high in-group cohesion leads to higher enjoyment and more frequent use of humor disparaging the out-group.

There are several ways to clarify this question, all of which involve obtaining experimental evidence. Based on the literature review above, we hypothesize that men exposed to sexist humor will show higher positive distinctiveness, lower male in-group threat, and higher in-group cohesion than men exposed to non-sexist humor. In an experimental setting, participants could be randomly assigned to be exposed to sexist or non-sexist humor, followed by measures of positive distinctiveness, male in-group threat and male in-group cohesion. Alternatively, varying in-group cohesion and allowing participants a choice of sexist and non-sexist jokes to send to a female confederate would test the opposite causal link. Both experiments can be further expanded by assessing pre-existing sexist attitudes, such as Ambivalent Sexism (Glick and Fiske 2011).

Secondly, there is some direct evidence on sexist humor as an outcome of in-group threat and in-group norms. The literature we reviewed here used experimental designs and usually operationalized sexual harassment based on the Computer Harassment Paradigm, which naturally classifies sexist humor as the dependent variable. This literature can benefit from triangulation using qualitative methodology. For example, interviewing participants following the experimental procedure would provide valuable insights into their reasoning and justification for sending (or not sending) sexist jokes. An even more

ecologically valid way of examining sexual harassment via sexist jokes is to interview men on conditions under which they would be inclined to make sexist jokes. We can then ask which functions sexist humor serves men in these situations and compare their answers with predictions from the Social Identity Approach.

Thirdly, we reviewed the evidence on sexist humor as a moderator of the relationship between sexist attitudes and rape proclivity. This section was least suitable for a social identity interpretation and none of the studies explicitly included social identity ideas in their theoretical rationale. Therefore, our assumptions above are largely speculative. None of the above studies have investigated the impact of in-group norms, in-group threat and the perceived stability and legitimacy of the intergroup hierarchy on rape proclivity and victim blame. To close this gap in the literature, experimental research could vary in-group threat, in-group norms, perceived stability and legitimacy of the intergroup hierarchy and sexist (as opposed to non-sexist) humor and measure their impact on rape proclivity and victim blame.

Lastly, this paper did not include a review of the literature on women's reactions to sexist humor. We feel that more experimental work is needed on this topic. As Woodzicka and Ford (2010) point out, not much literature exists on women's reactions to intergroup discrimination and harassment and we know even less about how men react to the responses of female humor targets. Once such evidence has been established, an emergent research focus should be on ways of counteracting the acceptability, occurrence and effects of sexist humor. Such research may include the development of educational programs, anti-harassment training, and anti-bullying training, as well as evaluating their short- and long-term effectiveness when implemented.

5.1 Summary and conclusions

In this article, we reviewed the evidence on the way sexist humor functions a) as predictor of male in-group cohesion, b) as an outcome in the form of sexual harassment and c) as a moderator of the relationship between sexist attitudes and rape proclivity. Focusing on sex as an intergroup context, we argued that sexist humor can serve men to establish positive distinctiveness through intergroup comparisons and reduce male in-group threat. Moreover, sexist humor can be a result of adherence to in-group norms and a perceived instability or illegitimacy of the intergroup hierarchy.

Overall, the literatures on sexist humor as a form of strengthening in-group bonds and sexist humor as a form of sexual harassment fit well within the tenets

of the Social Identity Approach. Both literatures support the idea that sexist humor is used simultaneously to enhance in-group cohesion and to denigrate the out-group. In contrast, the literature on sexist humour as a moderator of the relationship between sexist attitudes and rape proclivity/victim blame fits the Social Identity Framework less well. It does, however, extent Martineau's claim that disparagement humor can introduce or foster hostile disposition toward the out-group, demonstrating that disparagement humor can amplify aggressive behavioral tendencies in intergroup contexts.

This paper discussed sexist humor as a social lubricant for the male in-group and as a social 'abrasive' in intergroup relations between women and men. We hope this paper will stimulate new research, allowing for more coherent links between the literatures on sexist humor and its role in male in-group bonding, sexual harassment, rape proclivity and victim blame.

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Bionotes

Manuela Thomae

Manuela Thomae is a Lecturer in Psychology at the University of Winchester. Her research focuses on the replication of WEIRD research findings in non-WEIRD contexts, intergroup contact, ambivalent sexism and sexist humor.

Afroditi Pina

Afroditi Pina is a Lecturer in Forensic Psychology at the Centre of Research and Education in Forensic Psychology (CORE-FP) at the University of Kent. Her areas of expertise are sexual and cyber-harassment perpetrators and victims.