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# Sex of Subject and Gender Identity as Factors in Humor Appreciation

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Appreciation of cartoon humor was examined in male and female college students who had been categorized into one of four gender identity groups (masculine, feminine, androgynous, undifferentiated) on the basis of Bem's Sex Role Inventory Results indicated that males preferred sexual humor more than absurd humor, while females showed the reverse pattern Furthermore, gender identity was related to humor appreciation only for females While feminine females preferred absurd humor more than sexual humor, masculine and androgynous females were more appreciative of sexual humor Finally, masculine, feminine, and undifferentiated males, as well as masculine and androgynous females, showed greater appreciation of sexual humor which portrayed females, as opposed to males, as the sex object or brunt of the joke

In the past two decades psychologists have shown an increasing interest in the study of humor, particularly in the area of sex differences. Research has indicated that males and females react differently to humor. Males often show an independence between their overt, public expression of humor appreciation (mirth) and their private, evaluative response to humor stimuli (funniness ratings), whereas for females there exists a greater interdependence between these behavioral measures (Cupchik & Leventhal, 1974, Leventhal & Mace, 1970). Further, males have been found to appreciate sexual (Groch, 1974, Malpass & Fitzpatrick, 1959, Terry & Ertel, 1974) and aggressive humor (Groch, 1974, Landis & Ross, 1933) more than females, while the reverse pattern has been noted for absurd humor (Groch, 1974, Landis & Ross, 1933, Terry & Ertel, 1974). Males, in comparison to females, also have been reported to produce

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significantly funnier captions to stimuli containing sexual and aggressive themes, but not neutral themes (Brodzinsky & Rubien, 1976)

To date, most of the research in the area of humor has dealt with the sex differences only in terms of biological sex. An alternative approach to sex differences, one that is gaining considerable acceptance in the psychological literature at large, is individuals' psychological sex or gender identity, that is, how individuals perceive themselves in terms of traditional male and female roles

While traditional conceptions of masculinity and femininity have been viewed as endpoints along a single continuum, with an individual being sex typed as either masculine or feminine, more recent research has indicated that this is not necessarily the case Bem (1974, 1977), in particular, has strongly criticized such a narrow view of gender identity, and has developed a scale for independently measuring masculinity and femininity within an individual Bem's work is based on the assumption that an individual's gender identity represents a relative balance of "masculine" and "feminine" characteristics. Thus, individuals, regardless of biological sex, are said to be sex typed as masculine when they attribute to themselves a significantly larger number of masculine than feminine traits, while the reverse is true for individuals sex typed as feminine. In contrast, many individuals attribute both masculine and feminine characteristics to themselves. Such individuals are termed "androgynous" Bem (1977) also has described a fourth group of individuals, termed "undifferentiated," who tend not to strongly attribute either masculine or feminine characteristics to themselves

With regard to humor, a series of interesting questions can be raised concerning humor appreciation in individuals from various gender identity groups. For example, is there a correspondence between the humor preference patterns of biological males and females and their gender identity counterparts. In other words, will masculine-typed individuals prefer sexual over nonsexual humor, and feminine-typed individuals the reverse pattern? Furthermore, what about psychologically androgynous and undifferentiated persons? Bem (1975) has suggested that androgynous individuals are more adaptable than individuals from other gender identity groups in that the former are able to adopt either masculine or feminine behavior so as to fit the situation. If this is the case, one might expect androgynous individuals to show little differentiation in their humor appreciation, that is, they may adapt to the humor situation by showing appreciation for both sexual and nonsexual humor

In addition to the above questions, the present study also focused on the content of humor stimuli as a factor in humor appreciation. Past research has indicated that greater appreciation of sexual and aggressive humor by males than females may be restricted to sexist humor. For example, Chapman and Gadfield (1976) asked males and females to rate a series of cartoons that contained a variety of sexual and nonsexual themes. Males were found to prefer

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sexual humor more than females only when the humor was derogatory toward women and/or when women were treated as a sex object In contrast, no sex differences were observed for sexual humor which was nonsexist Similarly, Priest and Wilhelm (1974) reported that male undergraduates rated antifemale hostility jokes funnier than antimale hostility jokes, while the reverse was noted for female undergraduates. On the other hand, Losco and Epstein (1975) reported that both male and female subjects preferred cartoons in which the

brunt of the joke was a female rather than a male (see also Cantor, 1976)

Given the rather narrow focus of past research on sex differences in humor appreciation, as well as the recent concern with the importance of thematic content of humor stimuli, the present study was designed to compare biological and psychological sex as factors in appreciation of various forms of humor. In order to accomplish this goal, male and female undergraduates from four gender identity categories were presented with a series of cartoons varying in content so that one-third of the stimuli contained sexual themes with the female as the brunt of the joke, one-third contained sexual themes with the male as the brunt of the joke, and one-third contained absurd themes

#### **METHOD**

#### Subjects

One hundred sixty male and female undergraduate students from lower level psychology courses were pretested in large groups using the Bem Sex Role Inventory (Bem, 1974) On the basis of their scores, individuals were placed into one of four gender identity categories 46 in the masculine group, 47 in the feminine group, 34 in the androgynous group, and 33 in the undifferentiated group Of those pretested, a total of 96 subjects, 12 males and 12 females from each of the four gender identity groups, were chosen to participate in the study Because of scheduling problems, however, 1 female in the masculine group and 4 males in the undifferentiated group could not participate, thus reducing the subject sample to 91 individuals. All subjects received course credit for participating in the study

#### Materials

Bem Sex Role Inventory Bem's inventory (1974) is a paper-and-pencil scale consisting of 60 personality characteristics (20 masculine, 20 feminine, 20 neutral) developed to measure gender identity. A person is asked to indicate on

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a scale of 1 (never, or almost never true) to 7 (always, or almost always true) how well each characteristic describes himself or herself For each individual a mean masculine and feminine score is calculated. To determine gender category placement, a median split is computed for all masculine and feminine scores independently. Individuals are sex typed as masculine if their masculine score is above the median and their feminine score is below the median. On the other hand, individuals are sex typed as feminine if their masculine score is below the median and their feminine score is above the median. Finally, individuals are considered androgynous if both scores are above the median, and undifferentiated if both scores are below the median. In the present study, subjects' masculine and feminine median scores were 4.87 and 4.83, respectively. These scores are quite similar to those reported by Bem (1974, 1977).

In light of the recent controversy regarding the measurement of gender identity (Bem, 1977, Heilbrun, 1976, Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1975, Strahan, 1975), it should be pointed out that originally Bem suggested categorizing subjects on her scale by means of a t ratio for the difference between a person's feminine and masculine scores Accordingly, a significant positive tscore signified a feminine gender identity, and a significant negative t score signified a masculine gender identity Furthermore, the closer a person's t score was to zero, the more the person was considered to be androgynous This procedure, however, did not distinguish between high-high scoring individuals (who strongly attributed both masculine and feminine characteristics to themselves) and low-low scoring individuals (who tended not to attribute either masculine or feminine traits to themselves) Recently, Bem (1977) has agreed with her critics that the distinction between high-high and low-low scorers is warranted, and that only the former individuals should be considered androgynous, while the latter group is best characterized as undifferentiated with respect to gender identity We have adopted the double median split procedure instead of the t ratio for determining gender category placement as recommended by Bem (1977)

Humor Stumula After careful analysis of a large number of cartoons from contemporary books and magazines, a total of 48 cartoons were initially selected by the first two authors. These stimuli were then presented to 10 judges for placement into one of four categories sexual theme, with a male as "sex object" or brunt of the joke (SM), sexual theme, with a female as "sex object" or brunt of the joke (SF), absurd theme (AB), or uncertain Six cartoons were chosen from each of the first three categories to be test stimuli. In order for a cartoon to be selected, no more than one judge could disagree on its placement. Of the cartoons selected, there was 96% agreement among judges for category placement. Three cartoons from the uncertain category also were included as warmup stimuli. The 21 cartoons were presented in a looseleaf notebook, one cartoon per page. The 3 warm-up cartoons were presented first, followed by the 18 test stimuli arranged in one constant randomized order, with the constraint that no two cartoons from the same category follow one another.

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#### **Procedure**

Subjects were presented with the humor stimuli in an individual testing session by the second author, who at the time was unaware of subjects' gender identity status. Subjects were brought into a small room and seated at a table facing a one-way mirror that was partly covered. The notebook containing the humor stimuli was placed on a small stand in front of the subject. At this point, the experimenter explained that she was interested in finding out what kind of humor different people enjoy, and how they respond physiologically to humor Subjects were told that a measure of pulse rate would be taken by a device attached to their neck. Actually, the device was a disguised throat microphone connected to an amplification system in an adjoining room. The purpose of this minor deception was to allow the experimenter to monitor low levels of chuckling and laughter (part of a mirth scale) without the subject feeling uncomfortable because of the obvious presence of a microphone

After explaining the purpose of the "monitoring device," and attaching it to the subject's neck, the experimenter explained that the subject would be rating a series of cartoons on two 5-point scales funniness (1 = not funny, 5 = extremely funny) and familiarity (1 = not at all familiar, 5 = extremely familiar) In addition to these measures, the experimenter also rated subject's spontaneous mirth to each cartoon through the one-way mirror (1 = blank expression, 2 = slight smile, 3 = full smile, 4 = chuckling or laughter) Interrater reliability for mirth between the first two authors was 88%

Before leaving the testing room, the experimenter asked the subject to carefully read a separate set of instructions on the first page of the notebook. These written instructions reiterated the verbal instructions, and were used primarily to create enough time to allow the experimenter to get into the adjoining room before the subject began rating the cartoons. The instructions emphasized that the experimenter would be monitoring pulse rate in the other room, and could not tell when the subject began or finished rating the cartoons. Therefore, the subject was asked to push a buzzer located on the table to signal the experimenter when he/she began and finished rating the stimuli. Once again, this deception was adopted to deter any suspicion on the part of subjects that they were being observed, and to ensure relatively natural responding. On the basis of subjects' remarks during a debriefing session, both deceptions appeared to have accomplished their purpose

#### **RESULTS**

#### Cartoon Familiarity

Since group differences in humor appreciation might be affected by differential familiarity with the cartoons, a preliminary 2 (Sex) X 4 (Gender Identity)

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Table I Mean Familiarity Score as a Function of Subject and Cartoon Content

	SM	SF	AB	Total
Males	1 63	1 65	1 27	1 52
Females	1 53	1 51	1 51	1 52
Total	1 58	1 58	1 39	

 $\times$  3 (Cartoon Type) analysis of variance with repeated measures on the latter variable was performed on the cartoon familiarity data. The main effect for Cartoon Type and the Sex  $\times$  Cartoon Type interaction were both significant, F(2, 166) = 9.03, p < 001, F(2, 166) = 8.91, p < 001, respectively. Table I indicates that while females were equally familiar with all cartoon categories, males were more familiar with the two sexual categories (SM and SF) than the absurd category (AB) (p < 01). Furthermore, while females were significantly more familiar with absurd cartoons than males (p < 05), a trend in the opposite direction was noted for sexual cartoons <sup>2</sup>

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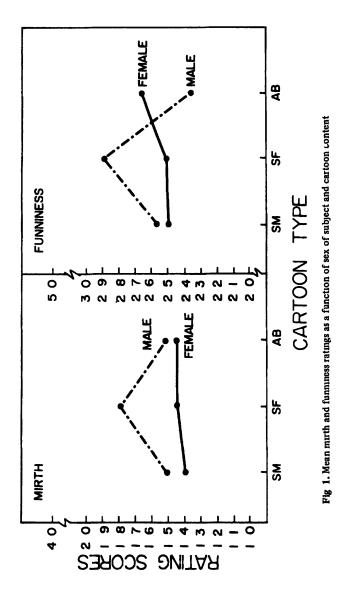
Separate 2 (Sex)  $\times$  3 (Cartoon Type) repeated measures analyses of covariance were computed for the mirth and funniness rating data. The covariate was subjects' familiarity scores for each cartoon type

For the mirth data, the main effect for Sex showed a trend toward significance, F(1, 88) = 3 47, p < 07, indicating that males  $(M = 1 \ 61)$  tended to smile and laugh more than females  $(M = 1 \ 43)$  to the humor stimuli. The main effect for Cartoon Type was also significant,  $F(2, 177) = 4 \ 85$ , p < 01. Overall, subjects preferred SF cartoons  $(M = 1 \ 62)$  more than either SM  $(M = 1 \ 46)$  or AB (M = 1.49) cartoons. These effects were qualified, however, by a significant Sex X Cartoon Type interaction,  $F(2, 177) = 3 \ 79$ , p < 05. Inspection of Figure 1 shows that the differential mirth response to the various cartoon types was found only for males (p < 05). Females produced about the same level of mirth to all cartoon categories. In addition, males showed significantly greater mirth than females for SF cartoons (p < 05), but not for SM or AB cartoons

For the funniness rating data, only the main effect for Cartoon Type and the Sex  $\times$  Cartoon Type interaction were significant, F(1, 88) = 310, p < 05, F(2, 177) = 704, p < 002, respectively. The main effect for Cartoon Type

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Simple effects tests and Newman-Keuls tests were used throughout the data analysis to test for specific group differences





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paralleled the findings for the mirth data in that SF cartoons (M=271) were appreciated more than either SM (M=254) or AB (M=251) cartoons In contrast, the Sex X Cartoon Type interaction yielded somewhat different results for the funniness rating as opposed to the mirth data (see Figure 1) Females showed no differences in mirth for the different cartoon categories, but they tended to rate AB cartoons as funnier than either SM or SF cartoons (p < 10) Males rated SF cartoons funnier than SM cartoons, which they rated funnier than AB cartoons (p < 01) Furthermore, while males rated SF cartoons higher in funniness than females (p < 05), the reverse pattern was noted for AB cartoons (p < 05) No sex differences were found for SM cartoons.

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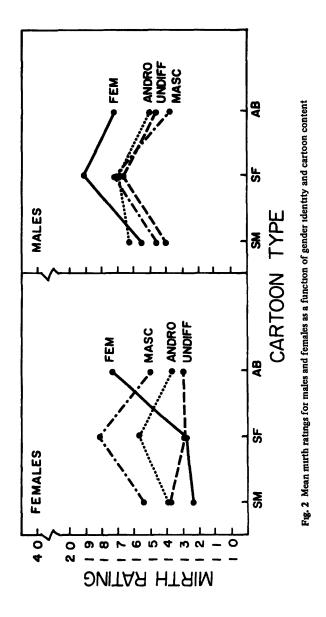
In order to determine whether subjects from the various gender identity groups displayed differential humor appreciation, a 4 (Gender Identity)  $\times$  3 (Cartoon Type) repeated measures analysis of covariance was computed for both the mirth and funniness rating data Once again, the covariate was subjects' familiarity scores for each cartoon category. These analyses were performed separately for males and females, however, since an overall analysis of covariance which included Sex as a factor tended to obscure the different pattern of results found for the two sexes. Furthermore, since the mirth and funniness rating data produced the same results, only the mirth data will be presented

Although the main effect for Gender Identity was not significant for either sex, the Gender Identity  $\times$  Cartoon Type interaction was significant for females, F(6, 85) = 3 34, p < 01, but not for males Figure 2 indicates that masculine and androgynous females generally showed the same pattern of cartoon preference. Both groups displayed significantly greater mirth to SF than SM or AB cartoons (p < 05) In contrast, feminine females showed greater mirth to AB cartoons than to either category of sexual humor (p < 01) No differences in mirth were noted for undifferentiated females' responses to the various cartoon categories For males, all gender identity groups showed essentially the same humor preference pattern, that is, they appreciated SF cartoons the most, with little difference between SM and AB cartoons Androgynous males, however, were the only subjects who displayed the same level of mirth to SM and SF cartoons

Simple effects tests also showed that for females there were differences in the amount of mirth displayed by the gender identity groups for the various cartoon themes. For SM cartoons, masculine females produced significantly greater mirth than feminine females (p < 05), androgynous and undifferentiated females fell between these groups, but were not different from them Masculine and androgynous females also showed greater mirth than feminine

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and undifferentiated for SF cartoons (p < 05) Finally, feminine females displayed higher levels of mirth than androgynous and undifferentiated females for AB cartoons (p < 05), while masculine females fell between these groups, but did not differ from them

For male subjects, the only significant difference among gender identity groups was found for AB cartoons (see Figure 2) Feminine males showed greater mirth to these stimuli than masculine males (p < 05)

#### DISCUSSION

Several important findings emerged from the present study First, in line with past research (Groch, 1974, Landis & Ross, 1933, Malpass & Fitzpatrick, 1959, Terry & Ertel, 1974), biological males and females displayed different patterns of humor preference. Males rated sexual humor funnier than absurd humor, whereas the reverse pattern was found for females Furthermore, males preferred sexual humor more than females (at least when the brunt of the joke was a female), while females rated absurd humor funnier than males

In the past, sex differences in humor appreciation and production have been explained in terms of different socialization patterns for males and females (Brodzinsky & Rightmyer, 1980, Brodzinsky & Rubien, 1976, Zippin, 1966) It has been suggested that females have less exposure to materials that are overtly sexual Consequently, they have been assumed to be less knowledgeable, less comfortable, and possibly more conflict ridden in respect to sexuality. Females would be expected to show decreased appreciation of sexual humor in comparison to males This explanation, however, appears stereotypic and simplistic in light of the results for the gender identity data. Only the feminine females showed the "typical" female humor preference pattern, that is, greater appreciation of absurd than sexual humor In contrast, masculine and androgynous females were comfortable with, and were able to enjoy, sexual humor to the same extent as their male counterparts. Moreover, these females' pattern of humor preference was the same as that of the vast majority of biological males, that is, greater appreciation of SF than SM or AB cartoons Finally, undifferentiated females not only showed the lowest overall response but also were the only subjects who did not display a differential preference for the cartoon categories.

This pattern of results suggests a more complicated picture of humor appreciation in females than has been found in past research. The problem has been that past researchers have treated females (and males) as a unitary group composed of individuals assumed to have experienced the same general pattern of socialization and, hence, developed essentially the same sexual identity. This assumption is invalid, as Bem's research has clearly shown (Bem, 1974, 1975,

1977, Bem & Lenney, 1976, Bem, Martyna, & Watson, 1976) Individuals, whether female or male, are not only capable of developing gender identities congruent with their biological sex but are also capable of becoming cross-sextyped, as well as attributing both (or neither) masculine and feminine traits to themselves (androgynous and undifferentiated sex typing, respectively) Moreover, the present study indicates that the different gender identity patterns developed by females are associated with quite different patterns of humor preference. Thus, it is clear that for females, psychological sex is a more sensitive index of humor appreciation than biological sex.

The pattern of results for males, on the other hand, is clearly different All four gender identity groups displayed essentially the same humor preference pattern (i.e., greater appreciation of SF than either SM or AB cartoons), the only exception being the androgynous group which showed no difference in appreciation of SM and SF stimuli Furthermore, with the exception of greater mirth by feminine, in comparison to masculine, males in response to AB cartoons, there were no differences for males among gender identity groups in response to the various cartoon categories

The differential influence of gender for males and females is difficult to explain Nevertheless, two possible explanations can be suggested First, if it is true that males, regardless of gender identity, are more often exposed to sexual humor and more often use it, then they may become more responsive to it. This follows from Zajonc's (1968) "mere exposure" hypothesis, which suggests that familiarity breeds liking. In other words, society structures the experience of males in a way that - regardless of their private feelings of sexual identity they quite often come in contact with sexual humor (most likely through contact with other male friends and co-workers) and, as a result of familiarity with this form of humor, come to appreciate it Females' opportunity for exposure to sexual humor is less likely, since society generally defines this form of humor as "masculine" Consequently, females who adopt traditional feminine sex-role attitudes and behavior would be less likely to seek out, use, and respond to sexual humor Masculine females, however, might be more likely to adapt to crosssex attitudes and behavior, and hence seek out, become familiar with, and appreciate sexual humor Furthermore, the increased appreciation of sexual humor by androgynous females may simply reflect their greater adaptability to task demands (Bem, 1975, Bem & Lenney, 1976)

An alternative explanation, however, at least for the behavior of males, concerns the nature of the subject-experimenter interaction. The experimenter in the present study was an attractive undergraduate female who behaved in a friendly, nonflirtatious manner. It is possible that male subjects, regardless of gender identity, were indirectly expressing their interest in the experimenter by means of increased mirth and high funniness ratings to sexual cartoons, particularly cartoons in which a female was portrayed as a sex object or brunt of the

joke This explanation is consistent with data reported by Davis and Farina (1970), who also found that male undergraduates communicated their sexual interest to an attractive female experimenter by selectively responding to sexual rather than nonsexual humor. If the present interpretation is correct, then considerable rethinking of the sex difference literature with respect to humor is needed. Few researchers have bothered to consider the potential influence of sex and demeanor of the experimenter as possible factors determining the humor response of subjects. Yet it may be that one cannot dismiss the social context of the experimental setting as a factor contributing to the nature of the dependent variable. In view of this possibility, future researchers need to become more sensitive to the potential communicative function served by different types of humor, and to devise procedures that either control for or eliminate this factor within the experimental setting.

The results of the present study also indicated an antifemale bias in humor appreciation for masculine, feminine, and undifferentiated males, as well as for masculine and androgynous females. In other words, the majority of subjects preferred sexual humor portraying females, as opposed to males, as the sex object or brunt of the joke This finding is congruent with data reported by Losco and Epstein (1975) and Cantor (1976) While Cantor (1976) attempted to explain this result in terms of societal attitudes concerning female competency, as well as cultural expectations about the appropriateness of the use of disparagement humor by males versus females, to date no empirical data, including Cantor's, shed light on the meaning of this phenomenon Furthermore, one cannot dismiss the possibility that the SF cartoons in this study (as well as in other studies) were simply funnier than the other humor stimuli No study to date has held sexual humor content constant while varying the object (sex) of disparagement (similar to the procedure used by Cantor) Only this type of manipulation can ensure that differences between male versus female disparagement humor are a function of the sex being disparaged and not a function of extraneous stimulus factors.

Finally, it is important to note that even if the main effect for cartoon type in the present study were due to differences in the initial quality of the humor stimuli, this would not diminish the importance of the effect found for gender identity among females. In fact, quite the opposite is true. The significant interaction between gender identity and cartoon type for females indicates a pattern of humor appreciation that cannot be explained by initial differences in cartoon funniness.

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