

From the Dumb Blonde to the Demonized Mother-in-Law:
How Humor Preserves the Status Quo*

RC Morris

Department of Sociology
Weber State University
3850 University Circle
Ogden, Utah 84408

robvox@gmail.com

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Abstract

This study was inspired by the overabundance of comedy that pokes fun at women's words, women's actions, or the female experience in general. Some sociologists have considered the persuasive function of humor as well as its ability to reflect societal concerns and expectations, but much less attention has been given to the ways in which humor serves as a medium for maintaining gender stereotypes. In this research, we attempt to explore the intricacies of two archetypal gender jokes: blonde jokes and mother-in-law jokes. Toward this end, we conducted an Internet search of comedic websites and then analyzed jokes depicting these two types of women. An "evil" mother-in-law caricature and a "dumb" blond representation categorically emerged during the analysis. More importantly, additional themes surfaced, all of which cast female blondes and mothers-in-law in a harsh and rather unforgiving light, typically portraying them as socially handicapped or psychologically flawed. We argue that these seemingly innocuous one-liners perpetuate age-old, and predominantly unflattering, myths about women. A continued study of humor, and the impact that it has on individuals' perceptions of men and women, is needed to more fully understand the implications of gendered jokes.

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Perceptions of gender, specifically what it is to be male or female in society, have undergone tremendous change in recent decades. Great movement towards gender equality has begun and in many cases been successful; however, a faction of gender typecasting survives. Humor, or more accurately, gendered humor, exists in contemporary society as a means by which gender stereotyping may be perpetuated and unequal gender relations preserved. While progress toward gender-inclusive language (e.g., police officer, flight attendant) may be evident, contemporary American comedic culture continues to use language as a tool to uphold gender stereotypes, frequently relying on jokes expressing antiquated notions of femininity and femaleness. Taken independently, each joke may appear inconsequential or rather innocuous, but when analyzed collectively, the body of gendered humor works to suppress flexibility and growth in our conceptions of gender.

Unfortunately, there is a noticeable lack of research dedicated to the study of cultural and gender-specific humor. While a small amount of literature has acknowledged the importance of humor, most concentrate on the theory and philosophy of humor rather than the social implications of certain types of comedy. Arguably, as sociologists, we have been remiss to ignore the subtle, but powerful force of humor. Humor is a representative method of channeling cultural meanings about gender and cultural expectations for each gender. Humor, therefore, is a pathway for communicating and legitimating outdated or stereotypical depictions of males and females.

Simply, humor is a tool or form of language. Symbolically, humor conveys messages about social expectations, interactions, and interpretations. In some ways, humor relays the ethos of the times. The transmission of the current social condition takes place through the mediums of television programming, films, books, comic strips, political cartoons, jokes, the Internet, and more. The most banal level - word of mouth - is also a fundamental way in which we use humor to convey messages about the social environment. Importantly, to be considered humorous, the joke must be mutually understood and deemed funny by both the teller and the listener. As Basso (1979: 67-76) states, "joking situations require that those present play along with jokers" as they extort certain "individuals as the butt of the jokes. This is affected through a reliance on preexisting relations of goodwill between the two parties involved." In the case of jokes that communicate gender and the implied cultural expectations conveyed in its message this gives a pretense on which to justify the telling of the joke. Arguing that the humor does no real harm because there is an already present relationship of goodwill. Indeed, as Goffman (1959) pointed out, there are times when a working consensus may be developed, and words and ideas may come to hold similar meaning amongst individuals. Thus, jokes may serve as a conduit for comprehending general sentiments surrounding social roles or social occurrences, particularly as they pertain to gender.

It is important to note that a parody on gender roles can only be done harmlessly if some preexisting condition of goodwill and equality exists. This supposed equality then becomes the springboard or safety net to justify the joke telling. The jokes and their themes thereby emerge dramatizing conceptions of what is wrong and inappropriate, but doing so without the "safety net" in place.

Description of Research

The intent of this research was to identify how humor reflects the greater social climate of gender, maintains stereotypical notions of femininity, and potentially perpetuates gender inequality. Because the literature is generally devoid of scholarly research on gendered humor, the project was exploratory in design. Particularly, we were interested in documenting the emergent themes in jokes and producing a descriptive analysis for the audience.

Initially, we considered numerous sources of humor (e.g., joke books, films) in order to gain a sense of how to proceed with the study. Eventually it became clear that the most efficient way to access this particular brand of humor was through the Internet. We accessed entire joke databases via the Internet, and numerous search tools helped us to obtain gender-specific humor. Though jokes about women, womanhood, or women's roles were numerous, eventually the data was narrowed and the scope of the paper focused to two dominant genres of gendered jokes: blonde jokes and mother-in-law jokes. These two forms of female identity had noticeably more jokes than other specific female identities (such as wife, daughter, mother, girlfriend, or stewardess).

Some websites were devoted exclusively to blonde or mother-in-law jokes, others had a subsection devoted to these jokes, and still others had just one or two jokes relevant to our analysis. Repetition of jokes across the websites was high, and a saturation point was reached early. In the end, we assembled a sample of 200 dumb blonde jokes and a sample of 163 mother-in-law jokes, stemming from 45 Internet websites.

The Analysis

The predominant themes in blonde jokes and mother-in-law jokes is discussed below. Blonde's and mothers-in-law appear to have three things in common in the world of jokes. First, the character of both females is attacked with humor. Second, the jokes accentuate the appearance of each female type. Third, some form of harm is caused by or befalls the woman in the joke. A fourth category is unique to each female identity. Humor about mothers-in-law often highlights the physical or emotional distance between she and others (typically her son-in-law) while humor about blonde's frequently centers around the topic of intelligence (or lack thereof). The remainder of this paper explores each of these themes in further detail.

Female Character

The character of both blonde's and mothers-in-law is relentlessly questioned and attacked in comedy. Her temperament, personality, and moral fiber all serve as fodder for comedy. In jokes looked at the mother-in-law will hereafter be referred to as *MIL*, and the blonde simply as *B*.

MIL: My mother-in-law is a well balanced person. She's got a chip on **both** shoulders.

MIL: I find it interesting that if you rearrange the letters in the words "mother in law" you get the words "woman Hitler."

B: Q: Why was the blonde upset when she got her Driver's License?
A: Because she got an F in sex.

B: Q: What did the blonde say when asked if she'd ever been picked up by "the fuzz?"
A: "No. But I've been swung around by the tits."

Unquestionably, both jokes categories of gendered jokes depict women in an unattractive light. The humor device in the mother-in-law joke paints a picture of a

woman “out to get” those (understood male) towards which she bears any amount of animosity. The blonde jokes depict women as individuals of no intelligence who are blindly consumed with sex and her physical appearance.

Physical Appearance

The use of physical appearance to advance a punchline was found in both genres of gendered jokes. Notably, the context surrounding female physical appearance is highly different for blonde's and mothers-in-law. Yet similarly, each female type suffers criticisms about her appearance, either in her obsession with looks or her neglect of them.

B: Q: How do you drown a blonde?
A: Put a mirror at the bottom of the pool.

B: Q: How does a blonde commit suicide?
A: She gathers her clothes into a pile and jumps off the top story.

MIL: Last night the local peeping-tom knocked on my mother-in-law's door and asked her to shut her blinds.

MIL: My mother-in-law is a big woman. She got run over last week. The driver said he *did* have enough room to get around her, but wasn't sure that he had *enough* gas.

The blonde is depicted as excessively concerned with appearance, beauty, and fashion. mothers-in-law, on the other hand, are the epitome of ugliness in jokes. A woman so consumed with her own (actual or perceived) beauty is something to condemn, and another woman that is the polar opposite is also to be shunned. The mocked blonde with her exceptional grooming and the mother-in-law with her exceptional repugnance demonstrate the dichotomy laid before women: on the one hand a woman must somehow look beautiful on the other hand she must not need to work at this .

Harm

Themes of harm manifested in various ways throughout the analysis. In the case of the mother-in-law, sometimes harm is projected *from* the mother-in-law whereas other times it is projected *onto* the mother-in-law.

MIL: Q: What does a vampire and a mother-in-law have in common?

A: Other than fangs, nasty temperaments, an overbite and wanting to suck the life out of you, absolutely nothing.

MIL: A man finds a lamp, rubs it, and sure enough a genie appears. The genie tells the man he may have two wishes. He will get whatever two things he wishes, but whatever he gets his mother-in-law will get double of. The man thinks for awhile and then proclaims, “1) I’d like 10 million dollars, and 2) beat me half to death.”

In every joke referencing harm, the joke served to demean or deride the mother-in-law. Even in the cases where the mother-in-law is inflicting the harm, (e.g. in the first joke, “fangs, nasty temperaments, an overbite and [*ability*] to suck the life out of you...”) it is understood that a vampire, though powerful, is seen as an evil to be avoided.

Likening a mother-in-law to such a figure does not empower her, rather the advocating or authorizing this aggression does quite the opposite. Jokes such as these create an image of a mother-in-law that is malicious wicked and hated. The most dominant representation of the mother-in-law had some level of harm involving her character.

The use of humor advocating these views helps to sustain a climate of gender inequality and causes a great deal of harm to the group being portrayed. These jokes are trivializing a rampant and significant social problem. A problem that glorifies violence toward women as humorous. The findings in this joke category alone gives rise to great uneasiness and cause for serious reflection on whether this brand of humor is indeed harmful.

For blonde's, however, harm befalls her due to lack of foresight. Hence, the damage is her own fault.

B: Two blonde's were walking through the woods when one looked down and said "Oh, look at the deer tracks." The other blonde looks and says "Those aren't deer tracks, those are wolf tracks." "No. Those are deer tracks." They keep arguing, and arguing, and half an hour later, they were both killed by a train.

A prevalent construct in the jokes that furthers this degradation of female status is the blonde intelligence stigma.

Blonde Intelligence

Perhaps the most familiar joke type about women is the “dumb blonde” joke. Humor related to blonde’s apparent stupidity were the most popular of all blonde jokes studied.

DB: Q: What do you call 10 blondes standing ear to ear?
A: A wind tunnel.

DB: Q: How can you tell if a blonde's been using the computer?
A: There's white-out on the screen.

DB: Q: How can you tell if another blonde's been using the computer?
A: There's writing on the white-out

DB: Q: Why should blondes not be given coffee breaks?
A: It takes too long to retrain them.

The label “stupidity” attached to the blonde group helps justify the segregation of women. Moreover, humor like this fuels notions that women are less capable and complete than men.

Mothers-in-law and Distance

Numerous forms of distance surfaced in mother-in-law jokes. Physical distance (e.g., not wanting to touch her), social distance (e.g., not wanting her around), and

emotional distance (e.g., no feelings of fondness, affection, or love) emerged, sometimes all in the same joke.

MIL: Man: My mother-in-law and I were happy for about 25 years.
Friend: What changed?
Man: We met each other.

MIL: Q: What is the difference between outlaws and in-laws?
A: The outlaws are wanted.

MIL: Doctor: I am sorry, you only have a few months to live.
Man: Are you sure?
Doctor: I am afraid so.
Man: Well, I guess I better start packing to move.
Doctor: Move?
Man: Yes, if I am in fact going to die, I intend to move in with my mother-in-law.
Doctor: Why would you do that?
Man: That way the time will feel like an eternity.

Discussion

This work demonstrates how gender stereotypes and inequality is sustained in ways that may seem superficial, innocent, or harmless. For centuries, there has been a constant up-and-down struggling for equality. Struggle denotes an imbalance, and where such exists the relationship required by Keith Basso (1979) “a reliance on preexisting relations of goodwill between the two parties,” can not exist. On this basis the female character portrayed in these jokes is attacked to affect a continued imbalance of equality. Susan Seizer (1997) states, “comedians rely on the willingness of women to indulge their exaggerated portrayals of female sexuality as aggressively repressive, trusting the women to recognize that the jokes ultimately affirm conceptions of what is 'right' and proper by dramatizing conceptions of 'what' is wrong and inappropriate.”

The intended goal of this examination is to draw attention to the predominant belief that on an individual basis each joke is inconsequential and innocuous. This study demonstrates that when this social condition is analyzed collectively, it becomes evident that the body of gendered humor distinctly works to suppress flexibility and growth in our conceptions of gender. This is accomplished one joke at a time. To put it in the words of Sigmund Freud (1905) “The thought seeks to wrap itself in a joke...because this wrapping bribes our powers of criticism and confuses them. We are inclined to give the thought the benefit of what has pleased us in the form of the joke; and we are no longer inclined to find anything wrong that has given us enjoyment and so to spoil the source of a pleasure.”

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