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**Sexist humour and social identity: The role of sexist humour in men's ingroup cohesion,  
sexual harassment, rape proclivity and victim blame**

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**Abstract**

Jokes have been recognised 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 humour, using Martineau's (1972) model on the social functions of humour as well as Tajfel and Turner's (2004 [1986]) Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Turner et al.'s (1987) Self Categorisation Theory. Within these frameworks, we particularly focus on sex as an intergroup context and on the way sexist humour functions to a) enhance male ingroup cohesion (sexist humour as a predictor) b) serves as a form of sexual harassment (sexist humour as an outcome) and c) amplifies self-reported rape proclivity and victim blame (sexist humour as a moderator). The paper concludes by highlighting gaps in the existing literature and providing directions for future research.

**Key words:** Sexist humour, social identity approach, ingroup cohesion, sexual harassment, rape proclivity, victim blame

## **Sexist humour and social identity: The role of sexist humour in men's ingroup cohesion, sexual harassment, rape proclivity and victim blame**

### **1. Theoretical background**

In his seminal chapter, 'A Model of Social Functions of Humour', Martineau (1972) outlined a group-based theoretical model of the functions of humour. Martineau delineates the following variables which impact on these social functions: The individual or group initiating the humour (the actor), the audience or recipient of the humour, the target of the humour, the judgement of the humour (esteeming or disparaging) and the cultural context and the social positions of the involved parties. According to Martineau (1972), humour shapes human interactions in three different group settings: Intragroup situations, intergroup situations and intergroup interactions. This paper particularly focusses on intragroup situations and intergroup interactions. Intragroup humour is humour exchanged solely within the ingroup and can have either the ingroup or an outgroup as target. In contrast, intergroup humour impacts on the interaction between the groups.

Our emphasis here is on disparagement humour, a form of humour 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 humour, a form of disparagement humour which derogates and belittles women as a group (humour target), often initiated by men (actors). We will focus on intragroup situations, in which sexist humour strengthens the cohesion of the male ingroup at the expense of the female outgroup. We will also investigate the evidence with respect to intergroup interactions between women and men, where sexist humour is linked to hostile dispositions and negative behavioural tendencies towards women as the disparaged group. In Martineau's (1972) words, we will discuss sexist humour as a social 'lubricant' for the male ingroup 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 humour, the social identity approach can provide further theoretical justifications for these hypotheses, as well 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 humour serves for men, treating sexist humour as a predictor, an outcome and a moderator of intra- and intergroup behaviour.

Ferguson and Ford (2008) review the literature on disparagement humour, focussing 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 humour, 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 Categorisation Theory. Finally, we hope to widen the focus of this paper beyond positive distinctiveness, including other psychological mechanisms such as categorisation, 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 Categorisation Theory (SCT; Turner et al. 1987). SIT focusses on intergroup relations and on group members' attempts to obtain or maintain a positive social identity. SCT, in contrast, emphasises intragroup processes, explaining phenomena like group polarisation and cohesiveness via cognitive categorisation 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 behaviour disadvantaging outgroup 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 ingroup 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 humour. By allowing for social comparisons to relevant outgroups, disparagement humour can provide positive distinctiveness to the ingroup. In turn, re-establishing positive distinctiveness will allow the formerly threatened ingroup member to perceive the disparagement humour as funny and to enjoy it (Ferguson and Ford 2008).

Self Categorisation Theory (SCT) refines the cognitive components of SIT, focussing on categorisation processes. According to SCT, people tend to maximise differences between categories and minimise 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 depersonalisation and drives ingroup cohesion, conformity to ingroup norms, deindividuation and outgroup stereotyping. Disparagement humour 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 humour: Both theories predict that humour disparaging an outgroup a) serves to enhance the morale and cohesion of the ingroup and b) introduces or fosters a hostile disposition towards the outgroup. Biological sex can be defined as an ingroup, 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 focusses on the 'abrasive' impact sexist humour has on the treatment of women as the outgroup and the 'lubricating' functions of sexist humour for the male ingroup. Specifically, we will concentrate on the role of sexist humour in male ingroup cohesion, and outgroup discrimination including sexual harassment, self-reported rape proclivity and victim blame.

## **2. Sexist humour and ingroup 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 conceptualised as positive attitudes among ingroup members (e.g. Lott 1961) and as attraction between ingroup

members (e.g. Forsyth 1983). These definitions emphasise that cohesion is a process relevant to intragroup situations. Ingroup cohesion functions to facilitate the evaluation of intergroup situations, ingroup conformity, and communication, but also the expression of intergroup aggression (Hogg and Reid 2006; Tajfel 1982).

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

### *2.1. Sexist humour as a predictor of ingroup cohesion*

The idea of strengthening ingroup bonds by disparaging outgroups 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 ingroup favouritism 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 ingroup 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 humour in young men's school cultures. In line with SCT, these authors concluded that intragroup humorous exchanges assisted the male humour initiators in reinforcing their heterosexual masculine identities. Jokes helped these young men to establish a heterosexist status hierarchy, occasionally blurring the line between humour and harassment. These findings suggest that sexist humour can be used by men as a way of establishing (masculine) prototypicality, as well as behavioural norms, while simultaneously treating the targeted outgroup – women – as a homogeneous entity, to whom the male ingroup responded with negative attitudes disguised as humour.

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 humour, including sexist and racist humour, 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 humour 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 ingroup cohesion via the use of sexist humour.

## *2.2. Responses to sexist humour 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 humour 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) conceptualisation of sexist humour 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 humour 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 humour. 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 humour. Highly hostile sexist people were also less willing to donate



money to a women's organisation 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 humour, thereby consenting to the implied normative standard. Following the exposure to sexist humour, 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 humour as a 'releaser' of prejudice (Ford and Ferguson 2004; Woodzicka and Ford 2010). This 'releaser' function of sexist humour converges with Martineau's (1972) model and social identity theory: Disparagement of the outgroup establishes positive distinctiveness for the ingroup. If shared in an intergroup interaction, these sexist jokes may simultaneously undermine the female outgroup (see Martineau 1972) by threatening women's social identity as women. Sexist humour here then concurrently functions to 'lubricate' ingroup ties by fostering cohesion and reducing threat, and 'abrade' the relationship with the outgroup.

### 2.3. *Summary*

Under the definition of cohesion as ingroup attraction (see Lott 1961), the assumption that negative attitudes towards the outgroup constitute the flipside of ingroup cohesion seems sensible (but also see Brewer 1999). In the specific case of sexist humour, 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 & Turner 1979; Turner & Brown 1978). Viewing sexist humour as a form of intergroup discrimination helps to explain the relationship between feelings of threat, sexist attitudes and the use of sexist humour.

In the evidence reviewed here, men appear to also use sexist humour to maintain and strengthen the cohesion of the male ingroup. In parallel, this humour functions as a way of stereotyping women and fostering potential intergroup conflict (see Tajfel 1982). This evidence supports the ingroup bonding function of disparagement humour proposed by

Martineau (1972) but also lends itself to an interpretation based on the Social Identity Approach. In particular, sexist humour in this context seems to serve as a means of establishing positive distinctiveness from the female outgroup as well as reducing threats to male friendship bonds and to masculine norms.

### **3. Sexist humour as sexual harassment**

Maintaining the perspective of men as initiators of sexist humour and women as humour targets, we now enter into the discussion of ‘intergroup interactions’ (Martineau 1972) by discussing male-to-female sexual harassment in the form of sexist humour. A unified definition of sexual harassment has long been problematic. Sexist humour 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 behaviours which may not be relevant to job-related outcomes (e.g., Fitzgerald 1993). Many contemporary researchers now define verbal comments, requests, and non-verbal behaviours as sexual harassment (e.g. European Commission 2010; Fitzgerald & Shullman 1993). Yet, often behaviours 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 & 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 behaviour (Fiske & Glick 1995), and because they have contact with others who accept or engage in similar behaviours (Gwartney-Gibbs et al. 1987). These findings indicate that ingroup norms appear to play an important role in the expression of sexist humour in intergroup settings. We now review the evidence on sexist humour as an outcome of ingroup threat and ingroup norms.

#### *3.1. Sexist humour as an outcome of ingroup threat and ingroup norms*

Siebler et al. (2008) tested the relationship between proclivity to sexually harass, sexism and actual harassment behaviour. 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 humour. Male students told more sexually oriented jokes to a female confederate if they were exposed to a peer engaging in similar behaviour. 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 ingroup bonds following a threat to masculinity. Masculinity threat here was operationalised 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, behaviours and emotions that are more commonly associated with men than with women' (Hunt and Gonsalkorale 2014:19). Ingroup norms were operationalised 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 ingroup 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 ingroup norms can impact on the initiation of sexist humour, making sexist humour an outcome of ingroup cohesion. We argue that sex categories will be very salient in intergroup situations in which sexist humour is used as a form of sexual harassment. Sexist humour then provides men with comparative fit with the male ingroup, emphasising ingroup similarities and intergroup differences. Moreover, sexist humour enhances positive distinctiveness by making the content of the normative fit positive: The ingroup is superior since the outgroup is the butt of the ingroup's jokes and/or the recipient the ingroup's of sexist discrimination.

These findings also support Ferguson and Ford's (2008) proposition that disparaging humour particularly serves to reduce feelings of ingroup 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 behaviour if the outgroup 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 humour) to reduce threat and simultaneously stabilise the status quo by undermining women in the work place and creating a hostile environment. In particular, we hypothesise, that this strategy will be adopted by men who are highly identified with the male ingroup 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 outgroup because either or both groups perceive the existing status and power hierarchy as unstable (see Brown 2000; Reicher et al. 2010; Tajfel and Turner 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 ingroup on more flattering dimensions or redefining what ingroup 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 humour, rape proclivity and victim blame**

Relying on a social identity based intergroup interaction perspective, we now examine the evidence on sexist humour 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 behaviour, 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 humour from negative outgroup attitudes to self-reports of potentially violent behaviours. 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 humour on rape proclivity and victim blame fits the social identity approach less well than the literatures on male ingroup 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 ingroup identification. In particular, we need to assume that ingroup members who highly identify with their group are prone to conduct outgroup discrimination. If sexist humour functions to increase ingroup cohesion, helps to communicate ingroup norms and amplifies outgroup 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 humour 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 humour and rape proclivity.

Ryan and Kanjorski (1998) explored the relationships between rape attitudes, relationship aggression and enjoyment of sexist humour. Although correlational in nature, Ryan and Kanjorski (1998) demonstrate clear links between men's enjoyment of sexist humour 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 (vs. 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 humour only impacts on rape proclivity when the aversiveness shown in response to the sexist humour 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 (vs. 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 (vs. stranger rape victim) following the exposure to sexist (vs. 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 focussed 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 humour and the social identity approach (Tajfel and Turner 2004 [1986]), we demonstrated that sexist humour can function to not only belittle or denigrate the outgroup but also as a tool for social control via self-reported inclinations to commit sexual violence against the outgroup. This latter interpretation of the literature extends Martineau's model as well as the idea of disparagement humour as a 'releaser' of prejudice (Ford and Ferguson 2004; Woodzicka and Ford 2010): Pre-existing prejudice in combination with hostile humour can conspire to have maximum negative impact on women as the disparaged outgroup.

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, ingroup identification, we can further our understanding of the above findings using the Social Identity Approach: The intergroup context interacts with ingroup identification to a point at which personal and situational variables conspire to release hostile responses against the outgroup. 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 humour in the light of Martineau's (1972) model on the social functions of humour and the Social Identity Approach. We particularly focussed on sexist humour as a predictor of male ingroup cohesion, as an outcome in the context of sexual harassment and as a moderator of the relationship between sexist humour 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 humour as a predictor of ingroup 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 humour and ingroup cohesion. Even though we argued here that sexist humour predicts ingroup cohesion, it is conceivable that high ingroup cohesion leads to higher enjoyment and more frequent use of humour disparaging the outgroup.

There are several ways to clarify this question, all of which involve obtaining experimental evidence. Based on the literature review above, we hypothesise that men exposed to sexist humour will show higher positive distinctiveness, lower male ingroup threat, and higher ingroup cohesion than men exposed to non-sexist humour. In an experimental setting, participants could be randomly assigned to be exposed to sexist versus non-sexist humour, followed by measures of positive distinctiveness, male ingroup threat and male ingroup cohesion. Alternatively, varying ingroup 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 humour as an outcome of ingroup threat and ingroup norms. The literature we reviewed here used experimental designs and usually operationalised sexual harassment based on the Computer Harassment Paradigm, which naturally classifies sexist humour 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 humour serves men in these situations and compare their answers with predictions from the Social Identity Approach.



Thirdly, we reviewed the evidence on sexist humour 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 ingroup norms, ingroup 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 ingroup threat, ingroup norms, perceived stability and legitimacy of the intergroup hierarchy and sexist (vs. non-sexist) humour 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 humour. We feel that more experimental work is needed on this topic. As Woodzicka and Ford (2010) point out, not much literature exists on these reactions to intergroup discrimination and harassment and we know even less about how men react to the responses of female humour targets. Once such evidence has been established, an emergent research focus should be on ways of counteracting the acceptability, occurrence and effects of sexist humour. Such research may include the development of educational programmes, 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 humour functions a) as predictor of male ingroup 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. Focussing on sex as an intergroup context, we argued that sexist humour can serve men to establish positive distinctiveness through intergroup comparisons and reduce male ingroup threat. Moreover, sexist humour can be a result of adherence to ingroup norms and a perceived instability or illegitimacy of the intergroup hierarchy.

Overall, the literatures on sexist humour as a form of strengthening ingroup bonds and sexist humour as a form of sexual harassment fit well within the tenets of the Social Identity Approach. Both literatures support the idea that sexist humour is used simultaneously to enhance ingroup cohesion and to denigrate the outgroup. 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, extend Martineau's claim that disparagement humour can introduce or foster hostile disposition toward the outgroup, demonstrating that disparagement humour can amplify aggressive behavioural tendencies in intergroup contexts.

This paper discussed sexist humour as a social 'lubricant' for the male ingroup 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 humour and its role in male ingroup bonding, sexual harassment, rape proclivity and victim blame.

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