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ABSTRACT

A study explored sex differences among tellers of sexually oriented jokes. One hundred forty-seven undergraduate students wrote and told sexually oriented jokes to same, opposite, and mixed sex audiences. These jokes were analyzed to determine whether they were biased against men or women, in favor of men or women, biased against both sexes, or biased against neither sex. The results indicated that more jokes were anti-male or biased against neither sex, and fewer jokes were told that were pro-female or pro-male by all subjects across the three audiences. Men tended to tell more anti-male and anti-female jokes than did women. The women were more likely to tell jokes that were discriminatory toward neither sex and were more likely than men to tell pro-male or pro-female jokes. Subjects did not alter the nature of the sexual jokes based on the gender of the audience. (Author/HTH)

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WHAT'S THE SQUARE ROOT OF 69?:
SEX DIFFERENCES IN SEXUAL HUMOR

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WHAT'S THE SQUARE ROOT OF 69?:
SEX DIFFERENCES IN SEXUAL HUMOR

Abstract

This study explored sex differences among joke-tellers of sexually-oriented humor. One hundred and forty-seven undergraduate students wrote, and told, sexually oriented jokes to same-sexed, opposite-sexed, and mixed-sexed audiences. These jokes were analyzed to determine if they discriminated against men or women, in favor of men or women, against both sexes, or against neither sex. More jokes are told that are anti-male or discriminate against neither sex and fewer jokes are told that are pro-female or pro-male by all persons across the three audiences. Men tend to tell more anti-male and anti-female jokes than do women. Women are more likely to tell jokes that are discriminatory toward neither sex, and they are more likely than men to tell jokes which are pro-female or pro-male. People do not alter the nature of the sexual jokes that they tell based on the gender of the audience.

Do sexual jokes discriminate against women? Do women engage in the same kind of sexual joke-telling as their male counterparts? Do people alter the object of denigration in sexual jokes when they engage in joke-telling to audiences of different gender composition? Little research has been completed which considers gender differences in sexual humor and provides answers to questions such as these. This study attempts to provide descriptive information about gender differences in sexual humor.

Humor is present in many communication exchanges, but everyone in our culture does not use humor with the same frequency. Women, according to current stereotypes, have no sense of humor (Kramarae, 1981), and they cannot tell jokes (Eakins & Eakins, 1978). In a survey of 14,500 magazine readers, Psychology Today reported that 83% of the men surveyed and 68% of the women surveyed identified a man as the wittiest person they knew (Hassett & Houlihan, 1979). Some behavioral justification appears to exist as boys tend to make more frequent verbal and behavioral attempts as humor (McGhee, 1976) and men appear to use humor far more often than women (Coser, 1960).

Sexual humor, constrained by social sanctions and taboos, appears to exist to some extent in most of the world's cultures (Fine, 1976). Few persons in our culture are not exposed to sexual jokes during a typical week at work, school, or in social settings. Fine (1976) states that sexual humor is primarily

a man's prerogative in our culture occurring most frequently in male groups. Recent research suggests that norms for the use of sexual humor by women and men may be changing. An examination of the graffiti written in the late 1970's was compared to that which was written in the 1950's and 1960's and demonstrated that women wrote more graffiti in the late 1970's and that their graffiti had a more sexual, hostile, and issue-related tone than earlier. In the 1950's and 1960's, men wrote more and what they wrote was of a more erotic, homosexual, or pornographic nature while women typically wrote "romantic" messages (Greenberg, 1979).

Prior research on humor preferences demonstrates a sexist dimension. Chapman and Gadfield (1976) assert that since males create the majority of sexual jokes and cartoons, the content of the messages is more apt to derogate women. In addition, they argue that males are more likely to enjoy female denigrating humor. Their findings generally support this prediction, with men enjoying humor more when it was sexist and nonthreatening to men and women reporting less appreciation for sexist humor.

Studies which have employed jokes with nonsexual content have demonstrated that both men and women assign significantly higher ratings to jokes in which men are depicted ridiculing women (Cantor, 1976; Losco & Epstein, 1975). Cantor suggests three potential explanations for this sexist bias: 1) Socialization processes in our society reinforce female inferiority; 2) people hold different expectations about appropriate male

and female behavior, and 3) expectations affect perceptions of communicators who behave in certain ways; e.g., sarcasm may be viewed as cruel when used by women and witty when used by men.

Females were not disparaged more frequently than males in a content analysis of prime-time television humor (Stocking, Sapolsky & Zillmann, 1977). To the contrary, men were disparaged far more frequently than women, regardless of the sex of the disparager. At the same time, males were cast in the role of the disparager far more frequently than females whether the target was a same-sex or opposite-sex victim. Males disparaged males more frequently than females except in the case of hostile sexual humor, where the opposite outcome was observed. This exception suggests that sexual humor may have a sexist bias against women.

With the exception of Stocking, Sapolsky and Zillman (1977), most of the prior research has focused on the receivers of humorous messages, in an attempt to identify factors which influence humorous assessment of sexual jokes. A recent study departed from this approach and centered on the selection of sexual jokes to be communicated to others. Pearson, Miller and Senter (1982) found, contrary to their predictions, that joke-tellers are more likely to select jokes with sexist content discriminating against men rather than against women. These results occurred consistently regardless of the sex-role preference of the joke-teller or the gender makeup of the target audience.

The inconsistent findings on gender differences in sexual humor are largely due to stereotypical beliefs, lack of empirical verification, and taboos against research in this area. The current study is descriptive, attempting to offer some modest discovery in the area of sex differences in sexual humor. A reflection on the sexual jokes in our repertoires suggests that sexual jokes may denigrate women or men, may be based on a highly positive attitude about women or men, may discriminate against both women and men, or may denigrate neither sex. The first research question, then, considers the frequencies with which jokes occur in these categories:

- Q₁: What is the relative frequency of occurrence of six types (anti-male, anti-female, pro-male, pro-female, anti-both, anti-neither) of sexist content in sexual jokes?

Sex differences in the sources of sexual jokes have not been determined. We may speculate, with others, that women may engage in less humor, in general, because of sex role socialization or because of traditional status differences between women and men. Sex role socialization encourages aggression on the part of men and discourages it on the part of women, particularly to men. In terms of status, persons with lower status tend to use less humor than do persons with higher status and, traditionally, women have been granted lower status than men in our culture. Sexual humor may be particularly offensive to women. Originally, sexual humor was indicted because of

the religious values in our culture which placed sexual behavior in an intimate category, inappropriate for public discussion. More recently, sexual humor has been viewed with aversion on the grounds that it is discriminatory against members of particular social groups including women, older people, children, and members of particular ethnic and racial groups.

Similarly, we may speculate on the different types of sexual humor that women and men might typically use in their interactions with others. Women might engage in jokes that are dependent upon a positive view of men and women or that discriminate against neither men nor women. Women are more socially oriented in their communication (Berg & Bass, 1961); tend to offer more positive reactions (Heis, 1962), and tend to exceed males in rewardingness of communication, exhibiting more warmth, helpfulness, and affiliation (Bennett & Cohen, 1959). Women tend to be more cooperative than men (Leventhal & Lane, 1970; Benton, 1973) and to engage in more pro-social behavior to resolve conflict (Roloff, 1980).

Men might select jokes that discriminate against men, against women, or against both sexes. Men are more likely than women to take risks (Coombs & Pruitt, 1960; Maier & Burke, 1967; Minton & Miller, 1970; Bauer & Turner, 1974), are more likely to engage in aggression (Sears, 1961; Lefkowitz, Eron, Walder & Huesmann, 1977), and are more likely to engage in anti-social modes of behavior including

verbal aggression and attacking the other person's self-concept (Roloff, 1980).

In order to provide some descriptive findings about the influence of the sex of the source of sexual jokes, we offer a second research question:

Q₂: Does the joke-tellers' gender affect the direction of sexist bias in the jokes selected to be told to others?

Finally, we might speculate on the influence of the gender of the target audience. A person probably would not tell an anti-Semitic joke to a Jewish person, an agist joke to an elderly person, or a racist joke to a black person. We might speculate, then, that people would tend to avoid anti-male jokes to male audiences and anti-female jokes to female audiences and might substitute pro-male or pro-female jokes or might rely upon jokes that discriminate against neither men nor women when speaking to mixed-sex audiences. However, the joke-teller's self-esteem, his or her level of aggression, and his or her perceptual acuity might mitigate against these outcomes. In order to offer some information on the influence of the gender of the target audience, the final research question is offered:

Q₃: Does the gender makeup of the target audience (same-sex as the joke-teller, opposite-sex of the joke-teller, or mixed sex) affect the sexist bias of the jokes that are selected to be told to others?

PROCEDURES

Joke-Tellers

The jokes examined in this study were generated by 147 undergraduate students enrolled in the beginning communication course at a large Midwestern university. Seventy-six men and 73 women supplied the jokes. First year students and sophomores comprised the majority of the sample, but all four undergraduate classes were represented.

Generating the Jokes

All of the jokes were collected in arranged sessions, immediately following the regular meeting of the communication course by the investigator. After receiving forms on which jokes were to be written, all of the joke-tellers were provided with the following instructions:

This study seeks to discover what kinds of sexually-oriented jokes people think are appropriate and funny for various kinds of audiences. Below are descriptions of three kinds of audience situations. You are asked to write out a sexually-oriented joke that you would consider telling each of the audiences because of its humor and appropriateness.

The joke-tellers indicated their sex on the form and were assigned to tell their jokes in pre-arranged groups comprised of same-sexed peers, opposite-sexed peers, and mixed-sex peers. The students were told that they could read their jokes from their written copy or they could tell them from memory. The joke-tellers were randomly assigned to the three audiences of

interest so that 1/3 of the students told their jokes to same-sexed audiences first, 1/3 to opposite-sexed audiences first, and 1/3 to mixed-sex audiences first. The investigator and assistants monitored the joke-telling to insure that students told the jokes that they had written and to collect the written copies of the jokes.

Sexist Content Categories

On the basis of the investigator's examination of numerous sexually-oriented jokes and prior literature, six categories of sexist content were identified and coded:

1. Anti-male jokes. This category includes any derogatory references to males including their bodily parts or their mental abilities. Jokes about potency, penis size, the effects of aging on male sexuality, males' insensitivity to females, and males' unawareness of their partners' infidelity would be included in this category.

2. Anti-female jokes. This category includes any derogatory references to females including bodily appearance and sexual knowledge. Jokes about female naivete, breast or vaginal size, non-normative variations in sexual appetite, and relational inferiority would be included in this category.

3. Pro-female jokes. This category includes positive or boastful comments made by, or about, women. Jokes about women's positive body image, high self-esteem, sexual knowledge, or assertiveness were included in this category.

4. Pro-male jokes. This category includes jokes which make a positive reference to men or which suggest pride on the part of men. Included in this category are jokes about men's sexual experience, sexual knowledge, their positive feelings about their bodies or their self-esteem.

5. Jokes which discriminate against neither women nor men. This category includes jokes which are based on word play, the humor that surrounds sexuality in general, and jokes which do not rely on denigrating either men or women for their humorousness. Examples of jokes in this category are those that pose children asking questions about body parts and then assimilating the information in humorous ways or jokes which ask, "What do you get when you put together a _____ and a _____?"

6. Jokes which discriminate against both men and women. This category includes jokes which denigrate both men and women in the same joke. These jokes combine derogatory references to men and women in a variety of ways. For instance, the uncleanness of a woman might be combined with the naivete of a man or the bodily appearance of a woman might be linked to male impotence.

Coding the Jokes

All content was coded by two trained coders working independently. Percentage agreement between coders was greater than 97 percent for each of the six categories of sexist content. Since the jokes contain only one of the six categories of sexist content, the results reported for all analyses use the entire joke as the unit of analysis.

RESULTS

One hundred and forty-seven college students, 76 males and 73 females, provided sexual jokes. All of the 76 males wrote a joke which they felt was appropriate for a same-sexed audience, an opposite-sexed audience, and a mixed sex audience. All of the 73 females wrote a joke which they felt was appropriate for a same-sexed audience and an opposite-sexed audience, but only 71 of the females wrote a joke which they felt were appropriate for a mixed-sex audience. The two females who did not provide jokes for a mixed-sex audience may have felt that the sexual jokes that they could recall were inappropriate for a mixed-sexed audience, or they may have simply not understood that they were to write an additional joke.

The jokes were first categorized into the six content analysis categories for the three target audiences. The frequencies of the jokes falling into these categories are presented in Table 1. These results indicate that people do not tell anti-male, anti-female, pro-female, pro-male, neither-sex discriminated, or both sexes discriminated with the same frequency to same sex audiences ($X^2 = 47.4$; $df = 5$; $p < .001$), to opposite sex audiences ($X^2 = 51.96$; $df = 5$; $p < .001$), or mixed sex audiences ($X^2 = 39.00$; $df = 5$; $p < .001$). Apparently people tend to tell more anti-male jokes and jokes which discriminate against neither sex, and they tend to tell fewer jokes which are pro-female or pro-male.

-- Place Table 1 Here --

The jokes were next examined in terms of sex differences among the tellers of the jokes. The frequencies of jokes falling into the six content analysis categories are presented in Table 2 for the men and women in the sample who served as the joke-tellers to the three target audiences. These results are de-

-- Place Table 2 Here --

icted in Figures 1, 2, and 3 which illustrate jokes told to

-- Place Figure 1 Here

same-sexed audiences, opposite-sexed audiences, and mixed-

-- Place Figure 2 Here --

sex audiences, respectively.

-- Place Figure 3 Here --

The data for the same-sexed audiences demonstrate that both men and women tell a large number of anti-male jokes, that men tell far more anti-female jokes than women, and that women tell more jokes which discriminate against neither sex than do men. Sex of the joke-teller appears to influence the tendency to tell jokes which are biased against men, women, or neither sex ($X^2 = 11.172$; $df = 5$; $.025 < p < .05$). The data for the opposite-sexed audiences suggest, again, that both men and women tell a large number of anti-male jokes, that men tell more jokes which discriminate against women than do men, and that women tell more jokes that discriminate against neither sex than do men, but these differences are not significant ($X^2 = 10.388$; $df = 5$; $.05 < p < .10$). The data for the mixed-sex audiences are less disparate for men and women than are the other two groups and this communication setting does not yield significant differences in the joke-telling behavior of men and women ($X^2 = 7.735$; $df = 5$; $.25 < p < .10$).

Finally, the data was analyzed to determine if people altered the sexual jokes they told on the basis of the gender of the target audience. A cursory examination of Table 1 suggests that they do not alter the person being denigrated in their jokes and the statistical analysis confirms this ($\chi^2 = .23$).

DISCUSSION

This study demonstrates that people do not tell sexually-oriented jokes at the same frequency which discriminate against men or women, in favor of men or women, against both sexes, or against neither sex. People tend to tell jokes which discriminate against neither sex, or against men most frequently; followed by jokes which discriminate against women; followed by jokes which discriminate against both sexes; and they tell the fewest sexual jokes which are biased in favor of women or in favor of men. Men and women engage in different joke-telling in same-sexed groups. Women are more likely to tell jokes to other women that are discriminatory toward neither sex, and they are more likely than men to tell jokes which are pro-female or pro-male. Men are more likely to tell jokes to other men that are anti-male or anti-female. Similar trends occur for men and women when they tell sexually-oriented jokes to opposite-sexed audiences and mixed-sex audiences, but the differences, between the two are not as pronounced. People do not appear to discriminate very much among the target audience to whom they are to tell a sexual joke. That is, similar joke-telling occurs in same-sexed, opposite-sexed, and mixed-sex audiences.

The frequency of anti-male jokes tends to support the recent research which demonstrates that joke tellers are no more likely to select jokes with a sexist bias against females than they are to tell jokes with a sexist bias against males (Pearson, Miller, & Senter, 1982) and to discount earlier assertions and findings of prior investigations which suggest that sexually-oriented jokes tend to discriminate against women rather than men (Chapman & Gadfield, 1976; Stocking, Sapolsky, & Zillman, 1977). Since the jokes in this study were collected at a different university than the jokes in the recent report, we cannot rely on an explanation of a disparate sample. The universe of sexual jokes may include more jokes that disparage men or disparage neither sex than those that derogate women or derogate both sexes and certainly more than those that are based on a bias in favor of women or men.

One unexamined content characteristic merits mention. The type of sexist content contained in each joke was examined in this study, but the intensity of that sexism was unexplored. A great deal of variation appeared among the jokes rendering some of them appropriate for inclusion in a research article such as this and causing some of them to be categorized as distasteful for the most seasoned sexual joke-teller. A cursory examination of the jokes suggests that those jokes which discriminate against both men and women tend to be among the most vulgar. As sexual jokes become increasingly repugnant, they may become more socially questionable and may be shared with fewer audiences. This possibility is being examined in a study in progress.

The differences in sexual joke-telling by men and women is consistent with earlier research on female and male interaction patterns. Women tend to tell most jokes which discriminate against neither sex which is consistent with their previously demonstrated warmth and affiliation, their interest in fair outcomes, and their pro-social behavior. Similarly, women are more likely than men to tell jokes which are based on a positive conception of women or on a positive conception of men which is consistent with research which characterizes women as offering more positive reactions, exceeding males in rewardingness of communication, and demonstrating more pro-social behavior.

Men tend to tell jokes which are anti-male or anti-female. This finding is consistent with the literature which determines that men are more likely to take risks, are more likely to engage in aggression, and are more likely to use anti-social modes of behavior in conflict resolution including verbal aggression and attacking the other person's self-concept.

People do not appear to alter the person or persons they are denigrating in sexual jokes as their target audience changes. In this study, people were more likely to tell the same joke, or similar jokes, to all three target audiences. Three potential explanations are useful. First, and most parsimonious, students were used in the current study, and they may have been attempting

to simplify their task. They knew that they could use a single joke for all three audiences and they may have determined that this was the easiest way to assist with the research. Second, the students may have had a limited number of sexual jokes at their disposal. If they could recall only one or two jokes, they may have used them simply because they had no recollection of any others. Finally, students might not discriminate very finely among audiences of the same sex, the opposite sex, and mixed sex as long as those audiences are comprised of their peers. In other words, college students, regardless of gender, are more similar than different. If the audiences had been comprised of other combinations of people (mothers of college students, female faculty members, Rotary club members, junior high school males), greater differences might have occurred. The question of using college sophomores in research may be more salient in this study than in other studies.

The suggestion that audiences of different ages may affect the content of the sexual joke selected raises another direction for future research. In this study, only sexist content was coded. Nonetheless, many of the jokes included aggression toward other groups--older people, persons of differing ethnic and racial groups, etc. It might be useful to devise a coding scheme which would take into account several dimensions of social discrimination which appears to occur in sexual humor. The combination of various sources of bias frequently results in jokes which are more repugnant, on the one hand, and more ideologically complex, on the other.

This study represents a modest beginning in the attempt to describe and explain some gender differences in sexual humor. The findings are of some interest as they replace stereotypic speculation about the communication of women and men with descriptive data. The data suggest that simplistic generalizations about the biases of sexually-oriented jokes may be appealing, but may also be largely inaccurate. As research on sex differences in sexual humor becomes more sophisticated we may find that we have over-simplified the differences in the use of sexual humor of women and men and that we have failed to grasp the ideological and communicative complexity of sexual humor.

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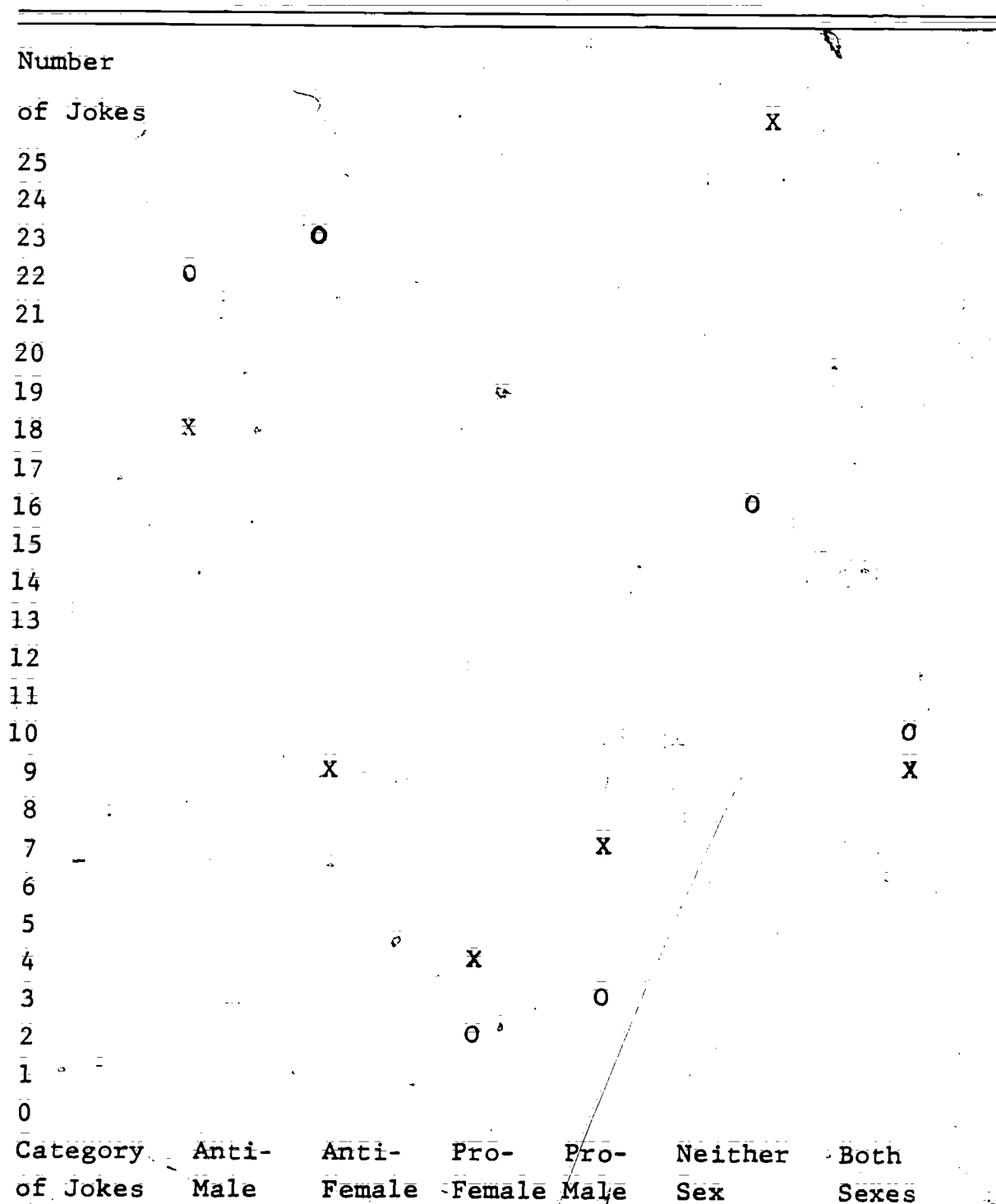
Table 1--Frequencies of Jokes told to Same-Sexed, Opposite-Sexed, and Mixed-Sex Audiences

Type of Joke	Same-Sexed Audience	Opposite-Sexed Audience	Mixed-Sexed Audience
Anti-Male	40	44	34
Anti-Female	32	33	31
Pro-Female	6	3	2
Pro-Male	10	11	17
Neither Sex	42	38	41
Both Sexes	19	20	22

Table 2--Frequencies of Jokes told by Men and Women to Same-Sexed, Opposite-Sexed, and Mixed-Sex Audiences

Type of Joke	Sex of Joke Teller	Same-Sexed Audience	Opposite-Sexed Audience	Mixed-Sex Audience
Anti-Male	Male	22	23	18
Anti-Male	Female	18	21	16
Anti-Female	Male	23	23	21
Anti-Female	Female	9	10	10
Pro-Female	Male	2	2	2
Pro-Female	Female	4	1	0
Pro-Male	Male	3	3	7
Pro-Male	Female	7	8	10
Neither	Male	16	17	17
Neither	Female	26	21	24
Both	Male	10	8	11
Both	Female	9	12	11

Figure 1--Frequencies of Jokes told by Men and Women to Same-Sexed Audiences



Key: O = Male Joke-Tellers
 X = Female Joke Tellers

Sexed Audiences

Number of Jokes	Anti- Male	Anti- Female	Pro- Female	Pro- Male	Neither Sex	Both Sexes
25						
24						
23	0	0				
22						
21	X				X	
20						
19						
18						
17					0	
16						
15						
14						
13						
12						X
11						
10		X				
9						
8				X		0
7						
6						
5						
4						
3				0		
2			0			
1			X			
0						

Key: 0 = Male Joke-Tellers
 X = Female Joke Tellers

Figure 3--Frequencies of Jokes told by Men and Women to Mixed-Sexed Audiences

Number of Jokes	Anti-Male	Anti-Female	Pro-Female	Pro-Male	Neither Sex	Both Sexes
25						
24					X	
23						
22						
21		0				
20						
19						
18	0				0	
17						
16	X					
15						
14						
13						
12						
11						X
10		X		X		
9						
8						
7				0		
6						
5						
4						
3						
2			0			
1						
0			X			

Key: 0 = Male Joke-Tellers
 X = Female Joke-Tellers

Figure 4--Frequencies of Jokes told to Same-Sexed, Opposite-Sexed, and Mixed-Sex Audiences

Number of Jokes	Anti-Male	Anti-Female	Pro-Female	Pro-Male	Neither Sex	Both Sexes
45						
44	O					
43						
42					X	
41					T	
40	X					
39						
38					O	
37						
36						
35						
34	T					
33		O				
32		X				
31		T				
30						
29						
28						
27						
26						
25						
24						
23						
22						T
21						
20						O
19						X
18						
17				T		
16						
15						
14						
13						
12						
11				O		
10				X		
9						
8						
7						
6			X			
5						
4						
3			O			
2			T			
1						
0						

Key: X = Same Sex; O = Opposite Sex; T = Mixed Sex