

# Gender and Higher Education: A Critical Spin in the Study of Humor

*Flavia Carvalho, Daniel Dana and Gene Roth*  
*Northern Illinois University*

*Feminist pedagogy as a research construct can be classified into gender and liberatory subgroups. Gender models frequently focus on learning. Liberatory models underline the social structures and power relations which constitute systems of oppression. Humor in practice may be used as a social corrective, or it may be used to extend power distances among groups. Using a poststructural feminist approach, this study examines gender issues and humor research in higher education contexts.*

Keywords: Humor, Feminist Pedagogy, Higher Education

The idea that there has been a long history of inequity between women and men in societies worldwide is a fairly commonplace claim. The social, cultural and economical lower status of women in societies has been both reproduced in and perpetuated by formal educational systems. It is also widely known that humor has also existed for a long time (Attardo, 2004), and those who study it recognize that it has been the target of inquiries for much longer than gender studies. However, minimal research exists that examines how humor relates to gender inequities and adult and higher education.

In the past several decades, the field of adult education has presented a relatively substantial discussion about the relationship between social inequities and education. Within the field of adult education in the United States, social justice is the line of research mostly responsible for a critical view of inequity issues in education and, more specifically, feminist pedagogy can be considered an academic niche that deals with gender issues from that perspective. Conversely, even though there is an area of humor studies that involves a social theorization of humor – generally dealing with “social control, conflict or cohesion, ... attitudes of joker and audience, or ... racist jokes and primitive inter-group rivalries” (Haig, 1988, p.10) – there are very few works that bring together the realms of gender issues, humor, and higher education contexts. Taking the above situation into consideration, the main purpose of this exploratory study is to examine how gender issues are being treated in higher education contexts in relation to the study of humor in education. Within this paper the authors will first problematize from a gender perspective the U.S. higher education scenario, then explain the theoretical framework in which this research is grounded, present a set of research questions, describe the method, and finally end with findings and conclusions.

## **Problem Statement**

Despite the assertion that women have systematically occupied, in most cases, a disadvantaged position in societies throughout world history, many scholars would concur that positive changes have occurred towards a more just social, cultural and economical structure as far as gender is concerned. Likewise, the formal education environment has shown and continues to show changes in its overall composition in regards to gender equity both as a reflection and as a promoter of broader social conditions. Nevertheless, a simple assessment of the present characteristics of the United States higher education context, for instance, demonstrates that even with advancements in its gender makeup, an immense amount of transformation is still needed to achieve a satisfactory level of gender equity.

An overview of reports and statistics concerning postsecondary education by the National Center for Education Statistics (2002b, 2003) indicates that the major achievements of women in higher education are related to their increase in all levels of participation – from associate to doctoral degrees. According to the statistics provided (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003), women already outnumbered men in postsecondary education enrollments in 1979, and in 2002 they represented 56% of fall enrollments. In contrast, a closer look at data reveals that many inequities persist in U.S. higher education, such as the disparity between the numbers of female/male students in some program areas traditionally dominated by men. For example, U.S. News and World Report (2002 as cited by Katz) states that top ranked professional schools have only 15%, 30%, 44%, and 45% female students enrolled in engineering, business, law, and medicine programs respectively.

In addition to characteristics of the student population, there are other structural factors linked to gender inequities in higher education. Faculty and curricula, for example, are essential elements in the organization of power relations within education institutions. When looking at the numbers available regarding faculty, although a significant proportional increase of 72% in the number of women teaching occurred between 1989 and 2000, females only represented 44% of total faculty in 2002 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). Even if the total numbers are assumed to be relatively positive in regards to this still changing gender scenario, the details of the higher education configuration remain problematic. The following are examples of gender disparities found in higher education institutions in the years of 1992 and 1998 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002b): Two thirds of full-time professors are male; the majority of part-time instructors are also male; in every program area, except education, the majority of full-time professors are male (over 90% of engineering professors are male); full-time male faculty averaged about \$61,700 in base salary, compared with \$48,400 for full-time female faculty (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002a); 70% of male professors indicated they were engaged in research, compared to about 62% of female professors (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002a).

Critical allegations that pertain to gender bias in educational curricula have also been reported, in particular allegations in the curricular areas of mathematics and science:

Curricula and teaching materials remain gender-biased to a large degree, and are rarely sensitive to the specific needs of girls and women. This reinforces traditional female and male roles that deny women opportunities for full and equal partnership in society. Lack of gender awareness by educators at all levels strengthens existing inequities between males and females by reinforcing discriminatory tendencies and undermining girls' self-esteem [...] Science curricula in particular are gender-biased. Science textbooks do not relate to women's and girls' daily experience and fail to give recognition to women scientists. Girls are often deprived of basic education in mathematics and science and technical training, which provide knowledge they could apply to improve their daily lives and enhance their employment opportunities (United Nations, no date).

Even in the field of adult education, which features the importance of a learner-centered approach as well as a preoccupation with critically looking at curriculum and knowledge production, criticisms of gender bias have emerged in several important works. When studying important contributions to adult education's body of knowledge, such as Knowles's andragogy and Freire's problem-posing education, it is not uncommon to discuss imminent gender bias. Furthermore, although adult education curricula are very diverse and include a large amount of female authors, its most recognized authors are male.

The preceding points affirm that this macro structural setting has micro consequences in the interactions of those who are part of it. The persisting inequities in student population, faculty and curriculum are embedded (sometimes clearly, many times subtly) within classroom dynamics, educator-learner interactions and relationships, content choice/approach/delivery, and most important, learning. When educators are not aware or do not consider hidden gender bias in all of its dimensions, things that may not seem to be issues, such as studying and applying humor to their educational philosophy, approach and practice can become problematic and even oppressive. Taking that into account, an academic treatment of humor from various critical angles, including the one discussed here, is important for theory and practice in order to not reproduce inequities in higher education.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study relies on a feminist approach, more specifically on what Tisdell (1993, 1995, 1996, 1998, and 2001) describes as poststructural feminist pedagogy both to guide this research and to analyze its findings. Since there are various meanings associated with feminism, before describing poststructural feminist pedagogy in particular, it is important to provide an explanation of what is meant here by a feminist approach. Feminism, as an organized movement with the general objective of fighting for women's rights, can be traced back to over two centuries ago in the United States (Goldberg & Hartmann, 1995 as cited by Doran, 2005). However, the conceptualization of what feminism and the feminist movement stand for has changed over time and consensus among scholars has not been achieved (hooks, 2000a). Hooks (2000b) asserts that the early feminists focused on an anti-male effort in order to advance the idea of equality between genders, but she believes a broader definition of feminism that concentrates on the struggle against sexism and oppression is more fitting with the present scenario. Thus, the feminist approach utilized here considers the sexism and oppression imbedded in societal structures.

According to Merriam and Caffarella (1999), as a whole, "feminist pedagogy focuses on the experiences, and in particular the oppression, of women in the context of education" (p. 359). As conceptualized by Tisdell (1993, 1995,

1996, 1998, and 2001), poststructural feminist pedagogy is the synthesis of the two feminist pedagogy models put forward by Maher (1987, as cited by Tisdell, 1995), which classified feminist pedagogy in *gender* and *liberatory* subgroups. While the gender models are psychologically oriented and focus on how women learn as well as how to create more adequate learning environments for them, the liberatory models underline the social structures and power relations which constitute systems of oppression that not only affect gender, but also class, race, sexual orientation and other issues (Tisdell, 1993, 1995, 1996, 1998, and 2001). Hence, poststructural feminist pedagogy contends with issues of structure, context and individuality as it encompasses the construction of knowledge, voice, authority, and positionality in its framework. Considering the preceding explanation, poststructural feminist pedagogy will guide the analysis of how the study of humor in relation to higher education has been approached in terms of gender within the research sample.

In addition to a theoretical framework that resides in poststructural feminist pedagogy, this paper also takes into account humor theory. Discussions and squabbles about the essences of humor are not new debates, such exchanges have existed for at least twenty-five hundred years (Oring, 2003). Over one hundred theories of humor have been offered by scholars over the years, and because humor is a multifaceted construct, no single theory captures all aspects of it (Haig, 1988). Humor can be described as a contested topic of research that has existed for centuries in disparate fields of practice and areas of inquiry. Lefcourt (2001) describes some of the problems that scholars face when humor is the focus of their research:

The problems in studying humor – as opposed to experiencing it – derive partly from the fact that humor has been subjected to investigation by scholars from a great variety of disciplines. Because each discipline has its own traditions and methods, it will draw attention only to certain aspects of humor while ignoring others. Towers of Babel sprout readily in such circumstances. (p. 26)

Attardo (1994) notes that a common classification of modern theories of humor divides them into three groups: incongruity, hostility/disparagement (including aggression, disparagement, and superiority), and release theories. The hostility/disparagement category, specifically superiority theory, offers the most intriguing connections to poststructural feminist pedagogy. Social theories of humor in this category include examples of humor that are used to keep people in their place via aggressive humor, or conversely, examples that are used cohesively to bring people together for a cause, depending on the source of the humor and its target. As Kotthoff (2005, p. 4) explains the esoteric application of jokes, “stereotypes in joke content can bring gender issues to the foreground of attention – in an affirmative or in a subversive way.” Therefore, humor can be directed at women in higher education contexts to maintain status quo and oppressive conditions, or humor can be strategically applied by women in higher education as a social corrective targeted at those who possess power.

Superiority theory can be traced back several centuries to the British philosopher Hobbes. Humor based on superiority theory uses a sudden perception of one person being superior to another as the basis for laughter (Haig, 1988). Jokes that put down people on the basis of gender, race, class, age, or other categories of difference are based in part on superiority theory. To take this perspective a step further, Wolfe (2002) asserted that a joke does not exist unless someone or something is its object of ridicule. This assertion is aligned with Gruner’s (1997) premise that every humorous situation involves a winner, and every humorous situation involves a loser. His succinct thesis is that humor involves a succession of games that includes elements such as competition and keeping score; and, most importantly according to Gruner, laughing equals winning.

For the purposes of this paper – with its focus on gender issues, humor, and higher education – readers are encouraged to think critically about who is winning and who is losing with humor in higher education. In turn, utilizing an interrelating perspective that combines these two frameworks means analyzing humor scenarios or situations beyond what directly puts a specific gender or its features “down” while empowering the other. The more profound examinations will also consider possible humor constructs that identify with features associated with a specific gender and if, for instance, individuals belonging to the other gender are oppressed by not identifying with it, feeling excluded or obligated to demonstrate a response (laugh, for example), or even internalizing certain kinds of meanings.

## Research Questions

The questions addressed in this study are:

1. Are gender issues present in articles addressing the study/use of humor?
2. Are gender issues present in articles addressing the study/use of humor in education?

3. If gender issues are present in articles addressing the study/use of humor and/or humor in education, how were these issues dealt with?

## Method

A literature review was conducted to research the existence of and possible approach(es) used in the treatment of gender issues in the study of humor and of humor in education. Considering time limitations, contextual constraints, and the exploratory nature of the study, the research was conducted through a Midwestern university library website. Within the library website, the authors chose databases related to education, gender/women's studies, and a general database – *ERIC via EBSCO Database*, *Contemporary Women's Issues Database (CWI)*, and *Wilson Select Plus Database*, respectively. The education and women's studies databases were chosen because they provide access to several academic journals that can be used to build a perspective on the academic production in these fields of study. The general database was chosen to verify if there were any articles in human and social sciences about gender linked to humor and/or humor in education.

In addition, the authors searched for academic journals directly related to humor, and found the journal *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research* to be an important resource for this research. In regards to this journal, although it has been published for a longer period of time, the articles available through the library website encompassed only the volumes from 2001 to 2005. We decided to delineate the sample of the research by utilizing this time frame for the three databases previously chosen, so the results would match with the electronic availability of *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*. Thus, a search using the word "humor" in the category "article title" was conducted for the years of 2001 to 2005 in each of the databases. The titles of the search results and the available volumes of *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research* were analyzed to find articles directly related to education and/or gender issues. At this stage, articles were selected for an analysis of their abstracts based on the mere presence of words such as, woman/women, gender/sex, feminism, education/higher education – and any other words or combination of words that could lead to the perception of a possible link to the topics in question – in their titles. The abstracts of the selected articles were read and, based on an analysis of their purpose, perspective, content(s), and result(s), it was determined which, if any, were related to the research questions of this study. Finally, the full texts of the selected articles were read and their contents were analyzed.

## Findings

The first assertion that can be made as a result of the searches performed is that a considerable number of articles on humor are accessible using the method explained above. The total result of all four sources for the delineated time frame (2001-2005) was 250, divided as follows: ERIC Database – 30 results, CWI Database – 4 results, Wilson Select Plus Database 125 results, and *International Journal of Humor Research* 91 results. In terms of humor articles directly related to either education and/or gender issues, the total result across the sources was 23, among which ERIC listed 11, CWI 2, Wilson Select Plus 9 (there were actually 14 articles, but 5 were repeats, already found on the ERIC Database results), and *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research* 1. Finally, there were 5 articles chosen to be read in full for matching the criterion described in the last step of the method.

An initial analysis of the titles of the 250 results indicated that humor has been studied from several approaches within the research sample, including theoretical and empirical studies with various themes related to the conceptualization and use of humor as it relates to a variety of topics. Twenty-three articles were associated with education and/or gender issues, which represent less than 10% of the total research sample. The first assertion that can be made from the analysis of the abstracts is that humor is considered a variable, which can be present or not in educational contexts. Almost all abstracts indicate that, when present in educational settings, humor is an important/positive educational element, and its absence can generally be considered negative. Some articles go beyond that proposition by either presenting guidelines or conditions for humor to be effectively beneficial and/or by promoting a discussion of how humor can be used in specific educational contexts. However, in the process of examining the 23 abstracts, no articles emphasized the three variables targeted by this study (gender, humor and education) together. Four dealt with humor and gender, while 19 focused mostly on humor and education. Therefore, at least in what concerns the research sample, the presence of gender issues was found in articles addressing the study/use of humor, but this was not the case for articles addressing the study/use of humor in education.

The 5 articles selected to be read and analyzed were the 4 articles dealing with humor and gender and only 1 of 19 articles about humor and education: Singaporean Humor: A Cross-Cultural, Cross-Gender Comparison by Nevo, Nevo, and Yin (2001); Getting a Laugh: Gender, Status, and Humor in Task Discussions by Robinson and Smith-

Lovin (2001); Is feminist humor an oxymoron? by Bing (2004); Women's humor is different by Burleigh (2004); and Humor in Clinical Nursing Education by Hayden-Miles (2002). The last article was discarded from the analysis after it was read because it did not have a connection with gender issues, in opposition to what was perceived after its abstract was analyzed. The following are the results of a comparative analysis of the remaining 4 articles.

The first important conclusion from the analysis of the articles is that their gender approach is not openly critical of how humor is studied/used, but that they do possess a significant component of gender problematization in theories and assumptions related to humor. The studies by Nevo et al (2001) and Robinson and Smith-Lovin (2001) have common theoretical assumptions, such as men have a different sense of humor and prefer aggressive jokes compared to women. Given that many jokes have butts, an anti-feminine bias can be found in humor, which contributes to gender differences in humor. However, the empirical results of such studies have contradicted or at least have not demonstrated sufficient consistency toward a gender humor theory. Interestingly, neither study concludes that there could be problems in the assumptions about gender in humor theories; and while Robinson and Smith-Lovin (2001) suggest that future humor research focusing on power-relations from a gender standpoint is an option to address this issue, Nevo et al (2001) blames the results on methodological circumstances, affirming that results were influenced by a feminist sample and by the gender (female) of the researcher directly dealing with the population.

Although the article by Burleigh (2004) is of journalistic nature and not academic, it does point to some gender issues from a very subtle, but still somewhat critical perspective. The article is mostly about five famous contemporary women who work with humor, but it briefly explores issues of male dominance in humor and how successful women have relied on aggressive, sometimes self-derogatory humor to establish themselves in the market. The approach used by Bing (2004) is actually centered on a view of how feminist humor has incorporated what are considered male humor preferences into their own humor style. The article is actually critical of feminist humor in the sense that it argues that anti-male jokes contribute to the oppression of women. Instead, Bing (2004) proposes self-affirming jokes to empower women and prevent jokes from reinforcing issues such as hierarchy maintenance, in-group forming, and gender polarization. Thus, another finding is that among all of the results, only this study really included a problematization of humor from a gender perspective according to the poststructural theoretical framework.

### **Limitations of the Study**

A limitation of this study is the small number of articles that were eventually selected for analysis. Readers are cautioned not to make generalizations about gender, humor, and higher education based on this exploratory study. Furthermore, the study is limited in that only journals electronically available through certain databases were perused and included in the study sample. These journals may not be representative of the larger array of journals that are available to scholars who might cast a wider search into the areas of gender, humor and higher education. The intent of this exploratory study is to raise questions and foster additional inquiry regarding humor, gender issues, and higher education.

### **Conclusion**

This study is an initial attempt to assess the recent humor scenario in higher education, through an analysis of a literature sample from a critical gender-humor perspective, and has possibly problematized it. Humor can be addressed from a critical perspective. Although it has been a topical target by various educational researchers, relatively few studies are available that examine humor and gender according to this limited research sample. Critical gender explorations of humor are not widely available, but sources exist for forming a starting point from within humor studies which can be linked to outside sources on gender, such as feminist pedagogy in the field of adult education. As previously mentioned, this study has its limitations in the sense that the sample is small. Furthermore, the problem statement lacks qualitative studies as sources for translating educational inequities into the experience of women as they relate to the use of humor in education settings. Thus, empirical studies addressing from a critical perspective how humor is used in the classroom for various disciplines, including disciplines directly dealing with humor, and the consequences for power relations are needed and encouraged. However, this study is unique in that it provides perspectives that have been heretofore unexplored in HRD research and shows possible paths for future research by using an interdisciplinary approach as its foundation.

## Implications for HRD Research and Practice

Roth, Yap, and Short (2006) urge researchers and practitioners to give strong consideration to humor as a research construct in the field of HRD. In the exploratory study described in this study, gender, humor and higher education were examined in a small sample of articles. In this case, higher education is viewed as an HRD context. Similar to other HRD contexts, universities and other higher education settings employ workers, function as organizations, and provide a social milieu in which men and women interact. Although humor is present in all work places, minimal research has been conducted to examine how it plays out in HRD contexts. In the same vein that Bierema and Cseh (2003) problematizes HRD literature through a feminist research framework, this exploratory research has concluded that minimal research has been conducted that links critical gender inquiry with humor studies in education contexts. Similar to other types of workplaces, higher education is carried out in settings that have established organizational cultures. Within these organizational cultures humor resides, including specific types of joking cultures. Humor within higher education contexts serves myriad purposes. It may exist as a social corrective that surfaces oppressive structures in the workplace, or it may be used to fuel hegemonic practices that are intended to maintain power imbalances.

Much of the literature on humor provides optimistic viewpoints about applications of humor, given the caveat that it must be used appropriately. Holmes (2005, p. 26) notes that of the myriad purposes of humor in the workplace, one of its most important functions is the “construction and maintenance of good relations among workers.” If humor is used appropriately, it can serve as an effective communication tool for HRD practitioners and it can allow inequities to be broached. But within workplaces how is the appropriateness of humor judged? Unless applications of humor are dealt with systemically within workplaces, the appropriateness of humor will simply reside within each individual’s head. What is many times conceptualized or seen as inoffensive can actually represent a subtle but perverse impediment to individual and organizational effectiveness. Inequities in the workplace can be problematized by processes that allow power structures to become transparent, and underlying beliefs to be surfaced and critiqued.

Humor exists in all cultures, and yet it exists uniquely in all cultures. Although theorizing about humor has existed for centuries, its entrance into HRD literature is recent and limited. This exploratory study encourages additional research that utilizes a feminist approach, and positions humor as a research construct within the theory and practice of HRD. Additional research is needed that explores disparate theories of humor, such as those that focus on superiority and relief, and consider them through a feminist lens in the research and practice of HRD. In addition, studies considering humor in the workplace are also necessary to determine the informal education/learning dimension it possesses. Combining these research lines can provide a holistic framework of great value to the field of HRD. The application of humor in the workplace is a rich vein of inquiry that is waiting to be mined.

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