

Researchers explore the purpose of offensive humour

May 10 2017, by Simon Weaver And Karen Morgan



Ricky Gervais has faced a lot of criticism for jokes perceived as offensive.
Credit: Matt Hobbs/Flickr, CC BY-SA

Some people believe that offensive humour such as sexist or racist jokes can help break down barriers and challenge prejudice. Others simply find it appalling. The topic is clearly sensitive and often leads to discussions about free speech, morality and political correctness. But what can academic research tell us about the implications of offensive joking?

We examined the the subject looking at jokes about [rape](#) that have [appeared in the media in recent years](#) with some regularity. High profile comedians that have used rape jokes include Jimmy Carr, Frankie Boyle, Dapper Laughs, Daniel Tosh, Sarah Silverman and Ricky Gervais. All of these jokes are different.

Some researchers argue that offensive jokes do not have any wider implications – they are inconsequential or "just jokes". This view broadly sees the criticism of offensive [humour](#) as a part of "political correctness", which is viewed as a movement that encourages censorship and threatens liberty and [free speech](#).

But [there is psychological research](#) on humour that denigrates, belittles, or maligns an individual or social group that argues the opposite. This work [has found](#) that such jokes act "as a releaser of existing prejudice". One study even found that exposure to sexist humour can [decrease male perceptions of the seriousness of rape](#).

Another study found that women were more likely to [view themselves as objects](#) and worry more about their bodies after viewing sexist humour. This research suggested that although jokes may not instantly change the world, they may affect people at an interpersonal level.

Some research argues that there are positive effects of offensive humour – usually as a form of resistance. The use of racist stereotypes by black and minority ethnic comedians has been shown to have the [potential to](#)

[undermine racism](#). Disabled comedians have also ridiculed stereotypes of the disabled by [reversing the offensive comments of the non-disabled](#). But the success of this "reverse joking" has a lot to do with the identity of the [comedian](#) – white and non-disabled comedians joking about black or disabled people have to work much harder not to reinforce stereotypes.

Case studies

Not surprisingly, in rape jokes the [common themes are often](#) sexual objectification, devaluation and violence. Our own research examined the few rape jokes that have been told by British comedian Ricky Gervais. There are two or three in his stand-up routines, and a few more on child abuse. Jokes can always be taken or "read" in more than one way. This small number of jokes garnered [significant criticism](#) on social media. Here is [one such joke from 2010](#):

"I've done it once, I'm not proud of it in the slightest. I'm fucking ashamed of it. I wasn't drunk, I was over the limit. That was Christmas and I took the car out and I knew I shouldn't. I knew at the time I shouldn't be in the car. But I learned my lesson 'cos I nearly killed an old woman. In the end I didn't kill her. In the end, I just raped her. But as I say nothing came of it 'cos luckily, thousand to one shot I know, she had Alzheimer's. Yeah, not a credible witness."

Gervais [defended the joke online](#): "The joke clearly revolves around the misdirection in the term 'nearly killed', suggesting narrowly avoided. But, as it turns out, 'nearly killed' means something much, much worse. A big taboo, but comically justified I feel." When Gervais defends the joke as "comically justified" he is really suggesting that he thinks it might be satirical – he is attempting to do more than simply laugh at rape. This relies on "nearly killed" meaning different things in different contexts.

But despite Gervais' intention, it is not possible to avoid the problematic misogynistic reading. And the satirical reading is not obvious. In the "lead-in" when setting up the joke he was not talking about satirical attitudes towards rape but to public service adverts on drink driving. The punchline relies on the statement "I just raped her" which connotes that rape is not serious and certainly not as serious as being "nearly killed".

There is no clear anti-rape satire developed in the joke. The lines about the woman not being a credible witness trivialises the criminality of rape – a social problem that is often cited in relation to justice for [rape victims](#). Again, the satire is not well developed.

Meanwhile, US comedian Sarah Silverman has joked about rape in a way that is more obviously satirical:

"Needless to say, rape, the most heinous crime imaginable. Seems it's a comic's dream, though. Because it seems that when you do rape jokes that, like, the material is so dangerous and edgy. But the truth is it's like the safest area to talk about in comedy. That's the trick. Cause who's going to complain about a rape joke? Rape victims? They don't even report rape. I mean, they're just traditionally not complainers."

Silverman directs her joke at male comedians who tell rape jokes. She juxtaposes a rhetoric of edgy taboo breaking with a reality of victims to critique male comedians who use rape in their comedy. Indeed, she highlights a hypocritical culture which simultaneously refer to rape as a serious crime, [while also laughing at rape jokes](#).

Offensive humour is political and highlights a connection between our identities, politics and the pleasure of laughter. When people engage in joking about rape or sexual assault – [Donald Trump is perhaps a good example here](#) – there are intended and unintended consequences for society. In contributing to a blurred distinction between a culture of

sexual abuse and humour, rape jokes may contribute to the normalisation of such abuse and make it more difficult than it already is for victims of sexual abuse to speak out.

There may be a place and time for certain offensive humour. But if you're unsure about just how damaging a [joke](#) could be, it may be wise to think it over one more time before delivering it.

This article was originally published on [The Conversation](#). Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Researchers explore the purpose of offensive humour (2017, May 10) retrieved 10 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2017-05-explore-purpose-offensive-humour.html>

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