Men win humor test (by a hair)

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Men just don't evolve. (winning caption); Oh, no, cavemen, is he going to eat me? (most often eliminated in the first round); In the tournament-style rating system used in the study, two captions were pitted against each other and participants chose the funnier of the two. In this case, the top caption was the overall winner, and the bottom one was most often eliminated in the first round. Credit: © Mick Stevens/The New Yorker Collection/www.cartoonbank.com

Men are funnier than women, but only just barely and mostly to other men. So says a psychology study from the University of California, San Diego Division of Social Sciences.

While the findings lend some support to the stereotype on gender differences and humor – perhaps most vociferously and provocatively argued in recent memory by author Christopher Hitchens in his 2007 Vanity Fair article "Why Women Aren't Funny" – they also undermine the standard explanations as to why. The standard explanations are

usually variations on an evolutionary sexual-selection argument that likens a man's humor to a peacock's fancy tail or a deer's rack of antlers, useful primarily for showing off and impressing potential mates.

Besides, said the study's first author Laura Mickes, a postdoctoral researcher in the UC San Diego Department of Psychology and a Ph.D. graduate of the same department, "The differences we find between men's and women's ability to be funny are so small that they can't account for the strength of the belief in the stereotype."

Men edged out women by 0.11 points out of a theoretically possible perfect score of 5.0, while about 90 percent of both male and female study participants agreed with the stereotype that men are funnier.

The study, published in the journal *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review,* used a controlled version of The New Yorker cartoon caption contest to reach its conclusions.

Coauthors on the study are Nicholas Christenfeld, a UC San Diego professor of psychology, graduate students Drew Walker and Julian Parris, and Robert Mankoff, cartoon editor for The New Yorker.

Male prowess at the task of being funny on command, said Christenfeld, was "just at the edge of detectability," and men scored better with other men than with women.

The study team ran two separate but related experiments. The first experiment had 16 undergraduate males and 16 undergraduate females writing captions alone in a quiet room for 20 New Yorker cartoons in 45 minutes, for a total of 640 captions. All were instructed to be as funny as they could be.

Though writing captions may not be the most "natural" way to be funny,

Christenfeld and Mickes explained, it has several distinct advantages, including a level playing field to determine what people are capable of doing (as opposed to what they do in social settings and day-to-day life, which could be governed by other factors). It also helps eliminate the effect of bias in the humor ratings since it is harder to tell, despite writer V.S. Naipaul's claims to the contrary, whether the writer is a man or a woman from written words alone.

The second phase of the first experiment had 34 male and 47 female undergraduates helping to rate the captions written earlier in a five-round knockout tournament: One cartoon image was displayed with two random and anonymous captions, and the raters chose the funnier of the two at their own pace. The process, with new captions each time, was repeated for all 32 captions for each cartoon. The 16 winning captions of round one were then randomly pitted against each other and so on. The number of rounds, from zero to five, that captions survived before being knocked out determined the writers' average scores.

True to the conventional wisdom, men did better than women, but not by much: Male writers earned an average 0.11 more points than female writers. But what's even more interesting, the researchers say, and what runs contrary to the standard explanations of why men might be funnier, is that men did better with other men: Female raters allocated only an average 0.06 more points to the male writers, while the male raters gave them a significantly higher average of 0.16 more points.

"Sad for the guys," Christenfeld said, "who think that by being funny they will impress the ladies, but really just impress other men who want to impress the ladies."

In a second, related experiment, the researchers tested memory and memory bias to see if men are credited with being funnier than they really are.

As expected, funny captions were remembered better than unfunny ones. The authors of funny captions were remembered better too. But humor was more often misremembered "as having sprung from men's minds," the researchers write. And, even more telling, Mickes said, when the study participants were guessing at authors' gender, unfunny captions were more often misattributed to women and funny captions were more often misattributed to men.*

So if the study is right and men are just a skosh more funny, why might that be? In analyzing the content of the captions, the researchers noted that men used profanity and sexual humor a little more frequently (about 4 vs. 2 percent of the time), but that didn't seem to account for the "win" since that style of caption didn't necessarily do better, with either sex.

It could be that men see more opportunities to take a stab at humor, said Christenfeld. It could be that they try harder or more often.

As The New Yorker cartoon editor Mankoff observed on his blog in May, after film critic Roger Ebert won the caption contest on his 107th try: Nine of the top 10 most devoted entrants, or "überenterers," are men. While fewer women win the actual contest, far fewer of them enter. When they do enter, though, their success rates are pretty impressive. Looking at contests #250 through #282, there are 32 winners, with 22 men and 10 women, Mankoff writes: "The 22 winning men entered an average of 70.22 contests, but the 10 women averaged 6.4 entries – and four of them won on their first attempt."

It remains for further research to ferret out the reasons men might be the marginally funnier sex. In the meanwhile, the current paper had one other finding worth noting: When asked to predict their own performance on a scale of one to five, the men figured they'd get a 2.3, and the women, a more modest 1.5. That is, the difference in self-assessment was greater than the actual difference detected by the

contest. "Male confidence, in this domain at least," the researchers write, "does seem to outstrip male competence."

*Mickes declined to make any funny comments because they'd be attributed to her male coauthors anyway.

Provided by University of California - San Diego

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