



**“Must a Woman be Funny in Order to be Taken Seriously?
Some Thoughts on Gender and Humor.”**

By Steve Wilson, MA, CSP

©Copyright, All Rights Reserved

Do men and women laugh at the same things? Is women’s humor any kinder than men’s? If a man and a woman both tell the same joke, will they be perceived differently? Who has greater social freedom to laugh out loud? Who is more expected to be able to take a joke and dish one out? Why are there disproportionately more male comedians, humorists, and comedy writers? I don’t claim to have all the answers, but there is some research and a lot of interesting information on the subject.

Pundits, performers, pedagogues, and other personalities have become fascinated with the difference between men and women on everything from muscle strength and depth perception to forming friendships, from health to leadership, fashion sense and conversational styles. Well, they’re finally getting around to a topic that really interests me, and where we once again see a double standard: humor.

Are Women Funny, Or What?

The idea that “a woman must be funny in order to be taken seriously” is illuminated by management psychologist Dr. Barbara Mackoff in “What Mona Lisa Knew: A Woman’s Guide to Getting Ahead in Business by Lightening Up” (Lowell House, 1990). She cites many personal experiences (her own and others’) and the results of a series of studies to reinforce and justify her conclusion about the need of women showing a good sense of humor.

Gender differences in the use of humor are distinct and apparent from an early age. In sense of humor, appreciation of humor, production of humor, or laughter, I believe that gender role training rather than biology accounts for most of the differences between men and women.

Simply stated, in our culture little boys are taught to be the source of humor while little girls are taught to be the audience. Comedy writer Anne Beatty, in her article “Why More Women Aren’t Funny,” points out one of the resulting patterns of the insidious double standard. “If you were a boy,” she says, “having a sense of humor meant pouring salt on the head of the girl who sat in front of you to make it look as though she has

dandruff. If you were a girl, having a sense of humor meant laughing when someone poured salt on your head.”

Many people have the impression that women never tell jokes or aren't very good at telling them. Many women have been made timid about humor and laughter by ever-lurking Victorian ideas such as: women should always be able to take a joke but not get a certain innuendo; and, women should laugh along with the laugh track, smile perpetually, and not laugh with their mouths open.

The gender differences are palpable in childhood and can last a lifetime. According to psychologist Rose Coser, in this culture, it's generally expected that the man will initiate the humor and the woman will be passive and receptive.

Research findings support the notion that men and women have different comfort levels about taking center stage or having power. Certainly, women do tell jokes, and many can do it well. However, they are likely to choose to do so under different circumstances than men choose.

According to linguistics professor Deborah Tannen, in *You Just Don't Understand: Woman and Men in Conversation*, “Many women (certainly not all) laugh at jokes but do not later remember them. Since they are not driven to seek and hold center stage in a group, they do not need a store of jokes to whip out for this purpose.” She concludes that much joking fits in with a competitive style that is more comfortable for men.

Tannen also reported, “Although some women are great raconteurs who can keep a group spellbound by recounting jokes and funny stories, there are fewer such personalities among women than among men. Many women who do tell jokes to large groups of people come from ethnic backgrounds in which verbal performance is highly valued. Although it is not true that women do not tell jokes, it is true that many women are less likely than men to tell jokes in large groups, especially groups including men.”

Writing for “Laugh it Up,” the newsletter of the American Association for Therapeutic Humor, Karen Buxman, RN, observes, “I think we're beginning to see a new and welcome trend. The Phyllis Diller style of self-effacing humor is being replaced with a new (and riskier) brand of humor. We see women challenging authority and refusing to take it seriously. We are seeing the emergence of feminist humor (don't let the F word scare you off). According to Gloria Kaufman, feminist humor is concerned with ‘the transfer of power from those who have it to those who have too little... It invites ‘victims’ to change their wrong behavior and join the laughter... Feminist humor strives to educate both weak and powerful in order to stimulate change in the direction of justice.’”

Personally, I find little connection between sense of humor and ability to tell jokes. Sense of humor is largely about appreciation of the absurd or ludicrous - seeing the non-serious element in a situation. Telling jokes has to do with memory, delivery, and timing. So, you may know people who are great at telling jokes but don't have a very good sense of humor. Whereas, you may be terrible at telling jokes, yet have a terrific sense of humor.

Why Bother With Humor?

There are many reasons human beings might want to develop a good sense of humor. The benefits abound in health, relationships, creativity, and joie de vivre, and there is some recent evidence that your good sense of humor can benefit your career.

It should interest you to know, especially if you are a career-minded woman who wants to “climb to the top”, that “84% of personnel directors stated that employees with a sense of humor did a better job, and 99% of CEO’s stated a preference for job candidates with a sense of humor. Yet, when 200 executives were asked to name the qualities that kept women from succeeding, lack of a sense of humor was near the top of the list.” Studies also show that employees with a sense of humor are viewed as more flexible, creative, and adaptable to change. These are highly desirable employee qualities, especially for supervisors, managers, and executives.

Donna Couper, a business consultant, says, “Even in a job interview, assuming you’re qualified for the position, showing that you have a sense of humor will make your prospective employer feel more comfortable with you.” Management consultant Fred Pryor asks, “Who would you rather have working on your company’s problems: a staff of stuffy bureaucrats or people who can see some humor in life?”

Contemporary Thinking About Women And Humor

Mackoff suggests that, humor-wise, it’s time to reconsider some of our beliefs about successful women:

Faulty Belief #1: She can’t risk being funny (or she won’t be taken seriously)

REALITY: “A woman can be funny and still maintain her credibility.” You do, however, need to learn how to use the right humor at the right time.

Faulty Belief #2: She must strive for perfection (she can’t afford to be wrong)

REALITY: Perfectionism will hold you back. “Paralyzed by the thought of being wrong, you will be unable to take risks, create alliances, gamble on hunches, or suggest bold ideas - to do the very things that make you shine in the workplace.”

Faulty Belief #3: She must hide her “feminine side”

REALITY: Slowly, but surely, good humored women are coming out of hiding. Regina Barreca, author of “They Used to Call Me Snow White... But I Drifted: Women’s Strategic Use of Humor,” says that women’s humor “may be undervalued, but it’s priceless. It may have been ignored or challenged, but it has always been a secretly potent, delightfully dangerous, wonderfully seductive, and, most important, powerful way to make ourselves heard, to capture the attention, the heart, and the respect of our audience.”

Faulty Belief #4: She always attacks sexism (she must be on guard)

REALITY: There is a difference between sexual heckling which, according to Mackoff, if you learn a few techniques, can be well managed with humor, and sexual harassment,

which is serious and may require formal action. Mackoff: "As a successful woman, you can be freer to stop personalizing a man's patronizing comments... As a confident woman, you can allow yourself to stop generalizing about men." You can learn to respond with certain kinds of male humor "often cruel and aggressive - without imitating it."

In Conclusion...

What all this says to me is that women need to have and use their good sense of humor to both react to and initiate humor. But doing so constitutes a role-reversal which will often be met with backlash. A degree of awareness combined with mastery of the ways to use humor strategically improves a woman's chances of attracting power and credibility rather than inviting resistance and derision.

Ideas About Humor (From Women)

"Acting is not very hard. The most important things are to be able to laugh and cry. If I have to cry, I think of my sex life. And if I have to laugh, well, I think of my sex life." - Glenda Jackson

"The trouble with the rat race is that even if you win, you're still a rat."
-Lily Tomlin

"The best kind of men can laugh in bed and joke and play like children."
-Merle Schain

"We're happy because we laugh, not the other way around."
-Annette Goodheart, Ph.D.

"Women take the decision to marry seriously, but the courtship has also got to be lighthearted." -Alice Kolator

"You grow up the day you have your first real laugh - at yourself."
-Ethel Barrymore

"A mime is a terrible thing to waste." -Lynn Kassan

"It is when humor restores proportion that our blind eye is open."
-Lorraine Risley

"I can't be happy every day but, at least, I can be cheerful."
-Beverly Sills

"Nonsense makes the heart grow fonder." -Carolyn Wells

Steve Wilson is a psychologist, speaker and author, living in Columbus, Ohio. He is the Cheerman of The Bored of World Laughter Tour, Inc. and USA Laughter Clubs. For more information visit his website www.stevewilson.com, or www.worldlaughtertour.com, or phone 1-800-669-5233.