

Jokes and Their Relation to Gender Orders

By Mostafa Abedinifard

An interesting and promising way of approaching the understanding of societies is to investigate their folklores and popular cultures, an aspect of which is humor. Humor has attracted the attention of many contemporary scholars from various disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. However, humor's seriousness has long been under debate. A look at some well-known scholarship on humor demonstrates that humor scholars have frequently felt the need to justify their serious inquiries into the realm of humor, hence revealing the pressure. Some scholars have actually argued for the significant role of humor, however, seem to have been as compelling as that of Michael Billig in *Towards a Social Critique of Humour* (2005). Building upon the humor goes so far as to argue that humor, in the form of ridicule, plays a contentious, the disciplinary (i.e., both controlling and punitive) function causing ridicule (by threatening to make us, or actually making us, the us to follow the course of social life. If "[w]ithout the possibility of cludes, "an understanding of humour is necessary for understanding sufficiently studied in its relation to humor, is gender.



of a presumption deeming that the humorous not be approached seriously in informing the serious. None of their arguments, his groundbreaking, yet ill-received book, *Laughter and Ridicule: humor and sociological theories of Bergson, Freud and Goffman, Billig necessary role in maintaining all social life. In this process, Billig of humor plays a vital role: the (fear/prospect) of embarrassment-object of others' laughter) acts as a social control strategy that causes laughter, serious social life could not be sustained," then, Billig con-serious social life." One significant aspect of serious social life, insuf-*

Despite some scholars' acknowledgment of the importance of teasing and ridicule in the process of gender-socialization, the disciplinary role of ridicule in sustaining gender orders, although sporadically recognized, has not yet received thorough attention. Gender order is defined as "the historically constructed pattern of power relations between men and women and definitions of masculinity and femininity." More importantly, no argument has been made for any necessary function ridicule may serve in the preservation of gender orders of societies, through sustaining the prevalent gender relations and "hierarchies of bodies". In fact, most research on gender and bodily norms ignores the role of ridicule in constructing gender and bodily normativity. Furthermore, a common problem among existing analyses of gender humor is that they either ignore or inadequately study subtleties regarding the disciplinary aspects of such humor, especially by failing to employ a holistic theory of gender and power capable of accounting for the complexities of power relations in gender humor. At best, such analyses provide us with certain sporadic themes in the humor they analyze, but fail to collect such isolated themes under an overarching theory of gender that tends to explain such elements as multiple masculinities and femininities, different sexual orientations, (dis)ability, race, class, age, and ethnicity—as far as these intersect with gender.

Consequently, despite the research performed on gender and gender humor, the interplay of humor as a socio-linguistic act and gender as a structure of social practice has not yet been thoroughly theorized. To fill these gaps in gender studies and gender humor research, I integrate Raewyn Connell's theory of gender with some functionalist theories of humor—and in particular that of Billig—to move towards a social theory of gender humor. Connell's social theory of gender, and especially her gender hierarchy model, based on her malleable key concept of hegemonic masculinity, seems to be highly promising in filling the abovementioned gap in the existing analyses of gender humor. This I will be doing in my PhD dissertation, which I am writing and that I have tentatively titled "Ridicule and Its Relation to Gender and Power: A Social Theory of Gender Humour and its Connection with Gender Order." For primary texts, I will focus on the folkloric and pop culture genres of the verbal joke and the sitcom. The research involves categorizing and analyzing a corpus of Anglo-American and Iranian contemporary jokes as well as examining episodes from the sitcoms *Ellen* (1994-98) and *Two and a Half Men* (2003-). It will be argued that the gender orders of the societies under discussion have induced systematic clusters of mainstream gender humor, which then reflect (on), patrol, and reinforce their corresponding gender orders. I will also discuss the issue of the rebellious or subversive gender humor—as a supposed antidote to the disciplinary power of the mainstream gender humor. Rebellious gender humor will be shown to have unsolicited conservative effects, too. In conclusion, I will debate the implications of my arguments for gender studies and activities. In search of solutions to the problem of the disciplinarity of the mainstream gender humor, a two-fold remedy is suggested as beneficial: not only, while encountering mainstream gender humour, must we take what Allan G. Johnson deems as "paths of greater resistance" (in his conceptualization of the interconnectedness of the social system and the social practice), but equally importantly, we must seriously strive to change the current hierarchical gender orders of our societies as a significant precondition for any change in the gender humor of our societies to follow.

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