Gender Differences in the Practice and Enjoyment of Humour in Norway

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In recent Norwegian society we can observe great changes in the use and the apprehension of humour, both in the mass media and in the daily life of people. Changes occur in the expectations, practice and evaluation of humorous communication. The focus in this article is on the changes in gender differences as regards humour. Creating my sources through fieldwork and distributing detailed questionnaires, I have been careful to establish a body of material that reflects experiences and views held by the informants. The possibility of applying an internal perspective to the relationship between humour and gender gives an opportunity to concretize and qualify theoretically based knowledge of gender differences. In the main the reflections of the informants verify our knowledge of gender patterns in the use and interpretation of humour, but at the same time they demonstrate the variety of apprehensions inherent in this extensive field of communication.

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Humour research is multidisciplinary and is characterised by a diversity of angles and theories. Analyses based on research within different disciplines have pointed out gender differences in the creating and use of humour. The content of the humour applied might have different meaning for the two sexes. In the social setting men are in general reported to be more aggressive, while women are said to use humour as oil in the social machinery (McGhee 1979a).

Folklorists show a continuing interest in gender topics. Several studies show how the social experiences and identities of people incorporate gender as an integrated element in performance and repertoire profiles of folklore (see Mills 1998). However, the relationship of humour and gender has not been much focused by folklorists (see Kinnunen 1998). Most research concerning this subject has been conducted in the fields of psychology and social psychology.

Being a folklorist, I mainly concentrate on the use of humour in folk culture. In recent society, however, folk culture could not be studied disconnected from the influence of mass culture and the deterritorialization of culture caused by the globalization processes (Anttonen 1998:6). The globalization processes change traditional culture and values, including traditional gender systems, and thus change traditional attitudes towards humour as well. Though many jokes of course still are orally transmitted, much humorous communication in today's society is mediated through electronically audio-visual techniques, especially by mass media like television and film.

There are great differences in the importance and values ascribed to humour in different cultures (Søbstad 1995:15). In Norway, traditional attitudes towards humour have varied consistently according to social and local normes, and of course according to age and gender (Johnsen 1997). Until recently the use of humour has been enacted within narrow frames among the middle and upper classes (Knutsen 1987, see even Kuipers 1998). Due to cultural conventions, traditionally verbal and practical

humorous activities have been favoured more by people in the region of Northern Norway than in the rest of the country (Knutsen 1987).

Today many variations between social and geographical groups are vanishing when it comes to traditional humour expressions; most interestingly traditional differences between the genders also seem less marked than before. However, new differences are being established, the generation gap is expanding strikingly due to the impact on young people from the mass media (Johnsen 1997:157). Changes are occurring in the expectations, practice and evaluation of humorous communication of the new generations.

The "View-from-the-Inside"

Humour is applied in many different types of communication and its meaning varies considerably according to the context in which it occurs. This is an important point when focusing on gender differences observed in humorous communication. The role of the individual is essential. Due to the dependence of the context and the ambiguity of the meaning, the individual variations of humorous communication cannot always be predicted. Especially feminist researchers have accused experimentally based research on humour and gender to be male biased and overlooking the female approach to humour (Sheppard 1986, Stillion and White 1987). This methodological problem can be overcome in folkloristic work if the study is based on analysis of the conceptualisations and notions on humour by the individual.

To apply a "view-from-the-inside" is a useful methodological point of departure. Current research based on the individual's self-understanding and terms has been carried out in a number of fields. This type of "view-from-the-inside" and related research might give an increased understanding of the basis of peoples' life and self-consciousness (Johnsen 1986).

In order to obtain a "view-from-the-inside" I have tried to establish a body of material on humour that reflects experiences and views held by the individual. I have been creating my sources through fieldwork and detailed postal questionnaires. The purpose of my research on humour has been twofold, to document the variations of humorous tradition in context and to make the individual respondents reflect on their relationship to humour. I therefore want to quote some of their utterances in the following.

In the years 1989–92, I travelled in the summers in the company of a professional humorist, Tore Skoglund, in Northern Norway. We recorded sessions of humorous story-telling and interviewed approximately fifty persons (Johnsen 1994). The collected material is now filed in the Norwegian Folklore Archives. This was qualitative field research, a dialogue between researcher and informant. The material reflects experiences and views held by the informants. I went on field research to interview people with a reputation as good story-tellers and active humorists. It will be no surprise to reveal that I met mostly men. I therefore decided to balance my empirical material with a survey showing a better gender distribution.

In 1995 I dispatched a detailed questionnaire to the regular informants of the archive of Norwegian Ethnological Research. These informants were in the main elderly people living in the countryside, so the questionnaire was also distributed to university students in the cities of Oslo and Trondheim. My questions were answered by fifty women and thirty-five men.

When designing the questionnaire, I was hoping to encourage the informants to reflect on questions related to humour in its social and cultural context. I was curious to get answers to questions like what motivates some individuals to endeavour to become good story-tellers and humorists, what are the values they ascribe to humorous communication, what types of humour they prefer and so on. In this way, an internal perspective is applied to a reflective level of analysis that is commonly focused on from an external perspective in folklore research.

Gender Patterns

Feminist researchers Judith Stillion and Hedy White claim that gender differences emerging in studies of humour seem to fall into four

categories: "First, research has shown that there are differences in the broad area of status which probably contribute to sex differences in humour.(...) Second, there are reliable sex differences in children's humour-related behaviour.(...) A third area that has shown sex differences is that of sexual and aggressive humour.(...) The fourth broad area in which sex differences in humour have been documented is that of humour appreciation based on the content of the humorous material" (Stillion and White 1987: 220, 221).

In order to get some empirical documentation of gender differences as cited above, both men and women in my body of research-material were asked to reflect on gender differences in their relationship to humour, and many of them took care to do this explicitly. The informants sent me more than 850 stories and jokes they characterise as humorous. Of even greater importance is the fact that they consciously describe how they use humour in daily life and give their opinion of the use of humour in today's society, and more specifically in the mass media. There is no doubt that both geographical and social belonging are important variables to explain individual differences in the use and apprehension of humour. But even more striking is the difference between the reports from the female and male informants about their actual verbal and situational humorous activities, and the individual nuances are fascinating. Men are all in the main more active and aggressive than women are, and they use humour more often in public arenas.

Looking for the established humorous categories, some of them belonging to well-known folklore genres as jokes and practical jokes, gender differences reported and observed in Norwegian humour activities in my research all in the main support general theories of traditional gender differences in humour (Søbstad 1995:60). But the reported individual experiences and appreciations of humour are important because of their potential for concretising the subject. The most striking finding in my material when it comes to gender differences, is a distinct tendency for the women to report of participation in unexpected events they describe or interpret as situational humour. This is done mainly by the genre of blunder-stories, mostly with themselves as the embarrassed part of the plot. "Self-irony and other self-directed humour is also considered a form of humour characteristic of women", to quote the Finnish folklorist Eeva-Liisa Kinnunen (1998: 407).

Humour in Public Arenas

According to Kinnunen, "... humour has long been considered an exclusively male domain in Finland as well as in other Western countries" (1998:403). With some few but outstanding female exceptions, public arenas of humorous communication have until recently been totally dominated by males in Norway as well. But even if the women traditionally have been reserved about drawing attention to themselves by telling jokes and anecdotes in public, they make frequent use of humour on more private occasions. The latter finding supports research where – according to some findings – "women's humour is more context-bound and more intense when it arises spontaneously from a situation, while men prefer to tell formal jokes" (Kinnunen 1998:407).

In Norway, as mentioned above, the use of humour in public is dominated by men. The women in my research have various explanations for this phenomenon. Marriage was an obstacle to some. To quote a female teacher: "During the first years of our marriage it became a matter-of-course that it was the task of my husband to tell the jokes in public and informal gatherings. It is still customary that most married women I know leave it to their husbands to be the funny one of the couple." [1]

Why Are Women Lousy Joke-Tellers?

Many female informants claim that the presence of men often prevents women from engaging in humour activities. On the other hand, they also report that on private occasions with only women participating, they generally prefer to use short, humorous comments and replies or short, personal stories rather than long stories like the anecdotes and tall tales that are the men's favourites. Even when it comes to

jokes, they report that men tell jokes much more often than women do. Many of the women claim that the reason is that they simply cannot remember jokes. As one says: "I don't know any jokes. I like to hear them, but don't remember them. But my husband often tells jokes and stories in daily life." [2]

Many of the women complain that they are not clever story-tellers or jokers. Reading their reports about their use of and attitudes towards humour carefully, makes it rather obvious that the reason for the reported bad memory of the women when it comes to joke-telling should be traced to the lack of training in these skills. Most good humorists and jokers practise a great deal, they strive to achieve their skills. Approval from an audience, be it only the nearest family members or friends, is crucial. The reports of my female informants reveal that women are not normally expected to be clever story-tellers and jokers, neither by the women themselves nor by their audiences. As the Danish psychologist Martin Führ has shown, "children who always come up with a joke or a funny remark generally have a high status in class. However, there is considerable difference in the ratings of boys and girls" (Führ 1998:2). In his research of Danish school-children, Führ manages to demonstrate how boys actually get a very good ranking for telling jokes, while girls cannot obtain the same status for this skill.(See Führ, Figure 2: "Social status through telling jokes".)

Another important reason for the female lack of training in telling formal jokes, is the fact that the way women usually come together does not give much opportunity to develop independent humour activities. The main purpose of women's talk often is to establish non-hierarchic and empathetic relations (Tannen 1992). In this type of conversation neither jokes nor long, humorous stories fit. Humorous comments and replies, on the other hand, are easy to use during women-to-women talk. "Women's speech is usually more modest or careful, less aggressive and more directed at creating and maintaining rapport with other people. Women's humour has been described in ways that seem to fit this pattern," to quote the Dutch sociologist Giselinde Kuipers (1998:9).

According to the American linguist Deborah Tannen, the purpose of men's talk is often to keep their freedom and to retain or establish status. Men often do this by drawing attention to themselves by telling jokes and stories (Tannen 1992). As a female informant in Norway puts it: "It seems as if men are especially fond of telling stories. It is as if they have more of a need to hear people laugh at them, while women find it okay just to laugh at others, to be entertained, in a way." [3]

Another interesting explanation to the fact that most women are lousy joke-tellers, is offered by Kuipers. She analyses the telling of jokes as a type of communication style – and she finds that the telling of jokes represent a communication style many females object to, rather than to the jokes themselves. "Hardly anyone (of the women) objected to the content of the jokes – as long as they were not very offensive, usually meaning racist –; they objected to the fact that joke tellers drew too much attention to themselves, that they 'forced' other people into laughter, that they were 'loud' and that telling jokes was 'impersonal'" (Kuipers 1998:7).

An Obstacle to Contact?

Humour is important because the way we use humour can influence our relationships to other people. According to Mahadev L. Apte, "A significant amount of human communication is devoted to humor" (Apte 1992:67). Humour is "one of the most powerful tools available to humans in their communicative endeavours" (ibid.). This is an important aspect regarding the consequences of traditional gender differences observed in the use of and attitudes towards humour. Mostly the use of humour has a positive effect on human relations, expressing togetherness, closeness and identification. Nevertheless, humour may be used for establishing borders. When it comes to gender differences, the use of humour often expresses group solidarity with one's own sex, or makes the borders between the genders distinct – women laugh at men and the other way round. Especially the latter phenomenon seems the most common of the two.

Both the apprehension and the practice of

humour vary considerably according to our identification and the contextual situation. Therefore differences between the humour of women and men reveal much of the nature of the relationship between the sexes. First, there are general differences in the content of the humour preferred, second, it is thought-provoking to discover what women and men, when they are on their own, actually tell each other about the opposite sex. When the humour of the women concerns men, they love stories where the male actor is drunk, clumsy or not capable of mastering the situation in some way or another. Often the man in the humorous stories of the women has strayed into an area that is traditionally regarded as female, connected to housework, child-care and the like. Some funny stories are about men trying to buy sanitary towels for their women.

An important reason for using humour is the effort to establish a positive basis for contact between the sexes. From a gender perspective the use of humour nevertheless can just as much be an obstacle to contact as promoting it. A female informant writes: "Men use humour more often than women do. Sometimes at parties or in pubs they become annoying jokers and want to be appreciated as quick-witted. Women do not always understand that men are joking. Men exaggerate and turn things upside down but nevertheless have straight faces."[4]

Erotic Humour and Female Intruders

According to the answers of the informants, the most obvious difference between women and men is that men tell many more erotic stories and jokes than the women do. Their humour is usually far more obscene than the women's stories. Gender differences tend to be more distinct when it comes to erotic humour. It is common to have fun at the expense of the opposite sex, and humour of this type is often referred to at informal gatherings between women and men. A woman writes: "Men obviously have many more and coarser obscene erotic jokes, and they laugh at other things than women."[5] Many female informants are not enthusiastic about the male preference for obscene humour. An old female informant utters: "Jokes about sex can be funny, but very, very seldom."[6]

Scholars draw attention to the performance styles of male and female storytellers in social contexts and "the effects of teller-audience gender relations..." (Mills 1998:13). The material shows that there are different norms applied to how women and men may actually use erotic humour. Even in social groups where humorous display is accepted and encouraged, and the women are equally active story-tellers and jokers, it seems that women are not as free as men to use erotic humour. A clever female story-teller reports: "I think that much of the reserve of the women is caused by their fear of being looked upon as coarse. A man is not afraid of being coarse. Something else is expected of women." [7]

What are the attitudes of men towards women who actually use jokes about sex? These vary, of course, according to the social setting, but the research material reveals a gap between the attitudes men hold as theirs, and the attitudes the women say that they actually encounter from the men.[8] A male informant claims, for example, that women can safely tell just as obscene stories as men. Another male declares that women who respond to humour about sex are not looked down upon.[9] But a woman from the same milieu reports on the contrary that her experiences of using humour about sex are not positive. She says: "I have found, that if you are quick-witted and so on, men might take it as an invitation."[10] Unlike men, women have to take care if they want to use obscene humour, or else their sexual morality might be questioned.

Equal Rights for Women?

Of course, there is no doubt that the attitudes towards women participating in erotic humorous activities nevertheless have changed markedly during the last two generations. Some time ago, at least among the upper and middle classes, it was the rule that women should in no way show the least interest in sex, or reveal any knowledge about it. Therefore it was obvious that they could not laugh when confronted with erotic humour. A female informant writes: "In our family, if we heard a good story, we always

retold it when we came home. It was most enjoyable to tell my mother erotic jokes when she grew old. She belonged to a generation and a social group in which it was unthinkable to show openly that one could understand and even appreciate jokes of this type."[11]

The answers of the female informants reveal that in some humour situations there may be a social pressure that makes women accept humour that in fact offends their moral norms. Especially young women feel the social pressure not to show how embarrassed they are and feel bound to laugh with the group.

Erotic and obscene humour is used today much more freely by both sexes than before. We can observe an increasing acceptance of women applying it. On the other hand, we also see a development towards greater consciousness about the sexist content of much of this humour. Both female and male informants hold that humour about sex very often is not funny, because it can be too outspoken.

My informants discuss how erotic and obscene humour should be interpreted and understood. It seems that among most males it is looked upon as an expression of vitality rather than discrimination of women. To quote a male humorist: "If you lack a sense of humour, if you are suspicious, you might see nothing but bad in this type of humour. But it is actually a manifestation of life."[12]

It is important to realise that from a theoretical feminist point of view most of the erotic and obscene humour would have to be interpreted as "male-centred and hierarchical. Due to its hierarchical nature it is also a power system..." (Lipponen 1998: 345). This point of departure would hardly be confirmed by many of the male informants who actually create and use erotic humour. Even many of the women participating in such humorous communication would oppose to this type of feminist understanding of their use and pleasure of humour.

Humour-Behaviour as Expected

Gender differences in the making of and use of humour have been outlined from different disciplines. Most influential are the works of psychologists. Gender differences are explained by the American psychologist Paul McGhee in this way: "It is proposed here that a clearly definable set of sex-role standards regarding humour exists for males and females in our culture. Most important along theses lines is the expectation that males should be initiators of humour, while females should be responders.(...) Because of the power associated with the successful use of humour, humour initiation has become associated with other traditionally masculine characteristics, such as aggressiveness, dominance and assertiveness. For a female to develop into a clown or a joker, then, she must violate the pattern normally reserved for women" (McGhee 1979b:183–184).

As the Norwegian humour researcher Frode Søbstad points out, the gender differences of society also are expressed in the area of humour (Søbstad 1995:62). He observes that girls and boys prefer to a certain extent different content of humour, further that there are differences in the ways they meet with the media humour. The girls are more socially orientated, while the boys are more self-assertive. These differences also can be observed in their making of humour.

The answers to the questionnaires and the interviews shows that gender differences in the preferred form and content of the humour reported, briefly can be summarised as follows: My female informants reveal that they are fond of jokes and stories about children and humorous family anecdotes. They prefer blunder-stories of their own or of female friends rather than stories about dirty tricks. Almost all wicked practical jokes reported by both women and men have male actors. Many of the stories of the women refer to a situation in which a humorous comment or reply was uttered at the right moment. When their stories are about sex, it is above all stories of the innocent type, often with children as actors.

In daily life men are usually more active than women when it comes to humour. Most good story-tellers and jokers are men, and so are the perpetrators of crude practical jokes. The men still tell jokes and anecdotes from the Second World War (Johnsen 1997:103). They are fond of practical jokes and often report on their great efforts to obtain a reputation as good jokers or story-tellers. Unlike women, many of

the men report that they often intentionally create humorous situations to obtain raw material for making good stories to tell afterwards.

These findings correspond then to general theories of gender differences, as far as verbal combats, ritual insults and practical jokes seldom are part of women's humour (Apte 1985). But my empirical body of material leaves no doubts that when it comes to the talent for discovering humorous situations that unexpectedly occur in daily life, women seem just as observant as men. This phenomenon indicates that a sense of humour might be just as common among women as among men. All findings point to the fact that in spite of their sense of humour, the women are very passive due to social normes and cultural conventions like traditional gender expectations.

The American anthropologist Mahadev Apte points out in his book *Humor and Laughter* that in general, the humour of women lack the aggressive and hostile tone (mentality) that can be found in the humour of men (Apte 1985). His statement coincide with statements of several women in my empirical material. A main point to explain the reserved attitude of the women towards using humour is, as they explain themselves, the fear of hurting the feelings of other people. The female informants are rather preoccupied with the more aggressive and ambivalent traits of humour. They hold that they often don't use humour because they care for other people and don't want to hurt them. They also tell about men who lack social antennae and use humour in situations that the women describe as very unfitting.

Gender and Humour in a New Cultural Setting

So far I have mostly been preoccupied with the humour of everyday life. However, research has shown that the borders between humour presented in the media and the humour used in human interaction are blurred (Søbstad 1995:48). A good deal of the humour exposed in the media has its basis in everyday humour, while much of the humour of daily life has its origin or inspiration in people watching television (Fine 1977:333).

Today most people get an important part of their cultural frames of references and identity from the international flow of commercialised mass culture (Featherstone 1990, Smith 1990). Humour has quickly become a core value of the new, global mass culture, which may be regarded as being mainly of Anglo-American origin. The globalization processes have two main effects on culture – on the one hand the homogenisation and global spread of mass culture and on the other hand the increased significance of local and regional culture. On a national level the impulses both from the international mass culture and from the region of Northern Norway have caused a marked increase in the domestic production of humour programmes. Our humorists often study television and video programmes both of Norwegian and foreign origin to obtain inspiration and new ideas. The human models in these humour programmes have so far mostly been male.

Stand-up comedians are a phenomenon newly introduced to Norwegians by international mass culture. Only recently the first Norwegian female stand-up comedians have emerged. Much of the stand-up humour might be characterised as sexist. The female stand-up comics strive to establish an acceptable form and content for their humour that is not self-discriminating, a problem that they are working consciously to solve (Løvland 1996). It seems that the very setting of stand-up comedy is a bit awkward to handle for females who want to do something more than being self-ironical. To quote a Danish male stand-up comedian: "There are few women who are stand-up-comedians. (...) Comic is a kind of bungyjumping without safety net, and women are in general more afraid of showing themselves off without a safety net" (*Politiken* 1998).

In Norway the popular television programmes *Baluba* and *Weekend-Globoid*, have drawn attention to a new, non-traditional female way of using humour. The programmes were produced in 1996 and 1998 with female humorist Synnøve Svabø, for the state broadcasting, NRK 1. It has been argued that new types of norm-breaking humour-programmes first are established on the state channel, because the commercial channels would not take

the risk of loosing audience. Commercial channels do not promote the untypical feminine, says media-researcher Wencke Mühleisen (*Dagbladet* 1998).

These programmes showed a female humour that was quick-witted, playful, and above all disrespectful. Svabø managed to get our former prime minister into a situation where he touched her breasts in public – a genuine moment of situational humour. But in spite of the positive response to Svabø's humour, it is thought-provoking that the underlying theme of her humour is the very fact that she is a female. She is constantly playing with the various roles of women and her own sexuality – a phenomenon that hardly would have been necessary for a professional male humorist.

Weekend-Globoid was as a satirical weekly review in which the ironical, glamorous staging of the self was central. Svabø signalised a reflexive, playful female draft, a figure which implies a break with traditional female representations (Mühleisen 1998:1). Mühleisen points out how Svabø by means of self-irony and satirical sting embraces a low culture women's community. But in spite of the enormous audience response, Svabø has so far refused to go on making new programmes at this line. She needs a time-out (*VG* 1998).

New female humour models exposed in the mass media certainly will change traditional gender patterns in the use and apprehension of humour in daily life. But only time will show if Svabø's programmes signalize the beginning of a new trend in established gender patterns or if this non-traditional type of humour will remain merely a mass-media phenomenon.

Concluding Remarks

This article has outlined some gender differences in the practice and enjoyment of humour in recent Norwegian society. These differences may partly be seen as a consequence of traditional gender systems, partly be traced to recent changes both in gender roles and in the apprehension of humour. The possibility of applying an internal perspective to the relationship of humour and gender gives an opportunity to arrive at specific, nuanced knowledge of gender differences that elsewhere is mainly theoretically based. In the main the reflections of the informants verify our knowledge of gender patterns in the use and interpretation of humour, but at the same time they show the variety of apprehensions inherent in this extensive field of communication. Above all, humorous activities are unpredictable, they are dependent on inspiration on the spot, creativity and the wish to surprise the audience. Therefore theoretical humour research needs to be corrected and even based on studies of the individual's practice and apprehension of humour.

Notes

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1. NEG (Norsk Etnologisk Gransking) 31664.
2. NEG 31668.
3. NEG 31656.
4. NEG 31735.
5. NEG 31660.
6. NEG 31662.
7. NFS (Norsk Folkeminnesamling) Nord-Norge, bånd 36.
8. NEG 31643.
9. NFS, Nord-Norge, bånd 19.
10. NFS, Nord-Norge, bånd 36.
11. NEG 31664.
12. NFS, Nord-Norge, bånd 19.

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