# Who's Laughing Now? The Effects of Sexist and Rape Humor

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ABSTRACT. The present study explored the effects of sexist humor and rape jokes on behavior toward women and rape myth acceptance in both women and men. Prior studies have suggested that exposure to sexist humor leads men who are high in hostile sexism to behave in a discriminatory manner toward women, and feel less ashamed for doing so (Ford, Boxer, Armstrong, & Edel, 2008). It was therefore predicted that sexist and rape jokes would increase rape myth acceptance and sexist behavior. Participants were 96 undergraduates. In partial support of predictions, sexist jokes increased rape myth acceptance among high-hostile sexist men more than nonsexist jokes, $F(1, 42) = 5.58$, $p = .02$, $\eta_P^2 = .12$. Additionally, among participants high in hostile sexism, sexist jokes increased rape myth acceptance more in men than in women, $F(1, 42) = 4.97$, $p = .03$, $\eta_P^2 = .11$. However, there was no evidence to suggest that sexist jokes increased sexist behavior by making participants less likely to donate to a women's organization. The implications of these empirical findings and participants' qualitative responses to the topics of rape and sexism are discussed, and amendments to Ford and Ferguson's (2004) prejudiced norm theory are proposed.
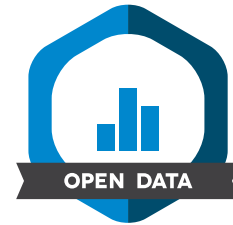
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Despite efforts to create an egalitarian learning environment in colleges, sexism remains a virulent problem on campuses. Diary studies, in which college students were asked to daily record sexist events that they witnessed or by which they were targeted, have revealed that female students are exposed to as many as 3.45 sexist events per day, and that these sexist events harm their sense of comfort, mood, and self-esteem (Brinkman & Rickard, 2009; Swim, Hyers, Cohen, & Ferguson, 2001). Among these sexist events are sexist jokes, which belong to the larger category of disparagement humor: jokes that demean some social group. Aside from creating distress in its targets, disparagement humor has been proposed to perpetuate cultural and societal prejudice, thereby widening power imbalances between dominant and disadvantaged groups (Ford &

Ferguson, 2004).

Recent studies have suggested that the ability of disparaging jokes to change attitudes depends on preexisting societal attitudes toward the disparaged groups and the groups' societal status (Ford, 2000; Ford, Woodzicka, Triplett, Kochersberger, & Holden, 2014; Greenwood & Isbell, 2002). Social groups toward which society holds ambivalent attitudes may be more vulnerable to being the target of discriminatory attitudes as a result of disparaging humor.

Ford et al. (2014) tested the effect of targeting "ambivalent" social groups such as Muslims on people's tolerance of discriminatory events in a series of experiments. Tolerance of discriminatory events was measured by the degree of self-directed negative affect (e.g., shame) that individuals reported they would experience upon witnessing

such events. Their findings support the idea that disparagement humor increases tolerance of discriminatory events only for groups toward which society holds ambivalent attitudes. Understanding *why* and *how* this occurs is crucial to addressing the issue of sexist humor.

In initial research on the attitudinal effects of disparagement humor, it was proposed that exposure to such humor would increase discriminatory attitudes toward the disparaged group by making negative stereotypes more accessible (Olson, Maio, & Hobden, 1999). If attitudinal change toward disparaged groups were a function of increased stereotype accessibility or a priming effect, then disparaging statements should produce an effect similar to that of the disparaging jokes. However, studies comparing the effect of sexist jokes to sexist statements and neutral jokes have shown that they have approximately the same effect on sexist attitudes, and sexist jokes produce significantly more sexist attitudes (Ford, 2000; Ford, Wentzel, & Lorion, 2001; Gray & Ford, 2013). This finding strongly suggests that there is something unique about humorous communication. The prevailing explanation for the unique effect of disparaging jokes is that humor endorses a noncritical mindset—that is, a mindset that interprets only the superficial features of a communication (e.g., tone, facial cues) rather than its deeper meaning. In so doing, disparagement humor trivializes "discrimination under the veil of benign amusement, thus precluding challenges or opposition that nonhumorous [discriminatory] communication would likely incur" (Ford, Boxer, Armstrong, & Edel, 2008, p. 159). However, the trivialization of discrimination is only the first step in the process of channeling exposure to disparagement humor into freer expression of discriminatory attitudes.

Ford and Ferguson (2004) have proposed prejudiced norm theory as the mechanism by which disparagement humor changes attitude expression. The theory states that disparagement humor does not change the evaluative content of stereotypes—that is, the degree to which an individual agrees with stereotypes about a group. Moreover, an individual's evaluative content of stereotypes is generally regarded as stable across situations, however this theory also posits that it increases tolerance of discriminatory events among people already high in prejudice. This increases the likelihood that these individuals will more freely express their true discriminatory attitudes. The process is broken down into four major parts (Ford & Ferguson, 2004). The first step is the activation of the humorous, noncritical mindset. The second step involves the recipient of the humor perceiving this activation as a local norm of tolerance. People who are exposed to the humor interpret the joke as a signal that everyone in that local context will tolerate (i.e., refrain from critically examining) discrimination against the disparaged group. In the third step, humor recipients use the perceived local norm of tolerance to regulate their own tolerance of discrimination. In the fourth and final step, humor recipients' preexisting prejudice levels interact with the local norm of tolerance to alter expressions of prejudice. Thus, if the humor recipient is high in prejudice, he or she will be more likely to express prejudice against the disparaged group in that social context. If the humor recipient is low in prejudice, the recipient is unlikely to switch to a noncritical mindset upon hearing the joke (i.e., unlikely to find the joke humorous), therefore the recipient will be no more likely to express prejudice than if the recipient had not received the joke at all. Ford and Ferguson (2004) have based these two predictions on the premise that people high in prejudice have more weakly internalized convictions to behave in a nonprejudiced manner than do nonprejudiced people.

As previously mentioned, sexist humor is a subset of disparagement humor. Given the mixed messages that society sends women—such as greater attention placed on sexual assault investigations under Title IX yet a profusion of product advertisements that portray women as sexual objects through the commodification of their body parts—women are a social group toward which society holds ambivalent attitudes. As such, it would follow from prejudiced norm theory that sexist humor, especially that pertaining to women as sexual objects, would have detrimental effects on attitudes and behaviors toward women.

Sexist Humor: Attitudinal and Behavioral Effects

Since the development of the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory by Glick and Fiske in 1996, researchers have been able to predict who will engage in sexist humor. The inventory has two subscales, one that taps benevolent sexism and another that taps hostile sexism. Hostile sexism consists of negative, antagonistic attitudes toward women whereas benevolent sexism consists of more positive but traditional attitudes toward women.

Greenwood and Isbell (2002) found that people who scored high in hostile sexism judged

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misogynistic jokes to be more amusing and less offensive than did people who scored low in hostile sexism. No support was found for gender differences among hostile sexists in terms of amusement or offensiveness ratings. There was a significant negative correlation between amusement and offensiveness ratings; the more amusing a person found the jokes, the less offensive they rated them. Taken together, these findings and those by earlier researchers (Ford, 2000; Ford, Wentzel, & Lorion, 2001) suggest that preexisting sexist attitudes predict how amusing and offensive one finds a sexist joke. It follows, then, that individuals' amusement and offensiveness ratings can predict sexism levels.

Many studies performed on sexist humor and disparagement humor have used written vignettes, which, although appropriate for the construct of the experiments, may produce issues with ecological validity. Typically, people encounter sexist jokes not by reading the transcript of a conversation between two strangers but by *hearing* jokes told by friends, acquaintances, or comedians on television. Greenwood and Isbell (2002) addressed this issue by having participants listen to an audio recording that allegedly belonged to a separate study about impression formation featuring two unknown male undergraduates telling blonde jokes in the context of a discussion about a broad range of topics. This presentation technique better represents the actual mode in which people hear sexist jokes.

As research has begun to address the *effects* of sexist humor on individuals, researchers have continued to factor in preexisting hostile sexism levels under the expectation that hostile sexism mediates the effects of the jokes, which is consistent with prejudiced norm theory. Generally, findings have supported this model.

For example, Ford et al. (2001) found that high-hostile sexist men who were exposed to sexist jokes least expected others to be offended by a hypothetical supervisor's sexist comments in a written workplace scenario. Also as expected, high-hostile sexist men exposed to sexist jokes anticipated the least shame and disappointment after imagining that they had behaved as the supervisor had, calling a female staff member by an inappropriate pet name and communicating low performance expectations. However, all men exposed to the sexist jokes, regardless of hostile sexism level, reported less shame and disappointment upon imagining themselves as the supervisor and therefore expressed higher tolerance of discrimination. These two findings demonstrated that

exposure to sexist humor increased high-hostile sexist men's tolerance of discriminatory events; the high-hostile sexist men perceived a local norm of tolerance of discrimination. They also suggest that sexist humor may also induce men *low* in hostile sexism to perceive a sexist event as socially acceptable.

Attention has expanded to include the effects of sexist humor on discriminatory behavior. Ford et al. (2008) found that exposure to sexist humor led men high in hostile sexism to "release" (i.e., express) their prejudice as assessed by decisions made in role-playing tasks. In one study, men were asked to indicate how much they would be willing to give on a scale of $0 to $20 to a women's rights organization that was soliciting donations. Among participants exposed to the sexist jokes, higher hostile sexism scores predicted smaller donations. The act of donating less to the women's organization was interpreted as a sign of acting in a discriminatory manner toward women. Thus, exposure to sexist jokes encouraged men high in hostile sexism to release their prejudice.

In a second experiment, Ford et al. (2008) replaced the donation task with a budget-cutting task. Male undergraduates were instructed to cut a total of $24,000 out of the budgets of actual student organizations. Regardless of hostile sexism level, all men who were exposed to sexist jokes allocated a greater percentage of the funding cuts to the women's organization. The higher men scored in hostile sexism, the more they cut from the women's organization and the more they thought others would approve of their decision—but only if they had been exposed to sexist humor. Overall, these results suggest that sexist humor increases hostile behavior toward women across the board but that the increase is more pronounced for men high in hostile sexism. The fact that men high in hostile sexism anticipated greater social approval of their discrimination against women is in line with prejudiced norm theory: the sexist humor led the high-hostile sexist men to perceive a local norm of tolerance. In summary, there is strong support in the literature for the notion that sexist humor increases discriminatory attitudes (specifically, tolerance of discriminatory events) and behavior in those who are already sexist, but there is also evidence that sexist humor has a similar albeit less pronounced effect on men who are not sexist.

Sexist Humor: Effects on Rape Proclivity

In the studies described thus far, it would appear

that the worst effect that sexist humor has on men is an increased likelihood to discriminate against women by opposing or expressing apathy about their political and occupational advancement. However, opposition to women's advancement may not the only consequence. There is a body of research that has suggested that exposure to sexist humor can actually increase rape proclivity, which is a person's self-reported likelihood of committing rape (Romero-Sánchez, Durán, Carretero-Dios, Megías, & Moya, 2010; Thomae & Viki, 2013).

Romero-Sánchez and colleagues (2010) studied the relationship between hostile sexism, exposure to sexist humor, and rape proclivity among male undergraduates in Spain. Rape proclivity was assessed by reading date-rape vignettes and indicating how likely one would be to behave like the rapist. Men high in hostile sexism reported higher rape proclivity in general, and sexist jokes increased rape proclivity across *all* men, particularly those high in hostile sexism. These findings have been replicated in other studies (Abrams, Viki, Masser, & Bohner, 2003). However, in an experiment by Thomae and Viki (2013), controlling for the sexual content of these sexist jokes eliminated the increase in rape proclivity across all men, suggesting that it is the combination of sexist *and* sexual content that increases rape proclivity.

Overall, the tendency for high-hostile sexist men to report higher rape proclivity upon exposure to sexist jokes supports prejudiced norm theory. Within this theoretical framework, the sexist jokes created a local norm of tolerance for men who had weak internalized convictions about expressing adversarial attitudes toward women, thus allowing them to more freely express their true attitudes toward rape.

The Present Study

The key purposes of the present study were fourfold. The first was to examine how rape jokes influence rape myth acceptance, hostile attitudes toward women, and behavior toward women. Thus far, no published studies have explored the effects of *rape* humor. The jokes in the aforementioned studies have made light of gender stereotypes or made references to women performing sexual acts, but none of the jokes have addressed rape per se. Additionally, only men's rape proclivity has been tested. This selective testing makes sense given that men commit the vast majority of rape, but women can still hold attitudes that in some way support or justify rape, if not indicate a proclivity to rape. Such

attitudes can be measured by the degree to which a person accepts rape myths such as the idea that women who dress in skimpy clothing are "asking" to be raped. Multiple scales for measuring rape myth acceptance have been created (Burt, 1980; Deitz, Blackwell, Daley, & Bentley, 1982), but one of the most reliable and widely used scales is the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (IRMA), which recently has been adapted by McMahon and Farmer (2011) into a form that better reflects the colloquial language of college students. Namely, men are referred to as "guys," and women are referred to as "girls."

The second key purpose was to compare the effects of rape jokes to those of nonsexual sexist jokes, which have been examined in the literature, and to do so by examining actual *changes* in sexist attitudes, which have not yet been addressed in the literature. Prior studies have examined only the expression of sexist attitudes *after* joke exposure. This comparison of rape jokes and nonsexual sexist jokes functioned to determine if one category of joke was more influential than the other on attitudes and behavior.

The third key purpose of the present study was to address issues of ecological validity and internal validity by having participants listen to jokes and by controlling for the effect of sexual content in jokes. Finally, the present study examined gender differences in responses to sexist and rape humor, another topic that has been largely ignored in the literature. Given the literature that suggests that humorous communications operate differently than straightforward statements or events (Ford, Wentzel, & Lorion, 2001), it could be that the sexist humor makes women more expressive of prejudice toward themselves, which in turn harms their self-esteem and induces negative affect. However, the opposite effect is also possible. Given that sexist events have been shown to harm women's self-esteem and induce negative affect (Brinkman & Rickard, 2009), it is conceivable that sexist humor will also induce negative affect and thereby make women less likely to express prejudice toward their own social group. Men, on the other hand, are not threatened by the content of such sexist humor, therefore sexist humor is less likely to induce negative affect and decrease the expression of sexism.

The study employed a 2 (sexual content of jokes: sex, no sex) × 2 (sexist content of jokes: sexist, nonsexist) × 2 (participant gender: woman, man) × 2 (hostile sexism level: high, low) factorial design. Combinations of the sexual content and

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sexist content factors yielded four joke categories: gender stereotype, rape, racial, and ribald. The rationale for having these four categories was to address the confounds of sexual content and offensiveness that arose in prior studies. As demonstrated by Thomae and Viki (2013), the inclusion of sexual content confounded the effect of joke type, making low-hostile sexist men more likely to report higher rape proclivity. Another potentially confounding factor was the differential offensiveness of the jokes. In the many studies conducted by Ford, the "control" condition consisted of neutral jokes that were not at all offensive. Hence, the joke categories of racial and ribald served as "controls" for offensive and sexual content. The racial category consisted of jokes that were offensive but neither sexist nor sexual in nature, serving as a comparison for the gender stereotype jokes, which were sexist but not sexual in nature. The ribald category consisted of jokes that were nonsexist but sexual in nature, serving as a comparison for the rape jokes, which were both sexist and sexual in nature. To measure the *changes* in attitudes toward women and rape myth acceptance, a pretest-posttest design was employed with items measuring sexism and rape myth acceptance in both tests.

Based on results from prior studies, it was hypothesized that there would be a main effect of joke type on attitudes toward women, rape myth acceptance, and behavior toward women. Specifically, it was predicted that sexist jokes (i.e., gender stereotype and rape) would increase hostile attitudes toward women and rape myth acceptance more than nonsexist jokes (i.e., racial and ribald), and that participants exposed to sexist jokes should be less likely to donate to either a women's organization or a rape hotline on a behavioral measure adapted from Ford et al.'s (2008) donation task. Second, it was hypothesized that men would be more affected by the sexist jokes than would women. Third, it was predicted that rape jokes would increase rape myth acceptance more than any other joke group. Based on findings from prior studies (Abrams et al., 2003; Ford et al., 2001; Ford et al., 2008; Romero-Sánchez et al., 2010), it was also anticipated that all of the aforementioned effects would be more pronounced for people high in hostile sexism. Finally, based on Thomae and Viki's (2013) findings that hostile sexism and rape myth acceptance are related, it was anticipated that hostile attitudes toward women scores and rape myth acceptance scores would correlate positively with each other.

Method

Participants
Participants consisted of 113 undergraduate students at a small liberal arts college. They were recruited from 32 introductory-level courses across various departments. Additional recruitment of male participants was undertaken through snowballing (i.e., participants bringing along friends) and by contacting fraternity leaders. Junior and senior psychology majors were eliminated from the pool of participants so as to reduce the number of participants who might expect and actively search for deception and therefore see through the deception that was critical to obtaining honest responses. Participants self-identified their gender. Those who identified themselves as "man," "male," or "masculine," were coded as men. Those who identified as "woman," "female," or "feminine," were coded as women. There were roughly equal number of men ($n = 53$) and women ($n = 59$). Most participants ($n = 91$) identified as White or European American. Of the remaining participants, eight identified as Black or African American, five identified as Hispanic, three identified as Asian, and six identified as mixed race. Four participants identified as international students. Of the 113 participants, one failed to indicate gender, one failed to choose an organization for the behavioral measure, and 15 declined to answer all attitudes toward women or rape myth acceptance questions on the pretest and/or posttest. These 17 participants were excluded from all analyses, which left a final sample of 96 participants.

Materials
The pretest, jokes, and posttest were presented on computers. Participants were provided with headphones, which were used to listen to the jokes and reduce the audibility of ambient laughter. The jokes were presented as audio clips of a joke-telling exchange in the college dining hall. Each audio clip consisted of an ostensibly male speaker telling a joke, followed by laughter from a group of two men and two women, who were described as friends of the participant. Ambient noise from the dining hall ran in the background. This format was used to increase ecological validity; college students are more likely to *hear* jokes within friend groups, not *overhear* them in conversations between strangers.

The jokes were selected on the basis of a pilot study involving 23 randomly selected junior and senior psychology majors. In the pilot study, each participant was randomly assigned 20 jokes from

two of the joke conditions and was asked to rate the humorousness of the jokes. Jokes were selected on the basis of two criteria: (a) having a median humor rating between 1 (*not at all funny*) and 2 (*somewhat funny*), inclusive; and (b) having a moderately variable distribution of humor ratings. The rationale for the criteria was that the most common humor rating for the majority of the gender stereotype and rape jokes was 1 (*not funny at all*), but it would be contrary to the purposes of the study to select jokes that no one found humorous, so jokes were selected that elicited at least a little amusement and appealed differently to a range of participants.

Two attitudinal assessments and one behavioral assessment were used to measure initial attitudes toward women and the attitudinal and behavioral effects of the jokes. The first attitudinal assessment gauged attitudes toward women. This assessment consisted of a modified version of the hostile sexism subscale of the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory and four items taken from Benson and Vincent's (1980) Sexist Attitudes Towards Women Scale (SATWS). The SATWS has been found to have high internal consistency for college students, and items on the scale are highly correlated with appreciation of sexist humor (Benson & Vincent, 1980). Four items from the SATWS were chosen on the basis that they reflect relatively controversial opinions that are applicable to college students (e.g., "women rely more on intuition and less on reason than men do") and that these opinions are not addressed by the hostile sexism portion of the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory. The same method used by McMahon and Farmer (2011) to make the IRMA more applicable to college students was used to modify the hostile sexism and SATWS items. In the pilot study, Cronbach's alpha was .62 for the seven pretest items and .74 for the seven posttest items. Split-half reliability was within acceptable limits, $r(21) = .81$, $p < .001$. The items were divided between the pretest and the posttest by randomly selecting five items from the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory Hostile Sexism subscale and two items from the SATWS for each test. If any two items on a test were found to be very similar (e.g., "feminists are making entirely reasonable demands of guys" and "feminists are not seeking for women to have more power than guys"), one of them was swapped with an item on the other test so as to avoid redundancy on a single test.

This process resulted in a pretest whose questions consisted almost entirely of items from the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory and a posttest whose questions consisted of roughly equal numbers of items from the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory and the SATWS. Given that the SATWS items contained statements that were sexist but *not* necessarily hostile in nature (e.g., "girls rely more on intuition and less on reason than guys do"), the degree to which they tapped the different valences of sexism (i.e., hostile and not hostile) was not equal. This methodological limitation, which was discovered after the results had been analyzed, precludes any valid comparison of the pretest and posttest scores for attitudes toward women, therefore the results for the attitudes toward women assessment will not reported.

The second attitudinal assessment consisted of a selection of the rape myth acceptance items from McMahon and Farmer's (2011) modified version of the IRMA. All of the scales were divided to form a pretest and a posttest. Filler questions and a selection of modified questions from Marlowe & Crowne's (1960) Social Desirability Scale were added to the pretest and posttest to obscure the purpose of the survey. In the pilot study, Cronbach's alpha was .78 for the nine pretest items and .77 for the nine posttest items. Split-half reliability was within acceptable limits, $r(22) = .76$, $p < .001$. As with the attitudes toward women items, the rape myth acceptance items were randomly divided between the pretest and the posttest and then adjusted to reduce redundancy of items on a single test.

The behavioral assessment consisted of a modified version of the donation task from Ford et al. (2008): Participants were asked to select one of several social justice organizations to which to have $2 donated for their participation. The target organizations were a women's rights organization and a sexual assault hotline.

Procedure

After institutional review board approval (PSY501-2015S-099) was given, participants were recruited and scheduled to take part in the experiment in the computer lab. Participants completed the pretest under the guise that it was an unrelated survey on social attitudes being conducted by the researcher's supervisor. In keeping with this cover story, participants were informed that they could skip this section without penalty. After completing the pretest, participants were directed to a fake debriefing page and were then presented with a second informed consent form on the computer stating that the purpose of the present study was

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to examine the relationship between sociopolitical attitudes and humor appreciation. Participants were then prompted to put on their headphones and were randomly assigned to one of four joke conditions: gender stereotype (i.e., sexist, no sexual content), racial (i.e., nonsexist, no sexual content), rape (i.e., sexist, sexual content), and ribald (i.e., nonsexist, sexual content). The Appendix shows examples of jokes from each condition.

Participants were instructed to close their eyes and imagine themselves sitting in the dining hall with a mixed group of friends, "two girls and two guys." They then clicked a button on the screen to hear a recording of an ostensibly male speaker telling a joke followed by canned laughter. Beneath the audio player for each joke, a text version of the joke was available onscreen. Participants were asked to rate the humorousness of the joke on a six-interval scale, from "not funny at all" to "extremely funny." Each participant was exposed to a total of four jokes from their assigned category, plus three neutral jokes that were common to all four conditions. The purpose of the neutral jokes was to decrease suspicion about the purpose of the study.

Upon completion of the joke ratings, participants completed the posttest and completed a series of demographic questions intended to reduce suspicion and support the alleged purpose of the study. Next, participants were given two free-response questions intended to serve as a deception check and a manipulation check, respectively: (a) "What do you think the purpose of the study was?" and (b) "What did you think of the jokes (e.g., were they funny, offensive, worth repeating)? Were there any you didn't understand?"

Upon completion of the survey, participants were presented with a debriefing page containing the behavioral measure of attitudes toward women. As a form of compensation, participants were given a choice of organizations to which the Psychology Department would donate $2. The organizations included the National Organization for Women and the National Sexual Assault Hotline (i.e., the organizations of interest), as well as five other social justice organizations (i.e, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Wounded Warrior Project, National Alliance on Mental Illness, National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation), each with a brief description. After participants indicated their preferred organization, they submitted their data and reported to the experimenter for debriefing.

Participants were verbally debriefed, either alone or in small groups if more than one participant finished at the same time. The verbal debriefing presented an opportunity to gather feedback and other qualitative information from participants including reactions to the questions and jokes.

Results

Manipulation Check

More than a third of participants ($n = 42$) wrote that they found the gender stereotype, rape, or racial jokes personally offensive or offensive to others. This finding suggested that these jokes expressed the politically incorrect material that they were meant to.

Deception Check

None of the participants expressed suspicion or correctly guessed in either the free-response section or the verbal debriefing that the study was about the effect of jokes on attitudes. However, in the free-response section, 43 participants indicated that they thought the study was about attitudes toward women, feminism, sexism, rape, or rape culture. These participants will henceforth be referred to as "suspicious participants."

In a post-hoc analysis, participants were coded as either suspicious or unsuspecting. It was found that suspiciousness was linked to hostility toward women. Suspicious participants reported significantly more hostile attitudes toward women on both the pretest, $t(94) = -2.15$, $p = .03$, Cohen's $d = .44$, and the posttest, $t(94) = -2.18$, $p = .03$, Cohen's $d = .45$. However, no significant differences were found between the rape myth acceptance pretest scores for the two groups or between the rape myth acceptance posttest scores. A Pearson chi-square test for independence was performed on the relationship between suspiciousness and gender. The relationship did not reach significance, $\eta^2(1, N = 96) = 1.00$, $p = .32$, Cramer's $V = .10$.

This pattern of results suggests that participants who held more hostile attitudes toward women were more sensitive to or aware of questions pertaining to sexism or rape. To better examine the effect of higher hostile sexism, analyses were performed both with and without the suspicious participants.

Hostile Sexism Designation

In keeping with procedures used in other studies that divided participants into low and high-hostile sexists (Ford, 2000), participants were designated

as either low or high in hostile sexism based on a median split on the distribution of scores from the pretest attitudes toward women items ($Mdn = 3.04$), which consisted almost entirely of items from the hostile sexism subscale of Glick and Fiske's (1996) Ambivalent Sexism Inventory. The mean score for those low in hostile sexism was 2.21 ($SD = 0.60$), and the mean score for those high in hostile sexism was 3.94 ($SD = 0.61$).

Effects on Rape Myth Acceptance

Rape myth acceptance was measured on a 6-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Lower scores indicated less acceptance of rape myths, and higher scores indicated greater acceptance of rape myths. Cronbach's alphas for the nine pretest and nine posttest rape myth acceptance items were .81 and .87, respectively, indicating good reliability.
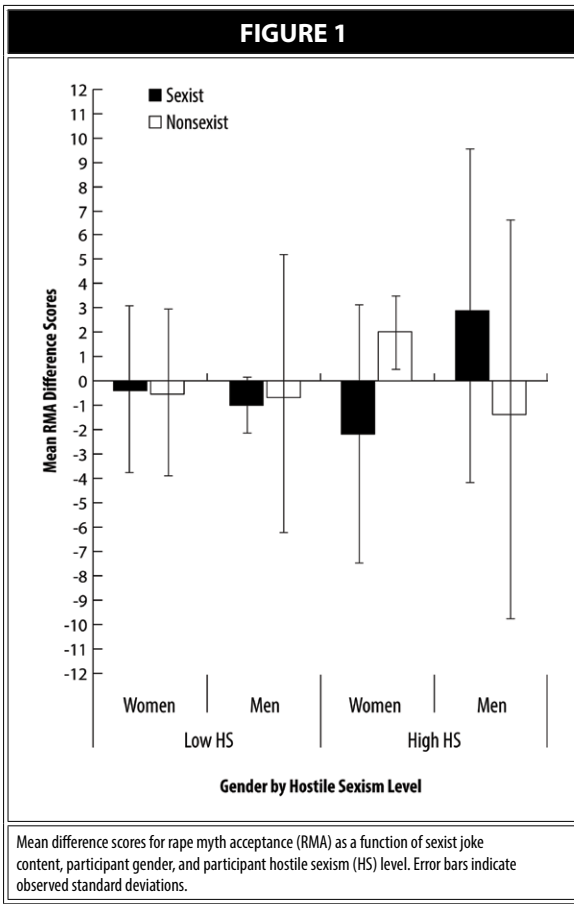
Rape myth acceptance difference scores were calculated by averaging the pretest rape myth acceptance scores and the posttest scores and subtracting the pretest scores from the posttest scores. A 2 (gender: woman, man) × 2 (sexual content of

FIGURE 1

Mean difference scores for rape myth acceptance (RMA) as a function of sexist joke content, participant gender, and participant hostile sexism (HS) level. Error bars indicate observed standard deviations.

jokes: sex, no sex) × 2 (sexist content of jokes: sexist, nonsexist) × 2 (hostile sexism level: high, low) Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was performed on these difference scores to test the hypothesis that sexist jokes would increase rape myth acceptance, especially among men and those high in hostile sexism. Contrary to predictions, no main effect of sexist content was found, $p = .26$, $\eta_P^2 = .02$, nor did any other main or interaction effects reach significance.

With the suspicious participants excluded, another 2 (gender: woman, man) × 2 (sexual content of jokes: sex, no sex) × 2 (sexist content of jokes: sexist, nonsexist) × 2 (hostile sexism level: high, low) ANOVA was performed on the rape myth acceptance difference scores. There was a significant three-way interaction between sexist joke content, hostile sexism level, and gender, $F(1, 42) = 4.40$, $p = .04$, $\eta_P^2 = .10$. As shown in Figure 1, the direction of the difference between rape myth acceptance difference scores for high-hostile sexist men was opposite that for high-hostile sexist women. Furthermore, the magnitude of these differences between the genders was greater for high-hostile sexist participants than for low-hostile sexist participants. In support of these graphical inferences, simple main effects analyses revealed two significant effects. First, among men high in hostile sexism, sexist jokes increased rape myth acceptance ($M = 2.67$, $SD = 6.98$) more than nonsexist jokes ($M = -1.44$, $SD = 7.88$), $F(1, 42) = 5.58$, $p = .02$, $\eta_P^2 = .12$. Second, for participants high in hostile sexism, sexist jokes increased rape myth acceptance more for men ($M = 2.67$, $SD = 6.98$) than for women ($M = -2.20$, $SD = 5.31$), $F(1, 42) = 4.97$, $p = .03$, $\eta_P^2 = .11$. No other interaction or main effects reached significance, $ps > .05$.

Effect on Behavior Toward Women

Behavior toward women was measured indirectly through the donation task, in which the participant chose one social justice organization from a list of seven including the target organizations of the National Organization for Women and the National Sexual Assault Hotline. A Pearson chi-square test for independence was performed on the relationship between joke condition and whether or not participants donated to one of the women's organizations to test the hypothesis that sexist jokes would worsen behavior toward women, particularly among those high in hostile sexism. The relationship failed to reach significance, $p = .09$, Cramer's $V = .26$. With suspicious

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participants excluded, another Pearson chi-square test for independence was performed on the relationship between joke condition and donation behavior. This relationship also failed to reach significance, $p = .06$, Cramer's $V = .36$.

Attitudes Toward Women and Rape Acceptance

Given that attitudes toward women were measured by participants' agreement with all statements from the hostile sexism portion of Glick and Fiske's (1996) Ambivalent Sexism Inventory, pretest attitudes toward women can, in the scope of this study, be treated as a measure of hostile sexism. A Pearson's r correlation was performed on the pretest attitudes toward women scores and rape myth acceptance scores. A strong, significantly positive correlation was found between the two, $r(94) = .72$, $p < .001$, suggesting that hostile sexism and rape myth acceptance are closely related.

Discussion

The primary focus of this study was to determine the effect of sexual and sexist humor on attitudes toward women, rape myth acceptance, and behavior toward women. More specifically, it was hypothesized that exposure to sexist jokes (i.e., rape and gender stereotype) would increase rape myth acceptance and discrimination against women when choosing a charitable organization to which to donate. It was also hypothesized that rape jokes in particular would increase rape myth acceptance and that all of the above effects would be more pronounced for people high in hostile sexism. Overall, the findings lent no support to the behavioral hypotheses and mixed support to the rape myth acceptance hypotheses.

Effects of Sexist and Rape Humor

Effect on rape myth acceptance. With suspicious participants included, no support was found for the hypothesis that among high-hostile sexist men, gender stereotype or rape jokes increased rape myth acceptance more than nonsexist jokes. There was also a lack of evidence for the predictions that sexist jokes would increase rape myth acceptance across the board and that sexist jokes would increase rape myth acceptance more for men than for women. However, with the suspicious participants excluded, a pattern emerged that partially supported these hypotheses. Among high-hostile sexist men, sexist jokes increased rape myth acceptance more than nonsexist jokes. Moreover, sexist jokes did increase rape myth acceptance more for men than for

women—but only among those high in hostile sexism.

These findings should be interpreted with caution because of the two different ways in which rape myth acceptance can be defined. On the one hand, increased rape myth acceptance could qualify as freer expression of prejudice toward a subset of women: rape victims. In this case, the sexist jokes presumably activated a local norm of tolerance of prejudice for men who were already prejudiced toward women, thereby increasing their willingness to agree with rape myth statements—that is, express prejudice toward women rape victims. This interpretation is consistent with prejudiced norm theory. On the other hand, however, changes in rape myth acceptance could be conceptualized as changes in the evaluative content of stereotypes. Rape myths equate to stereotypes about rape victims in that they depict situations or qualities of the rape victim that are often seen on popular television or in media coverage of real rape cases. One such example is the 2012 Steubenville High School rape case, in which members of the Steubenville community blamed the intoxicated female victim (Macur & Schweber, 2012) and CNN news coverage focused on the grief of the rapists, downplaying their culpability. Thus, the sexist jokes made high-hostile sexist men more adopting of stereotypes about rape victims. This interpretation challenges one component of prejudiced norm theory, which states that the evaluative content of stereotypes is a stable trait (Ford & Ferguson, 2004).

In interpreting the difference in changes in rape myth acceptance between high-hostile sexist men and women, another challenge to the literature on prejudiced norm theory arises. Although it is clear that sexist jokes increased rape myth acceptance more for high-hostile sexist men than for high-hostile sexist women, it could also be stated that sexist jokes *decreased* rape myth acceptance more for high-hostile sexist women than for high-hostile sexist men. Prior studies have disregarded the effects of sexist jokes on women's expression of prejudice on the basis that their hostile sexism levels were too low (Ford, Wentzel, & Lorion, 2001). This finding illustrates that women can be high in hostile sexism and that sexist jokes do have an effect on their expression of prejudice or acceptance of stereotypes.

Together, these findings support the broader concept of prejudiced norm theory—that exposure to prejudicial humor increases prejudice in those who are already prejudiced. However, the finer

details of prejudiced norm theory, namely whether "prejudice" should encompass both tolerance of discriminatory events and the evaluative content of stereotypes, require further investigation. Furthermore, these findings call for the need to include women in this line of research so as to account for cases in which the humor recipient belongs to the targeted group, which could demand an amendment of prejudiced norm theory.

Effect on behavior. It was predicted that participants exposed to rape or gender stereotype jokes would be less likely to donate to a women's organization—either the National Organization for Women or the National Sexual Assault Hotline—than would participants exposed to racist or ribald jokes. The results failed to support this prediction. Possible reasons for the lack of support include the confounds of the differential familiarity of the organizations, whereby more familiar organizations (e.g., the Wounded Warrior Project) attracted disproportionately more donations than more obscure organizations (e.g., the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights), and the politically charged nature of certain organizations. For example, the National Organization for Women is known to support liberal candidates who support women's reproductive rights including abortion. By contrast, the Wounded Warrior Project has no political affiliations, so participants might have deemed it a "safer" choice. Possible solutions to these limitations include asking participants why they chose a given organization, including only organizations that have no political affiliations, or selecting organizations of equal familiarity.

Other possible explanations for the lack of confirmatory findings include the construct validity of the behavioral measure. Unlike Ford et al.'s (2008) behavioral measures, which involved either (a) donating to one organization (a women's organization) or (b) potentially cutting the budget of a women's organization, the behavioral measure in the present study was diffuse. Choosing to donate to one organization over one of the women's organization might have reflected not discrimination toward women but a personal investment in one of the other organizations. This explanation is borne out by qualitative data from the postexperimental interviews, in which some self-identified members of the college's Gay-Straight Alliance expressed their delight that they could donate to the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation. One way to determine if this was the case would be to ask participants to self-report their personal investment in each organization before exposure to the jokes.

Methodological limitations aside, yet another explanation for the lack of confirmatory findings is that the sexist jokes simply did not increase discriminatory behavior against women. Further inquiry is needed. It may be fruitful to use more than one behavioral measure so as to distinguish discrimination against women in general from women rape victims. Such multi-faceted behavioral measures could involve asking participants to choose an amount to donate to women in different scenarios.

Attitudes Toward Women and Rape Acceptance

The finding that initial hostile attitudes toward women correlated very strongly and positively with initial rape myth acceptance suggests that hostile sexism and rape myth acceptance are closely related. Given that the rape myths in this study hinged on the woman being perceived as malicious or less than a person, it is likely that hostile sexism underlies rape myth acceptance. Another possibility is that both traits belong to some larger complex such as a social dominance orientation.

Limitations

Of the limitations of the present study, the most substantial was the methodological issue with the assessment of attitudes toward women discussed earlier. No conclusions can be drawn for the effect of jokes on attitudes toward women. This limitation can be addressed by assessing hostile sexism in a temporally removed setting and then loading the pretest and the posttest with nonhostile sexist attitudes toward women items only. Alternately, efforts can be made to include equal numbers of hostile sexist and nonhostile attitudes toward women items on the pretest and the posttest. The temporally removed assessment of hostile sexism could also serve to reduce suspicion among participants. Aside from this methodological issue and the one concerning the behavioral measure, other methodological issues include participants' concern with self-presentation, which inevitably occurs when using self-report or surveys as a measurement tool. By nature, people are more inclined to respond in a socially desirable manner than to respond honestly.

Other limitations of the present study include distractions, the sample gathered, and the gender of the researcher and lab assistants. First, at minimum, a dozen participants were observed texting or answering phone calls during the study. Such

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distractions conceivably decreased the internal validity of the study by interrupting joke exposure or by introducing confounding variables in the form of interaction with and information from others. Second, the sample was one of convenience, although an attempt was made to make the sample representative. Moreover, the researcher might have influenced the way participants responded to the attitudes toward women and rape myth acceptance statements, as well as to the jokes. Bearing in mind that the researcher is a woman, participants might have been more guarded about their true attitudes toward women than they would have been had the experimenter been a man, as in other studies (Ford et al., 2008).

General Discussion
Overall, the present study lent some support to Ford and Ferguson's (2004) prejudiced norm theory and the researcher's predictions about gender differences. The present study also identified important areas for further study.

First, sexist humor increased rape myth acceptance among high-hostile sexist men and affected high-hostile sexist men more than high-hostile sexist women—but only when suspicious participants were excluded from analyses. The fact that these effects emerged only when suspicious participants were excluded suggests that the suspicious participants had some sort of dilative effect. That is, their responses on the pretest or the posttest offset the changes observed in unsuspecting participants. This observation raises the possibility that suspicious participants were higher self-monitors than unsuspecting participants, so they were more inclined to respond consistently on the pretest and the posttest.

It is also possible that the cause of their suspiciousness was heterogeneous; perhaps some were high self-monitors whereas others were recently involved in a sexist incident or took a women's studies class. Should high self-monitoring be found to be a mediator of responses to sexist humor or statements, prejudiced norm theory must be expanded to account for this effect. In any case, the identification of naturally existing groups (suspicious and unsuspecting) is essential to removing confounds and therefore promoting internal validity, much in the way that researchers in the field have identified high- and low-hostile sexists participants.

Second, although the quantitative effect of sexist humor on attitudes toward women could not be ascertained because of methodological issues,

qualitative data from the free-response questions and the debriefing strongly suggest that attitudes toward women are mutable and that, in accordance with prejudiced norm theory, the expression of hostile attitudes could be dependent on preexisting hostile sexism levels. Some participants expressed that the statements about rape and women on the survey made them feel uncomfortable because they knew they ought to respond a certain way but felt differently—that is, in a more hostile manner. Two participants suggested adding a free-response block to each statement so they could explain why they somewhat agreed with the rape myths statements. In the free-response section, one participant wrote quite tellingly:

> Although they were offensive, I found most of [the jokes] to be very funny. I think that people need to losen [sic] up a little bit (more like a lot). Most of our issues is [sic] because everyone takes themselves too seriously. A specific comment about rape...obviously it is terrible, obviously no one should every commit it. However, [...] I think women need to understand the peril that they could be in a given situation. If you knew that a hungry lion ws [sic] waiting in a cave, would you walk into it? That is why I answered the way I did. I'm not a woman hater. I just think rational solutions for this horrendous act should be multi-dimensional. I explained this to provide you insight into my answer and so tht [sic] you will think I'm a less terrible person, hopefully.

The extreme concern with self-presentation paired with the obvious acceptance of rape myths (i.e., victim blaming) evident in this comment point to the difficulty of accurately measuring rape myth acceptance and attitudes toward women, as well as the role that suspicion of or vigilance to the topics of sexism and rape plays in the expression of attitudes toward women, especially rape victims. This comment also demonstrates the sort of ambiguous attitudes that college students hold toward the issues of rape and the behavior of women.

In conclusion, the findings of the present study show that sexist humor can indeed influence the way that people think and feel about rape victims. These novel findings as well as the methodological limitations of the study warrant further research. Future research should investigate the role that the gender of the experimenter plays, more

systematically probe participants' thought processes as they respond to sexist or rape-myth accepting statements, and systematically examine the effect that suspicion has on responses to such statements, not to mention the relationship that suspicion may have with other traits. More importantly, however, future research must include women, as the present study has shown that women can be high in hostile sexism and that sexist jokes can alter how they respond to rape myths. Women's responses to rape victims contribute enormously to rape culture, college climates, and how they appraise themselves should they be raped, which makes this topic especially exigent. The inclusion of women in future research in this area is also essential to inspecting the role that being exposed to disparagement humor that targets one's own social group plays in how one responds in a sexist setting and whether any long-term attitudinal changes result.

As this study illustrates, sexist humor can lead people to trivialize rape. People continue to consume rape humor by watching inappropriate television programs, overlook or discount blatant sexist and sexual assault-endorsing qualities when electing people to public office, and rationalize rape myths. As long as this continues, colleges, not to mention society at large, will remain hazardous places for women to exist, places for sexual violence to seethe in silence.

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APPENDIX

Examples of Jokes From Each Condition

Condition	Joke
Gender Stereotype (Sexist × No Sex)	Adam was walking around the Garden of Eden feeling very lonely, so God asked, "What is wrong with you?" Adam said he didn't have anyone to talk to. God said he was going to give him a companion. God said, "This person will cook for you and wash your clothes. She will always agree with every decision you make. She will bear your children and never ask you to get up in the middle of the night to take care of them. She will not nag you, and she will always be the first to admit she was wrong when you've had a disagreement." Adam asked God, "What will this woman cost?" God replied, "An arm and a leg." Adam said, "What can I get for just a rib?"
Racial (Nonsexist × No Sex)	Q: A black guy and a Mexican are in a car. Who is driving? A: A cop.
Rape (Sexist × Sex)	Statistically speaking, 9 out of 10 people enjoy gang rape.
Ribald (Nonsexist x Sex)	A little girl is in line to see Santa. When it's her turn, she climbs up on Santa's lap. Santa asks, "What would you like Santa to bring you for Christmas?" The little girl replies, "I want a Barbie and a G.I. Joe." Santa looks at the girl for a moment and says, "But I thought Barbie comes with Ken." "No," says the little girl. "She comes with G.I. Joe; she fakes it with Ken."

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