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**Contradictions in Gendered Discourses: Feminist Readings of Sexist
Jokes?**

by

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Abstract

In this paper I examine the notion of *contradictions* as experienced by feminist readers of sexist jokes, and at ways such readers may deal with these. Drawing on the notions of *interpellation* and *focalisation*, I look at ways of reading the text in question. Then, drawing on notions of *reader response(s)*, *discourse(s)*, *post-feminism*, *irony* and *double voicing*, I look at ways of articulating feminist readings of the set of jokes. I propose four ‘alternative reading positions’ for feminists; in this way the paper contributes modestly to a theory of reading. I conclude by looking at implications of the study for practice and for feminism itself.

Keywords: reading, contradictions, discourse, post-feminism, double voicing

The notion of ‘contradictions’ is an important one for Critical discourse analysis (where it originates from Hegel’s *Science of Logic*; see Houlgate, 1998), for post-structuralism and for discursive psychology. Drawing loosely or explicitly on one or more of these approaches, ‘contradictions’ have also been discussed by those working within gender and language study. Margaret Wetherell *et al.* (1987) in their interviews with young women and men about future employment identified several occurrences of both an ‘equal opportunities’ theme and a contradictory ‘practical considerations’ theme in the talk of the same individual. Wendy Hollway (1995) contrasted what she called a ‘discourse of unpleasurable heterosex’ with extra-discursive, positive, heterosexual practice. And Becky Francis (1999) noted young children’s articulation of contradictory discourses of gender (in)equality.

Baxter (2003) cites Soper’s (1993) phrase ‘productive contradiction’, a phrase which Soper was using to refer to the result of the dissonance between feminism and post-structuralism, but contradiction can also be seen as productive in a wider sense. Hegel in the 19th century had posited the idea of contradiction as “the root of all movement and vitality”, noting that “it is only insofar as it contains a Contradiction that anything moves and has impulse and activity”, a sentiment with which Lenin concurred. We

can go one step further and ask whether such productive contradictions are also *progressive* (as indeed Hegel and Lenin were implying). Fairclough for example sees contradictions as *potentially emancipatory*: there is always ‘leverage’ from alternative, contradictory, competing discourses, since contradictions render dominant/traditional discourses unsustainable (Fairclough, 2001). In some contrast, Wendy Hollway, noting that “every practice to some extent articulates ... contradictions”, represents progressive and conservative forces entailed in contradiction as *balanced*, in that every practice is “a site of potential change” but also “a site of reproduction” (1984: 260). Wetherell *et al.* (1987) in further contrast saw contradictions as conservative, *essential to the maintenance* of an ideology: in their study referred to above, ‘Egalitarian discourse’ was not ‘wiped out’ by ‘non-egalitarian discourse’, but the latter in the form of ‘practical considerations’ talk “serve[d] to naturalize and justify inequality” (1987: 69).

Discursive psychology draws on elements of both Critical discourse analysis and post-structuralism. It is not concerned with the ‘inner self’, but rather sees identities as social, drawing on social knowledge, and displayed in one’s discourse. Referring to ‘contradictions of common sense’ and ‘contrary aspects of social belief’, discursive psychology has conceptualised the related notion of *ideological dilemmas* – the title of a 1988 book by Michael Billig, Susan Condor, Derek Edwards, Mike Gane, David Middleton and Alan Radley. Billig *et al.* apply this, *inter alia*, to competing notions of ‘gender’ and ‘individual difference’. They too see contradictions as productive:

It is not haphazard that common sense contains its contrary themes The very existence of these opposing images, words, evaluations, maxims and so on is crucial, in that they permit the possibility not just of social dilemmas but of social thinking itself. Without these oppositions there would be no way of arguing about dilemmas or understanding how opposing values can come into collision (Billig *et al.*, 1988: 17).

Nigel Edley (2001) describes *Ideological Dilemmas* as providing:

illustrations of how there is no unitary meaning to common sense. Time and again [the writers] show how it does not ‘hang together’ to provide people with clear indications as to how they should think and act. Instead, we see that it contains many contrary or competing arguments.

He cites Billig *et al.*’s examples of such contradictory proverbs as ‘look before we leap’ and ‘he who hesitates is lost’, but we can go further than this. People not only frequently contradict themselves (see Myers, 2004), but also are often aware of

alternative positions, of looking at things in different ways, and indeed of articulating what may *seem* like contradictory positions. We use expressions such as ‘On the one hand, on the other’, and ‘One part of me thinks while the other part of me thinks’ We are aware of using one set of arguments in one situation, and another contradictory set in a different situation, for example with an interlocutor in the morning whose position we consider too prescriptive and another in the afternoon whose position on the same issue we see as too libertarian. We are aware (though we may not articulate it like this), of drawing on different discourses at different times and in different situations: ‘Selective schools are unfair and socially divisive’ on the one hand, and ‘Parents should do the best for their children (and my child would do best at a selective school)’ on the other. We may be able to discursively reconcile these two positions (e.g. ‘Selective schools are unfair *but* I can live with that as I have to do the best for my child’ or ‘Of course I want to do the best for my child *but* not at the expense of others’), but we may still experience the ideological dilemma as a psychologically uncomfortable one.

All this rightly convinces Edley (and Billig *et al.*) that ‘lived ideologies’ (a society’s ‘way of life’) are “wonderfully rich and flexible resources for social interaction and everyday sense-making” (Edley, 2001: 202). And certainly ‘contradictions’ or ‘ideological dilemmas’ provide an interesting approach to gender and language study, given the sheer amount of discourse on gender currently circulating (see Cameron, 1997), which points to gender as a key social topic (and *women* and *men* as key social categories).

Contradictions occur in both the talk of individuals and in written texts. Less obviously, though they may be identified as polysemy in the form of different meanings within a spoken or written text, they can in turn occur in the form of different, contradictory *readings* of a text by the same text ‘consumer’. Here, I am making a (problematic) distinction between (a) *text-based* contradictions in written and spoken discourse, for example two competing discourses, which we can (with, despite our co-constructive role, a sense of objectivity), recognise, identify and name, and (b) *reader-based* contradictions resulting from different readings simultaneously being constructed by the hearer or reader, i.e. ‘subjectively-experienced’ contradictions in what we might call the *cognitive consumption* of a text. The difference between *text-* and *reader-based* contradictions may be a very fuzzy one of

the degree to which the reader *subjectively and consciously* experiences contradiction, perhaps accompanied by a sense of confusion – the case with my responses to the data under consideration here.

Against a background of discourse analysis and discursive psychology, ‘cognitive consumption’ can be seen as not only individual but also social and discourse-related. Relevant here is van Dijk’s claim that

in order to relate discourse and society, and hence discourse and the reproduction of dominance and inequality, we need to examine in detail the role of social representations in the minds of social actors (1993: 251).

It is the social representations of women and men in a particular, arguably sexist, text, and readings of these, which is the subject of this paper. Social actors who mentally experience the social representations include feminist readers.

The data consists of a set of gendered jokes, and the study is thus located within a growing field of ‘gender and humour’. A key site here has been joke-telling, and, sometimes, gender tendencies (see Barreca, 1991; Crawford, 1995; Jenkins, 1985; Kotthof, 1999). This paper, in contrast, is concerned with ‘ways of reading’ sexist jokes in written form – in particular, by feminist readers. In this sense the study contributes in a modest way to a theory of reading.

The study itself is a largely theoretical one: I have not, for example, carried out empirical work on different readings of these jokes. The study does, nevertheless, have implications for texts beyond this particular illustrative dataset (and may also prompt ideas for related empirical work).

The jokes were circulated by e-mail (and may thus have been changed since their original launching). Freud (1905/1976) asks why we are driven to tell jokes to others, noting that the joker’s pleasure needs to be ‘discharged’ to be complete; the practice of circulating jokes by e-mail (where laughter can only be predicted), may be a related practice of late modernity. The set is entitled:

NEW COURSES AVAILABLE FOR WOMEN: Training courses are now available for women on the following subjects.

The 'courses' were:

- Silence, the Final Frontier: Where No Woman Has Gone Before.
- The Undiscovered Side of Banking: Making Deposits.
- Parties: Going Without New Outfits
- Man Management: Minor Household Chores Can Wait until After The Game.
- Bathroom Etiquette I: Men Need Space in the Bathroom Cabinet Too.
- Bathroom Etiquette II: His Razor is His
- Communication Skills I: Tears? The Last Resort, not the First.
- Communication Skills II: Thinking Before Speaking
- Communication Skills III: Getting what you want without nagging.
- Driving a Car Safely: A Skill You CAN Acquire.
- Telephone Skills: How to Hang Up.
- Introduction to Parking.
- Advanced Parking: Backing Into a Space.
- Water Retention: Fact or Fat.
- Cooking I: Bringing Back Bacon, Eggs and Butter.
- Cooking II: Bran and Tofu are Not for Human Consumption.
- Cooking III: How not to Inflict Your Diets on Other People.
- Compliments: Accepting Them Gracefully.
- PMS: Your Problem ... Not His.
- Dancing: Why Men Don't Like To.
- Classic Clothing: Wearing Outfits You Already Have.
- Household Dust: A Harmless Natural Occurrence Only Women Notice.
- Integrating Your Laundry: Washing It All Together.
- Oil and Petrol: Your Car Needs Both.
- TV Remotes: For Men Only.
- Getting ready to go out: Start the day before.

The list concluded with 'Please register immediately as courses are expected to be in great demand'.

Now this is clearly a 'spoof' list of Adult Education courses, workshop sessions at a 'Taster' day, or even academic conference sessions (note the short, snappy phrases,

often starting with a rather general noun or noun phrase, followed by a colon anticipating the final piece of information, which indicates the specific focus of the ‘course’). As spoofs, they are amusing: the structural features of the genre are recognisable.

That said, they are also clear expressions of stereotypical women’s behaviour, linguistic and otherwise. Without having to be universally understood in every detail, the jokes also largely transcend cultures. They presumably hail from the USA (see joke 4) – but you do not have to (be able to) buy a new outfit for every party (joke 3) yourself in order to recognise the gendered stereotype that is being drawn on here. They can be seen to fall into Freud’s categories of ‘tendentious’ and ‘hostile’ jokes (1905/1976: 132) – they have a purpose, and they may offend. They jocularly but clearly draw on a dominant ‘Gender differences’ discourse (see Sunderland, 2004) which allows neither for differences *within* women (and within men), nor similarities *between* women and men.

So why did I (and indeed my own ‘Gender and Language Research Group’ members) at one and the same time recognise the sexism *and* find the jokes at least mildly amusing? Did we experience an ‘ideological dilemma’ here? Assuming that there were obvious contradictions between the premise of these jokes, and our own largely feminist convictions, why did we laugh (as we did, though not uproariously)? Most importantly, what, precisely, were we laughing *at*? Freud’s claim that

an absence of any factor that could provoke feelings opposed to the purpose of the joke, is an indispensable condition if the third person is to collaborate in the completion of the process of making the joke (1905/1976: 197)

really did not seem to apply. Addressing these questions – and, more broadly, questions surrounding the reading of texts of ‘late modernity’, for which a ‘straight’ reading is often an extremely impoverished one - is the objective of this paper.

My analysis consists of two parts: first, ways of reading the text, and, secondly, ways of understanding the way (feminist) readers may recognise, psychologically deal with, perhaps rationalise, and perhaps be amused by these contradictions.

Ways of Reading the Text

Several theoretical concepts are available to help us identify different, simultaneous ways of reading texts: here I look at the two related notions of *interpellation* and *focalisation* and at their interplay in this text.

The Althusserian concept of *interpellation* allows us to ask the question of ‘Who are being addressed, *and as what?*’ Here, *women* are apparently, on the surface, ‘hailed’, with *you* (‘Integrating your laundry’). However, if we consider who the jokes are presumably aimed at – the ‘ideal readers’ - this suggests that those being primarily interpellated are in fact ‘Men in heterosexual partnerships – probably without children’. (We might also add ‘who enjoy jokes, and who do not mind, or even enjoy, being constructed as somewhat unreconstructed’.) However, we can also argue that the jokes are aimed at women too, given that women will laugh at jokes about (even against) women: consider the laughter which mother-in-law jokes can still *widely* elicit. This may be surprising: Kotthoff (2000) cites Zillman’s (e.g. 1983) ‘disposition theory’ (“If I am positively disposed to the person put down in a joke, I cannot enjoy the joke”). Yet, although this may explain why men and boys laugh at jokes about women, but do not laugh at jokes about men and boys, it does not explain why many women find jokes about women amusing. Rather, as Kotthoff (2000: 59) further comments: “This seems to confirm the old Durkheimian thesis that societal value hierarchies find expression in almost all individuals in a similar way”. We can add that these jokes are also aimed at *people* who are unlikely (unlike me), if they find these jokes amusing, to feel they have to go to considerable rhetorical lengths to explain to themselves, or others, why this is.

The claim that men are not the only interpelees can be supported by the fact that men are not, here, being addressed with ‘You’ (or, given the genre, something like ‘Hi, Jack!’), so this is certainly not interpellation of the most straightforward kind. Rather, we can see women in heterosexual partnerships as also being interpellated, but, at a non-surface level, indirectly (see also Sunderland, 2004). Women are being indirectly (but fairly obviously) interpellated *as*:

- excessively talkative
- talking without thinking (illogical?)
- nagging
- spendthrift
- vain

- preoccupied with appearance
- manipulative
- bad drivers
- irrational
- non-technical
- disorganised

For both women and men to ‘get’ the joke, the interpellation of both must be successful. There are of course several familiar gender stereotypes here, the first three being *folklinguistic* stereotypes of how women talk.

Interpellation is related to the notion of *focalisation* - the act of bringing into focus; more particularly, in a written text, a shown point of view, perspective, or “presentation of a scene through the subjective perception of a character” (Felluga, 2002; see also Mills, 1995; Benwell, 2002). This can be achieved most obviously through first-person narration or direct speech attributed to a particular speaker, but also through free indirect discourse. Focalisation may thus be evident or concealed. If we read ‘ “Ribbons are definitely hot property this summer” Jade mused, sorting through the latest range’ (chosen at random from *Bratz Annual 2005*), this claim about ribbons is clearly attributed to Jade. ‘That’s when Sasha noticed how quiet I was’ is presumably attributed to ‘I’, via first person narration. However, ‘The road was getting bumpier as Jade went to work with the tongs’ could be seen as the perspective of the narrator of the story in which this sentence appears, or, depending on co-textual considerations, could be seen as free indirect discourse, and thus the perspective of any of the girls in the story (other than, presumably, Jade).

Just as men are actually being interpellated, the focalisation is accordingly – as is clear from even the first joke - that of those men who apparently find these apparent behaviours of women incomprehensible, irritating and/or in need of correction. This masculine focalisation obtains despite the use of ‘you’ and ‘your’ in several of the jokes to refer to women (on the surface, but only on the surface, the addressees), and of ‘his’ and ‘men’ (making men the topic of the jokes – but again only on the surface).

This masculine focalisation is also achieved in part because these behaviours of women are all described in a critical, prescriptive or proscriptive way, drawing on existing gendered stereotypes and discourses (e.g. women talking too much, and being serial clothes shoppers; men enjoying fatty food and football). It is *men’s* interests that

are being defended ('His razor is his'), however light-heartedly or jocularly. Note the considerable constructed familiar opposition of interests (implicit or explicit) between the female, especially *feminist* reader and the interpellated and implied male 'ideal reader' (see Talbot 1995, also Sunderland (2004) on the 'Battle of the sexes' discourse). Accordingly, it is *women* who are implicitly the topic, butt, or, in a sense, object of each joke. Even the 'gender-neutral' cases, like 'The Undiscovered Side of Banking: Making Deposits', can of course be read as being *about* women, given the context (this one follows 'Silence, the Final Frontier: Where No Woman Has Gone Before'); the focalisation accordingly that of men.

Above I have looked briefly at why, despite this masculine interpellation and focalisation, (some) women can and do enjoy these jokes. But women whose lives are informed by feminism, who are conscious of experiencing a strong sense of contradiction? How can this complex form of 'cognitive consumption' be articulated?

Ways of understanding feminist readings of the text

Freud (1905/1976) observes that (spoken) jokes are a 'social process', involving three 'persons' – the teller of the joke, the person the joke as about, and the person who is hearing the joke. It is this 'third person' we are concerned with in this section, the feminist reader, who of course is subsumed within the category of the 'second person' in the joke. Both women sympathetic to feminism as well as others may find these jokes amusing because, like it or not, they can see themselves in them (the personal does not always match the political). This may apply too to lesbian women living in a partnership. As Freud notes, pleasure can come from recognition (1905/1976: 170). But what *theoretical* concepts help us to understand such 'recognised contradictions'? And can these concepts provide strategies for dealing with the particular gendered interpellation, as well as with the 'ideological dilemma' of finding something one basically disapproves of, nevertheless at least faintly amusing?

An obvious starting point is the notion of *reader response*. As Sara Mills wrote more than a decade ago:

A dissatisfaction with formalist accounts [of written texts] and with attempts to trace author intentions have led to concerns with the reader. Once the author is considered 'dead' [Barthes 1986], then it seems to be a logical move to try to institute the reader in that position of stability (Mills, 1994).

This may be particularly apposite in a practical and *production* sense in the electronically-circulated jokes in question, whose original author is not evident, and which may have been frequently revised. Theoretically and empirically, it may also be more interesting and fruitful to look beyond the author. Shifting our concern to the reader - without yet bringing gender or discourse or ideology into the equation – allows us to acknowledge that different readers will respond differently to a particular joke, these responses extending to different interpretations – including, I argue later, feminist readings of what, to some, will be a profoundly anti-feminist text.

Reader response can usefully be extended to *a reader's responses*, in that, accepting that the meaning or 'signified' of a spoken or written text (a joke in this case) is never fixed, and that in any case any text will allow more than one reading, a reader can simultaneously *herself* entertain more than one meaning, and thus experience more than one response, *and be aware of all this*. Experiencing an 'ideological dilemma' over a new piece of government legislation (say, in relation to selective schools) would be a case in point here.

This takes us some way to looking at simultaneously critical and pleasurable responses to the same joke. However, as an 'explanation' this is over-straightforward, over-general and uninteresting. In particular, it ignores issues of gender relations, stereotyping, and the fact that certain ways of seeing and representing the world are more dominant and powerful than others. Helpful here is the theoretical concept of *discourse(s)*, associated with Critical discourse analysis, Critical social theory and post-structuralism. For all these, (a) discourse is value-laden and constitutive.

Linguistically, a discourse is realised by, and recognised through, particular linguistic *traces* (e.g. Talbot, 1998), from which the discourse can be co-constructed by a listener or reader. In these jokes, we can recognise an overall 'traditional' gendered discourse: in relation to men, women are spendthrift, vain, shallow, and bad at reverse parking. However, feminist (and other) readers of the jokes are likely to be aware of (and are thus able to 'invoke') another, intertextually-related, set of discourses. These, I suggest (and readers of this paper will be able to come up with others) include:

- a critical *anti-sexist discourse* (entailing awareness of sexism)
- a feminist *discourse of agency/non-victimhood/self-value*
- a *post-feminist discourse* (see below)

Feminist readers, who will be aware of the above, can thus be seen as ‘multiply’ positioned or ‘located’ by these jokes, given their intertextual links (competing as well as supporting) and given that, like all texts, these will be encountered in a particular sociopolitical and thus discursive time and space. As Judith Baxter (2003) writes:

For post-structuralism, we may be simultaneously ‘multiply positioned’ by different discourses, and thus ‘multiply located’ within a ‘nexus’ of discourses.

Most obviously, women are positioned by some *traditional* discourses of gender - of which the jokes carry interpretable linguistic traces – as the very women who are the butt of the jokes (our understanding of them means that we have been successfully interpellated and that this must be the case). However, the nexus within which we are multiply located, and our positioning within this, is also constituted by progressive and critical discourses.

The idea of the *nexus* is developed in Baxter’s ‘Feminist post-structuralist discourse analysis’ (FPDA) (e.g. Baxter, 2002, 2003). Though some discourses may be less accessible than others at a given moment within a given space, being ‘multiply located’ allows a reader, to a certain extent, to *choose* which to ‘access’. A feminist reader of these jokes, while acknowledging the sexism, might at the same time find them (mildly) amusing given the awareness and social and political self-confidence that can simultaneously come from also having access to a critical *anti-sexist discourse* (entailing awareness of sexism) and/or a positive feminist *discourse of agency/non-victimhood/self-value*.

But why even *mildly* amusing? If the above argument is not entirely convincing, it can be made more so, I suggest, if the feminist reader is seen as also able to access what might be called a ‘Post-feminist discourse’. ‘Post-feminism’ is used in different ways, and means different things to different people, indeed sometimes to the same person (unsurprising and proper, given its close relationship with post-structuralism), so I will suggest several possible meanings (none of which is ‘The need for feminism is over’ or ‘Feminism is dead’). ‘We’, here, refers to a female, feminist reader of these sexist jokes (though the principle could be extended to others in other contexts). The meanings are:

- we do and see things *knowing about feminism*
- we see and do things with the benefit of *having experienced feminism*
- we adopt a feminist perspective *not just a 'sexism awareness' perspective*
- we see sexism *and beyond* (e.g. its causes, but also its spin-offs)

To put it another way, the whole relationship between such jokes and their readers can be seen as: “we know about feminism, others know, and we know they know, and they know we know they know”, where ‘we’ can be the reader or producer of a text. This is the case in the relationship between the producers and consumers of men’s ‘lifestyle’ magazines such as *Loaded* (by-line: ‘for men who should know better’); and *GQ*: (by-line: ‘so bad it’s good’). In this same vein of ‘knowingness’, with reference to her own work on men’s ‘lifestyle’ magazines, Bethan Benwell writes: “it seems that the reader is required to tread a subtle and practised course though a minefield of irony, ambiguity and double-voicing” (2002: 166). She sees ‘double-voicing’ as highly characteristic of such magazines, suggesting that ‘magazine masculinity’ depends on being able to ‘read’ at both levels at the same time: to ‘get’ the irony, but not to enjoy that irony too enthusiastically (2002: 170). For the feminist reader to enjoy these jokes, on the other hand, the irony *must*, if not enjoyed enthusiastically, at least be appreciated fully – and, indeed, worked at.

The relevant concept of *double-voicing* joins those of *reader response(s)* and *discourse(s)*. Originally from Bakhtin (and a form of *polyphony*), it is also related to focalisation. It refers most simply to a speaker ‘voicing’ the words of another in an account to a listener in ways which differentiate that ‘other’s’ words from her/his own, perhaps by using a different accent or speech style. In writing, it is thus characteristic of literary texts, where a character’s voice may not be the narrator’s, and indeed the narrator’s may well not be the author’s. It may in particular be evident in the words of a character expressing something the author wishes to represent as unpalatable in order to cast it in high (and negative) relief.

More broadly, *double-voicing* can be used to refer to the possibility of two readings of a text being made available simultaneously: something Benwell (2002) claims is done through the intentionally-deployed irony of *Loaded* and *GQ*, along the lines of ‘Yes, it’s sexist, but we know that, and (so) we’re being ironic’. Here, I am suggesting rather differently that our experience of double-voiced texts, together with the

accessibility of a range of discourses, allows us to ‘double-voice’ a text *for ourselves*, as a productive form of ‘reading against the grain’, i.e. we can deliberately read these jokes in more than one way, simultaneously. Radu Surdulescu (2002) observes that

when resistance or tension between [the two voices] appear, the double-voicing is active: such is the status of the “word with a loophole”, in which there is included a statement, its rebuttal, the response to the rebuttal, and so on, possibly *ad infinitum*.

Given the generic limitations of this set of jokes, *ad infinitum* is hard to claim here. Nevertheless, the tension between the textualised sexist voice and (as I hope I have shown) a resistant, colonising and interpretive feminist voice certainly makes this tension a productive one (as the production of this paper about these jokes bears testament).

Kotthoff observes that “feminists exhibit solidarity with their own gender in enjoying jokes, and deconstruct patriarchal ideologies of gender orders in their humor” (2000: 59). And, clearly, not *all* women enjoy jokes which draw on female stereotypes. However, telling jokes which deconstruct patriarchal ideologies with feminist friends is differing from the experience of consuming jokes which draw on female stereotypes. So, what are some alternative *reading* positions for the feminist who encounters these jokes? Mills (1992) looks at alternative reading positions in relation to a male-focalised poem, ‘Valentine’, and I have adapted these positions here. I suggest that there are four possible reading positions *vis á vis* the jokes, shading into each other.

First, the feminist reader may simply critically reject these jokes – for example, by deleting them and/or asking the person who forwarded them not to do so again.

Secondly, she may engage in ‘resistant reading’: she may recognize and negatively evaluate the sexist discourse, thus resist and contest the jokes’ presuppositions, but continue to read, *analytically*. She may position herself as an ‘overhearer’ of a text addressed to men, in order to resist interpellation through identifying with a subject position of ‘men’, or of ‘women’. (As Mills (1992) notes, though, to make sense of such texts, she must still *recognise* the indirect interpellation of women, which means that she must - however indirectly – also have been interpellated as such.)

Thirdly, she may *critically enjoy* the text. For example, as suggested above, she may co-construct the text's ironic potential, 'double discourse' the text, and take critical intellectual pleasure in that. Of one article in *GQ*, Benwell identifies "a second voice in the form of self-irony, whereby irony is directed at the masculinity espoused by the magazine and by implication its readers" (2002: 166), and in her 2004 paper on ironic discourse in men's 'lifestyle' magazines exemplifies this with a case of "the target or 'victim' of the irony [being] therefore the writer himself, ironizing the disjunction between Jones' [Vinnie Jones – a UK footballer] excessive heroic masculinity and his own feeble antiheroism" (2004: 10). We do not have to read very far against the grain to see such a voice in these jokes too, in which Kotthoff's observation that "Jokes at the expense of others can also intersect in complex ways with those at one's own expense" (2000: 56) holds very true. But if this is the case, then we can also see the jokes as being (at least in part) not about women at all, but rather about the writers and (male) consumers of the jokes – suggesting a fourth reading.

This fourth reading is to 'reclaim' the jokes, from a feminist perspective. Cognitively more complex, but perhaps ultimately more satisfying, is to 'refocalise' (ironicise?) the jokes for ourselves and take the woman's perspective, moving the 'object' of the joke (women) to subject position and make the original focalisers, men, the object. This allows us to see humour in the fact that these tired old stereotypes are *still* in circulation and that some people *still* enjoy them: "Nice spoofs – but how silly these jokes and their producers and the consumers who unthinkingly find their presuppositions funny are!" Further, if we wish, we can reject some or all of the premises on which the jokes are based, and consider, for example, the *value* of talk (and/or getting rid of dust and/or separating the laundry). Though at least some of this may be hard to do, for most women it is probably not *too* hard an additional repositioning. Accordingly, we can again then be *critical* of the specific masculine focalisation, and again move men from being subject of the jokes (the focalisers) to their topic or object: men simply do not appreciate the value of talk (and/or getting rid of dust and/or separating the laundry). This allows us further to see humour in this represented lack of appreciation (back to "how silly they are!").

The different reading positions may provide good survival strategies, each one arguably stronger than the one before. Such readings of the text can variously result in critique, enjoyment *and* an achieved refusal to be damaged, or subject positioned as

nagging, manipulative, a bad driver or, worst of all, irrational. The possibility of the fourth reading position additionally helps us address the question of what exactly it is that is amusing when we find ourselves laughing inwardly or outwardly at these jokes. Rather than the sexism of the jokes, it is the foolish assumptions behind them, and the fact that this foolishness retains some currency, that is entertaining. The joke is thus at the expense of these particular social norms (see also Kotthoff, 2000).

The above rhetorical manoeuvres leave open two further questions: both political, though in different senses. The first one is this: even if one can deal theoretically with these contradictions in and for oneself (for example, in one or more of the ways I have suggested), perhaps as a form of survival strategy, how can one deal with them when interacting with others? The answer must depend on *which* others, in *which* Community of Practice. While one may feel safe displaying amusement at jokes such as these when surrounded by feminists with post-structuralist leanings, or post-structuralists with feminist leanings, who can be assumed to share relevant understandings, one's displayed response might be rather different if confronted by the jokes in other, differently-populated spaces. At the risk of perpetuating the stereotype of the humourless feminist, and indeed of sounding ridiculously pompous, we might then 'display' disapproval by saying – perhaps light-heartedly - to a man who is audibly enjoying these jokes, words to the effect of “your reaction does you no favours, you know”.

The second, more serious, political question is whether – contradictions aside - the existence of such jokes points (in some sense) to a failure of feminism. Of men's lifestyle magazines such as *Loaded* and *GQ*, Benwell observes that “[the] ‘knowing’ tone, the ambiguity, the double-voicing are all strategies employed to preserve [traditional, heterosexual] masculine values in the face of a disapproving world” (2002: 170; see Benwell, 2004 for further discussion of this point). Sally Johnson (1997) and others have observed that to survive, traditional institutions and practices simply need to adapt somewhat – and many do, despite the inherent contradictions. The use of irony potentially entailed in these jokes can be seen as a form of adaptation. If this is so, whereas Reading Positions 1 and 2 (rejecting the text, and reading it critically) may be appropriate (traditional) feminist responses, Reading Positions 3 and 4 (recognising the contradictions in one's own responses, and critically enjoying, and reclaiming the jokes), on the other hand, are not. Consumption

of the jokes through Reading Positions 3 and 4 do not entail having to cut oneself loose from all traces of feminist *discourses*, but the question that remains, of course, is whether – socially and politically - these individualistic, post-structuralist ways of dealing with contradictions, are appropriate, productive and progressive *feminist responses* at all.

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