

HUMOR PREFERENCE AS A FUNCTION OF PREOEDIPAL FIXATION

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Psychoanalytic theory predicts that humor preference is a derivative of unresolved childhood conflicts. Students' Rorschach protocols were analyzed to yield measures of preoedipal fixation. The students were given decks of jokes to rank from most to least funny. Results showed that the ranking of jokes was a function of the fixation measures on the Rorschach for women only but not for men.

Psychoanalytic theory of humor appreciation is predicated on the assumption that it serves as a channel for the expression of unconscious impulses seeking discharge (Freud, 1905). If the construct of psychosexual fixation implies that different personality types have distinct repressed drives seeking discharge, then Freud's (1927) assertion that "there is no doubt that the essence of humor is that one spares oneself the affects to which the situation would naturally give rise and dismisses the possibility of such expressions of emotion with a jest" (p. 162) clearly implies that humor appreciation of specific content jokes varies directly with the degree of fixation in their respective areas.

In his thesis on humor, Freud refers to aggression and regression as primary determinants. Although it is clear that the two are autonomous facets of humor, studies in the area have generally focused on the aggressive aspect (compiled in Levine, 1969). The studies have produced inconsistent and often contradictory results, possibly because of the minimal stress in their designs to tap unconscious (as opposed to overt) aggression in predicting appreciation of hostile humor. An exception to this criticism is an early study by Murray (1934) showing that subjects with high aggression on the TAT tended to appreciate aggressive humor, where the use of the projective test was designed to tap unconscious drives exclusively.

Content scoring of projective protocols is evolving as a potent tool in testing psychoanalytic hypotheses about psychosexual fixation. Juni and Frenz (1981) review the major studies in orality using this approach, and present a reliable coding system for arriving at numerical indices of the preoedipal stages of orality, anality, and sadism using precise content criteria to categorize thematic material in Rorschach protocols.

In this study, 71 women and 33 men participated in an hour session for credit toward their undergraduate course requirement. Each subject was first given a structured version of the Rorschach where a specific number of responses are required for each card. The next task was to rank-order a deck of 18 jokes from most funny to least funny. The content of the "punch lines" of the jokes was either oral, anal, sadistic (in accordance with criteria of Schafer, 1954), or neutral. Specifically, the *oral* jokes related to food or depicted dependency, the *anal* jokes either had dirt, anal/rectal or defecation reference, satirized money hoarding or pertained to explosion, and the *sadistic* jokes featured deprivation, devouring, or direct aggression. By assigning a value

of 18 to the funniest joke for a subject and successively lower values to the others - through the value of I for the least funny - mean values were computed for oral, anal, and sadistic humor preference.

It was hypothesized that humor preference for a specific content area is a function of fixation in that area. Since the humor preference indices were based on mutually exclusive rank ordering, the Rorschach-derived fixation measures were similarly computed by dividing each fixation count by the total of all fixation counts. In effect, then, each humor or fixation score in a specific area is thus relative to the remaining areas rather than being absolute.

Pearson product-moment correlations were computed between the fixation measures and the humor indices. Results confirmed the hypothesis for *women*, where there were no positive correlations approaching significance ($p < 0.10$) other than those hypothesized between orality and oral humor ($r = 0.40$, $p < 0.001$), anality and anal humor ($r = 0.21$, $p = 0.04$), and sadism and sadistic humor ($r = 0.21$, $p = 0.04$). For *men*, there were no correlations approaching significance. These sex differences are not readily understood, although they are commonplace in research on psychoanalytic hypotheses (Masling and Schwartz, 1979). Equally common are consistently low but significant correlations in the studies operationalizing psychosexual fixation, confirming the role of characterology as an important but circumscribed determinant of behavior.

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