

[Back to front page »](#)

March 12, 2007, 7:58 pm

## [But Seriously: Why Is There a Gender Gap in Laughter?](#)

By [John Tierney](#)

Tags: [gender](#), [humor](#), [Laughter](#)

In my [column](#) on laughter, I mention that female speakers are more likely to laugh than male speakers are. That's one aspect of a large gender gap that Robert Provine, a neuroscientist at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, discovered when he left the lab and went out into the wild — well, sidewalks and shopping malls — to observe “laugh episodes.”

When men and women converse with one another, “females are the leading laughers, but males are the best laugh getters,” Professor Provine explains in his 2000 book, “Laughter: A Scientific Investigation.” He reached this conclusion by noting each time laughter occurred in a conversation and recording who laughed — the speaker, the audience, or both.

Overall, he found that speakers outlaughed their audiences by close to 50 percent. But the pattern varied enormously according to gender.

When a woman spoke to a female audience, she laughed about 70 percent more often than her listeners. When she spoke to men, the ratio got more lopsided: she laughed more than twice as often as the guys listening to her.

When a man was speaking to a male audience, he laughed about 20 percent more than the audience. But when he was speaking to women, they laughed a little more — about 8 percent — than he did.

“As audiences,” Professor Provine writes, “both males and females were more selective in whom they laughed at or with than they were as speakers — neither males nor females laughed as much at female as male speakers.” He notes that another study in England found a gender gap starting at an early age: “Among children viewing cartoons, girls laughed more with boys than with girls, and girls reciprocated boys' laughter more often than boys reciprocated girls' laughter.”

Guys can quickly come up with an explanation for the Laugh Gap: We're funnier. Women can counter: No, you're just more ridiculous. (As one of Professor Provine's female colleagues put it: “When dealing

with males there is so much more to laugh at.”) But as I explain in the column, laughter isn’t usually a response to wit or absurdity — it’s generally an involuntary response that functions as a social lubricant. Professor Provine found that only 10 to 20 percent of the laughs he recorded were triggered by anything remotely amusing. So whether men are funnier or more ridiculous, there’s something else causing most of the laughter.

Feel free to post your theories on what that is. (You can also weigh in on the question of who’s funnier, men or women, but that’s not going to explain the Laugh Gap.)

- [E-mail This](#)

## 35 comments so far...

- 1.  
March 12th,  
2007  
[8:23 pm](#)

Comedy is inherently conservative and men are generally conservative while women (especially unmarried women) are generally liberal. It is unsurprising then that humor is a male province.

— *Posted by Orrin Judd*

- 2.  
March 12th,  
2007  
[9:46 pm](#)

Is this finding applicable cross-culturally? Is Dr. Provine examining this issue as a cultural issue or as something hardwired into the human brain?

— *Posted by Bob Lohr*

- 3.  
March 12th,  
2007  
[10:24 pm](#)

I often laugh not because someone is especially funny but because I sense that the person/speaker wishes to be found funny, and I want to be kind to that person. I think the gender gap persists because (1) women intuit emotional signals differently/ more finely than men, so more often pick up on the cues as to when someone wishes to be found funny and (2) men more often want to be found funny.

Jackie  
(female)

— *Posted by Jackie*

•

4.  
March 12th,  
2007  
[11:37 pm](#)

I tend to find that men are generally funnier...lighter outlook on life..less serious. I think it is biological and one of the unfairnesses that can be reduced back to the sperm and the egg. Ive always been envious of male friendships that revolve around humorous banter while women get down to business and talk about emotional topics or gossip or whatever.

— *Posted by sarah*

•

5.  
March 12th,  
2007  
[11:38 pm](#)

and i also agree very much with jackie's comment.

— *Posted by sarah*

•

6.  
March 13th,  
2007  
[12:22 am](#)

Molly Ivins is spinning in her grave. This column is so ridiculous — my guess is that the

“scientists” were taking notes at business meetings etc. There is no account for regional variations, intimacy of group etc. Yes, sure, I bet laughter is a built in “I’m a subordinate mammal” thing, but it’s the difference between a real smile and a Duchene smile. The fake stuff and the real stuff. Real laughter is pure communication, and there can only be pure communication between equals.

— *Posted by Kelly Cash*

•

7.  
March 13th,  
2007  
[1:02 am](#)

Women gain status by having a bigger network of friends, whereas men gain status by being higher in a hierarchy.

Thus, women are usually trying to bond, and for women, laughter is a way to begin or strengthen a relationship. In contrast, for men, laughter is a sort of syncophantic behavior, to be doled out only to those of superior rank.

By telling jokes to women, men think they are cementing their superior status when women’s laughter occurs, whereas women think they are strengthening a peer bond. If a man hears a woman’s joke, he uses laughter grudgingly, to not lose his self-perceived social status as the superior gender.

There’s also the issue of men feeling entitled to waste women’s time even on stupid jokes, whereas women usually eschew stupid jokes out of respect for other’s time.

So, the Laugh Gap arises because women and men demonstrate social status differently.

— *Posted by Brenda*

•

8.  
March 13th,  
2007  
[1:22 am](#)

Laughter is a truly communal activity. Sit in a 1/2 empty theatre and listen in vain for gales of laughter...the same film in a crowded theatre evokes a much more uproarious response.

As for gender differences, you don't need a decibel meter to detect the greater volume of laughter generated by women.

As Kathleen Turner's sexy toon says when asked what she sees in Roger Rabbit—"He makes me laugh."

— *Posted by Lionel Libson*

- 9.  
March 13th,  
2007  
[3:08 am](#)

Provine and the FSU researchers are somewhat incorrect. Their model is incomplete and their logic flawed because they are looking at the wrong things to explain humor. But so many in history went down partial paths too. My book on the psychology of humor (out next year) will convey a better model. Here's another way of looking at things: how one interprets information (humor) depends on being able to comprehend certain elements of situation that comprise humor. That depends on your mental abilities, your cultural beliefs - which differ significantly between men and women, or immature and the mature, and even deeply religious and non-religious - and certain other factors. Humor a redneck loves might leave a feminist cold.

Once humor has been recognized internally, whether one expresses that perception to the outside depends in large part on your current emotional state and the external social context. For example, laugh tracks make it more acceptable for some to express perception of humor; and presence of the boss may restrict your expression. A gutbusting obscene joke might die if told in court before a magistrate, but work in a nightclub full of drunks. There are many elements that must exist together for something to be funny, and it is easy for researchers to misunderstand the complexity of the whole.

The full model is far more complex than I have room here to cover, and I apologize for the brevity.

— *Posted by Bert Kaye*

- 10.  
March 13th,  
2007  
[3:08 am](#)

As much as I hate to speak of it, I think the gender hierarchy has a lot to do with the difference in how much women and men laugh, and I would venture so far as to suggest it is the dominant

reason. It is like Tierney's graduate student example, in which the extent to which a group laughed depended largely on "who belongs where in the status hierarchy."

For all that the sexual revolution has changed gender relationships in the West, there are still huge differences in social position between the genders. Women are still lower on the social scale than men, and that may well explain why they laugh more, especially when they are in the presence of men.

Perhaps our mostly unconscious attitudes towards gender would be something worthy of exploration as we approach the first Democratic primaries (at least in my young memory) in which a woman is thus far one of the most prominent candidates. A recent Boston Globe article touches upon this sensitive issue well [http://www.boston.com/news/nation/articles/2007/02/19/hillary\\_clinton\\_and\\_the\\_glass\\_ceiling/](http://www.boston.com/news/nation/articles/2007/02/19/hillary_clinton_and_the_glass_ceiling/)

— *Posted by Annie*

- 11.  
March 13th,  
2007  
[3:59 am](#)

As Jackie (female), above, noted, men more often want to be found funny. (Which does not, by a long shot, imply that they're funnier.) So... why?

I'd speculate that it's because making someone laugh is an act of domination. You are manipulating someone into a desired response. There's also something needful about seeking out a laugh — the need for the approbation implied by the laugh. Either way, it probably doesn't say anything terribly positive about the laugh seeker that he's seeking said laugh.

My question is what our host can possibly have against Jim Carrey movies? (I mean the ones intended to be funny, not his awkward "serious work.") Don't discount the rare and serious craft happening in his hijinx just because he's doesn't hold the desired outcome at arm's length — the too-hip "I don't care if you laugh or not" pose. That chic ironical attitude only gives the laugh seeker an out, and it's always tougher to work without such a safety net. Carrey doesn't give himself any outs, and goes way further out on a thin comedy limb than most of his contemporaries. Sure, it doesn't always work, but look at what he risks.

— *Posted by Jimmy*

- 12.

March 13th,  
2007  
[4:30 am](#)

I read this article hoping to find something about bias jokes and why some people think it is ok to put down other people.

— *Posted by tricia*



13.  
March 13th,  
2007  
[4:44 am](#)

At first glance one might suspect that the social laugh reflex in humans arises from a dominance relationship recognized by the subconscious (instinctive). The Tickler is dominating the Ticklee. The adult tickles the child, the male tickles the female (think primitive animals, such as insects, in their courtship rituals). I think that it's much more complicated when it comes to human beings (like a lot of things). This "social laughter" is a tool in the repertoire of human communication. It may have started out in animals as a way of acknowledging basic dominance but has been adapted by humans to express more than the simple idea of who is dominant. As a "social lubricant" I suspect that the observed laughter in any particular instance is communicating something beyond general acceptance or friendliness. It can be specific to the conversation and used as part of the grammar of human communication. If that is the case then the greater frequency of laughter among women can be attributed to their naturally having better communication skills than men (in general). In addition, women may laugh at/with men more often because it is an easier and more effective way to communicate with men (you know, better than using all those words, half of which men ignore!)

As to what is funny, that is something which is peculiar to the culture and individual. Almost anything can be seen as funny from the right perspective. I've found that I laugh much less now at "ethnic" humor, or any joke that mocks someone, than when I was a child. Though it is still ok to laugh at the powerful and self-important, and of course, most of all, oneself.

— *Posted by martin g*



14.  
March 13th,  
2007

[5:03 am](#)

I would compare the phenomenon of women laughing more than men in conversation to other gender differences in modes of communication. Women give and look out for positive reinforcement in a conversation— nodding of the head in agreement, verbal feedback, and so on—to show that their audience is really listening. As men are more likely to just stand and listen than to nod their head in a discussion, women often feel that men just aren't listening. Since women already give more verbal feedback in a conversation, the finding that they also laugh more is not surprising; laughing, even if a joke isn't that funny, shows that the speaker has been heard and invites them to keep speaking. So the analogy of laughter as a “social lubricant” is very apt.

— *Posted by Liz Danner*

•

15.  
March 13th,  
2007  
[5:12 am](#)

I'm thinking from a human history adaptive point of view that maybe females laugh more with males to ease or avoid any aggressive or violent behavior that males may exhibit. A female may also laugh more with a male as a way to get something she wants from him.

— *Posted by Stephanie*

•

16.  
March 13th,  
2007  
[6:31 am](#)

Men aren't funnier. They are more comical.

— *Posted by Heide Fasnacht*

•

17.  
March 13th,  
2007  
[7:00 am](#)

It's good to get some insight into the behaviors of the non-dysfunctional crowd, a group that I avoid religiously. This laughter issue is just another example of the duplicitous habits that are endemic in society, especially among those most likely to succeed. But thanks, again.

— *Posted by Frank Correnti*



18.  
March 13th,  
2007  
[7:02 am](#)

What Jackie said makes a lot of sense to me. It takes into account that the gap is perceived at a young age and also the data that shows that laughing at something or someone does not indicate that it or they are 'funny'. Humor is not the issue in this discussion, it is the tendency to laugh despite a lack of humor. Women tend to have more ability to read social cues and to want to be cooperative than many men, and laughing is a useful tool for that.

— *Posted by Eden*



19.  
March 13th,  
2007  
[7:09 am](#)

What I found illuminating about that humor study was how men became angry when punchlines did not deliver, whereas women were more delighted about all the jokes because they were caught off guard.

I took this to mean that men feel they "deserve" to laugh while women are shocked that anything pleasant is happening to them unexpectedly.

Perhaps thousands of centuries spent in slavery under a restrictive social order has given women lower expectations than men about their own right to pleasure.

Women are as funny, likely much funnier, than men. We just express it differently. Our humor is less physical and more intellectual.

We use more thousands more words every day so it would make sense we'd know how to wield them better. What is called cattiness or bitchiness when displayed by women is generally called put-down humor when used by men.

— *Posted by Molly*

- 20.  
March 13th,  
2007  
[7:14 am](#)

It's funny how scientists are so culturally based, not a bad thing at all if you don't pretend to be getting at some universal truth. In this case, the need to laugh at unfunny things is a particularly American trait. It's can feel disorienting to foreigners until they get used to it, as this social laughter you describe just feels so forced. Some countries have other ways of getting along, more in the line of smiling rather than laughter.

— *Posted by Billy*

- 21.  
March 13th,  
2007  
[7:23 am](#)

I don't want to think it but: just as the article said that people were more likely to laugh if the joker was their boss could women't more frequrent laughing, especially at men, be yet another signal of a gender hierarchy. We need more information on this: specifically do males laugh more at males who are their boss? I suspect they do.

— *Posted by Sandee*

- 22.  
March 13th,  
2007  
[7:26 am](#)

People with no sense of humor naturally believe that other people are laughing at nothing.

— *Posted by Charles Nydorf*

-

23.

March 13th,

2007

[7:50 am](#)

Jackie is right. You are underestimating women's ability to "fake it." A man who can truly make you laugh is much more appealing.

— *Posted by Laura*

•

24.

March 13th,

2007

[7:55 am](#)

My cousin always had the theory of SMOC to explain jokes - the Small Moment Of Confusion. Maybe the confusion lasts longer for one gender...

— *Posted by Kim*

•

25.

March 13th,

2007

[7:57 am](#)

All this supports Deborah Tannen's work on cross cultural gender communications. Women predominately seek rapport and connection when they communicate. Laughter is one way of showing and soliciting connection. Men predominately seek hierarchy and status when they communicate. Too much laughter could indicate a lower "status". "You win, you made me laugh - or show my weakness" Men use humor very differently - in ways to assert higher status.

— *Posted by Denise*

•

26.

March 13th,

2007

[8:11 am](#)

Well, if laughter evolved as a “see I’m just playing, not fighting” perhaps the smaller more vulnerable female is hardwired for this defense. Female humans are also more social and by this study laughter is primarily social interaction. Women and girls are also more verbally skilled (see any linguistics gender study). This appears to be another link in that socially adept chain with the added benefit of “don’t kill me, I’m just kidding”.

Janet

— *Posted by Janet*



27.

March 13th,

2007

[8:22 am](#)

“Ha, ha ha!” Ho, ho, ho! Golly!”

Whew. I now feel comfortable, accepted, protected, and “safe within a social net.” We are born into a predatory world and need to feel secure.

“Hey, did you hear th one about th.....?”

L.D. Egan

— *Posted by Larry Egan*



28.

March 13th,

2007

[8:36 am](#)

“The human ha-ha evolved from the rhythmic sound — pant-pant — made by primates like chimpanzees when they tickle and chase one other while playing.”

Is this a fact or just a belief of the scientists? Like so much evolution science, it’s just psychological pornography. There’s no real value to it, but it jingles everyone’s bells (some more than others).

— *Posted by Ralph*



29.

March 13th,

2007

[8:37 am](#)

Intelligent people laugh at humor. Absurd and insecure people laugh to be accepted. There is definitely a social reason for it. As for gender, courtship warrants a woman and a man laugh at each other's jokes, laughter is medicine for the soul. I don't think it ought to be dissected though by class, gender, power etc. It is a gift to each of us for just being human.

— *Posted by cgoerner*

•

30.

March 13th,

2007

[8:39 am](#)

While serving in the Navy, I had observed over the course of number of sea tours that the Captain was consistently the “funniest” officer onboard. This dates back to the time when women did not serve in destroyers. Talk about survivalism; the environment resembled that of your chimpanzees. Now that women are in command, I wonder whether this generality still stands. There is probably an unmined opportunity to analyze leadership traits.

— *Posted by Russell Gottfried*

•

31.

March 13th,

2007

[8:41 am](#)

I have some friends, both male and female, who laugh more than others. Upon reflection, I think that more of these laugh-prone folks are female than male. Still, I can't help but think that the trait is linked to personality more than to gender. I plan to conduct my own survey on this point with a series of bad jokes later today.

Richard

BTW, I miss your op-ed column.

— *Posted by Richard*

•

32.  
March 13th,  
2007  
[8:47 am](#)

A related topic is the “Theater Laugh”. When I was younger and was first starting to attend Broadway shows, I always wondered why people laughed at some decidedly un-funny lines. It wasn’t that I didn’t understand what was going on; it just wasn’t funny.

My unscientific research concluded that either a)the hysterical laughs were blood relatives of the production (I most recently experienced this last Saturday night at a community theater production). b)it was truly a ‘social lubricant’; “Don’t you people realize how much these tickets cost? It HAS to be funny.” c)”I’m having a great time...it’s unfortunate that the rest of you people are knuckle-draggers, and just don’t appreciate the subtlty of great comedy”.

Even Neil Simon writes lines that aren’t supposed to be funny. Why do people feel that it’s some sort of mandate to laugh at everything?

Jack Pignatello

— *Posted by Jack Pignatello*

•

33.  
March 13th,  
2007  
[8:56 am](#)

Of course laughter is influenced by social factors, it is a form of communication. So is applause. And I’m sure applause varies between men and women in our society, too.

But we bond socially by laughing sometimes, and by applauding sometimes. But its social function is largely tangential to what is funny, isn’t it?

— *Posted by epistemology*

•

34.

March 13th,  
2007  
[8:59 am](#)

This isn't about what should be, but what is - in the sense of social empowerment. Deeply imprinted in males is a sense self empowerment and acceptance, and, in females strong tracings of being less powerful, even subservient. Laughter is a release of pressure and frustration. The serfs always enjoyed ridiculing their lords. In ancient times there was the 'feast of fools,' where the commoners could make fun of royalty,,,,,and it was pure laughter. Face it, much of laughter is the outpouring of hostility. Perhaps if men could laugh at themselves more easily there would be less strokes and heart attacks.

— *Posted by George (not W) in Texas*

•

35.  
March 13th,  
2007  
[9:34 am](#)

What I was hoping to find discussed is the difference in what men and women find funny!

And yes, I do think that men laugh at jokes that many women consider crude, to put it mildly.

However, for what it's worth, I'll agree that women in general laugh more. Could it be that we are kinder and more polite and willing to make others feel better about themselves?

I do refuse to laugh or even smile at "crude" jokes.

— *Posted by MaryAnn Salo*

## Add your comments...

Name

*Required* E-mail

*Required (will not be*