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Who tells the best jokes? Neurotic, aggressive jerks

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Joe Pesci's character in "Goodfellas" fits all the criteria for "funny." Everett Collection

‘Man alone suffers so excruciatingly in the world,’ said Friedrich Nietzsche, “that he was compelled to invent laughter.”

This was a landmark moment in comedy, because exactly two seconds after Nietzsche said this, the atomic wedgie was invented by the boy standing behind him in the middle-school lunch line.

Today science is looking for better explanations of comedy than existential suffering, cognitive scientist Scott Weems says in his book “Ha! The Science of When We Laugh and Why” (Basic Books).

Along the way, comedy researchers have stumbled upon surprising truths. For instance, lawyer jokes were almost nonexistent in the 1950s, whereas today more than 3,000 websites are dedicated to attorney mockery. Jokes about cleanliness (“Why do Italian men wear

mustaches? To look like their mothers.”) don’t work in Europe, where nobody thinks it’s odd if you don’t shower very often.

A Silver Star was once awarded for, essentially, Awesome Comedic Performance in Time of War (Vietnam captive Gerald Venanzi, an Air Force captain, kept morale up among his fellow POWs with a Roberto Benigni-worthy routine that involved riding a pretend motorcycle and telling jokes through an imaginary chimpanzee friend named Barney). And, most surprising of all, during a visit to a remote colony of indigenous peoples in Borneo, scientists even discovered someone who laughed at “The Hangover Part III.”

Other points found by comedy researchers are less surprising. For instance, studies show sense of humor is strongly linked to intelligence. Faith tends to be inversely correlated with some types of humor: A survey of some 400 subjects by Belgian psychologist Vassillis Saroglou found that strength of religious belief was inversely proportionate to social humor, and also that religious men have a tendency to tell a joke poorly.

Age and politics are linked to humor: Conservatives, and older people, prefer incongruity jokes over nonsensical ones.

Example of nonsense humor: A dog is at the telegraph office, dictating a telegram. “Woof,” he says. “Woof. Woof. Woof. Woof. Woof. Woof. Woof. Woof.” The telegraph clerk says, “That’s nine words. You could add in one more ‘Woof’ for the same price.” Dog says, “But that would make no sense at all.”

Example of incongruity humor: Woman walks into a bar with a duck on a leash. Bartender says, “Where’d you find the pig?” Woman says, “This isn’t a pig, you idiot, it’s a duck.” Bartender says, “I was talking to the duck.”

That last joke is also an aggressive one, one that comes at someone’s expense. Aggressive humor, you’ll probably guess, is linked to maleness, but also to American-ness. Other nationalities don’t respond nearly as favorably to put-downs, though one major international figure who does is God. Researchers investigating laughter by God or His followers in the Bible classified each occurrence as stemming from aggression, sadness or joy. The big winner was aggression, with 45 laughs. Laughter due to joy only happened twice.

All this is a long-winded way of confirming the obvious: that God is an American man. He probably drives a Ford-150 and made a point of resting on the seventh day because He had a lot of football to watch.

Being a dude, God probably didn’t find Chelsea Handler or Roseanne Barr funny either. Weems, a researcher at the University of Maryland, tiptoes into the area of what he delicately calls women’s “struggle in the world of comedy,” or as feminist sociolinguist Robin Lakoff put it more directly in 1975, “Women can’t tell jokes — they are bound to ruin the punch line, they mix up the order of things, and so on. Moreover, they don’t ‘get’ jokes. In short, women have no sense of humor.”

Terrified of where he’s heading, Weems retreats to the usual Women’s Studies jibber-jabber about how this is men’s fault, writing, “Women communicate differently than men and, consequently, are often subjected to misunderstandings in male-dominated environments.

Because their language tends to be powerless, they can't tell jokes, at least not effectively, and so are robbed of an important social function."

But look at the stable of writers Tina Fey hired for "30 Rock": a huge majority of them were men (eight of her top 10 most-used scribes were guys, according to imdb.com).

Fran Lebowitz is not a cognitive scientist, but she was onto something when she said, "Humor is largely aggressive and pre-emptive, and what's more male than that?"

A study of professional cartoonists by psychologist Paul Pearson linked funniness to "neuroticism" (a somewhat misleading catchall term for having high levels of feelings such as anxiety, tension, depression and guilt) and "psychoticism" (an even more misleading term for displaying such characteristics as being assertive and manipulative).

Both groups of traits, of course, strongly correlate with maleness. "Maladjusted" and "in-your-face" may not be the adjectives you should use to describe yourself on the average job interview, but if you want to get work down at the Laff Factory — or even at "30 Rock" — they're invaluable.