Gender and humour.
The new state of the art*

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Abstract

The article presents a research overview on developments in the field of gender and humour over the last fifty years, going back a bit further in relation to literature and film. The research comes mainly from linguistics and communication studies, but also from sociology, psychology, literature and media studies. Most changes lie in the appropriation of multifaceted humorous forms by girls and women. Humour becomes apparent as a component of a social semiotics that indexes and stylizes (non)traditional gender poles. The sub-themes revolve around humour development in children, laughter as a form of communication, humour in the world of work and in the media.

1 Introduction

This chapter aims to explore the role of gender in the field of humour. Traditionally, men have enjoyed much greater freedom of action than women in the comic field (cf. Walker 1988; Finney 1994; Preschl 2008). However, a lot has changed in this area during the last 30 to 40 years, in which feminist and other emancipatory movements have influenced many societies as well as the humour practices in private and public spheres. Contemporary theories challenge simple binary conceptions of gender and emphasize pluralities of masculinities, femininities and in-betweens. However, gender factors still play a role, and humour continues to be used as a tool of gender construction. I see no reason to underline essentialist differences "in nature" between "male and female types of humour", because we witness historical changes in gender orders in many contexts reflecting humour practices and vice versa. I therefore suggest a social constructivist view on gender. Humour can be used "to do" or "to index" a certain type of masculinity or femininity or to do both at the same time (Kotthoff 2021).

The play with deformation, ambiguity, and the inversion of norms presupposes a subject who rises above the circumstances. Those who laugh with her/him likewise swing to the meta-level of distance and amusement. For women, such a level of subjectivity and power was not envisioned for centuries; humour was often denied them (cf. Crawford 1995; Bing 2007). The relationship between humour and power is deeply gendered and has for a long time been ignored in research (cf. Dunbar et al. 2012). Lakoff summarized the culturally pervasive prejudices

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visible for centuries quite simply: "Women have no sense of humour" (Lakoff 1975: 56). Freud (1905/1985: 102), too, attributed the pleasure of nonsense to boys, but not to children in general.

When participants in a study were asked to provide a brief narrative describing the humour characteristics of a person they knew who embodied an outstanding sense of humour, Crawford/ Gressley (1991) reported that a majority of the participants from the US identified a male figure as the person who embodied an outstanding sense of humour. Indeed, of the 141 respondents (49 men, 92 women), nearly 84% of men and 67% of women selected a male figure. The researchers also classified the humour characteristics mentioned into five categories: creativity (witty, clever, quick comeback), caring (humour used to put others at ease), real life (grounding the humour in real life experiences), jokes (having a repertoire of jokes), and hostility/sarcasm (satirical, biting humour) and noted that creativity, caring and real life were mentioned most often, and that there were no discernible differences in the weighting of these characteristics as a function of either participant gender or target gender. Nevo et al. (2001) reported similar findings for Singaporean participants. Kuipers (2006), however, replicated the Crawford/ Gressley question for someone with an excellent sense of humour, and in the Netherlands people usually mentioned women but not in her (smallish) US sample.

According to the disposition theory of humour (cf. Zillmann/Cantor 1976), the attitude or disposition which the recipient maintains in relation to the humorous target plays a role in the enjoyment of humour. If s/he has taken the side of the attacker and has an aversion to the target, he/she will enjoy the joke. Cantor (1976) demonstrated that both women and men found the same jokes funnier when they were at the expense of a female. Men showed solidarity with their gender counterparts, but women did not. This stance has changed in the meantime. Drucker et al. (2014) used experimental reception studies to show that contemporary men (the study was conducted in Israel) find sarcastic remarks funnier than women. This finding is consistent with similar ones from thirty years ago. Women find sarcastic remarks funniest when women made them at the expense of men. Today's women are thus better able than their mothers' generation to show solidarity with their sex in the enjoyment of humour.

In Western societies, there are several other signs of tentative change in the gender politics of humour. The historically inherited general incompatibility of doing femininity with active and even aggressive joking is gradually beginning to dissolve. This does not mean that gender is no longer a variable of relevance to joking activities at all; it just means that gender orders are being produced by reference to other contexts. The crassness of the old pattern of the actively joking man and the receptively smiling woman is rarely found in the Western world anymore (cf. Bing 2007; Holmes/Schnurr 2005). Dunbar et al. (2012) were able to show, for example, that women were humorously more active than men in experimentally manipulated settings when the task was to solve a new problem in a group with a stranger. The researchers attributed a bonding function to the humour of these women (cf. Dunbar et al. 2012).

Gender-relevant themes and attributions are sometimes at the foreground of interaction in joking forms of interaction as well, e. g., in sexual teasing, in sexist jokes (cf. Mulkay 1988), in sexist and joking remarks to the speeches of women parliamentarians (cf. Burckhard 1992), or

in mock-deprecating coverage of women politicians (cf. Bendix/Bendix 1992) in the mass media. Often they remain as habitus phenomena (in Bourdieu's sense; cf. Bourdieu 1979/1984) in the background of the interaction, but can be detected by various research methods.

2 Plays with gender norms in artistic comedy

In the realm of artistic comedy, it can be seen that in the case of women, not only the production of humour was restricted, but its transmission, as well, was not assured for many decades. The restriction of female comedy and laughter ranged from devaluing and disregarding women's artistic and everyday comic practices, from relegating them to private spaces, to negative stereotyping in humour research itself (cf. Kotthoff 1988; Crawford 1995; Kotthoff 2006a; Figl 2010). For example, from the beginning of film history, women were active in front of and behind the camera, sitting in the audience, decisively determining cinematographic reception on both sides. Nevertheless, the history of early film comedy so far lists almost entirely male performers, including Max Linder, Charles Chaplin or Harold Lloyd. "Max" or "Charlie," even the Italian"Polydoro," are familiar to audiences in early film titles, but "Lea," "Leontine," "Rosalie" or "Gigetta" are less so. In addition to prominent names such as Asta Nielsen, Lucile Ball or Ossi Oswalda, Preschl therefore also mentions personalities to be discovered, such as Gigetta Morano and Sarah Duhamel (cf. Preschl 2008: 74). Porter (2012) shows similar trends for the British history of comic films.

The extremely productive film director Alice Guy-Blaché was only recently rediscovered at the 2018 Cannes Film Festival by Pamela Green, who presented a documentary on the life and work of this forgotten film director who was also prolific in comedy. In 1896, she made her first film. Over the decades, hundreds followed. She was one of the first people to make a feature film, and was arguably the first woman ever in film directing and cinematic comedy. She also made the first film exclusively with African-American actors. For a long time, film historians had attributed many of Guy-Blaché's works to men (cf. Adler 2021).

Another aspect of the connection between gender and humour, especially in the world of art, lies in the normative classifications that have always been played with. Milner Davis' (2014) discussion of farce sees men and women from Aristophanes' Lysistrata through Italian commedia dell' arte up to BBC TV series as very much on an equal footing. We can only briefly touch on three examples here. Because it often focuses on marginal, eccentric or "loser" characters, comedy seems to be a particularly fertile ground for showing deviations from gender norms. However, humour can both contribute to destabilizing these norms or, on the contrary, to strengthening them. Within an often ambivalent comical set-up, comedians play a key part in the disruption and/or the consolidation of these norms and the power relations that are inherently linked to them. Women mistaken for men, men mistaken for women, disguised as men – this play with identity and gender does not seem to be a new topic for the theatre or film audience of the 21st century. Even in Elizabethan England, where identity and the question of class were very important for society, these confusing relationships shown on stage were puzzling. Although confusions over identity have existed in comedy since classical times, Bolten (2010) shows that it is Shakespeare who mainly focused on the issue of gender in his comedies. For example, in *Twelfth Night*, he plays with the cultural constructions of his time, for example the question of gender and erotic attraction, even between partners of the same sex. No wonder

some contemporary polemical writers attacked the theatre, characterizing it to be a "seed-bed for sexual depravity". Nonetheless, Shakespeare's play exposes the strangeness of these attitudes towards sexuality and gender. It gives later generations an interesting insight in the uncertainties that surrounded this topic, even in the late 16th century. As one of the characters who challenge these social constructions, Viola dresses up as a man and transforms the conventional ideal of women in Elizabethan England.

Bouchetoux (2014) shows transgressions of gender in the Japanese *Kyogen* and *Kabuki* theatrical genres. For centuries in the all-male kabuki male actors have played female roles, not to enact the essence of femininity, but rather a highly stylized female-likeness (cf. ibd.: 113). He writes that contemporary *onnagata* deliberately cultivate a fantasy, a 'lie' (*uso*) that goes beyond the binary of male and female toward imagining reality rather than emulating it, and presenting the 'beauty of the artificial' (*jinko no bi*) – a female-likeness that appears ambiguous and transformative. The spectators see a male body beneath the feminine costume, an aesthetics of exaggeration and subversions of the male/female dichotomy, eventually dismantling the illusion of a natural gender identity.

Another very prominent example of a "crossdressing" comedy phenomenon is Charlie Chaplin's (1915) two-reel *A Woman*. The story sees him transforming into a woman to toy with two men's affections, and Chaplin's character eventually tricks them into kissing each other. Ephraim (2019) qualitatively evaluates representations of the female protagonist in Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936). In this film, Chaplin departs from his earlier representations of women as either vamps, suffragettes or in domestic roles. Chaplin's portrayal of the gamine as a strong, industrious and resilient character who contributes immensely in making the hero, gives *Modern Times* strong pro-feminist impulses. Ephraim argues that *Modern Times* can be viewed as more than the popular critical perspective of being a social commentary on the exploitation of human labour and the futility of pursuing happiness. He discusses it as a fine example of early feminist cinema. He sees it as Charlie Chaplin's greatest film and indeed one of the greatest films ever made. The main action in the film centres round the male lead actor, a tramp (played by Chaplin himself). The tramp is first seen as a worker in a steel factory. In the factory, he is made to work at inhuman speeds in order to meet his boss's desire for increased production and greed for more profit. The tramp suffers all manner of indignities in the factory – of note, being subjected to try out a new "feeding machine". Later he is mistakenly arrested as the head of a communist group. The tramp continues his search for work, penniless, hungry and seeking employment. During his wanderings, the tramp stumbles on the female protagonist in the film, a girl described as a gamine (a role played by Paulette Goddard). The girl is fleeing from the police after stealing a loaf of bread. The term *gamine* is of French origin and refers to 'a girl with mischievous or boyish charm' or 'a female street urchin' (*The New Oxford English Dictionary* 1998: 754). In the film the gamine is introduced as "a girl who refuses to be hungry". However, the tramp's meeting with the gamine is not her first appearance in the film. She is seen stealing bananas from a boat and throwing them to fellow street urchins. From her first appearance, the gamine is introduced as a character of power (a provider and helper), contrary to the tramp who is seen as a helpless worker slaving in a modern factory.

The exploitation of gender norms has long been a feature of artistic comedy, in many forms. On the one hand, the comic modality broadens the scope of social typification; on the other, a certain enlightenment concerning the doing or undoing of gender is delivered.

3 Humour development

In research on children's interactions, gendered differences in humour emerged as a topic in the 1980s. McGhee, in the course of large-scale studies of humour development in children, found that strong differences emerged between girls and boys at the end of preschool age (cf. McGhee 1976a, 1976b, 1979, 1980). In his studies, he investigated the question of when and in what form differences in the development of girls and boys become apparent and what these differences might be related to. In mixed groups at school age, boys were more often found initiating fun and girls more in the role of so-called fun recipients. Somewhat abbreviated, one could say: From school age on, boys made more jokes, tomfoolery, and clowning around, and girls laughed more often. In mixed groups, the girls laughed more than in all-girl groups. In a kindergarten study, Haas (1979) also found that boys in mixed groups made more jokes and girls responded to them, laughing. The girls began to affirm the boys in their dominant roles. Both boys and girls adapted their behaviour to common role expectations.

By kindergarten age, differences in joking behaviour between girls and boys were weakly developed. Around the time of school entry, the gap widened even further (cf. McGhee 1979). Various factors interact in this process. Playing around, fooling around, etc., were restricted by adults early on in girls' lives because they were perceived as boyish. One reason for gender differences, however strong or weak they may be, depending on context, has to do with social permission to show aggression (see Huuki et al. 2010). As children grow older, they become more and more conscious of the behaviours that are judged to be appropriate for boys and girls.

At around six years of age, children are intellectually capable of perceiving linguistic ambiguity, which is a prerequisite for many types of verbal humour (cf. McGhee 1980). At this age, boys exhibit more "silly rhyming, naughty words, playfully untrue or incongruous statements, and so forth" (ibid.: 209) and they practised joke telling more than girls.

Boys also competed with jokes, including sexual jokes at a later age (cf. Fine 1990). Similarly, nonverbal joking, such as playing crazy and playing clown, came significantly more often from boys in McGhee's studies. On the hostility scale, boys' humour also ranked higher on average (see also Oswald et al. 1986). In their ethnographic schoolyard study, Huuki et al. (2010) confirm the trend that boys often reproduce a pecking order in their humour. The little bosses amuse themselves by means of snottiness and sarcasm about less popular children. In Bergen's (2009) study of gifted children, younger age groups (average age 8 years) and older age groups (average age 11 years) both were able to "get" the more complicated jokes and could explain why they were funny. Bergen found that the expression of hostile humour was significantly greater for gifted male children than female children. Bergen (2020) reviews the age when sex differences in humour initiation and appreciation emerge in order to understand whether the observed sex differences among adults are due to environmental or biological causes. Her finding that sex differences emerge only late in elementary school lead her to conclude that environment plays a larger role in developing such differences.

A study carried out by Galindo Merino (2021) of 140 Spanish humorous narratives produced by 7- and 8-year-old boys and girls about a school exchange finds that boys narratively display aggressiveness and status much more than girls, who often had uncomfortable situations in the centre of their stories. But both groups resort to scatology as a source for humour.

Other studies also point to some differences in the joking behaviour of girls and boys among their peers (cf. Bönsch-Kauke 2003), and in college age the adaptation in style to each other tends to be reciprocal in mixed-sex contexts (cf. Lampert/Ervin-Tripp 1998, 2006). Bönsch-Kauke (2003) often discovers combative themes and fantasy characters as well as obscene wordings in the humour of school boys. In girls, she found many humorous chaos techniques, e. g., "talking until you are right", or confusing one's counterpart with nonsense. Their joking topics were often love affairs and appearance (cf. similarly Branner 2003). Bönsch-Kauke also sees gender differences in the reception of challenging humour. Boys are more likely to take hurtful humorous remarks and counter them, (thereby doing masculinity), while girls are more likely to sulk. In mixed company, American college girls joke more than among themselves, and boys display more forms of joking at their own expense (cf. Lampert 1996). Thus, for both sexes in contact with each other, behaviours that are more typical of the other sex increase relative to their frequencies in same-sex groups (cf. Ervin-Tripp/Lampert 1992).

Joking is always context sensitive. Huuki et al. (2010) show in a large-scale interaction study, conducted for seven years in Finnish primary and secondary schools, that for boys, risky verbal and nonverbal forms of humour are a resource for negotiating cultural masculinity. Boys with high status, in particular, often cross general boundaries of acceptance with their humour. They offensively ridicule other children and still have the laughs on their side even when their humour crosses boundaries. The study provides further insights into the complex relationships between humour forms, gender, violence, age and social status. Violence, in particular, was often found disguised in a humorous frame, making resistance especially difficult for the victims of the jokes. Boys who were unable to counter humorous attacks lost influence in the group. Rose et al. (2016), in a study of "problem talk" found that, although girls participated in such talk more than boys, the boys used humour during such talk more often, and this communicated closeness only for boys. In particular, the social dimension of male/female trajectories of early humour development grow more diverse during adolesce. Crawford (2003) suggests that cultural standards include the expectation that males will initiate humour more than women and that this helps them to gain dominant roles in society. But this pattern has lost stability.

4 Humour and "indexing gender"

In the context of joke communication, we not only amuse ourselves, but also engage in face work, establish social order, and much more.

We can trace associations of joke practice and social gender as we did in the chapter above. However, in humour, it is evident that social stylizations are used as very specific knowledge bases to present oneself as a certain type or to produce social types in performances. For reconstructing the relevance of gender, we can work with the interpretive approach of indexing (cf. Ochs 1992; Kotthoff 2021, which can also capture non-exclusive and indirect relations between stylistic features, speech activities and social categories, e. g. that of gender. The concept of

indexing is able to capture couplings and co-articulations of different dimensions of communicating gender.

Since sexual joking in particular was historically taboo for women in the public sphere, it can be used today to flaunt one's progressiveness and stage female bravado. Freud (1905/1985) claimed that the enjoyment of sexual humour was alien to women, which is why he saw vulgar humour as an exclusively male enjoyment, often at the expense of women. Freud inadmissibly anthropologized historical manifestations of gender politics (cf. Apte 1985: 68f.). Young men can use the joking so often assigned to women at their own expense to reject a macho image of themselves (cf. Lampert/Ervin-Tripp 2006); good middle-class girls can indexicalize in their cultivation of highly cooperative forms of joking that they are indeed "the nice girls next door" (cf. Branner 2003; Ardington 2006). Especially in feature films and television series, the capacities of humour are used to create specifically gendered characters (cf. Harwood/Giles 1992; Davies 2006). In particular, swashbuckling characters are also assigned such a style with a humour based on attack; subordinate or very friendly characters joke at their own expense and show much supportive laughter. In former times, female comedians primarily used a type of humour that was self-deprecatory (e. g. in the US Phyllis Diller, in Germany Helga Feddersen). Today, women have more options to use the entire range of humour types and do it to stylize very specific characters.

The very successful German TV comedian Carolyn Kebekus makes her audience laugh with punchlines about formerly taboo topics, e. g. flatulence, and manages to embed them in a context of an equality of the sexes still waiting to be achieved. In her comedy, she works with a broad repertoire of indices that are simultaneously low class and male-oriented. In an interview with Scholz (2017 in "Die Welt"), she points out that parts of the audience find her "chavvy" and "vulgar." She points out how she welcomes being mistaken for a "bully" because she's often heard she's "quite funny for a woman." She has struggled to be crude and crass, she says, in order even to be noticed in the male-driven comedy scene. She serves both an attacking sense of humour and one that delves into areas of physical taboo.

For some years, the comedian Ilka Bessin was successful on German TV with her figure of "Cindy", who made the violation of the common "good taste" her programme and was designed to index lower class norms. Her vulgar speech in Berlin dialect, her corpulence, the blond hair with the dark roots, her little crown, and her pink jogging suit were meant to give her the ironic image of a failed princess and at the same time associate her with the lower class. Pink as a colour is a classic girl index. Her performance as a princess, however, ran counter to societal ideas of what a princess should be. She played with and broke this image in many ways. Cindy is rude and speaks vulgarly (e. g. about the size of her genitals), thus working with indexes of traditional masculinity. In her TV program "Nicht jeder Prinz kommt uff'm Pferd" (2016), Princess Cindy sits on her throne in a pink princess dress, has food thrown on stage by the audience and eats it with bad manners. She overstylizes the stereotype of an unemployed fat welfare recipient who acts mean. Comedy, as always, works with skilful exaggeration of features that create the persona. In an empirical study of the media discourse on weight, Villa/Zimmermann (2008) write that a media construction of a so-called politically "normal body" is now of great importance in our society. The "abnormal" that deviates from this – that is, being fat in contrast to being desirably slim – is staged as monstrous and morally questionable. Monstrosity

is meant here as vice. With demonstrative nastiness, the Cindy figure counteracts the vice of laziness and sloth in our achievement-oriented society. She burps and smacks and talks to a waiter about her genitals.

Indexing gender and class often goes hand in hand, as is the case here. Female comedians who act out vulgar humour produce other indexes of low class. With Kuipers (2006), who in her studies of jokes draws on the sociology of taste by Bourdieu (1979/1984), we note the existence of aesthetic sub-cultures that are also connected to indexes of femininity and masculinity. These "high-brow" and "low-brow" taste cultures connect both to individual aspirations and to social hierarchies, reflecting a society's cultural knowledge. Working class cultures connect to a semiotics of masculinity which is exploited by female comedians to broaden their humour spectrum. In sociolinguistics, it is well known that upper middle class men integrate a range of linguistically nonstandard low class indexes to communicate masculinity (cf. Kotthoff/Nübling 2018). These highbrow and lowbrow humour tastes have to do with vulgarity vs. sophistication in content and style, and constitute different notions of "good humour", varying around whether it should be "sociable or confrontational, hard or civilized, artistic or relaxed" (Kuipers 2006: 79–90). Preferences reflect variations in education and politeness.

Ruiz-Gurillo (2019) also shows how a Spanish comedian uses humour as a tool to construct and deconstruct masculinities and femininities. She examines Spanish stand-up comedy as it is performed by the comedian Eva Hache. In her monologues on TV, Hache sometimes indexes femininity up to the point of stereotype reinforcement but combines this with the mockery of men and the indexing of non-stereotypical gender and intersectional categories.

Humour always has a socially indicative potential in many senses. We associate humour at the expense of others with social superiority, humour at one's own expense with inferiority – but the history of a personal relationship and discourse must always be taken into account. As soon as others present tell similar stories about their own failures, no further costs arise. And the tables can easily turn within an in-group. Interactors play with gender and class associations in everyday life. They are not necessarily implemented in a straight line. Chiaro/Baccolini (2014) point out that it used to be the "bad girls" who engaged in behaviour normally reserved for men, such as being witty with a dispensation of beauty, laughing out loud and behaving in a boisterous manner.

An analysis of humour and sexual identity must lend especially critical attention to gender when LGBT experiences are taken into account. According to Willard's (2010) research on humour by gay men and women, gay women can frequently be said to use humour to work against the type of deprecating humour often found in the majority society and to celebrate diversity: "lesbian jokes are an affirmation and validation of a diverse lesbian identity. [...] Lesbian humour deconstructs the stereotype of lesbians as hypersexual, and instead celebrates sexual agency and the power to self-define" (Willard 2010: 47). Seals (2016) points out that lesbians are often mocked for being humourless as a way to (purposefully or unpurposefully) deprecate them in society. As such, humour can be used by lesbians to index this stereotypical view and then contest the perception that they are humourless, thus simultaneously resisting further marginalization. As a result, humour can serve an indexical function for lesbian comedians to contest social stereotypes and to focus on the multiple facets that make up their identity as individuals.

Finally, Seals (2016) names an additional difference that should be considered when it comes to when and by whom LGBT humour can be used. She cites Willard, "In general, humour within the LBGTQ population is welcomed when one is a self-identified member of this population. Many participants felt more comfortable using humour when around others who were similar to them, or who they felt they could trust or who could understand" (ibd.: 119). Extending this idea then, she finds it reasonable to expect that an LGBT comedian would feel more comfortable telling LGBT themed jokes when his or her audience is part of the same community. In her article, she points out how an LGBT comedian uses humour differently for different audiences, and how this is manifested via intertextuality and audience design.

5 Verbal duelling, mockery, teasing, humour with a bite

Humorous aggression, which is part of many kinds of mocking, teasing, parody, and ridiculing, is gender relevant. We can joke at people's expense, outright put them down, or expose their weaknesses to an audience. While directly belittling people goes against the politeness norms of most societies, humorous, indirectly joking attacks are much harder to pin down. The joking attack, after all, generally allows us to retreat to a claim that we did not mean the attack seriously. This ambiguity of the joking does not mean, however, that people cannot nevertheless distinguish degrees of aggressiveness.

The clearer the aggressive tendency in joking, the less such activity was engaged in by women in earlier times, and the more the joking was likely to "do masculinity". Apte (1985: 70) summarizes ethnological research from pre-industrial societies as showing that women did not participate in joking genres with aggressive sexual overtones, such as "verbal duelling". Patterns of humourous attacks were ritualized in many societies and practised as verbal attack games ("verbal duellings") rather among men (cf. Labov 1972; Dundes/Leech/Özkök 1972; Gossen 1976; Tertilt 1997). Labov's (1972) famous study of vernacular culture in Harlem showed that verbal duelling has evolved into a kind of art form, with young men demonstrating their prowess on the street in what is known as "sounding" or "signifying". Even today, witty repartee plays a greater role in men's and boys' cliques than in girls' and women's cliques (cf. Branner 2003; Deppermann/Schmidt 2001a and 2001b). Kotthoff's research (1995) on jocular verbal duelling rituals in Caucasian Georgia also identifies these as male terrain. Folb (1980) has shown for the US that women do not engage in verbal duelling publicly; among themselves, however, they very frequently practise similar forms. As is so often the case, the public factor is central to the conversational acting of women and men.

Biting humour is not practiced in the same way by different groups in society. What differs from group to group are levels of attack, topics, ways of responding, and indexes of social hierarchy. Groups of young men are variously reported to have very high levels of assault in teasing. 12- to 14-year-old baseball players, such as those observed by Gary Fine (1990) in the U. S. over a period of years, aggressively teased each other about deficits in their appearance, ridiculed bad players in front of everyone, even taunted the girlfriends of some with ridiculing remarks. This went so far that boys whose girlfriends were constantly ridiculed (e. g. as not being beautiful enough) also separated from these girls. Thus, the mocking jokes intruded quite deeply into their lives. Some of these phenomena were also found in a group of young male

skaters in Germany (cf. Hartung 2000; Deppermann/Schmidt 2001a). However, it is also interesting to note that in boys' groups, quick-witted counterattacks and targeted countering are highly valued (cf. Schmidt 2004). Those who master these skills can rise in the clique hierarchy or at least strengthen their position. Hierarchy is sometimes accepted in joking communication. Powerful boys then joke with powerless ones again and again in the same constellation. In Germany, "dissing" is a new form of communication of playful verbal aggression (cf. Deppermann/Schmidt 2001b): burp tirades always seem to be fun, rude addresses to the whole group like "hey you cunts" (with which males and females can be addressed, definitely also in a friendly manner) or "you piece of shit" (cf. ibid.; Schmidt 2004) can, depending on the context, still generate moderate hilarity even the fiftieth time, whereby it is also noticeable that the amusing taboo-breaking relies on the fact that taboos still exist in the modes and topics of expression (e. g. excretion, drugs, sexuality). Joking communication is not necessarily original. When such joking involves teasing or putdowns, however, the interaction can become a double-edged sword, with the potential for either "biting" or bonding (cf. Boxer/Cortés-Conde 1997). But a bonding function cannot be denied.

Coates (2014) discusses many examples of all-male groups from various places in the world who combine a competitive conversational style with much laughter and a demonstration of group membership. O'Dwyer's study (2021) of humour in a suburban Dublin sports club fits in here nicely because he shows how these young men index their normative masculinity via combining competitive joking and cursing and swearing. The same can be said about the groups in Germany studied by Schmidt (2004).

Ethnographies of group communication show in various parts of the world that male in-group members can display a sense of solidarity by earning licence to direct verbal putdowns toward one another in the presence of others. Set in a corner donut shop in southern California, Murphy (2017) describes how a group of old, straight, White middle-class men direct improvisational putdowns toward each other, and he explains how this banter maintains a sense of group solidarity for these men. The article puts forth a view of ritual insult in the form of "humour orgies" as emergent interactional phenomena characterized by successive, situation-dependent turns, whereby group members play with interpersonal meanings in "givin' it on top" and "takin' it on bottom". The ethnographic findings show that the old men involve themselves in rituals of doing masculinity via everyday improvisational humour in public settings.

Wolfers (2020) carried out an ethnographic and interaction analytic study of two German football teams, one of them professional (56 hours of talk). She is interested in how members communicate with each other before, during and after football matches and training. Teasing is the most widespread and commonly used type of humour in this community of practice. With Boxer/Cortés-Condes (1997), Wolfers sees teasing as running along a continuum of bonding, from nipping to biting (cf. ibd.: 279). Conversationalists challenge each other, wishing to outwit one another, while still remaining jocular. "Biting" means to put down an addressee who might bite back. The butt usually does not support the bite tease and is placed as a temporary outgroup member. But on the whole, the football teams with this competitive style of humour retain team cohesion. Examples of self-directed humour also generally play a role in the football teams and help in building solidarity. Even racialised humour sometimes plays a role in the two groups. Thereby differences in nationality, culture or ethnicity are foregrounded. The players joke, for

example, about the superiority of athletic prowess and muscularity of their Black colleagues, and it depends on the context and the development of the discourse over longer periods of time whether such a type of joking results in ingroup/outgroup differentiation. When Muslim players, for example, joke about how short the dating time is for young people in the Muslim world before marriage is expected, they create sympathy for their problems. Exaggerated stereotypes are often used as a source of entertainment.

6 Gender and laughter

People use laughter in many ways as a resource for shaping interactions (cf. Mulkay 1988; Partington 2006; Sistenich 2010). It was initially conversation analysis that empirically tracked down these meaning-creating potentials of laughter (cf. Jefferson 1979, 1984).

Some empirical interaction studies (cf. e. g. Duncan/Fiske 1977; Provine 2000) show that women laugh more than men in quite different situations. Speaker initiated laughter is interpreted in many contexts as an invitation to laugh along. Women show these supportive responses to initial laughter more often than men (cf. also Jefferson 2004). Furthermore, they integrate laughter particles into various types of utterances, including criticism. A laughing criticism has an inherent weakening potential (cf. Hay 2001). Such double-coded messages make sense in many contexts and should not be interpreted hastily as female subordination or insecurity.

Overall, laughter has great significance for shaping interactions (cf. Kotthoff 1998; Glenn 2003; Merziger 2005). Sistenich (2010) differentiated the laughter of participants in three television discussions on German TV according to the following environments: initial laughter, expression of coolness, accompanying laughter (e. g. during remarks), aggressive laughter, covering laughter, laughter during sensitive topics, laughter in the context of teasing, and the "big laugh", i. e. bursting laughter that occurs only once in the broadcasts examined (cf. ibd.: 138). In the first subchapter of her study, she notes that women laugh significantly more often than men and that men laugh "initiatively", while women laugh more often "in reaction" (ibd.: 62). Men remain "cooler" in televised conversations, telling funny stories "without their own laughter" (ibd.: 76), they contribute "more joking remarks" (ibd.: 81), whereas women are more likely to support men's remarks with accompanying laughter (cf. ibd.: 86).

In sum, we underscore the finding that the most prevalent type of laughter in everyday life is not the burst-of-amusement kind, but social laughter, which serves a wide variety of functions and can usually be considered a type of social lubricant (cf. Hay 2001; Provine 2000). Initial laughter in the context of problem representations communicates that the narrator is willing to take the problems lightly. Responsive laughter is usually not preferred in this context, but rather substantive engagement with the problems being narrated (cf. Jefferson 1984; Kotthoff 2000). Provine (2000) shows for his large corpus from an ethnography of many everyday interactions in the USA that speakers laugh much more than listeners. This completely contradicts the everyday assumption that we laugh when someone says something funny. Funny stories and jokes are often told with laughing and evoke laughter along with the story even before it is completed (Kotthoff 1998). In teasing and joking, the attackers laugh, but those attacked in jest often first justify themselves seriously for the misbehaviour attributed to them before they laugh along and appreciate the witty potential. There may also be immediate witty counterattacks, resulting

in other interactional sequences. Jefferson (1984) observed that obscenities are often just hidden by laughter particles. However, they are once again made identifiable as such by this indexical process.

Female speakers are 70 percent more likely to laugh than the male speaker in a conversation with a female listener, and twice as likely to laugh than the male speaker when in conversation with one Provine (2000). Initiatively, women are likely to add a light and amusing touch to a conversation, much more so when talking to men.

Who laughs, when, how, with whom provides interesting clues about the social and gender order. Of great importance is whether and how the interactants appreciate humour initiatives. Laughing or wittily formulated utterances suggest that this interaction modality is confirmed in the reaction if the utterance is positively relationship-oriented.

Women are reported to laugh more than men in private interactions (cf. Mehu/Dunbar 2008), and they laugh more in reaction to an utterance of a male partner than vice versa (cf. Jefferson 2004; Adelswärd 1989). To this laughter, the researchers attribute the functions of receptiveness and affiliation. Also, the traditional script of humour in romantic interaction has it that men produce more humorous utterances and women laugh more (cf. Ross/Hall 2020). Provine (1993) observed young adults in public places and found that both males and females laughed more frequently in response to male than to female speakers. In a later study, he found the same pattern when examining 1200 naturally occurring conversations between men and women (cf. Provine 2000: 42). In her study of extensive interviews with 10 heterosexual, bilingual couples, each pair sharing two different native languages, Ang-Tschachtli (2020) also found that the female participants in couples of both language combinations produced more laughter pulses than the male participants (568.0 vs. 438.2 on average, cf. ibd.: 596); their laughter episodes also lasted longer. At the same time, she found evidence that the couples consisting of Swiss females and Anglophone males produced far more laughter pulses as well as laughter episodes than the other couples, which suggests that more humour was produced in these conversations. Since the Anglophone women laughed less in reaction to their partners than the reverse, Ang-Tschachtli (2020: 599) concludes that, among these bilingual couples, a partners' mother tongue outweighs the influence of gender with regard to which partner triggers more laughter. There was also a tendency to react with more laughter to contributions from the native speaker of the language in use. The study shows, however, how gender interacts with other factors of the situation that may be more decisive. In a later interview with the couples about who is funnier, none of the couples found that the female partner is funnier than the male partner, thereby confirming a stereotype that is not entirely supported by their real behaviour.

There are many other strategies of humour support, such as echoing, contributing more humour, or commenting further on the topic. In a study of three dinner events of an extended Hong Kong Chinese family, Hui (2014) found that the highest level of audible humour support was provided by the girlfriend of the son. The three women (mother, daughter, girlfriend) of the family used laughter as a support strategy more often than verbal support, whereas men scored higher on further verbal contributions of humour as a support strategy (cf. Hui 2014: 192). Hui does, of course, not generalize these findings from the standpoint of an ethnographic and interaction

analytic study but discusses it within a multi- layered model of the various strategies and functions of humour in small groups.

7 Social bonding via humour

The attribution of a bonding function is often attributed especially to humour among women (cf. Kalcik 1975; Makri-Tsilipakou 1994; Hay 2000, 2001), but we already mentioned that even biting humour, such as teasing, can create solidarity. Here discourse and methods of analysing humour via interaction do more justice to its dialogicity than earlier laboratory studies or impressionistic renditions of observations, let alone studies of written representations of jokes.

Thirty-five years ago, when humour research started to look at gender characteristics in humour and compared, e. g. conversations at mothers' meetings and coffee gossip with regulars' tables, it became clear that joking about one's own weaknesses is very popular among women (cf. Jenkins 1992). Many women are true masters at packaging their own weaknesses in an amusing way (cf. Kotthoff 2000). Such humour brings people closer together if the others respond in similar ways. However, this bonding function is not gender-exclusive. But it is comparatively rare in work contexts that rely on competition. The boss, however, who wants to be recognized as an equal buddy can express this precisely by inviting laughter about himself, be it by celebrating his inability to operate a photocopier, be it by his frequent tardiness (cf. Holmes 2006a, 2006b; Kotthoff 2006a).

Hay (2000) explored the functions of humour in eighteen New Zealand friendship groups. She found that women were more likely to share funny personal stories to create solidarity and that creating solidarity seemed to matter more to women than to men in both single-sex and mixed talk. Coates (2014) reports similar findings from audio-recorded groups of female friends in England. They create solidarity and construct themselves as feminine by sharing stories from their own experiences.

A similar finding is reported in Bing/Heller's (2003) study of humour in lesbian communities. Bing and Heller find that, much like other marginalized groups, lesbians tend to use humour to strengthen the in-group sense of community by drawing on stereotyped lesbian attributions and making fun of them.

Lampert/Ervin-Tripp (2006), who compared humour styles of young people in California, wrote that joking at one's own expense increased significantly among young men as soon as they were in contact with young women. Among themselves, they were more likely to joke at the expense of others. This is status-building. They would have noticed, however, that joking at their own expense had a sympathetic effect on women. If you can joke about yourself, you don't come across as macho. The man then doesn't have to be the master of the situation, and that indicates role distance from the patriarchal male image. Robinson/Smith-Lovin (2001) analysed humour in discussion groups with different gender distributions. They found that men made more funny comments in mixed-sex groups than women did, and that their attempts triggered laughter more frequently than the women's. Nonetheless, most humour was used in groups consisting entirely of women (cf. Robinson/Smith-Lovin 2001: 137). It is possible, as Hay points out, that men tend to use more humour than women do in mixed-gender settings

because "appearing witty seems more central to a male personal identity than to a female identity" (Hay 2000: 33). Being witty in that case indexes masculinity.

8 Humour in the workplace[1]

Various older studies on joking in the world of work have shown that the lower the status of joke recipients, the more likely they are to acknowledge the joke of status higher-ups with the expected laughter (cf. Pizzini 1996). Humour, jokes, and laughter are thoroughly social phenomena. Forms of joking have been treated variously as instruments of social influence (cf. e. g. Nietz 1980; Groth 1992; Schnurr 2008). At least in part, social influence is one of the reasons for joke telling as well as for spontaneously created witty remarks. Many knew the situation where the boss made a funny remark and everyone roared with laughter, although hardly anyone really thought the joke was good. More recent studies do not show this pattern any more. Such scenes reproduce a social divide. Most jokes fulfil several functions at the same time. Persons of low status are most likely to be funny if they joke at their own expense, i. e. if they offer themselves as a target. Joking communication can virtually become an indicator of the extent of hierarchy. Bosses who are interested in a flat hierarchy and symmetrical relationships with those under them can indicate this by jokingly modalizing instructions and joking about their own weaknesses (cf. Schnurr 2008).

Rose Coser (1960) conducted her humour study in the late 1950s using tape recordings of faculty meetings at an American university psychiatric hospital. This study can serve as a historical baseline document for further consideration of the status dimension in joke culture. The current state of research suggests that status orders communicated via humour are not as straightforward today as they were then (cf. Holmes 2000; Holmes/Marra 2002). Humorous status reproduction, however, is certainly still the case in some contexts (cf. Burckhard 1992; Pizzini 1996).

In the 24 meetings on the ward of the psychiatric university hospital which Coser tape-recorded, three specialists and professors of psychiatry participated, two psychiatry professors, six physicians in residency training (male), and six other staff members (nurses and therapists). Of the total 103 jokes made during these work interviews, 53 were made by the highest-status male professors, 33 by the physicians, and only four were made by the other female staff members, three of whom were nurses, two were therapists, and one was a sociologist. Of the 103 witty remarks, 86 had a target in the ward. In Coser's study, jokes were made only at the expense of those lower in the hierarchy, including, for example, absent patients. The five high-status women did not exhibit this humour at the expense of others. In the official situation of the regular staff meeting, the women hardly joked at all. It was inconsistent with the role model of the late 1950s to engage in such risky behaviour. At the unofficial meetings, however, they displayed a very strong sense of humour, according to Coser.

In the late 1970s, there are many similar findings from the world of work.

For example, Spradley/Mann (1973) studied joking communication among employees in an American bar. The women were all servers, the men bartenders. In the bar world, the men were considered to have a higher status, but at the same time they were dependent on the women.

[1] The displays in this chapter can to a great extend also be found in Kotthoff (2006a)

Spradley/Mann characterize the humour of the bartenders as being at the expense of the women servers. They often joked insinuatingly and condescendingly about the appearance of the waitresses. They also managed to jokingly blame ordering mistakes they themselves had made on the women. Mulkay (1988) comments on the bartenders' humour as contemptuous in relation to the women servers. The women servers talked a lot among themselves about the mean jokes of their colleagues, but did not see themselves in a position to stop them.

Later studies from the world of work also show that those highest in the hierarchy take more liberty with certain forms of risky joking toward those below them. For example, Schütte's work on joke communication among orchestra musicians (1992) illustrates that the conductor assumes a right to evaluate musicians' activities with sarcastic remarks. Teachers also do this from time to time. Sarcasm is an aggressive form of irony and indicates an existing power imbalance (cf. Schütte 1991: 336). For the conductor, however, sarcasm is nevertheless a method of avoiding open conflict and of securing cooperation in the face of divergent demands and interaction expectations. After all, there are sharper forms of criticism than sarcastic ones. In the orchestra studied by Schütte, female musicians are in the absolute minority. They did not joke in public. At any rate, Schütte does not mention them. However, here we also encounter the circumstance that in research a view of gender relations is often simply missing.

In the German Bundestag, too, the order of interaction in the 1990s was quite patriarchal. There, male members of parliament often stand out with ironic heckling, which causes howls of solidarity from other men, at least from the heckler's faction. As speakers, women receive more heckling than men and, above all, more heckling meant as a joke according to an evaluation of the "Stenographische Bundestagsprotokolle" by Burckhard (1992).

The research of the group around Janet Holmes suggests, firstly, that in the meantime, the female restraint in joking in the working world has decreased, and, secondly, that jokes are also being increasingly made at the expense of higher-ups present (cf. Holmes/Marra 2002), i. e. subversive forms of humour are definitely found in the working world, even if not very often. Holmes recorded 330 interactions in ministry departments in New Zealand in 1996–2000 as part of her project "Language in the Workplace" (cf. Holmes 2000; Holmes/Marra 2002). Her team distinguishes repressive and subversive forms of humour; the former are used by higher-ups to secure their power. The latter are used by subordinates to challenge the authority of those higher in status. They further distinguish degrees in the collegiality of humour to which no specific power component is ascribed (cf. Holmes 2006a, b). Without giving exact numerical ratios, Holmes (2006a) nevertheless presents many examples in which women joke as bosses and also as subordinates. Female bosses, for example, package criticism and requests in joking form. Holmes (2000) shows that in asymmetrical work relationships, humour is very often used by those in power to maintain control while appearing collegial. Subordinates occasionally take the liberty of humorously attacking quirks of their bosses, such as their exaggerated enthusiasm for computers or their constant tardiness.

Holmes/Stubbe (2003) point to differences in joking behaviour between the sexes in gender-separate workplaces. Female supervisors are even particularly active in developing longer jok-

ing sequences that affirm the group and a collegial work atmosphere. In classically male-dominated contexts of factory work, they found challenging, attacking forms of humour that were nonetheless conducive to team spirit and social cohesion.

Holmes (2006b) presents many episodes from the New Zealand workplace, including how women can use humour in the role of boss to simultaneously stage themselves as authority and yet communicate role distance (2006b: 59f.):

Cla.: Smithy and I have roles that may seem to overlap
and we just wanted to make it clear where they did overlap
and where they didn't overlap [drawls]: um:
Smithy's the project manager
he's responsible for coordinating the project…
and: he's there to make sure that everything we you do
while on on the project fits into that big picture ... my role is
I'm responsible I need to deliver to the rest of [name of the organization]
so in a way I'm the person you're doing this for ()
[general laughter]
Smi: because in effect you're working for for /two different+\
Cla: /two masters\
Smi: two different masters
Cla: so when you're on the project where you're working for the master
and when you're working on the normal job you're working for me
Smi: yeah
Mar: the queen
XF: the queen
[general laughter]
Smi: /the queen is a customer for the project\
[laughter]

Clara explicitly and clearly engages in a monologue about her responsibilities. In this respect, she enacts a rather masculine style of leadership (Holmes 2006b: 61). At the same time, she allows herself to be laughingly called queen by the team members and laughs along with them. She does not dismiss this attribution, but confidently allows it to stand. In this respect, she allows her subordinates to engage in risky speech activities, thus making herself approachable.

Schnurr (2008) uses recordings from the New Zealand project to examine two case studies of female department heads. These two high-status women minimize status differences with their humour, which tends to compromise their authority. They often jokingly downplay their knowledge and skills, but also vent frustration via humour. Overall, their style of humour helps them perform the balancing act of meeting criteria of contemporary cultural femininity and the professional demands on a boss.

Mullany (2004) shows how female managers use humour strategies in workplaces that were formerly associated with men. She examines the relationship between gender, politeness and institutional power by focussing on how, in managerial business meetings, chairpersons utilise the linguistic practice of humour in their attempt to gain the compliance of subordinates. She analyses data from six such meetings taken from two ethnographic case studies of businesses based in the UK. Following Holmes (2000: 175), the notion of "repressive humour" as a strategy of linguistic politeness is adopted, whereby those who are enacting power disguise this by minimising the status differences between themselves and their subordinates, a strategy that she

sees as resulting from "conversationalization" of public discourse (Fairclough 1992). She found clear evidence of the female chairs using the tactic of repressive humour as a mitigation strategy to attempt to gain compliance of their subordinates, which negates former findings of female humour restraint in the workplace. Mullany (2004: 13) did not find male chairs adopting this strategy. It seems to be no longer the case that female chairs are linguistically more polite than their male counterparts. To gain compliance, male chairs use a variety of mitigation strategies to ensure that their attempts to gain compliance are not issued in a bald manner.

Holmes/Schnurr (2005) present a variety of ways in which humour interacts with gender in the performance of femininity at work. In the Wellington Language in the Workplace Project they see that humour may be used to enact femininity through self-deprecating humorous anecdotes, for instance, and by providing a means to soften performances of power and authority in the workplace. They also explore ways in which women use humour to parody stereotypically feminine behaviours and to question the restrictive gender norms that operate in many workplaces. The line between humour used to enact normative femininity and the more self-conscious and ironic use of humour to parody stereotypical behaviour is said by the authors to be not always clear (Holmes/Schnurr 2005: 180). At any rate, women typically contributed at least as often as men to workplace humour.

9 Sexuality and romantic interest

Especially in the field of sexual humour, men have had greater freedom across cultures throughout history (cf. Apte 1985). Even today, women who tell sex jokes in mixed company run the risk of being judged as "easy" (cf. Bing 2007). Women do tell sex jokes among themselves (cf. Nardini 2000) that they would not present to a mixed audience. Nardini conducted her studies in a Chicago club of Italian ladies. They enjoy among themselves the performance of the joke as much as its ambiguities and taboo violations. Barrecca also reports the female "underground activity" (Barrecca 1991: 151) of telling and enjoying sex jokes. Bing (2007) notes for jokes from the women's movement that, in addition to an amusing punchline, they almost always include insights into social power relations. They not only address sex, but also sexism. Here's a German example: "She was with the new gynecologist and raves to her husband, 'That's a very competent and sympathetic woman. She told me I had skin like a thirty-year-old'. He responds, 'And what did she say about your fifty-year-old ass?' She: 'Oh. We didn't talk about you at all.'

Particularly in psychology, researchers have also been looking at correlations between humour and mate choice. Lippa (2007) conducted a survey study among BBC Internet participants (119,733 male and 98,462 female, 53 nations) concerning which of 23 named characteristics they considered primarily significant, secondarily significant, or tertiarily significant in mate selection. Across the board, the following emerged as primary: intelligence, humour, honesty, kindness, good looks, pretty face, values, communication skills, and attachment. On average, men indicated good looks and pretty face more frequently than women ($d = 0.55$ and 0.36, respectively); women placed honesty, humour, and attachment higher than men as desired mate characteristics ($d = 0.23$, 0.22, 0.18, and 0.15, respectively). Differences in sexual orientation were smaller than gender differences. Men placed humour lower than women in lists of desired

partner traits. For women, humour is among the most desired partner characteristics across cultures. Such survey findings are sometimes interpreted by psychologists in a Darwinian light, e. g., Wilbur/Campell (2011: 919) apply "sexual selection theory" to statements by women who desire active humourists as partners. They see the production of humour as a fitness indicator that allows men to co-convey other personal qualities. In two studies of online dating advertisements (cf. Wilbur/Campell 2011: 923), they found evidence of greater humorous activity by men in initiating contact with a woman of interest, and in women they document more "appreciation of humour as a signal of interest" (ibd.: 924). When women were particularly amused by a man's joke, this simultaneously indicated their interest in that man. For both sexes, humour plays a role in the initiation of sexual and romantic contacts; men strengthen the active-humoristic side when interested in their partner, women the receptive-humoristic side.

Rees/Knight (2010) analysed bedside interactions between physicians, students, and patients in relation to the construction of gender and identity through laughter. At the bedside, medical students practice their skills on patients while being scrutinized and accompanied by physicians. Very often, the three parties enact a playful setting; the patients tease the students or vice versa. In their article, they discuss teasing scenes in which the doctors tease the students (communicating their professional superiority) and also those with sexually connoted teasing of female medical students by male patients, who thus symbolically connect with and gender-relate to male doctors or students. In one scene, for example, the doctor tells the patient that the female students are now going to examine his heart and "if they do anything else, let me know". The patient replies: "I'd be glad to", (translation by H. K. Rees/Knight 2010: 3389) which is a sexual innuendo and is acknowledged by both doctor and patient with laughter. The two authors analyse the specific identity politics of such interaction sequences.

10 Conclusion

I have given some insights into gender-sensitive areas of humour. In all these areas, changes are emerging in the sense that the spectrum of female expression has increased.

I give the last words to Rod A. Martin (2016:145), who closed with them his article "An Overview of Psychological Research" from. It also fits here:

> In conclusion, it is overly simplistic to think about gender differences in humor in terms of unitary "sense of humor" concepts. There is no support in the research for stereotypical views of women as having less humor than men overall (cf. Hitchens 2007). As we have seen, humor is a complex phenomenon that can be expressed in many ways and used for many purposes. Men and women show close similarities on many of these aspects of humor, and differences on others. When we view it as a mode of interpersonal communication with a wide range of social functions, it is not surprising that both men and women use humor in ways that are consistent with their general conversational goals in particular social contexts.
>
> (Martin 2016:145)

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