

Autonomic differentiation of temporal components of sexist humor

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Abstract

Investigations employing physiological markers to assess affective responses to humor have largely ignored concomitant cognitive processes. To clarify some of these relationships, pupil diameter, the skin conductance response, and heart rate were recorded while 24 male and female subjects responded to a series of nonsexist, male sexist, and female sexist jokes. Pupil change, heart rate, and skin conductance were measured both before and after auditory presentation of humorous statements. Additionally, subjects rated the statements on two dimensions: humorousness and offensiveness. Results provide support for the attenuation of heart rate and skin conductance measures of arousal during decoding of sexist humor. That subjects first interpreted the jokes cognitively was evidenced by pupillary dilation during statement presentation, with decreased pupil diameter occurring afterwards. Even though subjects clearly differentiated the statements by humorousness and offensiveness, no relationships were found among these subjective measures and the physiological data. This indicates that at least two temporally distinct psychological periods occurred while responding to sexist humor. The results of the present investigation underscore the usefulness of combining cognitive and physiological measures to understand the time course of humor decoding and appreciation.

Sigmund Freud clearly recognized the fact that individuals find sexual content in humor amusing and with a purpose; that is, it compels the person who is assailed of the utterance to imagine the part of the body or procedure in question and shows that the assailant is also imagining it (Freud 1960 [1905]). Sexist humor often contains elements of what Freud referred to as smut, sexual content, either explicit or more subtle