Goede humor, slechte smaak: een sociologie van de mop

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Citation for published version (APA):

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This book is about social differences in sense of humor. I have taken the specific humorous genre of the joke as the starting-point for my exploration of humor and taste. More specifically, my focus has been on the standardized or 'canned' joke: a short story, ending in a punch-line, usually featuring more or less standardized characters, settings and motifs, which is transmitted orally -- the kind of joke that as a general rule was not invented by the person delivering the joke. Unlike most other languages, Dutch has a word for this specific genre: mop.

The main reason for focusing on this genre is the fact that it is a contested genre. In the Netherlands, there is a wide diversity of strongly held opinions about jokes: some people, like the joke-tellers I interviewed, are real enthusiasts, while others consider joke-telling bad taste. Such disagreement makes the joke a good starting-point for studying differences in taste. Moreover, focusing on joke-telling enabled me to not only look at the appreciation of standardized humor, but also at the role of humor in everyday interaction. The final important reason for focusing on this genre is that jokes are of particular sociological interest because they are 'social facts': they are not invented by professionals, but created by society as a whole. Jokes exist only because people feel they are worth passing on to others.

The appreciation of jokes was found to be related to three important social background factors: class, gender, and age. I interviewed 34 'joke-tellers', people who know a lot of jokes; I conducted a survey among a sample of the Dutch population (N =340), and after that I interviewed a sample of 32 people who filled out the questionnaire at length. Also, I collected a large number of jokes from a wide variety of sources (interviews, books, magazines, the Internet). Both the survey and the interviews showed that the appreciation of jokes is related both to gender and to class: men like jokes more than women, lower educated people like jokes more than higher educated people. These differences pertain to the genre as a whole, not to individual jokes. Age, while not a factor in the appreciation of the genre as a whole, did prove to be significant for the appreciation of individual jokes.

Existing theories usually explain differences in the appreciation of humor proceeding form or content of the joke: characteristics of individual jokes. In my view, differences in the appreciation of a genre as a whole need to be explained by characteristics of this genre. In the second part of this thesis, called 'style and social background', I have argued that differences in the appreciation of a genre are not so much a matter of form or content, but
rather a matter of style. In the case of jokes, the appreciation of the genre is directly related to communication style and humor style.

Much of the enthusiasm of the joke-tellers I interviewed, but also the objections to jokes as being in bad taste, had to do with joke telling, with the exchange of jokes as a social activity. ‘Cracking jokes’ is a form of communication that is more in accordance with the communication styles of men, and people of working or lower middle class background, than with the communication styles of women and people of upper middle class background. The objections of these last two groups against joke-telling were remarkably similar: both women and upper middle class people disliked the notion of telling jokes that are merely passed on, not invented — they preferred humor to be more personal and creative. Moreover, they both considered joke-telling loud and intrusive.

Although women like jokes less than men, their rejection of jokes usually was not as strict as the rejection by upper middle class people. Gender differences in the appreciation of jokes is in many ways a matter of gender roles: there are women who like jokes, but they usually leave the joke-telling to men. These class differences, on the other hand, seem to be more a matter of culture. Upper middle class people simply do not tell jokes.

Liking jokes is not only linked to a particular communication style, but also to a particular humor style: a broader style or taste in humor. The analysis of the survey resulted in an amazingly simple pattern: two humor tastes related to age, and two humor tastes related to educational level, which I have dubbed ‘highbrow’ and ‘lowbrow’ humor. These tastes for comedians and TV-shows were closely connected with the appreciation of jokes: people with a lowbrow humor style usually like jokes; people who prefer highbrow humor feel jokes have nothing to do with humor.

Class differences in sense of humor are even more distinctly visible in these humor styles. Higher and lower educated people have very different notions of what good and bad humor is — and behind these notions lie completely different cultural ‘logics’. Higher educated people usually prefer the style that I have dubbed ‘highbrow humor’. They value originality, absurdity, and ambivalence; they expect humor to provide an intellectual challenge. ‘Humor has to be complicated sometimes’, as one informant put it. For people with a lowbrow taste — mainly lower educated people — humor does not have to be an intellectual challenge: they expect humor to create a nice atmosphere: the feel of a pleasant evening with friends. To them, good humor is directly linked to pleasant communication. Higher educated people usually feel that ‘good humor’ is not a matter of sociability, but rather of creativity, wit, and intellect. Obviously, a joke-teller does not have a particularly good sense of humor by their standards. Lower educated people, on the other hand, tend to judge the authenticity of a person’s sense of humor by his social intention. By this definition, telling jokes may very well be a sign of a wonderful sense of humor.
In the third part of the book, I have tried to explain differences in the appreciation of individual jokes or categories of jokes by looking at form and content of jokes. Structure, form and technique of a joke were found to be a very important factor in the evaluation of jokes, but apparently, people agree by and large on what is a good joke structurally. When it comes to the form of a joke, everybody, irrespective of his opinion on the genre as a whole, applies roughly the same criteria for joke quality. Moreover, an amazingly effective measurement for joke quality was found. The number of words in a joke contributed considerably to the appreciation of this joke: the longer the joke, the better people — of any social background — like it.

Social of individual differences in the appreciation of individual jokes were mainly caused by the content and the subject matter of these jokes. These differences were mainly related to the offensiveness of the joke. Almost all jokes touch, or transgress, social or moral boundaries; humor is usually about sensitive issues. However, not everything is equally sensitive to all people: what goes to far for one person is just right for another.

Differences in sensitivity to offensive jokes were found to be mainly related to age. In the past fifty years, social and cultural boundaries have shifted considerably. This has lead to an increasing crudeness of Dutch humor: as more was allowed, one had to go farther to achieve the same humorous effect. The humor of different age groups reflects this development. The sensitivities of social classes differed in some respects as well: higher educated people were more easily offended by ethnic humor, whereas lower educated people were more easily shocked by ‘hurtful’ jokes about religion, death and disaster. Even within the group of joke-tellers, there was a variation in the degree of sensitivity: some joke-tellers clearly enjoyed telling crude or highly explicit jokes, but the majority did their best to stay within the limits of common decency.

The relationship between humor and social boundaries also appeared to be very important in talks about humor. Joke-tellers are often very concerned about the risk to go ‘too far’ and ‘hurt’ people. They worried in particular about hurting and offending women: joke-tellers usually feel that women are ‘easily embarrassed’. From my interviews with women who do like jokes I got the impression that a considerable part of this embarrassment is on the part of the joke-tellers themselves. Sex differences in the appreciation of jokes are usually the effect of the emphatic masculinity of the repertoire, rather than of female sensitivity.

Dutch jokes do not reflect the mentality of Dutch society as a whole; they mainly reflect the worldviews of those who like and tell jokes most. Thus, individual jokes are likely to appeal more to men and lower educated people. In a genre as masculine as the joke, the perspective is always with men, and for this reason, jokes are often funnier to men: the male dreams and terrors in jokes — often dreams and terrors of females and female roles — do not have much to offer to women by way of identification.
Identification is crucial to the appreciation of humor. Possibilities for identification are linked with social background, but there are always significant individual differences: the personal styles of joke-tellers usually reflect their individual preoccupations. However, identification is first and foremost a social process. People do not only laugh at a joke because they feel it reflects their life, but even more because they identify with the person telling the joke, and with the other people present. By laughing at a joke, people do not only show their agreement with the joke they are laughing at, but even more their involvement with the people they are laughing with.

A good joke is not just funny; it also creates a sense of solidarity and sociability. A good joke is funny and gezellig – a Dutch word said to be untranslatable, but referring to precisely the sociable and pleasant atmosphere the amateurs of lowbrow humor expect humor to create. When a joke succeeds, the feeling of togetherness brought about by laughing together is endorsed by the content of the joke. The joke may, for instance, demarcate the boundary between the ingroup and outsiders, such as Belgians, Turks, women, or gays; it may allow people to collectively transgress boundaries by laughing at improper or ‘naughty’ words; the joke may stress other people’s shortcomings, or refer to shared experiences. The content of the Dutch joke repertoire is exceptionally fit to appeal to these feelings of solidarity, especially male solidarity, and, to a somewhat lesser extent, the solidarity of the working and lower middle classes.

A good joke is a ‘tiny conspiracy’ of the joke-teller and his audience. The appreciation of a joke is always a social process, not just a confrontation between one person and one joke. Even when someone is reading a joke in a joke-book (or a questionnaire), wider identifications and social relations are still in effect. This is the reason that joke-tellers always stress the joke-telling: joke-telling is not just about the joke, but even more about the people with whom the joke is shared. The fact that a joke is told, is always more important than the topic of the joke. The content of the joke can emphasize and support a message, but the telling is the message.

Every individual joke only gets its final meaning within the social context. Taste differences in humor are always directly related to the social meaning of humor: not only the appreciation of genres, but also the appreciation of individual jokes. ‘Cracking jokes’ is, like all humor, an exchange of jokes and laughter.