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Lesbian jokes: A reply to Christie Davies

JANET BING

In his response to the article “How many lesbians does it take to screw in a light bulb?” Christie Davies raises issues that are important for an interdisciplinary professional organization. In methodological discussions and debates among scholars from different disciplines, one frequently finds that what is inadmissible in one field is sometimes standard practice in another (e.g. Taylor et al. 1999). Professor Davies, a sociologist, dis-favors scholarship not based on large random samples. Moreover, in his reply he seems to be questioning not only this particular article, but also the value of qualitative research in general. I would like to respond to four of the issues Davies raises.

Davies first questions the value of an extended discussion of a representative joke, the U-haul joke:

(1) Question: What does a lesbian bring on the second date?

Answer: A U-Haul.

The goal of our paper was stated in the first sentence of the abstract: “This paper explores how humor reveals shared aspects of a culture of lesbian communities in the U.S.” Davies attempts to discredit our discussion of the U-Haul joke by proposing other interpretations. He even suggests the possibility that the second date in the joke above might have been with a man. Since, as a rule of thumb, lesbians do not date men, I would note that some interpretations are more plausible than others.

Different interpretations of the jokes we discussed *are* possible, but since our focus was on jokes by and for lesbians, we did solicit responses from lesbians and non-lesbians as one way of assessing our interpretations of various jokes. For example, in reference to the U-haul joke, one of my lesbian colleagues said the joke was almost accurate, but that

she had moved in with her partner of ten years on the first date, not the second.

Davies asks (this issue), “What is the point of basing a long argument on the meaning of a single joke in the first place?” However, as he notes, “jokes are a social phenomenon,” and within a particular speech community, any joke that is almost universally known and frequently repeated can surely reveal something about the perceptions of that speech community. Furthermore, an intensive analysis of particular texts is considered a legitimate approach in a number of disciplines, including literature and linguistics, the disciplines of the two authors. An approach to a text I find particularly useful is frame/script analysis, as used by Victor Raskin (1985), who provides an eleven-page (117–127) close analysis of one two-line joke. I have used a similar approach with different types of texts in Bing and Lombardo (1997) and Bing and Woodward (1998).

A second issue is that of switching scripts. Davies questions my observation that the U-haul joke switches from a sexual (DATE) script to a non-sexual (DOMESTIC) script, unlike Raskin’s well-known doctor joke, which switches from a non-sexual (DOCTOR) script to a sexual (LOVER) script.¹ Both switches exist as possibilities and are not limited to jokes that lesbians tell each other. I have no interest in doing a statistical analysis of how many jokes follow this pattern, but it is easy to find other examples where a sexual script switches to a non-sexual one, as in the joke below by Pam Stone:

- (2) I had a girlfriend who told me she was in the hospital for female problems:
 I said, “Get real! What does that mean?”
 She said, “You know, female problems.”
 I said. “What? You can’t parallel park? You can’t get credit?”

A third issue raised by Davies’ response is his noting that certain readers might be offended by a tasteless and blasphemous joke such as Kate Clinton’s (2002) recollections of her Catholic girlhood and her gratitude for the strength and dexterity that her tongue developed from manipulating the communion wafer in her mouth. Is Davies implying that a journal such as *Humor* should include only jokes that offend nobody? Although I am as offended by sexist, homophobic, and racist jokes as much as some hypothetical readers may be by Kate Clinton’s joke, I would never advocate censorship of any kind, and, as the co-author of *Censorship and Obscenity*, Davies, I suspect, would agree with me. The

issue of censorship was debated in a roundtable discussion called "Humor and political correctness" (Lewis 1997). As Davies says in this debate (p. 497), joke tellers play with the shocking. He observes (p. 496):

Of course, people tell jokes about, or even when taking part in, the most repellent of crimes. Why should anyone be surprised or bothered by this? Humor can be used as an adjunct to almost any human activity, good, bad, or abhorrent.

Since I assume that Professor Davies is not in favor of censorship, I am puzzled that he would even raise this issue.

Davies states that he does not find it surprising that heterosexuals stereotype lesbians in terms of sexuality and have no interest in other aspects of lesbian lives. He says (this issue), "That [heterosexuals] do not tell such jokes [other than sexual] merely indicates that these things do not impinge on them and are not important to them; it does not follow that heterosexuals dehumanize individual lesbians by seeing them as mere sexual entities." He also believes, "jokes have no significant impact on the real world" (Lewis 1997: 498). As a feminist, I question whether treating a group of people as merely sexual does not tend to dehumanize that group. Certainly a few jokes by themselves cannot dehumanize a group of people, even an underprivileged group. However, when any group, be it lesbians or women in general, are repeatedly treated as sex objects rather than as human beings in jokes, in pornography, in advertisements, in the media, in films, in books, etc., it is quite possible that this dehumanization makes it easier for others to restrict, rape, assault, and even kill individuals from these groups. Some putative scientific studies to test the effects of jokes have failed to find any significant effects. However, exposing a group of subjects to derogatory jokes and then immediately testing them for an increased tendency toward violence seems analogous to feeding some group half a dozen cookies and then deciding whether cookies make people fat. Repeat the same process for a year or decade, and the cumulative results might be quite different.

Davies claims that men think lesbians are unimportant and that "the nature of the sexual contact between lesbians is also not particularly interesting to heterosexual joke-tellers" (this issue). A more plausible but equally extraneous generalization is that most lesbians are not particularly interested in men's sexuality, but what does this have to do with methodology? Davies' argument here is opaque. Is he saying that because men are not interested in the subject there is no reason for lesbians to be?

He seems to be puzzled about why lesbians make jokes at all. He says (this issue):

From a male point of view lesbians are unimportant. It is then all the more interesting that in the absence of male interest, some lesbians should have taken to what was traditionally an all-male pastime, namely the inventing of jokes about sexual behavior. Why is this the case?

If methodology is the issue here, one questions the evidence for Davies' assertion that sexual jokes are limited to males. Surely male researchers must wonder about laughter coming from all-female gatherings at restaurants, slumber parties, powder rooms, locker rooms, book clubs, and baby showers. Davies says he fails to find any jokes about lesbians in Legman's (1975) collection of sex jokes about unorthodox sex. I am not familiar with Legman's book, and I do not accept Davies' point, if I understand it correctly. He seems to assume that lesbian sex is unorthodox, but he also suggests that jokes about lesbian sex are missing from this collection because they do not exist. There may be a number of reasons why lesbians might not have wanted to share their jokes with male researchers in the 1970s.

Finally, a brief explanation in response to one of Davies' objections will, I hope, clarify another issue. His commentary titled "The dog that did not bark in the night," suggests that Dana Heller and I may not have provided enough context in our discussion of why lesbians tell so few jokes about male oppression. Dana and I began to study lesbian jokes after I had been exploring jokes that feminists tell each other (Bing 2003). Several years ago, I was quite surprised when I did a search on *google.com* for both "feminist joke" and "lesbian joke." To my surprise, my search for "feminist joke" uncovered 14 anti-feminist jokes, 57 anti-male jokes and no other jokes that failed to refer to men negatively. A similar search the same day using "lesbian joke" identified 30 anti-lesbian jokes, 14 jokes about lesbians, and only one anti-male joke. Although white middle-class feminists in the U.S. are discriminated against less than lesbians, many putative feminist jokes frame males as oppressors, something lesbian jokes rarely do. This is the context that makes the absence of lesbian jokes about male oppression interesting to me. However, Davies' discussion of jokes about oppression suggests that he and I probably have different definitions of oppression. Davies has stated elsewhere that date rape is synonymous with seduction and that American feminists absurdly

amplify “trivial sexual misdemeanors,” (Lewis 1997: 496). In any case, the debate on whether the “discontents of lesbians in America” constitute oppression or not is beyond the scope of a discussion on methodology.

In fact, I disagree very little with Davies’ methodological conclusions. Jokes (including Kate Clinton’s jokes about the dexterity of Catholic tongues) are ambiguous and are not serious statements. Heller and I never claimed otherwise. I agree that it is useful “to look for substantial aggregates of a particular kind of joke and to compare them with other large sets of jokes.” Over a four-year period I collected feminist and lesbian jokes and compared the two types of jokes in “Is feminist humor an oxymoron?” Bing (2003). Although I do agree with many of Davies’ conclusions, I also believe that the close analysis of representative individual jokes is far from an “inadmissible procedure,” and I find it useful to explore the underlying frames and scripts of representative jokes. Making a script explicit still does not predict what an individual will find funny about any particular joke, since jokes are indeed ambiguous, but it can suggest plausible possibilities and even probabilities.

This response has been mine alone because Dana Heller, my co-author, is on sabbatical, but I will give Dana the last word by quoting an e-mail she sent after reading Professor Davies’ response: “I wasn’t put off by it, but I was kind of flattered that he read the article so closely and chose to devote his valuable time and energies to a response, and such a fervent one at that . . . My one disappointment is that I did not get to hear Professor Davies’ jokes about nuns and dildoes . . . perhaps another time.”

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Notes

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1. “Is the doctor at home?” the patient asked in his bronchial whisper.
“No,” the doctor’s young and pretty wife whispered in reply. “Come right in” (Raskin 1985: 100).

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