

FORGETTING OF JOKES: A FUNCTION OF REPRESSION?¹

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According to popular, as well as scientific, belief, jokes, like dreams, fade over-quickly from memory. Psychoanalytic writers have cited this rapid forgetting as support of Freud's (2) theory that "tendency wit" is the expression of material usually repressed. E.g., Grotjahn stated: "The inability to remember jokes and dreams is determined by the same mechanism . . . a repressive force is at work" (3). The economy in expenditure of psychic energy with the temporary relaxation of repressive forces accounts for pleasure. Tendency wit is thus seen to provoke a more pleasurable affect than harmless wit.

If this is so, the prediction follows that the funnier the joke the more rapidly it will be forgotten because the temporarily relaxed greater repressive forces would subsequently be reinstated. We previously found, however, that when asked to pick out from a larger group cartoons they had seen earlier, *Ss* were more likely to recognize those they had originally judged as the more humorous ones (4). That is, *Ss* forgot the *less* humorous cartoons. When the cartoons were inspected for possible clues to the reasons why some were more often forgotten than others, we found: Compared with the nine cartoons most frequently recognized, the 12 most frequently forgotten were judged to be more verbal than visual (i.e., relied more on outline than drawing for humor), more intellectual than emotional, and more commonplace than unique. Both groups of cartoons, however, were rated equally moderate to low on aggressive and sexual, i.e., "repressive" content. These observations were based on agreement among three judges other than the experimenters, who rated the cartoons on a number of dimensions.

The present study employed jokes rather than cartoons and was designed as a more radical test of the Freudian theory of the nature and forgetting of humor, by focusing on jokes with openly sexual or aggressive, i.e., "repressive" themes.

PROCEDURE

Materials came ready-made in the IPAT Humor Test of Personality (1) which was presented to an introductory psychology class with standard instructions. This test uses a forced-choice technique in getting at humor preferences, *S* indicating which joke in each of 72 pairs he considers "the more amusing." Fifty days later, 48 *Ss* were presented a mimeographed booklet with the 144 IPAT jokes,

¹This study was completed at the University of Kentucky.

plus 85 new jokes similar in form and content. *Ss* were instructed to mark all the jokes they recognized from the previous session.

On the basis of a factor analysis, Cattell (1) had clustered a group of 17 jokes with sexual or aggressive themes. These were 1B, 4A, 14B, 22B, 28B, 36A, 37A, 37B, 39B, 40A, 41B, 48A, 49A, 56B, 61B, 71A, 75A. An example would be 37B, which reads: HOUSEWIFE (*calling out the window to the iceman*): "Have you the time?" ICEMAN: "Yes, if I can get someone to hold the horse." Seventeen such jokes scattered through the others, provided the material on which this study concentrated.

RESULTS

All jokes considered, the results are consistent with those of the earlier study on cartoons. Of the 48 *Ss*, 44 forgot more nonpreferred than preferred jokes. By the binomial sign test, such a discrepancy is significant beyond the .001 level of confidence.

Due to the forced-choice technique, half of the IPAT jokes had to be preferred. Paired as they were with jokes of different themes, all 17 sexual or aggressive jokes could be chosen by a subject if he liked—with one exception. Two of the critical jokes were paired together (37A and 37B). These were dropped from further consideration from this point on, and the further results are based on the 15 remaining critical jokes.

The *Ss* preferred the critical jokes by a clear declaration—the 720 votes by the 48 *Ss* fell 490 in favor of sexual or aggressive humor versus 230 against, about two to one. This outcome suggests that, if repression is the source of humor, these are the areas where lie the repressions of the modern college student.

However, of the 490 sexual or aggressive joke preferences, *Ss* forgot 128 or 26%; while of the 230 nonpreferences, they forgot 77 or 34%. Thus the tendency for forgetting the critical jokes is in the same direction as for the larger pool of jokes in the present study and for the cartoons in the previous study. The preferred jokes are better retained.

Table 1 presents the various percentages of jokes which were forgotten in relation to type of content and to *Ss*' preference for them.

TABLE 1. PERCENTAGES OF JOKES FORGOTTEN IN RELATION TO CONTENT AND PREFERENCE*

	sexual or aggressive jokes	neutral jokes	total
preferred jokes	26	33	32
nonpreferred jokes	34	44	43
total	28	39	37.5

*Based on 48 *Ss*, and 127 neutral and 15 "repressive" jokes.

The table shows that, in addition to the crucial discrepancy between the rates of forgetting of the preferred versus the nonpreferred "repressive" jokes, these jokes are forgotten *less often* than jokes with neutral content. This result is quite opposite to what would be expected by the repression theory, though it is difficult to evaluate since it is confounded with a strong preference factor.

To test the statistical significance of the different rate of forgetting of the nonpreferred over the preferred sexual or aggressive jokes, it was necessary, as above, to consider the tendencies of the individuals (since within individuals the choices were not "independent"). For each individual, two ratios were computed: (a) his preferred-forgotten/preferred, and (b) his nonpreferred-forgotten/nonpreferred. No test was possible on three Ss who forgot none of the 15; for two Ss, the percentages were equal. Of the remaining 43 Ss only 12 forgot a larger proportion of their preferred than of their nonpreferred sexual or aggressive jokes. By the binomial sign test again, this split is significant beyond the .01 level of confidence. The clearness of the result is all the more surprising, since there were only a few jokes in which the tendency could manifest itself.

CONCLUSION

Among jokes with sexual or aggressive themes, as among others, those considered funnier are better remembered. These results tend to challenge the generality of the Freudian theory of the source of humor. The fact that the joke considered more humorous does not return to repressed regions more quickly than does the one considered less humorous, raises doubts that it came from there. Furthermore, contrary to the repression hypothesis, sexual or aggressive jokes were less forgotten than neutral jokes, although this result is confounded with a strong preference factor.

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