

**Laughing among engineers:
About the interaction of gender, technology and humour**

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Based on various theories and findings about humour, particularly about gender and humour in the workplace (Freud 1905, Kanter 1977, Kehily & Nayak 1997, Husu 2001, Collinson 2002, Friedman & Friedman 2003, Kotthoff 2005), I will discuss the interaction of gender and humour in engineering and technology research workplaces. This paper is based on data from the European project Prometea “Empowering Women Engineers Careers in Industrial and Academic Research” (Godfroy-Genin 2008), which was conducted to improve the understanding of genderedness in engineering and technology research settings, in order to recommend measures for gender equal career settings in academic and industrial research in Europe. 83 interviews and 44 focus groups were carried out in twelve European countries and in Chile in 2006. These single and group interviews were originally conducted in the eleven different national languages; afterwards the transcripts were summarized, translated into English and entered into a shared database¹. This web-based database allowed and still allows the various European (and Chilean) project teams to generate answers from all interviewees to special questions.

Technology research in Europe

Concerning the different career systems in academia and industry it is to say, that career paths in higher education are in most countries hierarchically organized, with the possibility (but not the guarantee!) for career progression going along with the acquisition of degrees. In the governmental sector is on the one hand less information available and on the other hand governmental research institutions are mainly oriented towards the academic career system. The industrial research sector has its own success measures and career paths depending on company policies, most company differentiate between so called management and expert career ladders for technological researchers (see more about industrial research in Thaler 2008). Those industry career paths are not country-specific because many companies with research and development departments are global companies.

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From the career biographies of women it can be summarized from Prometea that the “standard type” of academic career is not very probable nowadays, temporary contracts, a lack of guarantees for an academic career are especially typical for both the higher education and the governmental sector. To a certain extent these conditions can be assumed for male careers as well although Prometea did not conduct interviews with male researchers, that should be done in future research projects.

As the strongest career influencing factor for women technology researchers was mentioned the lack of career prospects. Especially in the higher education sector temporary contracts are usual and low wages and dissatisfaction with working conditions are main sources for career changes. Nearly all interviewees are looking for higher positions or want to run own enterprises, others told about their plans to move horizontally and gain expertise in a special field. Most important supportive factors for women researchers’ careers are social support, beside that also structural support with childcare and/or relief in the household were mentioned as possible supportive factors. Females and male researchers discussed in focus groups about challenges and problems in technological research and both females and males agreed on several job related factors, like financial issues (lack of money, organizing funding), coping with competition, publishing pressure, teaching duties, acquiring professional skills and knowledge and daily challenges in organizing projects (see also Wächter 2008).

Humour in technology research²

Jokes and humour are not very deeply discussed in literature about technological research working environments, although the topic is very pervasive as pictorial representations in comic books and internet jokes websites. One interpretation about the role of verbal humour in engineering is that jokes and funny stories serve as a group-internal communication strategy of engineers, which create a feeling of “we-ness” as Mellström puts it (1985, p.89). Friedman and Friedman (2003) refer to that as bonding humour, describing the “I get it”-effect when group-members share a humour that needs insider’s knowledge to get the punchline. This seems to be an appropriate interpretation for all group-internal jokes, regarding professions, sport etc. But the speciality of this bonding humour in engineering is the strong connection of inside knowledge about technology and engineering which labels persons immediately as outsiders, and therefore non-engineers, as they can not contribute to the joking and/or laugh about the engineering jokes. Humour in engineering marks the boundary of knowledge and expertise of group-members to group-outsiders more than in other groups.

Kehily and Nayak (1997) also emphasize the conformist sides of humour and focus in their study on the role of jokes to constitute heterosexual masculine identities and produce heterosexual hierarchies. Jokes in that sense of bonding humour are mainly used amongst engineers to laugh about people without technological knowledge that illustrates a shared experience of pleasure in engineering, which

² This part is a revised version of the chapter “Excursus: Jokes and humour” of Thaler (2008).

excludes non-engineers (Faulkner 2000). Another frame is to see humour as a coping strategy of women (for instance in academia, see therefore Husu 2001; or in automotive industry, see therefore Thaler 2006) facing and/or reframing discriminative experiences.

In the empiric data of the group discussions and interviews with technology researchers I found three different specific gender-related purposes of jokes, ironic comments and humour. First, women serve as “triggers” for sexist (“dirty”) jokes, especially in male dominated areas like technological industries. Kanter (1977) pointed out that males more often discuss sexual connoted stories and jokes when token women are present, whereas men amongst themselves rather talk about company or private issues. Contrary to that in the discourse about “dirty jokes and stories” women are often seen as “civilizing factors” for the male dominated area of engineering (see, for example, Wächter 2007). The next quote from a female interviewee can be seen against the background of this argument:

“So also in the company in the beginning they would tell you: ‘Oh no, we can't tell this joke!’ or something like that, because it's a male, a pure male environment. It was, but after a while they noticed that, now it's ok and I was playing cards with them during lunch time and all that sort of things.” (Germany, H_TW1_M1)

And another women researcher refers explicitly to “dirty jokes” and how the exclusion from this type of humour leads to a perception of being different:

“It's a bit embarrassing also to notice that because I'm having my lunch with men, there are usually never any women there in the same group. And I sometimes have kind of a feeling that they were talking about, maybe some dirty jokes but they had changed the subject before I came in. I would not want that, because I tell dirty jokes myself. I would have no problem with that. But maybe they feel that I'm somehow different even though I don't feel so different myself.” (Finland, B_FGW_J2)

This woman feels excluded from a bonding humorous talk, although she does not know whether the males really shared some jokes during her absence. But maybe she just overheard a part of a joke or recognized the laughter or the abrupt stopping of laughter of the males when she joined the group, all that would have the same excluding effect, underlining the separation of the hegemonic group from the token woman, and assigning her the role of the “audience for dominant cultural expressions” (Kanter 1977, p.224).

Second, jokes and laughter act as coping strategies for women. For instance this humorous way of reframing a difficult situation, where token women are treated as invisible and their achievements are ignored or not valued:

“Though it has happened a couple of times that I have pointed out something and no-one comments it but just a little later someone else says the exactly same thing and doesn't even realize that I have said it earlier. But I don't really mind, in that way you also get your ideas noticed, just hint to certain direction and someone says it out loud as his/her own idea (laughter).” (Finland, B_WR1_J2)

The following example of an Austrian top woman researcher shows how humour can serve to ironize serious situations, which could not be controlled by oneself, so in order to not feel powerless, some individuals tend to enlighten the tension with a portion irony. Like this woman who was asked why are

so few women at the top in technology research and she starts with an ironic statement and then explains her opinion seriously and in detail:

“Ah that’s...natural...natural selection! ([laughter] Well it’s really...just draw through from childhood that children are or girls are discouraged from technology and engineering. Going then to young women, it’s clear role patterns that technology and engineering work is male work and that work there is not desirable or it’s not something you really want to do. ...” (Austria, H_TW1_Y)

But not only do women laugh about difficult situations and also about jokes at their expense in order to prove their sense of humour. Women are also making gender-related jokes themselves, sometimes anticipating jokes from others (about women), sometimes about men or reacting to other jokes. Helga Kotthoff (2005) describes a comedy sketch in the tradition of feminist of humour, where male sexual advances are jokingly reframed with an emphasis on traditional gender role behaviour. This form of reversing jokes and reacting on an humorous level, can lead to ping-pong-situations in working places, where alternating ironic comments and jokes are made and the common laughing can create a group-feeling beside all gender borders. In the focus group data I found this example for an answer to jokes with a sexist undertone:

“Five € for the male chauvinist cash box.” (Germany, B_FGW2_M2)

Through actively participating in the joking, women get agency and power, they can influence the situation by themselves and do not have to only re-act but also act and play along. But it is crucial to emphasize that a culture including jokes, which intend to subordinate women, has to be rejected by the management of organisations, especially if they are so called male dominated. As innocent the term “dirty jokes” sounds, as offensive their content can be, there is only a thin line between those jokes and sexual harassment (Collinson 2002).

Third and very important it seems that political correctness, diversity and gender mainstreaming processes have left some males (and some women as well) with uncertainty what they are allowed to say about gender in general and women in special, so they help themselves with making jokes about gender roles and perpetuating gender stereotypes with an ironic respectively humorous tone. Sometimes also sexist and discriminatory statements are hidden behind those jokes. If women or other men do not laugh about those ironic comments and jokes, they are labelled as having no sense of humour:

“Actually, taken as a fun-factor, it [gender] is a permanent topic in our office. [...] I have no problem with that. My boss once said, ‘We did the project even though there was a woman involved.’ He meant it as a joke; it eases up the atmosphere a lot. I can laugh about it. And it also is some sort of being nice to each other.” (Austria, B_FGGP_FGW_Y2)

This intention of humour can be seen in the tradition of Freud’s theory of jokes as an access to the unconscious (Freud 1989), where humour is utilized in order to discuss “in-discussable” topics, like the perceived “bad match of women and engineering” in the quoted example above.

This humour contextualising gender issues in engineering and technology can also be interpreted as coping strategies for hegemonic masculine engineers, who have in times of gender mainstreaming and diversity processes not many political correct possibilities left to argue pro hegemonic masculine

tendencies in engineering. What and how can you say something against so called “non-typical males” and women in engineering when political correctness taught you to think very carefully of your words?

Conclusion

The empirical data of the European research project brought as a side-effect some insights on humour in engineering and technology research. Beside the well known group-cohesive forms of humour and jokes about the use of technology itself, I found three different gender-specific purposes of humour in technology. First, I found sexist (so called “dirty”) jokes, which are typical for male dominated areas like engineering or higher management positions (see also Kanter 1977).

Second, I could show that humour can serve as a coping strategy to handle difficult situations or to react on other jokes. In this category I also included women’s jokes on gender topics, where they anticipate stereotypes and clichés and therefore get agency and play along.

And third, there are ironic statements about gender roles and perpetuations of gender stereotypes with a humorous tone. I explained that with Freud’s theory of the unconscious (1905, 1989) and the utilized humour to discuss the “un-discussable” and I also reframed that humour as a coping strategy to perpetuate hegemonic masculinity in times of gender mainstreaming and diversity processes in engineering. Jokes can be seen as a way to stay within the border of political correctness and to say something against gender equality or diversity in engineering, and if somebody is annoyed about that, it can be added that it is only a joke, of course not seriously meant at all.

To summarize, the emerged ambiguity of humour in technology represents the various ambivalent messages women receive in technology research. On the one hand, a red carpet is rolled out to get more women into technology research, but on the other hand nobody has removed the pitfalls and stumbling blocks hidden under that carpet so far.

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