

THE GREAT COMEDIENNES: PERSONALITY AND OTHER FACTORS

Women have been prominent in show business since long before the advent of the feminist movement. However, today—in contrast to all other areas of show business—women are still in the minority in stand-up comedy. Why is comedy male dominated? To answer this question, this study investigated the personality traits of women in comedy, their family backgrounds, and their psychosexual dynamics. The study examines the roles of women in stand-up comedy and compares the differences and similarities to male comedians.

The number of women in all other areas of show business is at least equal to, or exceeds the number of men. However, among full-time professional stand-up comics, the percentage of women is now only 12%. Five years ago it was 8%. The number of women in comedy has increased minimally. By examining the personality traits, backgrounds, and dynamics, this study shows that it is not by choice or accident that so few women succeed in this area of entertainment. The study examines to what extent sex roles define women's place in stand-up comedy and what effect the feminist movement has had on the stereotypes of comediennes.

Fourteen full-time comediennes were studied and compared with 48 male comics, reported on in a previous paper. In order to qualify for this study, the comediennes had to be full-time stand-up professionals in comedy. Most of the subjects earned six-figure incomes and were nationally known in concerts, night clubs, and on television. The time spent in comedy ranged from 5 to 31 years, averaging 14 years. The majority of women studied were raised in large metropolitan areas in the United States and Canada. The subjects represented all major religious and socioeconomic groups. Subjects were interviewed in New York, California, and Las Vegas. All subjects volunteered without any remuneration and were personally interviewed by the authors.

The data was obtained from in-depth clinical interviews with each subject. Each interview lasted three hours. The Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale and the Machover Human Figure Drawing Test were administered. In addition, the comedic routines of the subjects were systematically analyzed to examine

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the nature of the routines, the relationship of a routine to the subject's personality, and the role of the woman as defined by the comedic routine.

Intelligence scores ranged from 112 to 144 plus. (The range of average IQ is from 90 to 110.) Four subjects scored in the bright average range—i.e., 108 to 115. The remaining subjects scored above 118 with a mean score of 126. Two subjects scored above 130. The mean score for male comics was 138. The subjects approached the testing with overenthusiasm, in some cases bordering on frenzy. Despite the brightness of the group, all subjects needed constant reassurance and positive feedback.

Most of the subjects were from blue-collar, working-class families. Eighty percent were from blue-collar, 10% from lower-middle-class, and 10% from upper-middle-class families. Whereas males showed some pattern of hierarchy as to family position, 55% of the comediennees were the youngest child in the family. Being the baby placed them in a position where they became the center of attention and every antic was thought of as cute and amusing. This is particularly true of one famous comedienne, who often does a pelvic grinding motion called the "coochie-coochie," who did this at home and in the convent school she was raised in and delighted her viewers, who thought it was "cute."

Male comics all reported feeling closer to their mothers and said that their mothers played active roles in their lives. The majority of female subjects reported being much closer to their fathers, often being called by others, including the mothers, "Daddy's girl." As children they tagged along with their fathers and were included as "one of the boys." Several comediennees were raised by their fathers and older siblings due to the death of their mothers during their early childhoods. The comediennees admired their fathers, even condoning their amorous extramarital adventures. Fathers were overwhelmingly the role models for these women. The fathers were generally poor providers, at best mediocre in business. The comediennees saw their fathers as being misunderstood and misjudged by their wives. Thus they saw their roles as one of providing warmth, encouragement, companionship, and amusement for their fathers. Of the 10% who came from upper-middle-class backgrounds, one father was a physician and one a scientific writer and businessman. These comediennees also felt closer to and identified with their fathers.

Of the mothers, 85% were housewives. Comediennees viewed their mothers as struggling, unhappy people who had to stretch the dollar and had no choice but to accept their lot in life. Mothers were seen as unsuccessful people punished both by economic woes and by being women in traditional roles. Being housewives was viewed as a dead-end street. This view of the woman became the subject matter of much of the comic routines of the comediennees.

Relationships with siblings were described as good by most subjects. Many

comediennes helped support their siblings, who were struggling financially or attending school. They are protective of their siblings. The majority of the subjects came from intact families. Although many were from poor backgrounds, there always was a continuing family striving for cohesion. Three subjects reported hostile responses from their families about their decision to enter full-time comedy. Most families treated comedy as a passing fancy and regarded the decision as one more "kooky" thing she has done.

Of the subjects studied, 57% were then or had been married. Compared to men in comedy, this is low, as 96% of the men were married. Of the remaining 43%, 29% expressed serious doubts that they would ever marry. Of the married subjects, 35% were still living with their first husbands. Half of this population had been separated and reconciled from one to three times. Three subjects had been married two or more times. Eighty-five percent had their husbands working for them as managers, arrangers, agents, etc. Fifty percent of the married comediennes had children, all of whom were their own natural children. Among the male comics, 84% of the men had children, with a high adoption rate. Thus, women in comedy seem to have less of a need for family and children than men.

While 85% of the "old great" males in comedy were Jewish, the women in comedy were 50% Jewish. However this is still an above-average representation of Jews, who comprise approximately 3% of the national population.

As many other women, comediennes were hesitant to reveal their exact ages. Generally, the women ranged from mid-twenties to mid-sixties. The average age of the comediennes was 38. Those subjects over 35 were more inclined to have a traditional marriage and children. Some had even tried to be full-time homemakers for their families before committing themselves totally to comedy. The younger comediennes are more against traditional marriage, both philosophically and in practice.

On stage, many try to add years to their age to avoid looking sexy. Many women reported difficulty being accepted as comics. Years were spent trying to get people to accept that they were capable of being funny. Besides being a woman, being pretty and young presented obstacles. To establish a credible rapport with the audience, they had to stress their maturity and show that they have lived long enough to suffer the circumstances they were joking about. Age also permitted women to more freely utilize blatant sexual material in their nightclub routines and to use taboo terms. Aging seems to establish a sense of universality with and acceptance by audiences.

The educational background of the subjects ranged from tenth grade to college graduate. A few subjects had attended graduate school. One subject was educated in a convent boarding school. Only one subject had not graduated high school; 56% had attended college, 15% graduated college, of whom one achieved Phi Beta Kappa. Many comediennes had sought a

college education, but decided that it did not have the relevance they wanted it to have for the future. College and the choice of comedy and show business were seen as totally incongruent. Comediennes as a group are bright, curious, restless, and self-educated. They are much less apt to claim that they have all the answers to life than their male counterparts.

Forty-three percent of the subject population reported having had some form of short-term psychotherapy, ranging from three visits to three months. Two subjects were in continuous therapy for over one year. Therapy was sought during life crises such as the breakup of a romance or marital problems. Several reported that friends had urged them to try therapy. Some comediennes reported leaving therapy because they felt that their therapists were too emotionally needy and that they, as comediennes, felt the need to nurture and to entertain their therapists.

Unlike men in comedy, who engaged in compulsive power struggles with their therapists, the women tended to withdraw emotionally when the therapists did not understand their pain, loneliness, and longing. Part of the reason given for leaving therapy was the "uniqueness" of their lives as comediennes and their striving for success in a male-dominated area. Comediennes felt that their therapists pressured them to conform to more traditional female roles in marriage and family and looked askance or with undue interest at their careers. Confirming the male role-models of their fathers in their lives, these women overwhelmingly sought male therapists. They generally shunned female therapists with the rationalization that they too would be traditionalists. Thus, the comediennes set up their own special disappointment when they viewed the older male therapist as having let them down by not understanding them. This tends to replicate their relationships with their fathers, who could be role models, friends, and confidants, but whose Oedipal difficulties prevented true closeness. Both fathers and therapists were seen as the emotionally needy ones who leaned on and drew from the comediennes in a way that was momentarily gratifying in giving the women a sense of power and importance, but who in the long run would not relinquish their traditional views of women. Interestingly, women have similar on- and offstage personalities, while men are for the most part opposite. The women are vivacious, frenetic, hypomanic, and hyperactive. Men offstage are depressive and introverted.

Comediennes have drawn upon their family experiences and their views of their mothers for their comedic material. The subject matter of most comediennes' routines deals primarily with views of domestic life and their personal failures at it, either by accident or design. Women tend to deal with topics that are more inwardly directed, for example clothing, appearance, and homemaking. Females in comedy also are more self-deprecatory about their personal appearance, in joke or dress, and bemoan their lack of femininity.

Phyllis Diller is notorious for her absurd dress and hairdos and her domestic inadequacy with Fang, her stage husband. Joan Rivers jokes, "You've heard of A cup, B cup, and C cup—well now you are looking at demi-tasse." Audiences howl when she relates how her mother put up a sign on their front lawn announcing: "Last girl before Freeway." Totie Fields accentuated her weight, her compulsive eating, and the absurdity of fat women as sex objects, as she described herself struggling into her pantyhose. Lili Tomlin plays the asexual little girl or the heavily dialected telephone operator. Thus, items of a comedic nature include biological anomalies, operations, wifely ineptness, and a fairly universal but grossly exaggerated lack of sexual prowess and attractiveness. Unlike men in comedy, whose material deals with worldly affairs and politics, women confine their comedic concern to the kitchen and the bedroom. A new breed of young comedienne is attempting to change the image of women in comedy. They more-aggressively discuss women's liberation, drugs, politics, and current events. One feminist comedy team is attempting to take the male prerogative by turning the tables and joking about the male anatomy. For example: "So he said to me, 'come and get your peaches honey' (gesturing to the area of the crotch), and I said to him 'they may be peaches, honey, but they sure are hanging from a dead limb.'" This is followed with, "and we all know that all men aren't created equal, don't we, Girls?" The new breed expresses strong desires to get away from the stereotypes of the dumb and funny klutz who elicits laughter with her pitiable, unfeminine body, retarded IQ, and her inability to toast bread without a major mishap. They are trying to present authentic appearances of their lives and looks and gain acceptance as women, not only as residents of the bedroom and kitchen. They are asking to be laughed with, not only laughed at. This group has not as yet gained universal acceptance, for audiences—both men and women—still demand the more traditional roles. They strive to get away from the saying that has applied to women in humor, that "you can say the nastiest things about yourself without offending anyone."

In summary, the early stand-up comedienne as well as the ingenues are pioneers in a male-dominated field. Women have similar on- and off-stage personalities—they are vivacious, frenetic, and hypomanic. Men offstage fit the manic-depressive syndrome, being primarily depressive and introverted. Women direct their hostility at themselves, inwardly. They denigrate their physical and sexual attributes and use their role as women as an object of ridicule. Although identifying with their fathers, they pattern their comedic routines upon their experiences of their mothers. They gain acceptance by maintaining the stereotypes of naggers, whiners, and complainers. For the most part, they do not concern themselves in their work with political and social messages or affairs of state. Routines are traditionally built upon domestic issues.

Many comediennes expressed little need for traditional marriages and family experience, in sharp contrast to the "old great" comics, who are mostly men. Many of those who are married have their husbands as full-time managers, directors, and arrangers of their acts and careers. Husbands generally handle the financial and professional arrangements. Male comedians were closer to their mothers; females preferred their fathers, were closer to them, and in their personal lives identified with them. By identifying with men, they can do what they expect men to do, and that is to put down women. They do this on stage by putting down themselves and other women. In this way, they deny the traditional role of women in their personal lives by making it a part of their stage makeup. Their assuming this stage role enables the middle-American audience not only to identify with, but to accept the woman in this role. The womens' liberation movement has had minimal impact in this important area of show business so far. Men in comedy have the option of having the audience identify with them as the aggressor or as the victim. Most choose the aggressor. Generally, women employ identification with the victim, utilizing two traditional roles in comedy—the dumb, whining unattractive nag or the beautiful but dumb sex kitten.

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