

Gender Differences in the Perceptions of Adolescents' Playful and Aggressive Use of Sarcasm



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Introduction

Verbal irony is a type of non-literal language in which a speaker intentionally says one thing, but means another (Gibbs, 2000). It is commonly categorized into *jocular* (ironic speech intended to tease or poke fun) and *sarcasm* (ironic speech intended to hurt or wound) (Gibbs, 2000).

Some evidence suggests that males' and females' understanding of the intent of verbal irony differs, partly due to gender differences in evaluating social context (DeHart et al., 2012). Female listeners tend to view boys' ironic utterances as more aggressive in nature, whereas male listeners often view boys' irony as playful banter. It is possible that verbal irony serves a similar developmental function during adolescence as rough-and-tumble play serves during early childhood (i.e., aggression used to develop social hierarchies).

Research on rough-and-tumble play in early childhood suggests that boys' and girls' perceptions of other children's physical bouts differ in regard to aggressiveness and playfulness (Smith Smees, & Pellegrini, 2004). Boys are more likely to interpret other boys' fights as playful, whereas girls are more likely to view boys' fights as aggressive. Scholars have posited that verbal irony may function as a form of verbal rough-and-tumble play during adolescence, when physical forms of aggression are no longer developmentally appropriate (DeHart et al., 2013).

This study attempted to make similar connections by examining gender differences in late adolescents' perceptions of video clips, selected to exemplify ironic and non-ironic verbal interactions.

Method

- Participants included 122 undergraduates (70% female) from a college in western New York.
- Participants were shown a PowerPoint presentation containing verbally ironic and non-ironic video clips (32 clips in all). Due to time constraints, the study focused on sarcastic rather than jocular clips.
- Video clips were drawn from a study of adolescent sibling and friend relationships, in which 17-year-olds engaged in cooking tasks with siblings and friends.
- All clips were of same-sex dyads, half siblings and half friends. Each clip was 15 to 30 seconds in length and featured one adolescent using sarcasm, the sibling's or friend's response, and some additional contextual conversation.
- For each sarcastic clip, a corresponding non-sarcastic clip showing the same dyad was used to counterbalance study design and control for confounds.

- Clips were selected as sarcastic or non-sarcastic using a coding scheme developed to assess various qualities of ironic language (e.g., surface meaning, underlying intent, affective intensity).
- For each clip shown, participants were asked to judge separately whether the clip contained sarcasm and whether it contained joking around (jocular).
- Each clip that a participant judged to contain sarcasm was then rated for aggressiveness vs. playfulness, using a 5-point Likert scale in which 1 = aggressive and 5 = playful. Clips judged to contain joking around were also rated for aggressiveness vs. playfulness.
- Results were analyzed using 2 (Clip Type: sarcastic vs. non-sarcastic) x 2 (Clip Gender) x 2 (Participant Gender) repeated measure ANOVAs.

Tables

Table 1.

Participant Ratings of Aggressiveness vs. Playfulness by Clip Type (Perceived Presence of Sarcasm) and Clip Gender

	Sarcastic Clip Means		Non-Sarcastic Clip Means	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Male Participants	3.49	3.91	3.49	3.62
Female Participants	3.64	4.21	3.75	3.77
Total Participants	3.60	4.12	3.68	3.72

Table 2.

Participant Ratings of Aggressiveness vs. Playfulness by Clip Type (Perceived Presence of Joking) and Clip Gender

	Joking Clip Means		Non-Joking Clip Means	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Male Participants	3.92	4.06	3.68	3.82
Female Participants	3.79	4.25	3.99	3.94
Total Participants	3.83	4.19	3.90	3.90

* Note: Clips were rated on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 = aggressive, and 5 = playful.

Results

- Participants judged roughly half of the sarcastic clips to actually contain sarcasm ($M = 7.95, SD = 2.77$). In contrast, they only thought about one-eighth of the non-sarcastic clips contained sarcasm ($M = 2.25, SD = 2.32$).
- In addition, participants judged just over half of the sarcastic clips to contain instances of joking around ($M = 9.30, SD = 3.51$). They were somewhat less likely to say the non-sarcastic clips contained joking around ($M = 6.07, SD = 4.00$).
- Participants rated male clips perceived to contain sarcasm as more aggressive/less playful ($M = 3.60, SD = .79$) than female clips perceived to contain sarcasm ($M = 4.12, SD = .56$) ($F(1, 42) = 6.07, p < .05$).
- However, there was also a sarcasm x clip gender effect ($F(1, 105) = 5.98, p < .05$); the clip gender effect held only for clips that the participants viewed as sarcastic, not for those that they viewed as non-sarcastic (See Table 1.)
- There was also a gender effect for clips that the participants judged to contain joking around; male clips in this category were also seen as more aggressive/less playful ($M = 3.83, SD = .62$) than female clips ($M = 4.19, SD = .53$) ($F(1, 105) = 8.40, p < .01$). There was no gender difference for clips perceived not to include joking around (See Table 2.)
- There were no participant gender effects or interactions involving participant gender.

Discussion

Results indicated that participant gender did not matter as much as the gender of adolescents in the video clips. This was unexpected, because previous research suggests that participant gender matters more when evaluating others' use of playful and aggressive social strategies. A possible reason for these contrasting findings is that regardless of gender, participants have preexisting understandings of males' and females' interaction styles and language intent. This coincides with our finding that participants viewed male clips as more aggressive and female clips as more playful in nature. Although clip-rater gender was insignificant, this does not detract from the developmental importance of sarcasm as verbal rough-and-tumble play. It is possible that males' and females' differences in playful and aggressive irony are both intended to assert social dominance in gender-specific ways. Likewise, adolescents of both genders may have little difficulty interpreting males' and females' gender-specific intentions.

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