



# Beware the Trojan Horse of Humour: Using Stand-up Comedy to Explore Notions of Gender Identity in Grade 10 Boys

Kathleen Schroeder  
Hilton College, South Africa

## Further Information

This poster and further information is available at <http://www.theibsc.org/>

Researcher's Email: [kms@hiltoncollege.com](mailto:kms@hiltoncollege.com)

## Introduction

Boys are constantly urged to take responsibility for how men behave and to fight against traditional patriarchal values. They are challenged to stand up for minorities and the marginalised. They are, I believe, fatigued by this and also feel that they are being accused of being terrible people.

I wondered how effective all the talks and videos and instructions we impose upon them are. I know that boys are very good at saying what we want to hear and they know what is politically correct and how to promote these values publicly. They seem to be very PC ... until they let their guard down.

## Research Context and Participants

Hilton College is an elite boys' high school in the Midlands of KwaZulu Natal, South Africa. It has full boarding for nearly 600 boys, who are encouraged to engage in all spheres of school life – academics, sports, culture, and the environment.

For this project I engaged my class of eighteen Grade 10 English boys.

## The Research Question

How might the use of humour and comedy serve to challenge perceptions of gender in Grade 10 boys?

## The Research Action

I introduced the boys to the idea of how comedy offends through an article from *BBC News*, "Trevor Noah: Aboriginal anger as 'disgusting' joke resurfaces" 2018 (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia>), which included commentary from outraged Australian viewers about the racist and sexist nature of the jokes told. We explored those reactions.

I then used the stand-up comedy of Shappi Khorsandi, Trevor Noah, and Chris Rock to analyse what qualities and prejudices each skit might rely on for its humour. We examined the potential these skits had to offend different groups, and why. I considered the boys' responses individually and collectively against the research on comedy by Puchner (2014), Woodzicka and Ford (2010), and Vashist (2016).

As a class, we analysed and discussed the boys' unquestioning amusement at "funny things" which allowed them to perpetuate hurts and offences against others in their daily lives.

I hoped to draw attention to their passivity and encourage them to contemplate how their jokes and banter in the boarding and school context can be very hurtful to others.

## Abiding Questions

Why do boys joke in ways that contradict what we have tried to teach them?

How do we make them understand that humour can be hurtful?

What are some of the features of comedy that we ignore when we laugh?

"It was just a joke."

"Comedians mock everyone."



<https://www.the-national.co.uk/arts/culture/trevor-noah-dubai-comedy-festival-this-october-1.125583>

"Her jokes were light-hearted."

"She plays on stereotypes and not on facts."

"I'm not gay..."



<http://www.shappi.co.uk/edinburgh-fringe-mistress-misfit/>

## Trevor Noah: Aboriginal anger as 'disgusting' joke resurfaces

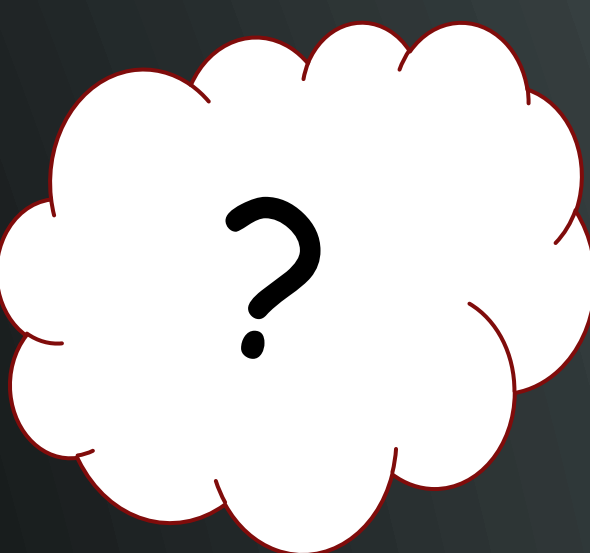


<https://hollywoodffia.com/2018/02/27/chris-rock-chris-rock-dis-leud-response/>

"The women were laughing too."



[www.hiltoncollege.com](http://www.hiltoncollege.com)



## Data Collection and Analysis

- **Individual written responses** reflecting on the stimulus video and article provided private and personal expression. I recorded key words or refrains that emerged across the class.
- A **questionnaire** assessed characteristics seen as "masculine" or "feminine" according to a 1-5 scale. I included associations with sexual orientation. Data were assigned values to categories, which made for easy comparison.
- Groups recorded their **discussions** and feedback in response to stimulus videos; transcripts of these were made. Each group completed a written response to questions on the videos.
- A **private written review** was done by each boy. This provided material for assessing past behaviour and views in light of current attitudes. I could assess whether the boys felt any new awareness of their positions relative to others.

## Key Findings and Discussion

**Alignment:** The extent to which boys felt affinity or alignment with the comedian impacted upon their reactions. They felt protective of Trevor Noah as a male South African and sided with him, seeing the victims as "oversensitive."

**Stereotypes:** Boys hold very clear views on differences in gender and sexuality. The manner in which they perceived either the comedian or the subject affected whether they thought the comedian was offensive or not. For example, women are not seen as a threat when they joke about men. Heterosexual men are seen as aggressive and are, therefore, potentially more threatening.

**Separation:** When boys felt that they were merely on-lookers and not part of the targeted group they found the comedy funny. They felt no obligation to condemn or challenge this humour.

**Self-Awareness:** The extent to which boys were aware of the impact of their own behaviours and attitudes upon others changed over the project. While initially seeing the problem as not being their own, the boys later projected themselves empathetically, suggesting that they became more conscious that they are not only observers of behaviour, but perpetrators thereof. However, boys stated that they would *like* to intervene in the future when they see someone being victimised, but acknowledged they probably would not have the courage to do so.

## Conclusions

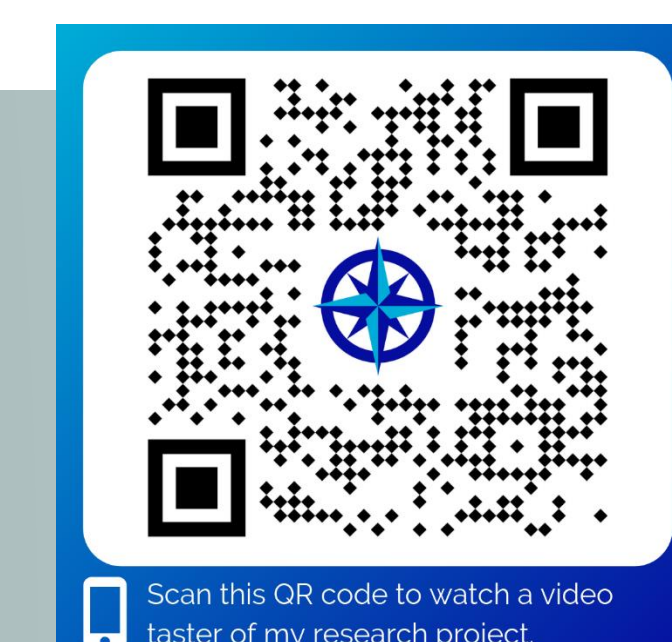
The boys were aware of what is politically correct and what is required of them. They perform according to expectations in public, but their private views are mostly at odds with this. They do not see their banter or jokes as really offensive or hurtful. Using public figures and their comedic performances allows for a far more effective way of examining the impact of jokes and humour on the individual subject without being didactic and alienating the boys. Actually changing behaviour, however, may take more than simply changing attitudes.

## Key Readings

Puchner, L. (2014). Disruptions of the self-narrative musings on teaching social justice topics in a research methods course. *Multicultural Education*, Fall, 51-55.

Vashist, N. (2016). The effect of misogynistic humor on millennials' perception of women. *The University of Central Florida Undergraduate Research Journal*, 8(1), 24-40.

Woodzicka, J., & Ford, T. (2010). A framework for thinking about the (not-so-funny) effects of sexist humor. *Europe's Journal of Psychology*, 6(3), 174-195.



Scan this QR code to watch a video faster of my research project.