

# Jokes, the unconscious and social subjectivity: from the “latent narratives” to the groupal bond<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*The purpose of this paper is to propose a psychosociological approach to the configuration of human bonds, on the one hand, and a methodological reflection on the analysis, on the other. The bonds are analyzed in their less explicit side, in order to reveal those emotional and representational elements which tend to express themselves an unclear and obscure way. The empirical research material has been a set of jokes told in different focus groups, with participants located in similar social positions. We analysed the associative chains developed in group dynamics, presenting methodological schemes for each particular analysis. The “latent accounts” arising from the analysis of each discussion group exhibit significant differences which are expressive of link models specific to each social context. Additionally, the phenomenon of the joke is confirmed as a valuable tool for social research.*

*Keywords: bonds, jokes, associations, interpretation, gender, sexuality.*

## 1. Introduction

Our aim here is to analyse joke telling and examine the less obvious and explicit elements of social life that bind us to one another. Jokes have the virtue of both revealing and hiding what we cannot always speak of directly, despite it being what matters to us most. Laughing and making others laugh reveals or expresses a part of our being, whether we are the narrator or the listener, thereby creating a common space in which bonds are formed. This paper analyses human bonds by identifying associative chains between the jokes told in focus groups.

Is the *other* in this bond an abstract *other*, or rather do human bonds tend to form with a concrete *other* characterised by the social position they occupy? Is *free association* a useful technique for analysing group bonding?

It is with this dual interest, both theoretical and methodological, substantive and formal, that the article, on the one hand, presents the categories and concepts employed within this research and, on the other, adopts a psychosociological approach to the phenomenon of jokes. We first detail the design and methodological aspects and then present the results obtained from the interpretive analysis of jokes told in a focus group, also using methodological maps. The article ends with a conclusions section discussing what is suppressed in jokes, and some final considerations.

## **2. Human bonds and subjectivity: recognition of the other**

Our aim here is to conceptualise bonds based on the understanding that their formation is the culmination of a process in which subjects recognise themselves in “the other”. We provide a theoretical explanation of this concept, founded on the well-known Weberian definitions of social action and relation, on the one hand, and on Freud’s approach to bonds, on the other. According to Weber (1978 [1922]), social action is that which takes others into account, while social relation refers to reciprocal behaviours, also mentioned by authors such as Habermas (1981) and Pichón Rivière (1980). Weber focuses on the conscious and intentional dimension of bonds, which contrasts with Freud’s (2004 [1921]), who conceives them as being based on unconscious processes. These differences aside, the similarity between Freud and Weber’s conceptualisations is found in bonds being considered the (re)presentation of the other in one’s own subjectivity (Izquierdo 1996: 185).

From this perspective, the act of recognition would not necessarily imply approval of any kind. Rather, the recognition we refer to here would be related to the formulation “in you I see myself”, meaning that the subjects of recognition see each other as a type, as a representation of something they have in common.<sup>2</sup> Recognising one another therefore involves subjects sharing the same point of reference, on which a common space is built. To comprehend this, we must understand that this recognition is a synthesis of what Ricoeur (2005) calls the active voice of the subject that recognises, and the passive voice of the subject that is recognised. That said, we do not deny the existence of different types of recognition, such as identification and/or opposition, for example. Therefore, the point of reference may be shared, even if the opinion, the content or the way of addressing it are not. According to Pichón Rivière’s definition (1980: 22), the acts of recognition that bonds entail establish “the particular way in which a subject connects with the other or others, creating a particular structure for each case and for each moment”. And, as the same author notes, establishing bonds takes the form of communication and learning,<sup>3</sup> which suggests that bonds do not only bring into play biographical elements of the subjects, but can also produce changes, introducing nuances in those elements that initially shaped the bond.

Recognition by opposition, for example, may be indicative of a conflict relating to the subjects’ identities, in which there is negotiation of this “in you I see myself”, or how the subjects define themselves in the established bond. We might suspect that bonds by opposition may be the most “productive” type, insofar as they clarify that which initially bonded the subjects, while at the same time indicating the work involved in producing the bond. In recognition by identification, on the other hand, subjects tend to share the positions and identities from which their bonds are formed, confirming the elements that have shaped them. These models can be played out or coexist in the bonding process, the type of bond varying with the social context.<sup>4</sup>

Our working hypothesis states that recognition does not refer to a reciprocal gaze which activates identification/projection processes, but rather a third element that comes into play when establishing the bond, taking the form of a characteristic pertaining to the subjects of the

bond. Recognition is reciprocal when subjects realise that there are indicators of this third element in themselves and in the other actors involved. The recurrence of a theme or some content, and the way of addressing it, often initiate the act of recognition, highlighting what binds the subjects. Thus, in the analysis we propose here, the predominant models of bonds between certain social groups are those elements that refer to social positions and subjectivities.

### 3. Jokes: the gateway

The choice of jokes to analyse what is implicit in bonds with others was not a random one. Peter L. Berger (2011 [1967]) began his *Invitation to Sociology* by asking why there are so few jokes about sociologists. His answer was ignorance, although we might add to that the little social relevance attributed to the work of the sociologist. In general, jokes are made about that which is socially relevant, what people know and are not indifferent to, even if the opposite might initially seem to be the case. As Bakhtin (1974) stated in his analysis of jokes for popular culture, jokes retain that elusive and paradoxical character of what matters being presented as supposedly unimportant or insignificant, awarding things a ludicrous image, and thereby hiding social tensions. Therefore, if we address jokes with the utmost seriousness, their analysis and interpretation will prove a suitable and fruitful gateway to social life. Moreover, the joke, a social and communicative phenomenon par excellence, fosters the establishing of bonds with others. When a joke amuses us, we feel a need to communicate it to others, and this is only possible when three people are involved.<sup>5</sup> According to Freud (2003 [1905]), the three people required to form a joke are: the person who tells it, the person-object of the joke and the receiver, who is responsible for the effect of laughter, if appropriate.

Shared laughter, the result of telling jokes, can be an expression of a common way of thinking, and deeper still, a common feeling. When a joke is told, it usually seeks a knowing laugh, something is expected of the other, whether proximity, sympathy or offense. This group dimension of laughter was highlighted by the philosopher Henri Bergson (2008 [1900]), who believed laughter, specifically making others laugh, is specific to humans. However, the phenomenon of laughter has been approached from different angles; it has been defined as an involuntary reflex, in that it is spontaneous, or contrarily, and speaking of civilized laughter, as expressing closeness and proximity with the other, albeit at the expense of spontaneity (Koestler 1964). Beyond diverse types of laughter, we find a consensus among the different approaches on the non-neutrality of laughter: when we laugh, we laugh about something. If we follow Bergson's (2008 [1900]) work *Laughter*, we deduce that we laugh about something because we understand it; that is, because we put our intelligence into action. The most relevant contribution of this author for our work, however, is knowing that we laugh about something because we attach social significance to it. This means that the comic tends to appear associated with common life.

We have already said that jokes are directly related to laughter, insofar as they are one of the social phenomena that lead us to it. Freud (2003 [1905]), in his work *Jokes and their Relation with the Unconscious*, analyses the capacity of the joke to generate a process that tends to culminate with laughter. Unlike Bergson (2008 [1900]), who postulated the silencing of affection as a condition for laughter, according to Freud it results from a process in which the joke triggers the discharge of accumulated psychic tension, producing a pleasant sensation, however ephemeral.

Indeed, there are jokes that provide the pleasure of laughter in themselves. These Freud referred to as *innocent*, saying that they are an end in themselves, seeking only to provoke laughter. But Freud also noted that there are jokes that allow us to obtain the gratification of desires, some of which, as in dreams, are unconscious. These he called *tendentious*, because

they are at the service of an intention (desire). We can distinguish between those which pursue pleasure directly, such as *sexual* and *aggressive* (or hostile) jokes, and those which attack the order and rules that stand in the way of pleasure: *cynical* jokes, which attack the social institutions that establish rules for and limits on desires; and *skeptical* jokes, which attack certainties to free up knowledge.

Freud's approach (2003 [1905]) went beyond classifications, however,<sup>6</sup> and represented an attempt to unravel the genesis of the pleasure of laughter caused by jokes, which he maintained is common to all of them. He elaborated the hypothesis of "psychic cost", according to which the pleasure caused by a joke would correspond to the psychic cost it saved. According to Freud, the psychic apparatus has to "make an effort" to inhibit certain desires or tendencies that are not consciously accepted. The joke allows this expense to be saved, avoiding censorship. Therefore, added to the "preliminary pleasure" linked to the fulfilment of the desire or tendency, is the pleasure of saving repression. In psychoanalysis, unconscious desires are never met, rather they are realised in the imagination through alternative forms, the joke connecting us with them.

To Freud (1963 [1927]), humour takes place with the emotional release from a situation of suffering experienced by the subject as painful. Similarly to the joke, humoristic pleasure derives from the "savings in sentimental cost" that would be produced by an unpleasant situation. The humorist, therefore, is someone who downplays evils, and even sees them as opportunities for pleasure.<sup>7</sup> Influenced by Lacanian thinking, Susan Purdie (1993) developed an analysis of comedy derived from transgression. The jokes would produce practical effects in reality by violating the rules of language.

In the field of sociology, on the other hand, Mulkay (1988) suggested the need to contextualise humour socially. He argued that humour does not create laughter of itself, but rather laughter must take place in a social environment that makes things humorous. A part, though not all, of humour is generated by so-called structural jokes, directly related to the structural organisation of the social context in which they occur. This can constitute either *pure* humour, with no implications beyond humorous discourse, or *applied* humour, with serious implications for interactions. Thus, we can distinguish between types of humour according to the effects they have on the social structure, although inversely, different social structures or media may also have different forms of humour attributed to them. The basic source of humour would in fact be the multiple ways of interpreting social life and serious discourse, as humour emerges from the contradictions of the serious world, which is always susceptible to not being so due to the actions of those who are the targets of humour. In a way, this vision may be close to Freud's, if we see humour acting as "protection" from serious discourse, which can at times be the cause of suffering. If humour makes use of what threatens serious discourse (i.e., the inconsistent, the contradictory), we can then think of it having a liberating dimension.

Mary Douglas (1968) argued along similar lines, understanding the joke to subvert hierarchies and devalue dominant norms. However, what this anthropologist calls the "anti-rite" trait of the joke, which is capable of diminishing the importance of social structures, does not imply that the comic only serves transforming forces, as it finds its limits in the social structures of power, which establish what can and cannot be funny (Purdie 1993). The consequences of jokes can be both positive and negative for the social structure and power relations (Paton *et al.* 1996).

#### 4. Design and methodological development

We employed focus group methodology to determine how a group is constituted, how the bonds between participants are established, what these bonds consist of, and what distinguishes

one group from another. Specifically, we followed the focus group model proposed by Conde (2008). However, given the specific development of focus groups based on telling jokes, some of the criteria were made more flexible and were adapted accordingly. One of the distinguishing features was to replace discourse with joke telling. The initial impetus was to invite participants to freely tell “any jokes that might occur” to them. The use of focus groups was designed to provide a context that encouraged participants to express themselves, so as to capture their collective and shared dimension. Telling jokes does not involve a commitment to anything, due to the fact that from both the narrator and the listener’s perspective there is no need to take them seriously. As participants did not have to talk about any particular topic, they were only left with the option of talking about themselves, expressing what matters to them, their desires, their hates, what interests they shared to a greater or lesser extent, etc.

In this research, a good number of the focus groups had three or four participants, fewer than usual in so-called canonical groups (see Ibáñez 1979 and Alonso 1998). The aim here was to approximate the triangular group approach, whereby a social situation is created in which the subjects tend to be located in an open space between the “I” and “the others”; that is, between the more subjective and personal space and the “outside” space occupied by the others, analogously to the transitional space developed by D. Winnicott. We believe this approach suits the analysis of the subject matter proposed in this study (Conde 2008).

The groups that were formed, only one of which is analysed here for reasons of space,<sup>8</sup> are seen to represent certain broad sectors of the social structure, given their socio-demographic variables:

FG: Women (2) and Men (2), 42 to 52 years old, medium-low social class, unemployed, did not complete primary education (3), secondary education (1), separated (3) and living with a partner (1)

Since our aim is to analyse those latent elements that connect participants, we chose to apply the *free association* method, although adapted to our goals. Given the originality of using this method for sociological purposes, we provide a basic explanation of it here and present the steps followed in the process in the analysis section. Taken from the field of psychoanalysis, free association consists in expressing whatever comes to one’s mind free from discrimination, whether based on a given element or spontaneous. Here, the “given element” was jokes narrated in the group dynamic.<sup>9</sup> Central to our analysis was the effect produced by the chain linking several jokes. This chain occurs by association, described as that which designates “any link between two or more psychic elements, which as a series constitutes an associative chain” (Laplanche & Pontalis 1967: 33). This includes both the material verbalised in a session—in our case, in the focus group—and affective bonds related to it.

To paraphrase Conde (2009: 236), associations “indicate the existence of a shared space, a common space, of fields with social, symbolic and energetic forces that cause this set of associations”. Hence, their analysis may reveal the latent and deeper meanings underlying jokes, the bonds they generate among participants, and more specifically, the shared desires, pains and emotional positions these tend to bring out. As Fedida (1974) pointed out, associations of ideas form a frame, the crosslinks of which are the unconscious text of conscious discourse. Thus, associations linking one joke with another are the unit of analysis. These may occur as contrast or confluence, as we have already noted that the intersubjective links can take the form of opposition. It should also be noted that the association may not be immediate: when a narrator tells more than one joke consecutively, the other participants may be mentally preparing the joke they are going to tell, without attempting, even as they do so, to relate their joke to any of the previous ones. This gives rise to genuine associations, while the aim, of course, is for the jokes to be as funny as possible.

Moreover, and in accordance with the psycho-sociological interest of our study, we have sought to clarify the relationship between narrating jokes and objective social elements that unify the group as well as the subjectivity of the group's participants. For this reason, when the same joke or one of its variants has been narrated in different groups, it can be interpreted differently, depending on the social context of the group and the joke's position in the chain. With regard to the work of analysis, the counterpart of free association is the "floating attention" required by the analyst or researcher. This means paying attention to all elements of the jokes narrated one after another, without specifically looking for anything in particular. Applying to jokes what Freud (1963 [1909]) said about clinical cases in one of his earliest first references to the issue, our task is not to understand jokes immediately; we only have to do so after receiving several impressions of them, so we shall keep our judgment on hold and pay level attention to everything there is to observe.

Signs of association may be the common elements in one joke or among several jokes, as well as elements that allow links to be established between jokes, in terms of meaning and/or affect, and therefore suggest forms of bonding between participants. In our analysis, we developed schematic maps to show the fundamental elements of the interpretations and associative chains, with their different possibilities. This attempt to formalise the elements was aimed at bringing transparency to the method by which we reached the group's "latent narrative", which is summarised at the end. Systematically, on the maps we focus on the *semantic level* of analysis, or interpretation of each joke,<sup>10</sup> and at the *pragmatic level*, in the interpretation and development of associative chains. While the former would correspond to "what the joke says" with its meaning (Ibáñez 1985), the *pragmatic level* would correspond to "what is done with the joke", with the meaning and its practice associated with psychosocial processes and conflicts (Alonso 1998: 65), which we believe contributes to forming the group. That is, the use their narrators make of jokes in specific social and personal contexts (Reyes 1995: 74).

Finally, it should be noted that we have worked on a fundamentally interpretive level. This means that there is the possibility of different interpretations of the same empirical material, even if not all interpretations acquire the same validity; as Desprats-Péquignot (1995: 99) noted, "interpretation is not open to any meaning possible". To the extent that this is so, we follow the validation criterion proposed by Ricoeur (1976), based on the *likelihood* of interpretations. Thus, the interpretative analyses were carried out considering the most likely possibility of those considered to exist (Eco 1995). We therefore recapture the metaphor used by von Glaserfeld (1988: 40) to characterise the nature of scientific knowledge, comparing knowledge to a key: "A key fits in the lock when it opens it. That fitting describes a capacity of the key, but not the lock. (...) We know too well that there are a lot of keys with different shapes to ours, but which nevertheless open our doors".

## **5. Analysis and interpretation: masculinity and femininity ethical commitments and sexuality**

We now move on to the interpretative analysis of the associative chains found in the jokes told in the focus group presented here.

The focus group, comprising men and women in medium-low socio-economic positions, was particularly marked by the structural relationships established by the sex/gender system in some of its key dimensions. The mixed composition of the group from the point of view of gender provided for contrasting positions between men and women, as well as being a stimulus for the emergence of conflict between them. We established two large distinct blocks of associative chains sharing a common background: the conflict between manifestations of

masculinity and femininity.<sup>11</sup> The first of these can be ascribed to the different ways in which men and women display ethical commitments; the second, to specific ways in which sexual desires appear.

The chain element in the first jokes is the consequences for other men of men's actions when pursuing a sexual goal at all costs. This brings into play the question of limits, precisely what the subsequent jokes refer to. Narrator 2 acknowledges that it is not always possible to do what you want, because if you do, both external reality and others will impose limits. Narrator 1 introduces the need for external limits, in cases where internal ones do not seem to exist. The meaning of this chain can be read from the perspective of men lacking the *ethic of caring* for people close to them and for themselves. This is confirmed by Narrator 1, a woman who is separated, with the third and fourth jokes. She narrates the conflict existing in a marriage when husbands drink too much wine without considering the consequences. We will not have children because you drink too much wine, joke four says, via the metaphor of worms referring to sperm. What really concerns the woman is the desire to have children, and this expresses the instrumental relationship she has with her husband. An example of men's disregard for one of women's fundamental demands (Izquierdo 1998: 185) generates unease. A fairly similar situation can be seen in the subsequent joke, although with new elements introduced. We tend to think that the core of the chain and bond is given by the expression of opposition. We would expect that a man would always be willing to have sex with an attractive woman, but — and this is why the joke makes us laugh — this is precisely not the case. The narrator, an older man who is also separated, identifies with the figure of the provider, and it is based on the *ethics of provision* that the typical mandate of hegemonic masculinity is articulated (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005), and which can be expressed without inhibition via the joke. The husband pays to transfer his wife's problem to the doctor, thereby producing a transposition in the relationship between the instrumental and the substantive. The bond by opposition expressed by jokes exists between these two types of ethics, conditioned by the gender of the person practicing them. More specifically, joke five reveals the manifestation of a *male ethic of curing*, more focused on the damage than the person suffering it (Izquierdo 2003: 13).

With the subsequent joke, Narrator 1 continues the theme. The husband's drunkenness again constitutes the pivotal scene, although this time he seems to recognise the inappropriateness of his actions. The ethics of care, manifested here in the supposed<sup>12</sup> concern for the other, is used for the purposes of emotional manipulation: the intention is to provoke guilt in the husband. An interpretation of the latent level of the joke suggests that the woman's real concern is for what happens to her, but via her husband. Otherwise, how could we explain that he is the one who drinks and she the one who dies? We might infer that what is expressed in the joke is symptomatic of a *symbiotic* relationship demanded by the woman. We interpret that behind this joke there is the woman's demand for love, the plot of which would be "If my husband doesn't do what I want, I will die...". The husband downplays the situation, thinking his wife is not going to die because of this. In addition, he is not willing to accept that what happens to her will have consequences for him ("bury" his wife, "make holes"). There are women who try to manipulate, thereby expressing the dark side of the ethics of care (Izquierdo 2007), and yet there are husbands who refuse to allow it.

1. *"Un vasco que se encuentra un amigo con el otro y le dice ¡pero chico dice que te pasa que vas así que te caes pa el otro lao dice, pues yo que sé vengo del médico, dice, pues si ayer estaba yo así también, dice y qué...a sí y dice eché tres polvos a la mujer y me se fue y dice y donde encuentro yo ahora a tu mujer."* (Narrator 1).

[“A Basque who meets a friend of his, and says, but boy, he says, what happens to you that you go falling the other side, he says, I don't know I come from the doctor, he says, yesterday I was also like this, he says, and what?... yeah like this and then

I had three intercouses with the woman and, says, it disappear, and where I find now your wife!” (Narrator 1).]

2. *“Pues había uno, una persona que paseando paseaba por la ciudad, pues le entró mucha hambre y no tiene dinero para pagar entonces estaba pensando que rollo tenía que montar para comer sin pagar. Paseándose por los restaurantes cogió un ratón, lo mató y lo metió en el bolsillo entró al restaurante a comer gratis no, primer plato, segundo,... en el segundo plato cogió el ratón, lo metió dentro del plato y dice ¡oiga camarero ven ven! que comida me ha traído, la comida con ratones yo no... entonces pues salió sin pagar se ha hinchao de comer y se ha largao sin comer, o sea sin pagar. Al día siguiente contó a su amigo el mismo rollo entonces su amigo dice donde, donde enseñame donde has comido sin pagar y tal que voy a hacer igual que tú dice pues en tal sitio pero tienes que llevar un ratón en el bolsillo para que comas sin pagar, entonces pues su amigo se metió también en el mismo restaurante para comer, pues le pidió al otro dame un primer plato, comió el primero y el segundo también, entonces el camarero estaba vigilando a ver si va a hacer como el de ayer, entonces ha visto que sacaba algo, le vino con un palo y venga a pegarle a pegarle hasta que se ha marchao, y ya está. (Say 4) el otro se fue hinchao a comer y hinchao a palos. (Dice 1) Sí lo que pasa es que el otro se llevó el postre.”* (Narrator 2).

[“Well there was one, a person who was walking, walking in the city, as he went hungry and had no money to pay, then he was thinking to put together a roll to eat without paying. He was walking though restaurants and caught a mouse, killed it and pocketed then he entered the restaurant to eat free no? First course, second, ... in the second course took the mouse, put it into the dish and says: Hey waiter comes, come! What food you brought me, food with mice, I don’t... then he left without paying. He has swelled to eat and has gone off the restaurant without eating, I mean without paying. The next day told his friend the same roll then his friend says where, where show me where you ate without paying and maybe I’ll do it like you, he said, in that site, but you have to take a mouse in your pocket to eat without paying, then his friend also got into the same restaurant to eat, then he asked the other give me a starter, ate the first and second also, then the waiter was watching to see if he will do like that one of yesterday, then he has seen that he pulled something, he came with a stick and hit him until he has gone, and that’s it. (Says 4) the other was swollen to eat and swollen of hits. (Says 1) Yes what happens is that the other took the dessert.” (Narrator 2).]

3. *“Uno iba con una moto que iba a torear a un bar y cuando ya tenía más de cuatro o cinco cubalibres, empezaba el tío ¡rummm rummm! y se iba echando ostias y al segundo día que pide el tío un cubalibre y empieza así a hacer rum se puso el camarero en la puerta y el tío rum rum y cuando fue a salir le pegó una ostia lo tiró patas arriba y dice ¡psssssss! se pinchó la rueda.”* (Narrator 1).

[“One was with a bike that would bullfight at a bar and when he had more than four or five Cuba libres, the guy began rummm! rummm! And he went at full speed, and the second day he asked the guy for a Cuba libre and begins to make rummm, the waiter stood at the door and the guy rum rum and when he went out he tossed him upside down and says ¡psssssss ! it’s a broken tyre.” (Narrator 1).]

4. *“Había otro que dice, una señora va al médico y mire que mi marido bebe mucho y yo lo encuentro muy mal y tal y dice pues mire le voy a hacer la prueba entonces echó un vaso vino y echó un gusano dice para que el se de cuenta que con el vino*

*el gusano se murió. Cuando llegó a casa la mujer hizo la prueba y dice ves mira he hechao el gusano, uno en el vaso vino y otro en el vaso de agua y el del vaso de vino está muerto y el del agua está vivo dice pues dice y tú no sacas na en tu cabeza dice que bebiendo vino nunca tendré gusanos.” (Narrator 1).*

[“There was another that said, a lady goes to the doctor and see my husband drinks a lot and I find him very badly and so, and he says: look I’ll do the test then he threw a glass of wine and he threw a worm he says, so he realizes that with the wine the worm died. When she got home the woman did the test and said look, look, I have thrown the worm, one in the white wine and the other in the water glass and the one in the glass of wine is dead and the one in the water is alive, says, she says and you do not take nothing out of your head? Says, drinking wine I will never have worms.” (Narrator 1).]

5. *“Dice que era uno que tiene a la mujer muy guapa, y la mujer le dice me encuentro mal dice bueno pues vamos al médico. La lleva al médico y cuando entra al médico le dice que mi mujer no se encuentra bien y dice y quiero saber que es lo que necesita mi mujer dice mira sabe lo que necesita su mujer que le echen un polvo dice pues que se lo echen que se lo echen. - Que para eso pago (dice Narrator 1) Que se lo echen que para eso pago la Seguridad Social. - Y encima me va a hacer usted un favor, que yo no se lo voy a tener que echar.” (Narratore 4).*

[“He says that there was one who has a very beautiful woman, and the woman tells him I feel sick, he says, well then we go to the doctor. He takes her to the doctor and when he enters the doctor’s office and tells him my wife is not well and says and let me know what my wife needs, he says, look, what your wife needs is that someone to fuck her, he says. Ok let somebody fuck her, fuck her. Since I pay for that (says Narrator 1). They must fuck her since I pay Social Security. And besides you will do me a favour, I will not have to fuck her.” (Narrator 4).]

6. *“Aquella señora que estaba durmiendo y llega el marido borracho perdió y dice me vas a matar, tú me vas a enterrar a mí, dice sí pa eso vengo yo ahora pa hacer hoyos.” (Narrator 1).*

[“That lady who was sleeping and the drunk astray husband comes and she says, you are going to kill me, you’re going to bury me. He says yes for that I come now, to make holes.” (Narrator 1).]

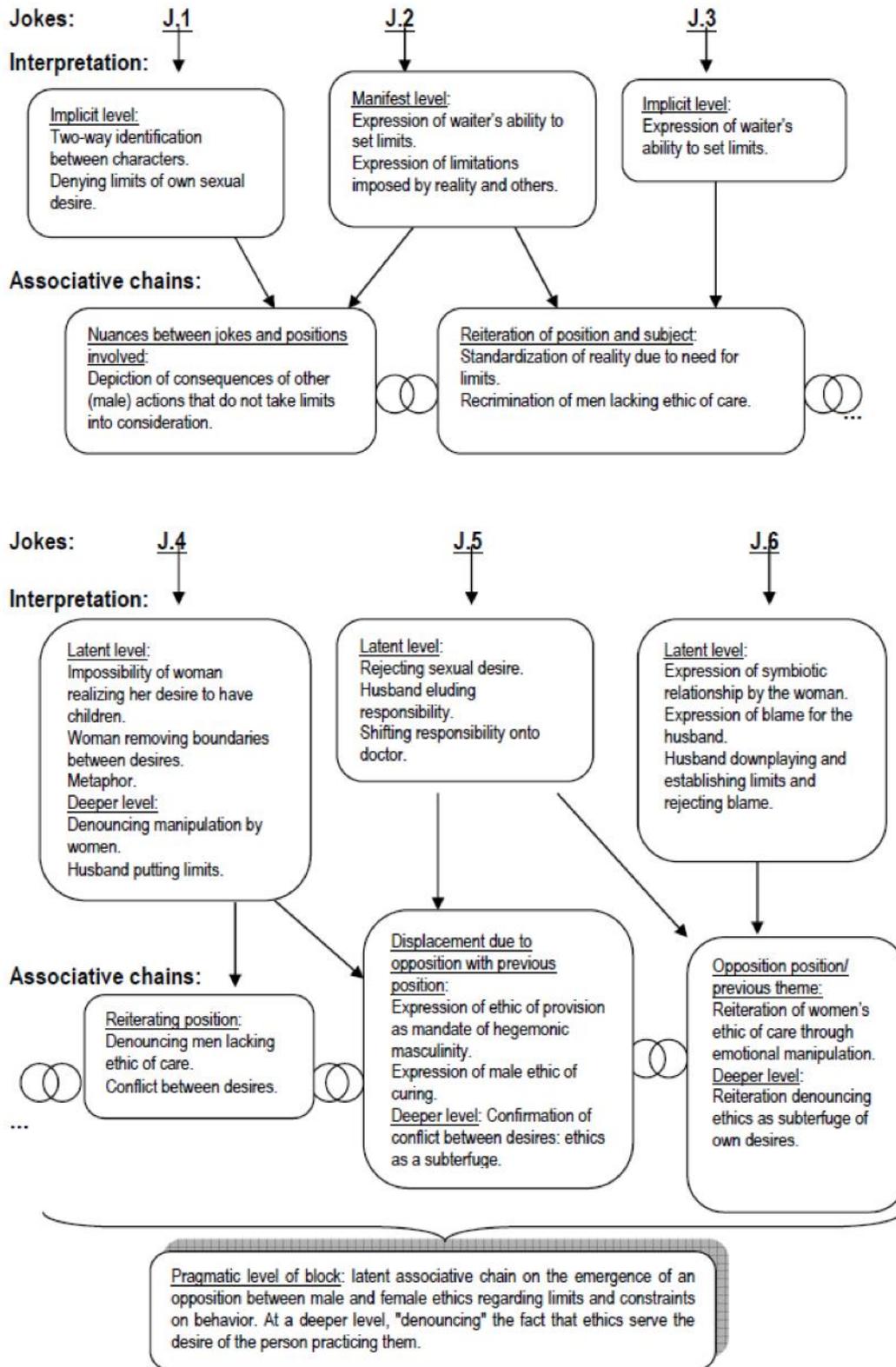


Figure 1. First link in the associative chain

With the seventh joke we move on to the second block, which revolves around sexuality. With their jokes, the women in the group tended to desexualise reality, on the one hand, and express sexuality indirectly through dissimulation or concealment, on the other. When the Mother

Superior in joke seven expresses her solidarity with the other nuns accepting being raped, perhaps it is because for generational reasons she does not know how to discriminate between rape and sexuality, as the others do. It is undeniable, however, that she has a sexual desire that opens up a dialectical reading, according to which her act of solidarity also has selfish ends, serving the sexual desires of someone like a Mother Superior, who cannot express them openly. The logic of dissimulation is continued with the figure of a nun in joke eight. Jaimito knows that the only way to get a nun “to give him a handjob” is by hiding, so he buries himself thinking about what the other wants to take advantage of that. And the nun acts similarly, showing interest more in an object-thing that works—a “*tail that spouts out milk and everything when you touch it!*”—than for Jaimito as a subject. With the objectivisation and instrumentalisation of the other, she can realise her sexual goals without them appearing as such. Joke nine, on the other hand, reveals how this contrasts with men’s open and direct expression of sexuality. Thus, faced with the seller’s censoring of sex talk in public, the condom buyer assumes the role of subject of sexual desire. Here we would be witnessing the contrast between male and female sexuality.

What do these distinctions in attitudes toward sexuality reveal? We may suppose with these jokes and the subsequent ones that when women openly accept their sexual desires, they open themselves to conflictive situations. With the subsequent joke we observe an evolution in the latent meaning with respect to the above, where Narrator 1 expresses by way of summary the need for women to stop concealing their sexual desires. While the American tourist suffers from the “culture of concealment” in her search for sex using the metaphor of ludo, the man in the store, by contrast, does not hesitate to literally and directly exhibit his sexuality and sexual desires towards her. What actually happens when women do express their sexual desires and implement them, like the tourist here, is that they tend to resexualise those relationships that in principle should be prohibited (extramarital: lover, priest). In addition, it is men who become immersed in the logic of concealment and deceit, as seen with the priest, the guy with the moths and Jaimito.

According to these jokes, what women want is sex with someone other than their husband, but without him reacting. How else are we to understand the concealment of sexual practices with others in front of their husbands? One does not try to deceive anyone if one does not care what that person might do or think about one’s actions or desires. Therefore, the meaning revealed by these jokes is not that women do not accept their sexual desires, but that through deception and concealment they protect themselves from their consequences. And more so with women like the ones in the focus group, whose status distances them from any position of power or privilege. It is likely that these women do not desire their husbands, but if deception and concealment are employed as defensive strategies it must be because they depend on them given their unequal status with men. Some studies point to disparate attitudes and behaviours of men and women towards infidelity, where the latter seem to be subject to greater constraints than men. It has been suggested that, particularly in low socio-economic contexts such as those of the women in this focus group, the social inequality of women acts as an inhibitory factor for the practice of extramarital relationships (Hardy & Jiménez 2001). With the subsequent joke, Narrator 2 seems to divert attention from the strategy of concealment, stressing that actions do indeed have consequences, as happens with the gypsy<sup>13</sup> who does not get paid. With the final joke, however, Narrator 1 emphasises the need for women to protect themselves. With this joke one would say that men have to hide to find out what women say about them; apparently what really counts are not boyfriends as subjects, but what they have, “cocks”. We note, however, that the time factor is important in how men are valued, since, as Izquierdo (2007: 10) stated, “men increase in value with age while women decrease”.

7. *“Dice que entra un violador a un convento de monjas y dice vengo a violarlas a todas y bueno y salen las monjas y empiezan todas: no, pero a la madre superiora no por favor. Bueno, el tío se va pasando una por una por la piedra y todas empiezan: no, la madre superiora no, y claro, la madre superiora estaba al deso... y dice: ¿que pasa? Dice, hay madre superiora lo que pasa es que queremos defenderla del violador... ¡ha dicho a todas, eh a todas!”* (Narrator 3)

[“Says that a rapist enters a nunnery and he says I come to rape you all and well, and nuns run out and all of them start: no, but the abbess not please. Well, the guy passes one by one by the stone and they all start: no, not the abbess, and of course, the abbess was ... and she says, what happens? They say, abbess what happens is that we want to defend you from the rapist ... He has said all, here, to everybody!” (Narrator 3)]

8. *“Como Jaimito estaba con otro y dice oye que te apuestas que la monja me la menea a mí hoy, dice que dices, que sí hombre que sí, cogió el tío se enterró se puso el rabo pa arriba viene una monja y dice ¡uy! mira que rabo más tiernecito dice al tocarlo echa leche y todo.”* (Narrator 1)

[“As Jaimito was with another guy and he says listen to me, what do you bet that the nun shakes my dick today. He says: what are you saying? Yes man yes. The guy goes and buries himself, putting the tail up. A nun comes and says uy! Look at that tail so tender, says, when you touch it throws milk and all.” (Narrator 1)]

9. *“Pues hay una persona que se mete en la farmacia pa comprarse los condones, entonces dice oiga oiga me da un condón dice le hizo así como hay que tener vergüenza dice no no, no pa mis ojos pa mí...”* (Narrator 2)

[“For there is a person who gets into the pharmacy to buy condoms, then he says hear, hear will you give me a condom, says, he shows that it must ashaming [pointing at his eye], says no, no, not to my eyes, for me.” (Narrator 2)]

10. *“Una americana cuando vino a España y estaban jugando al parchís y todo el mundo aquí jugando al parchís y dice la tía bueno y este juego como se llama dice parchís, y va la tía va a la tienda quiero un parchichi, y le sacaban y no sabían na, que no, quiero un parchichi, coño el tío se cabrea se bajó los pantalones lo puso encima del mostrador y dice eso no es parchichi eso es par chocho.”* (Narrator 1)

[“An American woman, when she came to Spain and they were playing “parchís” [typical Spanish table game] and everyone here playing ”parchís” and the chippy says and this game how is it called, says “parchís”, and the chippy goes to the store, I want a parchichi [chichi is similar as pussy in Spanish slang], and they take out and the didn’t know nothing, no, I want a parchichi. Fuck! The guy got stick of, he dropped his pants, puts it on the counter and says that is not parchichi that is for the pussy.” (Narrator 1)]

11. *“Era un cura que tenía los chavales enseñándoles la religión y de uno de los alumnos su madre era muy guapa ¿no?, y siempre le decía al chaval que tú qué ni estudias ni tu madre ni folla tampoco, entonces salta el niño y se va a casa y dice mamá, mamá el cura me dice esa palabra dice sí pues dile que tu madre te ha dicho que venga a casa para rollo, entonces va el cura y al poco rato viene el marido, ostia, la mujer lo esconde detrás, ¿no?, de un bidón, le mete la cabeza dentro y el culo al aire, coge una vela y la hincan en el culo. Entra el marido y ve la vela ahí puesta y al poco rato escucha al cura diciendo ¡ay ay! dice que hay aquí se va y*

*encuentra al cura con la vela ahí dentro del culo, pues ya está. Se le ha quemao el culo.*” (Narrator 2)

[“It was a priest who had the kids teaching them religion and one of the pupils her mother was very pretty, right?, and always told the kid that you don’t study neither your mother fucks, then the child pops out and goes home and says mom, the priest tells me that word, says yes, then tell him that your mother told you to come home for a deal [sexual relationship in Spanish slang], then the priest goes and soon comes the husband, oh my god!, the woman hides him behind a drum, no? He sticks his head inside and his ass is in the air, he takes a candle and nails it into the ass. The husband comes and sees the candle put there and soon he hears the priest saying ay, ay! He says what there is here he goes and finds the priest with the candle there in the ass, since it is that’s all. He has burned his ass.” (Narrator 2)]

12. *“Aquella mujer que engañaba al marido, se va de trabajar el hombre y viene el querido. Esto que viene el marido de vuelta se había dejao el bocadillo en casa, ¡leche! que viene ahora mi marido, se coge el tío empieza ahí a palos, dice usted que hace aquí dice vengo a matar las polillas, dice desnudo, y dice ya se han comío la ropa.”* (Narrator 1)

[“The woman who betrays the husband, he goes to work and the lover comes. The husband comes back, he had forgotten the sandwich at home, oh! my husband is coming now, he takes the guy he catches hw starts thrashing him, what are you doing here? He says. He says I come to kill moths, he says naked, and says, they already have eaten clothes.” (Narrator 1)]

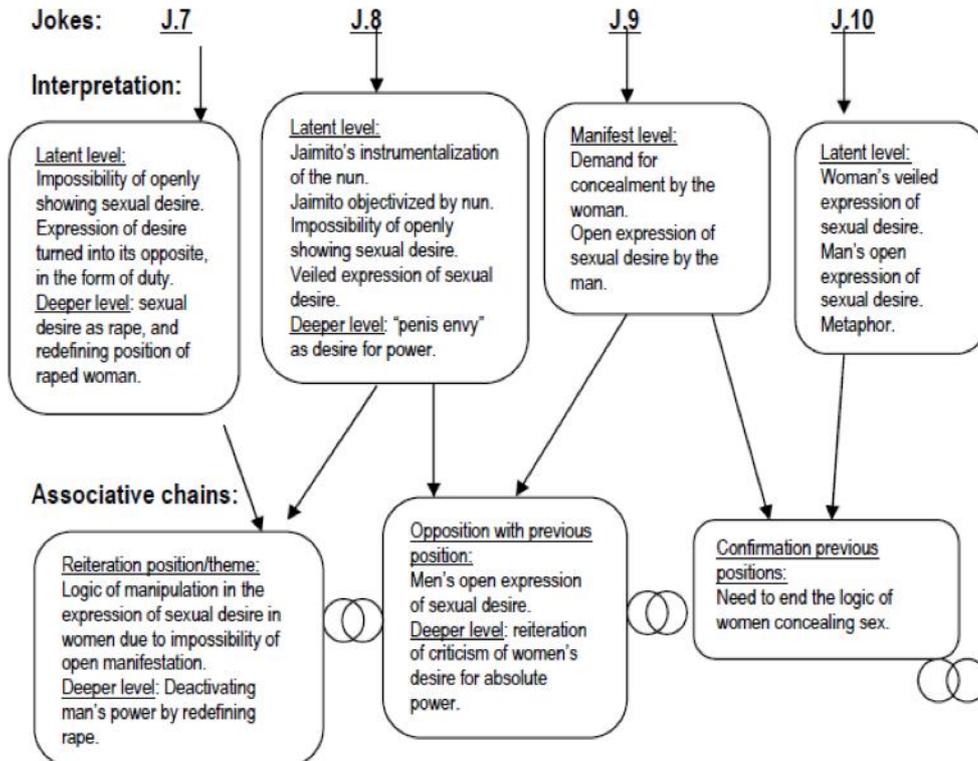
13. *“Era un gitano que se buscaba el trabajo paseándose por las obras, entonces pues preguntando por ahí no, al encargao y dijo vale tienes que venir mañana a trabajar. El gitano empezó a trabajar pues su trabajo era de pintor, entonces cogía la brocha y empezó a decir, pinto que no pinto, pinto que no pinto. Al día siguiente el mismo rollo, pinto que no pinto, al verlo el encargao pues dice va este como trabaja ya veremos el fin de la semana a ver. Pues a la semana llega el encargao para pagar entonces ha pagao a todos los trabajadores menos él, cuando llegó a su lado dijo: pago que no pago, pago que no pago...”* (Narrator 2).

[“There was a gypsy who looked for a job pacing the buildings under construction, then asking around, to the boss and he said ok you have to come to work tomorrow. The gypsy began working as his work was painting, then he picked up the brush and began to say, I paint I don’t paint, I paint I don’t paint. The next day the same this, I paint I don’t paint, seeing it the boss says this is how he works we’ll see the weekend. Next week the boss comes to pay then he has paid all the workers except for him, when he reached him he said: that I pay I don’t pay, I pay I don’t pay...” (Narrator 2)]

14. *“Esto es uno de Jaimito que estaban las novias de todos reunidas, estaban hablando dice mi novio tiene una polla que vale tres pesetas, Jaimito estaba escondido debajo de la cama, dice el otro pues la del mío vale seis pesetas, y la otra dice pues la de fulano vale nueve pesetas, en fin, pues así hasta que llegan a diecisiete pesetas y sale el tío riendo ¡ja ja ja ja! dice de que te ríes Jaimito desde cuando estás ahí, dice, desde que valían las pollas a tres pesetas.”* (Narrator 1)

[“This is one about Jaimito who the brides of all were gathered, they were talking, my boyfriend says has a cock that is worth three pesetas [Spanish currency before the euro], Jaimito was hiding under the bed, says the other, mine is worth six

pesetas, and the other says so-and-so cock is worth nine pesetas, until they reach seventeen pesetas and the guy comes out laughing ha, ha, ha, ha! What are you laughing at Jaimito, how long have you been hiding there Jaimito, and he says since cocks were worth three pesetas.” (Narrator 1)]



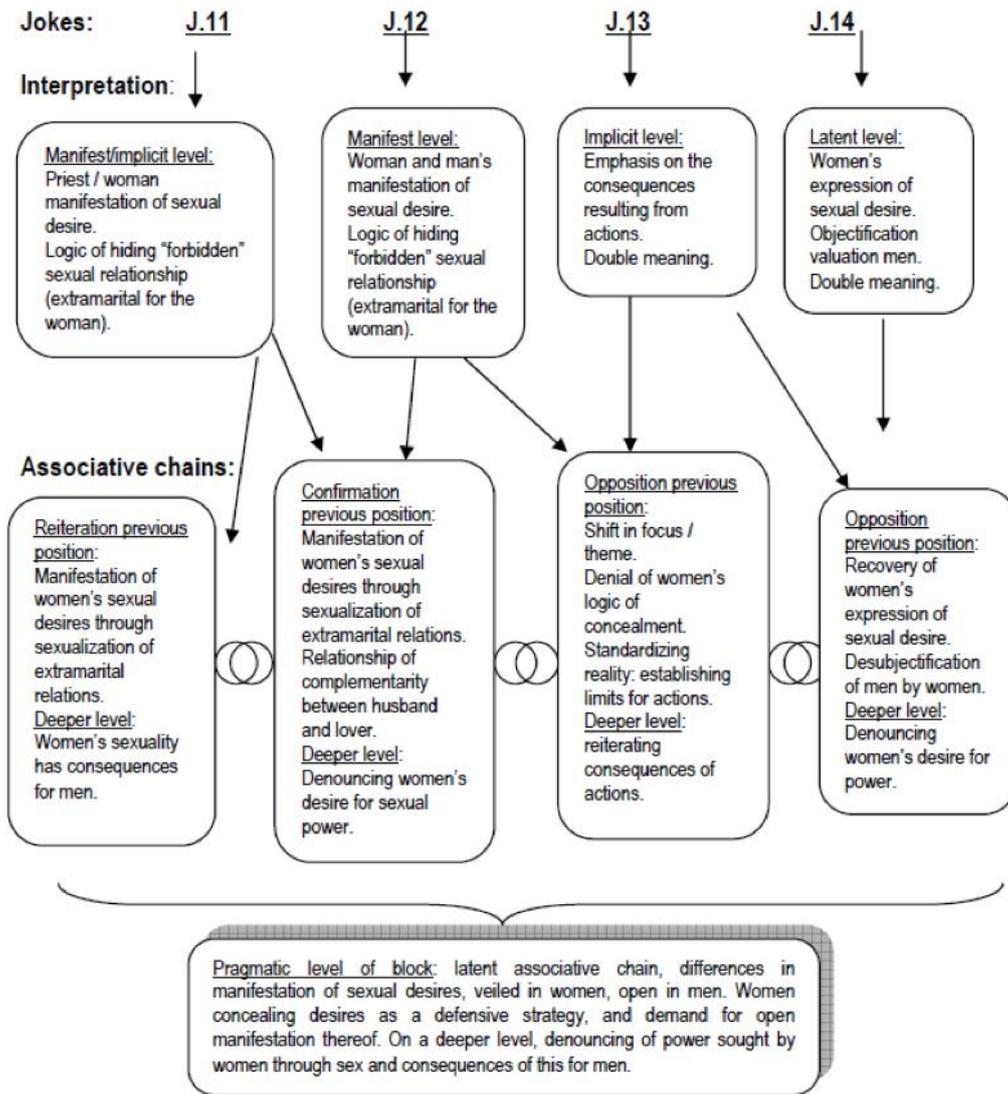


Figure 2. Second link in the associative chain

## 6. The “latent narrative” in jokes: subjective elaboration of the group

Our analysis allowed us to observe how bonding processes developed between the participants of the different groups. We noted, however, that on several occasions the bonds manifested themselves dialectically, clarifying or transforming initial positions through a “dialogue”. The specific tendency of the group was to produce a “latent narrative” developed through the chain of jokes. Insofar as the unmanifest may be understood as that which causes conflicts with oneself and/or others (and with culture), by way of summary we have reconstructed these “other” narratives (Fedida 1974), which collectively bound the group participants together.

The “dialogue” held by this FG composed of men and women of medium-low socio-economic status was marked by sex/gender relations. The basis for forming bonds between participants in the first block of jokes was the contrast in ethical commitments. In fact, we could talk here of a “gender war”, in that conflictive situations were expressed resulting from the influence gender exerts on women and men. The first jokes (by Narrator 1) denounced the ignorance of limits sometimes displayed in the actions of men—N2 even acknowledged this—and highlighted the need for such limits. They also highlighted men not practicing or

experiencing an ethic of care, and reproached their disregard for others, even for themselves. However, the men (via Narrator 4) responded with the ethics of provision, typical of hegemonic forms of masculinity. In this case, the response that constitutes a bond would be their considering solutions to problems on the basis of a male ethic of curing, which, unlike that of care, focuses on problem-solving rather than caring for the person. One might say that men give care by providing. This subjective position denounced by the women in the group is at the same time a motive for identification between the men. According to our analysis, closure is reached in this conflict by taking the ethic of care to its ultimate consequences, whereby women use emotional manipulation to combat unease. The latent narrative suggests that some women, especially in the social context of these participants, are in reality caring about themselves when they express concern about their husbands, and disregarding the aspirations of the latter. Hence, the strategy employed by women is to create guilt in those husbands who are not willing to be manipulated by them.

In the second block of jokes, the gender conflict remains, though now broached via sexuality. At first, the women in the group tend to express sexuality indirectly and desexualise reality, hiding or concealing sexual desire. Men, on the other hand, express their sexuality openly. We therefore ask ourselves what the motives for these distinctions are. According to our analysis of the last jokes, the established hypothesis refers to a defensive position adopted and implemented by women in the face of conflicts that may arise from the free expression of their sexual desires; these desires are not always aimed at their husbands or partners, whom, however, they do not want to lose. In situations of social inequality, like those likely to arise in this focus group, women's open expression of sexuality may be a source of marital conflict and result in the worsening of their socio-economic situation due to a possible divorce for infidelity.

## **7. Final considerations**

As a final conclusion, we can confirm that jokes have been shown to be a phenomenon of outstanding sociological importance. Through their analysis, we have been able to observe the correlation between the participants' objective status and their subjective position. We find what we might call a dual "group effect" on them: one related to the group dynamic itself, and one related to their objective social status. The subjective forming of the group bond manifested itself in intersubjective recognition, "in you I see myself", and identities finding common ground when there are discrepancies. This paper has also presented the methodological basis for carrying out an interpretive analysis of meaningful bonds via the associative chains in a series of jokes. Our choice of method has sought to avoid confusing different levels, favouring the analytical separation of themes addressed by jokes and the motives of the group members during the bonding process. Thus, we have seen that the forming of bonds in a focus group by means of jokes is not universal, as the substance used by each group is different, and is related to the objective and subjective social contexts of its participants.

## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Considering that this paper is focused on the sense of jokes—manifest as well as latent—the authors understand that it is very difficult to translate them to English since it is very improbable to find a loyal correspondence between Spanish or Catalan expressions and the English ones, particularly when emotional states associated to contents are the main focus of our work. Therefore the jokes are transcribed in the language in which were told, and an English translation has been added for readability. For the translation of the text we have received partial funding from the University of Girona.

<sup>2</sup> We believe that the bond, which is formed via the process of recognition, should not be confused with a bond based on narcissism, as the latter would not be considered an actual bond, where the other must be taken as an extension of oneself. Recognition requires a previous act of knowledge and is opposed to narcissism, because it involves one's own qualities not being unique but rather shared by others.

<sup>3</sup> Characteristics that tend to be present in "normal" type bonds, which differ from the "pathological" type. This distinction is beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>4</sup> What we here conceptualise as a bond must not be confused with its social dimension, as then we would be speaking of the "social bond". See Maturana (1988).

<sup>5</sup> By contrast with Freud (2003 [1905]), Fine (1983) define two people as the minimum for the joke process.

<sup>6</sup> Although Freud (2003 [1905]) did not do this, we can understand the classification he proposed as ideal types for characterising the attested variety of jokes and their different levels of interpretation.

<sup>7</sup> For a reading of humor from a masochistic perspective, see Deleuze (2001 [1967]), and for a phenomenological and general approach see Berger (2014 [1997]), McGheen and Goldstein (1983), and Davies (2011, 1998). For a recent theoretical and empirical contribution see Dynel (2011).

<sup>8</sup> This study forms part of a broader research project, for which 24 focus groups were conducted. For reasons of space and the strategy of focusing on the details of the associations between jokes, only one of the groups is presented here. For other analyses, see Izquierdo & Barbata (2013).

<sup>9</sup> Clearly, in this study we were not able to control the more or less conscious resistances of participants in their spontaneous joke telling. However, the joke, by nature, lends itself to spontaneity. In any case, the motive for the narrator is to have their audience connect with the joke, making it excellent material for detecting the bond.

<sup>10</sup> The summary tables indicate the level of interpretation of each joke that favours understanding the level from which associations are derived. However, the levels, manifest, latent, deep, do not only refer to the analysis, to whether one element or another is located at one level or another in the view of the researcher, but also refers to the levels of consciousness the narrator puts into the joke. As for the chains, we generally find ourselves at a latent level in both of the senses mentioned here.

<sup>11</sup> As gender positions are referred to, we followed Izquierdo (1998) and Freud (2004 [1914]; 1963 [1933]). On the ethical commitments marked by gender, see Izquierdo (2003, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> If we award the concern that the woman expresses regarding the drunkenness of her husband through her own death the status of "supposed", it is because what really concerns her is her husband neglecting her demands, and the significant beginning of the joke itself: "*aquella señora que estaba durmiendo...*". We question whether a woman worried about her husband getting drunk at night is the same woman who manages to sleep with no apparent problem.

<sup>13</sup> As well as using the politically incorrect term "gypsy" (*gitano*), the joke is based on the associated stereotype of laziness and dishonesty.

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