

FROM THE EDITORIAL BOARD

WHERE THE STRUCTURAL MEETS THE PERSONAL: MOTHER-IN-LAW HUMOR BETWEEN A JOKE CYCLE AND JOKING RELATIONSHIPS IN BELARUS

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Abstract: The paper discusses the status of mother-in-law humor in the context of humorous family communication in contemporary Belarusian families. The humorous communication is represented by widespread canned jokes that portray the wife's mother as an ill-natured and imperious character, and by personal humorous stories and other personal forms of humorous communication.

Canned joke texts reflect structural issues and are impersonal, but the practice of joke-telling is not. During my fieldwork among Belarusian couples, mother-in-law jokes were often contextualized in the tellers' own family relationships. Thus, no clear-cut distinction was made between canned jokes, teasing, and other forms of family humor. The examples of mother-in-law jokes and other forms of mother-in-law humor, as well as the practices and reflections connected to them, open up the floor for discussing the interconnections between the cultural codes that lie at the basis of the jokes and the emic practices of joke-telling. The paper also explores the ways in which mother-in-law humor adds a new dimension to the anthropological concept of joking relationships.

Keywords: family folklore, family relations, humor, joking relationships, mother-in-law jokes

INTRODUCTION

It is hard to find a family member who has enjoyed as much attention in humorous folklore as the mother-in-law. In contrast to the relatively limited representation of the mother-in-law in other folklore genres such as proverbs, songs, and tales, jokes about her are popular across different cultures. The

precursors of contemporary mother-in-law jokes can be traced back to ancient Rome (Watson & Watson 2014: 145), but their heyday came with the spread of the short punch-lined joke format in the twentieth century. The popularity of these jokes did not escape scholars' attention. As in many other cases of joke studies (see, for example, Davies 1998, 2011; Oring 1992, 2003, 2016), the cornerstone of such research was the link between joke targets and texts on the one hand, and the social circumstances in which the jokes flourish on the other. One of the first scholars to link mother-in-law humor and the peculiar nature of mother-in-law relationships was Sigmund Freud. In his seminal study *Totem and Taboo*, he described avoidance relationships that exist between mothers-in-law and their sons-in-law in many cultures, arguing that although avoidance is not practiced in Western countries, “[t]he fact that the witticisms of civilized races show such a preference for this very mother-in-law theme ... point[s] to the fact that the emotional relations between mother-in-law and son-in-law are controlled by components which stand in sharp contrast to each other” (2009 [1913]: 21). Freud explained these avoidance practices and jokes (as he did not draw a clear boundary between the two) with hidden incestuous inclinations, which both parties seek to suppress.

Emil Draitser (1999) followed Freud's ideas by looking at Russian mother-in-law jokes at the turn of the century. He used psychoanalytic theory to interpret the general phenomenon of mother-in-law jokes, but he also compared Russian and American mother-in-law jokes, arguing that Russian jokes were more malevolent as Russian women had to depend on their mothers extensively (especially on their help with childcare), and young families in the USSR often had to share apartments with their parents-in-law. He also compared Russian canned jokes (that largely originate from urban areas) to the tradition of short humorous rhymed songs, *chastushkas*¹, which were more popular in rural areas, and concluded that the latter did not demonstrate such a negative attitude towards mothers-in-law.

While relief theory of humor² holds a dominant position in mother-in-law jokes research³, other perspectives exist as well. Cotterill (1994, 1996) explores mother-in-law jokes in the family context. She discusses the gender aspect of joking and demonstrates how mother-in-law jokes help to maintain male dominance in the family. A problematic aspect of her work is that she does not make any notable distinctions between different genres of humorous folklore and different ways these genres function in everyday communication. While relying mostly on interview accounts, Cotterill deals primarily with conversational jokes, banter, and joking relationships⁴, but she also makes a reference to comedians' humor and “standardized jokes” (1996: 211) to make her case. Ruth Shade adopts a similar approach, arguing that “jokes are used to reinforce

negative imagery of older women and to negate them, as a punishment for their non-conformance with a sociocultural archive of rules that disenfranchises women who are perceived to have lost their looks and their sexual allure” (2010: 73). She focuses more on the gender aspect of mother-in-law jokes rather than mother-in-law’s specific status within a family.

Christie Davies (2012) provides a detailed analysis of mother-in-law jokes. By comparing English mother-in-law jokes to serious complaints about the husband’s mother in English-speaking cultures and non-humorous mother-in-law folklore in India, he shows that it is mostly men who invent and tell mother-in-law jokes, since they regard tensions with mothers-in-law as a structural problem (in contrast to women, whose complaints and humor about their mothers-in-law are personal). Davies concludes that the jokes stem from the ambivalent status of the mother-in-law in the English family. On the one hand, she is treated as an outsider because the nuclear family is perceived to be an ideal; on the other hand, many young families have relied on the wife’s mother or shared the household with her, especially after World War II (*ibid.*: 16). As there were numerous cases of matrilocality in post-war England, husbands understood the structural nature of this problem and created jokes as a reaction to it (*ibid.*: 17). Jokes were thus created to deal with the broader social issue (Lockyer & Savigny 2019) and, consequently, were based on generic scripts rather than men’s personal experiences.

This distinction between jokes and personal stories, however, is much less clear-cut when the performance and reception of jokes are examined in the context of actual family interactions, where personal feelings and relationships often intermingle with broader structural tensions. While previous studies of mother-in-law jokes focused mostly on their texts, largely ignoring the practices of joke-telling,⁵ more personal genres of humor (e.g., humorous stories) and the emic interpretations of this humor, this paper aims to fill this gap and show how mother-in-law jokes and other forms of mother-in-law humor are approached in families. The emic approach of this study involves taking into consideration the immediate context in which folklore exists, the opinions and perceptions of folklore bearers, and “is conceptualized as a ‘native’ category” (Bronner 2017 [2016]: 50).

The paper outlines the basic features of the mother-in-law archetype targeted in jokes, and shows why jocular representations of mothers-in-law may provoke strong feelings in joke-tellers and their audiences. While acknowledging the link between mother-in-law jokes and the social and gender structure of Belarusian families, I aim to demonstrate how the ideas and topics reflected in jokes are renegotiated on a vernacular level in the context of individual families.

This evokes an opposition – but also continuity – between the structural (cf. Davies 2012) and the personal levels of mother-in-law jokes. Researching jokes on the structural level implies looking at their texts and the broader social context in which they exist (for examples of such studies in different cultural contexts, see Davies 1990, 2011), while the personal level pertains to the immediate context of interpersonal communication surrounding such humor (such an approach was adopted in Norrick 1993; Norrick & Chiaro 2009).

By exploring the applicability of concepts of *joke cycles* as “set[s] of jokes that are related” (Attardo 2001: 69) and *joking relationships* as a way to maintain the balance between certain kinship groups, including in-laws (Radcliffe-Brown 1940), to mother-in-law jokes, I analyze the various ways in which jokes can both condition views on family relations and be conditioned by them. I also discuss the broader social circumstances and gender aspects of Belarusian society in which the jokes came into existence. By comparing the practices of joke-telling to joking relationships, I show that the dichotomy “laughing *at* – laughing *with*” is not always straightforward and has numerous gray zones. As the generic mother-in-law is recognized as a stereotypical joke target, joking with the mother-in-law (or at one’s mother-in-law) often occurs through the prism of this stereotype.

METHODS AND DATA

The data for this study comes from my interviews with 60 Belarusian couples aged 24 to 66, conducted in 2016–2017. Participation in the interviews was voluntary and the participants were recruited via snowball sampling. This resulted in having a participant pool of mostly middle-class urban dwellers. The interviews were conducted by me in either Russian or Belarusian (depending on the language my interviewees preferred). They were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed. I have translated excerpts of the interviews into English for citation in this article. Each interview lasted for approximately 40–60 minutes, and the majority of the interview questions revolved around idiosyncratic humorous folklore shared within the family, including personal humorous narratives, teasing between family members, humorous dyadic traditions (Oring 1984), etc. Some of the respondents shared conversational jokes and humorous stories about mothers-in-law in this context without any additional suggestions on my part. At the end of each interview, I asked participants whether they knew any canned jokes about family relationships. While I explicitly stated that this question did not concern their particular family,

a number of my interviewees accompanied the jokes with comments on their family relations.

Among the canned jokes shared by my respondents, mother-in-law jokes were the most common. Some of my interviewees (especially those in their twenties and thirties) could not recall any specific jokes during the interview, but still recognized that many such jokes exist.

While most of the data discussed in this paper comes from the interviews, I have also collected 83 jokes from popular Belarusian joke websites, internet forums, and joke books. These jokes lack a personal dimension as the immediate context of their performance cannot be reconstructed, but they contribute to the understanding of thematic variety of mother-in-law jokelore in Belarus.

This paper offers a qualitative analysis of the canned jokes and instances of conversational humor⁶ collected during the interviews, as well as additional canned jokes from published and online joke collections, additionally integrating comments and discussions surrounding these jokes. Many of my methodological tools, such as genre analysis and the comparison of emic and analytic interpretations, derive from folklore studies, but I also rely on some methods employed by neighboring disciplines, such as sociology and anthropology. Namely, I employ a sociological approach to canned jokes, as outlined by Christie Davies (1990, 2011), which involves making sense of the jokes based on a wider social context of their use.

MOTHER-IN-LAW JOKES IN THE BELARUSIAN SOCIAL CONTEXT

Prior to the October Revolution of 1917, Belarus was a part of the Russian Empire, and most of its population worked in agriculture. It was common for several generations to live under one roof, sharing the house with members of the extended family. As in many other patriarchal societies, after getting married the wife would usually join her husband's family and live together with her in-laws. In rare cases, the husband would instead move into his wife's family; however, such husbands (called *prymaki*) did not have an equal standing in the family, unless the master of the house had no male heirs (Rakava 2009: 80).

The shift towards the nuclear family started in the nineteenth and continued into the twentieth century, being especially prominent after the October Revolution when Belarus became a constituent republic of the USSR. Soviet authorities abolished private land ownership, mandating that land be distributed per person rather than per family. Ethnographer Rakava argued that

“[t]his allowed every young family to fulfil their dream to become economically independent from their parents” (2009: 192).

However, for many couples this dream never came true. Housing was a pressing issue in the USSR (including Belarus) throughout much of its history (Zinchenko 2010). While Soviet scholars studying family life developed theoretical models according to which young families would separate from their parents and live on their own (Bandarchik 1976: 15), the reality was often different. Even if a young family lived separately, they often relied on their parents’ financial support and especially on their mothers’ help with childcare (Dulov 2004: 177), as women had to work equally with men.

Nuclear families consisting of two generations are prevalent in today’s post-independence Belarus (Andreykovets 2014; Lin 2014), but many young families continue to live with their parents after marriage. The most likely reason for this is the still existent housing issue (Burova 2015: 7). Many young and older families receive various kinds of help from their parents (Kalachova 2009: 52), including financial support for families where both partners work (Burova 2010: 92). As women tend to rely on their parents’ support more than men do (*ibid.*: 91), it is the wife’s parents who play the bigger role in Belarusians’ families, especially her mother, who helps with child-raising. However, grandparents’ role in their grandchildren’s upbringing has been somewhat decreasing recently (Lin 2014: 46; Zlotnikov & Zlotnikov 2017: 325). Combined with the increasing marriage age (Andreykovets 2015: 22) and the high divorce rate, this may mean that communication with mothers-in-law is becoming less of a systemic issue. Still, the structural tension that gave birth to the numerous mother-in-law jokes to some extent continues to exist in Belarusian families.

Similar to Britain, the USA, and a number of other countries (e.g. Estonia, see Davies 2012: 30–32), mother-in-law jokes in Belarus and other Russian-speaking countries feature predominantly the wife’s mother (Druzhinin 2006: 125). Jokes about the husband’s mother exist but are much less common (Zheleznova 2015: 123). This is easy to verify, as, unlike English, both Belarusian and Russian (the two official languages of Belarus) distinguish between the wife’s mother (*cioshcha / teshcha*) and the husband’s mother (*svyakrou / svekrou*). According to Watkins (1978) and Davies (2012), the prevalence of jokes about the wife’s mother is in part due to the fact that mother-in-law jokes are mostly performed by men. This is in line with the idea that men generally tend to tell more canned jokes than women, who prefer other, less competitive kinds of humor (Kuipers 2006: 55). Like English-speaking daughters-in-law (Merrill 2007), Belarusian daughters-in-law use websites and forum threads to complain about their mother-in-law’s intrusiveness in their nuclear family, but humor is rarely involved and there are few canned jokes comparable to mother-in-law versus son-in-law jokes.⁷

TYPICAL CANNED JOKES ABOUT MOTHERS-IN-LAW IN BELARUSIAN FOLKLORE

Mother-in-law versus son-in-law canned jokes must be fairly new to Belarusian joke folklore; these targets did not feature in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century folklore collections. Instead, there was a handful of jokes describing confrontations between a daughter-in-law and her parents-in-law:

A mother-in-law was constantly asking God for death, so a man brought her an owl perched on a pole. The woman asked him: "What is it?" He replied: "Well, you constantly talk of death, so here it came!" She turned to the owl and started whispering: "Shoo! Go to the daughter-in-law! Shoo! Go to the daughter-in-law!" (Federowski 1903: 82)

Another joke in the same collection features two daughters-in-law plotting the murder of their fathers-in-law; the joke consists of each daughter-in-law suggesting her own way to kill the father-in-law by performing different manipulations on bread (Federowski 1903: 83). Patrilocal families created a suitable environment for such a structural conflict that could provoke women to tell these jokes (both of the above jokes were recorded from women), but the fact that women in general tell fewer jokes than men resulted in a small proportion of such jokes in the collections. The examples above also have some features of personal stories: for example, the joke about plotting a murder ends with a bottom line rather than a punchline. These examples of folk humor belong to the older genre of the humorous tale. This genre was more prevalent in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century joke collections than short jokes with a punchline and jokes with hidden narrative functions. (For a discussion on jokes and tales, see Oring 1992: 81–82; for a discussion on narrative jokes, see Oring 2016: 147–164.)

As it was mostly the wife who had to communicate with her in-laws on a daily basis, the earliest jokes feature the daughter-in-law and her husband's relatives. As the daughter-in-law came to live in her husband's family, she had to adapt to life in a new household and often felt the burden of expectations she had to live up to. She had to work hard and be a good mother, wife, and daughter-in-law, while at the same time being subjected to her parents-in-law's power. Such a situation inevitably provoked tensions, which could create a fruitful ground for humor. The husband's contacts with his wife's parents were, on the other hand, infrequent. The husband's in-laws make their first appearance in Evdokim Romanov's 1912 ethnographic study and, curiously, it was the father-in-law rather than the mother-in-law:

When I got married, my father-in-law, as a dowry, gave me a bag with seven partitions: for bread and such⁸, for millet and such, for salt and such... And he also gave me a mare that, if you put seven empty sacks on a cart, can even pull it downhill! (Romanov 1912: 381)

Typical mother-in-law jokes became prominent in the second half of the twentieth century. Some of them, especially the earlier ones, revolved around the economic dimension of family life, demonstrating the incongruity between the support the mother-in-law had to provide for her daughter's family (including the son-in-law) and the son-in-law's outsider status in his wife's family:

A man's mother-in-law died. He went to her burial with his wife. The wife was crying for her mother and the husband was standing quietly by her side. Then the wife said to him: "You could also cry and mourn my mother. Don't you feel sad?"

The man came closer to the deceased and started lamenting: "Oh, mother, my mother! I used to come to your place with my Malanka [wife's name], and you would give Malanka cheese and sour cream, and I would only get the whe-e-ey..."

"Enough! Why are you crying so loud?"

(Fiadosik 2005: 165, initially recorded in 1971)

One of the jokes told to me during an interview revolves around a similar theme:

A mother-in-law and a son-in-law are having breakfast. The son-in-law is making himself a toast by spreading butter over a piece of bread. The mother-in-law says:

"My dear son-in-law, do spread the butter, spread it..."

He says: "But I'm already spreading it".

"No, dear, you are not spreading, you are piling it. Do spread it, spread it..."

(female, 40 years old)

Frequent interference of a mother-in-law in her daughter's family affairs is often portrayed as challenging the power relations in the family and the masculinity of her son-in-law:

A son-in-law comes home. He says that the mother-in-law does not value him. "So you come, hit the table with your fist: 'Who is the master in this house?'"

He decides to try it. He comes [to her], hits the table with his fist: "Who is the master in this house?" And the mother-in-law is cooking borscht⁹, and she takes the ladle and hits the son-in-law on the forehead. He faints.

*At that moment a neighbor comes in, the door was left open. She says:
“Why is your son-in-law lying on the kitchen floor?”*

“I don’t know, he is the master, he lies where he wants.”

(male, 46 year old)

The mother-in-law can perform other nefarious deeds in canned jokes; she can be portrayed as stupid, ugly, or (in rare cases) engaging in sexual activities¹⁰ with her son-in-law. But most often jokes do not ridicule her for “any specific misdeeds” (Draitser 1999: 193); instead, she simply symbolizes wickedness. Such an emphasis on unspecified wickedness can be explained by the “otherness” of the mother-in-law in a nuclear family. Mother-in-law jokes treat her clearly as an outsider (Ponomareva 2015: 190) who is contrasted to the positive characters:

A toastmaster at the table: “And now let’s drink to good people!”

Then, turning to the mother-in-law: “And the next toast will be to you!”¹¹

Also, she is often compared to a snake (Morozova 2017: 126):

I took my mother-in-law to the serpentarium. She was watching the snakes with amusement, eating ice-cream, mumbling something – long story short, doing her best to pretend she didn’t understand what those creatures were hissing about.¹²

Given the wicked image of the mother-in-law, it is not surprising that many joke texts suggest that she has to be eliminated from the family: either temporarily (not let into the couple’s house) or, preferably, permanently. Thus the most popular motif is one of death and burial.

A boy asks his father: “Dad, dad, why is granny running around the garden so fast?”

The father replies, recharging his gun: “Someone’s granny is someone else’s mother-in-law.”

(female, 41 years old)¹³

The most often (five times) quoted joke from my interviews goes as follows:

A mother-in-law comes to her son-in-law and says:

“Do whatever you want, but I want to be buried in the Kremlin Wall.”¹⁴

The day after, the son-in-law comes [to her] and says:

“Do whatever you want, but the burial is tomorrow at noon.”¹⁵

The son-in-law’s glee at his mother-in-law’s funeral is another typical trope (Kosinets 2014: 116):

During the mother-in-law's funeral, we ripped apart two accordions [while playing and singing out of joy].

(female, 25 years old; variant by male, 55)

He felt like singing and dancing, but the coffin containing his mother-in-law's body pressed down on his shoulder, preventing him from doing so.¹⁶

The popularity of mother-in-law jokes also gives birth to meta-jokes:

"My mother-in-law is an exemplary mother-in-law!"

"How is that?"

"There is no mother-in-law joke that wouldn't fit her..."¹⁷

The examples above demonstrate that although these jokes can be labeled as mother-in-law jokes, the mother-in-law herself is not always an active protagonist in them. While in some of the jokes she is a target due to her perceived vices, in many other jokes she is not ridiculed and is rather a part of the joke's situation than the joke's target (for a discussion of a situation, target, and other joke knowledge resources, see Attardo & Raskin 1991). However, the jokes featuring mother-in-law have a recognizable set of topics and share a limited number of unfavorable representations of the mother-in-law. Therefore, they can be labeled as a joke cycle, although a more thematically and structurally heterogeneous one than other joke cycles (cf. with Dundes 1979).

Due to their aggressive implications, many mother-in-law jokes come close to gallows humor, which is defined as "making fun of death or life-threatening situations" (Attardo 2014: 255). People often express certain reservations in using this kind of humor: it is especially evident in a public context (Sullivan 2000), but even in a private setting of a family, perceptions related to telling these jokes might be ambiguous – as was reflected in my interviewees' responses.

CONNECTING MOTHER-IN-LAW JOKES AND JOKE-TELLING TO PERSONAL CIRCUMSTANCES

According to Davies's view of mother-in-law jokes as a reflection of a structural rather than personal issue, actual mothers-in-law are not supposed to get offended by these jokes because of the obviously grotesque nature of the jokes and their focus on an archetypal mother-in-law (2012: 17).

This notion holds true when jokes are viewed as a social phenomenon. However, when jokes are examined in light of the perspectives of actual people that share them, it becomes evident that the "generic" characters and tropes of the jokes form connections to the people's personal circumstances. This does not

necessarily mean that the joke-tellers directly project the jokes' plots or underlying messages onto their family relations, but certain links may be drawn between the jokes and the tellers' relationships with their mothers-in-law.

While such links can take many forms, they perhaps manifest themselves most notably in jokes that involve funerals. One of my interviewees (male, 61 years old) expressly mentioned that he used to tell the "Do whatever you want, the burial is tomorrow" joke only when his mother-in-law was still alive. Another reflection was offered by a male interviewee of 50 years, whose mother-in-law died at a young age:

[Jokes] about mother-in-law... I don't have a mother-in-law. Like in that joke...

A mother-in-law died. The guy [her son-in-law] was a decent fellow, he arranged the burial to lay her to rest, his colleagues came, and one guy looked at the deceased and asked:

"What did your mother-in-law die of?"

[The son-in-law] replied:

"She ate poisonous mushrooms."

"Poisonous mushrooms, how's that work? Doesn't the son-in-law have a hand in it? I can see a black eye under her makeup."

"Well, she didn't initially want to eat them."¹⁸

So it turns out that he basically made his mother-in-law [eat the mushrooms]. Well, the same happened to me, I got rid of my mother-in-law. Joking aside, let me tell you, at the age of 42, she was 42 [when she died]... It sucks [living] without a mother-in-law.

In the case above the joke-teller almost identifies himself with the joke's protagonist at the end of his performance. While such extreme cases of nearly direct projection of one's life story onto a joke setting are rare, many other interviewees were also guided by their personal circumstances in their joke-telling practices. A young couple (both aged 28) reported not telling mother-in-law jokes because the wife did not have a mother. The wife also added that this fact could be a reason for a conversational joke, whereby she would tease her husband that he is lucky because he does not have a mother-in-law. This is an interesting instance of family humor. In its base lies the recognition of the structural problem of husband versus mother-in-law relationships. However, this recognition does not result in telling canned jokes: the husband (who is otherwise more likely to tell such jokes) in this case sees them as inappropriate. The wife, on the other side, finds it possible to joke about it, but chooses a more personal genre of humor to frame this topic. This example shows that the images of real and stereotypical mothers-in-law are closely interconnected; a clash between them can also produce humor in forms other than canned jokes.

Several interviewees expressed very negative opinions about mother-in-law jokes in general. Interestingly, the labels they used to describe them often neglected the humorous aspect of jokes:

“I don’t like all those family jokes in general, all those horrible stories about the husband’s and wife’s mothers-in-law” (female, 34 years old) (emphasis mine)

“[My husband always says that his mother-in-law] does not at all deserve these ugly names that are created for the mother-in-law” (female, 54 years old) (emphasis mine)

Thus, from some respondents’ perspective, telling mother-in-law jokes amounts to expressing a negative attitude towards one’s own mother-in-law. The ideas about the connection between mother-in-law jokes and the hostility they express in real life (Baizerman & Ellison 1971: 167–168; Bloomfield 1980: 135–136) are clearly illustrated by the following example:

Me: *Do you know any mother-in-law jokes?*

Male, 47 years old: *I cannot say anything bad about the mother-in-law.*

As the example above suggests, some of my interviewees justify this aversion towards mother-in-law jokes by explaining that in their families the son-in-law has a good relationship with his mother-in-law. However, such a relationship is not regarded as the norm; couples that speak of harmony between the husband and the mother-in-law in their family often contrast it to other (supposedly numerous) cases where such a harmony is lacking. A good relationship with the mother-in-law is thus seen as incongruous, and the very idea of loving a mother-in-law can provoke humor:

I can generally joke with my mother-in-law: “Dear beloved mother-in-law, come here” (laughs). (male, 38 years old)

In the cases when families do not tell mother-in-law jokes, whether due to ethical considerations as discussed above or for some other reasons (for example, because they rarely tell jokes in general), they still recognize the existence of this subject matter in Belarusian jokelore. This was especially prominent in the interviews with the younger couples, many of whom could not remember any mother-in-law joke texts but still acknowledged that many of them exist.

While discussing mother-in-law jokes, most of my interviewees referred exclusively to mother-in-law versus son-in-law jokes and did not mention the husband’s mother at all. However, one of my male interviewees provided an interesting reflection on such an unequal distribution of humor:

It seems that most jokes are about a son-in-law and his mother-in-law. But in reality, my own experience shows that a wife's mother likes her son-in-law more than a husband's mother likes her daughter-in-law. The daughter-in-law faces more nitpicking, and everybody will honestly say that a daughter-in-law gets more stick. And even though we have excellent relationships, but if we take it, compare and weight on the scales, then my wife always gets more stick than I do. On this note, here is a joke about a daughter-in-law and a mother-in-law. About a daughter-in-law who is bad, and she is always bad, and she is guilty of everything. [Guilty] of the fact that the piglets are scrawny, the carrots have become wet, and so on and so forth. And so the mother-in-law is trashing the daughter-in-law once again, [saying] that she is guilty of something, and her husband who is sitting there says: "So why would you yell at the girl, she's not even around, she's away from home!" "How come she's away, her robe [svytka]¹⁹ is hanging here!" Such a lifelike joke, here is her jacket, that's why she is guilty – but she wasn't even around. (male, 36 years old)

This example is curious in several respects. The joke is obviously set in a rural area, and the reference to the robe indicates that it dates back to the times when a typical Belarusian family was large, patrilocal and worked in agriculture. However, the joke-teller uses it to illustrate current relations in both his own family and (presumably) other Belarusian families as well. Summing up the joke at the end, he substitutes a robe with a jacket to "update" the joke to the modern era. Moreover, he directly links the high proportion of jokes about a particular family relationship issue with the existence of this issue in real life, and then inverts this logic: if jokes indicate that a certain issue exists, then the existence of the issue should be accompanied by jokes. And although the setting of the joke he used as an example was clearly outdated, the important aspect of the joke for him (and for many other respondents) was that it reflects the relations in his own family and in a wider cultural context.

For my interviewees, jokes about mothers-in-law were different from jokes about many other targets: the label "mother-in-law" often invoked in their minds a specific person, as most of them had or had once had a mother-in-law. The interview setting also contributed to it: although I tried to draw a boundary between generic canned jokes and personal family humor (which mainly consisted of conversational jokes), many of the interviewees placed "generic" jokes in a personal context. But even outside of the interview context, canned jokes are often not self-contained and are framed by the conversational situation (Linstead 1985: 746). The ostensibly aggressive nature of some of these jokes was in sharp contrast to the image of benevolent family humor that my interviewees tried to create during the interview. They made an effort to find

a balance between the generic and the personal; while recognizing and accepting the cultural code of the wicked mother-in-law, they tried to renegotiate it with the help of jokes and joke-telling practices so that it would fit their perceptions of their own and other people's family lives.

It would, however, be too simplistic to reduce my interviewees' ideas about mother-in-law jokes and joke-telling to a straightforward projection of aggression or lack thereof onto their personal lives. Two of my interviewees instead accompanied the mother-in-law jokes they shared (in both cases these were variants of "Do whatever you want, the burial is tomorrow") by comments, placing the joke outside of their family context. A female interviewee of 34 years reported that in her family this joke was used to allude to something that absolutely had to be done. A 40-year-old male university professor said that he always remembered this joke at work when informing his students that they would have to resit an exam. Thus, the telling of mother-in-law jokes can certainly expand beyond contexts involving a particular mother-in-law.

Jokes are usually cited in a conversation when they are topically appropriate in some way (Norrick 1993: 36). However, one's relationship with their mother-in-law can be a powerful trigger that stimulates mother-in-law jokes or reflections on them. This also works the other way round: mother-in-law jokes can provoke reflections on one's own family relations.

GENDER ASPECT OF MOTHER-IN-LAW JOKES AND THEIR TELLING

While both male and female interviewees drew parallels between the realm of jokes and the real world, certain differences emerged as to how these parallels were framed. Women tended to concentrate more on the content of the jokes and highlight (and often condemn) the wicked nature of the mother-in-law's image in these texts. Even though some of the mother-in-law jokes that I collected during the interviews were told to me by women, they often distanced themselves from the jokes ("This is a joke my father used to tell", "I am not much into jokes") and did not reflect much on their practices of joke-telling (cf. Kuipers's (2006: 46–47) observation that women tend to play down their joke-telling skills during the interviews). Men, on the other hand, were eager to explain the context of joke-telling and reflect on how they frame joke-telling in their family life:

Poking fun and teasing each other extends to our entire family, ... mother-in-law and father-in-law, their shortcomings and habits, that's normal.

... [It also extends to] cousins. The little ones, not so much, of course, but our and our parents' generations, certainly. (male, 36 years old)

Thus, the static aspect of jokes was more important for women, while men concentrated on the dynamics of the jokes.

Interestingly, none of my interviewees placed mother-in-law jokes in the broader context of gender relations. Researchers often interpret mother-in-law jokes as prescriptive of certain gender roles, arguing, for example, that “mother-in-law jokes ... serve to remind women of their ‘place’ as wives and mothers” (Green 1998: 181; see also Shade 2010). This can be easily applied to the Belarusian context, where women have achieved legal, but not factual equality and a paternalist attitude towards them prevails in political, financial, and everyday life (Petina 2004). Although Global Gender Gap Reports indicate that the gender gap has decreased in Belarus over the last years (Belarus ranked 28th in 2018, see Report 2018: 25–26), there are still certain tensions that provide a fruitful ground for gender-related jokes. Jokes targeting women (and potentially offensive for them) are frequent even in female-oriented media (Sidorskaya 2014: 382).

However, the emic interpretations of my interviewees focused on the mother-in-law as a particular element in family relations. One of the possible explanations is that gender-related discourse is still fairly marginal in Belarus, even in the academic sphere (Volina 2013), and gender issues are widely misrepresented in mass media (Sidorskaya 2012: 79). It is also possible, however, that the issue of mothers-in-law's important (and sometimes intrusive) role in the contemporary Belarusian family provokes more emic reflections, even if her gender might add an extra layer of meaning to jokes about her.

JOKING RELATIONSHIPS AND OTHER FORMS OF HUMOR

A concept often invoked in existing academic discussions of mother-in-law jokes (e.g. Cotterill 1996; Davies 2012) is that of joking relationships, as described by Radcliffe-Brown (1940) and other anthropologists. In stateless societies (as well as in some state societies; see, e.g., Hagberg 2006), joking relationships are a mechanism to regulate certain types of family relations. These practices involve teasing each other without taking offence and are maintained between kinship members who have an equal status and often belong to the same generation (Radcliffe-Brown 1940). Another way to avoid tensions between in-laws, according to Radcliffe-Brown, is extreme avoidance, more characteristic of relatives whose status is not equal, such as sons-in-law and mothers-in-law (ibid.).

In contemporary European societies, however, relations between mothers-in-law and sons-in-law are not based on such extreme avoidance (Davies 2012: 18). But even if these relationships do involve joking, it largely occurs in an asymmetric way, with jokes predominantly used by sons-in-law to control their relations with mothers-in-law without the latter joking to the same extent in return (Cotterill 1996: 195).

Based on my interview data, it appears that the concept of joking relations can apply to family humor in a slightly different way. While the circumstances that gave birth to mother-in-law jokes and their structural patterns do indeed resemble avoidance as described by Radcliffe-Brown, there are other humorous forms and practices between sons-in-law and mothers-in-law that come closer to joking relationships. Most notably, these are teasing and banter (that both the son-in-law and the mother-in-law partake in). Joking *with* (rather than *at*) one's mother-in-law is a sign of good relations with her, reinforcing Cotterill's distinction between "joking with her [mother-in-law] and making jokes about her" (1996: 198–199). The example below illustrates this point:

He [the interviewee's husband] addresses his mother-in-law as "dear mother-in-law"²⁰. Sometimes [when] I am speaking with my mum, [he says]: "My regards to the mother-in-law" – "Mum, [he sends his] regards to you" – "And a kiss" – "Mum, and a kiss". Mum then goes: "Wow, I've even started to blush". And then the next time he sends his regards and two kisses. Mum goes: "Wow! Two kisses!" And then the third time he only sends regards, and mum goes: "So no kisses this time?" (female, 25 years old)

There can be situations when mother-in-law jokes can form a part of joking relations. It happens during the very practice of joke telling:

Me: Do you often tell jokes in your family or read them online?

Male (30 years old): If I hear some new jokes ... of course I tell them and some funny stories, it is normal. Usually my mother-in-law tells me jokes more often.

Later during the interview, when I asked him if he knew any mother-in-law jokes, he replied:

As to mother-in-law jokes, I do read them, and my mother-in-law tells me such jokes, we have good relations.

Thus, contrary to Cotterill's (1996: 212) suggestion that mothers-in-law do not initiate jokes for fear of alienating their daughters, some mothers-in-law can in fact share jokes and humorous banter with their sons-in-law. The motiva-

tion for mothers-in-law to tell mother-in-law jokes may be similar to that for using other forms of self-deprecating humor, namely, to present themselves in a favorable light and to improve their image in the eyes of the interlocutor (Greengross & Miller 2008; Zillmann & Stocking 1976: 155). Norrick (1993: 105) argues that “[s]ince jokes often trade on personal problems or slips and socially sensitive topics ..., they allow to demonstrate a certain tolerance and/or insensitivity”. Moreover, by sharing humor in this form, mothers-in-law establish closer and more equal relations with their sons-in-law, thus addressing a structural issue in kin relationships in a manner not dissimilar to joking relationships. Additionally, joking relationships in many contemporary societies (including Belarus) have moved away from being structural to being elective and thus they need to be regularly reconfirmed (Marsh 2015: 107). Regular joking with one’s mother-in-law fits this updated framework of joking relationships.

Thus, while mother-in-law jokes as a general, impersonal genre do not function similarly to joking relationships, sharing these jokes with one’s own mother- or son-in-law (and otherwise sharing humor between them) does indeed resemble joking relationships in certain aspects.

CONCLUSION

While previous research has not categorized mother-in-law jokes as such, many of their characteristics come close to definitions of a joke cycle. Mother-in-law jokes, as this article has demonstrated, have a certain topical homogeneity and recognizable settings. Meta-jokes (see the joke about an “exemplary mother-in-law” above) that require the audience to be familiar with mother-in-law joke scripts also exist. However, unlike many other joke cycles that emerge at a certain time, enjoy a (relatively short) period of popularity and are then forgotten (see, e.g., Dundes 1979; Rahkonen 2000), mother-in-law jokes seem to have undergone a thematic transition from domestic economy to just interpersonal tensions, yet they still maintain a certain identity. My interviews showed that many younger people do not remember any mother-in-law joke texts, but are still aware that they exist and mention mother-in-law jokes more often than other family-related jokes. Curiously, none of my interviewees mentioned mother-in-law memes or other forms of visual/audiovisual humor (in contrast to digital visual humor that targets husbands, wives, parents or children). This may indicate that the social context that gave birth to mother-in-law jokes is gradually changing, and although the topic of the mother-in-law’s wickedness does occasionally feature in new forms of visual humor (which stems from a context where the mother-in-law’s intrusion into the family is less pressing

a problem), these new forms of mother-in-law humor are not as popular as mother-in-law jokes once were and still are.

One of the biggest challenges in joke research is establishing the correlation between the jokes people tell and the attitude they have towards the joke targets. My interviewees' responses indicate that a generic, archetypical mother-in-law is still recognized as an ambivalent, or even malevolent, figure in the family. The very perceived need to highlight harmonious relations between mothers-in-law and sons-in-law, to the extent of organizing competitions like "Golden Mother-in-law" (Manuilik 2017), suggests that, in society at large, the wicked mother-in-law is objectified into a sociological fact akin to the stupid blonde (Oring 2003). Even some researchers fall prey to the straightforward interpretation of aggression in jokes as testimony to aggression in real-life relationships. Consider the study by Begovatova (2008), who hypothesized that the high prevalence of mother-in-law jokes in her respondents' accounts of joke usage would correlate with a high prominence of mother-in-law vs. son-in-law conflicts in their family lives, only to discover that was not in fact the case. Such perceptions result in the relations between the son- and mother-in-law being considered to be bad by default,²¹ with no evidence being required to support this notion. By contrast, good relations between a mother-in-law and her son-in-law are a "norm violation" and have to be explicitly explained and brought to attention.

The generic image of the mother-in-law as reflected in jokes thus correlates with (and perhaps reinforces) the generic image of the mother-in-law at large. The fuzziness between humorous and non-humorous discourse is visible in the epithets ("horrible stories", "ugly names") used by my interviewees while discussing mother-in-law jokes. While it is perhaps too ambitious to claim that family jokes are regarded as normative regulators in family relations and even predict the future (Druzhinin 2006); Duvall (1954 as cited in Watkins 1978: 4) does go as far as arguing that mother-in-law jokes shape people's ideas about the generic mother-in-law and stigmatize her.

However, when it comes to actual mothers-in-law, their image may be different or the personal context may be inappropriate for the image present in jokes to be projected onto real life. The clash between the image in jokes and the context of one's own family leads to a reevaluation of jokes and reflection on the practices of joke-telling. Distancing oneself from the generic image of the mother-in-law may take different forms: from engaging in joking relationships with one's mother-in-law (and emphasizing the fact that these relationships exist) to customizing canned jokes according to one's particular family context, to complete avoidance of mother-in-law jokes. The same is true of other jokes about the family. One of my interviewees (male, 40 years old), for example, said that he and his wife occasionally tell each other jokes about adultery, but

“these jokes don’t suit our faithful family”. Telling certain jokes does not mean people share the values that are humorously expressed in these jokes.

The emergence of mother-in-law jokes and their popularity in Belarusian folklore (as well as the folklore of many other nations) is a structural process that can be explained by analyzing the social context in which the jokes appeared and flourished, and the joke texts themselves. But in order to understand how the jokes are performed and perceived by the folklore bearers, it is important to also consider the personal dimension of their functioning. Studying joke-telling on an emic level is vital for understanding not only the particular circumstances of a certain family, but also the general aspects of mother-in-law jokes. By pointing to recurrent features in mother-in-law jokes that are known to exist beyond its immediate locale of study and by linking them to the emic dimension of joke-telling, this article can inform further research into mother-in-law humor around the world. The clash between a generic and a real mother-in-law offers multiple ways for resolution, and these ways can tell us a great deal not only about a particular family relationship, but also about vernacular practices of joke-telling and their links with other forms of humorous interactions.

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NOTES

- ¹ A *chastushka* is a short rhymed folk song that is sung to the accompaniment of an accordion or *balalaika* and that can be comic or satirical (Terras 1985: 77).
- ² As one of the most widely used theories of humor, relief theory posits that we joke because it helps us to “blow off steam” and relieve stress. Other influential theories of humor are superiority and incongruity theories. The former argues that humor makes us feel superior to the targets of our jokes; the latter says that jokes are funny because they are incongruous: their endings differ from what we expect and thus surprise us (Morreall 2016).
- ³ For example, Knyazyan (2015: 95) regards them as a way to release aggression that is suppressed in real life.

- ⁴ Cotterill notes that she uses the term “joking relationship” differently from Radcliff-Brown, who coined it (Cotterill 1996: 195–196; 1994: 91–94).
- ⁵ A great deal of existing scholarship on jokes does not address their performative aspect. However, there are several thorough studies of joke performances, such as Bauman 1986; Norrick 1993; Marsh 2015; Oring 2016.
- ⁶ For a discussion on the distinction between canned and conversational jokes, see, for example, Dynel (2009).
- ⁷ Some examples of such Belarusian forum threads can be found at <https://mamochki.by/forum/43/16765/> and <http://www.velvet.by/articles/otnosheniya/ob-otnosheniyakh/strashnye-istorii-pro-nevestku-i-svekrov>, both last accessed on 13 April 2020.
- ⁸ The original joke read that the partitions were for “*на хлеб і на выхлеб, на пшано і на выпшано, на сіль і на высіль*”. The words “*выхлеб*”, “*выпшано*” and “*высіль*” derive from words “*хлеб*” (bread), “*пшано*” (millet) and “*высіль*” (salt). “*Вы-*” is a prefix that is used in this case to provide a certain rhythm and emphasize the absence of actual food in the bag.
- ⁹ Borscht is a beetroot soup popular in Eastern Slavic cuisine. Cooking borscht is considered to be one of the stereotypical female chores and is often used as a metaphor for the traditional female role as opposed to emancipation and gender equality.
- ¹⁰ Freud (2009 [1913]) and Draitser (1999) emphasized this aspect of mother-in-law jokes in their analyses.
- ¹¹ Available at <https://talks.by/showthread.php?t=14265317&page=229>, last accessed on 9 April 2020.
- ¹² Available at <https://banana.by/index.php?newsid=200684>, last accessed on 6 May 2020.
- ¹³ The same joke in Draitser (1999: 195), a variant at https://library.by/portal/modules/humor/readme.php?subaction=showfull&id=1097230122&archive=&start_from=&ucat=&, last accessed on 13 April 2020.
- ¹⁴ Only the highest Soviet officials were buried in the Kremlin Wall Necropolis.
- ¹⁵ A variant of this joke can also be found in Draitser (1999: 196) and at https://www.e-reading.by/bookreader.php/103822/Semeiinye_anekdoty.html, last accessed on 13 April 2020.
- ¹⁶ Available at <https://forum.onliner.by/viewtopic.php?t=54569&start=1740>, last accessed on 9 April 2020.
- ¹⁷ Available at <https://anekdotov.me/teshha/110061-moya-teshha-samaya-obrazcovaya-v-mire-v-kakom-2.html>, last accessed on 6 May 2020.
- ¹⁸ For a variant of this joke, see Draitser (1999: 196).
- ¹⁹ Svytka (also referred to as svyta) is a long hand-made unisex overcoat that Belarusians and other Eastern Slavic peoples used to wear when it was cold outside.
- ²⁰ In the original version of the joke a diminutive suffix is used, the form of address is *тёщенька* (*teschen'ka*).
- ²¹ The Russian Associative Thesaurus shows that the most frequent association with the word “mother-in-law” is “wicked”, see *Russkii associativnyj slovar'*.

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