

Editorial:

Dispositions towards ridicule and being laughed at: Current research on gelotophobia, gelotophilia, and katagelasticism

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This special issue deals with basic questions but also applied aspects of different dispositions towards ridicule and being laughed at. Many people will have encountered situations in which it was unclear to them whether people laugh *with* them or *at* them. There is a broad variety of reasons why people might get laughed at in their everyday life, starting from their physical appearance to their personality or their behavior and many more reasons. Of course, there is a good-natured variant of laughing at others or teasing others (e.g., playing harmless pranks among friends or sharing memories of situations in which something odd happened to one of the friends). This playful variant of laughing at is commonly enjoyed by people and elicits positive emotions among those who encounter such situations. However, there is also a dark, mean-spirited side, such as ridicule, which may lead to malicious and harmful expressions of humor, which might even count as bullying. Given that this relates to many different domains within psychology (e.g., developmental psychology, health psychology, personality, psychological assessment, psychopathology etc.), it seems rather surprising that there is not much empirical research on how people deal with ridicule and being laughed at and that the knowledge about causes and consequences is still rather limited. The present issue of *Psychological Test and Assessment Modeling* presents current research on three central concepts in this field, namely, gelotophobia (i.e., the fear of being laughed at; from *gelos* = Greek for laughter), *gelotophilia* (i.e., the joy of being laughed at), and *katagelasticism* (i.e., the joy of laughing at others; from *katagelao* = Greek for “laughing at”).

Research on gelotophobia has a focus on the negative impact that *laughter* might have on people and how they deal with ridicule. Gelotophobes fear what most others experience

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as positive, relaxing, and joyful – humor and above all *laughter*. Gelotophobes strongly fear being laughed at and being ridiculed. They misinterpret laughter and smiling as something negative – as a means that others use to put them down. Also, they relate laughter by others to themselves (e.g., in a restaurant when hearing laughter somewhere in the room). Furthermore, they have the impression that they cannot keep up with others in situations where humor is involved. It seems obvious that this hyper-vigilant behavior leads to some peculiarities in their behavior that, in turn, might make them the butt of jokes. Titze (2009) observed among some of his patients a specific stiff posture and a “wooden appearance” when being confronted with laughter. He coined the term “Pinocchio-syndrome” to describe this specific behavior pattern that is supposed to resemble those of a marionette (see also Bergson [1924] and Sellschopp-Rüppel & von Rad, 1977). Overall, gelotophobes seem to misinterpret laughter-related information as aversive and negative disregarding the positive aspects of it.

Gelotophobia was first observed in clinical practice and first evidence on its existence stems from case-reports (see Titze [2009] for an overview). Ever since the publication of the first empirical article on *gelotophobia* (Ruch & Proyer, 2008a), attention to the topic has grown and more researchers developed an interest in this area. The interest in gelotophobia emerged from research of *humor*, which is still an understudied field in psychology. For an overview on the current state in humor research see Martin (2007) and Ruch (2008). However, together with the rise of positive psychology, research in humor has regained much attention. Positive psychology provides a new theoretical framework for studying humor (cf. Ruch, Proyer, & Weber, 2010). Peterson and Seligman (2004) describe *humor* as a strength of character; i.e., a (universally) highly positively valued trait. However, research of humor is also fostered elsewhere in many different ways. For example, there is a multidisciplinary society that aims at promoting the scientific study of humor (*The International Society for Humor Studies*, ISHS; www.hnu.edu/ishs) and a specialized peer-reviewed journal that is endorsed by the ISHS (*Humor: The International Journal of Humor Research*). It is no surprise that research on gelotophobia emerged from this environment and that the first empirical study was published in the above-mentioned journal.

Many studies have been completed in the last years and led to major progress in the field. For instance, the transfer or expansion from *gelotophobia* as a *clinical* concept (a pathological fear of being laughed at) to an *individual differences phenomenon* (the fear of being laughed at) in the range of normality inspired a lot of new studies and research efforts. We still keep the term gelotophobia, to acknowledge the origin of the concept although it would also be appropriate to talk about *anxiety* or *fear*, respectively, to entirely strip off the pathological connotation when talking about healthy adults. It should also be mentioned that the initial conceptualization of gelotophobia as the *pathological* fear of being laughed at is not yet fully substantiated with empirical data but relies mostly on observations of cases in clinical practice.

A milestone in the study of gelotophobia was a special issue that was published in *Humor: The International Journal of Humor Research* (Ruch, 2009). It gave a representative compilation of studies conducted in the field and presented initial data on cross-cultural comparisons (involving data from more than 70 countries) underlying its cross-

cultural relevance. The special issue gathered information from different areas³ (psychology, psychiatry, and sociology) and provided a rich basis of data on the validity of the concept. It allowed the description of some general patterns that seem to constitute the experiential world of gelotophobes. For example, they seem to have a biased view of their own self and on their abilities. In various studies, they were shown to underestimate their ability to create humorous productions, their self-estimates of their intellectual abilities are below their psychometric intelligence, and their self-rated virtuousness is lower than are peer-ratings of their virtuousness. Thus, their lowered self-estimates of own (humor-related and non humor-related) abilities and characteristics were found to be a pattern that generalizes across different areas. A further example is the finding that emotional experiences of gelotophobes can be traced back not only to a pattern of high shame and fear but also involves low joy. This finding generalized across two different studies and also seems to be a general pattern (emotions among gelotophobes have also been studied in relation to their emotion regulation, see Papousek, Ruch, Freudenthaler, Kogler, Lang, & Schulter, 2009).

Soon after the first studies on the fear of being laughed at were completed, it seemed necessary to expand the scope of the studies. Two new variables were introduced: the joy of being laughed at (*gelotophilia*) and the joy of laughing at others (*katagelasticism*; Ruch & Proyer, 2009a). This allows studying different dispositions towards ridicule and being laughed at; i.e., how people deal with laughter and with being laughed at from a broader perspective. The new variables were derived from reports that participants provided in a study (Ruch & Proyer, 2009a). They were asked to describe the worst event that they could think of in relation to being laughed at. Most of the entries dealt with embarrassing situations (e.g., slip of tongue) or inappropriate behavior (e.g., not being properly dressed – or even naked – at an official occasion). However, some descriptions were somewhat different. Some participants indicated that they could not think of such a situation because as long as laughter is involved it cannot be *laughed at* but only something positive. Others provided stories where they laughed at others and made them the butt of jokes. Thus, there seemed to be persons that enjoy all kinds of laughter even if it is directed at themselves or they indicated that they actively made others laugh at them. A different group of participants seemed to particularly enjoy laughing at others. Thus, the definition of the two new variables was derived from these productions. Gelotophiles actively seek and establish situations in which they can make others laugh at them. They do not refrain from telling embarrassing stories or incidents that happened to them for gaining laughs by others – and that is what they enjoy, the *laughter* by others. In case

³ Recently, Paul Lewis (2009) speculated whether *political gelotophobia* might have an impact on elections in the US („The twin fears of being effectively mocked or ineffective in mocking others [too harsh, blunt, tasteless] led candidates to aggressive and proactive strategies [going on TV to show they can take a joke, be funny – anything to avoid being rendered pathetically ridiculous or inappropriately derisive]“ [p. 42, conference abstract]). In a similar vein, Christie Davies comments satirically on the results of recent elections in the UK. He noticed that losers in those elections were frequently bald – “To be bald is to suffer from gelotophobia, to fear being laughed at; to fear being laughed at is to fear disorder; to fear disorder is to embrace absolutism” (retrieved at <http://www.socialaffairsunit.org.uk/blog/archives/001414.php>, February 19th, 2010).

something embarrassing happens to them, they also enjoy this situation as they anticipate the laughter from others when they tell them what happened. Katagelasticians actively seek and enjoy situations in which they can laugh at others at the expense of these persons. They think it is part of the daily life to laugh at others – those who do not agree should just fight back. Katagelasticians do not feel bad or guilty when embarrassing others for the sake of a joke and would think that there are some people who provoke being laughed at (and that they eventually *deserve* being laughed at). Ruch and Proyer (2009a) introduced the PhoPhiKat-45 as a measure of these dispositions towards ridicule and being laughed at. The authors report high internal consistency and retest-reliability for all scales. The three-dimensional factor structure turned out to be stable and replicable. The following studies with this new instrument provided support for its validity (see this issue and Ruch [2009] for an overview).

The aim of this collection of articles is to bring together latest results on research in the way people deal with laughter and ridicule. The special issue in total comprises eleven articles. The special issue is split into two parts:

- Part 1: *Basic studies*, and
- Part 2: *Applied studies*.

The section on basic studies is published in the current issue, while part 2 will be published in the next issue of *Psychological Test and Assessment Modeling*. Part 1 comprises four studies that target basic topics such as what can be said about the causes of gelotophobia? How does childhood teasing relate to the fear of being laughed at? Is gelotophobia different from social phobia? Does gelotophobia also exist in children and adolescents? These questions tackle yet unresolved fundamental issues and provide a basis for the further articles that will be published in part 2. These contributions (seven in total) focus more on content-related aspects such as the relation to emotions, ethnic differences within one country, humor, personality, psychological gender, and self-presentation styles.

All studies use either the GELOPH<15> (seven articles) that assesses gelotophobia or the PhoPhiKat-45 (four articles) for measuring gelotophobia, gelotophilia, and katagelasticism. A multi-functioning website (www.gelotophobia.org) run by the gelotophobia research and assessment team was set up and includes the GELOPH<15> and the PhoPhiKat-45 along with various other related measures that allow for a general diagnostic. This website also includes numerous research questionnaires for data collection⁴. Both measures are available upon request for research purposes from the editors of the special issue⁵.

⁴ The German language version of the PhoPhiKat-45 is available for self-assessments via www.charakterstaerken.org

⁵ The GELOPH<15> is available in 42 different languages (see Proyer, Ruch, Ali, Al-Olimat, Amemiya, Adal et al., 2009) and there are English and German versions of the PhoPhiKat-45 as well as preliminary Chinese, Japanese, and Romanian translations.

Overview on the articles of part 1 (Basic studies). The study by *Martin Führ* has high significance for the further advancement in the scientific study of gelotophobia. His results suggest that the fear of being laughed at is strongly present during childhood and adolescence and confirms that the GELOPH<15> is applicable for use among participants starting from eleven years of age. The psychometric properties of the instrument were highly comparable with those of the adult Danish version. Besides these technical aspects, the study also provides first hints on the expression and correlates of gelotophobia in the age group between eleven and sixteen. One of the most interesting findings is that the prevalence rate among the Danish pupils is much higher compared to Danish adults. At this point it can only be speculated whether these differences are, for example, due to developmental aspects or whether certain sample characteristics apply. In any case, a replication of the results is needed. As in adults (Platt, 2008; Platt, Proyer, & Ruch, 2009), higher expressions in the fear of being laughed at were associated with experiences of having been bullied. Additionally, those pupils who frequently *think* about skipping school and who have a low number of actual absent days seem to have higher fear of being laughed at. The contribution by Führ can be seen as a starting point for studying the fear of being laughed at among children and adolescents that needs to be supplemented by additional data.

Willibald Ruch, René Proyer, and Larry Ventis were interested in the relation of childhood and youth experiences of having been laughed at and ridiculed by parents, teachers, and peers. These are putative causes that could be derived from theoretical accounts by Titze (see Titze [2009] for an overview). By comparing groups of clinically diagnosed gelotophobes and groups of shame-based and non shame-based patient groups and normal controls, the authors conclude that these causes could not account for the expression of the fear of being laughed at in the group of diagnosed gelotophobes (or at least does not account fully for it). The authors suggest that the causes of the fear of being laughed at must be different. Interestingly, the putative causes yielded higher correlations among the groups of normal controls and the non shame-bound patients. It is speculated that causes with a higher intensity are needed to develop high expressions of gelotophobia. However, it has to be summarized that even though a few hints were collected on the causes of gelotophobia – however, its origins remain somewhat unclear so far.

Kim Edwards, Rod Martin and David Dozois find close relations between gelotophobia and measures of social fears and anxiety but less so to specific fears. The authors suggest that "... although gelotophobia is closely related to social anxiety generally, it does seem to have some unique characteristics that distinguish it from other anxieties" (p. 105) and they argue that gelotophobia should be "best viewed as a specific subtype of social phobia" (p. 105). Additionally, Edwards and colleagues deal with memories of having been teased in childhood and adolescence and the relation of these memories with the expression of fearing to be laughed at. Gelotophobia was related to a greater history of being teased about social behavior and academic excellence and less so about family background, appearance, and performance. However, this did not hold true for the family background, the appearance, or the performance. Additionally, the frequency of remembered teasing was of lesser importance but more so the distress. Thus, fearing to be laughed at does not seem to be triggered by frequent events of derision but more so of

events that are remembered (and putatively also *experienced*) with a higher intensity of feelings. It seems fruitful to study these relations in more detail in the future.

Hugo Carretero-Dios, Willibald Ruch, Diana Agudelo, Tracey Platt, and René Proyer address one of the most frequently asked questions by skeptics since the first articles on gelotophobia have been published and that Edwards and colleagues (see above) also dealt with; namely, *Is gelotophobia different from social anxiety/social phobia?* In this first psychometric study, the authors report high correlations between fear of negative evaluation, social anxiety disorder, and gelotophobia. An item factor analysis (involving measures for gelotophobia, social anxiety disorder, and fear of negative evaluation) showed a three-factor solution. Virtually all of the items loaded clearly on the expected factor. The factor structure was also verified by a confirmatory factor analysis. The findings are generally in line with those of Edwards and colleagues. It is evident that the fear of being laughed at has a robust relation to all of these (anxiety-related) concepts (it is predictable that gelotophobia relates to all dimensions that refer to a personality structure that can be characterized by high neuroticism and introversion). However, in both studies that deal with this topic in this special issue, the coefficients were high but far from indicating redundancy of one of the concepts.

Overview on the articles of part 2 (Applied studies). The first study in part two addresses the location of gelotophobia, gelotophilia, and katagelasticism in a broader model of personality. *René Proyer and Willibald Ruch* present first data on the personality of gelotophiles and katagelasticians. Using the Eysenckian model of personality, the study replicates findings for gelotophobia (N+, E-). Gelotophiles were found to be extraverts; so were the katagelasticians, who additionally yielded higher scores in psychoticism. However, gender differences were reported for the latter two dimensions. Gelotophilic females were lower in P and the relations to P and E were higher among katagelasticians males (who also scored low in the Lie scale). Overall, the results fit the predictions very well and it can be concluded that gelotophobia, gelotophilia, and katagelasticism can be located in the framework of a well-established personality model (see Furnham, Eysenck, & Saklofske, 2008).

David Rawlings, Tsu Ann Tham, and Jessica Milner Davis used a scenario test to induce feelings of shame, shyness or embarrassment (two scenarios for each) and participants had to rate their endorsement to nine different emotions. They identify predominantly fear (but also sadness and guilt) as major predictors of gelotophobia. Additionally, the authors did study personality correlates of gelotophobia by using the *Big Five Inventory* and the *Highly Sensitive Person Scale*. Gelotophobes were found to be introverted neurotics that tended to score higher on sensory sensitivity and lower in openness. In this study, shame turned out to be of lesser importance among gelotophobes compared to previous studies (Platt, 2008; Platt & Ruch, 2009). The authors speculate that specific characteristics of the study (the scenarios, the ratings measures, the cultural background of the participants – which is different from the one in the other studies) might contribute to the outcomes. The personality pattern (high N, low E) is well replicated by now and seems to be among the most stable predictors of the fear of being laughed at (see also Proyer & Ruch in this issue; Hřebicková, Ficková, Klementová, Ruch, & Proyer, 2009; Ruch & Proyer, 2009b; Ruch, Proyer, & Popa, 2008).

Karl-Heinz Renner and *Timo Heydasch* provide an interesting alternative framework that has hitherto not been considered for discussing the phenomena. Their contribution focuses on the role of (histrionic, acquisitive, and protective) self-presentation styles and how people deal with laughter and being laughed at. It is assumed that the three dispositions towards ridicule and being laughed at present themselves differently to their environment. Histrionic self-presentation style (i.e., performing explicit As-If-behaviors in everyday interactions) predicted gelotophilia and katagelasticism. The fear of being laughed at was correlated with protective self-presentation (i.e., avoiding social disapproval). The expression of an acquisitive self-presentation style (i.e., seeking social approval) existed independently from whether people enjoy laughing at others and was negatively related to gelotophobia but slightly positively to gelotophilia. Overall, gelotophobes, gelotophiles, and katagelasticists differed in a predictable manner with regard to the way they present images of themselves to other people.

Anna Radomska and *Joanna Tomczak* argue that while hitherto biological sex has been studied in relation to gelotophobia no attention has been paid to learned sex roles. They identify *psychological* gender as an important predictor of gelotophobia (low masculinity). Radomska and Tomczak also deal with self-presentation styles and find them be robustly related to the fear of being laughed at. Overall, those with high fear seem to favor a self-depreciation style in their self-presentation. The authors discuss the role of masculinity as a protective factor against the fear of being laughed at. The results on psychological gender are of special interest as previous studies did indicate that *biological* gender does not contribute to the expression of gelotophobia. Thus, this contribution could stimulate future research efforts in this promising direction. Overall, their findings on self-presentation converge well with those of Renner and Heydasch in this issue and it is assumed that this line of research is of particular relevance for the study of dispositions towards ridicule and being laughed.

Martin Lampert, *Kate Isaacson* and *Jim Lyttle* deal with variations of gelotophobia within the United States. Based on first results on cross-cultural comparisons in gelotophobia (Proyer et al., 2009), one might hypothesize that certain culture-bound dimensions (e.g., collectivism) contribute to the expression of the fear of being laughed at. However, the question emerges whether such potential differences are also reflected in comparisons of person from different descent *within* a country. The authors gathered self-identifications of Asian, African, European, or Hispanic/Latino heritage and compared their scores for gelotophobia. As expected, participants from the Asian-American sample scored highest followed by Latino, African-American, and European-American samples. Lampert and Isaacson also identified specific items that yielded higher endorsements among Asian Americans (i.e., items that relate to looking foolish in public places). Overall, the study provides support for the idea to study gelotophobia not only by comparing countries but also by comparing specific groups within one country (see also Samson, Proyer, Ceschi, Pedrini, & Ruch, in press).

Andrea Samson and *Yonni Meyer* study the relation of liking aggressive vs. non-aggressive cartoons in relation to gelotophobia, gelotophilia, and katagelasticism; ratings were given for *funniness* and *aversiveness*. Gelotophobes dislike aggressive humor while katagelasticists did enjoy this form of humorous productions. Gelotophiles seemed to

enjoy humorous material in general to a higher degree. The relation between fear of being laughed at and aggressive humor seems to be of special interest as Ruch et al. (2009) reported a zero-correlation between the GELOPH<15> and the scale on aggressive humor style out of the Humor Styles Questionnaire (HSQ; see Martin [2007] for an overview). Also, questionnaire measures of humor rarely were correlated with liking of humor (Martin, 2007; Ruch, 2008). It can be discussed whether different material used in the studies (ratings of aversion and funniness for cartoons vs. questionnaire) might have an impact on the results. Otherwise, one might think that subgroups of gelotophobes do exist that differ regarding certain characteristics; e.g., in whether they enjoy laughing at others or not (Ruch & Proyer, 2009a) or more generally speaking how they deal with laughing at others. Ruch and Proyer (2008a) introduced a different distinction, namely the one between “realistic” (they fear being laughed at and get laughed at frequently) and “pure” gelotophobes (they fear being laughed at and get laughed at but do not get laughed at frequently). However, this is a topic for future research.

Tracey Platt and *Willibald Ruch* examine whether gelotophobia, gelotophilia and katagelasticism are involved in how elderly people cope with age-related vulnerabilities (see also Platt, Ruch, & Proyer, 2010). The authors did compile a representative list of vulnerabilities (e.g., illness, isolation, depression, or decline in physical health) that might be conducive to eliciting ridicule and ask the participants to indicate whether they already experienced these vulnerabilities and whether or not they worry about them. The PhoPhiKat-30, experience of (and worry about) the vulnerabilities and demographic variables are used to predict gelotophobic, gelotophilic, and katagelasticistic answers in response to 14 prototypical scenarios. Results suggest a specific pattern for gelotophobes and katagelasticists in how they cope with age-related vulnerabilities. Gelotophobes with low education but who also enjoy laughing at others and who do *not experience* a lot of age-related vulnerabilities but *worry* about them indicated that they would show gelotophobic reactions when confronted with such vulnerabilities. The combination of gelotophilia, higher educational level, and not experiencing vulnerabilities was associated with making others laugh at ones problems. Laughing at the problems of others is best predicted by katagelasticism, higher age, lower education, and experiences of vulnerabilities but not worrying about them. Taken together, the results indicate that different dispositions towards ridicule and being laughed at relate differently but according to specific predictions to coping with age-related factors.

The contribution by Platt and Ruch also marks the first use of the PhoPhiKat-30 in the English-speaking world. As a next step it would be interesting to study cross-cultural variations in the way people deal with ridicule and being laughed at. A first approach with data from Taiwan is promising in terms of stable psychometric properties but also at the content-level (Chen, Chan, Ruch, & Proyer, 2010). For example, whereas there is a zero-correlation between gelotophobia and katagelasticism in data collected in German-speaking countries, there was a positive relation in the Taiwanese sample. This is interpreted in a way that Taiwanese people might use *laughing at* others as a defense mechanism to protect themselves from derision. However these cross-cultural comparisons are in a very initial stage but promising nevertheless.

These eleven studies represent a sample of the latest findings and current research directions. While there is a lot of data available from correlational studies so far, future research should first and foremost focus on experimental settings and testing interventions for gelotophobia. It should be of interest, for example, to find the conditions when people feel being laughed at, what cues do they use for this judgment (especially when objectively no basis for feeling being ridiculed exists) and what are the conditions for not feeling being the object of laughter. Once these mechanisms are clearer it will also be easier to develop intervention programs and to evaluate their effectiveness. Also, developmental aspects of the dispositions towards ridicule and being laughed at are of high interest. Currently, a study that deals with the expression of these dimensions within families (i.e., comparison between parents and children) is being finished. This study also contains information on the impact of parenting style on the way people deal with laughter and being laughed at as adults. A different line of research focuses on the relation of the dimensions to bullying experiences. It has been reported (Platt, 2008; Platt et al., 2009) that bullying experiences are a very potent predictor of the fear of being laughed at. However, all of these data were collected with adults. The interest in research on bullying in schools and its implications for practice is steadily growing in recent times. The way people deal with laughter and being laughed at might be a variable that allows predictions about both, the agents and targets of bullying. Platt and colleagues (2009) also discussed whether in some cases people who misattribute humor and laughter by colleagues (at work or in school) as *laughing at* them might raise “false alarms” when misperceiving these humorous productions as bullying. Interventions in these cases must be different from settings where people use humor in a mean-spirited way to put others down and to bully them. In any case, further studies on the causes of gelotophobia (and the other dimensions) as well as practical implications might be a good focus for further research. The latter aspect seems to be of high interest as, thus far, there are no interventions empirically evaluated intervention programs for gelotophobia. There are reports from practice on the usage of *humor drama* in the treatment of gelotophobes (see Titze, 2009) but the knowledge in this area is rather limited at the moment.

Final remarks on the special issue. We invited researchers who did study the fear of being laughed at recently. Between two to three experts reviewed each submission to the special issue. We are grateful for their help and contribution to the special issue. Two submitted papers were rejected. We would also like to express our gratitude to the editor of *Psychological Test and Assessment Modeling*, formerly *Psychology Science Quarterly*, Professor Klaus Kubinger, for his kind invitation and his support in making the special issue possible and, thereby, promoting the scientific exploration of the various dispositions towards ridicule and being laughed at, i.e., gelotophobia, gelotophilia, and katagelasticism. Finally, we would like to thank our student helpers at the department (Rahel Flisch, Helen Lischer, and Noah Savary) who supported us in different stages in the completion of the issue.

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