



## Gelotophobia, emotion-related skills and responses to the affective states of others

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### ABSTRACT

Gelotophobia (the fear of being laughed at) has recently been introduced as an individual difference variable that is not only relevant in clinical practice but also as part of a normal variant of personality. Observations of several emotion-related concomitants of gelotophobia suggested that gelotophobic individuals may be inapt or insecure with regard to the habitual use of certain emotion-related skills. We evaluated relationships of gelotophobia to measures of trait emotional intelligence and also examined participants' responses to the affective states of another person in an experimental setting (exposure to emotionally contagious films displaying intense cheerfulness, sadness, anxiety, anger, or neutral mood). Individuals with high gelotophobia scores indicated that they feel relatively weak at regulating their emotions, and the attempts they typically make to manage their emotions are considered inefficient by experts. Accordingly, they showed a high degree of emotional contagion of negative moods. They also reported to have a strong tendency to control the expression of their emotions. Both self-report, typical-performance and experimental data only revealed differences in the use of intrapersonal emotion-related skills, but provided no evidence that gelotophobia may be related to deficits in interpersonal skills.

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### 1. Introduction

Recently, gelotophobia has been introduced as an individual difference variable concerned with the fear of being laughed at (Ruch & Proyer, 2008a, 2009). Individuals scoring high in gelotophobia feel uncomfortable when confronted with laughter. They do not perceive humor and laughter from their interaction partners as shared enjoyment but rather as a sign of contempt or ridicule and tend to assume that laughter in their presence is directed at them. The phenomenon of gelotophobia was initially noticed and described among psychiatric patients (Titze, 2009). Self-report items which best discriminated between clinically diagnosed gelotophobes and groups with other psychiatric diagnoses and healthy controls (Nathanson, 1992; Ruch & Proyer, 2008a) were selected for inclusion into a self-report instrument for the reliable measurement and quantification of the trait (GELOPH, Ruch & Proyer, 2008b; Ruch & Titze, 1998) which has been applied in a number of empirical studies including a large-scale multi-nation study (see Ruch, 2009, for review). These data showed that the degree of gelotophobia varies considerably in non-clinical samples of adults. Consequently, it was concluded that gelotophobia is of relevance within the range of normality as well and should therefore be studied as an individual difference variable (Ruch & Proyer, 2008a).

A growing body of evidence suggests that the fear of being laughed at may be associated with several other emotion-related

characteristics. For instance, adults high in gelotophobia reported that they were laughed at during childhood or bullied. As this was self-reported retrospectively, a plausible possibility is that gelotophobic individuals also felt ridiculed or bullied when there actually was no objective evidence for it (Platt, 2008). Accordingly, it was demonstrated that gelotophobic individuals do not distinguish clearly between benevolent and malicious laughter and, hence, do not perceive laughter as pleasant, even if it is positively motivated (Ruch, Altfreder, & Proyer, 2009a). In harmless and playful teasing situations which normally elicit joy and surprise, they tend to perceive laughter as mean-spirited ridicule and respond with negative affect like anger, shame or fear (Platt, 2008). There is also evidence that gelotophobes may be predisposed to bad mood, low joy, and low cheerfulness in general (Platt & Ruch, 2009; Ruch, Beermann, & Proyer, 2009b). Gelotophobes may also misjudge how they affect other people, for instance, how witty they can be. Finally, it was shown that more gelotophobic individuals use coping strategies like coping humor and self-enhancing humor, which are generally considered effective and beneficial, to a lesser extent than individuals without gelotophobia (Ruch et al., 2009b). In sum, some of the observed characteristics of gelotophobes suggest that they may be inapt or insecure with regard to the habitual use of certain emotion-related skills. Those may be reflected in measures of trait emotional intelligence.

Within recent years, trait emotional intelligence (trait EI or trait emotional self-efficacy) has been established as a useful construct for the operationalisation and investigation of emotion-related individual differences. Trait EI is defined as a constellation of

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emotion-related self-perceptions and dispositions located at the lower level of personality hierarchies, referring to individual differences in processing, regulating and utilizing affect-laden information of an intrapersonal (e.g., perceiving and regulating one's own emotions) and interpersonal (e.g., perceiving and regulating the emotions of others) nature (Petrides, Pita, & Kokkinaki, 2007). In a series of studies, Freudenthaler and colleagues demonstrated that affect-related behaviours can be assessed not only as personality traits in the traditional manner through self-report, but also by conceptually related, but sufficiently distinct, typical-performance measures of emotional management (Freudenthaler & Neubauer, 2005, 2007). In addition, the findings of these studies provided evidence of the importance to distinguish between intrapersonal and interpersonal emotion-related skills.

According to the concept of gelotophobia and its reported emotion-related concomitants, gelotophobia may be related predominantly to deficits in interpersonal skills, for instance, incorrect perception of the emotions of others, or predominantly to deficits in intrapersonal skills, that is, lack or excess of emotion regulation. For instance, the faulty perception of laughter as an expression of evil intentions may result in anger or fear instead of shared cheerfulness. Deficits in the ability to efficiently downregulate (negative) emotions may result in generally higher levels of negative affect when confronted with the affective states of others. Excessive emotion regulation may result in reduced levels of any affect, that is, experience of less cheerfulness when confronted with laughter, but also less sadness or anxiety when confronted with negative affective states of others.

In the current study we did not only evaluate relationships of gelotophobia to questionnaire measures of emotion-related skills, but also examined participants' responses to the exposure to affective states of others in an experimental setting. With this experiment we aimed at examining how gelotophobia or its related characteristics may affect responses when individuals are actually confronted with the affective states of another person, and how specific these effects are for the perception of laughter or cheerfulness.

1. In a pilot study we examined whether gelotophobia was related to individual differences in self-report measures of several emotion-related skills, some of them with emphasis on intrapersonal and some with emphasis on interpersonal processes.
2. In the main study, besides a direct replication of the findings of the pilot study, we aimed at replicating the self-report findings with performance measures of intra- and interpersonal emotion-related skills, designed to assess the adequacy of individuals' typical behaviour in emotionally laden situations.
3. Participants were exposed to short films that were specifically designed to automatically 'infect' participants with a certain affect ('emotionally contagious films', ECOFs; Papousek, Schultze, & Lang, in press; cheerfulness, anger, sadness, anxiety, neutral mood). Emotional contagion through the films is an ecologically valid procedure, based upon largely automatic and unconscious processes (e.g., Neumann & Strack, 2000). Previous studies demonstrated the suitability of the ECOFs to successfully induce differentiated moods (Papousek, Freudenthaler, & Schultze, 2008; Papousek et al., in press). The films do not contain a story, but only show head and shoulders of a woman who openly expresses the respective affect. Therefore, they allowed observing responses to displays of emotional states, but not to a specific social situation or a story that may or may not fit the specific personal history of a participant. With this experiment we specifically tested the following research questions:

- A. Perception of emotional expressions of others: do more gelotophobic individuals generally feel emotions they perceive in others to be more unpleasant, less pleasant or more exciting than their less gelotophobic counterparts, or does this hold for cheerfulness/laughter only?
- B. Degree of contagion with specific emotional states: do more gelotophobic individuals specifically show less emotional contagion to cheerfulness/laughter or do they generally show less emotional contagion to all moods (deficit in emotion perception or excessive regulation), or are their affective responses to the emotions of others generally stronger, especially to negative moods (deficit in emotion regulation)?
- C. General predominance of certain emotions: are more gelotophobic individuals generally more likely to experience certain emotions than their less gelotophobic counterparts, that is, are they more likely to experience, e.g., anxiety when confronted with an ambivalent affective state of another person (neutral film)?

## 2. Pre-study

### 2.1. Method

#### 2.1.1. Participants

Participants were 56 female undergraduate students aged 18–35 years ( $M = 22.0$ ,  $SD = 3.7$  yr.).

#### 2.1.2. Gelotophobia

The GELOPH<46> (Ruch, 2009; Ruch & Proyer, 2008a; Ruch & Titze, 1998) is a self-report measure of gelotophobia including 46 positively keyed items in a four-point answer format ('strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'). A sample item is 'When others laugh in my presence I get suspicious'. In the present study, all 46 items were administered ( $\alpha = .91$ ).

#### 2.1.3. Emotion-related skills

The 'Self-report Emotional Ability Scale' (SEAS; Freudenthaler & Neubauer, 2005) encompasses three subscales for the measurement of self-assessed intrapersonal emotion-related skills: *Perception of one's own emotions* (9 items,  $\alpha = .72$ , item example: 'I often need a lot of time to recognize my true feelings'), *Regulation of one's own emotions* (6 items,  $\alpha = .76$ , item example: 'It is easy for me to change my bad mood'), *Control over the expression of emotions* (7 items,  $\alpha = .71$ , item example: 'In certain situations I can not suppress my feelings even though I try'), and two subscales for interpersonal emotion-related skills: *Perception of the emotions of others* (11 items,  $\alpha = .84$ , item example: 'It is not hard for me to identify dishonest expressions of emotions'), *Regulation of the emotions of others* (8 items,  $\alpha = .76$ , item example: 'I can hardly change the feelings of others'). Responses are scored on a six-graded scale ranging from 'not true' to 'very true'. The scale has already been used in several other recent studies (Freudenthaler & Neubauer, 2005; Freudenthaler, Neubauer, Gabler, Scherl, & Rindermann 2008; Papousek et al., 2008).

In individual test sessions participants filled out the SEAS and four to five weeks later the GELOPH<46>.

## 3. Results

Means and standard deviations were: GELOPH<46>  $M = 69.5$  ( $s = 14.5$ ); SEAS subscales:  $M = 41.1$  ( $s = 4.7$ ),  $M = 21.6$  ( $s = 4.0$ ),  $M = 22.5$  ( $s = 5.8$ ),  $M = 48.5$  ( $s = 5.3$ ),  $M = 33.8$  ( $s = 4.6$ ), respectively.

The five SEAS subscales were entered as the independent variables in a standard multiple regression analysis with gelotophobia as the dependent variable ( $F(5,50)=3.3$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Independently of

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