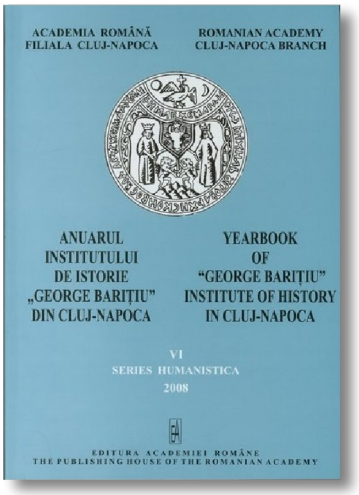

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THE FEAR OF BEING LAUGHED AT (GELOTOPHOBIA) AND PERSONALITY

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Abstract. *Gelotophobia is defined as the fear of being laughed at. First empirical studies of the concept (Ruch & Proyer, in press, 2008) show that it is a valid new construct. Furthermore, it can be assessed reliably by means of a self-report instrument (GELPH<46>). Gelotophobes interpret the laughter and smiling of other persons not in a positive way but as a weapon used to put them down. They are persistently concerned about being laughed at by others and are convinced of being ridiculous. While gelotophobia was first observed in clinical case studies, it is now considered as an individual difference phenomenon within the range of normality. We investigated whether it can be located in a comprehensive model of personality, namely, the Five Factor Model (FFM). A study investigating N = 119 participants showed that gelotophobia is high among emotionally instable introverts. Furthermore, there were lower but significant negative correlations with friendliness, openness and social desirability. However, only emotional stability and extraversion entered a stepwise regression analysis. Overall, the results fit the predictions very well and led to a revised version of a putative model of origins and consequences of gelotophobia. The concept of gelotophobia is of relevance in Romania, too. Results from the first data collection (N = 200) with a Romanian version of the short form of the self-report measure (GELOPH<15>) showed that approx. 13% of the participants exceeded a cut-off score indicating at least a slight expression of the fear of being laughed at. The Romanian version showed good psychometric properties in terms of high reliability and – as in the German and English form – a unidimensional factor solution. Based on these first promising experiences with this new concept, further studies on the fear of being laughed at in Romania are encouraged.*

Keywords: fear, five-factor model (FFM), gelotophobia, laughter

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1. **THE FEAR OF BEING LAUGHED AT AND PERSONALITY**

1.1. THE FEAR OF BEING LAUGHED AT: FROM SINGLE CASE STUDIES TO THE EMPIRICAL VERIFICATION OF THE CONCEPT

Laughter is an innate emotional expression in human beings that is associated with a distinct facial and vocal pattern (Ruch & Ekman, 2001). Though laughter is mostly related to the experience of positive emotions, there is empirical evidence that persons exist that are primarily concerned with the fear of being laughed at. In recent times, more and more effort has been spent on the scientific exploration of the concept. Though the fear of being laughed at is interpreted as an individual differences phenomenon, nowadays, the initial descriptions of the concept stem from the clinical realm.

The German psychotherapist Michael Titze published the first single case reports on the fear of being laughed at (1995, 1996, 1997). In his case-studies, Titze shows that some of his patients are persistently worried of being laughed at. Additionally, they seem to be convinced of being ridiculous and therefore laughed at for a good reason. They fear exposing themselves to others because the latter are supposedly screening them for evidence of ridiculousness, which then leads to laughter at the patient's expense. The fear of being laughed at involves at its extreme a more or less pronounced paranoid tendency, a marked sensitivity to offence, and social withdrawal (Titze, 1996). Titze coined the term *gelotophobia* (from the Greek word gelos = laughter) for describing the phenomenon.

Titze also set up several hypotheses on the origins and consequences of gelotophobia. He developed them based on his single case-observations. Titze refers to Henri Bergson (1924) in tracing gelotophobia back to repeated traumatic experiences of not being taken seriously (being laughed at or ridiculed) during childhood. His nomological net of proposed factors for the origins and consequences of gelotophobia can be illustrated best by a diagram (Ruch, 2004; see *Figure 1*).

Figure 1 summarizes the theoretical approach by Titze. It constitutes a comprehensive model of putative causes and consequences of the fear of being laughed at. A few important aspects should be highlighted. Titze (1995) describes the gelotophobes' general state to be "agelotic" (= being unable to appreciate the benefits of laughter). The origin of this attitude was, in many cases, that they experienced their early reference persons as lacking a "smiling face." The face they recollect from childhood corresponds to the petrified countenance of a sphinx: with a blank glance, being constantly disinterested and distant. Titze reckons that those may have been suffering from gelotophobic problems, as well. Thus, infancy (especially early parents-child interactions) plays an important role as a source of putative causes for the development of gelotophobia. When infants are confronted with such a "sphinx"-face, the "interpersonal bridge" (Kaufman, 1985) cannot be constructed and they

experience themselves as being unconnected to others. These children do not experience laughter as a positive means of shared identity and they cannot develop prosocial emotions, which reflect a cheerful and self-confident imperturbability. Rather, their fellows are constructed to be hostile strangers who treat them in an uncaring, cold, or sarcastic way. Derisive laughter is one weapon these strangers might use and this kind of laughter is what dissociated children fear so much.

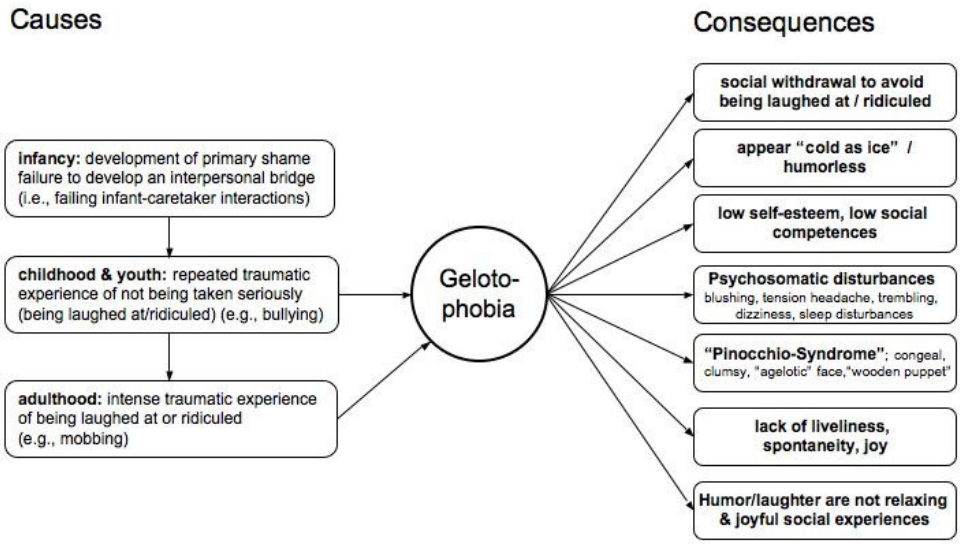

Fig. 1. A model of the putative causes and consequences of Gelotophobia as proposed by Titze (Ruch 2004)

The result is that such individuals would be unable to fit into a social group in an inconspicuous and relaxed way. Therefore, they will tend to separate from social groups (in childhood, youth, and as adults) – just to avoid appearing to others in an embarrassing or "comical" manner. Thus, these individuals do not develop adequate social skills. Shame casts them into the role of a shunned defensive character. However, it makes them ideal candidates for being the butt of mockery and derisive laughter. Consequently, the main purpose of their lives is to protect themselves from being laughed at by others.

Among the consequences that are shown in the *Figure 1* there are some which are shared with other fears (e.g., social withdrawal, low self-esteem, lack of liveliness etc.). On the other hand, there are also consequences that are specific for the fear of being laughed at. One of them is the so-called "Pinocchio Complex." Gelotophobes have not learned to appreciate laughter and even smiling in a positive way. Therefore, they respond even to positively motivated laughter and smiling in a way that indicates their fear of being put down or being otherwise humiliated by those who face them with laughter or smiling. They communicate – especially nonverbally

– feeling very uneasy thereby making a peculiar impression. Titze reports that their posture may get stiff and they develop muscular tension as a consequence of an emotional panic. The most conspicuous part of the appearance of gelotophobic patients, however, is their congeal expressive pattern and clumsy movements. Bergson (1924) compared people being laughed at or being cynically put down with wooden puppets or marionettes, and Titze (1995, 1996) referred to the well-known figure of Pinocchio to label this behavioral complex. Titze describes that their facial expression appears to be that of a mask. Their arms and legs may not move in a spontaneous way as they try to deliberately control their spontaneous body movements. Subsequently, their appearance approximates what Pinocchio was supposed to look like.

Additionally, humor and laughter are not experienced as relaxing and joyful among gelotophobes. For Titze, one of the main characteristics of gelotophobes is that they have never learned to appreciate laughter or smiling in a positive way. On the contrary, they experience it as an offensive act from their interaction partners to put them down. Laughter and smiling tend to be interpreted negatively by gelotophobes and they persistently scan their environment for new signs of laughter by others. This kind of behavior (i.e., insecure, vigilant, alert, etc.) may be seen as a new source for the mockery of others.

The model in its present form (Ruch, 2004) can be seen as a starting point for empirical research on the fear of being laughed at. However, first studies testing the hypothesis that early, intense, and repeated experiences of having been laughed at may facilitate the development of gelotophobia have been completed. Partly they point in a different direction than hypothesized and show that other factors may be relevant as well (or perhaps be even more important). For example, Ruch, Proyer, and Ventis (2008) studied the relation between remembered experiences of having been laughed at in a group of diagnosed gelotophobes by clinical experts, in a group of shame-based and non shame-based neurotics and in a group of normal controls (more than 800 participants in total). The results suggest that remembered experiences of being laughed at by parents, teachers or peers in different situations (at home, in school etc.) and time spans (childhood, youth) only accounts for differences in the expression of gelotophobia in the range of normality. Gelotophobes and shame-based neurotics reported not to have more of those experiences than the normal controls and non shame-based neurotics, their intensity and frequency did not explain individual differences in the fear of being laughed at in the group of gelotophobes and the shame-based neurotics. Similarly the results by Proyer, Hempelmann, and Ruch (2008) show that gelotophobes (not clinically diagnosed, but participants exceeding a cut-off score indicating at least a slight expression of gelotophobia; see the next section on the measurement of gelotophobia for more details) did not remember having been laughed at in the past twelve months with a higher frequency than participants that did not fear being laughed at. However, gelotophobes remember these events with a higher *intensity*. Overall, the first

empirical studies show that the assumptions regarding the putative causes are helpful (i.e., lead to partially confirmed hypotheses) but it seems as if other factors contribute to the development of gelotophobia as well – or are even more relevant for its development. For example, the relation between gelotophobia and certain personality factors might be considered as well. It might be possible that personality acts as a moderator and it is fruitful to consider them.

While Titze studies gelotophobia as a clinical phenomenon, Ruch and Proyer (in press) show that it is equally relevant as an individual difference variable among non-clinical groups. They found that 11.65% of the normal controls had scores that indicated at least a slight expression of the fear of being laughed at (data were collected in Germany). They concluded that gelotophobia should be studied in a non-clinical context, as well.

1.2. MEASUREMENT OF THE FEAR OF BEING LAUGHED AT: THE GELOPH<46>

In the study by Ruch and Proyer (2008) clinical experts familiar with the concept did the assessment of gelotophobia. The fear of being laughed at was also assessed in experimental settings and by means of a semi-projective test (see Ruch, Altfreder, & Proyer, 2008). However, for many research purposes an economic self-report measure is the method of choice.

Items were derived from descriptions of the experiential world of gelotophobes. These statements were included in the GELOPH<46> (Ruch & Titze, 1998). While some of the items formulated are referring particularly to the gelotophobic symptomatology, others are prevalent among gelotophobes but not specifically restricted to them; i.e., might be shared with other groups. Additionally, eight facets of gelotophobia were formulated (derived from Titze, 1995, 1996, 1997) and the items were assigned to the facets. The facets comprise (for each facet a typical statement is given in brackets): Paranoid sensitivity towards mockery by others (e.g., “When they laugh in my presence I get suspicious”), fear of the humor of others (e.g., “Others find pleasure in putting me to the spot”), critical self-consciousness of the own body (e.g., “When giving someone a smile I get the feeling that my facial muscles get cramped”), social withdrawal (e.g., “When I have made an embarrassing impression somewhere, I shun this place consequently”), general response to the smiling and laughter of others (e.g., “In the company of cheerful people I often feel uneasy because I fear not to be able to keep up with them”), discouragement and envy when comparing with the humor competence of others (e.g., “With quick-witted and humorous people I feel inferior”), and traumatizing experiences with laughter and mockery in the past (e.g., “During puberty I have avoided contact to peers in order not to get teased by them”). These facets comprise core symptoms of gelotophobia and

symptoms that are shared with other concepts; for example, social withdrawal that is also found in social phobics. Ruch and Proyer (2008) showed that the results from the self-report instrument converge well with the diagnosis by clinical experts. The 46 items show good psychometric properties in terms of a high reliability. Thus, it is concluded that the instrument is a valid, reliable, and economic measure for the fear of being laughed at.

In a recent study a 15-item short version of the self-report instrument was derived (Ruch & Proyer, in press). The criteria for the selection of the items were (1) prototypicality ratings from experts familiar with the concept, (2) the loadings on the first factor in a group of clinically diagnosed gelotophobes (≥ .50) and a group of normal controls (≥ .40), (3) high prevalence rates (mean scores ≥ 2.50) in a group of diagnosed gelotophobes and low prevalence rates in a group of normal controls (mean scores ≤ 2.50), (4) items were chosen to distinguish between high-scoring gelotophobes, shame-bound neurotics, non shame-bound neurotics, and normal controls (by means of their correlation with the first axis from a discriminant analysis), (5) only items with a corrected item total correlation exceeding .40 were considered, and it was requested that the final solution should show a high reliability (> .80). The final solution yielded a high reliability (alpha = .93 for the total sample). The items reflect the core symptoms of gelotophobia. Furthermore, it was shown that the results from this self-report instrument converged very well with the ratings from the clinical experts.

1.3. EXAMINING THE RELATION BETWEEN THE FEAR OF BEING LAUGHED AT AND PERSONALITY: THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The overview presented in the previous section suggests that gelotophobia should be studied as an individual differences variable in connection with comprehensive models of personality. Thus, we will examine the location of gelotophobia in the Five Factor Model (FFM) of personality.

Neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness are the personality traits that are organized hierarchically in the Five Factor Model of personality (Costa & McCrae, 1992a; Goldberg, 1993; McCrae & John, 1992). The factors were derived from a psycho-lexical approach. They are supposed to give a comprehensive account of personality. Several authors have defined specific dimensions or facets as first order factors with the big five dimensions as second order factors. The number of these facets varies from author to author. For example, Costa and McCrae (1992b) describe six facets for each factor in their NEO-PI-R while Caprara, Barbaranelli, Borgogni, and Perugini (1993) specify two facets per factor.

This kind of research is promising since literature shows some stable relations between anxiety (on different levels) and personality. Overall, current literature suggests that there is a strong relationship between scores in neuroticism

(high) and extraversion (low) to the diagnosis of social phobia. Furthermore, the scores are also related to agreeableness, but less strongly so (e.g., Bienvenu & Stein, 2003; Bienvenu, Nestadt, Samuels, Costa, Howard, & Eaton, 2001; Bienvenu, Samuels, Costa, Reti, Eaton, & Nestadt, 2004; Brandes & Bienvenu, 2006; Trull & Sher, 1994). Norton, Cox, Hewitt, and McLeod (1997) used a measure of anxiety in social interaction situations that was positively related to neuroticism, and negatively related to extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness from the FFM.

Based on the descriptions in *Figure 1* gelotophobes can be predicted as being introverted (e.g., social withdrawal, lack of liveliness, spontaneity, and joy) and emotionally instable (e.g., low self-esteem, psychosomatic disturbances). Indeed, laughing at someone is aimed to repel deviant behavior (leading to inhibition of that behavior) and it will upset people (i.e., induce strong negative emotions alarming the individual about their wrongdoing). Hence individuals with repeated traumatic experiences of being laughed at might have accentuated these personality traits. The use of a scale measuring the five factor model will help to determine whether gelotophobia additionally relates to agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness to experience.

However, one might also argue that everyone gets often laughed at during his or her lives but only few develop gelotophobia. Hence, it might be more important whether or not one is vulnerable to the effects of being laughed at and to take those instances more seriously. For example, people being prone to shame will suffer more from events of being laughed at, experience them more intensely and be more likely to develop gelotophobia. Thus, it might well be that introverted instable people perceive events of being laughed at more as punishment (and experience it as more unpleasant) than the stable extraverts do.

In sum, it should be highlighted that there are two lines of thinking about a relationship between gelotophobia and personality. Firstly, according to Titze one would hypothesize that repeated traumatic events of being laughed at during childhood and adolescence affects the personality development. In this line of thinking, personality changes as a consequence of gelotophobia. Secondly, it is argued that predispositions for gelotophobia exist which interact with eliciting conditions. Thus, personality traits determine who will cope well with incidences of being laughed at and who will develop the symptoms described.

While both lines of thinking suggest a relationship with personality traits, only a longitudinal design would allow the drawing of inferences about causality. However, as a first step, determining the pattern of correlations will suffice leaving the study of causality for later studies. Thus, the prime aim of the study presented in the next section is to localize gelotophobia in the Five Factor Model (FFM) of personality.

1.4. AN EMPIRICAL STUDY ON THE RELATION BETWEEN GELOTOPHOBIA AND THE FIVE FACTOR MODEL (FFM) OF PERSONALITY

Subjects

The sample consists of $N = 119$ students ($M = 24.51$, $SD = 5.75$) between 17 and 50 years. The male : female ratio is about 1 : 1 with 58 males (48.74 %) and 61 females (51.26 %).

Instruments

The *GELOPH<46>* (Ruch & Titze, 1998) is a 46-item questionnaire for the subjective assessment of gelotophobia. All items are positively keyed and they use a four-point answer scale (1 = strongly disagree; 2 = moderately disagree; 3 = moderately agree; 4 = strongly agree). Scores for each of the eight facets were computed. All analyses were made for the facets separately and for a total score comprising all 46-items. In the Ruch and Proyer (2008, in press) study the GELOPH<46> has proven its usefulness and validity for the subjective assessment of gelotophobia. Further evidence on its validity and usefulness can be retrieved in Ruch (2008).

The *Big Five Questionnaire* (BFQ; Caprara, Barbaranelli, Borgogni, & Perugini, 1993) is a 132 items questionnaire in a five-point answer format measuring five domains of personality, plus a lie scale. The names of the domains are energy (or extraversion), friendliness (or agreeableness), conscientiousness, emotional stability, and openness. An overview on studies supporting the validity of the instrument is given in Barbaranelli and Caprara (2002).

Procedure

The student samples were recruited by means of pamphlets. They were tested individually and were paid for their services. Testing took place in laboratory rooms in the university.

Results

The results show that 10% of the participants were exceeding the first cut-off point (mean score > 2.5) and 3% exceeded the second cut-off point (mean score > 3.0) indicating a pronounced gelotophobic symptomatology. (The rationale behind the cut-off points is described in detail in Ruch and Proyer, in press). In total 13 % of the participants showed at least a slight expression of gelotophobia. In order to examine the personality correlates of gelotophobia, the total score and facets of gelotophobia were correlated with the Big Five Questionnaire. The results regarding the correlations between the fear of being laughed at and personality are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 shows that gelotophobes primarily described themselves as emotionally instable and introverted (i.e., low in energy). Furthermore, there was a negative correlation with friendliness implying that gelotophobes tended to

describe themselves as being hostile. Finally, there were small negative correlations with openness to new experiences and the Lie scale. Gelotophobia was uncorrelated from conscientiousness. Stepwise multiple regressions with the content scales of the BFQ as predictors and the Geloph total score yielded a multiple correlation of .67 (F[2,103] = 41.96; $p < .0001$). Only extraversion (i.e., energy) and emotional stability entered the equation. The predictive power of (low) friendliness and (low) openness disappeared once the effects of extraversion and emotional stability were partialled out.

Table 1

Correlations Between Gelotophobia and the Scales of the Big Five Inventory (BFQ)

	E	*F*	*C*	*S*	*O*	*L*
Total	-.49***	-.29***	-.15	-.53***	-.21*	-.20*
F1	-.44***	-.31***	-.18*	-.46***	-.19*	-.22*
F2	-.33***	-.29***	-.10	-.42***	-.22*	-.12*
F3	-.50***	-.24**	-.10	-.52***	-.17	-.21*
F4	-.46***	-.18*	-.19*	-.36***	-.09	-.20*
F5	-.45***	-.31***	-.18*	-.47***	-.22*	-.24**
F6	-.46***	-.16	-.10	-.55***	-.20*	-.18*
F7	-.45***	-.26**	-.14	-.52***	-.16	-.16
F8	-.35***	-.27**	-.02	-.45***	-.24**	.00

Note. N = 111-116. E = energy, F = friendliness, C = conscientiousness, S = emotional stability, and O = openness. L = lying. F1 = paranoid sensitivity towards mockery of others; F2 = fear of the humor of others; F3 = critical self-consciousness of the own body; F4 = critical self-consciousness of the own verbal and non-verbal communicative functions; F5 = social withdrawal; F6 = general response to the smiling & laughter of others; F7 = discouragement and envy when comparing with the humor competence of others; F8 = traumatizing experiences with laughter in the past.
*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$.

While the facets of gelotophobia yielded unique correlational profiles, the results also showed that they did not convey much more information that exceeded the information contained in the total score of all 46 items. This indicated that the results should be interpreted best for the total score while the single facets were not of further relevance.

Discussion

The study offered several interesting findings relevant to the appraisal of the gelotophobic personality. Foremost, it showed that it was possible to locate gelotophobia in a comprehensive model of personality, namely the Five Factor Model of Personality (FFM); the results clearly indicate that gelotophobia as an

individual differences variable is predictably related to personality in a sample of healthy adults (student sample). In terms of the FFM, gelotophobes can be described as introverted and emotionally instable, with a tendency to be hostile and not open to new experiences. They answered frankly and no answer distortions in terms of social desirable answers were found. However, not all of the variance is accounted for by personality. Application of stepwise multiple regression analysis with the personality inventories as predictors and the total score from the list of statements as a criterion shows that the BFQ explains 44% of the variance (introversion, emotional instability). Given that only 13% of the participants can be classified as gelotophobes, it seems unlikely that having been laughed at shaped personality. Rather it is likely that personality is, at least in part, a determinant of the perception of being laughed at and a moderator of its effects. Nevertheless, longitudinal studies are needed to determine the direction of causality.

No apparent differences among the facets of gelotophobia were found suggesting that these facets do contribute equally well. Additionally, the results show that the relevant facet of a paranoid sensitivity towards mockery of others does not largely exceed the correlations found for other facets. This result underscores the homogeneity of the gelotophobia statements. Thus, the facets can be omitted in future studies and preferably the total score should be interpreted. Moreover, it is suggested that that the 15-item version should be used for studies on the fear of being laughed at in future studies (Ruch & Proyer, in press; see the Appendix).

The current study is embedded in a broader research program to explore the experiential world of gelotophobes. A first step is the further examination of the gelotophobia-personality relation by means of other comprehensive models of personality (e.g., the Eysenckian PEN-model; Eysenck & Eysenck, 1985). For further studies predictions can be made not only regarding personality, but also to the gelotophobes' proneness to certain emotions (e.g., shame), their stance towards humor and laughter, or their expressive pattern (facial and movement). Preliminary studies show that among gelotophobes there is a proneness to experience shame and fear during ordinary weeks, as well as having experienced a higher intensity of shame in ones past compared to others (Ruch, 2004). One limitation of the prior studies is that the concept was derived and validated only with German samples. Therefore, for future studies a multi-national approach for the examination of gelotophobia is endorsed. At the moment we have 40 different language versions of the GELOPH that are well suited for the subjective assessment of gelotophobia. A first group of researchers from Romania has joined the international research team[4] and provided initial data for an evaluation of the usefulness of the Romanian language version of the scale.

[4] The website of the project can be retrieved from http://www.psychologie.uzh.ch/perspsy/gelotophobia/

2. THE FEAR OF BEING LAUGHED AT IN ROMANIA

Currently, the Zurich-based authors are conducting a large multinational study on gelotophobia involving approximately 80 countries. The study is aimed at an examination of the question whether the fear of being laughed at can be reliably assessed in different regions, nations, and languages of the world by means of a self-report instrument. For this study data were also collected in Romania. The results for this sample will be presented in more detail and discussed with respect to its potential use in studies on gelotophobia in Romania.

Sample

A total of $N = 200$ participants ($n = 100$ males, $n = 100$ females) completed a self-report instrument for the subjective assessment of gelotophobia used in the study described above. Their mean age was 24.20 years (standard deviation = 8.56) with a range from 18 to 70 years. Most of them were not in a relationship ($n = 128$). In previous studies, gelotophobia was not related to age or sex not to other variables (including marital status, educational level, or size of the town the people live in). Therefore, it was decided that none of these variables needed to be considered specifically for the data collection.

Procedure and instrument

The data consisted primarily of university students from the "Dunarea de Jos" University of Galați. The participants were not paid for their services. The third author, a member of the Department of Modern Applied Languages translated the GELOPH<46> to Romanian. The answer format and instruction were identical with the German version that was used for the study described in the previous section. The procedure for the translation was standardized by the Zurich-based research group and included a translation-back-translation routine. An independent person did the back-translation. The translation and back-translation were compared and a final version was suggested. Following the suggestions by Ruch and Proyer (in press) the results for the GELOPH will be presented for its 15-item short form.

Results

First, a principal components analysis was computed for the 15 items and there was one strong first factor. The eigenvalues were 4.57, 1.40, 1.15, and 1.08, respectively. The loadings of the items on the first factor ranged between .34 (item 6) and .72 (item 10; with the exception of item 7 with a loading of .07). The median of the loading on the first factor was .54. The item 7 is of special interest. In the initial translation that was used for the data collection the translation indicated believing to make involuntarily an *amusing* impression on others. This was probably too positively connoted for the participants (in the sense of being an entertaining person for the others). Thus, it was decided to rephrase the item so that the item content of believing that one involuntarily gives a different impression to others than intended (i.e., a ridiculous impression). The questionnaire in the Appendix contains already the rephrased version.

In a next step the two answer categories indicating agreement to an item (i.e., "agree" and "strongly agree") were taken together and the frequency of the endorsement to each item was computed. The average item endorsement was 25.87% and the range was between 2.50% (item 15) and 65.50% (item 6). Thus, the item dealing with controlling oneself in order not to attract negative attention from others and hence make a ridiculous impression had the highest agreement rates of all items. The first results from the multinational study suggested that in all countries there was a similar average item endorsement but that the range between highest and lowest item endorsement was generally lower in the most countries.

Further on, we investigated how many gelotophobes were in the sample. Ruch and Proyer (in press) suggested differentiating between slight, pronounced, and extreme expressions of gelotophobia. They derived cut-off scores for each of these categories empirically. In the present sample there were 13.00% of the participants that exceeded the score indicating that gelotophobic symptoms apply (i.e., a mean score ≥ 2.50; see Ruch & Proyer for more information on the cut-off scores). 9.00% were characterized with slight and 4.00% with pronounced expressions of the fear of being laughed at. None of the participants exceeded the last cut-off score (i.e., extreme gelotophobia).

The 15 items showed high internal consistency; the alpha coefficient was .82. In a next step, the corrected item total correlations and the correlations of each item and the total score with age, sex, and marital status were computed (see Table 2).

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics, Corrected Item Total Correlations, and Correlations

	M	*SD*	*CITC*	*Age*	*Sex*	*Ms*
Item 1	1.89	0.94	.42	-.06	.22**	-.10
Item 2	1.73	0.95	.45	-.01	.24**	-.11
Item 3	1.70	0.89	.60	-.14	.26**	-.16*
Item 4	1.45	0.79	.36	.09	.11	-.15*
Item 5	1.76	0.86	.47	.08	.12	.04
Item 6	2.80	1.06	.28	-.03	.18	-.07
Item 7	2.39	1.04	.08	-.11	-.14	.05
Item 8	1.75	0.96	.41	.05	.19**	-.07
Item 9	2.24	1.04	.52	.07	.21**	.00
Item 10	2.07	1.04	.62	-.05	.39**	-.10
Item 11	1.90	0.95	.48	.06	.13	-.01
Item 12	1.86	0.96	.57	.09	.33**	.01
Item 13	1.77	0.96	.37	-.03	-.01	-.03
Item 14	1.63	0.79	.38	-.13	.17*	-.06
Item 15	1.86	0.95	.55	.13	.30**	.05
Total	1.92	0.50	--	-.02	.34**	-.10

Note. $N = 200$. *M* = mean, *SD* = standard deviation; *CITC* = corrected item-total correlation; *Age* = correlation with age, *Sex* = correlation with *sex* (1 = males, 2 = females), *Ms* = correlation with marital status (1 = single; 2 = in a relationship).
*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

Table 2 shows that females scored higher than men in the Romanian 15-item version. Neither age nor marital status (single vs. in a relation) was related to gelotophobia. The corrected item-total correlations ranged from .08 to .62 with a median of .45. The reason for the low corrected item total correlation for item 7 is due to an ambiguous formulation in the original form of the questionnaire (the Appendix already contains the revised version).

Discussion

The results indicate that the fear of being laughed at can be assessed in a reliable and economic way with the Romanian language version. The pattern of loadings on the first factor is highly similar to the original German version. Generally, the results converge well with previous findings from the German-speaking world. However, there is one exception. In most of the samples we have encountered so far there are no relations to gender. In Romania, women scored higher in gelotophobia than men did. One possible explanation would be that the expectations from the society towards women in the sense of not to look or behave ridiculous (they were brought up) has an impact on the expression of the fear of being laughed at – yet this hypothesis needs to be tested empirically and it is up to future research projects to examine whether this relation is stable or not and what explanations might apply.

The inspection of the endorsements to single items showed that the Romanian participants were relatively unconcerned from having a stiff posture and losing their ability to behave adequately when they have made a fool of themselves (lowest endorsement to an item of the GELOPH). Conversely, controlling oneself strongly not to attract negative attention from others and making a ridiculous impression yielded the highest endorsement for all items. Also, the comparatively high range between highest and lowest average item endorsement was interesting. This is important since it shows what factors might be of relevance for the expression of gelotophobia in Romania. These first results suggest for example that controlling oneself strongly for not being laughed at plays an important role (as a kind of “unwritten law”). Follow-up studies in Romania are needed for further discussion of this topic.

Furthermore, 13% of the participants (mostly university students) exceed the cut off score that indicates at least a slight expression of gelotophobia. Thus, the fear of being laughed at is a relevant phenomenon in Romania well worth for further investigations.

3. OUTLOOK

Currently, the Zurich-based authors complete a variety of new studies on the fear of being laughed at (see Ruch, in press). Among these there are, for example, studies dealing with experimental verifications of the concept, the frequency and

intensity with which gelotophobes experience having been laughed at in the past year, the humor of gelotophobes, a multi-national comparison in the fear of being laughed at, the relation to character strengths and intelligence (self-estimated and assessed via psychometric tests). Teams in England and Italy have also started investigating the phenomenon. Their results are very promising. For example, Tracey Platt (in press) showed that gelotophobes primarily react with shame and fear in their emotional responses to ridicule and good-natured teasing (interestingly, gelotophobes also react with the experience of negative emotions – primarily shame, fear, and anger – to good-natured teasing). Forabosco, Ruch, and Nucera (in press; Forabosco, Mazzotti Drei, & Missiroli, 2006) conducted a study in a clinical realm. They showed that gelotophobia was more prevalent among patients with personality disorders and schizophrenic disorders than among normal controls. Also, they found that the number of years spent in psychiatric care was positively related to gelotophobia.

The scientific study of gelotophobia as a new individual difference phenomenon has just recently begun and the first results are very encouraging. Overall, the prevalence rates found in the first data collection in Romania indicate that the concept is of relevance here, as well.

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APPENDIX: ROMANIAN VERSION OF THE GELOPH

GELOPH<15>

Cod: _____.....Vârsta: |__|__| Sex: O M O F

Sunteţi: O singur/-ă O trăiţi împreună cu o persoană fără a fi legal căsătoriţi O căsătorit/-ă O divorţat/-ă O vaduv/-ă

Instrucţiuni:

Următoarele afirmaţii se referă la sentimentele, acţiunile şi concepţiile dvs., în general. Descrieţi comportamentul şi atitudinile dvs. obişnuite, marcând cu x în dreptul uneia dintre cele patru căsuţe. Folosiţi următoarea scară:

(1) nu sunt deloc de acord
(2) nu prea sunt de acord
(3) sunt oarecum de acord
(4) sunt profund de acord

De exemplu:

Sunt o persoană veselă. (1) (2) (3) (4)

Dacă sunteţi întru totul de acord cu această afirmaţie, adică, dacă **în general** sunteţi o persoană veselă, **bifaţi cifra (4)**. Dacă această afirmaţie nu se aplică în cazul dvs., adică, **de obicei** *nu* sunteţi o persoană veselă, **bifaţi cifra (1).** Dacă vi se pare dificil să răspundeţi la o anumită întrebare, alegeţi răspunsul care vi se potriveşte **cel mai bine**.

Răspundeţi la toate întrebările, nu omiteţi niciuna

1	Când se râde în prezenţa mea devin suspicios/suspicioasă.	(1) (2) (3) (4)
2	Evit să mă manifest în public pentru că mi-e teamă ca ceilalţi să nu-şi dea seama de nesiguranţa mea şi să râdă de mine.	(1) (2) (3) (4)
3	Când persoane necunoscute râd în prezenţa mea consider că o fac pe seama mea.	(1) (2) (3) (4)
4	Îmi este greu să păstrez contactul vizual cu ceilalţi pentru că mă tem să nu fiu judecat/ă greşit.	(1) (2) (3) (4)
5	Când alţii glumesc pe seama mea, mă simt paralizat/-ă.	(1) (2) (3) (4)
6	Mă controlez ca să nu fac o impresie proastă şi să nu mă fac de râs.	(1) (2) (3) (4)
7	Cred că, involuntar, le par celorlalţi ridicol/caraghios.	(1) (2) (3) (4)
8	Deşi deseori mă simt singur/-ă, tind să nu mă implic în activităţi sociale ca să nu mă fac de râs.	(1) (2) (3) (4)
9	Când m-am făcut de râs într-un anumit loc, evit apoi acel loc.	(1) (2) (3) (4)
10	Dacă nu mi-ar fi teamă să nu mă fac de râs, aş vorbi mai des în public.	(1) (2) (3) (4)
11	Dacă cineva m-a tachinat în trecut, nu mai vreau să am de-a face cu el/ea.	(1) (2) (3) (4)
12	Mă refac greu dacă s-a râs pe seama mea.	(1) (2) (3) (4)
13	Mă simt stânjenit/-ă când dansez pentru că sunt convins/-ă că cei care mă privesc mă consideră caraghios/caraghioasă.	(1) (2) (3) (4)
14	Atunci când nu mă arăt preocupat, riscul este mai mare ca să atrag atenţia asupra mea şi să pară că mă comport ciudat.	(1) (2) (3) (4)
15	Când m-am făcut de râs în faţa celorlalţi, mă crispez şi-mi pierd capacitatea de a mă comporta cum se cuvine.	(1) (2) (3) (4)

Verificaţi dacă aţi completat toate întrebările.