

# Gelotophobia, self-presentation styles, and psychological gender

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## **Abstract**

The main research objective was to analyse the relationships between gelotophobia (Ruch & Proyer, 2008a) and self-presentation styles (based on Wojciszke, 2002a; see also Arkin, 1981; Tedeschi & Lindskold, 1976) as well as psychological gender (Bem, 1993). A sample of 200 persons (mostly students) completed the *GELOPH<15>*, Wojciszke's (2002a) *Self-presentation Style Questionnaire*, and Kuczyńska's (1992) *Sex Role Inventory* (i.e., the Polish version of Bem's Sex Role Inventory; Bem, 1974). Gelotophobes used primarily self-depreciation self-presentation styles and tended to display a higher number of such strategies in total. Furthermore, they did not use self-promoting self-presentation. Additionally, there was a negative relation to masculine psychological gender. In a regression analysis, self-depreciation and masculinity (negatively) turned out to be potent predictors of the fear of being laughed at (explaining about 40 %). Those with a feminine psychological gender scored higher in gelotophobia than those with masculine, androgynous or undifferentiated gender. Overall, both psychological gender and self-presentation styles were useful variables in the description of gelotophobes.

Key words: gelotophobia, fear of being laughed at, self-presentation style, self-promotion, self-depreciation, psychological gender

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Earlier studies on gelotophobia (see Ruch, 2009) provide hints that gelotophobes seem to be particularly sensitive to the impressions that they make on others. Their high concentration on self-presentation and the preoccupation with it gives rise to a vigilant self-observation and strict self-control. Gelotophobes are careful of their appearance and behavior not to give any rational grounds for unfavorable judgments. The consequences of gelotophobia have been described by a lack of spontaneity, joy, liveliness, affection, empathy; emotional numbness, and callousness, creating an impression of being cold and indifferent in interpersonal contacts. Furthermore, they do not derive pleasure from laughter that is shared with others and which consolidates common experiences. On the contrary, they even misread laughter associated with playful teasing for derisive laughter (Platt, 2008). For a summary on causes and consequences of the fear of being laughed at see the descriptions given in Titze (2009) and the graphical summary of the model (as presented in Ruch & Proyer, 2008a).

In numerous studies, gelotophobia turned out to be unrelated to *biological gender* (e.g., Kazarian, Ruch, & Proyer, 2009; Ruch, 2009; Ruch & Proyer, 2008ab). However, those studies did not consider the culturally conditioned gender identity, which may or may not coincide with the biological gender. Therefore, the present study will take the *psychological gender* of the participants into account as well. The latter is understood as a system of mental traits connected with gender that is shaped from early childhood by participation in social life (Kuczyńska, 1992). The concept of psychological gender is based on the gender schema theory of Bem (1993). According to this theory, sex-typing is conditioned by cultural definitions of *femininity* and *masculinity*. The latter delineate gender roles – models of behavior that should be respected if one wants to be accepted. Bem (1993) suggests that masculinity and femininity constitute two separate dimensions of personality on the basis of which an individual has to define for him-/herself. Inter-individual differences in this area address, among others, the tendency to endorse traits that are consistent with the feminine or masculine stereotype (or the disagreement with those stereotypes). Therefore, masculinity can be addressed when the concept of oneself is shaped on the social definitions of masculinity without the attribution of traits that are universally acknowledged as feminine. Femininity can be spoken of when someone identifies with the properties perceived as typically female with the absence of traits corresponding to the masculine stereotype. Androgyny is when a person simultaneously attributes categories to her-/himself that are stereotypically both masculine and feminine. Undifferentiated gender is when there is no clear identification with neither feminine nor masculine characteristics. Polish students (Kuczyńska, 1992) considered the following characteristics to be stereotypical masculine traits: dominance, independence, rivalry, success orientation, can-do spirit, ease in making decisions, arrogance, brusqueness, good physical condition, a sense of humor, being convincing, self-assurance, self-sufficiency, emotionally unrevealing, comfort loving, open to the world, experimentation in sexual life, and cunningness. Attributes that characterized stereotypically feminine traits were sensitivity (also to other people's affairs), protectiveness, thoughtfulness, involvement in the affairs of the milieu, gentleness, flirtatiousness, care and attention paid to one's own appearance, economical, a sense of aesthetics, grouchiness, affection,

emotionality, the ability to make sacrifices, delicateness, naivety, modesty, and reflectivity.

Apart from the gelotophobia construct of Ruch and Proyer (2008a) and Bem's (1993) gender schema theory, the present study focuses on *self-presentation style* concepts (Arkin, 1981; Tedeschi & Lindskold, 1976). The latter follows the approach of Wojciszke (2002a). The term self-presentation is defined as the process of directing the impression that a person makes on others – creating and controlling it; in other words, all the actions undertaken in order to communicate images of oneself to the partners of the interaction (Arkin, 1981; Goffman, 1959; Leary, 1996; Tedeschi & Lindskold, 1976). Classical theories of self-presentation assume the existence of two such styles: the *assertive* or *acquisitive* and *defensive* or *protective* style (see Arkin, 1981; Tedeschi & Lindskold, 1976). The assertive style consists of actions that are aimed at creating a very concrete, desired image of oneself in the eyes of others, which will lead to winning social approval. The defensive style comprises protective, careful forms of action. The main objective of the latter style is avoiding or minimizing disapproval from others (e.g., the social milieu; see Arkin, 1981; Schütz, 1998; Tedeschi & Lindskold, 1976).

Wojciszke (2002a), creating his own concept of self-presentation styles, based his theory on the two previously presented self-presentation styles (e.g., Arkin, 1981). The foundations of his theory lie in the idea of tactical self-presentation, which is divided into two styles: *Self-promotion* (acquisitive-assertive) and *self-depreciation* (avoiding-defensive). Self-promotion consists of presenting oneself as a person, who is competent, possesses extensive knowledge, and who is successful in her actions. It is related to a high level of self-esteem, achievement motivation, rivalry as a conflict resolving style and joy as the dominant emotional state as well as a high sense of effectiveness of one's actions (Wojciszke, 2000a). Self-depreciation depends on creating one's own image as a person who is incompetent, helpless, insecure, and responsible for one's own, numerous failures (and if successful, then the successes are independent from the person). This is connected with avoiding self-representation risk in order to minimize the experience of shame and/or embarrassment and on concentrating on combating one's own faults. It is positively connected with a low self-esteem, adaptation as a conflict resolving style as well as sadness and a sense of guilt as the experienced emotional states (Wojciszke, 2002ab).

The self-presentation theory of social anxiety (Leary, 1996; Leary & Kowalski, 1995) suggests that social anxiety arises when people are motivated to have a desired (not necessarily positive, but merely specific) impression, but doubt whether they will be able to achieve this goal. Recent studies by Carretero-Dios, Ruch, Agudelo, Platt, and Proyer (*Psychological Test and Assessment Modeling*, issue 1-2010) and Edwards, Martin, and Dozois (*Psychological Test and Assessment Modeling*, issue 1-2010) suggest an overlap between gelotophobia and social anxiety without gelotophobia being redundant to this related concept. It might be that causes of gelotophobia could be traced back to interpersonal relations wherein gelotophobes anticipate that they will be incapable of making a specific self-presentational impression. It can be expected that the majority of social circumstances have similar connotations for them due to the nature of their sensitivity to humor-related interactions (e.g., laughter, smiling) – perceiving contacts with others as threats that have a potential for eliciting shame or embarrassment (e.g., Ruch, 2009;

Ruch & Proyer, 2008a; Titze, 2009). An analogous experience of gelotophobes in social situations is most likely connected with the use of defensive self-presentation tactics to minimize the situation's negative impact on the self-presentation image being created in them. The above assumption has been confirmed in the studies of Renner and Heydasch (2010, this issue), who found a positive and moderately strong correlation between gelotophobia and the protective style as well as a weak and negative correlation with the acquisitive and histrionic self-presentation styles.

It is known that the degree of individual autonomy significantly differentiates the number of self-presentation strategies used (Lewis & Neighbors, 2005). More independent persons use a significantly smaller number of strategies. Moreover, individuals that are extremely dependent in comparison to more autonomous ones use more strategies that have unfavorable consequences (e.g., excuses, apologizing, or self-degradation). This gives rise to the assumption that gelotophobes will have a similar pattern of self-presentation styles.

### **Aims of the present study**

The main objective of the present study was threefold. Firstly, the relations between gelotophobia and self-presentation styles were examined. As described above, it was expected that gelotophobes show a strong endorsement to self-presentation styles. Secondly, a positive relation between gelotophobia and self-depreciation (as a defensive strategy), and a negative one between the fear of being laughed at and self-promotion style were expected. Thirdly, the study provides the first data on the relation between the fear of being laughed at and psychological gender. Gelotophobes were expected not to display psychological masculinity.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

#### *Sample*

The study tested 200 persons (160 women and 40 men) – most of which were students of Master's and post-graduate courses at the Warsaw University and the Warsaw University of Technology. The age of the respondents varied from 19 to 53 years old ( $M = 25.64$ ,  $SD = 6.85$ ).

### **Instruments**

The *GELOPH <15>* (Ruch & Proyer, 2008b) is a questionnaire for the subjective assessment of gelotophobia. It consists of 15 items and answers are given on a 4-point scale (1 = "strongly disagree" to 4 = "strongly agree". A sample item is "When others laugh in my

presence I get suspicious". The *GELOPH <15>* has been translated to Polish for the Proyer et al. (2009) multinational study and proved its usefulness there. The questionnaire yielded a high reliability coefficient (Cronbach alpha) in the present study ( $\alpha = .88$ ).

The *Self-Presentation Style Questionnaire (SSQ)* of Wojciszke (2002a) was used for assessing self-promotion, self-depreciation, and a general score for self-presentation styles. The questionnaire consists of 30 items (15 for each of the two scales). Sample items are "I accentuate my abilities" (self-promotion) and "I downgrade the importance of my achievements" (self-depreciation). Answers are given on a 5-point scale (1 = "never" to 5 = "very often"). Reliability coefficients were high in the present sample ( $\alpha = .79$  for self-promotion and  $\alpha = .87$  for self-depreciation).

The *Inventory of Psychological Gender (IPG)*; Kuczyńska; 1992) is the Polish correspondent of the *Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI)*; Bem, 1974). The questionnaire consists of 35 items that reflect gender-specific stereotypes (15 for "Femininity", 15 for "Masculinity" and five neutral ones – referring to traits equally attributed to women and men). Answers are given on a 5-point scale (1 = "I am completely unlike this" to 5 = "This is exactly what I am like"). The scoring key allows computing four qualitatively different gender categories: (1) Scores from 0 to 48 on the masculinity scale along with scores from 0 to 51 on the femininity scale set up the "undifferentiated" gender group; (2) scores from 0 to 48 on the masculinity scale and 52 to 75 on the femininity scale defines "feminine" gender; (3) scores between 49 and 75 on the masculinity scale and 0 and 51 on the femininity scale define "masculine" gender; and (4) scores from 49 to 75 on the masculine scale and 52 to 75 on the feminine scale indicate "androgynous gender" group. Previous studies indicate good psychometric properties for the IPG. The IPQ yielded high reliability coefficients (Kuder-Richardson) with .78 for Masculinity and .79 for Femininity.

## Procedure

The study was conducted from February to March 2008. The questionnaires were completed in the following order: *IPG*, *SSQ*, and *GELOPH <15>*. Participants were recruited via pamphlets at the university. They were not paid for their services but upon request, they could receive feedback on their results.

## Results

The application of the cut-off scores for the *GELOPH<15>* (as suggested by Ruch & Proyer, 2008b) indicated that 4.5 % of the participants were gelotophobes (2.5 % with a slight and 1 % with a marked expression). Gelotophobia was unrelated to the age ( $r = .01$ ,  $p = .897$ ) and biological gender of the participants ( $r = -.05$ ,  $p = .476$ ). The scoring of the IPG showed that 27 persons were in the undifferentiated gender-group, 68 were feminine, 24 masculine, and 81 androgynous. Descriptive statistics were computed (mean, standard deviation, minima, maxima, skewness and kurtosis) for all variables that entered the study (see Table 1).

**Table 1:**  
Descriptive Statistics for Gelotophobia, Psychological Gender, and Self-presentation Styles.

Variables	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Gelotophobia	1.00	3.87	1.68	0.47	0.96	2.04
<i>Psychological gender</i>						
Femininity	33.00	70.00	55.24	6.64	-0.49	0.27
Masculinity	26.00	66.00	49.05	8.24	-0.20	0.23
<i>Self-presentation style</i>						
Self-promotion	22.00	68.00	46.45	7.71	-0.07	-0.03
Self-depreciation	18.00	64.00	39.89	8.54	0.13	-0.26
Total self-presentation	61.00	110.00	86.34	9.93	-0.11	-0.43

Note. N = 200.

Table 1 shows that all variables were normally distributed. However, the gelotophobia scores were positively skewed indicating that less people yielded high scores in the variable. Given the sample size and the distribution of the other variables, Pearson correlation coefficients were used for analyzing the data. In accordance with expectations, gelotophobia and self-depreciation were significantly positively correlated ( $r = .54, p < .01$ ), while gelotophobia and the total self-presentation styles were weaker but also positively correlated ( $r = .31, p < .01$ ). Moreover, a weak and negative relationship was found between gelotophobia and self-promotion as a style ( $r = -.19, p < .01$ ). For psychological gender, there was a strong and negative relationship between gelotophobia and masculinity ( $r = -.54, p < .01$ ) but the fear of being laughed at existed widely independently from femininity ( $r = .14, p = .057$ ).

For a more detailed description of the relations to psychological gender, a multiple stepwise forward regression analysis was conducted with gelotophobia as the dependent variable and the two self-presentation styles and masculinity and femininity as predictors. The multiple correlation coefficient for the final model was  $R^2 = .40$  ( $F[2, 197] = 65.80, p < .001$ ). Table 2 contains the regression coefficients for the analyses.

**Table 2:**  
Regression Coefficients for the Analyzed Model

	<i>b</i>	<i>SEb</i>	$\beta$
<i>Step 1</i>			
Constant	7.01	2.08	
Self-depreciation style	0.46	0.05	.54*
<i>Step 2</i>			
Constant	28.57	4.05	
Self-depreciation style	0.32	0.05	.38*
Masculinity	-0.33	0.05	-.37*

Note.  $R^2 = .29$  for Step 1;  $\Delta R^2 = .11$  for Step 2 ( $ps < .001$ ).

\* $p < .001$ .

Table 2 shows that *self-depreciation* entered the analysis in the first step followed by self-depreciation and masculinity. The model based on these two predictors explained 40.0 % of the variance in gelotophobia; 28.9 % were accounted for by the level of self-depreciation and 11.1 % by masculinity (with a negative beta-weight). This indicates that the fear of being laughed at increases with increasing scores in self-depreciation (as a self-presentation style) and with decreasing scores in expression of masculinity.

Masculinity was identified as a potent predictor of the expression of gelotophobia. However, it was assumed that persons with different expressions in psychological gender would score differently in the fear of being laughed at. This hypothesis was tested by a one-factorial analysis of variance with gelotophobia as dependent variable and the four groups of psychological gender that were identified by means of the IPG as grouping variable. Levene's test suggested equality of variance. The analysis revealed a significant main effect indicating that there were differences among the four groups;  $F(3,196) = 17.71$  ( $p < .001$ ). Subsequently conducted post hoc tests (Scheffé) allowed testing differences among the groups.

Significant group differences were found in gelotophobia for groups defined by type of psychological gender. Femininity ( $M = 1.99$ ,  $SD = 0.50$ ) was characterized by a significantly higher fear of being laughed at than Masculinity ( $M = 1.50$ ,  $SD = 0.49$ ;  $d = 0.99$ ), Androgyny ( $M = 1.50$ ,  $SD = 0.37$ ;  $d = 1.11$ ) and undifferentiated gender ( $M = 1.58$ ,  $SD = 0.33$ ;  $d = 0.97$ ). The other groups did not differ significantly from each other (all *n.s.*).

## Discussion

As expected, the fear of being laughed at turned out to be significantly positively related to the amount and type of self-presentation styles used. Avoiding to be laughed at and to protect oneself from derision is probably the driving force of gelotophobes that motivates them so strongly to undertake a great many behaviors enabling them to make the desired impression on others. A significant positive correlation was found between gelotophobia and self-depreciation while a negative relationship was observed between the fear of being laughed at and the intensity of self-promotion as a self-presentation style. The previously reported avoidant behavior of gelotophobes was reflected in their endorsement of protective self-presentation styles (self-depreciation). The tendency to create one's own image as a person who is exaggeratedly modest, demeaning one's own achievements, uncertain of one's own competences and being resourceless seems to be characteristic for how gelotophobes think about themselves and seems to reflect their low self-esteem. There are numerous ways in which this is manifest, including by avoiding eye contact, not saying much in public for avoiding derision and speaking softly, as well as by a lack of assertiveness, showing signs of submissiveness, and undertaking servile behaviors in relation to others (e.g., Ruch & Proyer, 2008a; Titze, 2009). The looking-glass self of a gelotophobic person comprises the following convictions about themselves: weird, funny, pathetic, grotesque, and pitiful (e.g., Titze, 2009). Furthermore, several studies (Proyer & Ruch, 2009ab; Ruch, Beermann, & Proyer, 2009) found that individuals fearing being laughed at do not appreciate their own competences, both intel-

lectual (including the vocabulary and skills of focusing attention, Proyer & Ruch, 2009b), as well as humoristic (particularly the ability to generate humor; Ruch, Beer-mann, & Proyer, 2009). Additionally, they tend to underestimate their own virtuousness (in a comparison of self- and peer-ratings; Proyer & Ruch, 2009a). Finally, gelotophobes tend to use a rather self-defeating humor style (Ruch et al., 2009). An individual fearing being laughed at most probably does not know of any other way of attracting interest and attention to themselves other than taking on a “scapegoat” role thus becoming the object of ridicule and jokes of the milieu. The obtained result is also in agreement with the results of Schütz (2001) who suggested that the preferred self-presentation style depends on the self-esteem of the subject. Persons that are self-critical are reluctant in accentuating their merits and usually restrict themselves to defending their self-image.

The study confirmed the expected negative relationship of fear of being laughed at with masculinity, while femininity was characterized by significantly higher levels of gelotophobia compared to all the remaining types of psychological gender. These results were expected as the Polish stereotype of masculinity (Kuczyńska, 1992) has divergent characteristics to the traits of a person who fears being laughed at (e.g., independent, self-confident, self-assertive). These attributes describe a person that does not seem to be anxious in situations involving laughter and humorous interaction among people. The feminine stereotype on the other hand, includes the tendency to experience shame and sensitivity which are the “definitional” components of gelotophobia (for empirical evidence see Platt, 2008, and Platt & Ruch, 2009). Thus, a person perceiving him-/herself through the cultural prism of femininity is more susceptible to the fear of being laughed at.

Masculinity does not predispose to gelotophobia, on the contrary, one might even speculate that it constitutes a protective factor. Therefore, this study, similarly to several others (e.g., Adams & Sherer, 1985; Bassoff & Glass, 1982; Whitley, 1983, 1984; cf. also Grygorczuk, 2008) suggests that the optimal – from the point of view of effective adaptation – is masculinity, and not androgyny. The former seems to dispose a person to be mentally sound (Bassoff & Glass, 1982; Grygorczuk, 2008), to increase assertiveness, self-efficacy (Adams & Sherer, 1985), self-esteem (Whitley, 1983) and well-being (Whitley, 1984). Also, as indicated by the results of this study, perhaps it can constitute a “natural” barrier for the development of gelotophobia. Concluding, seeing that “instrumental” traits included in the masculine stereotype might “protect” people from fearing to be laughed at, further research should be conducted in this field.

On a final note, it would be worth mentioning the limitations of this research. One of the most significant is the small number of gelotophobes in the sample ( $N = 9$ ; 4.5 %). This is, except for Führ, Proyer, and Ruch (2009) the lowest score that has been reported for a country thus far. Further studies will show whether this is representative for Poland or whether it is a characteristic of the sample tested. Furthermore, the analyses conducted do not allow a causal interpretation of the results and it is, for example, unclear whether higher degrees of femininity lead to gelotophobia or whether gelotophobes develop a rather feminine psychological gender. Finally, the relation to biological gender could not be taken into account because of the sample characteristics. It would be interesting to see how this variable blends in with the current results (e.g., do feminine males differ from



feminine females or masculine males from masculine females and so on). Thus a comparison of persons whose psychological gender is the same as their biological gender with cross-sex typed persons would be fruitful.

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