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The Joke's on Me: The Relation between Self-Defeating Humor, Gelotophilia, and Gelotophobia

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Abstract

The *self-defeating* humor style is humor at the expense of one's self. It has a bad reputation because it is negatively correlated with self-esteem, positive personality traits, and creativity. However, some forms of self-defeating humor do not have such negative correlates. *Gelotophobia*, or the fear of being laughed at, and *gelotophilia*, the enjoyment of being laughed at, illustrate the discrepancy between positive and negative effects. Gelotophobia, like standard self-defeating humor, negatively correlates with self-esteem, well-being, creativity, and positive character traits. Conversely, gelotophilia positively correlates with creativity, positive character traits, self-esteem, self-compassion, and well-being. Possible areas of future research are also discussed.



The Joke's on Me

Brian Regan, a popular American comedian, used self-defeating humor to share his childhood experience:

I was a pretty stupid kid. I used to get talked into making crank calls, you know? My older brother and some friends were just standing around me: "Okay, Brian, make some crank calls . . ." And I'd get all nervous, and mess 'em up. "Is your refrigerator running? It's not? Ohhohohh . . . (whispers) *It's not! It's not! Oh, no, it's not!* Okay, you have a good day, now; you . . . take luck." "Brian, do this one! Read it, so you don't mess it up!" "Do you have Prince Albert in the can? You do? Well, then you better take him out, because he is . . . uhh . . . suff-oh-cot-ting. *He wants to know what that is.*" "Hang up! You're stupid! You stupid person!" (As cited in Hamilton, 2010)

While Regan shared this story, the audience roared with laughter. Almost every person could relate in some way to his childhood predicament; it had the power to unite the listeners by providing a shared experience to laugh about.

Humor bonded humans for centuries, dating at least as far back as the satirical plays of ancient Greece. However, humor is more than the stuff of an entertaining evening. It is also a method of understanding an individual from a psychological perspective. For example, Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, and Weir (2003) found that various aspects of humor correlated with different perspectives on life, including overall psychological well-being. Their research identified four main styles of humor: (a) *self-enhancing*, characterized by the use of humor to enhance the individual's experience; (b) *affiliative*, characterized by the intent to strengthen relationships with others; (c) *aggressive*, characterized by the individual's use of humor at others' expense; and (d) *self-defeating*, characterized by the individual's use of humor at his or her own expense. The authors further differentiated between styles that correlate positively with well-being—affiliative and self-enhancing—and those that correlate negatively—aggressive

and self-defeating. These findings indicate that understanding an individual's humor style can lead to a better understanding of that individual's self-perception and well-being.

Of the four humor styles, self-defeating humor correlates most negatively with overall well-being. Research shows its positive correlation with loneliness, negative mood, anxiety, depression, lack of social support, suicidal thoughts, social ineptitude, avoidance, and coping (Erickson & Feldstein, 2007; Martin et al., 2003; Schermer et al., 2017). These associations may indicate that self-defeating humor should be used with caution.

However, other researchers indicated different conclusions. Some proposed the use of subcategories such as self-deprecating humor or self-disparaging humor to better understand relationships (Janes & Olson, 2010). For example, self-deprecating humor is defined as self-defeating humor in an affiliative-humor setting, meaning the individual laughs at themselves to build relationships with others.

Ruch and Proyer (2009) offered other possible subcategories. They explored humor based on the reaction of the individual, expanding the research on *gelotophobia*, or the intense fear of being laughed at. They indicated that some people found intense pleasure in laughing at others, which they coined *katagelasticism*, and that others found pleasure in being laughed at, which they called *gelotophilia* (Ruch & Proyer, 2009). The latter shares many characteristics with self-deprecating humor. While all three reactions are important, the two most impactful in understanding the implications of self-defeating humor are gelotophobia and gelotophilia.

Intention is an important distinguishing feature between gelotophilia and the traditional perception of self-defeating humor. Ruch and Proyer (2009) argued that gelotophilics wanted others to laugh not *at* them but *with* them, contrary to the traditional perception of self-defeating humor. Although this variance is an important distinction, both gelotophilics and those using self-defeating humor still use themselves as a target to cause laughter in others, indicating a kinship. The correlation

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between self-defeating humor and gelotophilia was also been noted by researchers (Dursun, Dalgat, Brauer, Yerlikaya, & Proyer, 2017), as has the negative correlation between gelotophilia and gelotophobia (Ruch & Proyer, 2009). Thus, two aspects of self-defeating humor appear to be gelotophobic and gelotophilic, which might be two separate perceptions of the same style of humor. This could explain why some individuals thrive and others do not when employing self-defeating humor.

To better understand the nature and potential consequences of using self-defeating humor, both gelotophobia and gelotophilia must be examined. How an individual perceives being laughed at could explain the difference between negative and positive self-defeating humor. Although gelotophobic self-defeating humor (characteristically motivated by an intense fear of being laughed at) may adversely impact one's overall well-being, gelotophilic self-defeating humor (characterized by the joy of being laughed at) may be valuable to the individual who regularly employs self-defeating humor because it positively correlates with creativity, beneficial character traits and values, and positive self-perception that encompasses both self-esteem and self-compassion.

Self-Defeating Humor and Creativity

Many stand-up comedians attest that humor is an expression of creativity, a claim that is supported by research (Ando, Claridge, & Clark, 2014; Lussier, Gregoire, & Vachon, 2017). However, not all humor styles are equally adept at cultivating creativity. Martin et al. (2003) found that positive humor styles tended to correlate positively with creativity while negative, including self-defeating humor, correlated negatively. However, this relationship may depend on the perspective of the individual using self-defeating humor.

Past Research on Self-Defeating Humor and Creativity

Overall, past research on self-defeating humor showed a negative relationship with creativity. In Greengross, Martin, and Miller's (2012) study of professional comedians, self-defeating

humor was determined to be the least contributive of the four humor styles in expressing creativity and was the most strongly correlated with poor job outcomes and least-attended shows. The authors hypothesized that a third variable was responsible for the negative correlations. They speculated that comedians utilizing affiliative humor might have increased social skills, resulting in a larger number of shows. Chen et al. (2013) also found that self-defeating humor could be detrimental to creativity, specifically gelotophobic self-defeating humor. These studies indicate that gelotophobic self-defeating humor may be detrimental to creativity.

Gelotophobia and Creativity

The negative correlation between gelotophobic self-defeating humor and creativity is almost inseparable from the correlation between traditionally researched self-defeating humor and creativity. The correlation of gelotophobic self-defeating humor is hypothesized to be due to the fear of failure and mockery that prevents an individual from trying something new (Chan et al., 2013). However, the two are similar enough that perhaps more research is needed to determine whether self-defeating humor, as it is currently understood, is actually gelotophobic self-defeating humor, with gelotophilic self-defeating humor being a different category or a combination of categories. Whatever the explanation, gelotophobic self-defeating humor shows a significant negative correlation with creative performance and creative disposition (Chan et al., 2013), indicating that the fear of being laughed at may inhibit overall creativity.

Gelotophilia and Creativity

Differing from traditional self-defeating humor and gelotophobic self-defeating humor, gelotophilic self-defeating humor has have a positive relationship with creativity (Chan et al., 2013). It can also cultivate creativity when individuals in positions of authority utilize it to inspire creativity in their subordinates. Self-deprecating humor, which is similar to gelotophilic self-defeating humor, tends to have a positive impact on cultivating creativity in others, specifically if they work under the self-defeating humorist.

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Janes and Olson (2010) found that art teachers who employed self-defeating humor towards their own work tended to have students who felt more confident when attempting a new concept. Beyond the art room, Gkorezis and Bellou (2016) reported a similar observation in the work setting: bosses who employed self-defeating humor tended to be better liked and more approachable, making it easier for employees to suggest out-of-the-box ideas without fear of retaliation. While these findings do not directly deal with personal creativity, they do demonstrate a possible correlation between gelotophilic self-defeating humor and inspiring creativity. This example demonstrates the positive impact gelotophilic self-defeating humor can have on both the individual's creativity and the creativity of those who work with the individual. Self-defeating humor, when perceived as enjoyable by the recipient, may cultivate an atmosphere of creativity and growth.

Beneficial Character Traits and Values

The concept of creativity demonstrates the often-unrecognized correlation between humor and personal traits. For example, humor and values are usually not paired together; however, values, defined in this paper as morally-based traits, are often viewed as an essential part of an individual's character and perception of the world. Thus, the correlation between humor, character traits, and values is essential to understand. The positive humor styles positively correlate with high values, but the negative humor styles—especially self-defeating humor—negatively correlate with high values (Martin et al., 2003; Proyer, Wellenzohn, & Ruch, 2014). This pattern demonstrates that a relationship between humor and values likely exists, while also showing that different forms of humor have different relationships with values. To determine the correlation of self-defeating humor with positive human traits and values, its subcategories must be examined.

Past Research on Self-Defeating Humor, Character Traits, and Values

Previous research demonstrated the negative effects of self-defeating humor on character traits and values. Martin and colleagues (2003) found that self-defeating humor negatively correlated with agreeableness, conscientiousness, warmth, understanding of others, kindness, a focus on others, self-esteem, and overall well-being. In other words, they found self-defeating humor to be detrimental to many aspects of life. Schermer and colleagues (2017) focused on the social impact of humor styles and found that self-defeating humor was positively correlated with loneliness. Finally, two groups of researchers identified a strong positive correlation between self-defeating humor and depression, anxiety, and other mental disorders (Erickson & Feldstein, 2007; Martin et al., 2003). Thus, the consequences of excessive use of self-defeating humor has serious negative implications.

The Correlation of Gelotophobia with Character Traits and Values

Similarly, Proyer et al. (2014) found that gelotophobic self-defeating humor negatively correlated with attributes such as hope, curiosity, bravery, love, and zest. Interestingly, it also negatively correlates with humor, perhaps because gelotophobic individuals fear being laughed at. This same study found that gelotophobic values positively correlated with modesty and prudence, indicating a tendency towards self-consciousness (Proyer et al., 2014). This finding is further supported by Proyer and Ruch (2009), who found that gelotophobes consistently underestimate their abilities. These attributes can also be explained by Chan et al.'s (2013) theory that gelotophobes avoid attention to avoid failure and mockery. The similarities between the traits that self-defeating humor and gelotophobic self-defeating humor negatively correlate with indicate the two categories may have more in common than not. Perhaps the research on self-defeating humor only represents the gelotophobic perspective while missing the gelotophilic perspective.

Gelotophilia, Character Traits, and Values

Common traits and values associated with gelotophilic self-defeating humor differ substantially from both gelotophobic and traditional self-defeating humor. Bruntsch and Ruch (2017) characterized gelotophilic individuals as difficult to offend, even using the word “warm” to describe them (p. 142). Further studies demonstrated the positive benefits of gelotophilia, such as positive correlations with increased creativity, openness, enjoyment of humor, hope, zest, curiosity, bravery, and love (Chan et al., 2013; Proyer et al., 2014; see Table 1). In fact, gelotophilia positively correlated with the same values that gelotophobia is negatively correlated with (Proyer et al., 2014). This suggests that gelotophobia and gelotophilia are negatively correlated themselves, indicating the two may be two aspects of the same humor style. If perceived in a gelotophilic way, self-defeating humor can be a healthy expression of humor that can build, rather than cut down, the individual’s self-concept. This is further supported by the difference between gelotophobic and gelotophilic self-perception.

Overall Increase in Positive Self-Perception

Traditionally, researchers believed self-esteem to be an excellent indicator of overall well-being. New research suggested that its sister-quality, self-compassion, is a superior measurement of well-being. Containing three main parts, (a) mindfulness, (b) self-kindness, and (c) common humanity, self-compassion has many of the benefits of self-esteem without the shortcomings (Neff, 2003). For example, self-compassion is associated with the same belief in an individual’s capabilities, but lacks the social comparison commonly associated with determining one’s self-esteem (Neff, 2003). While self-compassion seems to be the superior quality in measuring overall well-being, far less research exists on the topic because it is a newer concept than self-esteem. Thus, to determine the impact of self-defeating humor on overall well-being, both self-esteem and self-compassion (which together will be called self-perception) will be compared to the self-defeating humor categories.

Past Research on Self-Defeating Humor and Self-Perception

Self-esteem. Martin et al.'s (2003) research into humor styles found a negative correlation between those who employed self-defeating humor as their main humor style and positive self-esteem. This finding suggests that self-defeating humor may impact many components of self-perception, even beyond self-esteem. The breakdown of the key components of self-compassion may explain why.

Self-compassion. Due to the obscurity of the humor styles and the newness of self-compassion, very little research exists on the correlation between self-compassion and humor, let alone on the specific styles of humor. However, Yue, Anna, and Hiranandani (2017) measured self-compassion in relation to the humor styles and found a negative correlation between self-compassion and self-defeating humor. Aydan (2015) reported that self-defeating humor was positively correlated with self-judgment—the opposite of self-compassion. This is unsurprising, as Martin et al. (2003) explained that self-defeating humor “involves denigration of the self and repression of one’s own emotional need” (p. 52). In other words, self-defeating humor is defined by its lack of mindfulness and self-kindness, two key components of self-compassion.

Interestingly, self-defeating humor does positively correlate with common humanity (Aydan, 2015). Although no conclusions can be definitively drawn due to lack of evidence, this correlation is interesting because it shows that self-defeating humor tends to remind individuals that their struggles are shared, a perception that may decrease feelings of isolation and hopelessness. Thus, although negatively related to self-compassion, self-defeating humor has a core component of self-compassion. Perhaps a change in the perception of humor could result in an increase of the other two components of self-compassion.

Gelotophobia and Self-perception

Self-esteem. As discussed earlier, gelotophobic self-defeating humor negatively correlates with self-esteem (Martin et al., 2003). In fact, it correlates with many traits indicative of low self-esteem,

such as prudence and modesty (Proyer et al., 2014). Further, Proyer and Ruch (2009) found gelotophobics consistently lack confidence in their abilities (2009). These findings demonstrate a lack of self-esteem overall, potentially foreshadowing further research into their self-compassion correlation.

Self-compassion. Unfortunately, little research focuses on the relationship of gelotophobia and self-compassion. Gelotophobic self-defeating humor would assumedly negatively correlate with at least self-kindness, as supported by participants' lack of self-esteem and excessive doubts concerning their abilities (Proyer & Ruch, 2009). Although it seems safe to assume that common humanity would be similar to the overall outcome of self-defeating humor, further research is needed to determine any kind of correlation.

Gelotophilia and Self-perception

Self-esteem. With gelotophilic individuals, the inverse of gelotophobic self-defeating humor's findings seem to be true. The self-esteem of gelotophilic individuals, as demonstrated through their high confidence levels, is on the verge of prideful (Proyer et al., 2014). This difference in self-confidence demonstrates that the individual's perception of humor may be more responsible for his or her well-being than the humor style itself.

Self-compassion. Not enough research exists to make conclusive statements about gelotophilia and self-compassion. However, due to the similarity of gelotophilia and self-deprecating humor (the use of self-defeating humor in an affiliative situation), inferences about gelotophilic self-defeating humor can be drawn from research on self-deprecating humor. For example, Gkorezis and Bellou (2016) explained that self-deprecating humor differs from self-defeating humor in that it is not meant to belittle the individual; rather, it is meant to build relationships between the individual and others. Further, they explained that self-defeating humor is meant to build positive emotions and acceptance of emotions (Gkorezis & Bellou, 2016). Thus, self-deprecating humor involves self-kindness, mindfulness, and common humanity, all of which are integral parts of self-compassion.

Like self-deprecating humor, the intention of gelotophilic self-defeating humor is not to belittle, but to entertain the self and others at one's expense. Thus, a gelotophilic's self-kindness would be higher than that of a gelotophobic. As for common humanity, Warren suggested that self-defeating humor is positive and enjoyable for the individual if it is done kindly and if it reflects the shared experience of the entire community (J. Warren, personal communication, March 1, 2018). With this perspective in mind, gelotophilic self-defeating humor may be more highly correlated with self-compassion than either gelotophobic self-defeating humor or traditional self-defeating humor, because it is enjoyable to the individual and generally reflects a shared experience. However, as noted before, further research is needed to determine correlation. Further, because similarities between self-deprecating humor and gelotophilic self-defeating humor may not extend to mindfulness, more research is needed to determine if mindfulness is greater in the latter category.

Conclusion

Clearly, the research on these areas of humor with their accompanying categories and subcategories is incomplete. With much left to understand, the potential for discovery is great. Do more humor styles exist? Are there positive and negative subcategories to each of Martin et al.'s (2003) humor styles? What correlations exist between each category and subcategory? What can each teach about humanity and well-being? Further research can reveal the implications of self-defeating humor, gelotophobia, and gelotophilia and their capability of uniting or dividing people.

Currently, understanding the humor styles, specifically self-defeating humor, can come from current research on gelotophilia, gelotophobia, and their correlations with creativity, character traits and values, and self-perception. These correlations emphasize the distinctness of gelotophilia from gelotophobia while highlighting the similarities between gelotophobia and the traditional concept of self-defeating humor.

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For example, the correlation between creativity and the concept of self-defeating humor is negative, much like gelotophobic self-defeating humor (Chan et al., 2013; Proyer et al., 2014). In contrast, the correlation of gelotophilic self-defeating humor and creativity is positive, which shows the distinctiveness of gelotophilic self-defeating humor from gelotophobic self-defeating humor and the traditional concept of self-defeating humor (Chan et al., 2013; see Table 1). Further, gelotophilic self-defeating humor can inspire creativity in others, which neither the gelotophobic self-defeating humor nor the traditional concept of self-defeating humor seem to do (Gkorezis & Bellou, 2016; Janes & Olson, 2010). These findings emphasize the distinctness of each subcategory while also showing its possible impact on creativity, an important character trait.

The impact of character traits and values varies significantly among self-defeating humor and its possible subcategories. This multiplicity has important implications for the reputation of self-defeating humor. Martin et al. (2003) found that self-defeating humor negatively correlates with many positive attributes, such as humor and creativity, and positively correlates with negative attributes, such as low self-esteem (2003). However, when self-defeating humor is divided into gelotophobic and gelotophilic, differing correlations arise. Revisiting the research of Proyer et al. (2014), gelotophobic negatively correlates with many valued character traits and positively correlates with only two potentially positive characteristics: modesty and prudence. As discussed previously, even those characteristics could be negative when applied to self-esteem. In contrast, gelotophilia positively correlates with most of the studied character traits but lacks modesty and prudence (Proyer et al., 2014; see Table 1). These correlations demonstrate the distinctness of gelotophilic and gelotophobic self-defeating humor and demonstrate a close relationship between gelotophobic self-defeating humor and the original concept of self-defeating humor. The similarities between the traditional concept of self-defeating humor and gelotophobic self-defeating humor, and the distinct differences between them when compared to gelotophilic self-defeating humor, also indicate that researchers

only examined gelotophobic self-defeating humor and coined that concept as self-defeating humor. Thus, self-defeating humor may have positive (gelotophilic) and negative (gelotophobic) aspects, but perhaps only the gelotophobic perspective is documented by researchers. Gelotophilic self-defeating humor may be an under-researched aspect of self-defeating humor that has positive outcomes for those who use it.

Finally, by examining the impact of self-defeating humor on self-perception—consisting of self-esteem and self-compassion—the original concept of self-defeating humor and gelotophobic self-defeating humor seem significantly different from gelotophilic self-defeating humor. While the traditional and gelotophobic self-defeating humors both negatively correlate with healthy self-esteem and many major aspects of self-compassion, gelotophilic self-defeating humor positively correlates with healthy self-esteem and at least one of the major aspects of self-compassion (Gkorezis & Bellou, 2016; Martin et al., 2003; Yue et al., 2017). Interestingly, all forms of self-defeating humor positively correlate with common humanity, indicating that all forms of self-defeating humor help the individuals feel more connected to those around them (Aydan, 2015). More research is needed to determine if gelotophilic self-defeating humor has a positive impact on self-compassion; previous research on a related humor style, self-deprecating humor, suggests that it may. These findings emphasize the positive aspects of self-defeating humor, especially gelotophilic self-defeating humor.

When Brian Regan shared his self-defeating story, the audience laughed. They did not laugh because he was inflicting internal anguish by telling a story that revealed his lack of creativity, questionable character traits, or inadequate self-esteem. Rather, they laughed because his story brought them all, Brian Regan included, closer together. Because he enjoyed being laughed at, and was thus laughed with, his stand-up routine was a positive experience for his audience and himself. Self-defeating humor, when used by someone who sincerely enjoys being laughed at, can bring people together.

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When a gelotophilic uses self-defeating humor, they get to share their creativity, increase their self-compassion and self-esteem, and encourage the development of their greatest qualities. Self-defeating humor is not something to be feared; it is something to be understood and employed. Brian Regan did that, and audiences are still laughing with him today.

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Appendix

Table 1
Partial Correlations (Controlled for Age and Gender) Between Gelotophobia, Gelotophilia, Katagelasticism, and Character Strengths

	Raw scores			Rank ordered strengths		
	Pho	Phi	Kat	Pho	Phi	Kat
Creativity	-.16	.25	.07	.01	.14	.16
Curiosity	-.32	.19	-.11	-.16	.04	-.02
Open-mindedness	-.06	.01	-.04	.18	-.18	.07
Love of learning	-.17	.10	-.09	.02	-.04	.00
Perspective	-.23	.16	.00	.02	-.02	.15
Bravery	-.39	.25	.03	-.20	.12	.17
Persistence	-.20	.04	-.07	-.01	-.12	.03
Authenticity	-.15	.08	-.11	.11	-.12	.01
Zest	-.40	.27	-.06	-.26	.15	.05
Love	-.39	.25	-.11	-.23	.11	-.02
Kindness	-.21	.24	-.12	.03	.08	-.01
Social intelligence	-.36	.27	-.04	-.14	.10	.09
Teamwork	-.18	.14	-.19	.07	-.05	-.09
Fairness	-.13	.11	-.27	.13	-.09	-.20
Leadership	-.25	.18	-.15	-.01	-.01	-.05
Forgiveness	-.25	.14	-.30	-.05	-.02	-.24

Modesty	.18	-.14	-.24	.36	-.27	-.12
Prudence	.06	-.13	-.22	.31	-.31	-.12
Self-regulation	-.12	-.05	-.16	.11	-.22	-.06
Beauty	-.03	.15	-.07	.21	.01	.04
Gratitude	-.21	.21	-.16	.01	.06	-.08
Hope	-.40	.22	-.08	-.28	.10	.00
Humor	-.38	.53	.15	-.22	.48	.28
Religiousness	-.10	.06	-.16	.03	-.04	-.12

All correlation coefficients $>.03$ were significant at $p < .05$

N = 5,134. Pho = gelotophobia; Phi = gelotophilia; Kat = katagelasticism

Beauty = appreciation of beauty and excellence

Note. Adapted from "Character and Dealing With Laughter: The Relation of Self- and Peer-Reported Strengths of Character With Gelotophobia, Gelotophilia, and Katagelasticism" by R. T. Proyer, S. Wellenzohn, and W. Ruch, 2014, *The Journal of Psychology*, 148, p. 119.

