



Vulnerable narcissism is related to the fear of being laughed at and to the joy of laughing at others

Ana Blasco-Belled^{a,*}, Radosław Rogoza^{b,c}, Carles Alsinet^d

^a University of Girona, Pujada de Sant Domènec, 9, 17004 Girona, Spain

^b Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw, Dewajtis 5, 01-815 Warszawa, Poland

^c Social Innovation Chair, University of Lleida, Avinguda de l'estudi general 4, 25001, Lleida, Spain

^d University of Lleida, Avinguda de l'estudi general 4, 25001, Lleida, Spain

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ABSTRACT

Vulnerable narcissism is associated to the fear of criticism and rejection; however, to date no investigation assessed its relations to the dispositions towards ridicule and laughter, which is scrutinized in the current paper. The dispositions towards ridicule and laughter could be conceptualized as three distinct types of humor traits: gelotophobia (the fear of being laughed at), gelotophilia (the joy of being laughed at), and katagelasticism (the joy of laughing at others). We expected that, according to the complex structure of vulnerable narcissism, it would be positively related to gelotophobia and katagelasticism, reflecting social withdrawal on the one hand, and antagonistic orientation towards people on the other. The results supported our hypotheses, providing further evidence to the complex structure of vulnerable narcissism.

1. Introduction

1.1. Vulnerable narcissism

Vulnerable narcissism could be broadly defined in terms of hypersensitivity to rejection, negative affectivity, social isolation, but also of distrust of others and increased levels of anger and hostility (Cain et al., 2008; Zajenkowski et al., 2021). Given that vulnerable narcissism fulfills the criteria of a) deliberate malevolence (i.e., antagonistic attitude towards others; Rogoza, Ciecuch, & Strus, 2022), b) callousness (i.e., lack of empathy; Zajenkowski & Szymaniak, 2019), and c) interpersonal manipulation (Tortoriello et al., 2017), it is considered as a so-called dark personality trait (Rogoza, Kowalski, et al., 2022). Since it represents a mixture of the neurotic and antagonistic facets (Krizan & Herlache, 2018), vulnerable narcissism is considered to be an internalizing dark trait; that is, it is primarily related to the heightened levels of neuroticism as well as to the lowered levels of agreeableness and extraversion (Rogoza et al., 2018; Zajenkowski et al., 2021).

1.2. Dispositions towards ridicule and laughter

Although humor seems to be a socially desirable characteristic (Martin, 2007), there are also more socially malevolent expressions of it

(Hofmann et al., 2020; Ruch & Proyer, 2009; Ruch et al., 2014). Within the study of humor, the dispositions towards ridicule and laughter present a model that encompasses three individual differences variables: gelotophobia, gelotophilia, and katagelasticism (Ruch & Proyer, 2009). These three dispositions define subclinical individual differences based on how individuals inwardly experience laughter and teasing in social situations, including satisfaction with partner relationships (Brauer & Proyer, 2018), romantic attachment styles (Brauer et al., 2020), and parental attachment and cyberbullying victimization (Canestrari et al., 2021). More specifically, gelotophobia is characterized by the fear of being laughed at as anticipation of being the target of mockery (Ruch et al., 2014). These individuals tend to mislead harmful and harmless situations and to misinterpret laughter as malicious, which triggers distressful emotions and social withdrawal (Hofmann et al., 2020; Ruch et al., 2014). Gelotophilia, in turn, entails the joy of being laughed at, which is perceived as a rewarding experience and represents a sign of appreciation by others. As a result, it might even involve virtue-related elements that help them deal with social interaction situations (Beermann & Ruch, 2009; Blasco-Belled et al., 2019; McGhee, 1996). Finally, katagelasticism refers to the joy of laughing at others. In this case, individuals might take pleasure from putting others down and might exploit others' mishaps without caring about their reactions as a by-product of their desire to laugh at them. For this reason, these

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: ana.blasco@udg.edu (A. Blasco-Belled).

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individuals are considered as self-centered, unfriendly, and annoying people (Ruch & Proyer, 2009), but their indulgence does not provide them with happiness (Blasco-Belled et al., 2019).

1.3. Dispositions towards ridicule and laughter and vulnerable narcissism

The basic goal in vulnerable narcissism is to protect the fragile core from the own conscious awareness as well as from being discovered by others (Rogoza, Cieciuch, & Strus, 2022). While vulnerable narcissism is mostly about anxiety, the paranoid fear of being criticized, rejected, or ridiculed are among its strongest driving forces (Cain et al., 2008; Caligor et al., 2015). To deal with such intense feelings of shame and inferiority, individuals scoring high on vulnerable narcissism either withdraw from social interactions to avoid being harmed or ruminate aggressive feelings on other people and attempt to secretly express them (e.g., through being passively aggressive; Rogoza, Cieciuch, & Strus, 2022; Zajenkowski et al., 2021). These two descriptions of vulnerable narcissism closely match two of the dispositions towards ridicule and laughter. On the one hand, due to heightened levels of neuroticism and its social withdrawal, vulnerable narcissism might be inevitably related to the fear of being laughed at. On the other, due to the fact that vulnerable narcissism is also related to being spiteful in the sense that the accidents of others make them feel better (Cain et al., 2008; Rogoza, Cieciuch, & Strus, 2022), it is also hypothesized to be positively related to katagelasticism. Finally, vulnerable narcissism might be unrelated to neither searching situations where people can laugh at their own expense (conversely, it is related to social isolation; Caligor et al., 2015) nor to social compliance (given the entitled expectations; Zajenkowski & Szymaniak, 2019). Therefore, it is unlikely to be conceptually related to gelotophilia.

1.4. Current study

The aim of this paper was to analyze the relationship of vulnerable narcissism with gelotophobia, gelotophilia, and katagelasticism. For this purpose, we conducted two studies. The first study examined a well-established measure of vulnerable narcissism, while the second study decomposed its facets to assess if there is some specificity in these relations. Given the previously presented theoretical considerations and the complex structure of vulnerable narcissism (Rogoza, Kowalski, et al., 2022), we expected that it would be simultaneously related to gelotophobia (H1) and katagelasticism (H2). We did not expect any relations to gelotophilia (H3). Within the first study, we used a measure treating vulnerable narcissism as a one-dimensional construct, while in the second study we decomposed the facets of neurotic introversion and neurotic antagonism as outlined in Rogoza, Kowalski, et al. (2022). As a result, in the second study we specifically expected that: both narcissistic facets would be related to gelotophobia because vulnerable narcissism is mostly about neuroticism (Miller et al., 2017; H4), but, this effect was expected to be significant only for neurotic introversion when the shared variance of neuroticism was partialled out (H5). Lastly, only the neurotic antagonism facet would be positively related to katagelasticism (H6).

2. Methods

2.1. Participants, procedure and data analysis

2.1.1. Study 1

We determined the required sample size using G*Power (v. 3.1.9.7; Faul et al., 2009) to detect small (i.e., 0.20) effect size with the level of $\alpha = 0.01$ and power of 0.95. The minimal required sample size equaled 382. In this study, a total of 419 undergraduate students ($M = 20.55$, $SD = 4.87$; 77.8% females) completed the self-reports of vulnerable narcissism and the dispositions towards ridicule and laughter. We used the Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale (Hendin & Cheek, 1997), which reports a general score on vulnerable narcissism,

providing a mixture of neurotic and antagonistic features (Wright & Edershile, 2018). It comprises ten items (sample item: "My feelings are easily hurt by ridicule or by the slighting remarks of others") to which participants responded using a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). To assess the dispositions, we used the Phophikat-45 (Ruch & Proyer, 2009; Spanish validation: Torres-Marín, Proyer, López-Benítez, & Carretero-Dios, 2019), which assesses gelotophobia (sample item: "When they laugh in my presence I get suspicious"), gelotophilia (sample item: "I enjoy it if other people laugh at me"), and katagelasticism (sample item: "Some people set themselves up for one to make fun at them") through 45 items using a four-point Likert-scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). Correlation analysis was conducted to test the relationship of vulnerable narcissism with gelotophobia, gelotophilia and katagelasticism.

2.1.2. Study 2

The second study was conducted as a follow-up study. We used the observed effect size (0.35) from Study 1 to determine power with the level of $\alpha = 0.01$ and $\beta = 0.05$. The minimum sample size required to detect such effect was 136. Given that correlations stabilize at greater sample size, we attempted to recruit ~200 participants. The final sample size comprised $N = 211$ adult participants from United Kingdom (49.3% females) aged between 20 and 78 ($M = 40.46$; $SD = 13.27$). They completed the brief measure of Phophikat-9 (Hofmann et al., 2017), which assesses the same constructs as in Study 1 although in a more economic manner, and a brief eight-item form of the Vulnerable Isolation and Enmity Questionnaire (Rogoza, Kowalski, et al., 2022), which assesses neurotic introversion (i.e., isolation; sample item: "I suffer because of the fact that others do not try to understand what I need") and neurotic antagonism (i.e., enmity; sample item: "When I'm in a group, other people purposely try to insult me") dimensions of vulnerable narcissism. As in Study 1, we applied correlational analyses to test the hypothesis. The associated data for both studies are available at <https://osf.io/t9pq7/>.

3. Results

3.1. Study 1

Descriptive statistics, correlations and the estimates of internal consistency are presented in Table 1. All measures reported acceptable Cronbach's α coefficients. Among the dispositions, gelotophobia and katagelasticism were positively related, while gelotophilia was negatively related to gelotophobia and katagelasticism. Regarding the link between vulnerable narcissism and the dispositions towards ridicule and laughter, vulnerable narcissism showed a positive relationship with gelotophobia and katagelasticism, but it was unrelated to gelotophilia. When entered into regression analysis (vulnerable narcissism as dependent variable, and the three dispositions as independent variable), the results remained the same. No changes were observed when demographic information (i.e., age and gender) were added as additional predictors. Thus, all our expectations were confirmed.

3.2. Study 2

Descriptive statistics, correlations and the estimates of internal consistency are presented in Table 2. Although we applied a brief measure of vulnerable narcissism and the dispositions towards ridicule and laughter, the estimates of internal consistency were all acceptable. When vulnerable narcissism was decomposed into neurotic introversion (isolation) and neurotic antagonism (enmity), both facets were related to gelotophilia, while only the antagonistic facet was related to katagelasticism, which supported our expectations (H4 and H6). Similar to the findings from Study 1, entering the three dispositions towards ridicule and laughter as independent variable (as well as including

Table 1

Descriptive statistics, estimates of internal consistency, and intercorrelations of the Study 1 variables.

	M(SD)	α	Pearson's correlations [95% CI]		
			2	3	4
1. Vulnerable narcissism	2.56(0.63)	0.76	0.64*[0.58, 0.69]	0.01[-0.09, 0.10]	0.38* [0.29, 0.46]
2. Gelotophobia	1.90(0.52)	0.85	–	–0.15*[-0.24, –0.05]	0.29*[0.20, 0.38]
3. Gelotophilia	2.23(0.53)	0.84	–	–	0.36*[0.27, 0.44]
4. Katagelasticism	2.87(1.66)	0.80	–	–	–

Note. Bonferroni correction applied. Coefficients are marked as significant with * when $p < .013$.

Table 2

Descriptive statistics, estimates of internal consistency, and intercorrelations of the study 2 variables.

	M(SD)	α	Pearson's correlations [95% CI]			
			2	3	4	5
1. Isolation	2.85(1.16)	0.83	0.57*[0.47, 0.66]	0.74*[0.68, 0.80]	–0.27*[-0.39, –0.14]	–0.01[-0.15, 0.12]
2. Enmity	2.01(0.89)	0.75	–	0.47*[0.35, 0.57]	0.11[-0.02, 0.24]	0.27*[0.14, 0.39]
3. Gelotophobia	2.23(0.75)	0.69	–	–	–0.29*[-0.41, –0.16]	–0.11[-0.24, 0.03]
4. Gelotophilia	2.33(0.78)	0.55	–	–	–	0.30*[0.17, 0.42]
5. Katagelasticism	1.66(0.55)	0.56	–	–	–	–

Note. Bonferroni correction applied. Coefficients are marked as significant with * when $p < .008$. The α estimate for gelotophilia including the three original items was 0.39. Thus, we removed one item (“No difference”) from further analyses. This item did not load on the expected factor in the validation study as well (Hofmann et al., 2017).

demographic information on age and gender) did not change the observed results. Of interest, however, isolation was related more strongly to gelotophobia than enmity ($Z = 6.12$; $p < .001$), and when the shared variance of the dimensions of vulnerable narcissism was taken into account, only isolation was related positively to gelotophobia ($\beta = 0.71$ [95%CI: 0.64, 0.78]; $p < .001$) while enmity was a non-significant predictor ($\beta = 0.06$ [95%CI: –0.03, 0.16]; $p = .272$), which confirmed the H5. Similarly, enmity was related more strongly to katagelasticism than isolation ($Z = 4.62$; $p < .001$) and the strength of this relation increased in a linear regression model ($\beta = 0.42$ [95%CI: 0.32, 0.51]; $p < .001$), while isolation appeared as a negative predictor of katagelasticism ($\beta = -0.26$ [–95%CI: 0.33, –0.18]; $p < .001$), therefore providing evidence to H6.

4. Discussion

Although vulnerable narcissism has been repeatedly reported to be linked to the fear of being criticized and rejected, as well as to hidden vindictiveness and spitefulness (Cain et al., 2008; Caligor et al., 2015; Hendin & Cheek, 1997; Rogoza, Cieciuch, & Strus, 2022), no previous study assessed its relation to the dispositions towards ridicule and laughter. Hence, the current study fills this empirical gap within the literature. Consistent to our expectations, the results revealed that vulnerable narcissism is associated not only to the fear of being laughed at (gelotophobia) but also to the joy of laughing at others (katagelasticism). In turn, it was unrelated to the joy of being laughed at (gelotophilia). Furthermore, the interrelations among the three dispositions are in accordance with previous studies (Blasco-Belled et al., 2019; Hofmann et al., 2017; Proyer et al., 2012).

We did not only examine the relations of vulnerable narcissism to the dispositions towards ridicule and laughter, but we also decomposed its more specific facets of neurotic introversion and neurotic antagonism. Recent research has proposed the Vulnerable Isolation and Enmity Concept (VIEC) model (Rogoza, Cieciuch, & Strus, 2022) to fully cover the expressions of vulnerable narcissism. According to this model, these two dimensions or strategies (i.e., isolation and enmity) are used as a means to protect the fragile self. Isolation prevents vulnerable narcissists from exposing themselves to others (Caligor et al., 2015; Krizan & Herlache, 2018), while enmity helps them cope with the feelings of

shame and inferiority (Kealy & Ogrodniczuk, 2011). While both dimensions are about neuroticism because they are specific facets of vulnerable narcissism (Miller et al., 2017), their differentiation allows to assess more nuanced introverted and antagonistic aspects (Rogoza, Cieciuch, & Strus, 2022).

Within this model, gelotophobia and katagelasticism align with the strategies of vulnerable narcissism of isolation and enmity, respectively. The fear of being laughed at is characterized by social withdrawal and social isolation (Ruch & Proyer, 2009) and it might be used as part of the passive strategy of isolation employed to avoid social interactions. The results from Study 2 provide support for such interpretation, as isolation was highly positively related to gelotophobia. This relation remained significant regardless of controlling for the shared variance of the dispositions towards ridicule and laughter, as well as for the shared variance of the dimensions of vulnerable narcissism. This emphasizes the fact that the fear of being laughed at is an important element of vulnerable narcissism, and it might explain that those scoring high on vulnerable narcissism refrain from social interactions due to their hypersensitivity to rejection and ridicule (Cain et al., 2008). Gelotophobia has also been associated negatively with relationship satisfaction in couples as it might entail the avoidance of intimate situations in which they would feel exposed or ridiculed (Brauer & Proyer, 2018). Indeed, the fear of being ridiculed and laughed at prevents from engaging in romantic relationships (Brauer et al., 2020). This would also fit with prior findings relating gelotophobia to romantic jealousy, expectedly due to their inward experience of shame, negative emotions and social misinterpretations (Brauer et al., 2021; Brauer & Proyer, 2018).

The core essence of katagelasticism is to laugh at others (Ruch & Proyer, 2009). Thus, it was unsurprising to see that previous research on putatively dark traits such as psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and sadism showed that they were positively related to it (Torres-Marín, Proyer, López-Benítez, Brauer, & Carretero-Dios, 2019; Torres-Marín et al., 2022). The current study provides similar evidence regarding vulnerable narcissism, and more specifically, in relation to its neurotic antagonistic part – enmity. Such a positive relation emphasizes that vulnerable narcissism is not only associated with the social withdrawal, but it also comprises more antagonistic attitudes (Cain et al., 2008; Zajenkowski et al., 2021). It seems, however, that there might be substantial differences between vulnerable narcissism and katagelasticism.

That is, katagelasticism is related to laughing at other either as a result of their own direct action or as a result of being a bystander (Ruch & Proyer, 2009), whereas enmity might in turn entail to secretly take pleasure of others' misfortunes and to behave in a spiteful, but not necessarily direct manner (Rogoza, Ciecuch, & Strus, 2022).

5. Conclusions

There are distinctive characteristics resembling vulnerable narcissism and the dispositions towards ridicule and laughter. First, a persistent bias in perceiving and responding to unrealistic threats as well as social withdrawal to protect the self characterize both vulnerable narcissism and gelotophobia; and second, a self-centered and careless reaction is present either in vulnerable narcissism and katagelasticism (Rogoza, Ciecuch, & Strus, 2022; Ruch & Proyer, 2009; Ruch et al., 2014). Altogether, our results suggest that the fear of being laughed at as well as the pleasure of laughing at others are important variables which might be useful in the explanation of the underlying motivations behind vulnerable narcissism (Rogoza, Ciecuch, & Strus, 2022).

6. Limitations and future directions

While the findings from Study 1 were of particular interest, they were limited for several reasons. First, we assessed vulnerable narcissism as a unitary construct. This led to the expectations and findings that it should be simultaneously related to gelotophobia and katagelasticism. Second, the sample from Study 1 involved only undergraduates. Third, while the findings were theoretically plausible, they lacked cross-validation. To address these limitations, we conducted a follow-up study which: a) assessed more specific dimensions of vulnerable narcissism; b) involved independently data collected from a community sample from a different country; and c) not only cross-validated findings, but it also provided a much more detailed insight onto the relations of vulnerable narcissism with the dispositions towards ridicule and laughter.

The major limitation of both studies is that while we have found compelling evidence linking gelotophobia and vulnerable narcissism (and more specifically, isolation), these findings were limited to self-reports. Future studies might therefore consider the application of experimental designs to assess whether the fear of being laughed at indeed facilitates isolation. Similarly, we also found the same evidence linking katagelasticism and vulnerable narcissism (and more specifically, enmity). The very same approach could be therefore applied to this dimension of vulnerable narcissism as well. Moreover, it could be tested whether enmity is indeed associated with an actual opportunity to laugh at someone. Finally, studies involving intensive longitudinal data focused on the assessment of feelings of being ridiculed or laughed at might be of special interest to learn more about the underlying processes and dynamics of vulnerable narcissism (Di Sarno et al., 2020).

Ethical approval

This study was approved by the Standards Committee of the Faculty of Education, Psychology and Social Work, University of Lleida and is in accordance with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Consent to participate

All participants were informed about the research and gave explicit consent to treat anonymously their data.

Data availability

The data associated with this article is available at <https://osf.io/t9pq7/>.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Ana Blasco-Belled: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – review & editing. **Radosław Rogoza:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – original draft. **Carles Alsinet:** Writing – review & editing, Resources, Supervision.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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The hypotheses presented within the manuscript were not pre-registered.

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