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Part 1: Festschrift Commentaries

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Part 1: Festschrift Commentaries

Abstract

In this first part of the "Festschrift for Willibald Ruch", we collated seven commentaries, from board members and attendees of the Humour Summer School, Colin Cooper, Alyona Ivanova, Martin D. Lampert, Rod A. Martin, Paul E. McGhee and Frank 'Appletree' Rodden.

Willibald Ruch and the Humour Summer School

Josiane Boutonnet, Liisi Laineste, Julia Rayz, Graeme Ritchie

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1 The humour summer school - a brief history

Willibald Ruch is a world-leading researcher in areas such as gelotophobia, positive psychology and sense of humour, but he has also had an important influence on the education of humour scholars around the world, by founding and directing the International Summer School and Symposium on Humour and Laughter: Theory, Research and Applications.

When he took up a post at Queen's University in Belfast in 2000, Willibald was already receiving enquiries from humour students and scholars seeking guidance in their research. He therefore conceived the idea of a one-week summer school on the topic of humour research. The first of these was held in June 2001, and was primarily on the topic of psychology, with most of the classes taught by Willibald or Paul McGhee. It was a great success, even attracting participants from outside psychology, and so a similar event was staged at Queen's University in June 2002, with further broadening of the scope across disciplines. In 2003, Willibald was settling in as a professor at the University of Zürich, and accepted an offer to have the summer school, still under his supervision, hosted by the University of Edinburgh. The summer school has continued to be an annual event, held in Scotland (twice), England (three times), Germany (three times), Switzerland (twice), Romania (twice), Spain, Estonia, Finland, Russia, and the USA. Although the typical participant is a graduate student working on a thesis on humour, it also attracts scholars at later stages of their career who are moving into some new area of humour research or application, or those who wish a refresher course. In 2004, an Advisory Board was created, made up of former local organisers of the school, and this group acts as a steering committee to ensure that the school takes place and follows an established scheme.

Throughout these two decades, Willibald Ruch has been the intellectual leader of this endeavour, acting as chair of the Advisory Board and coordinating the academic content of each school's programme. He has also continued to fulfil the role of lecturer, presenting talks and workshops. This long-running dedication and hard work has been carried out with Willibald's usual good humour, as is illustrated by the reminiscences presented below.

2 As others see him

The summer school, when it began, filled a noticeable gap -- it directly addressed the plight of many novice humour scholars who embark upon their research in relatively isolated conditions. The school has been very effective in providing such newcomers with an introduction to the relevant literature, methods and scholars. Those who have attended are very clear about the value of Willibald's work with this event, as can be seen from the comments in this section.

“At the beginning of 00s it was very hard for a Russian student like me to find any foreign literature in English on humour. ... Sometimes I could only find very old books in the Russian State Library named after Lenin. ... I remember my faculty at the Moscow State University began to collect first library of foreign editions. ... I was happy to find any text there, which included any mentioning of smile, laughter or comic study, even very far away from my own scientific interest. ... One day I found there one of Willi’s texts. ... Finally, I found something theoretical, systemized, methodologically clear and helpful that could really move my research. I was happy!”
(Alyona Ivanova)

In such conditions, many students took the step of contacting Willibald directly either before or during the school, with gratifying results:

“I sought help from Willi before meeting with him at the very first Humour Summer School in Belfast [in 2001]. Thanks to the inimitable instrument that is email, he was gracious enough to reply to an unknown, newly-qualified graduate, and so our academic relationship began.” (Ann Snowden)

It was the steady flow of such queries that led to the establishment of the first summer school, which was extremely successful:

“Several emails later, I arrived in Belfast [in 2001] to find him just as accommodating in person, to the point of spending time with me on the traditional ‘free’ Wednesday afternoon. ” (Ann Snowden)

“I first met Willi in Belfast at the very first International Summer School in 2001. It was by far the most memorable summer school in my book.” (Josiane Boutonnet)

From the start, and in subsequent summer schools, the emphasis was on a supportive and welcoming environment for students:

“Although I very much enjoyed the beautiful city of Edinburgh [in 2003], I was even more intrigued by the atmosphere Willi and all the other more senior researchers involved created at the Summer School. Their genuine interest in promoting and supporting younger scholars and their openness to our questions and ideas boosted everybody’s enthusiasm to proceed in this field ...” (Irina Falkenberg)

“When attending, I often see him happily chatting to students, giving them advice, joking around and sharing his knowledge, but also helping them to network with people and matching students and seasoned researchers with similar interests ... I have always enjoyed the relaxed atmosphere at the summer schools ...”(Jenny Hofmann)

“...my experience with Willi was a way of life with him. He generously gave time and the benefit of his extensive knowledge to many students at all levels.” (Ann Snowden)

“... I was impressed by Willi’s openness and artistic skills. But I was even more impressed when I found Prof. Dr. Ruch chatting with the students after the workshop in such a simple democratic way, discussing the subject, but also [replying to a] wide circle of questions.” (Alyona Ivanova)

This atmosphere was at least partly a result of Willibald's own love of research:

“ I ... remember the look of sheer joy Willibald had while looking at the first results ... for [a] study that was to appear [in *HUMOR*]. He probably caught me noticing and said, in a semi-contrite tone, ‘It's really fun doing this!’ I remembered that, years later in Fribourg [in 2006], at the first Summer School I attended, when Willibald was demonstrating FACS to a roomful of people and clearly enjoying it. That joy is what a true scholar looks like.” (Salvatore Attardo)

“... one thing that has always struck me is the passion that Willibald has for the summer school.” (Jenny Hofmann)

“The International Summer School and Symposium on Humour and Laughter ... resulted from Willi’s need to share scientific knowledge on humour.” (Alyona Ivanova)

However, the summer school was not just a highly enjoyable experience, but also a forum for real intellectual discourse, particularly feedback to students:

“[Willi's Summer School] has represented his group’s research well but it remains a great introduction to the field, and other disciplines and approaches are represented as well.” (Victor Raskin)

“I received really valuable feedback from delegates, and especially Willibald, which I do believe strengthened my theoretical model and allowed me to work on good foundations ... Willibald’s lectures linking humour to positive psychology even giving my own students the opportunity to meet-the-lecturer and ... [allowing] them to build their studies on strong foundations.” (Tracey Platt)

“The Humour Summer School fulfilled its aim to provide insights into the many facets that humour research, theories, and applications can have, and left me with a host of research ideas for my upcoming PhD studies.” (Sonja Heintz)

“Willi has always been enormously helpful, approachable and supportive with both the organizational part of running the Summer School but also with feedback on ideas and research questions.” (Irina Falkenberg)

Of course, creating this first-rate learning environment involved some serious work:

“It’s important to Willi that the organization runs smoothly, the program is balanced and students that attend can make the most of the experience.” (Jenny Hofmann)

“Something else which often gets taken for granted is the enormous amount of work that goes into the successful running of the Summer School, and for this, we should loudly praise Willi.” (Ann Snowden)

“Thanks to all the work and energy Willi and his teams have put into running this event, the Summer School is a great opportunity to learn, network and also have fun.” (Irina Falkenberg)

This potent combination of academic rigour and a relaxed atmosphere has left a legacy in various ways:

“I am very grateful to Willibald for establishing the summer school that helped so many humour students since 2001 to learn from the best scholars to improve their humour activities, and ideally to embark on a humour-related career of their own. I hope the humour summer school will continue its success story and provide knowledge and skills for humour students and practitioners for many years to come.” (Sonja Heintz)

“The fact that ... the Summer School is now close to its 20th anniversary is proof that this strategy is a great success.” (Irina Falkenberg)

“I feel that even now, 19 years later, I could still call on his help and would still be heard. ... The academic world of humour is a better place thanks to Prof. Dr. Willibald Ruch.” (Ann Snowden)

“I am sure there are many other humour scholars all over the world, who appreciate Willi’s help in their scientific development, the same way as me.” (Alyona Ivanova)

“You can really see that he is proud of this growing network of scholars interested in humor, coming from various disciplines and he puts in a lot of effort to make this loose group of strangers ‘a team’ ...” (Jenny Hofmann)

“Throughout his illustrious career, and his inception of the Humour Summer School, Willibald’s contribution to supporting those wishing to pursue humour research stands the test of time.” (Tracey Platt)

“Ruch remains a prominently active researcher, initiating new massive efforts in his field. But whatever he accomplishes next, the Summer School will definitely remain his significant legacy.” (Victor Raskin)

One aspect of this long-term influence is the way in which the summer school community supports the event:

“ ... many former attendees of the Summer School (myself included) later became organizers themselves ... “ (Irina Falkenberg)

“In 2010, whilst a doctorate student of Willibald’s, he gave me the opportunity to be the local organiser of the Summer School, then in its tenth year. Accepting the offer was the best thing I did for my career. ... As hard work as it was, fitting in event management and studying, the benefits far outstripped the cost and in 2018, along with Josiane Boutonnet, we brought the school to Wolverhampton.” (Tracey Platt)

“In 2017, Julia Rayz [a past participant] and I co-hosted the School at Purdue.”
(Victor Raskin)

Those who have attended the Summer Schools soon become aware not only of Willibald's intellectual leadership, but also of his quietly humorous world view:

“To those who have known him for a while, Willi is known for his absurd private sense of humor, which is so subtle that it can be overlooked by those who then think his public humor is all there is.” (Kiki Hempelmann)

“I will admit to his profuseness of wit and humanity, equally met. I will admire his personality traits showing strength of character. I will even confess that he has all the virtues I admire and none of the vices I dislike. Words and measures will not be sufficient to construct a WiPeIn (Willi Personality Indicator) and capture the man. Let us not be fooled by the man’s countenance for it hides a gift for lively repartee.”
(Josiane Boutonnet)

“... a key gesture of him comes to me: the eyebrow lifts. The first time I recognized this facial appearance was listening together to one of those plentiful dirty jokes of Christie Davis. ... Once asked in between the lectures to produce a personal smile I saw a whole construct appear which reminds me of the four phases of a high jump: approach, take off, flight and landing. Definitely Willibald needed a range of pre-laugh preparations. He starts swinging the shoulders followed by the head wiggling quite a distance. Then the warmed up eyebrows balancing left and right can fulfil their flight. And the landing? Definitely the eyes close the construct: the eyebrows falling down, light comes in the eyes and.....there is the birth of a smile. A (para)sympathetic end.” (Hugo Stuer)

Willibald also likes to connect with each location's ambience:

“Another thing I truly like is the idea that the summer school is hosted in a different location every year and I think that Professor Ruch shares this opinion: Curious in nature, he is always interested in the local culture (food in particular) and enjoys the stay in the respective universities or locations, indulges in the local humor habits, music, nature and activities.” (Jenny Hofmann)

“In the warm summer evening [2009; in Granada, Spain], we were treated to tapas and an exquisite flamenco recital, which to my surprise, Willibald contributed, with his fantastic guitar skills.” (Tracey Platt)

“After the School [2008; in Galati, Romania], our thoughtful convenor had arranged a proper break for staff and students. This was in the Carpathian Mountains, where time has stood still in terms of farming and village life. ... Several of us, including Willibald, set out to climb one of the hilly meadows nearby our lodging. Not having hiking gear, we just wore our teaching clothes, which for Professor Ruch meant jacket and tie. The view was amazing – wooded slopes interspersed with pocket handkerchief meadows; the air so pure, the grass starred with tiny flowers; the peace profound. Here, proclaimed Willibald, was the right place to be in touch with nature, not back at the man-made university. When we next looked, there he was, peacefully catching forty winks on the long grass in a flowery meadow: my favourite memory of Willibald.” (Jessica Milner Davis)

It is clear from all the memories and accolades expressed here that Willibald Ruch has, through the summer school, had a substantial positive influence on the lives and careers of hundreds of humour scholars throughout the world.

3 The future

Willibald Ruch has given no indication that he would like to terminate the sequence of summer schools or to withdraw from his leadership role. We can therefore hope that these events will continue for some time to come, underlining the breadth of Willibald's commitment and contribution to the humour research community.

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I first met Willi Ruch when he joined the School of Psychology at Queen's University, Belfast round about 2000. We were a fairly small department (by European and US standards) with about 25 academic staff; I was the only person who taught and researched individual differences, and I was overjoyed to have such a smart and thoroughly amiable colleague. Queen's was a friendly department (we all met for mid-morning coffee and gossip, went out for a meal at Christmas, etc.) and Willi thoroughly enjoyed all this and settled in very quickly.

In those days Belfast was very different from today's vibrant city. Although terrorist activity had officially ended and there were no troops on the streets, there were areas of the city where the ex-terrorists had turned into gangsters, and where no-one in their right mind would choose to live... except Willi. He was lodging with one of our colleagues in the leafy suburbs, and thought that it would be "an interesting experience" to find an apartment in one of these areas. I vividly remember hearing Bill Byth telling Willi "you must not move there – you will be killed!". Fortunately we all managed to persuade him that the dangers were real, and he settled happily into an apartment a short walk from the university.

He was an enthusiastic lecturer, and the students enjoyed his dry sense of humour as well as the content of his final-year "humour" course. He was also a very kind, supportive colleague – and I found it wonderful that we had such similar views on personality psychology. Our rooms were opposite each other, and I relished sharing ideas. Willi was well-settled in Belfast and we were all (selfishly) sorry when the "job of a lifetime" was offered to him and he left us. I visited him in Zurich, and were mightily impressed by the department he had created there – it is hard to imagine that he is retiring, though of course he is still busy editing and writing. Long may it all continue.

Tribute to Willibald Ruch

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My first “meeting” with Willi was through his works, the ones I have been hunting for in Moscow in my student years back to 2000s. Willy is well-known by his huge number of empirical studies, but I remember that the paper, which impressed me the most then, was the most theoretical text “Exhilaration and Humor” published in 1993.

Thanks to my father, I could attend my first ISHS international conference in Youngstown University in 2005, where I had an honor to meet Willi face to face. First, I participated in his seminar “How to measure facial responses to humor”, after which I was surprised how much time he dedicated to the participants answering their questions and being highly involved in informal discussion, unlikely typical, as I thought, for such a well-known professor.

Another day I presented my own paper, and I found him in the audience. It was my first public speech in English and for international colleagues, and God knows how scared I was. After the session I approached to Willi and asked him for a feedback, which he provided in a very detailed and helpful manner. This experience became the first in the series of priceless lessons I happened to get from the professor.

Next year I attended the International Summer School, founded by Willy, in Fribourg, and then again in 2012 in Savonlinna. Each of the events enriched me with new friends and colleagues, not to mentioning a huge luggage of materials, ideas and inspiration I always brought home.

Through writing articles in cooperation with Willi and his students, I gained competences comparable with the outcome of my whole university education. Willi was also one of the persons thanks to whom Sergei Troitskii and I managed to organize interaction and exchange between Russian and international humor scholars in the form of Gelological congress and the ISS, which took place in Saint Petersburg in 2015. I am especially thankful to Willi for his online participation in the Gelological congress 2021, during the COVID19 pandemic.

To conclude, I must say I am honored to consider Willi as one of my teachers and my conductor to the international humor research.

Tribute to Willibald Ruch

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Back in the ancient world of the 1980s, if you wished to do psychological research, you could not simply use an electronic data base to find published articles. Instead, you would have to go physically to a university library to comb through the Psychological Abstracts. This process usually started with opening up the indexes, year by year, and looking up subjects of interest. For each subject, you would find index numbers to write down, and then use these numbers to find corresponding abstracts in another set of reference books. As an 80s graduate student, interested in the psychology of humor, I would go through these indexes for the topic of humor, and remarkably, I found that the index numbers most often turned up the research of one fellow named Willibald Ruch.

I did not have the pleasure to meet Willi until some years later. At the 1994 Conference of the International Society for Humor Studies, Willi had organized a symposium on psychological assessment, and I spoke to him afterwards about a humor measure that Ken Craik and I had been developing at UC Berkeley's Institute of Personality and Social Research--the Humorous Behavior Q-Sort Deck. Willi expressed a genuine interest in the HBQD and was quite supportive. In the mid-90s, he visited Berkeley, California, and joined our IPSR research group, which included Ken, myself, and graduate student Aaron Ware. Willi invited us to publish with him in a special issue on assessment that he was developing for *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research* and he again invited us to contribute to a volume in the Humor Research Series on *The Sense of Humor*. Ken and Aaron contributed a chapter on the study humor and personality from a person-environment approach and I contributed with Susan Ervin-Tripp, a review of the research on gender and humor. Around this time, Willi also encouraged me to submit a proposal to host an ISHS Conference at my place of business, Holy Names University--which I did. I convened the 1999 ISHS Conference, which Willi helped to organize, and he contributed a symposium on Laughter, Physiology, and Health. Because of my work on this Conference, I was later asked to succeed Don Nilsen of Arizona State University as the Executive Secretary of the International Society for Humor Studies. Had Willi not encouraged me to host the 1999 Conference, I probably would not be the Society's current Executive Secretary. Over the last two decades, I have had other opportunities to work with Willi, but most notably from 2012 to 2013, when he served as ISHS President and encouraged me to host another ISHS Conference at Holy Names University in 2015, which he again helped organize and contributed another symposium on Humor and Health. Over time, I have been exceptionally appreciative of Willi's encouragement and support, and I can only be amazed by the fact that nearly 40 years ago, he started out for me as just a number to name in an abstract index.

Humor—the Final Personality Frontier: Boldly Going Where No Researcher has Gone Before. These are the Empirical Voyages of Dr. Willibald Ruch

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[All materials in “quotes” below are from personal communications with Dr. Ruch in January of 2020.]

I first met Dr. Willibald Ruch in 1984 at the 4th ISHS Conference in Tel Aviv. He had completed his PhD four years earlier at Karl Franzens University of Graz (Austria) and already had a sharp (and committed) focus on a range of key issues that he wanted to investigate in the recently-emergent field of humor research. I was coincidentally about to begin a year at the University of Paris V that fall as a Visiting Professor and visited Willi in Düsseldorf on several occasions both that year and during a two-year period (1987-89) when I returned to Paris as a Research Fellow. During these visits, I was consistently impressed with the many new research projects he had undertaken. On each new visit, the number of completed studies that were not yet submitted for publication grew because he was on to the next series of studies and just did not have time to write up the earlier ones. This early sign of the ability (and desire) to move in multiple research directions at the same time was to become a consistent theme throughout his research career . . . and continues to this day.

So how did this interest in studying humor get started? And what triggered the initial specific interest in humor and individual differences in personality? Amazingly, he remembers picking up a newspaper as a young child and reading something that “did not make sense.” His older sister explained that it was a “joke.” He did not laugh, but did “. . . learn that they [jokes] don’t need to be logical or make sense.” This led him to notice and think about jokes he did and did not like/find funny. The earliest precursor of what would become a life-long interest emerged during his elementary and secondary school years. “I noticed that teachers I did not like practiced humor than made me cringe, and friendly teachers made jokes that I found funny.”

At age 17, Willi studied classical music in the conservatory and found that while the staff was very boring and humorless, the band he soon played in had a lot of fun together and shared verbal humor and other creative ways of being funny. “So I somehow learned here that humor is indicative of personality.”

“In the last year at high school I went to a vocational career counseling institution and did an IQ test and a test of vocational interest. I stopped when I read one of the items: ‘I would rather tell a joke than investigate what makes it funny.’ This idea fascinated me. This test was by Erich Mittennecker & Walter Toman (*PIT: Personality and Interest test*). A year later I sat in a lecture by Erich Mittennecker in Graz as I started to study Psychology. In this course on Introduction to Psychology, Mittennecker also explained the workings of Jokes . . . probably Freud’s theory, which told me that studying jokes is a topic of psychology. I got fascinated by factor analysis at that time and read a lot about it.”

In the summer after his first year in Graz, he read Freud’s *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* and was immediately convinced that studying jokes needs to be done by

factor analysis. In his second year at Graz he completed his first factor analytic study of humor, taking the jokes from one single book. Initially frustrated by the fact that only one factor (incongruity-resolution) emerged, the subsequent discovery that all of the jokes in that book came from one newspaper—“...the most popular newspaper with a right-wing orientation...”—became the first evidence of a consistent pattern of such humor being a key component of sense of humor among conservatives.

Dr. Ruch’s prolific career has been a major force in shaping the direction of humor research for four decades. In the limited space available here, I will draw special attention to three key areas of key influence.

1a. Humor as a personality characteristic

1b. Factor analysis and the development of valid humor assessment tools

These two areas of contribution have been closely linked across Dr. Ruch’s 40 years of humor research. Strong assessment tools are critical in any research focusing on individual differences. He spent four years (1977-1981) as a Research Associate in a project (funded by the Foundation for the Support of Scientific Research, Austria) entitled “The Development of Multidimensional and Multimodal Testing Instruments for the Assessment of Assertiveness.” It was here that he developed his finely honed in-depth understanding of factor analysis.

This expertise was evident in his 1980 PhD Dissertation, “Common structures in humor appreciation and personality.” It was here that he unveiled his first humor assessment tool—the *3WD Humor Test*, subsequently validated in multiple countries. Other widely used and influential measures he developed are discussed elsewhere in this *Special Issue*. They include the State-Trait-Cheerfulness-Inventory (see section 4) and assessments of fear of being laughed at (gelotophobia), enjoyment of being laughed at (gelotophilia) and enjoyment of laughing at others (katagelacticism)—see section 5). The importance of (and interest in) the research on fear of being laughed at is evident in the development of Danish, Arabic (Lebanon), Czech, Slovak, Chinese, French, Israeli, Russian, Hungarian and Indian versions of the measure. This has led to numerous cross-cultural comparisons of gelotophobia.

One of his recent research initiatives is the development of measures of comic styles, giving special attention to benevolent vs. corrective humor. This new research explores the relationship between these distinctive humor styles and personality as they relate to psychological well being, and how comic styles differentially tap into temperament and character.

2 Humor and emotion

Dr. Ruch was the first humor researcher to draw attention to the importance of anchoring investigations of the emotional response to humor within the broader context of theoretical and empirical investigations of emotion. His initial work in this direction took place within the years-long project known as the “Habilitation” in Germany. In order to become a professor at German (and many other European) Universities, you must use a period of time after completing your doctorate to attain *Berufungsfähigkeit*—i.e., eligibility for a professor position. Several years are typically spent obtaining additional research (possibly combined with teaching) experience. The Habilitation serves as evidence of a new PhD’s capacity for competent independent research (and sometimes effectiveness as a teacher in his/her area of expertise).

After accepting a faculty position at the University of Düsseldorf in 1981, where he continued his work on humor and personality, he began his Habilitation, engaging in an in-

depth exploration of the emotional underpinnings of the subjective experience of humor. The outcome of this immersion in the broad field of research on emotion was his numerous compelling articles on humor and “exhilaration.” His Habilitation thesis title, completed in 1991, was “The emotion of exhilaration: Forms of expression and eliciting conditions.” His extensive work for his Habilitation led to several influential articles on humor and exhilaration in the 1990s, including his widely cited chapter in the Paul Ekman’s *Handbook of Emotions* (Ruch, 1993).

To further strengthen his expertise in the field of emotion, he had “research stays” with both Marvin Zuckerman (1995) and Paul Ekman (1998) in the USA. The most important impact of these collaborations may well have been Willi’s adoption of Ekman’s Facial Action Coding System (FACS) as a tool for distinguishing between genuine humor appreciation (as reflected in laughter and smiling) and artificial/forced expressions of amusement. This was a crucial advancement in the effort to assess genuine appreciation of humor. He has published at least 15 articles specifically using the FACS to study humor appreciation.

3 Humor as a character strength: humor and positive psychology

From the outset of the emergence of Positive Psychology at the turn of this century, it was Willibald Ruch who played the key role of clarifying the nature of humor as one of the 24 key “Character Strengths” and investigating its relationship to other character strengths and virtues. His ground breaking chapter in the (now classic) Peterson and Seligman (2004) *Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification* was the first of 17 articles specifically examining humor within the context of positive psychology and 57 additional articles focusing on other areas of Positive Psychology in the absence of a focus on humor. Among these articles, 13 focused on Positive Psychology intervention programs in general, while 7 specifically dealt with humor intervention programs. His impact in this area continues to expand. Included in this work are his investigations of personality and other factors influencing the effectiveness of Positive Psychology interventions (e.g., Wellenzohn, Proyer & Ruch, 2018).

It should be noted that Dr. Ruch has also published many articles on humor outside of the specific topics discussed in this *Special Issue of Humor*.

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Reminiscences of Willi Ruch

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I first met Willi Ruch at one of the annual conferences of the International Society for Humor Studies (ISHS) in the mid-1980s. We were both starting out in our careers as academic psychologists, seeking a foothold in the field of humor research. At that time psychologists were very much in the minority among the various disciplines represented in ISHS, making it all the more natural for us to gravitate to one another.

Over the ensuing years we renewed our acquaintance in whatever far-flung location in Europe or North America in which the ISHS conference was being held. I remember hours spent over pints of beer, discussing research ideas and exchanging war stories about our university departments back home. Willi was engaged in his pioneering research with the 3WD, conducting complicated factor analyses on funniness ratings of cartoons and jokes, and seeking to bring a greater degree of scientific rigor and order to the less systematic efforts of earlier scholars. I remember well his epic conference presentations in which he would wow the audiences with a series of overhead projector slides packed with statistical tables and graphs.

Sometime in the 1990s Willi came to London, Ontario, for a study leave and my wife and I put him up on the couch in our family room for a few weeks. One evening he surprised us with his hidden musical talents when he took out a guitar and entertained our three children with an extensive playlist of rock-n-roll songs. Somewhere in the basement I still have an old VHS video of Willi gamely bouncing on our backyard trampoline, trying to keep his balance while our children did backflips around him. On the weekends we took him for drives to the Great Lakes and Niagara Falls.

Later, when Willi arranged for me to speak in his department, he and his wife Dorothea reciprocated by putting me up in their apartment in Zurich. One day they took me for a long drive through the beautiful Swiss countryside. I have a delightful memory of a sunny spring day, sitting with them for lunch on the outdoor patio of an alpine restaurant surrounded by mountains, with patches of snow still melting in the nearby meadows.

As Willi's research career progressed and his list of publications multiplied, he increasingly took on a role of mentor to a younger generation of budding scholars, not only in supervising his own graduate students, but also with the multidisciplinary humor research summer schools that he instituted and fostered over the years. Several summers I had the pleasure of being an invited instructor at these schools in idyllic locations in Switzerland and Northern Ireland. I was impressed with Willi's enthusiasm and dedication in training those keen students in the intricacies of applying science to the study of humor.

Looking back over the years since we first met, Willi has certainly succeeded in making his mark in humor studies with his legacy of research and teaching, and I value my memories of those times together.

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As with the case of Lolita, the name Willibald Ruch trips lightly off the tongue. Think of Beethoven's 5th Symphony: (to be sung) Wi-lli-bald-Ruch, Who is this man?

The facts are clear in Wikipedia. He was born in Kühnsdorf, Austria in 1956. The first thing mentioned in Wikipedia is his career as a guitarist and then his life in Düsseldorf, in California, Belfast and now in Zurich.. He presently works as a professor of Psychology at the University of Zurich. That's his profession; that's how he earns his daily bread. His area of expertise is positive psychology and humor. Anything you want to know about humor, ask Willi.

But home back in Austria, he was a musician. Willi IS a very talented musician and until one has heard him play the guitar, one will not know him.

Willi has a beard and is not a loud person; sometimes his quiet muttering is practically inaudible. Given the right atmosphere, however, and the right people, he is a source of endless stories about events, places and people. The anecdotes that he tells are pointed and spiced with humor.

In his essence, Willi is a "Geniesser" – not an epicurean, not a bon vivant not a gourmet. He is from Austria. He knows how to deeply relish the good things of life. When he enjoys a meal, he does not want to talk; he wants to savor the gustatory pleasure of the moment. He takes his senses one at a time. He does not like to be hurried. He tolerates formal banquets but enjoys small intimate repasts much more. A good breakfast with a handful of friends and rich conversation can mutate into a very long lasting brunch. It's not an accident that Willi is a moving force in positive psychology.

His close colleagues have fascinating lives. They know him and love him but they must be constantly on the alert: Willi does not like to dress up – he has many blue shirts, When, however, he sees that he is underdressed for an event, his colleagues must be ready - not only to give him sartorial advice but also to advise him as to where he might be able to buy a tie within 30 minutes in downtown Istanbul.

Willi himself often points out similarities between humor and music. With respect to complexity, just as there is rock and roll music and classical music, there are jokes about blondes and there are jokes about ontology. In his heart, he never strays far from the guitar. To know Willi, one must hear him play – classical music, maybe from South America. As one listens to his delicately played tones and searches in vain for their meaning, one realizes that the music means nothing.

It is absurd. As absurd as humor.