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Introduction to the “Festschrift for Willibald Ruch”

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René Proyer is a full professor of psychology at the Martin-Luther-University Halle-Wittenberg, Germany. His main interests are playfulness, dispositions towards ridicule and being laughed at, and indicators of positive psychological functioning. He is a member of the editorial board of HUMOR and other journals and a member of the Advisory Board of the International Humour Summer School.

Abstract

This introduction to the “Festschrift for Willibald Ruch” outlines his impressive achievements in humor research, especially in the areas of measurement, individual differences as well as models and theories. Though mostly focusing on the psychology of humor and the sense of humor, Willibald also pioneered interdisciplinary and cross-cultural humor studies. This Festschrift comprises seven invited commentaries and eight articles, which expand areas of research that Willibald significantly shaped and advanced, including humor appreciation, comprehension and production, cheerfulness, dispositions towards laughter and being laughed at, as well as comic styles and humor dimensions.

1 Introduction

It is with great honor and excitement that we present this Festschrift in recognition of Willibald Ruch, a highly esteemed and accomplished researcher in the fields of humor research and, more generally speaking, research in individual differences, emotions, and psychological assessment. Most of the readers of HUMOR and members of the ISHS will be aware of his significant contributions to the academic community through his pioneering research, which helped bridging gaps between disciplines and fields. This may be particularly true for his contributions to humor research and his cooperation with, for example, linguists, medical doctors, computer scientists, emotion researchers, and many others more. He has also helped promoting humor research within the ever-growing field of positive psychology (e.g., Ruch 2004a) and by studying the virtuousness of humor (e.g., Beermann and Ruch 2009; Müller and Ruch, 2011; Ruch and Heintz 2016). His contributions have helped developing research in ways that will impact the field for years to come. Additionally, he has served twice as the International Society for Humor Studies (ISHS) president, was and still is an active member of the editorial board of HUMOR, and continues to mentor the next generation of researchers by initiating and regularly organizing the International Summer School and Symposium on Humour and Laughter. His extensive work was also praised with several achievement awards from the ISHS, the Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor (AATH), the International Positive Psychology Association (IPPA Fellow), the VIA Institute of Character Cincinnati, USA (Senior Scientist) and — last but not least — the “Goldene Humor Bad[wanne] Zurzach” (“Golden humor bathtub Zurzach”, Switzerland), which Willibald always had on prominent display in his office.

Given that we are all alumni of Willi’s Zurich lab, we felt it was appropriate for us to organize this Festschrift. We all share very warm memories to our time in the lab and fondly think back at the discussions around joint lunch or from door-to-door. The shared humor and laughter easily outweighed the hurdles of university administration or other imbalances the lab had to face in the department. Willibald Ruch led all of this from an office full of papers and books, one of the tables that, theoretically, could have been used for meetings was full of piles of papers, (up to, say, one meter height), journals, and books, and the characteristic MacBook frequently balanced on a book amidst piles of working materials.

Of course, we are fully aware that we will not be able to bring justice to all of his research interests; even a two-part special issue would likely not suffice to achieve this. However, in recognition of his numerous contributions and achievements, we have assembled this collection of essays and articles written by colleagues, former students, and friends. We took care to cover different fields, but, of course, we cannot cover all the areas he has left marks and continues to do so.

Psychologists love statistics and so it seems appropriate to add some to this introduction. On February 13th 2023, Willi’s work has been cited 32,848 times and of these 15,742 were since 2018. The average *h*-index of a psychology professor in Germany in personality and assessment is about 11 (Trost and Rindermann 2017) and his is 90 (data from GoogleScholar). This regularly places him among the most frequently cited researchers worldwide (top 2% worldwide). The University of Zurich’s *Zurich Open Repository and Archive*, which stores scientific contributions from all researchers at the University lists him as the 4th most downloaded author with a total of 86,903 downloads. Willibald received

numerous prestigious research grants, amongst others, from the *Swiss National Science Foundation* or the *German Research Foundation*. The latter includes a highly competitive Heisenberg grant, which allowed him to continue his research at the University of Düsseldorf¹ and not only, but also enabled his work on what has become a classic in the meantime *The Sense of Humor: Explorations of a personality characteristic* (1998, 2007). One related observation from working with the laureate for many years is his dedication to basic research and his eye on using experimental work to advance humor research. Also, by including objective markers of, for example, amusement. The latter makes for time-consuming research designs and requires a lot of skills in the analysis, but using the *Facial Action Coding System* (FACS; Ekman, Friesen and Hager 2002; Rosenberg and Ekman, 2020) has proven to be a very important addition to study basic phenomena related to humor and laughter (e.g. Ruch, 1993; Ruch and Ekman 2001; Ruch, Hofmann and Platt 2015). He has a clear and analytic mind and is very versatile in applying and developing mathematical models. Several years ago, at the ISHS conference in Boston, there was a contest for creating punchlines to cartoons. One of those presented was something to the effect that someone was unsure about a joke and asked whether Willi has already factor-analyzed it. However, the analyses only tell half of the story as they are just a means to an end and advancement to the field can only be made with robust data. Hence, his main contribution is not crunching numbers, but the development of new models and generating new ideas for the field to grow. In short, his unwavering dedication to his work is an inspiration to all those around him and has played a significant role in his success.

To the best of our knowledge, Willibald Ruch does one of the few lectures on individual differences and personality research in which humor is well-represented. Another observation is that students at the beginning of the lecture think that they know what “humor” is, but soon discover that the question “What is funny to whom and why?” requires a much more fine-grained understanding and was always great to see how students develop an understanding of why humor production needs an ability assessment, while the rating of funniness and aversiveness of jokes says something about humor appreciation. A plus in the lecture was also the live demonstration of *action units*—with a skillful and entertaining ‘eyebrow wave’—when commenting on FACS-based studies. This is just a small example of how accomplished as a teacher Willibald is to students at all levels of expertise.

Willibald’s accomplishments in humor research are numerous and influential. In the early 80’s, he proposed one of the few standardized, reliable and validated humor appreciation tests, the 3WD (“3 Witz-Dimensionen”, German for “3 joke dimensions”; Ruch 1980, 1983, 1992), which was the result of his PhD studies under the supervision of Erich Mittennecker² at the University of Graz, Austria. This measure was then used cross-culturally (e.g., Spain: Carretero-Dios and Ruch. 2010; Italy: Ruch and Forabosco 1996; France: Ruch, Ott, Accoce, and Bariaud 1991), in interdisciplinary research (e.g. linguistics: Hempelmann and Ruch 2005; advertisement: Hofmann and Ruch 2017; behavior genetics: Weber, Ruch, Riemann, Spinath, and Angleitner 2014) and also inspired the development of further humor measures (e.g., the *Cartoon Punch Line Production Test*: Köhler and Ruch 1993; Ruch and

¹ Another important step was accepting a post as senior lecturer for individual differences / motivation and emotion, at the School of Psychology at the Queen's University of Belfast (see Colin Cooper’s comment, this issue, for details).

² Erich Mittennecker provided valuable comments on an initial draft of the 2009 paper introducing gelotophilia and katagelasticism. Other influential personalities encouraging Willibald Ruch’s research were Alois Angleitner (Bielefeld; e.g., Ostendorf, Angleitner, and Ruch, 1986) and Hans-Jürgen Eysenck (London).

Heintz 2019a; *escala de apreciación del humor*: Carretero-Dios, Hugo, Cristino Pérez, and Gualberto Buela-Casal 2010; *Humor Structure Appreciation Scale*, Sulejmanov, Spasovski, and Platt 2018).

His next impact was made with the first comprehensive model and measure of humor as a temperament, in which he distinguished three traits (stable habits) and states (momentary tendencies) that make a person prone to engage with humor (Ruch et al. 1996, 1997). The State-Trait Cheerfulness model includes the three dimensions cheerfulness, seriousness, and bad mood, and can be assessed with various state and trait versions of the State-Trait Cheerfulness Inventory (STCI; for an overview, see Ruch and Hofmann 2014). To our knowledge, this is still the only model that combines state and trait approaches to date, and hence it is widely used and continues to be adapted in new languages (e.g., in the past two years in English: Lau, Chiesi, Hofmann, Saklofske and Ruch 2021; Italian: Lau, Chiesi, Hofmann, Ruch, and Saklofske 2020).

The next wide-ranging impact Willibald made in humor research was in proposing the concepts of dispositions towards laughter and being laughed at, starting with gelotophobia (the fear of being laughed at; Ruch 2004b; Ruch and Proyer 2008), gelotophilia (the joy of being laughed at) and katagelasticism (the joy of laughing at others; Ruch and Proyer 2009). The most researched concept among the three is gelotophobia, which has received extensive theoretical attention (for an overview see Ruch et al. 2014), a 2009 *HUMOR* double special issue (Ruch 2009), a 2010 two-part special issue in *Psychological Test and Assessment Modeling* (Proyer and Ruch 2010) and numerous studies to better understand the fear of being laughed at as an individual differences variable and from a clinical perspective (e.g. Brauer, Sendatzki, and Proyer 2022; Edwards, Martin, and Dozois 2010; Papousek et al. 2009; Platt 2021; Platt, Ruch, Hofmann, and Proyer 2012a; Proyer, Ruch, and Chen 2012; Ruch and Stahlmann 2020; Samson, Huber and Ruch 2011; Wu et al. 2015). This differentiated view (i.e., not all laughter and-laughter-related cues are necessarily perceived as something positive by everyone) has helped shaping new research on humor and laughter—and has proven an important control variable when conducting (experimental) research on laughter (see Platt, Hofmann, Ruch, Niewiadomski, and Urbain 2012b).

One of Willibald's long-standing goals has been to develop a comprehensive model of the sense of humor. In the last decade, several publications tapped into the emerging framework of such as model, describing four to six overarching humor dimensions (Ruch 2012; Ruch and Heintz 2019b) and at least eight comic styles (Heintz and Ruch 2019; Ruch et al. 2018). The comic styles have already been picked up in a range of studies, showing that they are viable individual-difference constructs in a range of cultures, including Chile (Mendiburo-Seguel and Heintz 2020), Italy (Dionigi, Duradoni, and Vagnoli 2021) and Portugal (Moreira and Inman 2021), with more translations currently underway. We will likely see more developments in refining and validating further dimensions of the sense of humor to eventually arrive at a comprehensive picture of the diversity of individual's humor comprehension, appreciation, and production.

Willibald has also been concerned with fostering the quality of humor research, especially the psychometric adequacy of humor measures. This has been highlighted by his regular talks on measurement in the *International Humor Summer School*, as well as publications comparing different humor measures (e.g. Köhler and Ruch 1996), testing the validity of existing humor measures (e.g. Carretero-Dios, Eid, and Ruch 2011; Deckers and Ruch 1992; Heintz, Ruch, Lau, Saklofske, and McGhee 2021; Ruch and Heintz 2017) and

proposing standards for validation (e.g. Delgado-Rico, Carretero-Dios, and Ruch 2012). All these efforts greatly contributed to a better understanding and enhancement of measurement quality in research and applications of humor and laughter, providing the groundwork for scientific, accumulative and interdisciplinary advances in the field.

2 The Festschrift

The Festschrift comprises two parts: First, we invited a range of scholars who have been working with Willibald throughout his career to write a commentary. Altogether, we assembled seven commentaries from the following contributors: 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. Some shorter, some longer, but all report fond memories they have shared with Willibald and the impact he has had on themselves and his field of research.

The second part of the Festschrift consists of articles that build on Willibald’s research contributions and add new findings and perspectives. We structured the articles by topic, covering several of the areas where Willibald made significant and lasting contributions to humor research:

2.1 Humor appreciation, comprehension, and production

Raskin provides a personal review of his experiences in humor research and conferences, the development of semantic theories of jokes, and the changes in humor culture in the past decades, in his contribution “The demise of the joke.”

Cowie provides a personal review of the beginning and advances in computational humor research, including the interdisciplinary April Fools’ Day Workshop in 2002, in his contribution “Computational research, and the case for taking humor seriously.”

Delgado-Rico et al. present an experimental approach to study the effect of different affective states on funniness and aversiveness ratings of jokes and cartoons in their contribution “Differential effects of affective arousal and valence on humor appreciation in female university students.”

Heintz et al. investigate individual differences in joke appreciation and comprehension and their interplay in their contribution “Humour comprehension and appreciation: An analysis of Italian jokes.”

2.2 Cheerfulness

Lau et al. provide a comprehensive psychometric investigation of the standard measure for trait cheerfulness, seriousness and bad mood, the STCI, in their contribution “The State-Trait Model of Cheerfulness and Social Desirability: An Investigation on Psychometric Properties and Links with Well-Being.”

2.3 Gelotophobia, Gelotophilia and Katagelasticism

Brauer et al. provide a novel cognitive perspective on gelotophobia, specifically memory bias and false memories, in their contribution “The fear of being laughed at (gelotophobia) in adults and children: Testing trait-congruent false memories in the Deese-Roediger-McDermott paradigm.”

Torres-Marín et al. provide a social-psychological perspective on the three dispositions towards laughter and being laughed at, specifically aversion to making eye contact in different social situations, in their contribution “Differentiation of dispositions toward ridicule and being laughed at in their relationships to self-reported eye contact aversion.”

2.4 Comic styles and humor dimensions

Milner Davis and Hofmann introduce a comprehensive and interdisciplinary framework for research on humor in their contribution “The Humor Transaction Schema: A conceptual framework for researching the nature and effects of humor.”

Overall, this list of articles provides novel insights into research areas that Willibald Ruch has started or significantly influenced. Furthermore, they investigate these areas from a range of different perspectives, including cognitive, social, psychometric, linguistic and literature studies. Additionally, we received contributions from different countries, including Australia, Belgium, Canada, Germany, Italy, Russia, Spain, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, the United States, showcasing that Willibald’s inputs has inspired researchers and scholars across the world.

We would like to thank everyone who contributed to this Festschrift, and hope that it not only highlights Willibald’s research and personal impact on humor scholars, but also serves to shape the next generation of humor researchers. Willibald remains an active researcher, and we are looking forward to many more impactful studies, joyful collaborations, and uniting humor summer schools.

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