

Whalen Symposium Spring 2018

Unrealistic Optimism and Gelotophobia: Bleak Past and Bleak Future
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When people assess the likelihood that they will experience positive or negative life events, they often show unrealistic optimism. That is, they believe that, compared to other people, good things are more likely to happen to them and bad things are less likely (Weinstein, 1980). Comparison of one's own experiences with those of others seems to reflect an egocentric approach to the assessments (Chambers, Windshitl, & Suls, 2003; Harris, Griffin, & Murray, 2008).

In previous research, we investigated a trait that might affect one's optimism, gelotophobia, the anxiety that arises when one interprets laughter as being directed toward oneself (Ruch & Proyer, 2009).

Participants showing high levels of gelotophobia showed lower levels of optimism regarding their future. Also, as gelotophobia score increased, optimism decreased for positive events, but not for anticipation of negative events. Thus, gelotophobes believed that they would not experience more unfortunate outcomes in life compared to others, but they were less certain that positive outcomes would occur.

As such, the outlook of gelotophobes on the course of their lives is likely more pessimistic than optimistic. In the current research, we revisited the issue of unrealistic optimism among gelotophobes and investigated their views of their past experience, current life, and their view of the future. With the prior patterns of results, we hypothesized that gelotophobes would show low levels of unrealistic optimism for positive events, but no specific pattern for negative events.

In addition, we hypothesized that gelotophobes would view their past as lacking in positivity but high in negativity when responding about their life in general. As such, although they may not expect specific, negative events in their lives, they will not see the past, present, or future in a positive light as measured by the Attitudes toward Time Inventory.

Participants completed an inventory measuring gelotophobia, an unrealistic optimism inventory, and the Attitude Toward Time Inventory, a 30-item survey regarding their view of how their life has been, is now, and will be in the future (Worrell, McKay, & Andretta, 2017).

Overall, participants were more optimistic about their own future than about that of others, replicating earlier research (e.g., Chambers et al., 2003). However, for gelotophobes this effect was limited to feelings of being protected from negative events, not the anticipation of greater positivity in their lives.

Thus, gelotophobes are not pessimistic regarding the occurrence of negative events; that is, they

believe that they will not experience more unfortunate outcomes in life compared to others. On the other hand, gelotophobes are less certain that positive outcomes will accrue in their lives. When we analyzed the results of the Attitudes Toward Time Inventory, we found that gelotophobes were uniformly negative about their childhood, about their present life, and about expectations in the future.

These results indicate that gelotophobes are not “plagued” by unrealistic optimism when they are queried about the likelihood of positive events in their lives. This finding is consistent with earlier research reporting that gelotophobes do not self-deceive (Beins et al., 2013). They have a realistic outlook on their lives in the sense that they do not automatically anticipate positive outcomes the way that non-gelotophobes do. At the same time, gelotophobes are just like everybody else when it comes to anticipating negative events—they feel protected from such outcomes. The outcome of this study thus suggests that gelotophobes do not necessarily believe that their lives will be bad; they just do not believe that their lives will be good.