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Laughing at Oneself: Trait or State?

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Laughing at Oneself

The ability to “laugh at oneself” is often considered a core component of the sense of humour, as well as a world-view and even a virtue (e.g., Comte-Sponville, 2004; Lersch, 1962; for more see Ruch, in press, this volume). Others have seen it as one of the most difficult levels of the sense of humour to be achieved within a training program (McGhee, 1996). La Fave, Haddad, and Maesen (1996) have described “laughing at oneself” as a “myopic illusion” (p. 79); they reason that an event at one’s own expense can’t be a happy event and thus, laughing at oneself can’t exist.

In empirical research, however, laughing at oneself has not received much attention and findings are restricted to one self-report questionnaire (see Ruch & Carrell, 1998). Until now, no experimental approach has been attempted to study the phenomenon of “laughing at oneself”. Therefore, a FACS study is indicated to address the actual behavior of people in situations in which they might or might not respond by actually laughing or smiling at themselves. In this first experimental attempt, we aimed at one’s appearance when laughing at oneself: Can people smile or laugh with enjoyment if a picture of their face has been caricatured?

The Experimental Approach

In addition to several questionnaires assessing the sense of humour (*Sense of Humor Scale*, SHS; McGhee, 1996), state and trait exhilaratability (*State Trait Cheerfulness Inventory*, STCI; Ruch, Köhler & van Thriel, 1996, 1997), and personality (*Eysenck Personality Questionnaire – Revised*, EPQ-RK; Eysenck, Eysenck, & Barrett, 1985), which were filled in by the participants at home, the participants were invited to an experimental part at the Department of Psychology (University of Zurich) for a single testing session. With a web cam and the Mac OS X program *Photo Booth* the experimenter took six distorted photographs of the participants. As a cover story, subjects were told that the photos were “made for a study evaluating physiognomy hypotheses”, and did not know about the distortions. While the participants then were occupied with filling in a questionnaire (*State Trait Cheerfulness Inventory, State version*, STCI-S, Ruch, Köhler, & van Thriel, 1997), the experimenter built the pictures into a computer presentation which also contained six distorted pictures each of a female and a male person. The pictures were in mixed order, beginning with a photograph of the participant. The participants were then confronted with the 18 pictures and were asked to indicate their funniness (1 = not funny, 7 = very funny). During

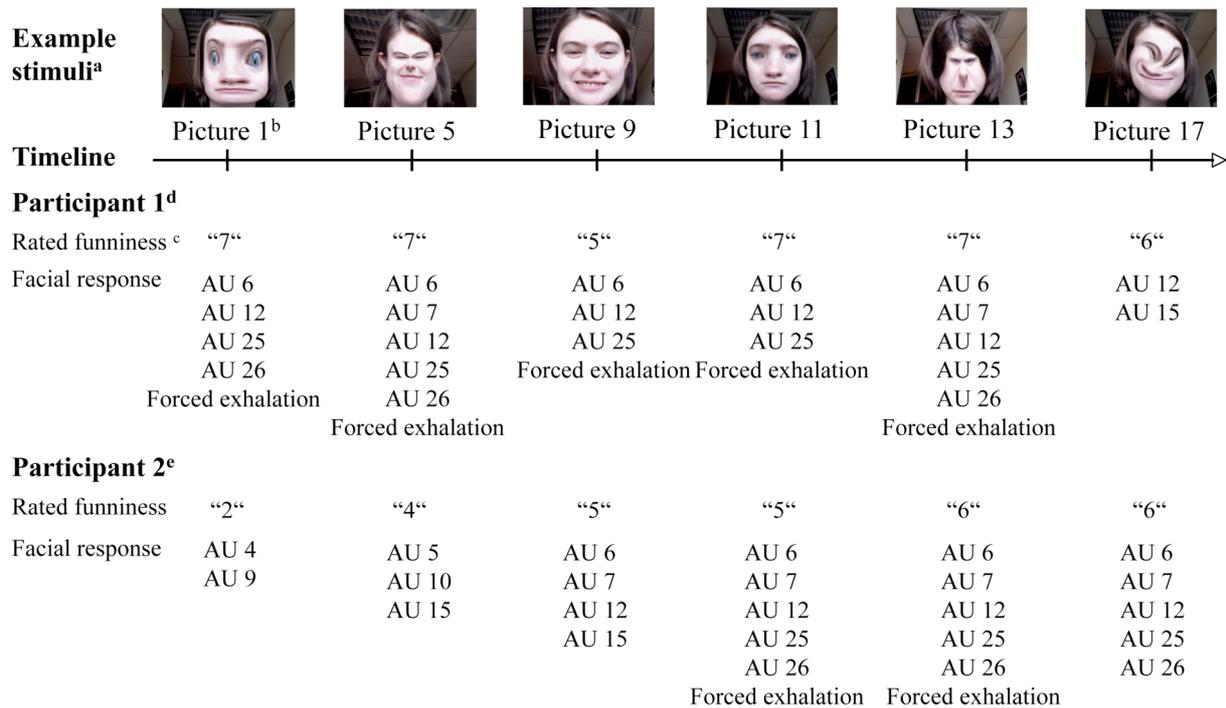
this procedure, a hidden camera videotaped their face. Afterwards, they filled in the STCI-S a second time. At the end of the experiment, the participants were debriefed and offered to see the video material deleted in front of their eyes. None of the participants took up the offer.

The Facial Action Coding System (FACS, Ekman, Friesen, & Hager, 2002) was used for coding the participants' facial responses. Criteria were set up to determine the occurrence of smiling or laughing at oneself. In at least one instance, the following facial responses should occur: Subjects should show the enjoyment smile, i.e., Duchenne display (AU 12 + 6). Possible additional Action Units (AUs) are AU 7, AU 25, AU 26, and AU 27. Furthermore, forced exhalation of air, voiced or unvoiced (which represents laughter) may occur. Negative emotion expressions, on the other hand, (at least in one instance) should not occur.

Types of Responses to the Caricatured Self Appearance

During the analyses, which are not yet completed, we came across the following two observations: (a) The phenomenon "laughing at oneself" exists as an individual difference variable. Some people do show the Duchenne display when they are confronted with a distorted picture of themselves, and some don't. Some people even respond with negative rather than positive facial expressions. And (b) different types of behavior when laughing at oneself seem to exist. "Laughing at oneself" is not only, as suggested by McGhee (1996), a *trait* in a way that a person either is able to laugh at him- or herself, or not, but also has a *state* quality and may develop in a process. That is, it might not be an "ability", which in every situation that might induce laughing at oneself, can, or can't, be performed, but in some persons occurs as a kind of "warming up"-process, a gradual alteration of the degree of cheerfulness addressed at oneself. This is plausible, as the emotion *exhilaration* also is understood as a short-lived process of "making cheerful" ("*er-heitern*") or temporary shifting in and out a cheerful state (Ruch, 1993). Two types of observed "laughing at oneself"-behavior are exemplified in Figure 1.

Participant 1 showed the first type of behavior. As can be seen in Figure 1, right from the beginning she gave very high—if not maximum—funniness ratings for the pictures and facially responded by displaying Duchenne laughter and smiling. Thus, the intensity of both funniness and facial enjoyment displays stay at the same high level. Her current mood state (scores see Figure 1) as well stayed at the same level: She already entered the experiment in a very cheerful, non-serious mood, which hardly changed in the course of the experiment. At the trait level, she described herself as a very cheerful and extraverted person who can laugh at herself very well.



Key. ^a Please note that the photographs in the figure are not stimuli actually used but representative examples. ^b The picture numbers represent the position of the pictures showing the participants themselves within the computer presentation of all 18 stimuli. ^c 1 = not funny, 7 = very funny. ^d Participant 1 (only selected scores are reported; ↑↑ = above average, ↑ = on upper boundaries of average, ↓↓ = below average, ↓ = on lower boundaries of average, Pre = testing time 1, Post = testing time 2): SHS-laughing at oneself, self report = 20↑↑; peer report = 17↑↑; EPQ-RK Extraversion = 11↑↑; STCI-T Cheerfulness = 77↑↑; STCI-S Cheerfulness Pre = 38↑↑; Post = 39↑↑; Seriousness Pre = 16↓↓; Post = 12↓↓; Bad Mood Pre = 10↓↓; Post = 10↓↓. ^e Participant 2: SHS-laughing at oneself, self report = 16↑; peer report = 11↓; EPQ-RK Extraversion = 8; STCI-T Cheerfulness = 66; STCI-T Seriousness = 52↑; STCI-S Cheerfulness Pre = 24↓; Post = 28; Seriousness Pre = 19; Post = 14↓; Bad Mood Pre = 18↑↑; Post = 15.

Figure 1. The Time Course of the Participants’ Verbal Responses and AU Configurations to the Distorted Pictures of Themselves.

In comparison to the first participant, participant 2 (Figure 1) showed the second type of behavior. While in the beginning of the experiment her funniness ratings were low and her facial expressions rather negative, both funniness of the pictures and facial responses shifted strongly in the cheerful, emotionally positive direction, and she showed Duchenne laughter and smiling. In contrast to participant 1, participant 2 entered the experiment in a rather serious, badly tempered mood state, which changed to a cheerful, much less serious and better mood state. At the trait level, her laughing at herself score, her extraversion and her trait cheerfulness were around average, and she is a serious person.

Thus, at least two types of “laughing at oneself” are observable. Participant 1 seems to represent the type of respondents who “at the push of a button”, i.e., as soon as a situation may induce this behavior, can laugh at themselves. Participant 2, on the other hand, needs some “warming-up” and her response is more characteristic of a *process*. Possibly corresponding to exhilaratability in general, seriousness and bad mood may influence the threshold of the probability of showing laughter or smiling at oneself; people who are more

serious, also can smile or laugh at themselves, but they need to be exhilarated more strongly to be able to do so. High trait cheerfulness persons might be ready to laugh at themselves at any time whereas a medium level of trait cheerfulness might lead to the process character. However, these observations have to be supported with group results.

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