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Fear Of Being Laughed At Crosses Cultural Boundaries

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Laughter is an emotional expression that is innate in human beings. This means laughing at others is also believed to be a universal phenomenon. However, the fear of being laughed at causes some people enormous problems in their social lives. This is known as gelotophobia, a disorder that affects people in all cultures alike.

What is the difference between a shy person and another who suffers from gelotophobia? One of the aims of a study published recently in the scientific journal Humor, which was led by a team from the University of Zurich, Switzerland, with the participation of researchers from 73 other countries, was to

find out if there is a valid and reliable way of evaluating the fear of being laughed at within different cultures.

"People laugh at others for many different reasons", Victor Rubio, a psychologist at the Autonomous University of Madrid and one of the Spanish researchers taking part in the study, tells SINC.

"This causes an anxiety or fear response in the person affected, leading them to avoid situations in which such circumstances may arise, and this may even become a problem that impacts on their social life", explains the expert.

The lead authors of the research study commissioned 93 scientists to use a questionnaire (translated into 42 languages) on a sample of 22,610 people in order to find out whether they suffered from gelotophobia, which comes from the Greek gelos, 'laugh', and phobos, 'fear'.

"Our study makes it possible to draw a clear distinction between people who suffer from this phobia and those who do not, as well as showing the scale of cultural differences, which are so important in any possible psychological treatment", says Rubio.

Spain, inclined towards the insecurity pole

This phobia was discussed for the first time in Spain at the ninth International Summer School and Symposium on Humor and Laughter: Theory, Research and Applications, held at the University of Granada last summer.

According to the experts, people can be classified within two opposite poles involved in the fear of being laughed at – the 'insecurity reaction' dimension (trying to hide one's lack of self-confidence from others, or believing that one is involuntarily funny) and 'avoidance reactions', whereby one avoids situations in which one has been laughed at, and the dimension of low-high tendencies to suspect that if others are laughing, they are laughing at you.

Although this phenomenon is shared by all cultures, the study shows there are certain differences. Countries such as Turkmenistan and Cambodia are represented within the first dimension of insecurity reactions, while people in Iraq, Egypt and Jordan are much more likely to avoid situations in which they have been laughed at. Spain is "slightly inclined towards the insecurity pole".

Another strange result is that people in Finland are the least likely to believe that if people laugh in their presence they are laughing at them (8.5%), while 80% of people in Thailand believe this to be the case.

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References: R. T. Proyer et al. "Breaking ground in cross-cultural research on the fear of being laughed at (gelotophobia): A multi-national study involving 73 countries". Humor 22(1/2): 253– 2009.

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