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Reframing Autistic People: Using a Narrative Review of Gelotophobia, Gelotophilia and Katagelasticism



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Background

From a life course perspective, research suggests that autistic individuals may experience gelotophobia, which is characterized by a fear of being laughed at or ridiculed by others. This under-researched phenomenon may have a significant impact on the life trajectories and overall well-being of autistic individuals, as it can lead to heightened social isolation, avoidance of social situations, and a decreased quality of life.



Objectives

We studied this area by exploring the literature, which was best achieved from a narrative review and reframing our current understanding of autistic people. We employed two research questions to guide this study:

1. Are gelotophobia and being autistic related, and if so, how?
2. What is known about gelotophilia and katagelasticism in autistic people?

Methods

We conducted a narrative review to explore the relationship between gelotophobia and being autistic. In addition, we investigated what is currently known in the academic literature regarding gelotophilia (joy of being laughed at) and katagelasticism (excessively enjoying laughing at others) in autistic people.

Findings

We found only five studies. These papers provided a small evidence base that describes autistic people as more likely to be gelotophobes. The previous reviews honed in on using ToM as the foundation for their theoretical framework.

However, as ToM does not encompass gelotophobia within the bidirectionality of social communication, its applicability to the findings of this review is limited. ToM fails to offer a clear explanation for the existence of gelotophobia in autistic individuals, as well as the social structures which autistic people face. As a result, this review emphasises exploring alternative explanations. Importantly, we need to consider the Double Empathy Problem (Milton, 2012).

Findings, cont.

We can shifting the model of disability to recognize autistic cognition as a minority neurotype. This change in perspective has implications for understanding the causes of gelotophobia, which include aspects like being laughed at or bullied and intense traumatic experiences.

Autistic individuals may experience life events in a magnified manner due to their sensory profiles, leading to higher levels of bullying. This social adversity can persist into adulthood, affecting individuals in various settings. Understanding the intensity of recalled ridicule is key and may influence the experience of gelotophobia.

This perspective sheds light on the experiences of autistic individuals and their interactions with the world around them.



Conclusions

This review suggests that there may be a connection between autistic people and gelotophobia. This link is important because it could increase the risk of trauma due to ridicule and shame anxiety. However, personality traits may be the main factor influencing gelotophobia, rather than autism being the cause. Further research is necessary to better understand this phenomenon.