

# Factors that cause or influence schadenfreude



When another experiences a misfortune, we can have several emotional responses, one of which is Schadenfreude. Described by numerous psychologists as the “delighting at the misfortune of others” (Sorrow) Schadenfreude is as common an emotion in us all as happiness and sadness. The rules and constructs of society however have categorized it as a negative and even sinful emotion as declared in the Book of Proverbs, “Rejoice not when thine enemy falleth, and let not thine heart be glad when he stumbleth: Lest the LORD see it, and it displease him, and he turn away his wrath from him.” (Proverbs 24: 17-18, King James Version). From childhood, it is actively repressed as we are taught instead to have compassion and sympathy for those around us yet it pervades and manifests itself in us, from the mild humour we find in someone’s falling off a bicycle to sadistic acts of sexual abuse. Having been studied only very recently around the turn of the century, psychologists now attempt to understand the factors that influence the degree to which Schadenfreude can be felt under specific circumstances.

## **Envy**

One of the first antecedents of Schadenfreude that were scientifically studied was envy. The relationship between envy and Schadenfreude was first experimentally established in 1996 by Smith et al. who documented that Schadenfreude occurred in an individual at an envied person’s misfortune. This however was strongly countered by both Hareli and Weiner and Feather and Sherman in 2002 who both found strong relationships between hostile emotions (hate, anger, resentment etc.) and Schadenfreude but not with envy as a predictor of Schadenfreude.

It was noted however, that within these opposing studies that the respective assessments of envy held by the psychologists at the time differed greatly. Smith's study was conducted from the point of view that envy encompassed hostile feelings, whereas " Both Feather and Sherman (2002) and Hareli and Weiner (2002) argued that hostile feelings (such as dislike and resentment) are not necessary defining characteristics of envy and should be treated as independent predictors of Schadenfreude." (Van Dijk)

The studies conducted by these different groups of researchers also differed in regard to the targets that the participants interacted with. In studies that supported a relationship between envy and Schadenfreude, it was apparent that participants responded more strongly to targets of the same gender (Smith). On the other hand, studies that failed to show any correlation between envy and Schadenfreude were conducted with participant exposure to female, male and gender unspecific targets (Hareli). This suggested the possibility that " The relationship between envy and Schadenfreude might be dependent upon the degree of similarity between participants and targets." (Van Dijk)

In 2006 Van Dijk et al. carried out a study to examine the current conflicting findings surrounding the relationship between envy and Schadenfreude. They hoped to determine if and how the differences in results were attributable to the differing assessments of envy by investigating envy and hostility independently of each other. In addition, they investigated the factor of similarity in participant and target gender or lack thereof in previous studies, thereby showing under which specific conditions envy may or may not predict Schadenfreude.

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Van Dijk et al. used 249 students (148 women, 101 men) of Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam in his study. Participants were separated into cubicles and under the deception that they were “ in a study on the impact of different media on impression formation” (Van Dijk). They were then told to read two interviews. The first was of a high achieving student with a bright future discussing their academic performance at their university. The purpose of this was to prompt feelings of envy in the participants. After reading the interview, they were given questionnaires to gauge their levels of envy and hostility. The subsequent interview involved the same student discussing how they had more recently suffered an extreme setback to their academic career such as being caught stealing a laptop or plagiarising work. Participants were again given questionnaires to gauge their reactions to the misfortune of this student[1].

Upon analysis of the data, it was apparent that whilst the presence of hostile feelings was able to predict Schadenfreude, envy was able to predict it to a much greater and more accurate extent. This indicates that the previous discrepancies in prior studies were attributable to the inclusion or not of hostile sentiments in definition of envy. In addition, envy was most able to predict Schadenfreude when the targets were of the same gender as the participants. This suggests that gender is not a predictor but perhaps an amplifier of Schadenfreude as the participant can most relate and best compare themselves to people of the same gender.

## **Nietzsche's Factors**

In 2003 researchers Leach et al. drew upon even earlier conjectures, found in German philosopher Nietzsche's book “ On the Genealogy of Morality”

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which was written in 1887, to put forth and examine three factors that affect Schadenfreude.

The first factor was of the importance of the domain in which an out-group performed. “ Although Schadenfreude is directed toward others, it is strongly tied to the (individual or group) self.” (Leach et al. 2003). As such, Nietzsche argued that Schadenfreude would therefore be strongest in domains that are relevant to the self. An example of this would be a serious football fan’s pleasure at the defeat of a rival team as opposed to any other team. This is because increased importance in the domain in turn raises the self-relevance of others’ performances in that same domain (Leach et al. 2003).

Their second proposition was that threat to an in-group’s status would increase Schadenfreude. Nietzsche reasoned that those who felt threatened by their inferiority have “ a desire to deaden pain by means of affect” (Nietzsche). It is in this way that the sensation of Schadenfreude is said to act as “ imaginary revenge” (Nietzsche) against this threat. In summation, Nietzsche proposed that the pleasure of Schadenfreude is used as a way for one to counter a “ status inferiority that threatens their self-worth” (Leach et al. 2003).

The final proposition inspired by Nietzsche’s musings was that since Schadenfreude is a passive and indirect emotion, it is reliant entirely on external and situational factors that most importantly make it an acceptable emotion to be felt (Leach et al. 2003). In practice, this suggests that Schadenfreude would be less apparent if another’s success was perceived as deserved. This idea was touched upon in a Feather and Sherman’s study

(2002) in which they showed how a peer's seemingly illegitimate achievement increased Schadenfreude in university students after the peer's ensuing failure.

In order to evaluate these three propositions, researchers Leach et al. “ examined intergroup Schadenfreude within the context of international soccer competition.” (Leach et al. 2003) Focusing on the Dutch reaction to the strong performance of neighbouring and rival national team of Germany, factors such as its “ physical proximity, greater size, and better international recognition and influence” (Leach et al. 2003) proved Germany to be a strong, dangerous and “ important out-group rival” (Leach et al. 2003) for the Dutch team. Also examined in this study was Italy for similar reasons. After conducting pilot studies in order to confirm Germany and Italy as suitable out-group comparisons, approximately 150 first year students from the University of Amsterdam were interviewed and asked questions designed to assess the level of Schadenfreude felt at a rival team's loss in relation with their level of domain interest, perception of the legitimacy of rival team's prior success and renown and personal insecurities towards the status of the national Dutch team.

The results obtained were as hypothesized with domain interest and in-group inferiority interacting to predict Schadenfreude. Domain interest as a factor of Schadenfreude was initially confirmed with German losses being seen to be more pleasurable to members of the study who were highly interested in the domain of football than to members with low domain interest. In addition to this, the threat of inferiority demonstrated an even larger influence on Schadenfreude as even those with low domain interest in football

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experienced a significant increase in perceived Schadenfreude when provided with information which suggested that the Dutch team was inferior to the German team.

From the comparison between the Dutch and Italian teams, it was recognized that there was less Schadenfreude directed towards the Italian team when they lost as the Dutch considered the Italian side to be a legitimately superior team. It was therefore apparent that legitimate superiority seemed to work as a limiting factor of Schadenfreude especially when the in-group was asked to be honest and direct. This highlights and proves Nietzsche's aforementioned claim on the sensitivity of Schadenfreude to circumstantial factors which can either act as a reality check and inhibit the emotion, or encourage and justify it.

### **Personal Sense of Inferiority**

In accordance with Tajfel and Turner's Social Identity Theory, an in-group's relative inferiority can result in damaging one's own self-esteem and worth (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and when the evidence of this comparison is indubitable, it is thus made difficult for the inferior in-group to directly challenge the superior out-group (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). As a result, it has been frequently " suggested that in-group inferiority leads to ' displaced' malevolence toward third parties" (Leach & Spears 2008).

By building upon their previous research in 2003, researchers Leach and Spears intended to examine a renewed hypothesis that " objective in-group inferiority leads to Schadenfreude toward third parties mainly because of the subjective experience of painful emotions associated with the psychological

threat of in-group inferiority (e. g., shame and frustration)” (Leach & Spears 2008). In essence, Leach and Spears wanted to emphasize and establish Schadenfreude as a progression of emotional stages in which unfavourable emotions about the self result in favourable emotions about another group at times of their misfortune.

Most research into Schadenfreude until this point had been contrary to this present theory on the pain of in-group inferiority, emphasizing more on out-group characteristics as explanations and factors for Schadenfreude such as envy, and anger based on dislike and the illegitimacy of out-group success. Consequently, Leach and Spears set out to compare the two viewpoints of self and other based explanations of Schadenfreude in order to discover the better.

In order to test these views, Leach and Spears fabricated the scenario of a Dutch interuniversity IQ competition to act as the domain of interest. 102 psychology students from the University of Amsterdam participated in the study under the pretence of market research for the possibility of turning the competition into a television quiz show. Universities competing in the competition were separated into different pools with the winner of each pool continuing forward to compete in a finale. The students from the University of Amsterdam comprised the in-group university of the experiment which would be deemed inferior to another out-group university which was placed in another pool so as to have had no direct competition with the in-group.

In the experiment, in-group inferiority was initially established and the perceived illegitimacy and pain of this was assessed. Following this, out-



group superiority was also established and the “ perceived illegitimacy and envy of this success, anger about this success, and pain of the inferiority implied by the out-group’s success” (Leach & Spears 2008) was assessed. Finally, a Schadenfreude opportunity was provided by having the successful out-group fail, at which point there were both self and other based explanations for Schadenfreude. In accordance with their hypothesis, self based explanations were expected to have the most effect on Schadenfreude.

The results of the study were completely confirmatory. The pain of inferiority was seen to be an extremely strong source of Schadenfreude when the in-group’s domain inferiority had been established. In fact, of all the self-based explanations of Schadenfreude, including domain interest and perceived illegitimacy of domain inferiority, the pain of domain inferiority had the greatest effect on Schadenfreude. Additionally, other-based explanations, for example pre-existing dislike of the out-group had very little effect on Schadenfreude despite being established immediately prior to the Schadenfreude event. From the interpretation of the data it was clear that “ Schadenfreude has more to do with the inferiority of the self than with the success others” (Leach & Spears 2008)

### **Personal Sense of Inferiority (Extended)**

The study conducted by Leach et al. (2008) was able to establish that Schadenfreude is derived from the initial pain inferiority, characterized by externalized anger towards successful out-groups. In a study concerning anger in 2009, Denzler et al. tested and proved their hypothesis that “ the goal to aggress increases accessibility of aggressive thoughts, and that after

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goal-ful→)llment, accessibility of aggressive content is reduced” (Denzler). The findings of this study provided relevant information to the operation of Schadenfreude. In their study, participants were put through a series of scenarios in which their accessibility of aggressive thoughts was assessed at different stages. Of the experimental condition relevant to Schadenfreude, participants were told to imagine a scenario in which they saw their lover cheating on them with their best friend. Levels of aggression were then assessed with generally high levels of aggression recorded. They were subsequently told to imagine a scenario in which they confronted their best friend and enacted revenge in any manner they would. Levels of aggression were then again recorded to which it was found that the accessibility of aggression was considerably less. These results indicated that fulfillment of anger-based goals, regardless of their real or virtual nature significantly reduced subsequent accessibility to aggressive content. The implications of these findings in terms of Schadenfreude, Denzler et al. (2009) explained how the misfortune or failure of a formerly successful out-group which eliminates the source of unfavorable comparison, resolves the goals previously set by anger and is thus manifested as pleasure: Schadenfreude.

## **Conclusion**

It seems that the pursuit of a complete understanding of Schadenfreude and its antecedents has lead to linear progression of further understanding over the years with each subsequent group of researchers being able to stand on the shoulders of their predecessors and their findings. Smith et al. (1996) and Van Dijk et al. (2006) were first able to propose the theory that Schadenfreude was envy based and that its intensity was gender dependent.

Leach et al. (2003) were able to propose the possibility that perceived illegitimacy of out-group success and in-group inferiority could act as a limiting factor as well as expand on Schadenfreude's gender dependency and suggest the role of general domain interest as an influential factor.

The culmination of research thus far is what was then included in the most recent study of Schadenfreude conducted by Leach et al. in 2008 in which it was surmised that there are in fact several contributing factors to the Schadenfreude felt by an individual, with the pain of inferiority being the most significant. Leach et al. were able to distinguish the pain of inferiority from other, less influential factors such as domain interest and pre-existing dislike for a successful out-group. They were also able to disentangle the pain of inferiority from other emotional responses such as envy and illegitimacy of out-group success and in-group inferiority that were the primary focus of previous research and study and establish the pain of inferiority as the strongest explanation of Schadenfreude. With the pain of inferiority, it is because it is such a harsh and damaging emotion that it leads us to seek out alleviation from this pain by exploiting the misfortune of others in order to feel pleasure at their misfortune.

Leach et al. conceptualized Schadenfreude as an unfolding emotional episode in which an unfavourable feeling towards oneself was transformed into a pleasant feeling regarding the misfortune of another party. Thus it was the dynamic characteristic of Schadenfreude's interplay of mental negotiations between psychological and social factors that were responsible for the numerous discrepancies between the findings of researchers' studies.

Even though Schadenfreude is an emotion about another party's success, it is most strongly affected by the internalized sense of pain regarding one's self-inferiority. This pain of inferiority, strengthened and reduced depending on several variables, is best illustrated and most easily understood through its explanation by anger. In the case of anger, the pain and frustration of inferiority is externalized into the feeling of anger at the success of other parties. When these successful parties fail, the source of pain is eliminated and the goals set by its resultant anger are resolved which is experienced as pleasure.