



Schadenfreude deconstructed and reconstructed: A tripartite motivational model

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ABSTRACT

Schadenfreude is the distinctive pleasure people derive from others' misfortune. Research over the past three decades points to the multifaceted nature of Schadenfreude rooted in humans' concerns for social justice, self-evaluation, and social identity. Less is known, however, regarding how the differing facets of Schadenfreude are interrelated and take shape in response to these concerns. To address these questions, we review extant theories in social psychology and draw upon evidence from developmental, personality, and clinical research literature to propose a novel, tripartite, taxonomy of Schadenfreude embedded in a motivational model. Our model posits that Schadenfreude comprises three separable but interrelated subforms (aggression, rivalry, and justice), which display different developmental trajectories and personality correlates. This model further posits that dehumanization plays a central role in both eliciting Schadenfreude and integrating its various facets. In closing, we point to fruitful directions for future research motivated by this novel account of Schadenfreude.

The word “Schadenfreude,” which literally means “harm joy” in German, refers to the uncanny yet widely shared experience of pleasure or delight in the misfortune of others (Heider, 1958; Schadenfreude, n.d.). Despite the word's German origin, Schadenfreude is pervasive across many cultures (Feather, 2012), even those, such as U.S. culture, that do not possess a formal term for it (Feather, 1989; Nachman, 1986).

Among philosophers, the debate over the moral nature of Schadenfreude has lasted at least since the time of the ancient Greeks. Some scholars have condemned Schadenfreude as a malicious emotion (Aristotle, 350 BEC/1941; Heider, 1958; Schopenhauer, 1892), whereas others perceived it as morally neutral or even virtuous (Nietzsche, 1887/1908; Portmann, 2000). Still, others judged Schadenfreude based on the severity of misfortune and the role of the Schadenfroh (i.e., an individual who experiences Schadenfreude; McNamee, 2003) in causing the misfortune (Ben-Ze'ev, 1992).

Although this philosophical debate is far from settled, it alludes to the different facets of Schadenfreude, which vary not only in their moral values but also in their potential causes. Social psychologists in the past three decades have provided helpful insights into Schadenfreude by highlighting and elucidating its separable facets. In this article, we first briefly review this literature and then draw from both developmental and individual differences approaches to address how the multiple facets of Schadenfreude take shape and how they are

related. In doing so, we propose a novel, tripartite, conception of Schadenfreude embedded in a motivational model that should have considerable heuristic value in future theory and research on this complex and poorly understood emotion.

1. Theories of Schadenfreude in social psychology

Our review of the extant theoretical approaches to Schadenfreude focuses on presenting the gist of each while pointing to its potential limitations. On this basis, we seek to organize this complex body of literature on Schadenfreude and related domains by proposing a novel taxonomy of Schadenfreude. For interested readers, van Dijk and Ouwerkerk (2014) provide more detailed overviews for each of the following theories.

1.1. Deservingness theory of Schadenfreude

About three decades ago, Feather conducted the first laboratory study on Schadenfreude, examining people's affective responses when high-status individuals fall from grace. Corroborating the common belief that people may sometimes derive pleasure when societally successful individuals are cut down to size, Feather (1989) found that participants tended to experience greater delight in the misfortune of a high achiever and perceived him/her to be more deserving of the

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misfortune than an average achiever, a tendency sometimes known as the “tall poppy” syndrome.

Research on the tall poppy syndrome led Feather to focus mainly on perceived deservingness as a major, if not the only, variable to account for Schadenfreude. Feather construed Schadenfreude as a justice-based emotion and proposed that individuals who believe that one's negative outcomes are deserved would experience delight when this person gets his/her just deserts. Based on Heider's (1958) principle of balance, Feather (1989) argued that whether an outcome is perceived as deserved depends on the action that produces it. An outcome may be perceived as deserved when the outcome and the action are consistent or balanced (e.g., a positive outcome follows a positive action), but undeserved when the action is inconsistent or unbalanced. In addition, Feather maintained that liking/disliking, intergroup relations, and self-evaluation also play key roles in evaluating the deservingness of a positive or negative outcome related to either the self or others. In a series of studies (Feather, 2008; Feather & Nairn, 2005; Feather & Sherman, 2002), he and his colleagues systematically manipulated these variables to examine their impact on perceived deservingness and participants' affective responses to the misfortune of others. The findings consistently supported a link between perceived deservingness and Schadenfreude.

Despite Feather's success in linking perceived deservingness to Schadenfreude, his theory is marked by a number of limitations. One of the major limitations concerns the direction of relations between perceived deservingness and Schadenfreude. Instead of perceived deservingness causing one to derive pleasure from others' misfortune, the person may feel Schadenfreude first and later justify his/her feelings by perceiving the misfortune as deserved, a possibility consistent with cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959) that research has yet to exclude (Feather, 2012). Another limitation involves the assumption that the victim of a misfortune is responsible for his/her actions that led to the negative outcome. Nevertheless, Schadenfreude often occurs when this assumption is not met or assumed (e.g., Feather, 1989, Study 1).

Despite these limitations, the perceived deservingness theory remains effective in accounting for instances of Schadenfreude that follow someone's deserved negative outcome within a context that implies personal causation. In recent years, the perceived deservingness theory has been extended to encompass theories that emphasize envy, ingroup inferiority (Feather, 2012), and hypocrisy (Powell & Smith, 2013).

1.2. Envy theory of Schadenfreude

Feather's conception of Schadenfreude as a justice-based emotion is likely to tell only part of the story. There are numerous cases in which the type of misfortune defies analysis of its perceived deservingness, renders Schadenfreude less justifiable, and endows it with a malicious flavor. One such instance concerns Schadenfreude related to envy.

The idea that Schadenfreude is linked to envy is not new. Plato expressed this idea over two thousand years ago: “Did we not say that pleasure in the misfortune of friends was caused by envy?” (Plato, 427–348 B.C./1925, p. 339, as cited in Smith et al., 1996, p. 158). Upholding this long-lasting belief, research shows that participants express stronger envy toward the high-status protagonist and feel more pleased following his/her misfortune than that of the average-status counterpart, an effect especially pronounced among individuals with high levels of dispositional envy (Brigham, Kelso, Jackson, & Smith, 1997; Feather, 1989; Smith et al., 1996; van Dijk, Ouwerkerk, Goslinga, Nieweg, & Gallucci, 2006).

Smith et al. (1996) proposed two theories to account for the relations between envy and Schadenfreude. One posits that both envy and Schadenfreude derive from social comparison, whereby the former stems from upward social comparison and is linked to a sense of inferiority, whereas the latter stems from downward social comparison and is linked to a sense of superiority. An envious person enjoys the

misfortune of the envied person, because it enhances the envious person's self-evaluation (see van Dijk & Ouwerkerk, 2014). The other theory posits that others' misfortune is rewarding because envy is an unpleasant feeling that learning of other's misfortunes would knock the envied person down a peg, rendering him or her less enviable. The removal of envy would therefore constitute a relief, itself being a pleasant feeling (e.g., Rothbart, 1973). Although the two theories suggest somewhat different appraisals, they both point to a concern for self-evaluation as a potential cause of Schadenfreude.

Despite evidence supporting the role of envy in experiencing Schadenfreude (Smith et al., 1996; Takahashi et al., 2009), studies have failed to replicate these findings (Feather & Sherman, 2002; Hareli & Weiner, 2002). van Dijk et al. (2006) suggested two crucial distinctions to account for these inconsistent results. First, researchers disagreed on the definitions of envy and have distinguished between *envy proper* (also known as *malicious envy*) from *benign envy*, depending on whether envy entails hostility (see Smith & Kim, 2007). van Dijk et al. (2006) found that in studies that supported the envy theory, researchers measured both aspects of envy (Smith & Kim, 2007; van de Ven, Zeelenberg, & Pieters, 2009), whereas in studies that did not support the envy theory, researchers assessed only the benign aspect.¹ Second, studies differed in the protagonist's relevance to the participants: the envy theory was corroborated only when participants and the protagonist were of the same gender, a condition rendering the protagonist's misfortune more relevant to the participants.

To unravel these factors, van Dijk et al. (2006) measured both (benign) envy and hostile emotions (as a proxy of envy proper) to ascertain their independent contributions to Schadenfreude; they also manipulated the achievement status of the protagonist and included both men and women to examine their potential effects on Schadenfreude. Participants were told about a protagonist of either high or average status and rated their feelings of (benign) envy and hostile emotions; they then were informed of the protagonist's recent setback and rated their feelings of Schadenfreude. Both hostility and (benign) envy independently predicted Schadenfreude. Significant relations emerged only when the protagonist and the participant were of the same gender. More recent studies showed that Schadenfreude is either unrelated to envy (Leach & Spears, 2008) or related but only when the malicious aspect of envy is measured (van de Ven et al., 2015). These findings again underline the specific conceptualization and operationalization of envy as critical in clarifying the relations between envy and Schadenfreude (Smith, Thielke, & Powell, 2014). Using a data-driven approach, Lange, Weidman, and Crusius (2018) proposed a novel theory of envy (i.e., Pain-driven Dual Envy Theory), which construes envy as encompassing three interrelated elements: benign envy, malicious envy, and the pain of envy. Based on this integrated theory of envy, Lange et al. (2018) demonstrated meta-analytically that envy is more strongly associated with Schadenfreude when it is conceptualized as malicious envy rather than benign envy or the pain of envy.

1.3. Intergroup theories of Schadenfreude

In addition to perceived deservingness and envy, research has linked Schadenfreude to intergroup interactions (Cikara, Botvinick, & Fiske, 2011; Leach, Spears, Branscombe, & Doosje, 2003). Unlike the previous two theories, intergroup theories of Schadenfreude share an interest in the intergroup context but vary in their accounts of Schadenfreude depending on intergroup contexts. Some accounts emphasize rivalry and competition (Ouwerkerk & van Dijk, 2014) or ingroup inferiority (Leach & Spears, 2008), whereas others emphasize intergroup

¹ According to Smith and Kim (2007), envy is “an unpleasant, often painful emotion characterized by feelings of inferiority, hostility, and resentment caused by an awareness of a desired attribute enjoyed by another person or group of persons” (p. 46).

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