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978-1-107-01750-4 - Schadenfreude: Understanding Pleasure at the Misfortune of Others

Edited by Wilco W. Van Dijk and Jaap W. Ouwerkerk

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1 Introduction to schadenfreude

Wilco W. van Dijk and Jaap W. Ouwerkerk

This book is about that joyful feeling you may experience when someone else suffers a mishap, a setback, a downfall, a calamity, an adversity, or any other type of misfortune. The German language has coined the word *Schadenfreude* for this pleasure at the misfortunes of other people. The main aim of this edited volume is to offer a comprehensive summary of current theoretical and empirical work on schadenfreude from different perspectives and to inspire new research that will further our understanding of the nature of schadenfreude and the role it plays in social relations and society. In this first chapter we will set the stage by introducing the emotion of schadenfreude and its main underlying motives. The chapter will be concluded by a short overview of the book.

Schadenfreude

Schadenfreude is a compound word of the German words *Schaden*, meaning harm, and *Freude*, meaning joy, and is used nowadays as a loanword in the English language. In 1895 the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* included schadenfreude for the first time as an entry and defined it until recently as “malicious enjoyment of the misfortunes of others.” The *OED* lists as the earliest citation for the word *Schadenfreude* in written English the book *On the Study of Words*, a collection of lectures of the philologist Richard Chenevix Trench addressed originally to the pupils at the Diocesan Training School in Winchester. In his second lecture (2nd edn, 1852) – *On the Morality in Words* – Trench, who later became Archbishop of Dublin, wrote:

Thus what a fearful thing it is that any language should have a word expressive of the pleasure which men feel at the calamities of others; for the existence of the word bears testimony to the existence of the thing. And yet in more than one such a word is found. (Trench, 1852: 39–40)

In a footnote Trench mentions both the Greek word *ἐπιχαίρεκακία* (*epichairekakia*) and the German word *Schadenfreude*. The inclusion of

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Excerpt

[More information](#)2 *Wilco W. van Dijk and Jaap W. Ouwkerk*

schadenfreude in the *OED* by the end of the nineteenth century indicates that by then the word was already used frequently in the English language.

Schadenfreude? Isn't that typically German?

The use of the loanword schadenfreude in the nineteenth century was not restricted to British English. On March 13, 1898, the *New York Times* used schadenfreude for the first time in its newspaper. In an article on foreign affairs Edward Beck wrote:

Just now the Germans are rubbing their hands over the Anglo-French Sokoto imbroglio and indulging unctiously in that "schadenfreude" which is one of the less lovely characteristics of the Teutonic nation. (*New York Times*, March 13, 1898, p. 7)

Almost three decades later, on July 24, 1926, *The Spectator* published an article in which was written "There is no English word for *Schadenfreude*, because there is no such feeling here" (quoted from Kropf, 2006, p. 7). Is schadenfreude typically German, as both the *New York Times* and *The Spectator* suggest? Certainly not!

In his essay on the historical semantics of schadenfreude, Leo Spitzer (1942) discusses the possibility that the German word *Schadenfreude* might actually be calqued from the Greek word *epichairekakia*. He pointed out that the use of the German word *Schadenfreude* can be dated back to as early as the sixteenth century, but that equally old or even older references to the experience of schadenfreude can be found in other languages, for example, Greek (*epichairekakia*) and French (*joie maligne*). Some of the Greek references to pleasure at the misfortunes of others can be dated back to before the Common Era and can be found, for example, in the work of Aristotle (e.g., 350 BCE/1941). In present times, many languages have a specific word for pleasure at misfortunes. Most of these words are a compound of the words "harm" and "joy," for example, Danish (*skadefryd*), Dutch (*leedvermaak*), Estonian (*kahjurõõm*), Finnish (*vahingonilo*), Hebrew (*simcha la-ed*), Hungarian (*káröröm*), Mandarin Chinese (*xing-xai-le-huo*), Russian (*zloradiye*), and Slovenian (*škodoželjnost*). In our view, it is most likely that these words have been calqued from the Greek word *epichairekakia*, the German word *Schadenfreude*, or the French word(s) *joie maligne* for pleasure at the misfortunes of others.

Although many languages have a specific word for pleasure at the misfortunes of others, there are also many languages that do not (e.g., Italian, Japanese, and Spanish). Does this tell us anything significant about the prevalence of the experience of schadenfreude in different cultures? We don't think so, as several scholars have argued that the emotion lexicon of a

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[More information](#)

language might not be informative about whether or not people are capable of experiencing a specific emotion. People from different cultures appear to be rather similar in their potential for the experience of emotions and, as a general rule, members of societies without a word for a particular emotional state readily understand the new term once its context is explained (e.g., Keltner, Haidt, and Shiota, 2006; Mesquita, Frijda, and Scherer, 1997). In his book *How the Mind Works*, Steven Pinker wrote:

The common remark that a language does or doesn't have a word for an emotion means little . . . Whether a language appears to have a word for an emotion depends on the skill of the translator and on quirks of the language's grammar and history. A language accumulates a large vocabulary, including words for emotions, when it has had influential wordsmiths, contact with other languages, rules for forming new words out of old ones, and widespread literacy, which allows new coinages to become epidemic. (Pinker, 1997, pp. 366–7)

Pinker continued by identifying the emotion *schadenfreude* as a case in point:

When English-speakers hear the word *Schadenfreude* for the first time, their reaction is not, "Let me see . . . Pleasure in another's misfortunes . . . What could that possibly be? I cannot grasp the concept; my language and culture have not provided me with such a category." Their reaction is, "You mean there's a word for it? Cool!" (Pinker, 1997, p. 367)

Perhaps this was what went through the minds of those who introduced *schadenfreude* as a loanword into the English language more than a century ago (although one could doubt whether the word "cool" was included in these thoughts). Thus, although the word *Schadenfreude* is German, we cannot blame the Germans for the existence of pleasure at the misfortunes of others. This emotional experience has been coined with a specific term for at least two millennia and is surely not bound by the borders of the "Teutonic Nation." Deriving joy from the misfortunes of others seems to be of all times and all places. Or to quote Leo Spitzer:

Schadenfreude is now seen as typical German, which it never was. People who experience *schadenfreude* are unfortunately everywhere, and critics who denounce them are also everywhere among civilised peoples. (Spitzer, 1942, p. 361, our translation)

Schadenfreude: diabolical or the ultimate pleasure?

As has already become apparent from the above quotes from the *New York Times* and *The Spectator*, people might regard the experience of *schadenfreude* with a degree of ambivalence. On the one hand, they might condemn it and many languages have proverbs, sayings, or adages that emphasize the

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Excerpt

[More information](#)4 *Wilco W. van Dijk and Jaap W. Ouwerkerk*

negative moral connotation of *schadenfreude*. For example, the Spanish language, although lacking one specific word for *schadenfreude*, has such a saying – *Gozarse en el mal ajeno, no es de hombre buen* (“A man who rejoices in another’s misfortune is not a good man”). Yet, people might admit, albeit reluctantly and uneasily, that there are some situations in which they “can’t resist a little smile” if something bad happens to another person. In fact, many languages – for example, Dutch, Estonian, German, Hebrew, Hungarian, Norwegian, Slovakian, and Swedish – have sayings that can be summarized as “pleasure in the misfortunes of others is the ultimate pleasure” (although this saying might also be used in an ironic context). The Japanese language, which also lacks a specific word for *schadenfreude*, does have adages that stress the pleasure of this emotion (Masato Sawada, personal communication). One example of this is: *Hito-no-fukou-wa-mitsu no aji* (“The misfortunes of others taste like honey”), while another example (loosely) translates as “Next-door neighbours living poor is the taste of duck.” This latter adage can be dated back to at least the beginning of the Edo period in Japan (1603–1868), in which duck was considered as a delicacy of the upper classes and as a rare and luxurious meal for the poor and working classes. Recently, in the Internet language of Japanese youth, the term *Meshi-Uma* is used to describe *schadenfreude*, a term that derives from *Tanin-no-fukou-de-meshi-ga-umai* (“Food tastes good when served with the misfortunes of others”).

Notwithstanding these positive notions about pleasure at the misfortunes of others, experiencing *schadenfreude* has mainly been condemned throughout history. That is, *schadenfroh* people have been accused of violating the obligation to cultivate the virtue of compassion, and *schadenfreude* has been regarded as a moral wrong and an emotion to be avoided. It has, for example, been described as a disguised expression of aggression (Aristotle, 350 BCE/1941); as fiendish, diabolical, and an “infallible sign of a thoroughly bad heart and profound moral worthlessness” (Schopenhauer, 1841/1965); as an “even more hideous cousin” of envy (Kierkegaard, 1847/1995); as a malicious and immoral feeling (Baudelaire, 1855/1955); and as harmful to social relations (Heider, 1958). Some scholars, however, have been less negative towards *schadenfreude*. To illustrate, in *Human, All Too Human*, Nietzsche answers the question “Is malicious joy devilish, as Schopenhauer says?” with the reply “All pleasure is, in itself, neither good nor bad” (Nietzsche, 1887/1908, p. 103). More recently, the contemporary philosopher John Portmann wrote in his book *When Bad Things Happen to Other People*: “Although *Schadenfreude* may include malice, it needn’t presuppose malice” (2000, p. 4). Portmann argues that *schadenfreude* can be regarded as a corollary of justice and “To the extent that *Schadenfreude* signifies love of justice or

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repugnance to injustice, this emotion is a virtue” (2000, p. 9). Furthermore, Aaron Ben-Ze’ev (2000) argues that the moral evaluation of schadenfreude should be dependent upon the severity of the misfortune and the extent of the *schadenfroh* person’s own involvement in causing the misfortune and their justification for the misfortune. He contends that although schadenfreude is not a virtue, it should (often) also not be considered a vice – or at least not a grave one.

In his book *Justice and Desert-Based Emotions: A Philosophical Exploration*, Kristján Kristjánsson (2006) criticizes both Portmann’s (2000) and Ben-Ze’ev’s (2000) claims that the notion of desert lies at the heart of schadenfreude and that therefore the experience of schadenfreude is often “morally acceptable.” He states that this is a clear misrepresentation of the core of schadenfreude and inconsistent with “a long philosophical and pedagogical tradition” (2006, p. 98). He argues, for example, that *epichairekakia* as used by Aristotle refers to pleasure at others’ *undeserved* bad fortune and not others’ *deserved bad fortune* (this latter emotion was left unnamed by Aristotle). According to Kristjánsson, pleasure at others’ *deserved* bad fortune should not be regarded as schadenfreude, but rather as *satisfied indignation*. Whereas satisfied indignation might be considered as “morally” acceptable, “real” schadenfreude has a different focus, that is, pleasure at another’s misfortune without any moral concern. However, one problem with this distinction between “satisfied indignation” and “real” schadenfreude is that, even if a misfortune happening to an individual can objectively be regarded as being “undeserved,” people have a tendency to belief in a just world (Lerner, 1980) and may therefore still assign personal responsibility to victims of objectively “undeserved” misfortunes (i.e., “bad things happen to bad people”), thereby leaving only a very limited number of situations that, according to Kristjánsson (2006), could be classified as “real” or pure schadenfreude.

So does experiencing schadenfreude make you a bad person or not? Concerning this moral verdict, it seems that the jury is still out. Playing devil’s advocate, we argue that whether or not schadenfreude should be regarded as a vice depends on the reason why people enjoy another’s misfortune. This is also the approach Martha Moers (1930) took in her “psychologisch-pädagogische” study of schadenfreude. She argued that the “moral worthlessness” (*sittlicher Unwert*) of schadenfreude could vary substantially depending on the reason why people experience this emotion:

It [schadenfreude] can go through a whole gamut from minor moral worthlessness to the worst we know, such that it characterises the completely rotten core of a human personality. This variety of moral worthlessness, which may be embodied in schadenfreude, is essentially determined by the motives from which it originates,

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Excerpt

[More information](#)6 *Wilco W. van Dijk and Jaap W. Ouwerkerk*

and so, when we study these motives, we obtain a range of different types of schadenfreude. (Moers, 1930, p. 126, our translation)

Thus, Moers argued that the moral acceptability of schadenfreude depends upon the motive underlying the experience of schadenfreude. She discussed the different forms that schadenfreude may take, ranging from the mildly to the seriously morally negative joy. In her discussion she distinguished between *echten* or genuine schadenfreude – which should be considered reprehensible – and *unechten* schadenfreude – which should not be necessarily considered reprehensible. With *unechten* or *Pseudoschadenfreude*, Moers refers to situations in which the pleasure about an event coincidentally also entails a misfortune for another person, for example, when a situation is sensational or comical, or represents a just situation. In these cases the suffering of others is not necessary for the pleasure. However, with *echten* or genuine schadenfreude, Moers refers to situations in which another's misfortune is the core or the essence of the pleasure, for instance, when schadenfreude is evoked by hatred (*Haß*) or malicious envy (*Neid*). She wrote:

But if it shows a distinct lack of love or even hatred and envy towards other people, then we are dealing with the truly bad motives for schadenfreude, and hence genuine schadenfreude. (Moers, 1930, p. 132, our translation)

Although Moers made a clear distinction between *echten* or genuine schadenfreude and *unechten* schadenfreude and their moral evaluations, she also argued that in reality, different motives are often intertwined in schadenfreude and that actual experiences of this emotion are usually a combination of the two types of schadenfreude (for a related discussion of the work of Moers, see Kristjánsson, 2006).

Scholars still disagree about the moral evaluation of schadenfreude and also about which emotional experiences should be considered as genuine schadenfreude and which should not. This debate will probably continue for years to come. We adopt a broad view on the emotion of schadenfreude and it is not the aim of this book to resolve this debate. We define schadenfreude as pleasure at the misfortunes of others, independent of whether this emotion may (or should) be considered as morally acceptable or not. Disentangling the emotional experience of schadenfreude from its moral evaluation is also consistent with the current definition of schadenfreude in the *OED*. Earlier definitions in the *OED* explicitly associated schadenfreude with malice, “Malicious enjoyment of the misfortunes of others.” In its most recent definition, the association with malice has disappeared, and currently schadenfreude is defined in the *Oxford Dictionaries Online* as: “Pleasure derived by someone from another person’s misfortune.” However, in line with the passive nature of

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Excerpt

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schadenfreude (see Nietzsche, 1887/1908; Ortony, Clore, and Collins, 1988), we do restrict the term “schadenfreude” to the pleasure at misfortunes of others that are *not* directly caused by the *schadenfroh* person (otherwise we would consider this more akin to sadism) and are *not* the result of actively defeating others through direct competition (otherwise we would consider this more akin to victorious joy or gloating).

Why can we enjoy the misfortunes of others?

Schadenfreude can be categorized as a type of joy, but also as a specific and seemingly atypical type of joy. Whereas joy concerns being pleased about a desirable event, schadenfreude concerns being pleased about an event presumed to be undesirable for someone else (Ortony, Clore, and Collins, 1988). But schadenfreude might be less an atypical type of joy than first meets the eye. The essence of appraisal theories is the claim that it is not the objective properties of an event that produce an emotion, but rather the individual’s subjective appraisal of the personal significance of the event (for an overview of appraisal theories, see Roseman and Smith, 2001). What makes appraisal theories of emotions especially powerful is that they can explain why the same event can evoke different emotions in different people (i.e., because they appraise the same situation differently) or why different events can evoke the same emotion in a person (i.e., because he or she appraises the different situations in the same way). For example, another’s misfortune might evoke sympathy in some people and schadenfreude in others because they differ in how the misfortune is appraised. Since the appraisal of an event rather than an event per se elicits an emotion, it is impossible to list all the specific events that elicit a particular emotion, since any emotion – including schadenfreude – may be evoked by an infinite number of events, including events that have never before been experienced (Roseman and Smith, 2001). Thus, as it is the appraisal of another’s misfortune rather than the misfortune itself that evokes schadenfreude, the various elicitors for schadenfreude do not need concrete common features. Objectively dissimilar events – such as an envied friend breaking a heel of her beautiful new shoes, an arrogant colleague being denied promotion, an untalented wannabe pop star being heavily criticized in a talent show, or a well-known (tel-)evangelist getting caught with his hand in the proverbial cookie jar – may all evoke schadenfreude if these misfortunes are appraised in the same way. But the question remains: *why* are we able to enjoy the misfortunes of others?

In his seminal article “The Laws of Emotion,” Nico Frijda writes: “*Emotions arise in response to events that are important to the individual’s goals, motives, or concerns*” (1988, p. 349, italics in original). In line with

most appraisal theories, he argues that negative emotions are elicited by events that harm or threaten an individual's concerns, whereas positive emotions are evoked by events that satisfy these concerns. Thus, for an event to evoke *schadenfreude*, another's misfortune should be appraised by the *schadenfroh* person as satisfying some important personal concern. In other words, something about the other's misfortune should be beneficial for the person experiencing *schadenfreude*. Thus, the misfortunes of an envied friend, an arrogant colleague, an untalented wannabe pop star, or a well-known (tel-)evangelist can all evoke *schadenfreude* if these misfortunes provide the *schadenfroh* person with some psychological benefits. So what can people gain by the misfortunes of others in order to enjoy them? Or, to put it another way, what may be the concerns that underlie the emotion of *schadenfreude*? Below we will shortly address three major concerns that have received empirical support over the years: deservingness, envy, and self-enhancement.

The first important concern is *deservingness*. As most people care deeply about just and deserved outcomes, witnessing a situation that represents such an outcome typically evokes a positive emotion, even if it entails the misfortunes of others. Thus, if another's misfortune is appraised as just and deserved, it will evoke *schadenfreude* as it satisfies our concern for just and deserved outcomes. This is perhaps best captured by the words of John Portmann: "It is not the suffering of others that brings us joy, but rather the evidence of justice triumphing before our eyes" (2000, p. xiii). An appraisal of deservingness, for example, can explain why people can enjoy the misfortunes of those they dislike, resent, or consider hypocrites. Their suffering will often be regarded as just and deserved and therefore will appeal to our sense of justice.

A second concern that may underlie *schadenfreude* is *envy*. People experience envy when they lack another person's superior quality, achievement, or possession, and they either desire these or wish that the other lacked them. Envy is usually a very unpleasant emotion, which can include feelings of hostility, inferiority, and injustice (Smith and Kim, 2007). The misfortune of an envied other can evoke *schadenfreude* because it cuts away the very basis of envy; it renders the other less enviable and transforms a painful upward social comparison into a more favorable comparison (Smith et al., 1996; Van Dijk et al., 2006). Although some scholars have disputed the role of envy in evoking *schadenfreude* (e.g., Feather and Sherman, 2002; Hareli and Weiner, 2002; Leach and Spears, 2008), empirical support for a causal relation between envy (especially the malicious form) and *schadenfreude* is mounting.

A third concern that may underlie *schadenfreude* is *self-enhancement*. People have a strong concern for a positive self-evaluation and when this

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Excerpt

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concern is threatened or harmed, they have a strong motivation to protect, restore, or enhance their self-evaluation (e.g., Taylor and Brown, 1988; Tesser, 1988). One possible route to a more positive self-view involves comparing one's own lot to that of less fortunate others (e.g., Collins, 1996; Wills, 1981; Wood, 1989). In other words, people can enjoy the misfortunes of others because it provides them with social comparison benefits and these satisfy their concern for a positive self-evaluation. A concern for a positive self-evaluation can explain why people who are momentarily threatened in their self-evaluation, or those who have low self-esteem, tend to experience more schadenfreude toward the misfortunes of others (Van Dijk et al., 2011a; Van Dijk et al., 2011; Van Dijk et al., 2012).

Thus, people can enjoy the misfortunes of others because these misfortunes satisfy some important personal concerns of the *schadenfroh*. Although scholars of schadenfreude have argued over which concern is the most (or only) important concern underlying schadenfreude, we agree with Martha Moers in arguing that the underlying concerns of schadenfreude are not mutually exclusive, and most often they are intertwined in actual experiences of schadenfreude. Which concern carries the most weight will depend upon the specific situation and the specific person experiencing schadenfreude. Schadenfreude is a multi-determined emotion, the list of underlying concerns is long, and the list of potential schadenfreude-evoking events seems to be endless. This is what makes schadenfreude such a fascinating and intriguing emotion, an emotion worthy of its own edited volume.

Overview of this volume

The main aim of this edited volume is to offer a comprehensive summary of current theoretical and empirical work on schadenfreude from philosophical, psychological, and other perspectives. The book is divided into five sections. Consistent with our analysis that justice-related concepts are considered an important factor underlying the evaluation and experience of schadenfreude, the three contributions in Part I (Schadenfreude as a justice-based emotion) focus on the relation of schadenfreude with *morality*, *deservingness*, and *hypocrisy*. In Chapter 2, contemporary philosopher John Portmann provides a moral analysis of schadenfreude and situations that evoke pleasure at the misfortunes of others based on theological and historical perspectives. Next, N. T. Feather gives an overview of his extensive psychological research program over the last twenty years in Chapter 3, focusing on how pleasure at another person's negative outcome is linked to judgments that the other deserves or does not deserve that negative outcome. The first section concludes with Chapter 4, in

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Excerpt

[More information](#)10 *Wilco W. van Dijk and Jaap W. Ouwerkerk*

which Caitlin A. J. Powell presents psychological research on the various reasons why the misfortunes that are suffered by a hypocrite are often so enjoyable to others.

The five contributions in Part II (Schadenfreude as a comparison-based emotion) focus on how comparisons between one's own lot and that of others influence the experience of schadenfreude. In Chapter 5, contemporary philosopher Aaron Ben-Ze'ev argues that the role of a personal comparative concern in emotion is crucial for understanding pleasure in others' misfortunes. In line with our analysis that envy is considered an important concern underlying the experience of schadenfreude, the following two contributions focus on psychological research into the relationship between comparison-based envy and pleasure at the misfortune of others. In Chapter 6, Richard H. Smith, Stephen M. Thielke, and Caitlin A. J. Powell discuss how envy and schadenfreude relate to each other. Next, Niels van de Ven discusses in Chapter 7 recent research that shows how and when envy is an antecedent of schadenfreude. In Chapter 8, Jill M. Sundie presents research on the role of social comparison processes in evoking schadenfreude in a consumer context. The part is concluded with Chapter 9, in which Wilco W. van Dijk and Jaap W. Ouwerkerk examine the role of one's self-view in schadenfreude. They argue that striving for a positive self-evaluation constitutes an important underlying motive for the experience of schadenfreude.

Part III (Schadenfreude as an intergroup phenomenon) is comprised of four contributions that focus on the role of schadenfreude in relations between social groups. In Chapter 10, Mina Cikara and Susan T. Fiske demonstrate that specific stereotypes about a social group influence whether suffering of that group elicits schadenfreude. Next, based on a social identity perspective, D. Ryan Schurtz, David Combs, Charles Hoogland, and Richard H. Smith in Chapter 11 present research on group-based schadenfreude in a political and sports context. In Chapter 12, Jaap W. Ouwerkerk and Wilco W. van Dijk argue that intergroup relations may provide a special breeding ground for schadenfreude, and provide empirical evidence showing that schadenfreude is more readily evoked in intergroup relations that are characterized by rivalry and competition. The third section is concluded with Chapter 13, in which Colin Wayne Leach, Russell Spears, and Antony S. R. Manstead situate schadenfreude in social relations and describe studies on intergroup relations showing that the passive, opportunistic pleasure of schadenfreude can be distinguished from joy derived from outdoing a rival in direct competition, which they define as gloating.

As the title suggests, the three contributions in Part IV (Schadenfreude and related phenomena) focus on phenomena that are closely related