Schadenfreude: Contexts in Which Men and Women Feel Pleasure in Response to Others’ Misfortune

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Background

• “Schadenfreude” is a German word used to represent a feeling of pleasure in response to another person’s misfortune.
• Systematic research suggests that schadenfreude is felt most often toward same-sex peers who are disliked or whose previous good fortune is perceived as undeserved.
• Nearly all of the existing studies on schadenfreude have been experimental manipulations involving hypothetical academic misfortune among college students.
• One objective of the current research is to determine whether people experience schadenfreude in contexts outside of academics: a second is to investigate whether men and women differ in their perceptions of which misfortunes elicit the most pleasure.

Method

Participants

• Participants in both phases of this research were students at UWEC who voluntarily completed questionnaires during allotted class time.

Phase 1

• After receiving a definition of schadenfreude, participants shared a situation in which they felt pleasure in response to another person’s misfortune and a situation in which they witnessed someone else feel pleasure in response to their own misfortune. For each situation, participants reported the sex of, and their relationship to, the other person.

Phase 2

• The nominations we gathered in Phase 1 clustered into 10 domains, such as mating misfortune, attractiveness misfortune, financial misfortune, etc. We developed three “template” items for each domain, and used them to craft 30-item sets, in which each set included one item from each of the 10 domains.
• On the questionnaire, participants first were asked to imagine a member of the same sex and age whose misfortune would give them some pleasure, and then to imagine a situation in which someone else felt pleasure in response to their own misfortune. For each situation, participants reported the sex of, and their relationship to, the other person.

Results

Phase I Results:

Act Nomination of Circumstances that Elicit Schadenfreude

• The common targets of participants’ schadenfreude were similar to participants’ reports of who they thought experienced schadenfreude toward them. However, men’s and women’s targets differed.
• Some situations were nominated more frequently than others, and more frequently by one sex than by the other. Below are men’s and women’s most commonly reported situations.

Phase II Results:

Ranking of Circumstances that Elicit More and Less Schadenfreude

• These items are from a female form. Men’s items were written with male pronouns.

Discussion

• Following the logic of intrasexual competition and previous research on the specific contexts in which men and women experience schadenfreude, we had expected that women would rank a same-sex other’s decreased attractiveness as more pleasing than men would and that men would rank a same-sex other’s status and occupational misfortune as more pleasing than women would. We had predicted a sex difference in rank ordering financial misfortune as well, but the sexes did not differ in their response to that misfortune.
• Notably, many men but no women in Phase I had nominated socially embarrassing circumstances, such as the sexual and occupational misfortunes, as eliciting schadenfreude: but in Phase II both men and women ranked such circumstances among their most pleasure-evoking. And although in Phase I neither sex mentioned financial misfortunes very often, in Phase II both sexes and especially women ranked such misfortunes among their top three. We aim to further explore these effects in future studies.

References


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