When Misfortune Befalls Another
Cassandra L. Abel, Amanda L. Johnson, and April Bleses-Reczech
University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire

BACKGROUND
• Schadenfreude is a feeling of pleasure in response to another’s misfortune.
• Previous studies of schadenfreude have focused primarily on feelings of schadenfreude in the academic context (e.g., happiness when a high-performing peer fails an exam).
• Those studies suggest that young adults feel more pleasure toward same-sex (as opposed to opposite-sex) others experiencing a downfall (such as a failed exam), and more pleasure if the downfall is deserved (as opposed to not).
• It is currently unclear whether the happiness that young adults report in response to another person’s misfortune is more closely tied to disliking that person or to feeling dislike or hostility toward that person.

OBJECTIVES
The current study has two objectives:
• To investigate whether happiness in response to another’s misfortune is more closely tied to disliking them or envying them.
• To investigate people’s feelings of schadenfreude in response to others’ downfalls in evolutionarily-meaningful domains (as opposed to academic performance).

METHOD
• Participants were 241 (114 M, 127 F) college students from various departments at UWEC. Students completed written questionnaires voluntarily during allocated class time.
• Participants first brought to mind a same-sex peer whom they either (1) disliked but did not envy; (2) envied but did not dislike; or (3) envied and disliked. Then they imagined that person experiencing four different misfortunes (counterbalanced) and rated their happiness upon hearing about the misfortune (1 to 10).

RESULTS
Participants were asked to think of a same-sex peer they...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Envious (but did not dislike)</th>
<th>58%</th>
<th>19%</th>
<th>10%</th>
<th>6%</th>
<th>2%</th>
<th>4%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Died</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disliked (but did not envy)</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At the end of the questionnaire, we asked participants who they had thought of. As shown in the figure above, when they had been asked to think of someone they disliked and envious, or someone they disliked but did not envy, their happiness varied widely. However, when participants had been asked to imagine someone they envied but did not dislike, they commonly reported it was a friend or best friend.

PREVISIONS
• We expected that young adults would report more pleasure in response to imagining misfortunes of someone they disliked than of someone they envied.
• In keeping with sex differences in domains of self-evaluation and intrasexual competition, we expected that men more than women would feel happiness in response to a same-sex other’s fall in large-group status, and that women more than men would feel happiness in response to a same-sex other’s fall in attractiveness or small-group belonging.

DISCUSSION
• One objective of this study was to dissociate envy and dislike, in order to investigate their independent links to feelings of schadenfreude. Participants reported more schadenfreude toward the downfalls of targets whom they disliked, regardless of whether they envied them or not. In conjunction with findings from van de Ven et al., we suspect that feeling both dislike and envy toward someone might also be described as malicious envy, and should be accompanied by a desire to pull that person down in standing. In contrast, feeling envy in the absence of dislike might be described as benign envy, and should be accompanied by a desire to elevate oneself to that person’s standing.

• Another objective of this study was to investigate people’s feelings of happiness about downfalls in evolutionally-relevant domains. In fact, participants reported moderate (not low) levels of happiness about the various misfortunes, and they reported the most happiness in response to others’ mating misfortunes. Future research could investigate whether men and women respond differently to a same-sex other’s short-term mating failure (e.g., getting sexually rejected) and long-term mating failure (e.g., being dumped by a committed romantic partner).

REFERENCES

Acknowledgements
• This research was funded by a grant from Summer Research Experiences for Undergraduates through the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at UWEC.
• We thank the faculty and staff who took time out of their classes to engage students in participation: Dr. Stephen Hill, Dr. Pete Myers, and Dr. Matthew Evans.