



## Exploring the When and Why of *Schadenfreude*

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### Abstract

We summarize the empirical work on *schadenfreude*, or pleasure felt at someone else's misfortune. Although *schadenfreude* is a socially undesirable emotion, research reveals at least three conditions in which it commonly arises. One condition is when observers gain from the misfortune. We discuss research showing that gains in ingroup outcomes based on the failures of rival outgroups can create *schadenfreude*, especially for those highly identified with their ingroups. A second condition is when another's misfortune is deserved. We focus on research showing that the misfortunes of hypocrites are perceived as highly deserved and therefore create *schadenfreude* in observers. A third condition is when a misfortune befalls an envied person. We summarize studies showing that the core ingredients of envy prime the envying person for *schadenfreude* when the envied person suffers.

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Everyday life produces many instances of other people suffering pain and misfortune. Some of these events hit very close to home, but most are simply the common part of what is covered in the news. It is hard to imagine the media without its instant coverage of disasters, murders, and scandals (Percy, 2000). Clearly, one reason that we are drawn to other people's suffering is that we feel empathy for them (Batson, 1991; Decety, Michalska, & Akitsuki, 2008; de Waal, 2008; Hoffman, 1981; Wispé, 1991). Empathy might dominate our emotions when friends and family are involved, or if future reciprocity is primed (de Waal, 2008; Singer, Seymour, O'Doherty, Kaube, Dolan, & Frith, 2004). But as the circle widens beyond kith and kin, and other motivations come into play (e.g., Schaller & Cialdini, 1988), it becomes less clear that empathy is the ruling sentiment. Who has the energy and emotional resources to feel deeply each and every time one is confronted by suffering? If pure empathy was the consistent and ruling reaction, we might typically turn away and avoid learning about these events rather than maintaining an exhausting focus. Furthermore, many of these events may actually cause the opposing

emotion of *schadenfreude*, or, 'satisfaction or pleasure felt at someone else's misfortune' (Random House Webster's Unabridged Dictionary, 1998, 1713). Perhaps, it is this latter possibility that partly explains why segments of the media seem to rely so much on misfortunes happening to others as its preferred fare.

That misfortunes befalling other people can produce pleasure in observers is unsettling, as it highlights an unsavory side of human nature, especially when this pleasure seems malicious or gleeful. Most people probably feel uneasy about taking any pleasure in the misfortunes of others, as this usually violates social norms and verges on shameful in many contexts (Wills, 1981). Indeed, definitions of *schadenfreude* often accent its malicious connotations (e.g., Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, 1933). However, empirical work has isolated an array of circumstances in which *schadenfreude* does arise, much of this work pioneered by Norman Feather beginning with his work of people's negative attitudes toward 'tall poppies' (Feather, 1989, 1999, 2006). The purpose of this article is to summarize research focusing on three broad, sometimes overlapping explanations for why *schadenfreude* occurs. The first explanation emphasizes that people can actually stand to gain from another person's misfortune. Pleasure, of course, is a natural reaction to personal gain. Although the pleasure may come more 'because of' the gain than 'in' the other's suffering, the fact of the benefit is linked to this suffering will probably blur this distinction. The second explanation stems from the strong connection between the deservingness of an outcome and general feelings of satisfaction derived from justice being served. Often, another person's misfortune will be perceived as deserved, and the event will be pleasing exactly because it fits a sense of what is just, despite the suffering. The third explanation focuses on the role of envy in creating conditions ripe for *schadenfreude*. This explanation is especially repugnant in terms of social norms, but there are good reasons for making the link between these two emotions. These reasons partly echo the first two explanations for *schadenfreude*, as a misfortune befalling an envied person can lead to, among other things, a pleasing personal gain and a subjective yet satisfying sense of deservingness.

### ***Schadenfreude* Resulting from Personal Gain**

Astronauts are a competitive breed. This is captured well in *Apollo 13*, the film about the ill-fated NASA mission to the moon. The astronaut Jim Lovell wants another opportunity to travel to the moon, but the chance has been given to fellow astronaut Alan Shepard and his crew. However, Shepard later develops an ear infection, and his crew is replaced by Lovell's crew. This is bad news for Shepard, but Lovell's reaction is exuberant when he rushes home to give the news to his family. Lovell shows no hint of sympathy for Shepard. The focus of his attention is on the anticipated thrill of another trip to the moon for himself. The good news happens

as a result of *another person's pain*, as Shepard is frustrated, even angry. Yet, for Lovell, because the end result for him is something that he craved, he experiences joy (Howard, 1995).

The movie takes Lovell's perspective on this event, and as viewers, we largely feel what he feels. We recognize that in these kinds of situations, when a particular outcome is strongly desired, its value and gain largely propel a person's emotional reaction. The additional detail that the outcome is the result of another person's loss is a relatively pallid point and takes away little of the associated pleasure. At first blush, it might appear that there is usually little to gain from other people's suffering. Observing others in physical or emotional pain can be aversive in itself (e.g. Batson, 1994; Decety, Michalska, & Akitsuki, 2008; de Waal, 2008; Hoffman, 1981; Wispé, 1991). However, we may gain more often from misfortunes happening than it might seem. This might be especially true in competitive circumstances, not uncommon in everyday life. Furthermore, we may under-appreciate how great a proportion of situations in life contain competitive elements. Competitive situations bring out what is arguably a naturally rivalrous streak in most people – and set the table for pleasure when rivals suffer.

### *Zero-sum competitions and group-level schadenfreude*

Pure examples of competition are 'zero-sum', meaning that that one person's gain or loss translates *exactly* into the loss or gain for oneself (Von Newmann & Morgenstern, 1944). Many competitive games are like this. For example, athletic contests tend to be zero-sum, as they almost always require a winner and a loser, which means that part of the joy of winning is intertwined with the fact that an opponent has lost. The competitive nature of sports extends to the outcomes for fans as well. Most sports fans would probably agree that sports are a part of life where *schadenfreude* over a rival team's loss can often come in a high octane grade (St. John, 2004). Why should fans have such strong emotional reactions?

Decades of research leads to the robust conclusion that people have a natural tendency to categorize themselves and others into ingroups or outgroups (Tajfel, 1972). In many cases, these categorizations are quickly cemented and arbitrary, yet are often consequential despite such arbitrary origins. Such categorizations and the strength of those categorizations can have a profound impact on how we experience group related events. When people strongly identify with an ingroup, they will tend to interpret events with respect to group rather than self-interest more narrowly defined (Mackie, Silver, & Smith, 2004). In a sense, the group becomes a part of the self, and the self becomes a part of the group. For many fans, reactions to the team's successes and failures are largely processed as if the person is part of the team and the team is a part of the person. Thus, wins and losses by the group are linked to self-evaluations and produce

either positive or negative emotions depending on the outcome (e.g. Cialdini et al., 1976; Hogg & Vaughan, 2002; Hogg & Williams, 2000; Reid & Hogg, 2005; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

As fans, we may tend to think that most of our sports related emotions follow from a narrow focus on our team winning rather our rival losing. In this sense, the pleasure might seem more a function of one's own team winning alone and of the pride, for example, that this winning might produce, without regard to this coming at another team's expense. However, the logic of social identity theory requires that it takes two groups to tango. The thrill of winning means that some other team has lost. The thrill is linked inextricably with the fact of winning over another team. Pleasurable emotions such as pride in performance are strongly linked to the knowledge of superior relative performance (Smith, Eyre, Powell, & Kim, 2006; Webster, Duvall, Gaines, & Smith, 2003). Indeed, the meaning of a performance itself is largely defined by social comparisons (e.g., Festinger, 1954; Smith, 2000). Also, in sports a rival can lose to other teams, not just our own. Rival teams are actually much more frequently playing other teams than our own, creating at least the potential for them to lose to these other teams, and the loss of a rival team often means a gain in the standings for one's own team. As a result, misfortunes suffered by rival teams usually provide opportunities for *schadenfreude*, as interesting studies by Leach, Spears, Branscombe, and Doosje (2003) show clearly. Of course, other factors besides the rival status of a team will also play a role in how we react to its losing. Simply disliking another team will cause us to find its losing pleasing (e.g., Hareli & Weiner, 2002), just as liking another team will produce sympathy. Severe misfortunes probably are less pleasing than mild ones (e.g., Hareli & Weiner, 2002). However, generally, any sports fan will admit that a misfortune suffered by a rival team is a sure recipe for pleasure.

### *Schadenfreude in politics*

Another breeding ground for *schadenfreude* is politics, a blood sport in its own right, where partisan instincts often carry the day more often than bipartisan desires. Misfortunes befalling opposing party candidates, ranging from sexual scandals to verbal gaffes, enhance the fate of one's own candidate or party. In the context of a political campaign, particularly as Election Day nears, many newsworthy events may be considered via their implications for victory or defeat of one's own side. This may be true even though a misfortune befalling an opponent may also create negative, undeserved consequences for people in general. As with sports, the obvious direct gain for the self may seem minimal. If one strongly identifies with a political party, however, then all events should be interpreted through the lens of ingroup gain, which, in the case of politics, might be considerable.

It would hardly be surprising to learn that a scandal suffered by a political adversary creates *schadenfreude*, especially if one has reason to dislike this person (Hareli & Weiner, 2002). What is surprising is that, under some circumstances, *schadenfreude* might also occur when the misfortune is general and widespread in its negative effects. We tested this possibility in a series of studies (Combs, Powell, Schurtz, & Smith, forthcoming). In these studies, we first assessed students' political party affiliation and the intensity of their identification with their party. Then, sometime later, we gauged their reactions to news articles detailing three different types of misfortunes. Some were comic in nature, embarrassing either the Republican or Democratic Party (e.g., George W. Bush falling off his bicycle and John Kerry dressed in comical outfit during a tour at NASA). Others were objectively hurtful to innocent bystanders and also had implications for the outcome of an upcoming election (e.g., troop deaths in Iraq). A third type of misfortune was objectively hurtful to innocent bystanders and had implications for the outcome of the election, but also clearly stated that the misfortune could have objectively hurtful implications (e.g. widespread economic downturn). In the first study, the reactions were reported just before the 2004 U.S. Presidential Election; in the second study, just before the 2006 U.S. Midterm Election; and, in the third study during the 2008 Presidential primary season. We expected that party affiliation and how strongly individuals identified with their parties would predict the strength of the participants' *schadenfreude*.

Our expectations were confirmed. In Study 1, Democrats found the comic articles about Bush considerably more pleasing than did Republicans; the opposite pattern occurred for the comic articles about Kerry. This pattern was stronger for those highly identified with their party. More interesting was the reaction Democrats had to an article detailing a downturn in the national economy. Democrats read an article which noted that job growth had taken a considerable hit in recent months and that many people were out of a job. Democrats, especially those who strongly identified with their political party, reported considerable *schadenfreude* as a result of the event. Study 2, conducted just before the 2006 midterm election, produced a similar result, but in this case our participants reacted to a much darker and permanent tragedy. One of the articles reported a story in which a number of U.S. soldiers were killed by a roadside bomb in Iraq. Democrats reported that they experienced greater *schadenfreude* than Republicans, although, importantly, this pleasure was muted and reported in tandem with strong negative affect. In addition, Democrats who strongly identified with their political party reported significantly more *schadenfreude* than Democrats who did not strongly identify with their political party.

In the third study, we replicated these findings for an objectively negative event that we could attribute to *either* Republicans or Democrats. In the prior two time periods, most negative newsworthy events could largely be

attributed to Republicans: at the time, they controlled all branches of the elected federal government, making it difficult to find some politically related misfortune that could be 'pinned' on Democrats directly. However, for this third study, the time period was the late spring of 2008, when the presumptive nominees for both parties (John McCain for the Republicans and Barack Obama for the Democrats) had been largely decided. We created a news article which detailed a housing and economic crisis which was ostensibly caused by Obama or McCain. Across all conditions, the article made it clear that the candidate's misguided economic thinking had been a key factor in the cause of the misfortune. We also made it clear that the event was so severe that it would affect *all* Americans. Thus, we were able to cross party affiliation of the participant with the party affiliation of the person associated with the misfortune.

Participants reported *schadenfreude* as a result of the articles they read provided that the misfortune described in the article was caused by a politician of the opposing party. Furthermore, Republicans who strongly identified with their party were more likely to report *schadenfreude* as a result of the objectively negative misfortune ostensibly caused by Obama than were Republicans who did not strongly identify with their party. This pattern of findings was similar for Democrats when McCain appeared to have caused an objectively negative misfortune. Participants reported these feelings while simultaneously reporting that they understood innocent others as well as they themselves might be hurt by the misfortune.

Overall, these findings suggest that everyday life provides many opportunities for *schadenfreude*. A case can be made that an underappreciated proportion of misfortunes happening to other people produce a least a touch of *schadenfreude*. This claim follows from the general logic that largely explains the emergence of *schadenfreude* in the competitive realms of sports and politics; specifically, that we often gain from the misfortune of others.

#### *Social comparison benefits of misfortunes befalling others*

It is worth emphasizing that there are clear advantages to superiority, as well as disadvantages of inferiority. Not only are valuable resources at stake based on relative standing (e.g., Smith, Combs, & Thiekle, 2008), but there are also self-related feelings in the mix as well (e.g., Brickman & Bulman, 1977; Morse & Gergen, 1970). Most contemporary psychological perspectives on the self make the common sense observation that people are motivated to feel good about themselves, and this motivation is a primary drive of human behavior (Baumeister, 1991; Brown & Dutton, 1995; Sedikides & Strube, 1997; Taylor & Brown, 1988; Tesser, Millar, & Moore, 1988). One prime way individuals are able to feel good about themselves is to conclude or discover that they are better than others on

valued attributes (Wills, 1981). Misfortunes happening to others, especially competitors, are one potential road to this positive feeling.

A recent series of studies by van Dijk, Ouwerkerk, Nieweg, van Koningsbruggen, and Wesseling (2009) supports the link between misfortunes happening to others and the boost in self-esteem that can occur as a result. In one study, participants read an interview with a student who was later found to have done a poor job on her thesis. Before reading the interview they completed a standard self-esteem scale. Participant's self-esteem predicted how much pleasure they felt after learning about the failure: the lower their reported self-esteem, the more pleasing the failure. A second study found that participants were more likely to find another person's failure pleasing when they themselves had failed at a task. A third study showed that this pattern was especially likely for people who had a chronic sense of low competence. In this study, the misfortune was watching a talent show contestant give a humiliating performance. Finally, autobiographical accounts of occasions in which people felt *schadenfreude* were associated with a boost in self-esteem. The upshot of these studies is that people often stand to gain psychologically from another person's misfortune. This seems generally true based on autobiographical accounts and especially true for people with low self-esteem or for people who have experienced a threat to their self-esteem.

### Summary

In sum, people often gain from misfortunes happening to others. This may be because many circumstances in life are fundamentally competitive. People gain from winning, and so they want to win. Psychologically, one can point to the significant benefits of superiority. *Schadenfreude* should be a natural, at least partial, reaction to the suffering of others – when such gains and benefits accrue from the suffering.

### ***Schadenfreude* Resulting from Deserved Misfortunes**

In Shakespeare's 'Hamlet', Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are given the mission by Claudius to betray Hamlet and murder him. But Hamlet outwits them, and they go to their own deaths instead. Hamlet takes pleasure in telling Horatio of how this came about, 'For 'tis the sport to have the engineer/Hoist with his own petar' (Shakespeare, 1601/1980, Hamlet III iv, p. 153). Why is it so satisfying, why is it such 'sport', when someone suffers the misfortune they had initially planned someone else? Perhaps the main reason is that it seems so fitting and deserved (e.g., Ben Ze'ev, 2000; Feather, 2006; Heider, 1958; Kristjánsson, 2006; Portmann, 2000). As personal justification for *schadenfreude*, deservingness has the advantage for seeming to be unrelated to self-interest. The person feeling it can appeal to general standards of what is just and fair. One might argue

that when *schadenfreude* is an 'emotional corollary of justice' (McNamee, 2007, p. 293), it is really righteous satisfaction and has little of the malicious overtones often associated with *schadenfreude* (Kristjánsson, 2006). Notwithstanding this important definitional question, deservingness may be the royal road to *schadenfreude*, as a persuasive series of theoretical and empirical papers spearheaded by Norman Feather shows clearly (e.g., Feather, 1999, 2006; Feather & Sherman, 2002). Other studies further support Feather's work (van Dijk, Ouwerkerk, Goslinga, & Nieweg, 2005; Powell & Smith, 2009).

### *Hypocrisy, deservingness, and schadenfreude*

One variant of a *schadenfreude*-producing misfortune that seems at least partly explained by deservingness are cases in which the misfortune is linked to the suffering person's hypocrisy. Certainly, examples of hypocrisy inspired *schadenfreude* are common in the popular press. Jimmy Swaggart is perhaps the crown prince of this category. This pioneer of televangelism not only preached about the consequences of sin, but he also made a habit of exposing people's sins, especially those sexual in nature. It turned out that Swaggart was the pot calling the kettle black, as it was revealed that he regularly visited prostitutes. In what is probably the most famous public confession in recent memory, Swaggart came before his congregation and television audience to acknowledge his sin and to ask for forgiveness. This was a humiliation for Swaggart, but, for most people, the image of Swaggart, his face twisted in pain and tears streaming down his cheeks was a source of mirth and of great humor. His behavior was high grade hypocrisy, and he only had it coming.

Why does a misfortune befalling a hypocrite seem so deserved, and therefore so pleasing? According to Newman (1986), hypocrisy is conceived of as 'simulation or feigning to be what one is not; the acting of a false part; especially, the assuming of a false appearance of virtue or religion' (p. 85). Hypocrites claim to behave one way when, in fact, they behave otherwise (Barden, Rucker, & Petty, 2005; Stone, Wiegand, Cooper, & Aronson 1997). Feather (2006), in his general model of deservingness and emotions, suggests that emotions following from judgments of deservingness result when the 'valence of the outcome fits with or is consistent with the valence of the action that led to it' (p. 40). Often, the misfortunes that hypocrites suffer involve being caught for the same immoral behavior that they claim not to engage in and which they criticize others for performing. The negative experience suffered by the hypocrite (getting caught, punished, embarrassed, etc.) has come about due to that individual's inconsistency between their statements and their actions, which is distasteful to others to begin with. Also, the hypocrite has engaged in an immoral action after judging the morality of others, which lends a sense of balance and symmetry to the outcome and to what brought about the outcome



(Heider, 1958). Furthermore, the initial moralizing statements by the hypocrite are likely to create resentment (Monin, 2007) and dislike from observers, reactions which should catalyze pleasure when the hypocrisy is exposed. Therefore, the negative experience, although it is painful for the hypocrite, should seem deserved (and pleasing) from an observer's perspective.

A sense of deservingness may come into play in yet another way. When hypocrites hoist themselves with their own petards, the symmetry of the immoral action matching the hypocrite's original moral position probably makes the outcome seem especially fitting and just. In this sense, it may satisfy in a 'poetic' way. Those punished suffer because of their own poor choices, thus reinforcing the notion of a just world and karmic retribution (e.g. Lerner & Miller, 1978). In addition, they have been discovered doing the behavior that they, often pompously, forbid others from doing, making their embarrassment all the richer. Such symmetry and balance, associated with moralizing people especially (Monin, 2007), should be inherently pleasant (Feather, 2006; Heider, 1958); it is 'poetic justice'.

In two studies (Powell & Smith, 2009), we examined the links between hypocrisy, deservingness, and *schadenfreude*. In the first study, participants read what appeared to be an Internet article based on an interview with a fellow student. This student mentioned being either an enthusiastic member of a campus organization aimed at reducing and exposing academic misconduct (high hypocrisy condition) or being in a French language club (low hypocrisy condition). In a second, follow-up article, participants read that the same student had been charged with plagiarizing. As expected, participants reported greater *schadenfreude* when the student's misconduct represented hypocritical behavior than when it did not. In addition, participants in the high hypocrisy condition reported that they felt the misfortune was more deserved.

A second study examined the role of the symmetry or match between the initial claims of hypocrites and their subsequent hypocritical behavior in producing *schadenfreude*. As in Study 1, we manipulated hypocrisy by changing whether or not the student being interviewed criticized others for plagiarizing in their initial interview. Participants then read a follow-up article that described the student being caught engaging in an immoral action and being placed on academic probation. In this follow-up article, we varied whether the misfortune-causing behavior matched the initial moralizing statement (i.e. criticizing others about plagiarizing and then getting caught plagiarizing) or was different from the initial statement (i.e. making the same critical statement against plagiarizing, but getting caught stealing). In both cases, the student spoke out against an immoral behavior of some kind and then was caught behaving immorally. Getting caught plagiarizing and stealing are also *both* deserved misfortunes, as both cheating and stealing are actions the student chooses to engage in, and any punishment has been brought about by his or her own immoral actions. However, we

expected that when the student's immoral action matched their initial moral statement, that this would lead to greater reports of hypocrisy, deservingness, and *schadenfreude* than when the actions were unsymmetrical.

In the low hypocrisy condition, when the target student had not previously criticized others for plagiarizing, participants reacted similarly to the two transgressions (plagiarizing and stealing). They felt equivalent *schadenfreude* when the students got caught and perceived that the misfortunes were equally deserved. In the high hypocrisy condition, however, participants perceived more hypocrisy when the target student was caught for the same transgression he or she had criticized others for committing than when it was a different, but equivalently immoral transgression. Importantly, participants also felt more *schadenfreude* in the matched, symmetric condition compared to the unmatched, asymmetric condition.

### Summary

Deservingness clearly plays a major role in explaining many instances of *schadenfreude*. It has the added bonus for the observer of the misfortune of allowing the pleasure to seem unrelated to self-interest. Deserved misfortunes seem to satisfy people's preference for balance and symmetry. Deserved misfortunes may have a satisfying kind poetry to them. An exemplar of this general notion is when hypocrites suffer by committing the same immoral behaviors they have self-righteously accused other of committing.

### ***Schadenfreude* Resulting from Envy**

An early episode of *The Simpsons*, 'When Flanders Failed,' explores the theme of envy and *schadenfreude*. Homer Simpson is deeply envious of his neighbor, Ned Flanders, who not only has desirable material possessions but is also morally superior. Flanders announces at a backyard barbecue that he will be starting a business venture called the 'Leforium' that will sell products designed to make life easier for people who are left-handed. In Homer's envy-filtered view, it is a 'stupid' idea and, when he gets the larger part of the wishbone from the turkey carcass, he gleefully imagines the business failing. And, when the business does start failing, this in fact makes Homer happy. Lisa notes her Dad's *schadenfreude* during a family dinner (Vitti & Reardon, 1991):

**Lisa:** Dad, do you know what *schadenfreude* is?

**Homer** (sarcastically): No, I do not know what *schadenfreude* is. Please tell me because I'm dying to know.

**Lisa:** It's a German word for shameful joy, taking pleasure in the suffering of others.

It turns out that the creators of *The Simpsons* are part of long tradition of scholarship linking envy in a singular way with *schadenfreude*. In Plato's

*Philebus*, Socrates suggests that ‘the envious man finds something in the misfortunes of his neighbors at which he is pleased’ (p. 113). Envy is a painful emotion, and the sources of this pain, superiority in another, presents an opportunity for pleasure – if a misfortune befalls the envied person. Aristotle (367–322 B.C.E./1992) also linked envy with *schadenfreude*.

Clearly, one reason that envy should lead to *schadenfreude*, if the envied person suffers, relates to the first theme of this article: that pleasure should follow from personal gain. There are potential social comparison benefits behind any misfortune to the extent that it represents downward comparison and the boost to self-evaluation that might follow. Envy, like *schadenfreude* generally, should be most frequently experienced in competitive, zero-sum situations (e.g., Foster, 1972; Sullivan, 1956). A misfortune befalling the envied person is likely to lead to competitive gain as well as the relief from the unpleasant emotion of envy itself (van Dijk et al., 2005). The unpleasant nature of envy and its other unappealing feature (e.g., feelings of inferiority, resentment) can be painful and perseverating (Smith, Combs, & Thiekle, 2008) and thus its reduction or removal should be pleasing. An associated result is the transforming of a threat to self-evaluation to a possible boost in self-evaluation. Envy represents the polar opposite of a downward comparison (e.g., Heider, 1958; Salovey & Rodin, 1984; Smith, 2000), but a misfortune befalling an envied person is potentially transforming, by turning the offending comparison upside down.

If any downward comparison has potential to boost the self, it should be all the more likely when the self-worth has been initially compromised by invidious comparison (Wills, 1981). For example, research by Leach and Spears (2008) revealed that participants whose university was made to seem inferior to another school felt more *schadenfreude* when a third, rival school suffered an academic defeat. Thus, to the extent that an invidious comparison creates a sense of inferiority, a misfortune befalling the envied person should be all the more pleasing.

### *Subjective sense of injustice in envy*

Definitions of envy often include an ingredient of resentment, in the sense that the envied person can seem undeserving of his or her advantage (e.g., Ben-Ze’ev, 2000; Heider, 1958; Smith, 1991). Although it is difficult to disentangle such resentful feelings in envy from resentment proper (D’Arms & Kerr, 2008; Leach, 2008; Miceli & Castelfranchi, 2007; Rawls, 1971; Smith, 1991; Smith & Kim, 2007), this prevalent aspect of invidious feelings suggests another reason why envy should lead to *schadenfreude* if the envied person suffers: to the extent that envy contains resentment, the misfortune will also seem deserved. As we outlined above, deservingness is a strong predictor of *schadenfreude*, perhaps the strongest (Feather, 1994, 2006; Feather & Sherman, 2002; Portman, 2000).

*The hostile aspect of envy*

Not only do people feeling envy feel discontent and often inferior because of the desired advantage enjoyed by envied person but, typically, they also feel ill will toward the envied person. They would just as soon that no one has the advantage if they themselves are denied it (Smith & Kim, 2007). There are number of possible explanations for this hostility (see Smith & Kim, 2007, for a review), but regardless of the particular causes of this hostility, it is a defining feature of envy. Furthermore, it is yet another reason for expecting a misfortune befalling an envied person to be pleasing. It is natural for negative, hostile feelings directed toward other people to coexist with a desire to have negative events happen to them (e.g., Heider, 1958), as Hareli and Weiner (2002) show.

A number of studies support claims that envy has a strong link with *schadenfreude* (see Powell, Smith, & Schurtz, 2008, for a review). In one early study (Smith, Turner, Garonzik, Leach, Urch-Druskat, & Weston, 1996), we asked participants to watch a video interview of either an enviable (high GPA, notable wealth, and impressive achievements) or average student (average GPA, average financial situation, and unimpressive achievements) who described plans for applying to medical school. During a pause at the end of the interview, we assessed their affective reactions to the interview. At the end of the interview, an epilogue announced that the student had been arrested for stealing amphetamines from a research lab and therefore was compelled to delay his plans for medical school. Finally, we assessed their affective reactions a second time. As expected, participants reported that the misfortune befalling the enviable student was more pleasing than when it happened to the average student. Furthermore, the envy created by this manipulation (assessed during the pause in the interview and before the misfortune) mediated this effect. Finally, participants who reported higher scores on a measure of dispositional envy, completed before viewing the interview, were more likely overall to find the misfortune pleasing. A second study (Brigham et al., 1997), using a similar methodology, replicated the effect for the envy manipulation. The study also showed that it occurred for *both* deserved and undeserved misfortunes. Thus, envious feelings were powerful enough to produce *schadenfreude* following a misfortune, even if the suffering person did not deserve the misfortune.

Although these studies supported the importance of envy in explaining some instances of *schadenfreude*, the full empirical picture is mixed with some research adding further support (e.g. van Dijk et al., 2005; van Dijk, Ouwerkerk, Goslinga, Nieweg, & Gallucci, 2006) and others failing to find support (Feather & Sherman, 2002; Hareli & Weiner, 2002). In a third study (Powell, 2009), we revisited the question of envy and *schadenfreude*. Participants read what they believed to be internet articles detailing interviews with fellow students. As in our earlier studies, the

student's responses to interview questions were manipulated so that the student appeared either enviable or not. We also manipulated whether the student appeared likable or not, and we also manipulated whether the misfortune appeared deserved or not.

As expected, each of the manipulations succeeded in creating *schadenfreude*. Participants reported more *schadenfreude* when an enviable peer suffered the misfortune than when the average person did; the disliked student's misfortune was also more pleasing than the liked student's misfortune; and the deserved misfortune was more pleasing than the less deserved one. Furthermore, envy mediated the relationship between the manipulation of envy and feelings of *schadenfreude*, feelings of dislike mediated the relationship between the manipulation of dislike and feelings of *schadenfreude*, and feelings of deservingness mediated the relationship between the manipulation of deservingness and feelings of *schadenfreude*.

Additional tests of mediation were also revealing. We expected that the manipulations of dislike and of deservingness would produce no effects on envy, and, this was the case. Envy also played no mediational role in explaining the effects of these two manipulations on *schadenfreude*. Dislike and deservingness each lead to increased *schadenfreude* but not because these characteristics affected feelings of envy. However, the manipulation of envy affected reports of envy *as well as* reports of dislike and deservingness. Indeed, if feelings of dislike, hostility and deservingness are part of (or sometimes by-products of) envy, then feelings of dislike and deservingness might also be created by a manipulation of envy. Additional mediational analysis showed that feelings of dislike and feelings of deservingness were both significant mediators between the manipulation of envy and *schadenfreude*.

### Summary

These findings clearly support the many scholarly claims that envy can be a cause of *schadenfreude*. Superiority in others does not always create envy, but when it does, it creates conditions ripe for *schadenfreude*, if the envied person suffers. These findings also replicated prior research linking dislike as well as deservingness with *schadenfreude* and hint at why dislike and deservingness can be construed as both separate and overlapping with envy as causes of *schadenfreude*. The effect of the manipulation of envy on *schadenfreude* was mediated by the measure of envy, as well as by the measures of dislike and deservingness. However, again, the manipulations of dislike and deservingness had no effects on envy, although they had effects on feelings of dislike and deservingness respectively. Envy includes a mix of feelings (e.g., inferiority, dislike, and resentment) that probably explains why it should have a close link with *schadenfreude*, even though these ingredients can have their own separate links with *schadenfreude* independent of an invidious context.

## Conclusion

The German philosopher, Schopenhauer (1851/2007), famously called *schadenfreude* the worst emotion of which humans were capable. We do not wish to claim that this emotion is the typical response to the misfortunes of others. Furthermore, people may feel pleasure over another person's misfortune, but have no desire to sadistically engineer this misfortune. Nonetheless, the empirical work we have reviewed reveals at least three circumstances in which it can arise. The first circumstance emphasizes that people often gain from another person's misfortune, and, when they do, pleasure should result. Studies in the competitive realms of sports and politics highlight this process. The second circumstance recognizes the strong link between the deservingness of a misfortune and the emotional satisfaction produced by such deservingness. The pleasure arising when people observe hypocrites suffering for actions that have criticized others for performing is one example. The third circumstance highlights the long-standing scholarly tradition linking envy with *schadenfreude*. Envy, because it can entail feelings of inferiority, hostility, and resentment, primes the envying person for pleasure if the envied person suffers. Envy is strongly linked with *schadenfreude* because it contains ingredients that, in similar forms, also produce *schadenfreude* outside of an invidious context. *Schadenfreude* may not be the prettiest emotion, and we might not always want to admit feeling it, but it is clear that conditions arise that cause it to flourish.

## Short Biography

Richard Smith is a professor of psychology at the University of Kentucky. He received his Ph.D. in social psychology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He has published empirical articles on social comparison processes, attribution theory, and various social emotions, such as envy and *schadenfreude*.

Caitlin A. J. Powell researches how social comparisons and social identity can influence social emotions, as well as how social comparison targets and group membership can influence self-evaluations, self-esteem, and affective responses. She is a contributing author to the recently published *Envy: Theory and Research* (Richard H. Smith, editor), and has co-authored papers in *Self and Identity*, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, and *British Journal of Social Psychology*. She is currently finishing her PhD at the University of Kentucky and has accepted a faculty position at Georgia College and State University in the fall semester of 2009.

David J. Y. Combs is a fifth year graduate student working with Dr. Richard H. Smith at the University of Kentucky. He has obtained an MA from the University of Kentucky as well as a certification in political psychology from Stanford University. His current research interests include

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David Schurtz is a third year graduate student working with Dr. Richard H. Smith at the University of Kentucky. Previously, he received his MA degree from the Experimental Psychology program at Towson University where he worked with Justin Buckingham. His current research interests include social comparison processes, self-serving biases, social emotions and their relationship to aggression and altruism, and *schadenfreude* in politics and sports.

## Endnote

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