

University of Groningen

Situating schadenfreude in social relations

Leach, Colinn Wayne; Spears, Russell; Manstead, Antony S. R.

Published in:
 Schadenfreude

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
 Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
 2014

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Leach, C. W., Spears, R., & Manstead, A. S. R. (2014). Situating schadenfreude in social relations. In W. van Dijk, & J. W. Ouwerkerk (Eds.), *Schadenfreude: Understanding pleasure at the misfortune of others* (pp. 200-216). Cambridge University Press.

Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.

13 Situating schadenfreude in social relations

*Colin Wayne Leach, Russell Spears, and Antony
S. R. Manstead*

Two somewhat distinct trends seem to have put schadenfreude on the scholarly and the popular agenda: (1) the academic (re)turn to emotion as a concept; and (2) the popular interest in seeing others suffer in the media. Recent media coverage has used the term “schadenfreude” to describe pleasure at the precipitous fall of celebrities; public rejoicing at the destruction of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001; and laughter at the public embarrassment of poor singers and misguided lovers on “reality TV” shows (see Kristjánsson, 2006; Lee, 2008). As shown in this volume, a good deal of the scholarly research of schadenfreude also focuses on pleasure at the fall of high achievers and the adversity suffered by the arrogant, the unfair, or others who seem to deserve adversity.

Although we have no doubt that things like material gain, envy, and perceived injustice can increase the pleasure that people take in others’ adversity, we focus on more minimal and mundane instances of schadenfreude. We think that these more minimal and mundane instances of schadenfreude offer a particularly clear picture of the emotion. In our view, the more minimal and mundane instances of schadenfreude also come closer to the pragmatic meaning of *Schadenfreude* in German. In everyday usage, Germans use the term *Schadenfreude* to refer to a moderate, modest pleasure felt in response to others’ minor falls and foibles. In other words, schadenfreude is pleasure about others’ misfortunes. Unlike other sorts of adversity, a misfortune is an adversity caused by happenstance (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 1989; see Leach and Spears, 2008, 2009). Thus, schadenfreude is pleasure about an adversity caused by bad luck or by the vagaries of competition. More forthright and fulsome

We thank Tina Camp, Kai Epstude, Nicole Harth, and Thomas Kessler for discussing the use and meaning of schadenfreude among German speakers. We thank Brian Koenig for his comments on our definition and conceptualization of schadenfreude. This chapter reports research that was supported by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (grant RES-000-23-0915).

pleasures are defined in other terms in German. For example, pleasure at seeing justice done is defined as *Genugtuung*.

Because of our focus on the more minimal and mundane instances of schadenfreude, we conceptualize schadenfreude as situated within social relations that render this particular pleasure passive, indirect, and opportunistic (see Leach et al., 2003; Spears and Leach, 2004). We conceptualize schadenfreude as a passive, indirect, and opportunistic pleasure because it is *about another's misfortune* – an adversity caused by happenstance. In addition, our conceptualization of schadenfreude is based in Nietzsche's (1887/1967) argument that schadenfreude is a pleasure taken by those too weak to more actively cause other's misfortunes themselves through direct competition (see Leach et al., 2003). In schadenfreude, the other's misfortune is not caused by the *schadenfroh* (i.e., the person experiencing schadenfreude). As such, schadenfreude can be distinguished from pleasure about outdoing a rival in direct competition, which we define as *gloating* (Leach, Snider, and Iyer, 2002; Leach et al., 2003; see also Ortony, Clore, and Collins, 1988). Unlike schadenfreude, we argue that gloating is active, direct, and self-caused (see Table 13.1). Because the pleasure of gloating is "earned" through the achievement of directly defeating a rival, it should be more intensely experienced and expressed. In this chapter, we discuss several recent studies designed to highlight the distinctions between schadenfreude and active, direct, and self-caused gloating.

Although most of our research has examined schadenfreude in intergroup relations, our conceptualization is general and should therefore apply across levels of analysis, and thus also to interpersonal relations. Two recent studies that support this claim are discussed below. Across levels of analysis, contexts, and methods, we aim to illustrate that schadenfreude is situated in particular social relations that give this pleasure its passive, indirect, and opportunistic qualities. It is these qualities, and the social relations that produce them, that make schadenfreude a particular kind of pleasure, different from less modest and moderate pleasures like pride, joy, or gloating.

Table 13.1 *Distinctions between schadenfreude and gloating*

	Active/ passive	Direct/ indirect	Comparative/ absolute	Gain
<i>Schadenfreude</i>	Passive	Indirect	Absolute (misfortune)	Psychological
<i>Gloating</i>	Active	Direct	Comparative	Psychological and material

Situating *schadenfreude*

As evaluations of ongoing person–environment interactions, all emotions are situated in social relations (Lazarus, 1991; Parkinson, Fischer, and Manstead, 2005; Tiedens and Leach, 2004). However, the socially situated nature of *schadenfreude* may be more obvious than that of other emotions because it is an emotion about the adversity of another (see Heider, 1958; Spears and Leach, 2004). Unlike joy on one’s birthday or pride in one’s home, *schadenfreude* is about an (adverse) event that befalls another party rather than oneself. Beyond this obvious way in which *schadenfreude* is more socially situated than other pleasures, we believe that *schadenfreude* has a particular quality of experience and expression because observing another’s misfortune situates the *schadenfroh* in a particularly passive, indirect, and opportunistic social relation to the sufferer and their misfortune. For example, the passive observation of a misfortune caused by happenstance rather than oneself situates the self in a different social relation to the other than does causing the other’s adversity by defeating them in direct competition. As such, the pleasure of gloating is based in a different social relation from the more moderate and modest pleasure of *schadenfreude*.

Consistent with appraisal theories of emotion (see Lazarus, 1991), the distinct experience and expression of *schadenfreude* should be tied to a unique set of appraisals that establish the meaning that people give to the social relation in which they are situated. Together, these appraisals of the other’s misfortune combine to create a signature unique to *schadenfreude*. We believe that the three defining appraisals of the other’s misfortune are of the external agency of the misfortune, the indirect control of the misfortune and thus the pleasure of *schadenfreude*, and the unexpected nature of the misfortune. Together, these three appraisals make *schadenfreude* a passive, indirect, and opportunistic pleasure.

Most important is the appraisal that someone other than the self is the agent of the other’s misfortune (see also Ben-Ze’ev, 2000 and Chapter 5 in this volume; Portmann, Chapter 2 in this volume; Seip et al., Chapter 15 in this volume; Van Dijk and Ouwerkerk, Chapter 1 in this volume). That the misfortune is appraised as caused by happenstance is what makes *schadenfreude* a passive emotion. In contrast, gloating and pride are more active states of self-agency. In addition, people should appraise themselves as having little perceived control over events in *schadenfreude*. This is what makes *schadenfreude* indirectly gained, rather than the more directly gained pleasures of pride and gloating. As an opportunistic pleasure, *schadenfreude* should be characterized by an appraisal that the misfortune is unexpected. The passive and indirect nature of *schadenfreude*

means that one must wait for the misfortune (or be pleasantly surprised by its occurrence) rather than bring it about oneself.

Because we view schadenfreude as a passive, indirect, and opportunistic pleasure about another's misfortune, we have empirically examined schadenfreude in ways consistent with this conceptualization. Thus, we have tended to examine feelings about the (ambiguously caused) failure and other misfortunes of parties not engaged in direct competition with the self. We have mainly examined schadenfreude in the context of individuals witnessing an equal-status rival fail against another party due to the vagaries of competition. We think that the absence of direct competition between the *schadenfroh* and the target, and the resultant preclusion of material gain, provides the purest context for schadenfreude. Again, these more minimal and mundane instances of schadenfreude seem to come closer to the German usage of the term to describe pleasure at other's minor falls and foibles.

Given our definition of schadenfreude, we do not examine pleasure at clearly deserved failures or pleasure at the punishment or other adversity of obvious wrongdoers. In our view, seeing justice done is likely to lead to a less moderate or modest pleasure than schadenfreude. We also worry that pleasure about seeing justice done may not be the same sort of pleasure as that about seeing someone suffer a misfortune caused by happenstance (see also Koenig, 2009; Kristjánsson, 2006; however, see also Portmann, 2000). For similar reasons, we do not examine pleasure at serious misfortunes or those that are likely to be seen as highly undeserved or unfair. In fact, we believe that there is good reason to expect that highly undeserved misfortunes will not encourage much schadenfreude (e.g., Leach et al., 2003; for discussions, see Feather, 2006; Spears and Leach, 2004). Taking pleasure in the serious and undeserved adversity of others may come closer to sadism than to schadenfreude. Thus, we think schadenfreude is best examined in social relations that are not marked by obvious or extreme justice or injustice, because in such instances any pleasure is likely to be more about the (in)justice than about the misfortune.

Unlike much other research on schadenfreude, the targets of schadenfreude that we examine tend to be of equal status to the *schadenfroh* rather than vastly superior. When we do establish targets of schadenfreude as successful in the domain of their eventual failure, this success is typically established independently of the *schadenfroh*'s performance (Leach et al., 2003, Studies 1 and 2; Leach and Spears, 2008, Studies 1 and 2). We have also tended to independently establish the *schadenfroh* as unsuccessful in the domain of the target's failure. With these aspects of our approach in mind, we can now turn to our specific examinations of schadenfreude and the social relations in which they are situated.

Schadenfreude is opportunistic – open to many targets

As a result of the emphasis on envy and undeserved success as causes of schadenfreude, most empirical work has examined schadenfreude toward highly successful targets who suffer a deserved failure or other adversity. However, our conceptualization of schadenfreude suggests that pleasure can be felt about the misfortunes of many targets. The target need not be more successful than the self. If the target is more successful, the success need not be undeserved, and thus the adversity need not be deserved. We have documented schadenfreude in many such cases.

One approach has been to examine schadenfreude at the failure of third parties who are relevant rivals, but who are not engaged in direct competition with the self. For example, we examined Dutch participants' pleasure at the loss of the German football team in an important world competition in 1998. The Germans were seen as near-equal in status. Their failure eliminated them from the competition at an earlier stage than the Dutch. Thus, the Germans were neither more successful nor unfairly so. In addition, their failure was not particularly deserved. Indeed, it was viewed as mildly undeserved (because Germany lost to lower-ranked Croatia). Nevertheless, the Dutch expressed moderate schadenfreude at Germany's loss. Leach et al. (2003, Study 2) found the Dutch to express near-moderate schadenfreude at a similar German loss in a European competition in 2000.

In two further studies, we dealt with some of the difficulties of studying schadenfreude in a real competition by leading students to believe that their university was involved in a competition (Leach and Spears, 2008). This allowed us to control the performance of the in-group and their cross-town rival. To establish in-group and rival performance independently, we had each group compete against a different set of opponents. Thus, consistent with our conceptualization of schadenfreude, the in-group and the out-group rival were never involved in direct competition. This means that the rival's eventual failure could provide no material benefit to the in-group (a factor that can also contribute to pleasure at a rival's failure: see Spears and Leach, 2004). Our paradigm also established participants as passive observers of their rival's eventual failure in the final stage of competition.

To align with most previous work on schadenfreude, we established the rival out-group as independently successful in their section of the competition. In one experimental condition (Leach and Spears, 2008, Study 1), participants only knew about the rival's general success before being told of the rival's eventual failure. In the absence of material benefit, participants tended to express a little schadenfreude at their rival's loss.

Those who perceived the rival's previous success as undeserved did not feel much more schadenfreude. In Study 2, we manipulated the deservingness of the rival's success. Here again, deservingness played little role. This is likely because the rival's loss in the competition was not a punishment, was not self-caused, and was not deserved. The rival simply lost against a closely matched opponent due to the vagaries of competition. This had little to do with justice, and thus pleasure at this misfortune had little to do with justice. Feeling a little pleasure at a rival's failure is the simple satisfaction of schadenfreude. When the stakes are fairly low, the pleasure is fairly modest (Iyer and Leach, 2008; Lazarus, 1991). However, the low stakes here are characteristic of everyday schadenfreude. Where there is material gain for the self, unjust success, or deserved adversity for the other, the pleasure in response is likely to be greater.

We have not always examined schadenfreude toward third parties not in direct competition with the self. In Leach et al. (2003, Study 2), we found that Dutch participants expressed moderate schadenfreude toward the Italian team's loss in the 2000 European competition. What is interesting about this is that Italy defeated the Dutch in this competition. We revisited this competition with a view to providing a better account of schadenfreude towards second and third parties. We found that greater schadenfreude was expressed toward (third party) Germany than toward (third party) Italy. This occurred despite the fact that Italy defeated the in-group and was seen as slightly better than the in-group in the domain of competition. More importantly, participants' feelings of dejection at their loss to Italy predicted schadenfreude toward Germany slightly better than it predicted schadenfreude toward Italy. In addition, dislike of Italy was a stronger predictor of schadenfreude toward Germany than toward Italy. Thus, being defeated by Italy, feeling dejected at this defeat, and disliking Italy all fed schadenfreude toward Germany – an uninvolved third party. In other studies, too (Leach et al., 2003, Study 1; Leach and Spears, 2008, Studies 1 and 2), performing poorly in a competition fed schadenfreude toward third parties who did not compete against the self.

Taken together, the five studies discussed above demonstrate that people can feel pleasure at a rival's failure in normal competition. In none of the cases examined did the rival clearly deserve to lose; rivals lost against closely matched adversaries as a result of the vagaries of competition. It did not seem to matter much whether the rivals were more or less successful than the self or roughly equal in performance. Neither did it matter whether the rival's prior performance was deserved or undeserved. In every case we examined, the (in-group) self could not gain materially from the rival's failure. People simply took pleasure in

seeing an equal-status rival fail in a domain of some importance to them. Thus, the pleasure of *schadenfreude* can follow from the misfortune of nearly any relevant party whom the *schadenfroh* is fortunate enough to observe. However, where the rival is not undeservedly successful and where the rival's adversity is not seen as a punishment or otherwise deserved, the pleasure taken at their adversity is likely to be modest. In the minimal and mundane circumstances of an everyday misfortune caused by happenstance, *schadenfreude* is only a moderate and a modest pleasure.

Schadenfreude is passive and indirect

Recently, we conducted two studies to examine the pattern of appraisal that we expect to distinguish *schadenfreude* from other forms of pleasure (Leach, Spears, and Manstead, 2013). These studies differ from our previous work in at least two important ways. First, we combined our previous focus on intergroup competition with attention to interpersonal competition. In this way, we could assess how well our approach works across levels of analysis. Second, we diversified our methodological approach. In Study 1, we examined people's narratives of actual events in order to compare *schadenfreude* events to those of gloating, pride, and joy. In Study 2, we asked people to imagine themselves in a particular *schadenfreude* (or gloating) event of our own design. As discussed above, passive, indirect, and opportunistic *schadenfreude* should be distinct from active, direct, and self-caused gloating. Because of these differences in what the emotions are about, and the corresponding appraisals, *schadenfreude* should be less intensely experienced and expressed than gloating. Of course, *schadenfreude* should also be distinguishable from active and direct pride about achievement and the more general pleasure of joy about unanticipated events.

Emotion narratives

In Study 1 of Leach, Spears, and Manstead (2013), we asked 121 students to recall an instance of pleasure about an event described in ways that match *schadenfreude*, gloating, pride, or joy. In addition, we specified the event at either the individual or the group level. This study used emotion-recall methodology to examine the social appraisals, phenomenology, and action tendencies characteristic of *schadenfreude* (compared to those of gloating, pride, and joy). As far as we are aware, this is the first time that emotion-recall methodology has been used to examine *schadenfreude*. In the *schadenfreude* condition, we asked British

participants to recall a time when they had “a *positive feeling* resulting from someone else [or a group to which you did *not* belong] suffering a defeat, failure, or other negative outcome . . . even though you [or your group] *played no role* in causing this outcome.” This is consistent with our conceptualization of schadenfreude as passive and indirect. Using this minimalist prompt also served to focus participants on what the particular pleasure of schadenfreude is about, rather than on their semantic knowledge or implicit emotion theories.

Although our emotion prompt made it clear that we were interested in pleasure about a passively observed adversity, our minimalist prompt did not specify that the adversity was a misfortune caused by happenstance, nor did our prompt specify that the participant could not benefit materially from the other’s adversity. As a result, participants could report events that did not meet our definition of schadenfreude. For this reason, we assigned extra participants to the schadenfreude condition of the study. This allowed us to isolate participants who reported clear gloating or pride events.

Two independent coders examined all 80 (individual and group) narratives in the schadenfreude conditions to gauge whether participants reported a genuine case of schadenfreude. The coders agreed in 90 percent (i.e., thirty-six) of the forty cases. Disagreements were settled by discussion. In the end, the coders found twelve participants who did not produce an individual or group event where the pleasure was passive, indirect, opportunistic, and without material gain. The majority of these twelve participants wrote about succeeding in a competition where a rival failed. The vast majority of these narratives involved direct competition between rivals and, in most cases, the other’s adversity provided some material benefit to the self. For example, when asked to report an example of individual schadenfreude, a participant reported: “I was competing at a big synchronized swimming competition and won gold two years in a row against the same people. I was really shocked when they announced I had won as I thought that the other girls were better than me.” When asked for an example of group schadenfreude, this participant reported: “At another competition . . . we won a very unexpected Bronze medal. [The other team] was visibly devastated, but we were extatic [sic].” She described her feeling about both events as “happiness,” but the individual event was coded as an example of pride and the group event was coded as gloating.

Another of these twelve participants reported on a competition for an internship: “I went on an industrial placement year last year as part of my degree. I found the interview process very daunting and was very surprised when I was offered the job. I was also delighted. However, my friend who

applied for the same job didn't get it, as I had been chosen. Obviously, I felt pleased that she hadn't got the job because it would have meant that I didn't [get the job] if she had." This person reported "pride" when asked to sum up her feelings, but her emotion was coded as gloating because she felt good about outdoing a rival in the absence of any obvious material benefit. The narrative she provided for the group *schadenfreude* condition was a case where she "had to take part in a team summer event, involving 'it's a knockout' style competitions. My team won, meaning the other teams lost. We won wine and money which I was very happy with. We won because we were the best on the day so I felt very good about myself." She described her feeling about this event as "happiness," but it was coded as pride given her emphasis of deserved achievement.

A more obvious example of a narrative coded as gloating was provided in an individual-level narrative involving an "intelligent" classmate whose parents "would always try to brag about her and compare her to me." The participant reported that the two girls got "almost identical" grades in their subjects, except for Spanish. She went on to say: "Her father was blaming poor teaching for his daughter's 'C' grade, and that the whole class did poorly. It was a great feeling to reveal [that] I gained an A+ grade, despite being in the same class. It was the first time I'd ever heard him go silent. It was satisfying that I had done better than her, and that she couldn't imply I was inferior to her. It was petty, but I enjoyed it." She summarized her feeling as "satisfaction/smugness."

Our elimination of the twelve participants who produced narratives that did not meet our definition of *schadenfreude* improved the quality of our data. However, it did not guarantee that the twenty-eight remaining participants produced "pure" cases of *schadenfreude*. In fact, 29 percent of the narratives these twenty-eight participants produced involved outdoing a rival in ways similar to the excluded narratives. Nevertheless, to maximize the comparability of the *schadenfreude* condition to the other three, we retained all twenty-eight participants to maintain near-equal numbers of participants in each condition. This makes our design a conservative test of our hypotheses.

To contrast *schadenfreude* to gloating, pride, and joy, we asked participants about events that fit our (minimal) definition of each emotion. Thus, in the gloating condition, we asked about "*positive feelings* resulting from (a group to which you belonged) *triumphing over*, or defeating, another person (group)." In the pride condition, we asked about "strong *positive feelings* (as a member of a group) resulting from an individual (group) achievement." And, in the joy condition, we asked about a "sudden and intense *positive feeling* (as a group member) resulting from something pleasurable happening."

A second pair of coders coded all of the narratives, blind to experimental condition. After extensive training on a pilot set of narratives, their average level of agreement was above 80 percent. Thus, the coders could evaluate whether the particular appraisals and features of the event were present with a good degree of accuracy. Perhaps most important for our purposes is the appraisal of agency in the narratives. When given the joy, pride, and gloating prompts, 85–96 percent of the narratives contained an appraisal that the (individual or group) self was the agent “responsible” for the event described. In the condition that asked participants to report an instance of schadenfreude, less than half appraised the self as the agent responsible for the event. This is not surprising given that the prompt asked participants to report pleasure at an event that they did not cause. More telling is the fact that just over a quarter of the participants reported appraising a party other than the rival or the self as the agent that caused the undesirable event that befell the rival. In no other condition was this appraisal of other-agency present even once. In just over 10 percent of cases, participants appraised the other’s adversity as due to “luck” or happenstance. This was at least twice the frequency observed in any other condition. Thus, even without focusing on pure cases of schadenfreude, it is clear that the pleasure not clearly caused by the self is more often attributed to uninvolved parties or luck.

Despite the fact that a non-trivial number of the narratives in the schadenfreude condition are better characterized as gloating, numerous features of the schadenfreude narratives distinguished them from the gloating narratives. For instance, two-thirds of the gloating narratives were coded as involving direct competition between the self and a second party. Only about a quarter of the schadenfreude narratives were coded as such. More than half of the gloating narratives involved direct material benefit to the self from the other’s adversity. Just under a quarter of the schadenfreude narratives involved direct material benefit to the self.

Considered as a whole, the coding of participants’ emotion narratives showed the minimal prompts we provided to yield very different events. In each of the four experimental conditions, the pleasure was about something quite different. Consistent with our conceptualization, recalled instances of schadenfreude were appraised as events that tended not to be caused by the self. Instead, the rival, a third party, or luck caused these undesirable events. In addition, schadenfreude (as well as pride and joy) involved much less direct competition and material benefit than gloating.

In another part of Study 1, we asked participants to make a number of closed-ended ratings of their appraisals of the reported event and to answer closed-ended questions about its features. These questions allowed us to analyze the full design of the study. Thus, we could examine

whether the four emotions differed from each other as well as across the individual and group levels of analysis. There were only two, very small, effects of level of analysis. Thus, across the numerous appraisals and event features assessed, the four emotions did not tend to differ as a function of whether they were individual or group events. Although we can imagine circumstances under which group emotions, like *schadenfreude*, might be more intense than individual-level emotions (see Ouwerkerk and Van Dijk, Chapter 12 in this volume), there is no reason why this should generally occur (for reviews, see Iyer and Leach, 2008; Parkinson, Fischer, and Manstead, 2005; Tiedens and Leach, 2004).

Importantly, the four emotion conditions did not differ from each other on appraisals that do not map onto the conceptual distinctions between *schadenfreude* and the other types of pleasure. Thus, the *schadenfreude* condition was no different from the others in terms of how changeable the situation was appraised to be. Neither did the four emotion conditions differ in the appraisals that the event was “unfair” or “illegitimate.” Indeed, none of the events (pride, joy, gloating, or *schadenfreude*) was appraised as particularly unjust. In addition, *schadenfreude* was not associated with lower perceived status than gloating, pride, and joy. Participants tend to appraise themselves to be “in a good position” and “better than” the other.

Other appraisals showed *schadenfreude* to have the distinctive pattern that we expected. In corroboration of our coding of participants’ narratives, closed-ended responses showed participants to appraise the *schadenfreude* events as not caused by the self. In contrast, gloating, pride, and joy were all equally appraised as caused by the self. In addition, those reporting on *schadenfreude* events appraised themselves as a passive observer rather than an active agent. Both of these differences were large and highly statistically significant. Those reporting an instance of *schadenfreude* were also distinct in appraising themselves as somewhat lacking in power and resources. This is consistent with participants’ appraisal of themselves as only moderately successful in the *schadenfreude* condition. Those reporting gloating, pride, and joy appraised themselves as highly successful. Thus, *schadenfreude* does indeed appear to be a passive pleasure caused by external events rather than by an active, powerful, and successful self. As expected, whether the pleasure examined was individual or group in nature made little difference to the reported appraisals.

Participants’ reported behavior in response to the emotion-eliciting event was consistent with our view of *schadenfreude* as a less intense, more muted pleasure. Although those who reported a *schadenfreude* episode reported a great deal of smiling (i.e., nearly seven on a nine-

point scale), they reported less smiling than those who reported an episode of gloating, pride, or joy. Participants in the schadenfreude condition reported moderate celebrating at the time of the event. Those reporting on episodes of gloating, pride, and joy reported celebrating more. The experience of schadenfreude was also characterized by less free expression of glee and less “flaunting” of the pleasure. As with the appraisals, whether the pleasure examined was individual or group in nature made little difference to the actions that participants reported.

It is somewhat difficult to ask people about their experiences of schadenfreude, given that many languages lack a commonly known word for this emotion (see also Ben-Ze’ev, Chapter 5 in this volume; Van Dijk and Ouwerkerk, Chapter 1 in this volume). In this study, we turned this difficulty into an opportunity by asking people to recall and report on a positive feeling about someone else’s adversity. Thus, we avoided the ambiguity, the idiosyncratic meaning, and the implicit emotion theories likely generated when people are asked to report their experience of an emotion term. Our minimalist event-based description of schadenfreude and the pleasures of gloating, pride, and joy did not fully specify the appraisals and actions that we expected to characterize these emotions. Despite our minimalist emotion prompts, schadenfreude was quite distinct from gloating, pride, and joy. Most importantly, participants reported being a passive, less powerful observer of events rather than an active, powerful cause of events. Consistent with this, the pleasure of schadenfreude was more moderate and more moderately expressed. Schadenfreude appeared to be a quiet pleasure, characterized more by smiling than by gleeful celebration. This stands in stark contrast to gloating and to joy, which are pleasures characterized by the free expression of an intense pleasure.

Vignette study

Although there are many advantages to emotion-recall studies, we wished to corroborate the above findings with a more controlled experimental method. Thus, in Study 2 of Leach et al., we developed carefully scripted vignettes of schadenfreude and gloating at the individual and the group levels. Thus, the study was a 2x2 design, with participants randomly assigned a vignette about either schadenfreude or gloating, at either the individual or the group level. A total of 125 UK psychology students participated.

We wished to make this study comparable to our previous studies of intergroup schadenfreude. Thus, we asked participants to imagine being very interested in sport and being involved in the university field hockey

team. We focused on field hockey because participants' general lack of knowledge about the sport allowed us to more freely manipulate the features of the competition. Specifically, in the individual condition, participants imagined competing against a rival for a position on the university team. In the group condition, participants imagined being part of a university team that competed against rival universities from around the UK. In both conditions, participants were led to believe that they and their rivals were about equal in status based on past performances.

Our schadenfreude scripts were based on our conceptualization of schadenfreude, our previous studies of (intergroup) schadenfreude, and the features of the real episodes of the emotion that participants described in Study 1. Thus, in both the individual and group conditions, participants passively observed the eventual failure of a rival because they were excluded from the competition at an earlier stage. In neither condition did the rival's previous success or eventual failure suggest that deservedness or justice was at issue; the rival's failure was a simple result of the vagaries of close competition. For instance, in the group schadenfreude condition, it was stated that: "A very close game meant that the outcome was decided in the last few moments, when the Plymouth attack put the ball in the back of the net, taking the final score to 7–6. Plymouth went on to the national finals, but Bath [i.e., the schadenfreude target] were out of the running!" In the individual and group gloating vignettes, participants imagined beating their rival in a close competition between equals. For example, in the individual gloating condition, participants were told: "The match was very close, but in the end you were selected for the team and [your rival] was not selected. So [his or her] hopes of representing Cardiff University at hockey had come to an end."

Importantly, participants rated the four vignettes as equivalent in ways unimportant to the manipulated distinctions between them. Thus, participants reported feeling moderate rivalry and little hostility toward the other party in all four conditions. Participants reported equivalent interest in sport and in field hockey across conditions. However, the schadenfreude and gloating vignettes produced very different emotional experiences. Schadenfreude led to a near-moderate level of general pleasure, whereas gloating led to very high general pleasure (e.g., satisfied, happy). In addition, the schadenfreude vignettes led to lower levels of triumphant (e.g., triumphant, victorious) and emboldened (i.e., bold, fearless) feelings than the gloating vignettes. Consistent with this, the schadenfreude vignettes led to low levels of the elevated phenomenology we expected to be more characteristic of gloating. In contrast, the gloating vignettes led to moderate levels of feeling "ten feet tall" and "on top of the

world.” As with the emotion-recall method of Study 1, the schadenfreude and gloating vignettes of this study produced very different emotional expressions. Although schadenfreude led to moderate smiling, gloating led to an even greater level of smiling. Those who imagined themselves in the schadenfreude situations also reported that they would celebrate the event, flaunt their pleasure, and boast much less than those who imagined gloating. As in Study 1, the individual or group nature of the events had no notable effect on people’s expected experience or expression of the emotions.

When considered together, these two studies offer firm support for our conceptualization of schadenfreude and the distinctions we drew between this passive and indirect pleasure about a misfortune and other pleasures, such as gloating. In these studies, we contrasted passive, indirect, and opportunistic schadenfreude with more active, direct, and self-caused pleasures to highlight the distinctive features of schadenfreude. Unlike schadenfreude, gloating is afforded by the view that one’s group has prestige and thus presumably has a right to openly celebrate its triumph over a rival group. In contrast, the passive pleasure of schadenfreude is more furtive and of lower intensity and behavioral consequence. Thus, these two studies show that schadenfreude is characterized by a distinct relational context as well as a distinct pattern of appraisal, phenomenology, and expression. In addition, these studies demonstrate that the characteristics of schadenfreude are quite similar across the individual and group levels of the emotion.

Conclusion

Thankfully, people do not appear to regularly or easily take pleasure in the serious adversities suffered by other people. Except when serious adversity is seen as deserved, it leads to little pleasure. Indeed, floods, fires, and grave failures precipitating human harm seem to lead most people to feel sympathy for victims. Although it is still malicious and malevolent in nature, schadenfreude at the minor adversity that happenstance causes another party is a fairly moderate and modest pleasure. Because the misfortune observed is caused by bad luck or the vagaries of competition, the social situation in which schadenfreude is situated renders the experience passive, indirect, and opportunistic. For us, these qualities are what distinguish schadenfreude as a particular sort of pleasure that warrants its own emotion concept. Consistent with this view, we reviewed evidence that schadenfreude can be directed at many different targets, as long as they suffer a misfortune that is sufficiently relevant to the self. The targets of schadenfreude need not be superior to the self, undeservedly

successful, or particularly deserving of their misfortune. Neither does the target of *schadenfreude* need to be in direct competition with the self and nor does their misfortune need to provide the self with any material gain. Our examinations of the minimal and mundane circumstances of *schadenfreude* serve to highlight the essential elements of the social relation in which this particular pleasure is situated. In fact, serious adversity, clear superiority, or undeserving victims are likely to limit people's pleasure. *Schadenfreude* is closer to slapstick than sadism.

In addition to showing that *schadenfreude* is observed in the more minimal and mundane social relations that we examined, we also showed that *schadenfreude* can be distinguished from other pleasures like joy, pride, and gloating. Distinguishing *schadenfreude* from gloating is important because these two pleasures share some similarities (and thus might be confused). Despite this, *schadenfreude* and gloating are quite opposite in a number of important ways. Whereas *schadenfreude* is the passive, indirect, and opportunistic observation of adversity caused by some agent other than the self, gloating is the active, direct, and purposive pleasure at defeating another party oneself. This is why, as Nietzsche suggested some time ago, gloating is a less moderate and less modest pleasure than *schadenfreude*. Taking pleasure in defeating a rival appears to entitle victors to boast openly and to thereby elevate themselves above the vanquished. After all, "to the victor go the spoils."

Although *schadenfreude* is more moderate in experience and more modest in expression than gloating, its furtive nature should not fool us into thinking that it does little harm to social relations. As a good feeling about a bad event that befalls another, *schadenfreude* is inherently malevolent (Heider, 1958). Because it is typically based on some degree of dislike for the sufferer of a misfortune, *schadenfreude* is also inherently malicious (Leach and Spears, 2008; Leach et al., 2003; Smith et al., 1996). As a result of its inherent malevolence and malice, *schadenfreude* appears to bring further damage to already-compromised social relations. Indeed, we showed that experiencing *schadenfreude* at a third party rival's failure was associated with greater negativity toward the third party. Such "displaced" *schadenfreude* did not make people feel better about the self, however. Thus, *schadenfreude* took social relations from bad to worse. As we have discussed elsewhere (Spears and Leach, 2004), the passive, indirect, and opportunistic pleasure of *schadenfreude* may be an initial step down the slippery slope to more active, direct, and purposeful acts of malice when circumstances allow. Because of the clear antagonism in taking pleasure in another's adversity, *schadenfreude* is one particularly disturbing way in which feeling good can be bad. Future work would do well to extend our focus

on the social relations in which schadenfreude is situated to better understand the ways in which social relations are further damaged by schadenfreude.

References

- Ben-Ze'ev, A. (2000). *The Subtlety of Emotions*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Feather, N. T. (2006). Deservingness and emotions: applying the structural model of deservingness to the analysis of affective reactions to outcomes. *European Review of Social Psychology* 17: 38–73.
- Heider, F. (1958). *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations*. New York: Wiley.
- Iyer, A. and Leach, C. W. (2008). Emotion in inter-group relations. *European Review of Social Psychology* 19: 86–125.
- Koenig, B. L. (2009). Using schadenfreude-like emotions to test an assumption of the motivation-satisfaction model of emotions: are motivating emotions and satisfying emotions two distinct kinds of emotions? PhD dissertation, New Mexico State University.
- Kristjánsson, K. (2006). *Justice and Desert-Based Emotions*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Lazarus, R. S. (1991). *Emotion and Adaptation*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Leach, C. W., Snider, N., and Iyer, A. (2002). Spoiling the consciences of the fortunate: the experience of relative advantage and support for social equality. In I. Walker and H. J. Smith (eds.), *Relative Deprivation: Specification, Development, and Integration*. New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 136–63.
- Leach, C. W. and Spears, R. (2008). “A vengefulness of the impotent”: the pain of in-group inferiority and schadenfreude toward successful out-groups. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 95: 1383–96.
- (2009). Dejection at in-group defeat and schadenfreude toward second- and third-party out-groups. *Emotion* 9: 659–65.
- Leach, C. W., Spears, R., Branscombe, N. R., and Doosje, B. (2003). Malicious pleasure: schadenfreude at the suffering of another group. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 84: 932–43.
- Leach, C. W., Spears, R., and Manstead, A. S. R. (2013). Parsing (malicious) pleasures: schadenfreude and gloating at others' adversity. Unpublished manuscript.
- Lee, L. (2008). *Schadenfreude, Baby: A Delicious Look at the Misfortunes of Others (and the Pleasure it Brings Us)*. Guilford, CT: Globe Pequot Press.
- Nietzsche, F. (1967 [1887]). *On the Genealogy of Morals* (translated by W. Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale). New York: Random House.
- Ortony, A., Clore, G. L., and Collins, A. (1988). *The Cognitive Structure of Emotions*. Cambridge University Press.
- Oxford English Dictionary* (1989). Oxford University Press.
- Parkinson, B., Fischer, A. H., and Manstead, A. S. R. (2005). *Emotion in Social Relations: Cultural, Group, and Interpersonal Processes*. New York: Psychology Press.
- Portmann, J. (2000). *When Bad Things Happen to Other People*. New York: Routledge.

- Smith, R. H., Turner, T. J., Garonzik, R., Leach, C. W., Urch-Druskat, V., and Weston, C. M. (1996). Envy and schadenfreude. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 25: 158–68.
- Spears, R. and Leach, C. W. (2004). Intergroup schadenfreude: conditions and consequences. In L. Z. Tiedens and C. W. Leach (eds.). *The Social Life of Emotions*. Cambridge University Press, pp. 336–55.
- Tiedens, L. Z., and Leach, C. W. (2004) (eds.). *The Social Life of Emotions*. Cambridge University Press.