

Schadenfreude, sympathy, antipathy, and apathy: An evolutionary approach



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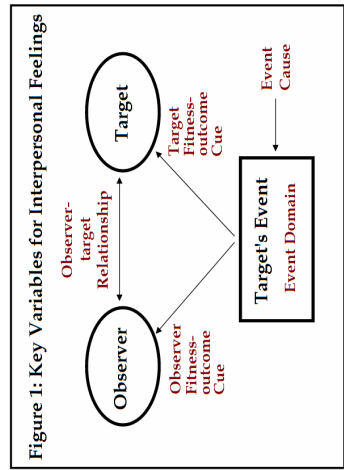
Schadenfreude, a folk concept, is pleasure at another's misfortune, specifically when a third party or circumstance causes the target's unpleasant event (van Dijk, Ouwerkerk, Gossinga, & Nieuwede, 2005). The 4 scenarios in Table 1, which are pleasant for you but unpleasant for another, illustrate two limitations of schadenfreude: (1) schadenfreude conflates different psychological processes activated by different types of events, e.g., competition and morality, and (2) events caused by the self or another may be processed by the same psychological processes. Is schadenfreude a unitary psychological process? What is schadenfreude?

We propose an alternative approach, the **fitness alignment model (FAM)**, which asserts that the hedonic valence of an observer's reaction to another's experience depends on whether the event results in cues for a fitness increase or decrease for the observer. A cue for fitness increase is pleasant; whereas a cue for fitness decrease is unpleasant (Johnston, 1999). Consideration of the alignment of fitness-outcome cues between the target (who experiences the event) and the observer results in three possible interpersonal feeling alignments: antipathy, sympathy, or apathy (see Table 2).

Competition	Morality
Schadenfreude Your rival is defeated in a race by a 3 rd party.	Schadenfreude A bully, who repeatedly abused you, is punched by a 3 rd party.
Not Schadenfreude You win a race against your rival.	Not Schadenfreude You punch a bully who repeatedly abused you.

- Antipathy**
- when observer and target's hedonic valences are opposite
 - occurs when observer and target fitness-outcome cues are opposed
- Sympathy**
- when observer and target's hedonic valences are concordant
 - occurs when observer and target fitness-outcome cues are aligned
- Apathy**
- when the observer has no hedonic reaction to the event
 - occurs when the event does not cue observer fitness change

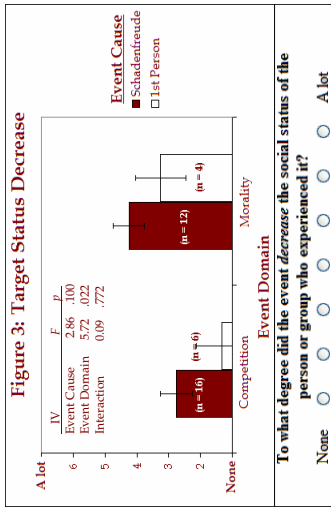
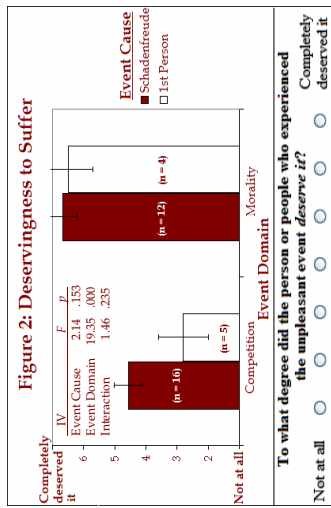
Observer's Fitness Outcome (Hedonic Valence)	Target's Fitness Outcome (Hedonic Valence)	
	Increase (Pleasant)	Decrease (Unpleasant)
Increase (Pleasant)	Sympathy	Antipathy
Decrease (Unpleasant)	Antipathy	Sympathy
Unchanged (Anhedonic)	Apathy	



The FAM identifies 4 key variables for interpersonal feelings (see Figure 1):

1. **observer-target relationship**, e.g., sibling or out-group member
2. **event domain**, e.g., competition or morality
3. **event cause**, e.g., observer or third party
4. **fitness-outcome cues for the observer and target**, e.g., opposed or aligned

Schadenfreude is pleasure at another's misfortune; in contrast, the FAM is a model that provides an ultimate explanation for why directionally valenced interpersonal feelings occur and predicts, contingent upon circumstances (the key variables in Figure 1), the valence of an observer's feelings in response to a special case of the upper-right type of antipathy in Table 2. Neither the FAM nor schadenfreude explicitly identify specific psychological processes. Indeed, the FAM, an ultimate explanation, is consistent with antipathy being mediated by multiple proximal psychological processes, including, for example, social comparison for competition (see, e.g., Tesser, 1985; Henrich & Gil-White, 2001) and punitive sentiment for morality (see, e.g., Price, Cosmides, & Tooby, 2002).



The Present Study

The current study crosses event cause (schadenfreude events vs non-schadenfreude events) with event domain (competition vs morality). It was predicted that (a) perceptions that the other deserved to suffer would be higher for morality events than competition events, and (b) competition events would result in greater reduction of other's status than would morality events. However, the critical prediction, inconsistent with schadenfreude being a unitary psychological process, is that event domain will have much larger effects than event cause. This is because event domain is predicted to be the primary psychological variable by which events are evaluated. Event cause, whether an event is schadenfreude or not, is predicted to result in secondary consequences and thus have relatively small effects on the outcome variables. That is, an event's status as schadenfreude or not is predicted to be less important than an event's status as competition or morality.

Method

Participants described an autobiographical event which resulted in pleasure for them but was unpleasant for the person who experienced the event (see Table 3 for examples). Participants rated how much that person deserved to suffer and how much the target person's status decreased (see Figures 2 and 3, respectively). Event cause was coded as schadenfreude (a third party or circumstance caused the unpleasant event) or 1st person (the participant caused the event). Event domain was coded as competition or morality.

Results

The degree to which participants enjoyed the unpleasantness of the event did not differ depending on event domain or event cause ($M = 5.05, SD = 1.15$ on 1-7 scale, $F_s < 1.51$). Event domain, but not event cause, was associated with differences in deservingness and perceived status reduction. Morality events had high ratings of deservingness; competition events did not (see Figure 2). Unexpectedly, targets in morality events were rated to have more status reduction than targets in competition events (see Figure 3), perhaps because of the larger costs of choosing immoral, as opposed to ineffective, social partners.

Competition	Morality
Schadenfreude "My ex-husband and his girlfriend broke up four months ago. This is my chance to get him back."	Schadenfreude "When my baby daddy experienced a brutal attack. The same way he used to attack me..."
Not Schadenfreude "I dated someone my friend also liked. I had a great time in the relationship, but felt guilty that I was so happy when my friend was upset by the situation."	Not Schadenfreude "When I told a girl that her boyfriend was cheating on her. The guy was getting punished for cheating."

Conclusions

Compared to event domain (competition vs morality), whether or not an event was schadenfreude had relatively small influence on outcome variables. These results suggest that schadenfreude *per se* may not be a psychological process, thus failing to "cut nature at the joints." Schadenfreude, neither theory nor psychological process, is therefore of questionable utility. The FAM, in contrast, provides a theoretical foundation from which to understand and predict diverse interpersonal feelings. Future studies will replicate these findings with a larger sample and will utilize experimental methods to evaluate the relative causal influences of the key variables identified in the FAM.