

Schadenfreude Conflates Competition and Morality While Unnecessarily Ignoring

First-Person Caused Events

1Koenig, B. L., 1Johnston, V., 2Colyn, L. A., & 1Ketelaar, T.

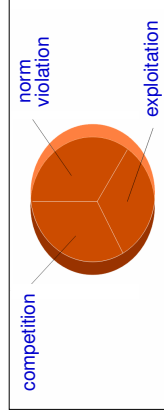
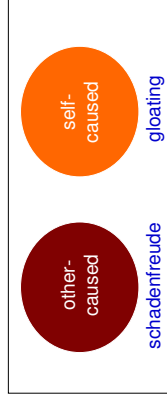
¹New Mexico State University, ²Bowling Green State University
 bikoen@nmsu.edu, <http://web.nmsu.edu/~blkoen/>



Schadenfreude, a folk concept, is traditionally defined as pleasure at another's misfortune or suffering.

- Researchers have argued that "schadenfreude is only enabled when a *third party or circumstance* causes another's misfortune" (Leach, Spears, Branscombe, & Doosje, 2003, p. 932, emphasis added).
- In contrast, researchers have defined "gloating [as] pleasure at someone else's pain, . . . but one for which *the self or ingroup* is responsible." (Yzerbyt, 2004, para 7, emphasis added).

- The distinction between schadenfreude and gloating may be unwarranted for two reasons.
- The separation between schadenfreude and gloating relies exclusively on who caused the event.
- Schadenfreude and gloating, as defined, can be activated regardless of the event context, for example, competition versus retribution for norm violation.



➢ Figure 1. Traditional conceptualization of the two distinct psychological processes, schadenfreude and gloating, as the mechanisms by which we enjoy another's suffering.

➢ Figure 2. In contrast, evolutionary functionalism suggests that different adaptive problems require different solutions. Thus, event context should predominantly determine which psychological processes are activated when we enjoy another's suffering.

- This research focused on **punishment psychology** activated by retribution for a norm violation.
- Punitive sentiment functions to maintain norms (Fehr & Gächter, 2000) by making the wrong-doer recalibrate the desirability of cheating.
- To deter a cheater strategy, punishment costs must be greater than cheating gains (Price, Cosmides, & Tooby, 2002).
- Thus, suffering and deservingness to suffer should be higher for retribution subsequent to a norm violation as compared to other event contexts.

The Present Study

The goal of the current study was to investigate whether the distinction between schadenfreude and gloating is robust. The study focused on events in which people enjoyed the suffering of another person, crossing event cause (schadenfreude events vs gloating events) with the event context in which the pleasure occurred (norm violation vs no norm violation). The study evaluated what psychological processes were activated, punishment psychology, schadenfreude, or gloating.

Predictions

After retribution for a norm violation . . .

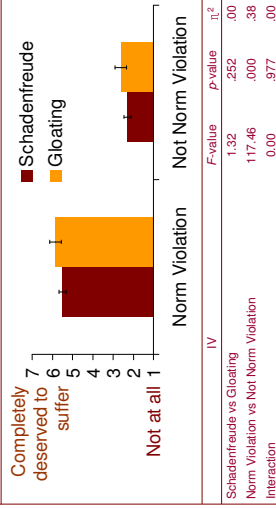
- P1 - deservingness to suffer will be higher.
- P2 - the pain will be considered more necessary for the perceiver to feel pleasure.
- P3 - the suffering itself will be more pleasant for the perceiver.
- P4 - suffering itself will be less painful for the perceiver.
- P5 - the sufferer will have learned a lesson.
- P6 - The distinction between schadenfreude and gloating will be relatively unimportant.

Method

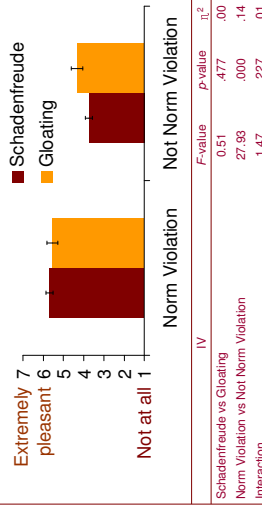
In an online study, 164 participants described an autobiographical event which resulted in pleasure for them but was unpleasant for the person who experienced the event. Participants provided ratings for additional questions. Each event was categorized as schadenfreude or gloating based on participant choice of event cause. Events were identified as norm violation (e.g., person betrayed participant) or not norm violation (e.g., person was an overachiever) based on participant choice of the event context.

Results

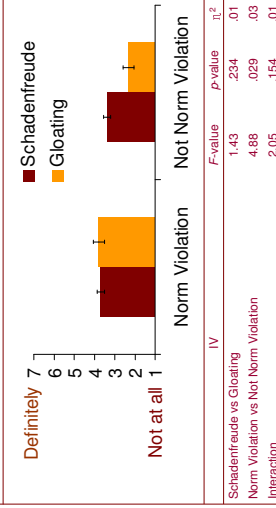
P1 – To what degree did the person deserve to suffer?



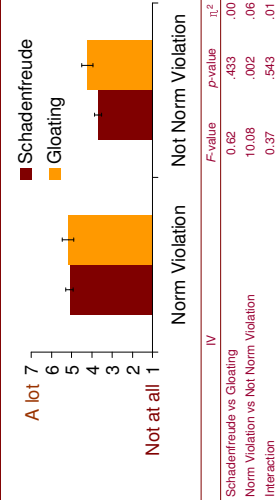
P3 – To what degree did the fact that the event was unpleasant bring you pleasure?



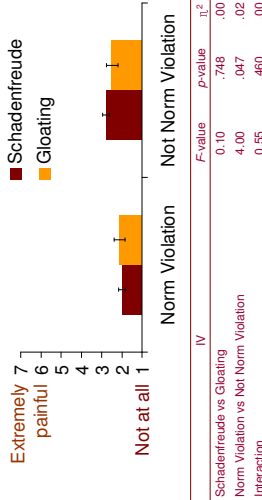
P5 – To what degree did the person learn a lesson?



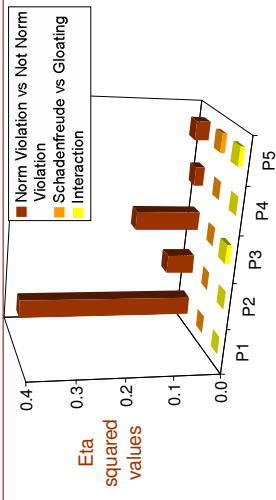
P2 - For you to feel pleasure at the event, how important was it that the person found it unpleasant?



P4 – To what degree did the fact that the event was unpleasant bring you pain?



P6 – The distinction between schadenfreude and gloating is not relatively important.



Conclusions

All predictions were supported (see results above). Norm violations were systematically associated with a predicted constellation of variables related to punishment psychology. Compared to whether the event context was retribution for a norm violation or not, the distinction between schadenfreude and gloating was relatively unimportant. These results suggest that schadenfreude *per se* may not be a psychological process, thus failing to "cut nature at the joints." Thus, a functional approach to understanding why we enjoy the suffering of others might be more fruitful than studies focused on schadenfreude or gloating.