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Schadenfreude and Gluckschmerz

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Abstract

We explore why people feel the socially improper emotions of *schadenfreude* (pleasure at another person's or group's misfortune) and *gluckschmerz* (pain at another person's or group's good fortune). One explanation follows from sentiment relations. Prior dislike leads to both *schadenfreude* and *gluckschmerz*. A second explanation relates to concerns over justice. Deserved misfortune is pleasing and undeserved good fortune is displeasing. A third explanation concerns appraisal of the good or bad fortunes of others as creating *either* benefit or harm for the self or in-group. Especially in competitive situations and when envy is present, gain is pleasing and loss is displeasing. Both emotions have important implications for understanding human relations at the individual and group levels.

Keywords
deservingness, envy, *gluckschmerz, schadenfreude*

Schadenfreude and *gluckschmerz* occupy a morally curious place among social emotions. They are emotions we avoid expressing and likely bring us swift condemnation if we do express them (e.g., Gromet, Goodwin, & Goodman, 2016). We probably feel them, however, more than we like to admit or even realize (e.g., Heider, 1958; R. H. Smith, 2013; van Dijk & Ouwerkerk, 2014; Wills, 1981). Take the everyday experience of watching the news. We observe the facial expression of newscasters as they sadden at bad news and brighten at good news, the proper and assumed natural response to bad and good events happening to others. Yet, as viewers, we can react in any way we actually feel, depending on the particular meaning of the event for ourselves (e.g., Yamada, Lamm, & Decety, 2011). Sometimes, bad news creates *schadenfreude* (pleasure at another's misfortune; e.g., an injury of the "cocky" star player of our rival sports team) and good news creates *gluckschmerz* (pain at another's good fortune; e.g., the unexpected quick recovery of this player just before an important match).

It is easy to find spheres of life where these emotions proliferate (e.g., Schindler, Körner, Bauer, Hadji, & Rudolph, 2015; R. H. Smith, 2013; van Dijk & Ouwerkerk, 2014). Anyone following a U.S. presidential race knows that the lead up to election night amounts to an unstable flow of events eliciting pleasure or pain depending on whether it enhances or hurts your candidate's chances of winning (Combs, Powell, Schurtz, & Smith, 2009). Events hurting the opposing side (e.g., gaffes, scandals) are pleasing and thereby create *schadenfreude*. Good events helping the rival side (e.g., a fortunate October surprise) are painful and thereby create *gluckschmerz*.

Our aim is to examine *schadenfreude* and *gluckschmerz*. First, we further define both, followed by an examination of why and when people feel them. We also briefly consider some implications of their prevalence in everyday life for understanding human nature.

Schadenfreude: When "Bad News" Arrives

Schadenfreude is a compound word of the German words *Schaden*, meaning harm, and *Freude*, meaning joy. It represents being pleased about an event presumed to be undesirable for someone else (Ortony, Clore, & Collins, 1988). Gloating—dwelling on one's own success or another's misfortune with smugness and malignant pleasure—is perhaps the English word closest to *schadenfreude* in meaning. But compared to gloating,

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schadenfreude is considered more passive, even less appropriate to feel or express, and more linked to feeling *inferior* rather than feeling superior (Leach, Spears, & Manstead, 2015). Although *schadenfreude* may predispose us to take aggressive actions against the suffering person (Cikara, Botvinick, & Fiske, 2011; R. H. Smith, 2013), the presumed self-superiority more inherent in the experience of gloating would seem more likely to breed aggression (Leach et al., 2015). And so, both *schadenfreude* and gloating are emotions of pleasure, but close inspection reveals that *schadenfreude* is more shameful, secretive, and passive—an emotion typically born out of inferiority rather than superiority.

We suggest that *schadenfreude* is typified by a discrete reaction to an *unexpected* event, although we would not go as far as to claim that the unexpectedness of the event is a necessary feature. For one thing, one can revisit this emotion by simply recalling the event, even after much time has passed. Generally, unexpected positive events are experienced more intensely than expected positive events (e.g., Ortony et al., 1988; Verinis, Brandsma, & Cofer, 1978), but we suggest that *schadenfreude* may be especially affected by whether the event was anticipated or unexpected. *Schadenfreude*, in our thinking, is felt most keenly when the unfortunate event may have been hoped for (often secretly), but hardly thought likely to happen. Then, from out of nowhere, the yearned-for event occurs. In this sense, this low-likelihood, but wished-for event, has a "news" quality to it. Although inspired by something unfortunate, it is largely experienced as good—hence a "YES!" reaction, the arrival of "bad news" bringing pleasurable excitement attached to the unexpected, and wanted, experience.

Gluckschmerz: When "Good News" Strikes

Gluckschmerz is also a compound term of two German words: *Gluck*, meaning luck, and *Schmerz*, meaning pain. It represents being displeased by an event presumed to be desirable for someone else. Like *schadenfreude*, English has no equivalent word for this discrete emotion either, perhaps the closest being disappointment—displeasure caused by the nonfulfillment of one's hopes or expectations (e.g., van Dijk, 1999). Compared to disappointment, *gluckschmerz* is a specifically *social* emotion—experienced in response to another person's or group's positive outcome.[1] It is also less appropriate to feel or express (as, again, the socially appropriate response to express at another's good fortune is pleasure rather than pain). *Gluckschmerz*, like *schadenfreude*, may have a passive character in that when we feel it, we have done nothing to prevent the others person's good fortune from happening. Also like *schadenfreude*, however, it may presuppose a hostile action tendency or hostile predisposition—that is to say, if we are apt to feel *gluckschmerz* over another person's good fortune, this may be one step away from directly undermining this person's success in the future or having initial thoughts to do so if the opportunity presents itself. *Gluckschmerz* has similarities with envy, which involves a negative reaction to another's perceived advantage, but unlike envy, *gluckschmerz* does not require a salient social comparison. For example, *gluckschmerz* can arise because someone we dislike experiences good fortune, even if we feel no envy over this good fortune per se. Our more general dislike of this person likely drives our *gluckschmerz*.

Our sense is that *gluckschmerz*, like *schadenfreude*, is also typified by a reaction to an unexpected event. We should feel *gluckschmerz* more sharply if we were not expecting the other's good fortune to happen. These cases are probably most painful, memorable, and distinctively "*gluckschmerz*"—though we may have no fitting label in our everyday language to put a firm cast to the emotion. Thus, *gluckschmerz* should also have a "news" quality to it. Although caused by a fortunate event, it is largely experienced as "bad," as if the rug had been pulled painfully out from under us. Many instances of *gluckschmerz* should have a "NO!" feel to them, a striking of "good news," a kind of jolt and dismay attached to the unexpected, and unwanted, experience.

When and Why Do We Feel *Schadenfreude* and *Gluckschmerz*?

Generally, with emotions arising from witnessing the fortune of others (e.g., Heider, 1958; Ortony et al., 1988), there is a reflexive, rough synchrony between other people's emotional lives and our own (e.g., Decety, 2011). Even in the absence of synchrony, norms prescribe that we *should* experience emotions congruently—dictating empathy toward other people's bad fortune and joy in other people's good fortune (e.g., Heider, 1958; Nook, Morelli, & Zaki, 2016). But our proclivity to mirror the emotions of others, and the normative prescriptions to do so, hardly determine what we actually feel across situations—because of a host of factors countering a close matching (e.g., Decety, 2011; Heider, 1958; Singer & Lamm, 2009; Zaki, 2014). In the following sections, we discuss empirical work addressing the appraisals that can make "bad news" pleasurable and "good news" painful. These studies have mostly focused on *schadenfreude*, but we argue that the factors shown to elicit this emotion also hold for *gluckschmerz*.

Liking and Disliking

Many instances of *schadenfreude* and *gluckschmerz* follow from prior attitudes or sentiments we have toward the person who has suffered or prospered. These are perhaps best explained by whether we like or dislike the person, for one reason or another (e.g., Heider, 1958)—dislike generating *schadenfreude* or *gluckschmerz* and liking generating sympathy or "happy for" feelings. The reasons why we might dislike someone are many, of course (e.g., Huston & Levinger, 1978), and these particulars will give our *schadenfreude* or *gluckschmerz* toward them different flavors. For example, if we dislike someone because they have intentionally humiliated us, such that our dislike ascends to hate (Fischer, Halperin, Canetti, & Jasini, 2018), the intensity of our *schadenfreude* and *gluckschmerz* should be correspondingly intense and satisfying. Nonetheless, it is worth suggesting that many examples of *schadenfreude* (e.g., Feather & McKee,

2014; Hareli & Weiner, 2002; R. H. Smith et al., 1996) and *gluckschmerz* (Hoogland et al., 2015) simply flow from our prior dislikes, however they might have arisen (Pietraszkiewicz & Wojciszke, 2014). Along with others (e.g., Feather & McKee, 2014; Pietraszkiewicz & Wojciszke, 2014), we suggest that this level of analysis might be best captured by a balance theory perspective (e.g., Heider, 1958; Insko, 1984). One appeal of a balance theory approach is its simplicity. Although a finer grained analysis of any one example of *schadenfreude* or *gluckschmerz* is likely possible (as we explore in what follows), both emotional reactions can be seen as a straightforward function of positive or negative relations.

In the parlance of balance theory, three-element units are balanced when all relations between the elements are positive or two are negative. In the case of *schadenfreude*, dislike toward another person (a negative balance unit) who, naturally, feels negatively toward his or her misfortune (another negative balance unit) is "balanced" by our positive feeling (a positive balance unit) toward this misfortune. In the case of *gluckschmerz*, dislike toward another person (a negative balance unit), who, naturally, feels positively toward his or her good fortune (a positive balance unit) is "balanced" by our negative feeling toward this good fortune (a negative balance unit). Thus, if P dislike O (−) and O suffers (−), P's reaction is positive (+; and granted the label of "*schadenfreude*"). Likewise, if P dislikes O (−) and O gets lucky (+), P's reaction is negative (−; and, we suggest, might be granted the label of "*gluckschmerz*"). These reactions might be quick, have a quite "primitive" character, and may not be easily articulated.

The Deservingness of Others' Good and Bad Fortunes

We have emphasized that moral unease often accompanies our *schadenfreude* and *gluckschmerz*. In fact, both emotions may normally travel with the counteremotions of guilt and shame (e.g., Berndsen & Feather, 2016). We infer a lot about our moral core from the emotions we feel, just as we do when witnessing the emotions other people feel (Gromet et al., 2016). *Schadenfreude* and *gluckschmerz* likely suggest moral failings and lead to the attribution of a character flaw when chronic (e.g., Spurgin, 2015). But there is another frequent driver of *schadenfreude* and *gluckschmerz* that probably lessens the immoral taint of both emotions, and this comes from the appraisal of deservingness.

Generally, we are sensitive to issues of justice and fairness (see Decety & Yoder, 2017, for a recent review). One implication of this general sensitivity is that we are likely to react to others' deserved misfortune with *schadenfreude* (e.g., Feather, 1999; Heider, 1958; Hoogland et al., 2015; Ortony et al., 1988; van Dijk, Ouwerkerk, & Goslinga, 2009; van Dijk, Ouwerkerk, Goslinga, & Nieweg, 2005) and others' undeserved good fortune with *gluckschmerz* (Feather & McKee, 2014; Hoogland et al., 2015). The empirical support for linking deservingness with *schadenfreude* is especially extensive and consistent (see Feather, 1999, 2006, 2014, for reviews) and includes recent developmental work with children as young as 4 years of age (Schindler et al., 2015; Schulz, Rudolph, Tscharaktschiew, & Rudolph, 2013).

Why might deservingness appraisals affect *schadenfreude* and *gluckschmerz*? Norman Feather has addressed this question with regard to *schadenfreude* by combining insights from his own work on people's reactions to the fall of "tall poppies" with a Lewinian analysis (1938)—as well as Heider's (1958) principle of balance just noted (e.g., Feather, 2006, 2014). Deservingness judgments about outcomes are assumed to depend on the evaluative structure of action–outcome relations. For example, people who are viewed as responsible for their own misfortune are often seen as deserving this negative outcome, and we can feel justified pleasure that relates to a balanced set of action–outcome relations that underlies deservingness.

Judgments of deservingness are influenced by many other factors, including some of the antecedents to *schadenfreude* (and *gluckschmerz*)—such as our likes and dislikes (e.g., Feather & McKee, 2014). To illustrate, an almost fully "balanced" situation would concern a disliked other being responsible for her/his own misfortune. In this case, the negative outcome would most likely be regarded as fully deserved and evoke intense *schadenfreude*. Also, generally, if we like someone, this might moderate perceptions of deservingness (Feather & McKee, 2014), therefore minimizing *schadenfreude* over their misfortune. An analogous logic should apply to *gluckschmerz*—generally, a disliked person experiencing undeserved good fortune should produce *gluckschmerz*. But a liked person's good fortune should not, even if it is undeserved. In other words, the intensity of *schadenfreude* and *gluckschmerz* will vary depending on variables that moderate the degree to which "bad news" and "good news" are appraised as either deserved or undeserved.

Some recent findings link just world theory with some instances of *schadenfreude* (Pietraszkiewicz & Wojciszke, 2014). At a broad level, we have a tendency to believe in a just world in which things happening to people fit a just pattern of outcomes (Lerner, 1980; for a recent review, see Hafer & Rubel, 2015). In yet another variant of the balance theory logic, good things should happen to good people and bad things should happen to bad people. As Melvin Lerner argued in his original claim about just world beliefs, the idea that the world might not be just is a scary proposition, leading to disturbing conclusions. Even in the absence of other factors that typically lead to deservingness judgments—such as responsibility (Tscharaktschiew & Rudolph, 2015; van Dijk, Goslinga, & Ouwerkerk, 2008; van Dijk et al., 2005) and (dis)liking (Hareli & Weiner, 2002; R. H. Smith et al., 1996)—we tend to see others' misfortune, because of just world beliefs, as deserved. Thus, empathy should decrease (e.g., Decety, Echols, & Correll, 2010), enhancing the likelihood of *schadenfreude* (Pietraszkiewicz, 2013; Tscharaktschiew & Rudolph, 2015).[2]

There are other examples of empirical work linking deservingness with *schadenfreude* (Powell, 2014; Powell & Smith, 2013). Most of us can think of a parade of high-profile individuals who, well known for the holier-than-thou statements, suffer

humiliation when their failure to practice what they preach is exposed. Do we feel sorry for them? Hardly—they seem to richly deserve their humiliation. After all, they have often set themselves as morally superior before their exposure, and their being cut down to size creates a pleasing, warranted social comparison boost. What's more, there is probably a cultural pressure against the hypocrite and a normative one towards their punishment—*schadenfreude* bearing witness to this pressure. Such collective support likely goes far in releasing us from any nagging guilt over our *schadenfreude*, as recent work in organizational settings imply (Dasborough & Harvey, 2017). There are probably other reasons (Powell, 2014), but the "has it coming" pleasure resulting from public exposure of hypocrisy seems inevitable, out in the open, and joyous.

We would expect hypocrisy to have a keen link with *gluckschmerz* as well. Imagine a presidential race in which a rival candidate tries to argue that our own candidate tried to avoid combat during the Vietnam War, despite evidence that he, himself, managed to avoid serving through family contacts. We anticipate that this evidence will come out, but then we read a news story revealing that that the relevant military records are missing and likely destroyed. This is good luck and welcome news for the rival candidate, but should evoke intense *gluckschmerz* in us.

Our level of analysis with regard to the role of deservingness in both *schadenfreude* and *gluckschmerz* could be more fine-grained. For example, the full set of emotions stirred by someone's undeserved good fortune also is likely to include some sort of justice-related emotion, resentment heading the list (e.g., see Feather, 2014, for a review). Indeed, it may be that resentment largely mediates the effect of deservingness on both *schadenfreude* and *gluckschmerz*. The same kind of argument holds for why dislike should be an antecedent to *gluckschmerz*. For example, if a disliked person experiences good fortune, one should feel *gluckschmerz* partly through the resentment this outcome produces. And, as we explore further in what follows, if the good fortune produces an invidious comparison, envy will likely be thrown into the mix in various strengths.

Desirability for Self, Competition, and Rivalry

Much of our emotional lives follow from how events affect our goals, motives, and concerns (see Frijda, 1988; Wondra & Ellsworth, 2015), which may be unaligned with the goals, motives, and concerns of others. When experiencing *schadenfreude*, we, in some way, appraise another person's bad fortune as good for us, and therefore we are pleased. When experiencing *gluckschmerz*, we appraise the good fortune of others as bad for us, and therefore we feel pain. And so, although *schadenfreude* and *gluckschmerz* are emotions linked with the "fortunes of others," they spring at least in part from the implications of these fortunes for our own goals (Heider, 1958; Ortony et al., 1988). The degree of correspondence between what matters to us and what matters to others has huge implications (e.g., Heider, 1958). With *schadenfreude*, something undesirable for another is desirable for us; with *gluckschmerz*, something desirable for another is undesirable for us. The rough, relatively broad appraisals: unexpected bad thing for other → good thing for me → pleased (*schadenfreude*); or, unexpected good thing for other → bad for me → displeased (*gluckschmerz*), may capture much of the process.

Although simply thinking in terms of a somewhat undifferentiated desirable/positive or undesirable/negative appraisal may often go far in explaining *schadenfreude* or *gluckschmerz*, the underpinnings of this appraisal cover many ingredients. Even liking and deservingness bear on this perception (Ortony et al., 1988). For example, if we cared little for justice, then whether someone suffers deservedly or gains undeservedly would probably matter little either. But one factor likely to be especially important in appraisals of desirability is the degree to which we are in competition with the person experiencing the bad or good fortune, and the direct effect this fortune has on our own outcomes.

Generally, the more competitive the relations between us and others, the more our reactions to their outcomes will *not* mirror theirs (e.g., Aderman & Unterberger, 1977; Brambilla & Riva, 2017; Englis, Vaughn, & Lanzetta, 1982). The outer region of this discordance is the familiar zero-sum situation in which another's benefit or loss translates *directly* into our own loss or benefit, respectively. Rather than all boats rising, one will float as the other sinks, and vice versa. Our immediate welfare is so linked to winning and losing that the chief question pricking our hopes may be: what about me? Perhaps our secondary reactions are empathic, as recent work by Yamada et al. (2011) suggests, and may be more willed than arise automatically. Evolutionary logic reinforces this theme. As situations trend toward competition, the misfortune of rivals leads more directly to our own gain—likely eliciting in us positive emotions such as *schadenfreude*—and the good fortune of others threatens our welfare—thus eliciting in us negative emotions such as *gluckschmerz*. Extreme circumstances especially (e.g., famine, warfare) strip away norms of good will toward our fellow human beings. An egoistic part of being, always operating to some extent, likely dominates the focus and flavor of our emotions. In a world with plenty, our sentiments would be more generous. As resources trend toward a zero-sum situation and when the stakes are high, if a misfortune, better you than me; if good fortune, better me than you. Generally, we prefer to be the one who avoids misfortune, but, especially in starkly competitive circumstances, there is no denying the pleasing benefits derived from others' misfortunes or the displeasing blow derived from their good fortunes, however mixed the pleasure may be with empathy (with others' misfortunes) or "happy for" feelings (for others' good fortunes).[3]

The broad point about the way competition shapes the likelihood of our feeling *schadenfreude* and *gluckschmerz* holds in the work-a-day world in which we vie for scarce resources and the spoils of achieving higher status and prestige. Sexual competition (Colyn & Gordon, 2013) and rivalry generally (Shamay-Tsoory, Ahronberg-Kirschenbaum, & Bauminger-Zviely, 2014) should intensify this pattern, as the adaptive implications of winning and losing are arguably so direct (Zheng et al., 2016). Sexual selection is the bottom line of evolution, and so,

typically, we should have less empathy for our sexual competition (e.g., Griskevicius et al., 2009; Stockley & Campbell, 2013; Zheng et al., 2016). The evolutionary imperative is the continuance of own genes. Phrases such as "all's fair in love and war" arise and resurface because of their kernel of truth. We do not step aside and say to our rival, "No, you go ahead, s/he is all yours." Rather, the green-eyed monster of sexual jealousy likely lies in wait to rouse pleasure in the setbacks suffered by our rivals and pain in their triumphs. It is hard to think of a greater passion than sexual jealousy (e.g., White, 2008), and thus its power to counter empathic emotions toward rivals must be correspondingly potent.

Consistent with an evolutionary perspective, research indicates that both women and men respond with positive emotion when a sexual rival's misfortune provides gains for their own mate value. For example, in line with the reasoning that the mate preferences typical of one's gender shape the domains in which members of the opposite gender compete (Darwin, 1871; Trivers, 1972), research by van Dijk, Ouwerkerk, and Smith (2015) showed that the intensity of *schadenfreude* experienced by undergraduate students differed depending upon the specific domain in which the misfortune occurred. In a first study, van Dijk et al. (2015) found that female undergraduates evaluated the social status of their (current or future) partners as more important than physical appearance or financial status, whereas male undergraduates evaluated physical appearance of their partners as more important than social or financial status. These findings indicate that—in the context of partner selection—male undergraduates compete with each other on social status, whereas female undergraduates compete with each other on physical appearance. In line with the different nature of intrasexual competition of college-aged men and women, van Dijk et al. (2015) found in their second study—in which both the gender of the unfortunate other and the domain in which the misfortune happened were manipulated—that female undergraduates experienced most *schadenfreude* when a former female rival lost her looks (i.e., suffered a misfortune in the domain of physical attractiveness), whereas male undergraduates experienced most *schadenfreude* when a former male rival turned out to be unsuccessful (i.e., suffered a misfortune in the domain of social status).

Albeit untested empirically, we expect that *gluckschmerz* would be also elicited in different, mate-value-relevant, situations. Women will respond with most *gluckschmerz* to good fortune heightening another woman's physical attractiveness, whereas men will respond with most *gluckschmerz* to good fortune increasing another's man social status. That is, like *schadenfreude, gluckschmerz* can also function as a mate-value-tracking mechanism, but by responding to fortunes that heighten a rival's mate value.[4]

Of course, other emotions might also be part of the mix. In both cases, for example, women and men might also feel jealousy if they perceive a specific relationship is threatened (see Chung & Harris, 2018, for more on jealousy) and/or envy if the other's good fortune entails a self-relevant upward comparison (e.g., Parrott & Smith, 1993). Indeed, *gluckschmerz* may be intensified by jealousy and envy, a possibility worth testing in future research.

Self-Evaluation

Good and bad events happening to our rivals have direct effects on our outcomes—we either receive the desired one's love or they do; we either get the job or they do. But the effects can broaden to those less tangible, such as self-evaluations. These can be seen in part as an averaging of direct effects over time on our internal self-reckoning and, in some sense, are the final, potent endpoint of these direct effects. For one thing, social comparisons are part of the building blocks of our self-evaluation (Festinger, 1954). Bad events happening to others, for example, often boost our ranking in important domains, enriching self-evaluation (e.g., Wills, 1981), which is broadly pleasing. Good events happening to others can decrease our ranking, shrinking our self-evaluation, which is broadly painful (e.g., Fiske, 2011; Tesser, Millar, & Moore, 1988). Generally, empathy for others' suffering arises less easily when they have, in other respects, been doing *better* than us than if they have been doing *worse* (e.g., Feng et al., 2016; R. H. Smith, Eyre, Powell, & Kim, 2006). Our reactions have relativistic anchors. From an evolutionary perspective, it is probably adaptive to experience some kind of positive emotion in reaction to favorable downward comparison information and some sort of negative emotion in response to unfavorable upward comparison information. Otherwise, one would be unlikely to do something to maintain one's superiority or to change one's inferiority, thus risking losing out in important competitive struggles related to adaptive fitness (e.g., Fiske, 2011; Hill & Buss, 2008; R. H. Smith, 2000; Swencionis & Fiske, 2014). This also implies that our *schadenfreude* and *gluckschmerz* will be more intense when our self-evaluation is—chronically or acutely—harmed or threatened. In such circumstances, our motivation to protect or enhance our self-evaluation is stronger, and good and bad fortunes of others affect us more.

"Bad news" can transform into "good news" if another person's misfortune is appraised as an opportunity to protect or enhance a positive view of the personal self. We have a strong need for a positive self-evaluation and strive to restore it when it is threatened or harmed (e.g., Alicke & Sedikides, 2009; Taylor & Brown, 1988). There are many ways to this restoration, one being to compare our own lot to that of less fortunate others (e.g., Wills, 1981). Thus, we can experience *schadenfreude* because another's misfortune provides us with social comparison benefits that satisfy our need for a positive self-view. Research has put these insights concerning the importance of self-evaluation in *schadenfreude* to the test. A series of studies showed that both, individuals who were low (compared to high) in self-esteem (van Dijk, van Koningsbruggen, Ouwerkerk, & Wesseling, 2011) or in whom an acute self-evaluation threat was experimentally induced (compared to not induced) experienced more *schadenfreude* when confronted with a high achiever's misfortune (van Dijk, Ouwerkerk, Wesseling, & van Koningsbruggen, 2011). Moreover, research showed that a

"double whammy" of both a chronic threat to one's self (i.e., low self-esteem) and an acute self-threat was especially conducive to *schadenfreude*. Results of this follow-up study showed that the effect of experimentally inducing an acute self-threat (i.e., feedback on a self-relevant performance task) on *schadenfreude* depended upon participants' self-esteem (assessed before the performance task). More specific, participants with low self-esteem experienced more *schadenfreude* following another's unflattering TV performance when they were first confronted with an acute self-threat (i.e., negative feedback on the performance task), compared with those who had first received an acute self-boost (i.e., positive feedback on the performance task). However, *schadenfreude* of participants with high self-esteem did not differ as a function of feedback on the performance task (van Dijk, Ouwerkerk, van Koningsbruggen, & Wesseling, 2012). Arguably, for these participants, their high self-esteem acted as a buffer against the acute self-threat.

The notion that another's misfortune can be pleasing because it can provide us with much needed social comparison benefits also implies that *schadenfreude* will be less intense when the motivation to self-enhance is weaker. Research corroborates this; van Dijk, van Koningsbruggen, et al. (2011) showed that providing (relatively) low self-esteem individuals with an alternative way to self-enhancement—self-affirmation in an unrelated context—attenuated their *schadenfreude* when confronted with another's misfortune. Furthermore, this notion also implies that people should feel more self-enhanced after they experienced *schadenfreude*. This was supported by a study—in which participants described a personal *schadenfreude* experience and indicated their subsequent feelings about the self—showing that the more intense participants' experience of *schadenfreude*, the more self-enhanced they felt afterwards (van Dijk & Ouwerkerk, 2014).

Thus, empirical studies support the notion that people can be pleased about the misfortunes of others because these events may be (appraised as) beneficial opportunities to protect or enhance their self-evaluation. Likewise, the experience of *gluckschmerz* should be motivated by a concern for a positive self-view. Although untested empirically, it can be expected that another's good fortune will be especially painful for us when we have a strong motivation to self-enhance. Therefore, our *gluckschmerz* will be more intense when we experience a (chronic or acute) self-threat and less intense when we recently experienced a self-boost. Furthermore, our *gluckschmerz* following another's good fortune will be less intense when we have alternative ways to self-enhance (e.g., via self-affirmation) or when we have a stable, high self-regard acts as a buffer against the threat posed by the good fortunes of others.

We emphasize that social comparison implications of another's good fortune make envy a possible concurrent emotion. Indeed, envy is likely to be the dominant emotion—to the extent that painful inferiority caused by an unflattering social comparison drives the emotional reactions. The pain and disappointment characteristic of *gluckschmerz* may become fused with the constellation of feeling states that often seem to be present in envy (e.g., pain, inferiority, frustration, and ill-will; e.g., van de Ven et al., 2015).

Envy

Envy, malicious envy in particular, also has a number of features linking it to *schadenfreude* (e.g., Lange, Weidman, & Crusius, 2018; R. H. Smith et al., 1996; Takahashi et al., 2009; van Dijk, Ouwerkerk, Goslinga, Nieweg, & Gallucci, 2006).[5] Any form of envy requires an unflattering social comparison in an important sphere of life—even benign envy is unpleasant. Usually, this implies a degree of competition and rivalry between us and the envied person. And so, ignoring any other appraisals, misfortunes befalling the envied person translate into something good for us; namely, an increase in our own relative status and whatever spoils that might then result. With malicious envy, there is also evidence that we perceive our disadvantage as unalterable and the envied person's advantage as undeserved (R. H. Smith, Parrott, Ozer, & Moniz, 1994). These processes are complex and difficult to isolate empirically (see Hoogland, Thielke, & Smith, 2017), but it may be that the misfortune of others lessens the frustration following from appraising our disadvantage as unalterable and satisfies a subjective, personal sense of justice.

But there is another important feature of malicious envy to consider. Generally, we avoid admitting to envy (e.g., Foster, 1972). We may fail to acknowledge it to ourselves. Admitting it reveals our inferiority and begrudging hostility (e.g., Hoogland, Thielke, & Smith, 2016; R. H. Smith, 2004). This means that our sense of the envied person's unfair, undeserved advantage is likely hidden, "subjective" and personal—as well as private. Part of the sense of unfairness probably comes from the frustration of being unable to control or to do anything about the advantage, a sense of undeserved inferiority beyond one's control and fault (R. H. Smith et al., 1994). And so, the other person's advantage is apt to be "suffered" in private, breeding further frustration and ill-will. Arguably, a misfortune befalling the envied person thus should produce a particularly satisfying sense of justice.

A number of features of an envied person's misfortune should enhance *schadenfreude*. Importantly, we need not be implicated in the misfortune. As our grievance with the envied person was likely private, it is unlikely we would have been able to make open claims of unfair advantage—especially if such claims seem motivated, and thus tainted, by the socially repugnant emotion of envy (e.g., R. H. Smith & Kim, 2007). This frustrating state of affairs, however, should receive relief through the misfortune unconnected with our own actions. As we noted earlier, *schadenfreude* is mainly passive (Leach et al., 2015). "Revenge," when it comes, originates from a source other than ourselves, and so we avoid the scorn following from taking aggressive actions against others just because we envy them. We may put up a front of crocodile tears but, inside, there should be celebration. For all these reasons, envy should have a special connection with *schadenfreude*—which may help explain why so many scholars over the centuries include in their definitions of envy a readiness to feel *schadenfreude* when the envied person suffers (e.g., Aristotle, 1954).

As we have emphasized, envy is likely to be intertwined with *gluckschmerz*. For example, the other person's good fortune

should aggravate the inferiority, associated frustration, and any subjective sense of unfairness associated with envy. This will heighten the pain of *gluckschmerz*, especially, we would suggest, if the good fortune is unexpected. Any "hopes" that the envied person might suffer are thwarted by the turnaround of fortunes. As with *schadenfreude* born out of envy, *gluckschmerz* catalyzed by envy must be endured in private. In fact, we suggest that one must pretend happiness and joy while actually experiencing keen, frustrated disappointment—along with heightened, amplified envy (of course, disentangling the overlapping reactions of envy and *gluckschmerz* in this case would be difficult). If there is an opposite reaction to crocodile tears, this is what we may express.

Intergroup Factors

Why should it matter so very much whether our favorite sports teams win or lose? Are we putting on the teams' jerseys and actually playing for these teams? Perhaps we do in the first case, but surely not in the second one. Their winning or losing has apparently no direct bearing on our own accomplishments and failures. Strangely, the origins of our team allegiances are often happenstance, in many cases the simple result of where we happened to grow up. And yet, once we form a team identity, a kind of imprinting seems to occur. Our team color becomes more than a color, connecting us with a nation of fans. If one considers, however, the functional benefits of group membership, as decades of research confirm (see Cikara & van Bavel, 2014, for a recent review), such immediate and firm connections seem less strange. A basic truth of our lives as social, group-forming beings, is that we derive part of our self-concept from the knowledge that we belong to groups—our collective self or social identity (e.g., Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This social identity can be a substantial element in our sense of self and can contribute powerfully to our emotional life, as now decades of research show (Mackie, Silver, & Smith, 2004; E. R. Smith, 1993; Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). As we strive also for a positive social identity, we want our in-groups to be distinguished positively from out-groups, contributing to a superior "us" versus an inferior "them" framing of our relation with out-group members. And so, *schadenfreude* and *gluckschmerz* can initiate from the positive or negative implications for "us" of events happening to or for "them."

An important point to emphasize, and one that may help further explain the strong impact of the intergroup factor on our reactions to good and bad events happening to out-group members, is that intergroup relations are generally more competitive, and less cooperative, than interpersonal ones (see Wildschut, Pinter, Vevea, Insko, & Schopler, 2003, for a review). Consequently, the intergroup context may prove an especially potent one for *schadenfreude* and *gluckschmerz*. And as one would expect, some research indeed suggests that such contexts evoke *schadenfreude* more intensely than interpersonal ones and that differences in competitiveness between groups and individuals may be an underlying reason (Ouwerkerk, van Dijk, Pennekamp, & Spears, cited in Ouwerkerk & van Dijk, 2014). In the study by Ouwerkerk et al., participants interacted as either individuals (interpersonal condition) or groups (intergroup condition) with three other individuals or groups in a situation in which they could display cooperative or competitive behavior. Participants were provided with an opportunity to earn money by making decisions about contributions (i.e., their level of cooperation) in a (multitrial) public good dilemma. They were asked each trial about their individual (group) contribution to the public good and informed about the contributions of the other individuals (groups)—which were in fact preprogrammed strategies either providing low, moderate, or high contributions. After 20 trials, participants were informed that one individual (group) had to be excluded from further interaction and that this individual (group) would be selected randomly by the computer. It was stressed that this would be unfortunate for the selected individual (group) because he or she (they) could not earn anything in the remaining trials. Next, participants were either informed that the individual (group) providing low contributions (uncooperative "other") or the individual (group) providing high contributions (cooperative "other") was excluded from further interaction. Results showed that, as groups, participants interacted more competitively than as individuals—indicated by their lower contributions to the public good. Furthermore, participants experienced more *schadenfreude* when an uncooperative "other" was excluded than when a cooperative "other" was excluded, and this effect was more profound in the intergroup condition. That is, groups of participants experienced more *schadenfreude* when an uncooperative other group was excluded, compared to individual participants when an uncooperative other individual was excluded, whereas no significant difference was observed for the exclusion of cooperative individuals or groups. Moreover, contribution to the public good was significantly correlated with the intensity of *schadenfreude*, suggesting that differences in competitiveness between individuals and groups may indeed be the reason why *schadenfreude* was more intense in the intergroup context.

We expect that these differences in competitiveness would also be a driving force for more intense *gluckschmerz* in the intergroup domain as compared to the interpersonal domain. Out-groups sometimes do represent a threat. If they are rivals, they can win, which means our in-group becomes the loser. The out-group gains the spoils, whereas "we" lose out. Real threats posed by rival out-groups arguably should produce a degree of counterempathic emotions when these groups suffer or flourish (Avenanti, Sirigu, & Aglioti, 2010; Chang, Krosch, & Cikara, 2016). Even in the absence of real threat, however, adding an intergroup element to an interaction likely reduces empathic reactions to the good and bad fortunes of out-group members, perhaps spiking competitive juices in the long run. Chang et al. (2016) note the "empathy bias" that seems almost inevitable when we react to out-group members. The empathy we feel when racial in-group members are in physical pain (a pin prick), for example, fails to arise if the pain is suffered by a racial out-group member. Threat increases the likelihood that another person, whose similarity to the in-group is ambiguous, will be excluded from in-group categorization—thus producing discriminatory reactions. When another person is an "other"

person, empathy seems to shut down and *schadenfreude* and *gluckschmerz* can enter our emotional lives without hindrance.

The seemingly inherent competitiveness of intergroup relations is probably one reason that identifying with our in-groups will cause us to feel *schadenfreude* or *gluckschmerz* in intergroup settings (Chang et al., 2016); but there are likely other reasons as well (e.g., Cikara, Bruneau, van Bavel, & Saxe, 2014; Leach & Spears, 2008; Zaki & Cikara, 2016). Some findings indicate we tend to believe that out-groups, generally, should not be trusted, justifying fear-inspired selfish behavior. Not only do we easily identify with groups (accruing certain benefits of group membership with little effort), but we also easily favor these groups, often in robustly biased ways (Brewer, 1999; Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002). Also, it may be that acting on behalf of the group can seem less "greedy" and can be rationalized as aiming to help other group members rather than the self—and may even appear to have group support. Indeed, other in-group members may insist on our acting on the group's behalf, creating conformity pressures that gradually transform what appears to be the "right" and proper thing to do, resulting in explicit group-favoring norms.

We noted the example of sports, and, clearly, any experience with fan behavior shows that this domain lends itself to *schadenfreude* and *gluckschmerz* (e.g., Hoogland et al., 2015; Vassilis & Melancon, 2012; Wann, Melnick, Russell, & Pease, 2001). In fact, one of the first studies to examine the role of in-group identification in both emotions used highly identified fans as participants (Cikara et al., 2011). Either die-hard Red Sox or Yankee fans watched (simulated) baseball plays involving favored, rival, and other teams in which in-group or out-group players did well (e.g., got a hit) or poorly (e.g., made an error). Participants reported pleasure over in-group (favored team) successes and pain over in-group failures. They also reported, however, *schadenfreude* over out-group (rival team) failures *and* *gluckschmerz* over out-group successes. Moreover, Cikara et al. (2011) showed that pleasure-associated neural activity in response to watching one's rival fail was associated with self-reported likelihood of harming fans of the rival team.

Hoogland et al. (2015) provided further evidence for such intergroup-level effects, this time with University of Kentucky basketball fans' reactions to misfortunes befalling one of their main rivals, Duke University. Participants responded to Internet articles describing Duke losses, both mild and severe injuries suffered by important Duke players, as well as articles describing these players' unexpected later recovery from their injuries. Level of identification with University of Kentucky basketball predicted both *schadenfreude* in reaction to injuries suffered by Duke players and *gluckschmerz* in reaction to the unexpected recovery of these players. Furthermore, *schadenfreude* and *gluckschmerz* were highly correlated. If participants reported *schadenfreude* over the initial injury, they were highly likely to report *gluckschmerz* when reading about a recovery, regardless of the severity of the injury and whether or not the player had reported great physical pain. Perceived gain for Kentucky, for the highly identified fans, was the most consistent mediator for both emotions.

Research in another arena, politics, presents a similar picture—affective dispositions towards a political in-group are bound to be important determinants of the level of *schadenfreude* people experience regarding a political out-group's misfortune and *gluckschmerz* in response to its good fortune. With regard to *schadenfreude*, for example, a set of studies by Combs et al. (2009) showed that the strength of people's identification with one political party affected their *schadenfreude* toward another's political party's misfortune. To illustrate, in one of their studies they demonstrated that in the run-up to the 2006 midterm elections, compared to Republicans, Democrats felt more *schadenfreude* over American troop deaths in Iraq during the Bush administration. In line with intergroup emotion theory (E. R. Smith, 1993), this effect was found only for those who identified strongly with the Democratic Party.

Further research showed, in line with a self-enhancement perspective, that stronger identification with one's own political party only increases *schadenfreude* over a rival party's misfortune when the suffering occurs in a domain of interest. Ouwerkerk, van Dijk, Vonkeman, and Spears (2018) showed—in the aftermath of the fall of a Dutch coalition government—that people who had, in the previous elections, voted for one of the parties that had not been part of the government (for these voters, the fall of the government represented an out-group's misfortune) felt more *schadenfreude* than those who had voted for one of the parties that had formed the government (for these voters, the fall of the government represented an in-group's misfortune). Moreover, in this study both identification with one's own political party (i.e., in-group identification) and interest in politics were also assessed. Results showed that among those who had voted for one of the opposition parties, in-group identification and interest in politics interactively predicted the *schadenfreude* they experienced following the out-group's misfortune (i.e., the fall of the government). For those voters, stronger in-group identification intensified (out-group) *schadenfreude* when political interest was high, whereas it did not when interest in politics was low. This interaction effect was not found among those who had voted for one of the coalition parties (i.e., when the fall of the government represented a misfortune for one's in-group). Thus, identification with one's own party increases *schadenfreude* when politics is considered an important domain for the self. Greater interest in politics increases the self-relevance of a political out-group and therefore one reacts more strongly to their misfortune.

Ouwerkerk et al. (2018) corroborated their findings in the political domain in another field study involving a consumer context. Making the most of reports in Dutch popular media of intense rivalry between young members of two brand communities in Amsterdam—BlackBerry users and iPhone users—they conducted a survey among young adult BlackBerry users and assessed their *schadenfreude* after reading negative news about Apple's iPhone (under the headline, "Problems for iPhone-users are piling up"). Results showed that stronger identification with other BlackBerry users was associated with more *schadenfreude* toward the "suffering" of iPhone users, but only when having a smartphone was important for them (i.e., when domain

interest was high). Additionally, results showed that both their *schadenfreude* and their hostile feelings toward iPhone users were correlated with the intention to engage in negative word of mouth (i.e., to share the negative news for iPhone users with others), and that the effect of their hostile feelings on sharing the bad news was mediated by their felt *schadenfreude*.

In all these studies in the intergroup domain, and in the many examples we can think of from everyday life, we are struck with the power of in-group identity to supplant empathic reactions to out-group members' good and bad fortunes. Again, perceived threat (whether actual competition for vital but scarce resources, symbolic, or tied to our social identity) can change our emotional reactions toward the lot of others dramatically. It is almost as if in-group identification created parallel universes in which misfortunes (ranging from mishaps to serious suffering) were cause for amusement or sympathy, or good fortunes (ranging from successful plays to recovering from injuries) were cause for pleasure or pain—depending on whose ox were being gored or changed for the better.

Implications for Understanding Human Nature

As emphasized above, one reason we feel *schadenfreude* and *gluckschmerz* is that there are circumstances in which another's suffering leads to our gain, or in which another person's success undermines our goals in some way. As unattractive as egoistic motives are, it would still be asking too much to transcend our egos and ignore the stubborn multilevel effects of gains and losses on our emotional experience. An important point to note is that pleasure and pain caused by direct gain or loss are less morally objectionable than pleasure *at the* suffering of others and pain *at the* good fortune of others, however difficult the precise feelings may be to disentangle (Votinov, Pripfl, Windischberger, Sailer, & Lamm, 2015). Generally, we find the pleasure of winning by our meritorious gain more morally satisfying than winning from someone's humiliating failure and enjoying this humiliation, for example (particularly if the failure is undeserved). An interesting question, relevant to moral attributions, is what is the first prick of emotion that occurs when another person suffers in the context of our gain or another person benefits in the context of our loss? Do we first feel the gain and then the prick of empathy; the loss then the boost of joy? Clearly, more research is needed to discover more about how these distinctive processes play out in various contexts.

When both emotions appear energized by objective assessments of deservingness, they reflect better on human nature. Optimal human relations are hard to imagine without our sensitivity to norms of fairness (Rawls, 1971), presumably inspired in part by moral emotions linked to judgments of fairness. *Schadenfreude* in reaction to another's deserved misfortune and *gluckschmerz* in reaction to another's undeserved good fortune mean that we value "fair play." Here, perhaps, *schadenfreude* and *gluckschmerz* are not empathic failures (Zaki & Cikara, 2016) as much as suitable reactions to a sense of justice (*schadenfreude*) or injustice (*gluckschmerz*).

It is probably because many of the more notorious cases of *schadenfreude* and *gluckschmerz* involved less savory underlying motives that their moral reputations are generally so dubious. For example, it is because we sometimes begrudge the success of other people even when they deserve their success (and display signs of *gluckschmerz*), or take pleasure in the failure of other people even when they have earned their initial success (and display signs of *schadenfreude*) that both emotions can seem so nasty across the board—and seem to reflect so poorly on us and on human nature. As noted earlier, *schadenfreude* is considered passive—and so is *gluckschmerz*—in that another person's misfortune or good fortune occurs without our agency. There are, however, likely implications for behavior the more we feel these emotions in their less generous and more begrudging form (e.g., Zaki & Cikara, 2016). Indeed, empirical findings in the case of *schadenfreude* suggest we are more likely to act aggressively when inappropriate to do so (Cikara & Fiske, 2013) and less likely to act prosocially when someone deserves our help (e.g., Hein, Silani, Preuschoff, Batson, & Singer, 2010; Nadler, 2016; Schindler et al., 2015; Tscharaktschiew & Rudolph, 2015) if we have felt prior *schadenfreude*. In any event, the particular energizing factors bringing about these emotions go a long way towards reflecting how flattering a portrait of ourselves we are left with after the fact.

Summary

Schadenfreude and *gluckschmerz*, despite their dubious moral reputations, are ordinary, prevalent human emotions reflecting the complex, multifaceted nature of human experience. Sometimes, as a balance theory approach to interpersonal relations predicts, both emotions follow from prior attitudes we hold toward others who are suffering or gaining. If for some reason we dislike them, their suffering brings *schadenfreude* and their gain brings *gluckschmerz*. Concerns over justice can also drive our reactions to others' suffering or gain. A number of factors can create a sense that others deserve their misfortunes, resulting in our *schadenfreude*. If others seem undeserving of their good fortune, our *gluckschmerz* results. When deservingness drives our *schadenfreude* and *gluckschmerz*, the moral taint associated with both emotions decreases. Another explanation for *schadenfreude* and gluckshmerz follows from whether our appraisals of others' good or bad fortunes are positive or negative for ourselves or our in-group. In competitive situations and when envy arises, their bad fortune is pleasing and their good fortune is displeasing.

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Notes

1 By definition, we do not feel disappointment over our own positive outcomes, unless, for instance, our gain also makes us feel guilty.

2 Lerner describes that the origins of the idea emerged from early experiences in a hospital psychiatric unit in which he noticed the physicians

and nurse finding humor in some of their patients' behavior—as their way of coping with the challenges of dealing with the plight of these patients.

3 English has no single word for happiness over another person's good fortune. This emotional state has received, however, some research attention (Cohen-Charash, Erez, & Scherbaum, 2008), perhaps helped by there being a recently coined Hebrew word, "*firgun*."

4 It should be noted that Henniger and Harris's (2015) findings suggest that the importance of different domains changes across the lifespan (e.g., what is envied at different ages). They found, for example, that younger women were likely to envy and be envied for their appearance, whereas men of all ages were likely to envy or be envied for their (occupational) success (see Harris, 2003, for a review). Thus, it could be that the (suggested) patterns of *schadenfreude* and *gluckschmerz* might change differently for men and women across their lifespan.

5 The empirical and conceptual picture is complicated by the fact that envy, arguably, also comes in a benign form (e.g., Lange & Crusius, 2015; Lange et al., 2018; Sterling, van de Ven, & Smith, 2017; van de Ven, Zeelenberg, & Pieters, 2009; but see Cohen-Charash & Larson, 2017, for a dissenting view). In this form, the envied person's suffering does not create *schadenfreude* (van de Ven et al., 2015). Critically, with benign envy, evidence suggests that the envied person's advantage is painful, but it is also perceived as deserved (as well as obtainable); with malicious envy, the envied person's advantage is perceived as undeserved (as well as unobtainable; e.g., van de Ven et al., 2009). Appraisals of this kind seem to mainly underlie why malicious envy has its hostile character and why the envied person's suffering is pleasing.

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