



That's too bad... NOT!

Predictors of feeling pleasure in response to another's misfortune

Danielle Ryan, Katey Quigley, Stacy Miller, Amanda Werner, Amy Johnson, Carolyn Kobl
UWEC Department of Psychology, Faculty mentor: Dr. April Bleske-Rechek



BACKGROUND

"Schadenfreude" is a feeling of pleasure in response to another's misfortune (Feather, 1989).

Men and women are more likely to feel schadenfreude toward members of the same sex, presumably because they are comparing themselves to members of the same sex (van Dijk et al., 2006).

Some researchers have suggested that people feel schadenfreude toward people they envy (who have what they would like to have) (Smith, 1991).

It is possible that both dislike (or feelings of hostility) and envy toward a hypothetical target can elicit happiness in response to imagining them experiencing a misfortune (van Dijk et al., 2006).

However, in research using focused scenarios to manipulate envy and dislike, researchers have shown that dislike for a hypothetical target elicits more schadenfreude than does envy (Hareli & Weiner, 2002).

Previous research has used focused scenarios involving a single misfortune, usually in the academic domain (e.g., a person at the top of the class failing the final exam).

The current research had three objectives:

- To determine, via act nomination, a range of domains in which men and women are likely to experience schadenfreude;
- To examine differences in men's and women's reported pleasure in response to imagining a same-sex target experience a range of misfortunate events;
- To examine men's and women's differential reaction to imagining misfortunes befalling a close same-sex friend as opposed to a same-sex member of their social network.

METHOD

Phase I

An initial sample of 40 students from two psychology courses were polled about either (a) circumstances in which they had felt envy toward another or (b) circumstances in which they had felt a touch of pleasure in response to someone else's misfortune. Students were asked to describe three specific circumstances in which they had felt the emotion. The circumstances that students nominated spanned a variety of domains and served as an initial list from which we expanded. Friends of the same sex and family members were the main targets in the circumstances that students mentioned; strangers rarely appeared. We split the nominations into domains and, by informally surveying friends of the research team, we generated several specific examples for each domain.

Phase II

In Phase II, 68 men and 241 women (mean age = 21.59) completed an online questionnaire about "mixed emotions." We established events on various Facebook group pages and sent the survey link to students who participate in research for course credit.

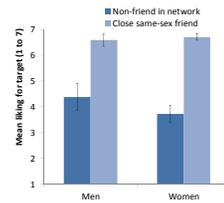
Participants were asked to think of either (a) a close same sex friend or (b) a member of the same sex who was a member of their social network but whom they would not consider to be a friend (henceforth "non-friend"). They typed this person's name into a response box, and that name was inserted into subsequent questions pertaining to that person.

Participants imagined each of 44 different events happening to their target person (same-sex friend or same-sex non-friend). In response to each item, participants reported how much sympathy they would feel, and then how much pleasure they would feel. All ratings were on an 11-point scale (0=None to 10=A lot). Sympathy ratings were included to facilitate admission of pleasure in response to the events. Table 1 shows a sample event from each domain, and the overall mean pleasure rating for that domain.

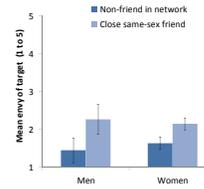
Before concluding the survey, participants used Likert type rating scales to report the degree to which they liked or disliked the target person, how much they envied the person, how much they felt in competition with the person, and how emotionally close they were to the person.

RESULTS

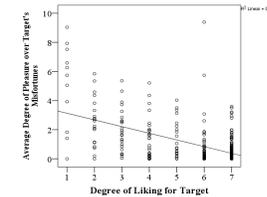
1. Dislike – and not envy – predicts pleasure felt at another's misfortune.



Both men and women liked their friend a lot more than the non-friend in their social network.



They also envied their friend more than they envied the non-friend in their social network. In fact, the more people liked the target, the more they envied the target, $r(305) = .32, p < .001$.

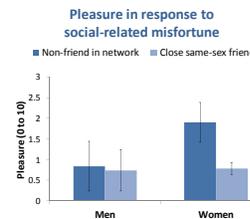
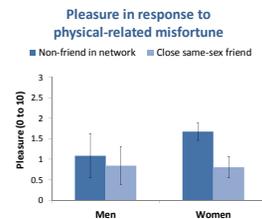
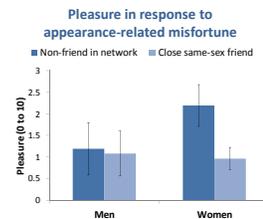


However, dislike – and not envy – predicts schadenfreude. Envy toward a person did not predict feeling pleasure in response to their misfortunes, but disliking them did predict feeling pleasure in response to that person experiencing misfortunes.

2. Men and women report low levels of schadenfreude overall, but different misfortune domains elicit different amounts of pleasure.

MISFORTUNE DOMAIN	Men		Women		ME Sex	ME Target	Sex x Target	Overall Pleasure
	Non-friend in Network	Close Friend	Non-friend in Network	Close Friend				
Academic (e.g., He/she is usually at the top of the class but got beat out by somebody else.)	1.71 (2.28)	0.88 (1.45)	1.96 (2.44)	1.08 (1.76)	0.60	8.63**	0.01	1.39(2.03)
Appearance (e.g., He/she gained a noticeable amount of weight.)	1.19 (1.73)	1.08 (1.59)	2.06 (2.53)	0.96 (1.51)	1.94	4.97*	3.37	1.35 (1.97)
Social (e.g., He/she wasn't invited to some of her friends' social gatherings.)	0.84 (1.63)	0.74 (1.45)	1.86 (2.45)	0.78 (1.59)	3.61	4.46*	3.07	1.12 (1.93)
Physical (e.g., He/she was normally the best athlete on the team but had a string of bad performances.)	1.08 (1.52)	0.84 (1.37)	1.67 (2.18)	0.80 (1.44)	1.33	5.38*	1.70	1.12 (1.74)
Mating (e.g., He/she began to have a hard time hooking up with women/men.)	1.46 (2.05)	1.59 (2.18)	1.54 (2.35)	0.54 (1.40)	3.19	2.63	4.33*	1.07 (1.94)
Material (e.g., He/she could no longer afford to buy clothes from the stores he/she wanted to.)	1.14 (1.58)	0.86 (1.38)	1.32 (1.90)	0.57 (1.22)	0.07	5.38*	1.08	0.93 (1.56)
Career (e.g., He/she got reprimanded at work for slacking off.)	1.31 (2.07)	0.53 (0.95)	1.39 (1.90)	0.59 (1.37)	0.10	11.63**	0.01	0.92 (1.62)
Romantic Partner (e.g., His/her romantic partner had sex with someone else.)	1.62 (2.53)	0.82 (1.32)	1.24 (1.83)	0.49 (1.07)	2.68	12.58***	0.01	0.88 (1.59)

3. Overall, women tend to discriminate between friends and non-friends more than men do.



A common pattern in the data (particularly in the domains shown in the three figures above) was for men to report a low level of pleasure in response to misfortunes experienced by either a friend or a non-friend in their network. Women on the other hand, showed a peak in pleasure in response to a non-friend experiencing various misfortune.

In other words, men were less affected by whom they were thinking about than women were. Not shown here is the corresponding pattern for sympathy. Men reported similarly moderate levels of sympathy in response to misfortunes experienced by either target, and women showed a peak level of sympathy in response to a friend experiencing misfortunes, with little sympathy for non-friends.

DISCUSSION

The current series of studies extended existing research on schadenfreude in two primary ways. First, we asked participants to respond about misfortunes across a variety of domains instead of focusing on just one (most previous research focuses on academic failure as a misfortune). Second, we asked men and women to think about a specific person they know rather than an imaginary target.

We found that although participants envied their friends more than their non-friends, they didn't experience more schadenfreude toward their friends than their non-friends. In fact, dislike – and not envy – predicted schadenfreude. This finding supports recent arguments that the roots of schadenfreude are not in envy, as commonly thought, but rather in feelings of dislike and hostility (e.g., Hareli & Weiner, 2002).

Previous research has not documented sex differences in reported pleasure over others' misfortunes. However, we documented circumstances in which women reported more schadenfreude toward a non-friend member of their network, and those circumstances were tied to dimensions on which women are known to compete. First, women compete on attractiveness (Buss, 1988), and their peak schadenfreude was toward non-friends experiencing a decrease in their attractiveness or physical fitness. Second, females from an early age compete to occupy limited slots in small groups (Benenson et al., 2008), and women reported relatively high schadenfreude toward non-friends experiencing social ostracism.

Our finding that men differentiated less than women did between targets in their emotional responses to misfortune needs to be replicated. It is entirely possible that men actually do not differentiate between different types of relationships, but we had far fewer men than women in the sample so our power to detect differences in men's responses was limited.

One surprising element of the study was the low level of schadenfreude that people reported despite the fact that we told participants that it is common for people to experience both sympathy and pleasure toward another's misfortune. While it is possible that our participants were displaying a classic level of Midwestern "niceness," we think it is more likely that participants truly experience less schadenfreude when imagining a real person – as they did in our study – rather than an imaginary target.

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