

# WHEN MISFORTUNE BEFALLS ANOTHER

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## BACKGROUND

- *Schadenfreude* is a feeling of pleasure in response to another's misfortune.
- Previous studies of schadenfreude have focused primarily on feelings of schadenfreude in the academic context (e.g., happiness when a high-performing peer fails an exam).<sup>1, 2</sup>
- Those studies suggest that young adults feel more pleasure toward same-sex (as opposed to opposite-sex) others experiencing a downfall<sup>3</sup> (such as a failed exam), and more pleasure if the downfall is deserved (as opposed to not).<sup>2, 4</sup>
- It is currently unclear whether the happiness that young adults report in response to another person's misfortune is tied more to *envying* that person<sup>3</sup> or to feeling *dislike* or hostility toward that person.<sup>5</sup>

## OBJECTIVES

The current study has two objectives:

- To investigate whether happiness in response to another's misfortune is more closely tied to *disliking* them or *envying* them.
- To investigate people's feelings of schadenfreude in response to others' downfalls in evolutionarily-meaningful domains<sup>6</sup> (as opposed to academic performance), including *small group belonging*, *large group status*, *attractiveness*, and *mating success*.

## PREDICTIONS

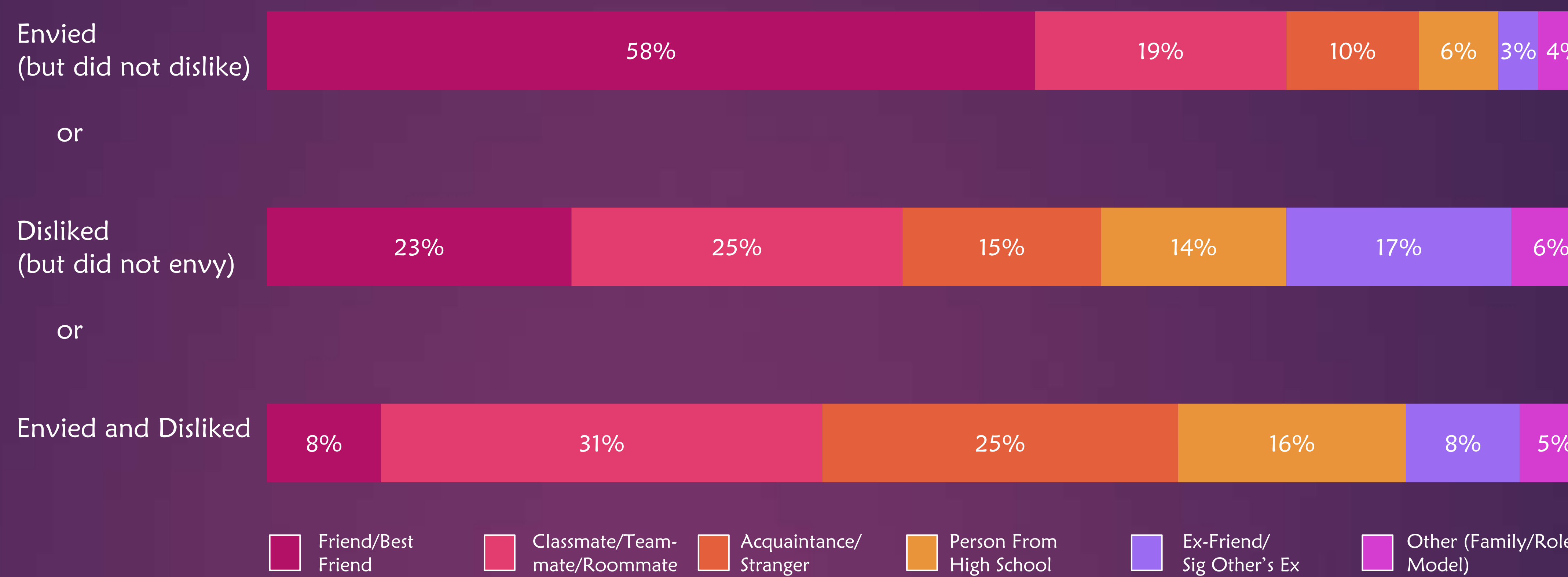
- We expected that young adults would report more pleasure in response to imagining misfortunes of someone they *dislike* than of someone they *envy*.
- In keeping with sex differences in domains of self-evaluation and intrasexual competition, we expected that men more than women would feel happiness in response to a same-sex other's fall in large-group status, and that women more than men would feel happiness in response to a same-sex other's fall in attractiveness or small-group belonging.

## METHOD

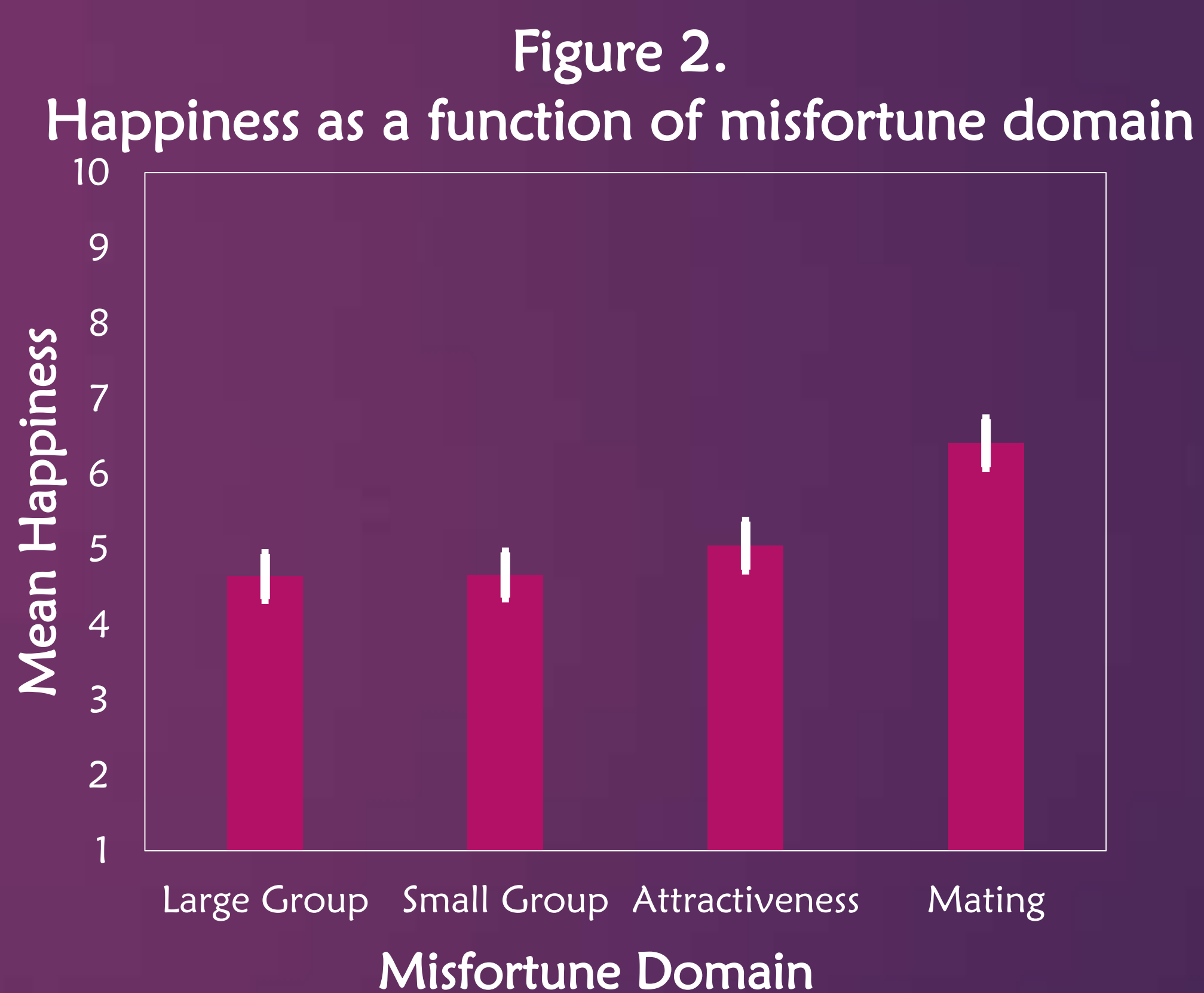
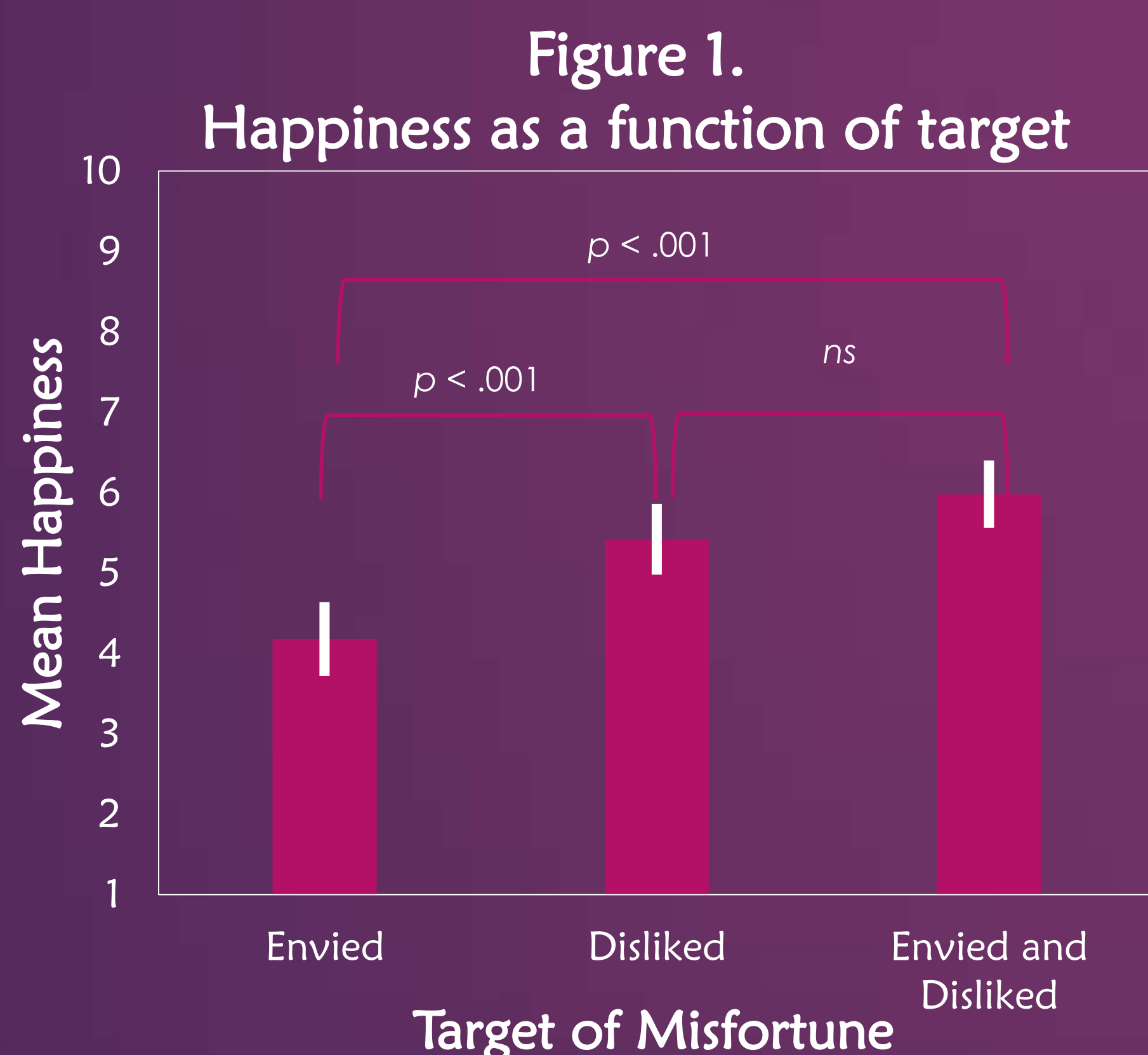
- Participants were 241 (114 M, 127 F) college students from various departments at UWEC. Students completed written questionnaires voluntarily during allocated class time.
- Participants first brought to mind a same-sex peer who they either (1) disliked but did not envy; (2) envied but did not dislike; or (3) envied and disliked. Then they imagined that person experiencing four different misfortunes (counterbalanced) and rated their happiness upon hearing about the misfortune (1 to 10).
- In the large-group misfortune, the target person freezes in front of a large group when giving a speech.
- In the small-group misfortune, the target person is ditched by two friends in choosing a housemate for the following year.
- In the attractiveness misfortune, the target person gains 20 pounds and is noticeably overweight.
- In the mating misfortune, the target person is repeatedly denied when trying to hook up with people at a party.

## RESULTS

Participants were asked to think of a same-sex peer they...

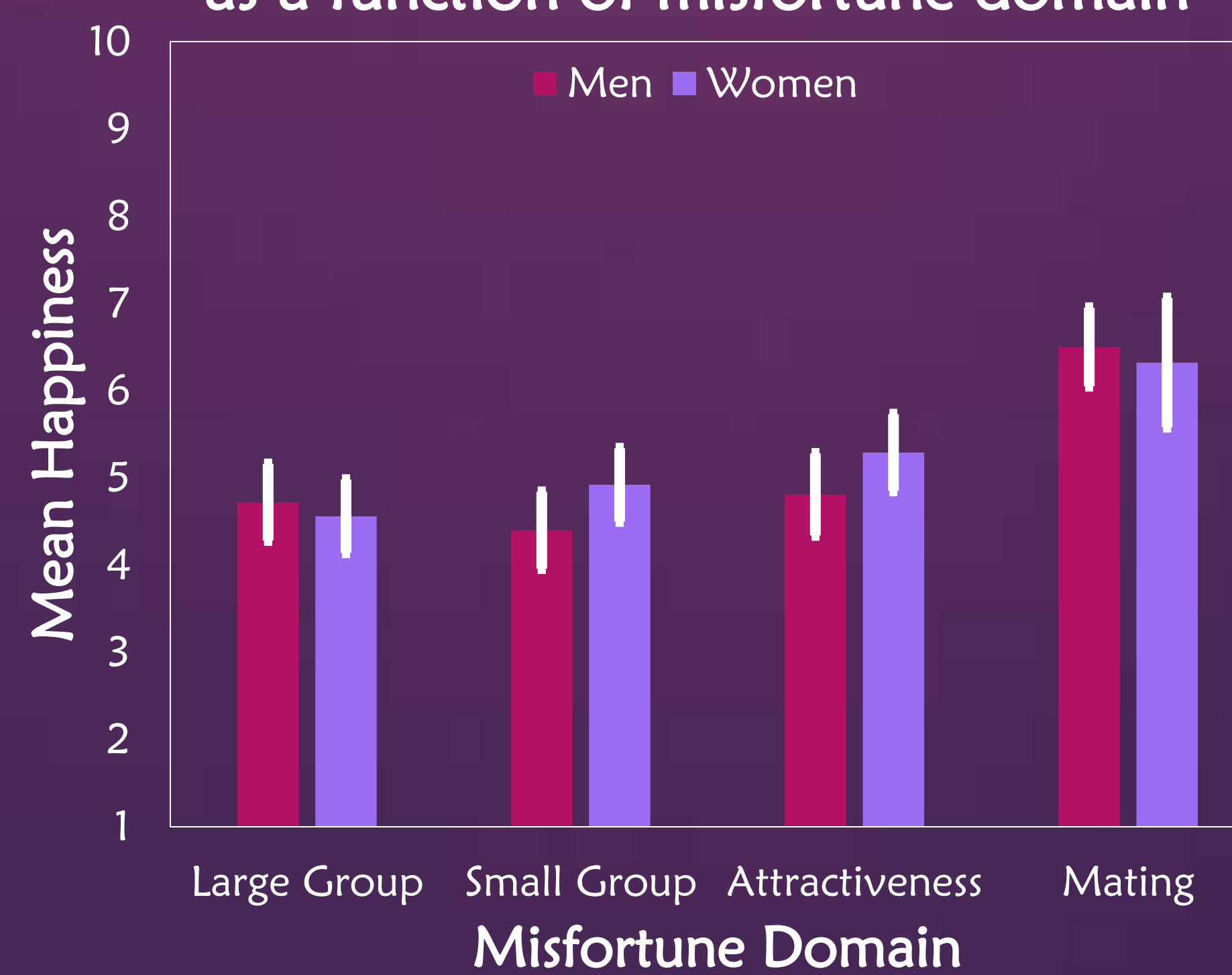


At the end of the questionnaire, we asked participants who they had thought of. As shown in the figure above, when they had been asked to think of someone they disliked and envied, or someone they disliked but did not envy, their targets varied widely. However, when participants had been asked to imagine someone they envied but did not dislike, they commonly reported it was a friend or best friend.



As shown in Figure 1, the common factor in participants' increased happiness in response to another person's misfortunes was *disliking* (not *envying*) that person. As displayed in Figure 2, participants reported more happiness toward another's mating misfortune relative to the other downfalls, and more happiness toward another's attractiveness misfortune relative to the small-group and large-group misfortunes. Notably, participants reported moderate levels of happiness in response to all four misfortunes. Apparently schadenfreude is an emotion that people feel in various contexts.

Figure 3. Men's and women's happiness as a function of misfortune domain



Note. Error bars represent  $\pm 2SE$

Figure 3 shows that men and women responded very similarly to the various types of misfortunes. We had expected women to report more happiness in response to a (disliked) peer experiencing a decrement in attractiveness, but both sexes reported moderate happiness about that downfall. We had also expected single participants to report more happiness about a peer's mating failure than involved participants would, but that effect did not occur, either. For both sexes and for both single and involved individuals, a peer's mating failure evoked the most happiness.

## DISCUSSION

- One objective of this study was to dissociate envy and dislike, in order to investigate their independent links to feelings of schadenfreude. Participants reported more schadenfreude toward the downfalls of targets whom they disliked, regardless of whether they envied them or not. In conjunction with findings from van de Ven et al.,<sup>7</sup> we suspect that feeling both dislike and envy toward someone might also be described as *malicious* envy, and should be accompanied by a desire to pull that person down in standing. In contrast, feeling envy in the absence of dislike might be described as *benign* envy, and should be accompanied by a desire to elevate oneself to that person's standing.
- Another objective of this study was to investigate people's feelings of happiness about downfalls in evolution-relevant domains. In fact, participants reported moderate (not low!) levels of happiness about the various misfortunes, and they reported the most happiness in response to others' mating misfortunes. Future research could investigate whether men and women respond differently to a same-sex other's short-term mating failure (e.g., getting sexually rejected) and long-term mating failure (e.g., being dumped by a committed romantic partner).

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