

## **schadenfreude and its relation with emotions and personality traits**

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### **Abstract**

Schadenfreude is a German word refers to pleasure at the misfortunes of the others. Schadenfreude is a response to another's failure, and is a commonly experienced emotion, facilitated by frequent interpersonal interaction. Schadenfreude is thought to be classified as self-conscious and moral emotion. Researcher s reveals at least three conditions in which it commonly arises. One condition is when observers gain from the misfortune. A second condition when another's misfortune is deserved. A third condition when a misfortune befalls an envied person. The method of the study is qualitative and is a review study. Population of study is articles in the period 2015 to 2021 and the results of some articles were presented. Results of the researches showed that disliking, deservingness, and malicious envy predicted schadenfreude. Schadenfreude is in relation with some dark triad of personality. Researches showed that this emotion can be examined in relation to various psychological variables.

**Keywords:** schadenfreude, emotion, self- conscious

## Introduction

Humans are social animals and maybe evolutionally hard-wired to be especially collaborative (Tomasello, 2014). It should be natural for others to act in compassion, when another human face a problem, as it would ensure their own survival. Yet, in our modern- day and age, people sometimes feel and express joy rather than sorrow, compassion, or indifference when they learn about the others misfortunes or misery. So they experience the emotion of schadenfreude or pleasure in the misfortunes of another (Heider, 1958). Schadenfreude is a commonly emotion experiences frequently in interpersonal interactions (Li, McAllister, llies, &Gloor, 2019). Due to the importance of recognizing emotions in psychology and psychotherapy and schadenfreude is an emotion that has remained unknown, and so far no research has been done on this, therefore, this study was conducted with the aim of identifying the emotion. At first, the definition of schadenfreude and the study of it in the theory of emotion evaluation and classification of emotions and its comparison with the three emotions of hatred, envy and empathy will be discussed. Then the results of some of the latest research in the field of variables related to schadenfreude will be discussed.

**Definition of schadenfreude:** schadenfreude is a German word and means pleasure at the misfortunes of the others. The English language does not have one specific word for this emotion and uses schadenfreude as a loanword. The Oxford English Dictionary included it as an entry for the first time in 1895, defining schadenfreude as “malicious enjoyment of the others “, feeling of enjoyment and happiness from others misfortune that experienced frequently in multitude interpersonal interaction(Van Dijk & Ouwkerk, 2014a). Throughout history, schadenfreude-although pleasurable for the person feeling it – has been morally condemned by scholars. In his seminal book *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations* (1985) Austrian psychologist Fritz Heider describes the experience of schadenfreude as a violation of the obligation to cultivate the virtue of compassion and thereby as harmful to social relations. Before Heider, other scholars had already emphasized the negative nature of schadenfreude. Aristotle (350 BCE/1941) described it as a disguised expression of aggression, whereas Baudelair (1855/1955) regarded it as a malicious and immoral feeling , and Schopenhauere (1841/1965) described it as fiendish, diabolical, and an “infallible sign of a thoroughly bad heart and profound moral worthlessness” (P. 135)(Dijk, Ouwkerk, Smith & Cikara, 2015).

**Schadenfreude and the appraisal theory:** Schadenfreude is a type of joy, albeit one that special and seemingly atypical. Whereas joy is typically experienced when someone is pleased about a desirable event, schadenfreude is evoked when someone is pleased about an event that is undesirable for somebody else (Heider, 1958; Ortony, Clore, &Collins, 1988). However analyzing schadenfreude of the perspective of appraisal theories of emotion, it appears less atypical than at first sight. One of the central tenets of

appraisal theories is claim that emotions are elicited by distinctive patterns of appraisals theories. Appraisal theories posit that it is an individual's subjective evaluation of the personal significance of a situation rather than its objective properties that elicits an emotion. What makes appraisal theories of emotions especially appealing is that they can explain why different situations can elicit the same emotion (because these situations are appraised similarly) or why the same situation can elicit different emotions in different people (because they appraised this situation differently). To illustrate, because people can differ in how they appraise the same misfortune suffered by another person, this misfortune can elicit schadenfreude in some people, while evoking sympathy in others. Moreover, since schadenfreude is elicited by the appraisal of another's misfortune, rather than its mere characteristics, objectively dissimilar misfortunes, such as when an envied student is caught cheating, or when contestant on a televised talent show fails miserably, or when a rival group suffers a setback, may all elicit schadenfreude if these misfortunes are appraised in similar way (van Dijk et al, 2015).

Although socially schadenfreude is a hated emotion, researchers have identified three situations, in which schadenfreude usually occurs. One condition is when observers gain from the misfortune. Second condition is when another's misfortune is deserved. A third condition is when a misfortune befalls an envied person (H, Smith, A. J. Powell, J. Y. Combs & Ryan Schurtz; 2009).

***Classification of schadenfreude as an emotion:*** Schadenfreude is thought to be as self-conscious emotion. Self-conscious emotions differ from basic emotion in terms of evaluation of the self (Tracy, Tangney, 2007). Individuals feel sorry when something bad happened because of them, they feel guilt. Similarly, when something bad to others, they make evaluations according to their standards, self-esteem and they may feel schadenfreude. According to Tracy & Robins (2004) self-conscious emotions have social targets like to pursue good relations with others, to develop our social status or protect it. Considering the relationship between deservingness of the target and feelings of schadenfreude towards them (Feather & Sherman, 2002), schadenfreude can be thought as both self-conscious and a moral emotion because moral emotion includes evaluation of the self, according to one's moral standards (Erzi).

***Schadenfreude in developmental psychology perspective:*** There are only a few researches which examines schadenfreude in expressions of developmental perspective. There are lots of studies which examine sympathy (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinard, 2006, pp. 694). According to Hoffman (2000) 24 months old infants can understand the other's personal distress. In the same way, Batson and Pawell (2003) told that development of perspective taking is related with singling out with others who need help, realizing others and feeling of sympathy towards them. So, understanding other's distress is essential not only for sympathy but also for schadenfreude.

Though, it is thought that feeling of schadenfreude can be considered as need more complex cognitive structure because feelings of schadenfreude take in understanding of moral standards in basic level such as being able to distinguishing right and wrong. So at

least 36 month old children who can vary right and wrong and recognize moral transgressions are thought to be able to feel schadenfreude (Schulz, Rudolph, Tscharaktschiew, Rudolph, 2013).

Individuals may feel schadenfreude because of envy (Smith et al., 1996), self-esteem related issues (Leach, Spears, Branscombe, & Doosje, 2003), deservingness (Feather & Sherman, 2002) and disliking others (Hareli & Weiner, 2002) In addition to those features, Schulz et al. (2013) told that morally negative valence of the actor's behavior makes children that are older than 36 months feel schadenfreude towards the actor too. To our education it was the first research which examined schadenfreude among 4- and 8-years old children. In their study they used picture stories and they understand that when the actor had a morally negative valence goal towards the target (pushing a friend), the misfortune which was experienced by the actor's behavior come up feelings of schadenfreude among children. In contrast when the actor had a morally positive valence goal (helping a friend) and experienced a misfortune, feeling of sympathy come up. Furthermore, in contrast to feelings of sympathy, the moral valence of the actor's goal was only essential when feelings of schadenfreude come up.

In heteronomous morality, children recognize the rules in terms of their participation to social order, correspondingly they follow the rules. According to Piaget, in this stage of morality, children think that punishment will occur right after the moral transgression, this is called imminent justice thought. In similar line, Schindler and Korner, Bauer, Hadji and Rudolph (2015) studied schadenfreude among 3 to 8 years old children by using picture stories. According to contributor's parents report about their child's first experience of schadenfreude, researchers classify three different situations that causes emergence of schadenfreude as physical misfortunes, competitive situations and misunderstandings. Researchers used pictures about a child that had morally negative valence goal in both versions of stories. In one of them, actor was able to carry out this goal but in the other although he or she wanted to do the wrong act he or she couldn't do it, but in the end he or she fell in both positions. In first story, children showed feelings of schadenfreude after actor fell but in the second, they did not. According to Piaget, in the heteronomous morality stage, children give more importance to the effects of the act than the intention of the actor. In the same line Schindler et al. (2015) found that schadenfreude only emerged when the actor accomplished morally negative valence goal.

Besides deservingness and moral valence of the act, schadenfreude deservingness and moral valence of the act, schadenfreude was studied in terms of social comparison among children who are aged 7- to 13-year-old. Steinbeis and Singer (2013) used two different tasks which children were rated on the report of their execution. In the first session, children were given feedbacks according to their rival's performances. In the second session, they were informed about their rival's execution. As a result of this study, it was showed that when the children got better feedbacks and their rival overcome, they felt more schadenfreude towards their rival's failure. In contrast, when the children got worse feedbacks, they felt more envy towards their rival. Researchers also found feeling of

schadenfreude and envy decreased by age in terms of identity. In similar line Schindler et al. (2015) also realized that schadenfreude feelings were decreased by age. Therefore, it is considered that increasing information about the social norms may be created this result because children can control and regulate their emotions when they get older (Eisenberg, 2000).

Besides the studies which contain contribution from early and middle childhood, Watanabe (2018) examined Schadenfreude among adolescents in terms of sharing those feelings. Sharing feelings of schadenfreude may sometimes incur social censure by people because it is a discordant emotion as told by Heider (1958). In contrast to this view Feather (2014) told that sharing schadenfreude can be accepted by individuals if the misfortune of the other is thought to be deserved. Sharing emotions are seemed to be important for healthy social relationships too. So, Watanabe (2018) examined the relationship between self- esteem and sharing feelings of schadenfreude among adolescents.

Self- esteem related issues are essential especially for his life time period because self-esteem is also related for socio- metric status of adolescents through creating social acceptance. Besides, if the individual's emotions are much the same to their peers, when they shared them, they would be likely to be accepted by them and this could boost their self- esteem. In contrast, previous work of Watanabe (2014) showed that adolescent's sharing of schadenfreude did not significantly related with their self- esteem.

As claimed by Smith et al. (2009) self-esteem is correlated with the feelings of schadenfreude. Therefore, may be the sharing of schadenfreude does not cause increment in self-esteem because sharing of schadenfreude remains in the background when deservingness is considered more important and the self-threat is not the case. Additionally, self-esteem, self- threat is an important variable in terms of feeling of schadenfreude (Jung, 2017). When individual had low self-esteem and came across with the high achiever individual, they would be likely to feel more schadenfreude. So controlling those variables may come up different results in terms of sharing and expressing feelings of schadenfreude among adolescents.

**Schadenfreude, envy and dislike:** dislike is the oldest emotion. The basis of dislike is the identification of substances that are corrupt or contaminated, but this can also extend to socialization experiments. Physical pollution represents the first example of disgusting things, but pollution also spreads to social and moral contexts. Deviant social acts can cause hatred, and the unfair treatments are disgusting. Beliefs and values can be contaminated and create moral hatred. In relation to moral pollution, people associate dislike with an object or event in order to eliminate any temptation to interact more with that object or event. The emotion of dislike is a strong predictor of schadenfreude (Hareli, Weiner, 2002).

Envy is a painful emotion caused by the happiness of others, and its job is to level one's position with others.

## Methods

This study is considered a review study with regard to the implementation method. The statistical population of this study includes research articles from quantitative studies on the relationship between schadenfreude and the emotions and personality traits. Articles were searched from Google scholar and after reviewing the results of some articles in the period 2015 to 2021 were briefly presented in this article.

## Results

Reviewing of several studies on the relationship between schadenfreude and dislike and envy showed that these two emotions are strong predictors of schadenfreude. In a research that conducted by Keegan D. Greenier entitled *The Roles of Disliking, Deservingness, and Envy in predicting schadenfreude in 2020*, the results revealed the strong effects of disliking and deservingness and also results showed that malicious but not benign envy predicted schadenfreude. Benign envy refers to envy that instills a desire to raise oneself up to the level of the envied target, or simply to have what the target has; malicious envy includes hostility toward the envied target and a desire to see the target lose his or her high status or advantage. In a study that examined the relationship between schadenfreude and the dark triad of personality, the results showed that people with the dark triad express more schadenfreude in the face of the misfortunes of others (Erzi, 2020).

In another study, entitled *the role of self-evaluation and envy in schadenfreude*, performed by van Dijk et al, in 2015, the results showed that malicious envy, not benign envy play an important role in evoking schadenfreude. In a study that Hareli and Weiner in 2002 did by titled *Dislike and Envy as Antecedents of pleasure at another's misfortune* showed that not only envy but also other negative emotions, dislike and anger, independent of envy can give rise to pleasure at another's misfortune. H. Smith in a study showed strongly support linking envy with schadenfreude.

## Discussion

The aim of this study was to identify the emotion of schadenfreude and review the role of envy and dislike in its occurrence. First, the definition of schadenfreude and its place in the classification of emotions and the theory of emotion evaluation were examined and the results showed that schadenfreude is a self-conscious, moral and situational emotion. Dislike is a strong predictor of schadenfreude and malicious envy not benign envy is also important role in prediction of schadenfreude. Also, the result of the researches showed that personality traits such as dark triad personality, higher levels of psychopathy, narcissism and Machiavellianism were associated with higher levels of schadenfreude (Erzi, 2020). Psychopathy was positively correlated with schadenfreude (James et al., 2014). psychopathy was more related with schadenfreude in social context. Narcissism was positively correlated with schadenfreude too (James et al., 2014). Narcissism

correlated more significantly with schadenfreude in academic context (Erzi, 2020). Machiavellianism was positively correlated with schadenfreude as well. Abell and Brewer (2018) found that woman who got high score on Machiavellianism, were likely to show schadenfreude when there was a social competitive situation; sexual competition with members of the same sex was also related with Machiavellianism (Brewer& Abell, 2015).

## Conclusion

According to the results of researches that has been obtained in different situations, schadenfreude is more likely occur in competitive situations and situations that are grounds for envy and dislike, so try to avoid being in competitive situations and move to Being a justice and empathetic society can reduce the happiness of people in face of the misfortunes of others. The researchers showed that this emotion can be examined in relation to various psychological variables and its results can be used in various fields such as advertising. However, this emotion is not fully understood and has been completely neglected in Iran. Researchers are suggested to study this emotion in different interpersonal and intergroup situations and in relation to different psychological variables in Iranian society.

## Disclosure Statements

The authors of this study declared no conflicts of interest.

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