

# Their Pain, Our Gain

You've heard that misery loves company. Enjoying others' misery does, too

By Emily Anthes

There is no English translation for the German word *schadenfreude*—that small, private rush of glee in response to someone else's misfortune. But everyone recognizes the emotion, even if they might not have a word for it (or admit to feeling it). Tabloids have long relied on people's fascination with public failures: moralizing politicians or entitled actresses disgraced for their peccadilloes. And in recent years *schadenfreude* has become a prime-time staple, with models, boyfriends, parents, overweight people and recovering addicts, among others, routinely humiliated on cable television.

Scientists who study *schadenfreude* are learning that this secret happiness at another person's loss has biological underpinnings. The feeling registers in the brain as a distinct form of pleasure, a satisfaction comparable to that of eating a good meal.

In a study published in 2009 neuroscientist Hidehiko Takahashi of Japan's National Institute of Radiological Sciences and his colleagues asked 19 adult volunteers to read scenarios describing the successes and misfortunes of fictional characters and to report their feelings about these people. Meanwhile Takahashi's team scanned their brain using functional MRI. The researchers found that when the participants reported feeling envy, a brain region known as the anterior cingulate cortex became unusually active. The anterior cingulate plays a role in processing physical pain, suggesting that envy is an unpleasant experience. On the other hand, feeling *schadenfreude* activated the striatum, a brain region involved in processing rewards. Thinking bad thoughts can feel good.

From an evolutionary standpoint, *schadenfreude* makes a

## FAST FACTS

### Schadenfreude Groupies

- 1» *Schadenfreude* registers in the brain as a distinct form of pleasure, a satisfaction comparable with that of eating a good meal.
- 2» *Schadenfreude* makes evolutionary sense. The world is a competitive place, and an individual benefits, for instance, when a sexual competitor breaks a leg or a hunting rival falls ill.
- 3» Intergroup *schadenfreude* can be especially potent and insidious. It may, in fact, help drive deep-seated prejudices that can lead to violence.

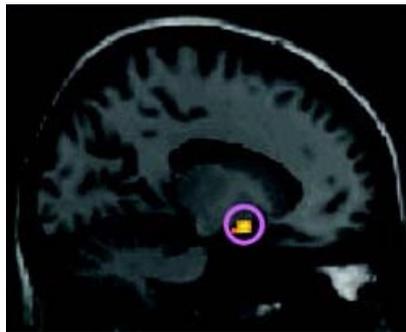
lot of sense. The world is a competitive place, and an individual benefits, for instance, when a sexual competitor breaks a leg or a hunting rival falls ill. “Anytime someone suffers a misfortune, that’s an opportunity,” says social psychologist Richard H. Smith of the University of Kentucky. “Life is essentially relativistic; [others’] misfortunes are good for the self.”

Most of the psychological research has focused on the schadenfreude that people feel toward individuals—such as when a girl who dissed you in high school goes through a nasty, high-profile divorce. But a few investigators are beginning to explore how schadenfreude plays out between rival groups, such as nations, political parties or sports teams. They are finding that such intergroup schadenfreude can be even more potent, and insidious, than individual schadenfreude. It may, in fact, be the first step toward more malicious group interactions, driving deep-seated prejudices that can ultimately lead to violence.

### Strength in Numbers

In one study that revealed the exceptional intensity of intergroup schadenfreude, social psychologists Wilco van Dijk of Leiden University in the Netherlands and Jaap Ouwkerk of the Free University Amsterdam asked individuals—and separately, teams of two people—to play a game in which they were given money and could decide how much to share with others. After several rounds of sharing, the participants were allowed to vote one of their fellow players or teams out of the game for whatever reason. Van Dijk and Ouwkerk found that the teams shared less money with their competitors than individuals did, and they also reported that the participants felt more joy when rival teams were voted out of the game than when individuals were.

“Schadenfreude is normally triggered by competitiveness,” van Dijk says. And social scientists have repeatedly documented that individuals in groups are more competitive than they are by themselves. Researchers are not sure what is responsible



In one study, feelings of envy elicited activity in a brain region called the anterior cingulate cortex (top), an arbiter of physical pain. By contrast, schadenfreude activated the striatum (bottom), a reward center.

everyone, Smith and his colleagues hypothesized that some Americans might be quietly pleased to see the economy weaken if they thought the downturn would threaten their rival political party. They tested this scenario in a study published in 2009.

The scientists analyzed undergraduate students’ reactions to current events in the run-up to the 2004 and 2008 presidential elections and the 2006 midterm elections. The students completed surveys about their political beliefs and gave their reactions to news stories detailing various national and political misfortunes. The researchers found that Democrats experienced schadenfreude—reporting that they were “secretly happy,” for instance—when reading about the economic downturn and the deaths of American troops abroad because they believed these events would bode well for their party. “Whether the event was good or bad in the objective sense was not as important as ‘Well, will this help my party or not?’ ” Smith says. And the more strongly the students identified as Democrats, the more schadenfreude they reported. (The Democrats, Smith noted, were sad that soldiers had died, but unlike the Republicans, many of them thought the cloud of casualties had a silver lining.)

### From Bad Karma to Bad Behavior

Schadenfreude is not in itself terribly worrisome. “What becomes dangerous is what schadenfreude turns into,” says social

for this phenomenon—known as the individual-group discontinuity effect—but one theory holds that group members feed off the emotions of other team members, amplifying their drive to win and desire to eliminate rivals.

Schadenfreude may be particularly susceptible to this group effect, says social psychologist Russell Spears of Cardiff University in Wales. Because it is not a feeling people trumpet with pride, individuals may hide it, dampening its effect. But among members of a team, the emotion becomes acceptable as a way to bond or express group loyalty, and knowing that others share your joy can constitute permission to embrace the feeling. Once in the open, the feeling can grow. “The sharing of an emotion is likely to strengthen it by validating it,” Spears says.

In fact, researchers have found that some people may identify so strongly with their groups that they experience schadenfreude in situations that are objectively bad for an entire society, including perhaps themselves. Take, for instance, a recession. Although it hurts ev-

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# Terrorists and dictators looking for new recruits exploit the human tendency to feel joyful when rivals suffer.

Some psychologists believe that schadenfreude could have helped motivate violent groups such as Rwandan soldiers (left), disciples of Hitler (center) and militant jihadists (right) to wage war on others.



psychologist Colin W. Leach of the University of Connecticut. In a 2009 study he and Spears asked 119 Dutch students to complete a series of surveys, which included questions about how much they disliked various nationalities, including the Germans. The subjects then read articles about a major soccer tournament in which their national team reached the semifinals and the German team—a fierce rival—was eliminated early in the tournament. The students reported how they felt about the German loss and to what degree a list of positive and negative traits such as “persistent,” “strong,” “arrogant” and “rude” applied to Germans as a whole.

Although a person’s overall fondness for or dislike of Germany was not correlated with the amount of schadenfreude he or she felt, the more schadenfreude a student experienced, the more he or she subsequently believed the negative stereotypes of the German populace. The researchers speculated that the students wanted to rationalize the fact that they felt pleasure at another group’s misfortune. To do so, Leach says, they might have had to tell themselves, “We’re feeling good about people suffering, and we’d only do that to bad people, people who aren’t deserving of nicer treatment.” In this way, schadenfreude resulting from seemingly benign rivalries could foster real prejudice.

The intergroup emotions Leach and Spears uncovered in their studies were so strong that they speculated in a 2008 book chapter that schadenfreude could play a role in serious group conflicts, including those that led to the Rwandan genocide and the Holocaust. Could schadenfreude explain why many Germans did not come forward to help the Jews during the Holocaust? Even those who would never have perpetrated violence may have felt some satisfaction in seeing the Jews suffer. “There was a lot of resentment built up toward the Jews at that time,” Spears says, “so that could have motivated schadenfreude and the absence of intervention” among some Germans.

Schadenfreude could then set the stage for further prejudice. “The more you express this nasty feeling toward a group,” Leach says, “the further you’re pushing them out of your circle of moral concern and sympathy.” By devaluing the lives of

members of rival groups, schadenfreude could lead to tacit acceptance of discrimination or even hatred.

Bystanders who find themselves secretly enjoying bearing witness to such persecution may be on the road to becoming perpetrators themselves. “You can imagine a kind of vicious circle,” Leach says, in which you “enjoy their suffering so much that maybe if the opportunity arises, you want to cause that suffering.” Terrorists, dictators and extremists looking for new recruits may have figured out this relationship, Leach thinks, and they exploit the human tendency to feel happy when rivals suffer. Leaders of violent groups, he says, may be “just really good and intuitive social psychologists.”

Schadenfreude is a common emotion, but it is one people rarely talk about. Researchers such as Spears and Leach are hoping to break that silence, believing that we should confer more openly about the private joy we feel when others suffer misfortunes. Such a dialogue might help us recognize the feeling more readily and prevent it from escalating. “It’s subtle,” Leach says of schadenfreude. “But it has this potential to turn into something else—to be a first step on a slippery slope.” **M**

## (Further Reading)

- ◆ **Intergroup Schadenfreude: Conditions and Consequences.** Russell Spears and Colin Leach in *The Social Life of Emotions*. Edited by Larissa Z. Tiedens and Colin Wayne Leach. Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- ◆ **Why Neighbors Don’t Stop the Killing: The Role of Group-Based Schadenfreude.** Russell Spears and Colin Leach in *Why Neighbors Kill: Explaining the Breakdown of Ethnic Relations*. Edited by Victoria M. Esses and Richard A. Vernon. Blackwell Publishing, 2008.
- ◆ **Politics, Schadenfreude, and Ingroup Identification: The Sometimes Happy Thing about a Poor Economy and Death.** David J. Y. Combs, Caitlin A. J. Powell, David Ryan Schurtz and Richard H. Smith in *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 45, No. 4, pages 635–646; July 2009.