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 if 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:

1. To determine, via act nomination, a range of domains in which men and women are likely to experience schadenfreude.
2. To examine differences in men’s and women’s reported pleasure in response to imagining a same-sex target experiencing a range of misfortune events.
3. 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.

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 is on academic failure as a misfortune). Second, we asked men and women to think about a specific person they knew 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).

Method

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 felt the emotion. The circumstances that students nominated spanned a variety of domains and served as a foundation from which we expanded. Friends of the same sex and family members were the main targets in the circumstances that students nominated; strangers rarely appeared. We split the nominations into domains, and, informally surveying friends of the research team, we generated several specific examples for each domain.

Phase I

In Phase II, 68 men and 241 women (mean age = 21.59) completed an online questionnaire about “mixed emotions.” We established websites on various Facebook group pages and sent the survey link to students who participated 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 (hereafter “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 how much such pleasure they would feel. All ratings were on a 11-point scale (0=No sympathy/0=No pleasure). 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 rate 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.

REFERENCE


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