

BRIEF REPORT

Self-Esteem, Self-Affirmation, and Schadenfreude

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In two studies we demonstrated that self-esteem has a negative relationship with schadenfreude toward a high achiever and that this relationship was mediated by the self-threat evoked by this high achiever. Moreover, we showed that this indirect relationship was contingent on an opportunity to affirm the self. When no self-affirmation opportunity was available, low self-esteem participants experienced a stronger self-threat when confronted with a high achiever, and this self-threat increased their schadenfreude, whereas this response was attenuated when they were given an opportunity to self-affirm. These findings indicate that the misfortunes of others can evoke schadenfreude because they provide people with an opportunity to protect or enhance their self-views.

Keywords: schadenfreude, self-esteem, self-affirmation, self-evaluation, emotion

Schadenfreude, pleasure at the misfortunes of others, is defined by Heider (1958) as a discordant emotional reaction to the lot of another person. In other words, in a schadenfroher person a negative experience of someone else elicits a positive emotion. But *why* do people sometimes enjoy the misfortunes of others? Frijda (1988) argued—in his influential article, “The Laws of Emotion”—that “[. . .] *Emotions arise in response to events that are important to the individual’s goals, motives, or concerns*” (p. 349, italics in original). Consistent with this view, we argue that another’s misfortune can elicit schadenfreude because it satisfies an important concern of the schadenfroher person. In our account, misfortunes happening to others provide an opportunity to protect or to enhance one’s self-view and therefore is one of the underlying motives for the experience of interpersonal schadenfreude. In the present research, we aim to provide support for this assumption by investigating the relationships between self-esteem, self-affirmation, and schadenfreude.

People’s motivation to view themselves positively is regarded by many contemporary psychologists as a primary drive of human behavior (e.g., Baumeister, 1991; Sedikides & Strube, 1997; Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Steele, 1988; Tesser, 1988). In support of the view that misfortunes of others might satisfy this concern, it has

been proposed that one possible route to a more positive self-view involves comparing one’s own lot to that of less fortunate others (e.g., Collins, 1996; Wills, 1981; Wood, 1989). Put differently, people can be pleased by the misfortunes of others because it provides them with social comparison benefits (van Dijk, Ouwerkerk, Wesseling, & van Koningsbruggen, 2011).

If another’s misfortune can be pleasing because it provides an opportunity to protect or enhance one’s self-view, people with a greater motivation for self-protection or self-enhancement should experience more schadenfreude following another’s misfortune. Indeed, recent research shows that people who experience an acute (situational) self-evaluation threat, and therefore have a greater need to protect their self-view, feel more schadenfreude following another’s misfortune than those who do not experience such a threat (van Dijk et al., 2011). Moreover, research in an intergroup context shows that a threat of in-group inferiority exacerbates intergroup schadenfreude and that individuals’ pain about their in-group inferiority predicts schadenfreude at the failure of a successful outgroup (Leach & Spears, 2008; Leach, Spears, Branscombe, & Doosje, 2003). These findings corroborate the view that an acute threat to the individual or collective self can fuel schadenfreude and that misfortunes of others can provide people with an opportunity to protect a threatened self-view.

In the present research we aim to provide more compelling support for the assumption that misfortunes happening to others can provide people with self-protection or self-enhancement opportunities. Our assumption implies that schadenfreude should increase when people’s motivation to self-protect or self-enhance becomes greater, whereas it should decrease when this motivation diminishes. We examine these implications by investigating the relationships between self-esteem, self-affirmation, and schadenfreude.

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First, we expect that people with low self-esteem will experience more *schadenfreude* at the misfortune of a high achiever than people with high self-esteem. This expectation is consistent with downward comparison theory. For example, it has been argued that low self-esteem people have a strong motivation for self-protection and often engage in downward comparison processes (e.g., Aspinwall & Taylor, 1993; Wills, 1981). Moreover, low self-esteem people may feel more threatened by relevant social comparisons to others, who perform well on important domains (e.g., Gibbons, 1986; Tesser, 1988). Therefore, we hypothesize that, as compared with high self-esteem people, low self-esteem people feel more threatened in their self-views by a relevant high achiever, and this increased self-threat intensifies their *schadenfreude* if this high achiever suffers a misfortune.

Second, we expect that providing low self-esteem people with an opportunity for self-affirmation will attenuate their *schadenfreude* at the misfortune of a high achiever. This expectation is based on self-affirmation theory (Steele, 1988). According to this theory, an opportunity to affirm self-integrity will decrease defensive reactions to threatening information. Typically, self-affirmation procedures occur when people are asked to identify an important value or aspect of life and subsequently are given the opportunity to reflect upon this self-relevant aspect (McQueen & Klein, 2006). Indeed, self-affirmation procedures like this have been shown to reduce defensiveness in, for instance, dissonance reduction (Steele & Liu, 1983), rumination (Koole, Smeets, van Knippenberg, & Dijksterhuis, 1999), and health information processing (van Koningsbruggen, Das, & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2009). Moreover, self-affirmation has been found to reduce the use of defensive strategies in threatening social comparison situations (Tesser & Cornell, 1991).

Since self-affirmation procedures bolster feelings of self-integrity, Steele (1988) suggested that it should reduce the motivation for self-protection or self-enhancement through other means (e.g., the misfortunes of others). Accordingly, we hypothesize that an opportunity to self-affirm will attenuate *schadenfreude* for low self-esteem people. Offering people low in self-esteem an opportunity for self-affirmation to restore their global sense of self-integrity should reduce their need to use the misfortunes of others to achieve this goal. Sherman and Cohen (2006, p. 187) argue in their review paper on self-affirmation theory: "Much research within the self-affirmation framework examines whether an affirmation of self-integrity, unrelated to a specific provoking threat, can attenuate or eliminate people's normal response to that threat. If it does, then one can infer that the response was motivated by a desire to protect self-integrity."

Present Research

In the present research we aim to demonstrate that people's self-esteem is negatively related to their *schadenfreude* toward the misfortune of a high achiever and that this relationship is mediated by the self-threat that a high achiever evokes. Moreover, we want to show that this mediated relationship is contingent on the opportunity for self-affirmation. Together, this would provide important empirical support for our assumption that misfortunes of others can be pleasing because they provide people with an opportunity to protect or enhance their self-views. Moreover, these findings will be an important addition to the literature in that they

will provide valuable insights about when and why people experience *schadenfreude*.

In both of our studies participants were provided with information about a relevant social comparison other, who performed well on important domains (a high achieving student from their own university) and who suffered a subsequent misfortune. In Study 1, we hypothesized that low self-esteem participants would experience more *schadenfreude* than high self-esteem participants and that this relationship would be mediated by the self-threat that the high achiever evoked in low self-esteem participants. In Study 2, we hypothesized that the indirect relationship of self-esteem with *schadenfreude* through self-threat for low self-esteem participants would be moderated by their opportunity for self-affirmation. Thus, we expected that when no self-affirmation opportunity was available, a high achiever would evoke a stronger self-threat in low self-esteem participants than in high self-esteem participants and, subsequently, it would intensify *schadenfreude* toward the high-achiever's misfortune (cf. Study 1); whereas this response would be attenuated when low self-esteem participants were given an opportunity to self-affirm.

Study 1

Method

Participants, design, and procedure. Participants were 70 undergraduates (40 women, 30 men) who were told that they would take part in two unrelated studies. In the first study, participants' self-esteem was assessed, whereas in the second study they were presented with two interviews that introduced a high-achieving student, who subsequently suffered a misfortune. Participants were randomly presented with interviews concerning a female or male student. The target or participant's gender did not affect the results reported below.¹ Unless specified otherwise, all variables were assessed by asking participants to specify their (dis)agreement with relevant statements (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*).

Self-esteem. Self-esteem was assessed with the State Self-Esteem Scale (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991), a 20-item measure of state self-esteem ($\alpha = .85$; $M = 4.92$, $SD = 0.74$).

Target person and misfortune information. As in previous research (van Dijk et al., 2005, 2006, 2011), we presented participants with two written interviews. In the first interview, a student was described in terms of high academic achievements and high likelihood to get a good job. Before participants read the second interview they completed measures that assessed their feelings of self-threat evoked by the high-achieving student. Next, participants read an interview with the student's supervisor that allegedly was conducted three months after the interview with the student. From this interview participants learned that the student recently had suffered a setback, as the supervisor remarked that the student had given a very poor presentation of his or her thesis and had to

¹ In one of our earlier studies we found stronger *schadenfreude* towards same-gender targets (van Dijk et al., 2006). The reason that we did not obtain such an effect in the present study might be that our present target, a fellow student, was sufficiently similar to participants to evoke the relevant social comparison processes.

rewrite major parts of it. Consequently, the student was about to suffer a serious delay in his or her studies. We then assessed participants' schadenfreude and sympathy toward this misfortune. Upon completing these questions, they were debriefed and thanked.

Self-threat, schadenfreude, and sympathy. Following the interview with the target person, self-threat was assessed with three statements (e.g., "I feel less good when I compare my results to those of Marleen/Mark"; $\alpha = .65$; $M = 3.36$, $SD = 1.22$). After participants learned about the misfortune in the second interview, schadenfreude was assessed with five statements (e.g., "I enjoy what happened to Marleen/Mark"; "I couldn't resist a little smile"; "I feel schadenfreude"²; $\alpha = .87$; $M = 2.63$, $SD = 1.19$) and sympathy was assessed with three statements (e.g., "I commiserate with Marleen/Mark about what happened"; $\alpha = .77$; $M = 4.14$, $SD = 1.21$).

Results and Discussion

Mediation analysis. To test our hypothesis that the self-threat evoked by a high-achiever mediates the (negative) relationship between self-esteem and schadenfreude, we conducted simple mediation analysis advocated by Preacher and Hayes (2004). Results showed that (a) low self-esteem participants experienced more schadenfreude than high self-esteem participants ($B = -0.37$, $t = -1.96$, $p = .05$), (b) low self-esteem participants felt more self-threat than high-self-esteem participants ($B = -0.86$, $t = -5.00$, $p < .001$), (c) after controlling for their self-esteem, participants who felt self-threatened experienced more schadenfreude than those who felt less self-threatened ($B = 0.38$, $t = 2.96$, $p = .004$), and (d) the relationship between self-esteem and schadenfreude was not significant after controlling for self-threat ($B = -0.05$, $t < 1$, $p = .82$). To test whether the indirect relationship of self-esteem with schadenfreude through self-threat was statistically significant we used a bootstrap approach (with 5,000 bootstrap resamples). Results showed that this indirect relationship is estimated to lie between -0.62 and -0.09 , with a 95% confidence interval (CI). Because zero is not in the 95% CI, we can conclude that the indirect relationship is statistically significant ($p < .05$). Together, these findings indicate that self-threat fully mediated the relationship between self-esteem and schadenfreude. Similar analyses on sympathy yielded no significant effects.

Study 2

Method

Participants, design, and procedure. Participants were 42 undergraduates (28 women, 14 men) who were randomly assigned to one of the two self-affirmation conditions (nonaffirmed, self-affirmed). They were told that they would take part in several unrelated studies. These studies subsequently identified participants' most and least important values to manipulate self-affirmation, assessed their self-esteem, introduced the target person and assessed participant's perceived self-threat, provided participants with either an opportunity or no opportunity to self-affirm, and, finally, introduced the misfortune of the target person and assessed schadenfreude and sympathy toward this misfortune.

As Study 1 yielded no significant effects of the target's gender and to limit the number of different variations of the interview, male participants were presented with interviews concerning a male target, whereas female participants were presented with interviews concerning a female target. The participant's gender did not affect the results reported below.

Values. Participants were presented with the six values (science, business, art, social, politics, and religion) of the Allport-Vernon-Lindzey study of Values (AVL; Allport, Vernon, & Lindzey, 1960), which they had to rank according to their personal importance.

Self-esteem. Self-esteem was assessed with the State Self-Esteem Scale (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991) using Visual Analog Scales (0 = *strongly disagree*; 100 = *strongly agree*; $\alpha = .91$; $M = 68.09$, $SD = 14.65$).

Target person information and self-threat. Target information was provided using the same interview as in Study 1. Self-threat was assessed with the same statements as in Study 1 ($\alpha = .72$; $M = 3.23$, $SD = 1.32$).

Self-affirmation manipulation. The manipulation of self-affirmation was based on a frequently used procedure (e.g., Tesser & Cornell, 1991; van Koningsbruggen & Das, 2009) whereby participants complete one of the AVL-subcales (science, business, art, social, politics, or religion; Allport et al., 1960) that consist of 10 statements with two possible answers. Participants were asked to choose between the answers. For every statement, one answer reflected the scale's main value (e.g., religion) and the other answer reflected one of the remaining values (science, business, art, social, or politics). For example, a statement from the religion scale was "It is more important to me that my child receives education in: religion or political organization." Participants in the self-affirmed condition completed the scale that matched their previously indicated most important value (see *Values*). Participants in the nonaffirmed condition completed the scale that matched their least important value. Thus, for participants in the self-affirmed condition it was possible to affirm their most important value ten times. However, participants in the nonaffirmed condition were not given this opportunity.

Misfortune information. Following the manipulation of self-affirmation, misfortune information was provided using the same interview as in Study 1.

Schadenfreude and sympathy. Schadenfreude ($\alpha = .89$; $M = 2.60$, $SD = 1.24$ and $M = 2.58$, $SD = 1.37$, for the self-affirmed and nonaffirmed conditions, respectively) and sympathy ($\alpha = .85$; $M = 4.18$, $SD = 1.45$ and $M = 4.05$, $SD = 1.41$, for the self-affirmed and nonaffirmed conditions, respectively) were assessed using the same statements as in Study 1.

Results and Discussion

Manipulation check. To assess the validity of the self-affirmation manipulation, we counted the number of times participants endorsed the manipulated value. Total scores on the affirmation task ranged from 0 to 10, with higher scores indicating higher affirmation. As intended, self-affirmed participants endorsed the manipulated value more often ($M = 7.10$, $SD = 1.97$)

² We used the term "leedvermaak," which is the Dutch word for schadenfreude.

than nonaffirmed participants ($M = 3.14$, $SD = 1.81$), $t(40) = 6.80$, $p < .001$.

Moderated mediation analysis. To test our hypothesis that the indirect effect of self-esteem on schadenfreude through self-threat is moderated by self-affirmation, we used a procedure advocated by Preacher, Rucker, and Hayes (2007) to assess the expected conditional indirect effect (moderated mediation, Model 3).

First, we modeled the relationship of self-esteem with self-threat (mediator). Results showed a significant negative relationship between self-esteem and self-threat ($B = -0.05$, $t = -4.21$, $p < .001$). Next, we modeled the indirect relationship of self-esteem with schadenfreude through self-threat. This indirect relationship was hypothesized to be moderated by self-affirmation. Results showed a statistically significant interaction between self-affirmation (moderator) and self-threat (mediator) on schadenfreude ($B = -0.73$, $t = -2.61$, $p = .01$), which implies that the indirect relationship of self-esteem with schadenfreude through self-threat is moderated by self-affirmation. The fact that the beta of the interaction is negative is consistent with the interpretation that the indirect relationship is stronger for nonaffirmed participants than for self-affirmed participants. Next, we probed the indirect relationship by estimating conditional indirect relationships at both values of the moderator (nonaffirmed, self-affirmed). We used a bootstrap approach (with 5,000 bootstrap resamples) to test whether the indirect relationship of self-esteem with schadenfreude through self-threat is statistically significant for nonaffirmed participants but not for self-affirmed participants. Results showed that the indirect relationship for nonaffirmed participants is estimated to lie between -0.06 and -0.008 (95% CI). Because zero is not in the 95% CI, we can conclude that, for nonaffirmed participants, the indirect relationship is statistically significant ($p < .05$). Moreover, results showed that the indirect relationship for self-affirmed participants is estimated to lie between -0.02 and 0.04 (95% CI). Because zero is in the 95% CI, we can conclude that, for self-affirmed participants, the indirect relationship is not statistically significant ($p > .05$).

Additional analyses showed that the interaction between self-esteem and self-affirmation had a significant relation with schadenfreude, $B = 0.04$, $t = 3.25$, $p = .002$. As expected, when self-affirmed, participants' self-esteem was not related to their experienced schadenfreude ($r = .09$, $p = .69$), whereas in the nonaffirmed condition, self-esteem was negatively related to schadenfreude ($r = -.66$, $p = .001$).

Together, these findings indicate that the indirect relationship of self-esteem with schadenfreude through self-threat is contingent on self-affirmation status (moderated mediation). That is, self-threat mediates the relationship of self-esteem with schadenfreude for nonaffirmed participants, whereas for self-affirmed participants the relationship between self-esteem and schadenfreude is not mediated by self-threat. Similar analyses on sympathy yielded no significant effects.

Discussion

The present research shows that people with low self-esteem experience more schadenfreude toward the misfortune of a high-achiever than those with high self-esteem and that this relationship is mediated by the self-threat evoked by the high-achiever. More-

over, the indirect relationship between self-esteem and schadenfreude is contingent on an opportunity of self-affirmation. When no self-affirmation opportunity is available, low-self-esteem participants experience a stronger self-threat when confronted with a high-achiever, and this self-threat increases their schadenfreude. This response is attenuated when they are given an opportunity to self-affirm. These findings support our assumption that the misfortunes of others can evoke schadenfreude because they provide people with an opportunity to protect or enhance their self-views.

The present research contributes to the existing literature on schadenfreude in important ways. First, our findings indicate that individual differences in self-esteem affect the experience of schadenfreude. To our knowledge, two earlier studies indirectly examined the role of self-esteem in schadenfreude. However, these earlier studies yielded inconsistent results. Feather (1994) showed that people low in self-esteem expressed more favorable attitudes toward the fall of high achievers, whereas Smith et al. (1996) found that self-confidence (used as a proxy measure for self-esteem) was unrelated to schadenfreude. The present research contributes to the literature by showing, in two studies, a significant (negative) relation between self-esteem and schadenfreude and revealing both mediating and moderating variables in this relationship. Second, our findings indicate that schadenfreude can represent a response to self-threat. This corroborates earlier research in which self-threat was manipulated and was found to enhance schadenfreude following the misfortunes of other individuals (van Dijk et al., 2011) or out-groups (Leach et al., 2003) and adds further support for the role of self-related processes in the experience of schadenfreude. Third, our findings provide a novel demonstration that self-affirmation attenuates schadenfreude for individuals with low self-esteem. As self-affirmation manipulations represent an accepted method for testing whether a response is motivated by self-evaluative concerns (Sherman & Cohen, 2006), the present findings provide strong support for the notion that schadenfreude can be motivated by a desire for self-protection and self-enhancement.

Possible Limitations and Future Research

In our research, participants were confronted with the misfortune of a high-achieving other. Because we did not include a condition in which they were confronted with a misfortune of an average-achieving or low-achieving other, it is not clear whether a high-achieving other is necessary to evoke differences in schadenfreude between low and high self-esteem individuals. One could argue that low self-esteem individuals are more easily self-threatened overall and are therefore generally more prone to feeling schadenfreude, independent of whether the other is a high achiever or not. Future studies can address this question, for example, by manipulating previous achievements of the unfortunate other (cf. Smith et al., 1996; van Dijk et al., 2006).

Concluding Remarks

Earlier research has shown that another's misfortune elicits schadenfreude when this misfortune is perceived as deserved (Feather, 1994; van Dijk, Ouwerkerk, Goslinga, & Nieweg, 2005), befalls an envied (Smith et al., 1996; van Dijk, Ouwerkerk, Goslinga, Nieweg, & Gallucci, 2006) or disliked person (Hareli &

Weiner, 2002; van Dijk et al., 2006), or when the *schadenfroh* person experienced a self-evaluation threat (van Dijk et al., 2011). Thus, *schadenfreude* appears to be a multidetermined emotion. Consistent with Frijda's (1988) notion that emotions arise in response to events that are important to people's goals, motives, and concerns, we argue that each determinant of *schadenfreude* reflects an underlying concern of the *schadenfroh* person. Most people care about just and deserved outcomes (Feather, 1994). Therefore, they may enjoy the misfortunes of those they dislike or resent as they tend to appraise their misfortunes as more deserved. Envy is usually a very unpleasant emotion, which can include feelings of inferiority, hostility, and injustice, and a misfortune befalling an envied person can be pleasing because it renders the advantaged other less enviable and removes the very basis of envy (Smith et al., 1996). Frijda (1988) argued that "every emotion hides a concern". The present research indicates that the social comparison benefits offered by the misfortunes of others is one of the concerns that *schadenfreude* hides.

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