

Adolescents' Narratives of Schadenfreude

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Abstract

This study explored the situational determinants of schadenfreude, how schadenfreude changes as a function of relationship, and how recollections of schadenfreude may vary by age. Using a narrative approach, 12- and 15-year-olds ($N = 60$) described times they felt schadenfreude toward various peers and adults. We coded their responses to extract information regarding preceding misfortunes and underlying reasoning for schadenfreude. We found that schadenfreude often involved another's physical harm and failure and was rooted in reasons of deservingness and personal gain. There were unique trends in the types of misfortunes and reasons mentioned toward each target of interest. Finally, deservingness reasoning was prominent within 15-year-olds' schadenfreude experiences. The findings are discussed in relation to adolescents' emotional experiences in conflict situations.

Adolescents' Narratives of Schadenfreude

Schadenfreude—a feeling of happiness at the pain or misfortune of another (Feather, 2008)—derives from German words *Schaden*, meaning harm, and *Freude*, meaning joy. Feelings of schadenfreude are perceived to be socially undesirable as they can accompany other malicious motivations and emotions such as retribution, envy and hatred (Dasborough & Harvey, 2017; Smith, Powell, Combs & Schurtz, 2009). Nevertheless, schadenfreude is a commonly experienced social emotion and as such, researchers have become increasingly interested in determining why it occurs and how it develops. Here, we aimed to contribute to these efforts by investigating adolescents' personal accounts of schadenfreude using a narrative approach. Narratives provide rich information about emotional development in relation to real-life experiences—a method that is particularly beneficial for understudied research phenomena (Wainryb, Brehl, & Matwin, 2005). We aimed to explore the experiential determinants underlying schadenfreude (i.e., the types of misfortunes that precede its emergence and the reasons underlying its occurrence), how schadenfreude may differ based on who the target is (e.g., peers, authority figures), and age-related differences in how adolescents interpret their experiences of schadenfreude.

Experiential Determinants of Schadenfreude: Misfortune and Reasoning

Misfortune. Schadenfreude has been experimentally induced in adults using several methods (e.g., recall, vignettes, videos). These methods have involved presenting the participants with various misfortunes involving themes of failure (e.g., Kramer, Yucel-Aybat & Lau-Gesk, 2011), physical harm (e.g., Hareli & Weiner, 2002) and social humiliation (e.g., van Dijk, Ouwerkerk, van Koningsbruggen & Wesseling, 2012). Most of these studies used hypothetical scenarios and preselected the misfortunes that would likely elicit schadenfreude in their

participants. As such, it remains unclear which misfortunes are most likely to galvanize schadenfreude in naturally occurring situations (see Gonzales-Gadea, Ibanez, & Sigman, 2018). To fill this research gap, we aimed to examine the most common types of misfortunes that elicit schadenfreude in adolescents' real-life experiences.

Reasoning. Two reasons have been found to underly schadenfreude: deservingness and personal gain (see Wang, Lilienfeld, & Rochat, 2019). Misfortunes that are perceived to be deserved elicit feelings of schadenfreude because these misfortunes satisfy the observer's belief of a just world—the idea that everyone ultimately gets what they deserve (van Dijk, Ouwerkerk, Goslinga, & Nieweg, 2005). As such, misfortunes that are concomitant with prior misdeeds are often endorsed and evoke happiness in the observer (see Feather, 1996). Research on schadenfreude following the comeuppance of hypocrites further supports this notion (Powell & Smith, 2013).

Schadenfreude embedded within reasons of personal gain occurs when the misfortune of another (particularly an individual with higher status) increases one's self-worth or inspires a sense of superiority (Smith et al., 2009). Van Dijk, Ouwerkerk, Wesseling, and van Koningsbruggen (2011) found that when adults observed a misfortune befall another, their self-evaluations increased, which then spurred feelings of schadenfreude. This suggests that seeing another's misfortune may provide (temporary) psychological benefits for the observer. In the present study, we explore the reasons underlying adolescents' schadenfreude.

Effect of Target on Schadenfreude

The degree to which the determinants above galvanize schadenfreude likely depends on *who* the target is. For instance, seeing an enemy fail may prompt more schadenfreude than if the same failure happened to a friend (Hareli & Weiner, 2002), likely because a relationship with a

friend is more important than a relationship with an enemy. Since adolescents spend time in various environments, they have relationships with individuals that vary in status and likability (e.g., friends, enemies, teachers, parents). As such, similar to other emotional experiences such as sympathy (Eisenberg, Sprinrad & Knafo-Noam, 2015), it is reasonable to assume that the characteristics of the target of schadenfreude play a part in its experience. In the present study, we investigated the degree to which the above-mentioned determinants of schadenfreude may be salient depending on the nature of the relationship with the target.

Developmental Differences in Schadenfreude

Recent research shows that by 4 years of age, children are able to experience schadenfreude in contexts involving ethical norm violations (Schindler, Körner, Bauer, Hadji, & Rudolph, 2015; Schulz, Rudolph, Tscharaktschiew, & Rudolph 2013). In these studies, children report feeling schadenfreude more strongly toward hypothetical characters who had immoral intentions or who behave immorally (e.g., pushed someone). Extending this work, our study aims to garner knowledge about how adolescents aged 12 to 15 years make meaning of their schadenfreude experiences, and how their interpretations may differ. We chose to focus on these age groups because they can draw self-related insights from moral conflict situations (Habermas & de Silveira, 2008) and as such, can provide in-depth information about their schadenfreude. Further, no study to our knowledge has examined schadenfreude in early to middle adolescence.

The Present Study

In summary, we examined adolescents' experiences of schadenfreude using a narrative approach. Our first aim was to identify the primary experiential determinants of schadenfreude based on the types of misfortunes and reasons expressed within adolescents' narratives. We expected adolescents to talk about a range of misfortunes and predicted that they would focus on

domains of failure and punishment due to the developmental salience of competition and fairness (Pomerantz, Ruble, Frey, & Greulich, 1995; Smith & Warneken, 2016). Next, replicating previous findings, we hypothesized that themes of deservingness and personal gain would be reflected in adolescents' reasoning (Wang et al., 2019). Then, we investigated trends in how themes of misfortunes and reasons varied by target: liked peer, disliked peer, teacher, parent. Finally, we examined age differences in how schadenfreude is experienced. We hypothesized developmental increases in deservingness reasoning with age due to the salience of justice and retaliation in adolescence (e.g., Frey, Pearson, & Cohen, 2015).

Method

Participants

A community sample of 60 12- ($M_{\text{age}} = 12.59$ years, $SD = 0.29$, 41% girls, $n = 31$) and 15-year-olds ($M_{\text{age}} = 15.60$ years, $SD = 0.28$, 48% girls, $n = 29$) and their primary caregivers from an urban Canadian city was used. A small sample size was targeted due to the qualitative nature of the study (Creswell, 1998). Based on data saturation, no new themes or codes emerged following the collection of 60 data points and thus data collection ceased (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006; Urqhart, 2013). Participants were recruited via a pre-existing database, flyers and recruitment events held at community centres. Participants reported diverse ethnic origins: North American (28%), Asian (17%), European (12%), Caribbean and South American (5%), Middle Eastern (3%), African, (3%), and other or multiple origins (27%; 5% missing). Primary caregivers reported their highest completed level of education: high school graduates (10%), post-secondary and university graduates (83%), and postgraduates (5%; 2% missing). The sample was representative of the community in which the study took place (Statistics Canada, 2016).

Measures

Schadenfreude narratives. Four narratives were obtained from each participant. We asked the participants to recall a time in which they felt schadenfreude following a misfortune that happened to four targets: a peer they like, a peer they dislike, a teacher, and a parent. Each narrative was obtained using the following instruction: “Tell me about a time you felt good or okay after seeing or hearing of [target] suffer a misfortune. Pick a time you remember really well and tell me everything you remember about that time” (Shantz, 1993; Wainryb et al., 2005). We asked the question this way because of the social stigma of schadenfreude—we wanted to ease the participants into considering times they felt good following another’s misfortune by having them think of times they also felt okay. Previous research also considers feelings of neutrality or satisfaction as schadenfreude (Powell & Smith, 2013). If participants did not explain why they felt schadenfreude or what type of harm the victim suffered, the interviewer further prompted by asking: “Tell me more about what happened” or “why did you feel that way?”

Coding and reliability. Participants’ narratives were coded using a coding scheme based on ours and others’ similar qualitative work (blinded for peer review). Regarding the experiential determinants, the type of misfortune that was mentioned in each narrative was coded into five categories: relational harm, physical harm, failure, punishment, and property loss. Reasoning was coded into three categories: deservingness, personal gain, and disengagement. Table 1 displays category descriptions and prototypical examples. Two research assistants independently coded a random subsample of responses (i.e., 25%). The reliability was high ($\kappa = 0.87$, range $\kappa = 0.75 - 0.96$) and disagreements were discussed for the final coding. Data was binary coded for our analyses.

Data Analytic Strategy

Our analyses were mostly thematic and exploratory due to the nature of our narrative approach. We conducted descriptive analyses to explore frequencies of the determinants of schadenfreude. We then examined trends in how the determinants of schadenfreude differed based on target status (i.e., liked peer vs. disliked peer vs. teacher vs. parent). Finally, we conducted χ^2 analyses to test developmental differences in schadenfreude between 12- and 15-year-olds.

Results

Experiential Determinants of Schadenfreude: Misfortunes and Reasoning

Physical harm was the most commonly reported misfortune across narratives (24%), followed by failure (21%), punishment (20%), relational harm (16%) and property loss (11%; 7% reported other misfortunes). Personal gain (35%) was the most frequently mentioned reasoning for schadenfreude, followed by deservingness (34%), disengagement (21%), and other reasons (10%).

Target Differences in Schadenfreude

Adolescents readily reported narratives toward peers and authority figures. That is, 85% of participants were able to recount a narrative about schadenfreude toward a peer (92% provided narratives about a disliked peer and 78% about a liked peer) and 76% provided a narrative about an authority figure (85% provided a narrative about a teacher and 67% about a parent). Figure 1 displays the three most frequently mentioned misfortunes and reasons by target. Trends in the data show that failure was a prominent theme within narratives about liked peers, punishment was most often mentioned within narratives about disliked peers, and physical harm was high in all narratives except for narratives about liked peers. Deservingness reasoning was common in narratives about disliked peers, personal gain was most often mentioned within

narratives about teachers, and disengagement often occurred when feeling schadenfreude toward teachers and parents.

Developmental Differences in Schadenfreude

Table 2 displays the frequencies of misfortunes and reasons overall and by age group, as well as χ^2 analyses testing developmental differences (12- versus 15-year-olds) in these variables. No age differences were found for misfortunes. There were age differences in reasoning: 15-year-olds reported more deservingness reasoning compared to 12-year-olds, and 12-year-olds reported more disengagement reasoning compared to 15-year-olds.

Discussion

This study was among the first to explore schadenfreude using a narrative approach in an adolescent sample. Narrative approaches offer a window into how adolescents construct their emotional and social experiences (Wainryb et al., 2005) and are particularly valuable in informing future research on understudied research topics.

Our findings revealed that adolescents mentioned a variety of misfortunes within their narratives which bolsters previous research using adult samples (e.g., Hareli & Weiner, 2002). Unexpectedly, we found that physical harm was most frequently mentioned. This may be because physical pain is perceptually salient and often displayed as comedic within popular media (Potter & Warren, 1998). As expected, failure and punishment were also frequently mentioned. Failure misfortunes reflect the competitive environment that is promoted in adolescence, whereby teens often strive to be top achievers in their classrooms (Kelly & Brandes, 2008). An attunement to the punishment of others may also reflect competition and may be the result of increased delinquency in adolescence—behavior that often involves repercussions from authority. These findings highlight that there are multiple misfortunes that

spur feelings of schadenfreude and focusing on one misfortune over another in research may result in the omission of key experiential information.

Our study also supports research suggesting that schadenfreude is rooted in two main types of reasoning: deservingness and personal gain. Schadenfreude based in personal gain may have self-serving functions that increases competition, self-esteem, and superiority (Smith et al., 2009). Competition permeates Western society and breeds social comparisons which make the misfortunes of others salient (Smith et al., 2009). This motive underlying schadenfreude may be problematic, however, because it may motivate rivalry and aggression instead of cooperation and comradery. Deservingness reasoning underlying schadenfreude highlights another's concern for justice (van Dijk et al., 2005). Researchers have argued that happiness following instances of deserved harm (e.g., punishment) may function as a "stop" signal to the sufferer and may motivate them to return to a moral path (Schulz et al., 2013). Further research is required to examine whether schadenfreude based in these underlying reasons differentially functions to stimulate social behavior.

We also explored whether there may be differences in adolescents' schadenfreude based on target inspired by work suggesting that relationship quality may impact schadenfreude (e.g., Hareli & Weiner, 2002). Our findings show that adolescents may be more likely to feel schadenfreude toward a liked peer following their failure. Educators should be mindful of schadenfreude in friendships as it has the potential to promote spite and competition instead of pride and comradery (Steinbeis & Singer, 2013). Schadenfreude may signal potential increases in status within the relationship in this context. We also found that instances of punishment were highest within narratives about disliked peers. This could be because dislike stems from previous transgression, and so the peer's punishment may signal justice. This is supported by our finding

that deservingness reasoning was highest within narratives about a disliked peer (Schindler et al., 2015). Finally, disengagement reasoning was highest when feeling schadenfreude toward authority figures, which may reflect adolescents' hesitation to truly engage with their experiences of schadenfreude toward those they love and respect. It is important to note that adolescents reported experiencing schadenfreude toward individuals with which they had positive *and* negative relationships; however, the quality of relationship likely influences the nature of schadenfreude.

Our final aim was to examine age-related differences in how adolescents recounted their experiences of schadenfreude. We found that 12- and 15-year-olds used different types of reasoning to justify their schadenfreude. Twelve-year-olds more frequently interpreted their schadenfreude through reasons of disengagement and less frequently through reasons of deservingness compared to 15-year-olds (and vice versa). This finding supports our hypotheses and suggests that older adolescents may be more sensitive to situations involving deservingness compared to younger adolescents, perhaps due to increases in justice sensitivity and revenge during mid-adolescence (Frey et al., 2015). Although we cannot be certain that 15-year-olds more often experience schadenfreude rooted in deservingness, our findings indicate that 15-year-olds are perhaps more in-tune and receptive to schadenfreude when it is motivated by justice. Although schadenfreude may signify one's recognition of deservingness and punitive justice, the emotion ultimately reflects a disregard for the perspective of the victim. Parents and educators would benefit from fostering adolescents' kindness through inductive techniques in order to prevent schadenfreude from hindering sympathy and prosocial responding in conflict situations. The higher frequency in disengagement reasoning among 12-year-olds may be related to puberty as there are marked increases in sympathy and personal distress between 10 to 13 years (Masten,

Eisenberger, Pfeifer, Colich, & Dapretto, 2013). Accordingly, 12-year-olds may be more negatively affected by the misfortune of others and opt to disengage from their schadenfreude experiences.

This study is not without limitations. First, our study is a snapshot of adolescents' schadenfreude—future work would benefit from studying schadenfreude longitudinally across childhood and adolescence. Further, although narratives provide rich information about real-life experiences, there are multiple factors that may impact event recall (particularly when recalling emotions) and details of events may be missed using this approach. Next, we did not limit the time frame of recall. Although our method allows participants to think of an experience that was most salient and meaningful to them, the event could have occurred at any point in their life and does not allow us to speculate about specific age differences in actual experiences of schadenfreude, only their interpretations of their previous schadenfreude experiences. Finally, despite the qualitative nature of the investigation, a larger sample would allow us to statistically test our identified trends.

Schadenfreude is a common yet complex emotion. Although previous research on schadenfreude has highlighted its maladaptive nature, the complete ontogeny of children's and adolescents' schadenfreude has yet to be discovered. The current study provided insight into the experience of schadenfreude in adolescents' social relationships and found that it is multifaceted and present in a variety of social contexts.

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Table 1

Coding System for Misfortunes and Reasoning Mentioned Within Schadenfreude Narratives

Category	Description	Example
Misfortune		
Relational harm	Incidents that threaten relationship quality. Includes themes of verbal harm and humiliation, such as rumours and teasing.	"[...] she was getting picked on by the class [...]"
Failure	Poor performance due to the target's personal characteristics/ skillset.	"[...] this girl only got up to 4 and the average was 5 for most people."
Punishment	Target receives punishment from someone with a higher status.	"[...] he got suspended for one day [...]"
Physical harm	Themes of bodily harm such as falling and injury.	"I heard that they got a really bad cut [...]"
Property loss	Accounts of property theft, damage and loss, including death of pets.	"I heard that my best friend lost his iPod."
Reasoning		
Deservingness	Themes involving previous antisocial behavior (karma-related) or being at fault for the misfortune due to lack of competence or conscientiousness.	"Yes, finally he gets in trouble. Finally, he gets what he deserves."
Personal gain	Increased self-esteem or social status for the observer.	"You feel like you've achieved more somehow. You see them fail and you feel better than them."
Disengagement	Emotional disconnect from the target or the event; minimization of harm.	"[...] everybody makes mistakes. It's not something you have to get upset about."
Other	Unelaborated or non-sensical reasons.	"Because it was funny."

Table 2

Frequencies of Misfortunes and Reasoning Reported Within Schadenfreude Narratives and Chi Square Analyses Testing Age Differences

Determinant	Age Groups		Total	χ^2
	12-Year-Olds	15-Year-Olds		
Misfortunes				
Physical Harm	27	19	46	2.67
Relational Harm	15	16	31	.00
Failure	16	25	41	1.75
Punishment	15	24	39	1.85
Property Loss	10	12	22	.07
Reasoning				
Deservingness	19	39	58	6.15*
Personal Gain	26	34	60	.29
Disengagement	25	12	37	8.57**

Note. Frequencies were calculated across all four narrative, resulting in a total frequency of 240 possible responses per determinant (179 valid responses excluding missing data).

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$.

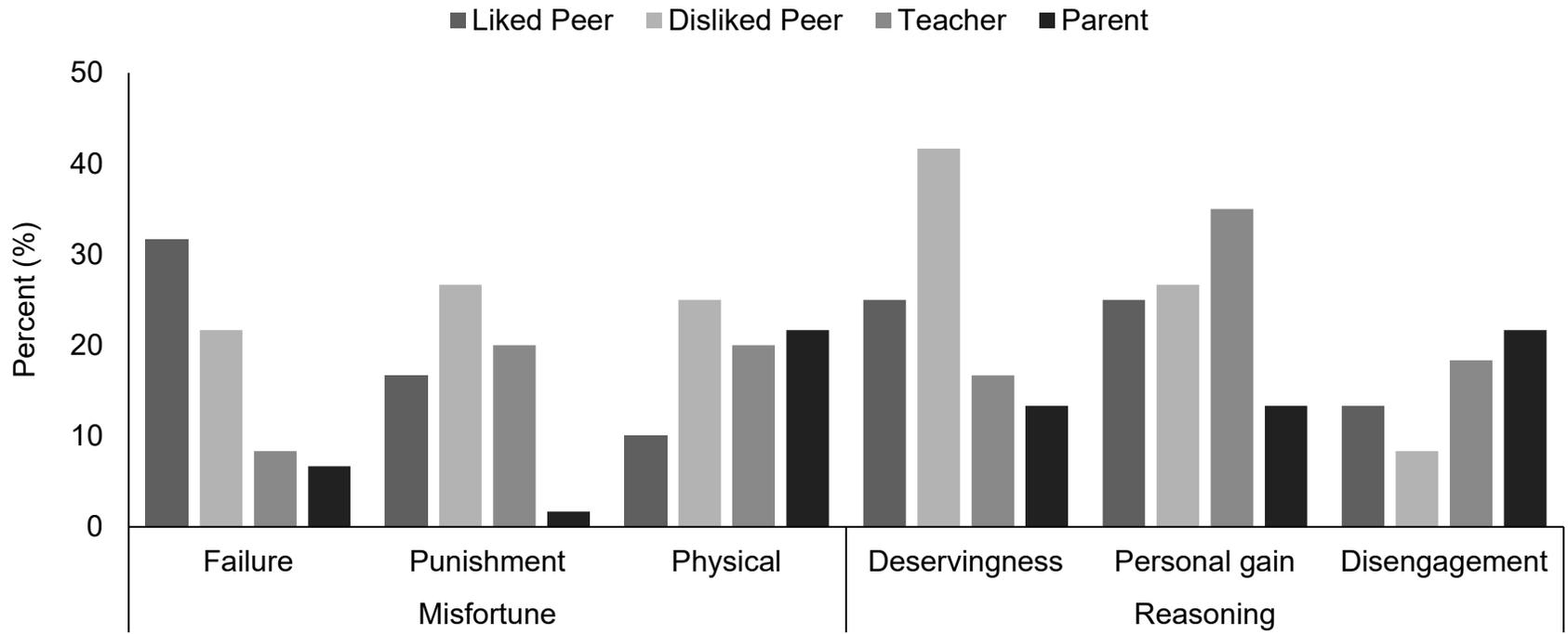


Figure 1. Experiential determinants of schadenfreude mentioned toward each target.