

Abstract

Why Some Take Pleasure in Other People's Pain: The Role of Attachment, Competition, and Cooperation on Schadenfreude

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After witnessing someone suffering a misfortune, people sometimes react with empathy and have a desire to offer support to a person needing help. Other times, people ignore or even enjoy others' pain, which is known as *schadenfreude*. The purpose of the current research was to determine when and why people sometimes react to others with compassion while others respond more callously. I conducted three studies investigating how individual differences in attachment, empathy, personal distress, and schadenfreude, and the effects of competition versus cooperation impacted prosocial behavior. As a novel contribution, I looked at attachment's association with not only state schadenfreude but also trait schadenfreude. After first developing a measure of trait schadenfreude (Study 1), I set out to determine if attachment insecurity related to the enjoyment of others' pain (Study 2). I also explored potential moderators, namely the effect of competition and cooperation on attachment's influence on reactions toward others in need (Study 3). As a way to assess how individual and situational differences impact actual helping behavior, I used real interactions (i.e., a confederate asking for help). A major contribution of this research was the development and validation of a new scale measuring trait schadenfreude. This research also provided new evidence in how people's experiences in their close relationships (i.e., attachment) impact reactions toward others' misfortunes. The general finding was that people with insecure attachment (anxious or avoidant) tended to react more negatively (e.g., more schadenfreude) toward another's suffering. Interestingly, schadenfreude and empathy's impact on helping behavior depended on attachment avoidance. Finally, while findings on helping behavior were less robust, people differed in how much empathy they felt toward a competitor, ally, or neutral partner depending on their attachment. The proposed research contributed to the field of prosocial behavior research by advancing understanding of how personality and situations impact reactions toward suffering others. My results highlighted some key personality differences in how people react toward downtrodden others using an attachment theoretical perspective.