The Impact of Deservingness on Schadenfreude and Sympathy: Further Evidence

WILCO W. VAN DIJK
JAAP W. OUWERKERK
SJOERD GOSLINGA
VU University Amsterdam

ABSTRACT. The authors tested the hypothesis that people experience less schadenfreude and more sympathy toward high achievers with deserved achievements who suffer misfortunes as opposed to those with undeserved achievements. The results support the hypothesis and show that this effect is mediated by the perceived deservingness of the misfortune.

Keywords: deservingness, emotion, schadenfreude, sympathy

WHEN PEOPLE LEARN OF THE ADVERSITIES of high achievers, they usually find it hard to resist a little smile; this pleasure derived from another’s misfortune is referred to by the German word schadenfreude. Research on schadenfreude has shown this malicious joy to be evoked by the downfall of high achievers, especially when they are envied or resented (Feather & Sherman, 2002;
Smith et al., 1996; Van Dijk, Ouwerkerk, Goslinga, Nieweg, & Gallucci, 2006). But are high achievers always an easy prey for schadenfreude, or are there circumstances that mitigate this emotion when they fall from grace? Previous research has indicated that schadenfreude is attenuated when a misfortune is perceived as undeserved (Feather, 1994; Van Dijk, Goslinga, & Ouwerkerk, 2008; Van Dijk, Ouwerkerk, Goslinga, & Nieweg, 2005). According to Feather (2006), people’s beliefs about deservingness depend on how they appraise the evaluative structure of action and outcome relations. More specifically, misfortunes following positively valued actions (e.g., working hard) are appraised by individuals as undeserved, and misfortunes evoke sympathy; however, misfortunes following negatively valued actions (e.g., not working hard) are appraised as deserved, and these evoke schadenfreude. In line with this reasoning, we hypothesized that people experience less schadenfreude and more sympathy toward high achievers who deserve their achievements but experience misfortunes than they do toward high achievers who do not deserve their achievements. Moreover, we expected that this effect would be mediated by the perceived deservingness of the subsequent misfortune.

Participants (52 women, 40 men; $M_{\text{age}} = 21.33$ years, $SD = 3.36$ years) read an interview with a high-achieving student. In this interview, we manipulated details to make the student’s achievements appear either deserved or undeserved. Subsequently, we provided participants with information about a recent misfortune suffered by the student. Participants rated the following on 7-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much): (a) deservingness of achievements (3 items; $\alpha = .93$), (b) schadenfreude (5 items; $\alpha = .90$), (c) sympathy (3 items; $\alpha = .82$), and (d) deservingness of misfortune (4 items, $\alpha = .91$). As hypothesized, results show that participants experienced less schadenfreude toward a student with deserved achievements ($M = 2.43$, $SD = 1.16$) than toward an individual with undeserved achievements ($M = 3.11$, $SD = 1.33$), $F(1, 84) = 6.18$, $p < .05$. However, participants experienced more sympathy toward a student with deserved achievements ($M = 4.49$, $SD = 1.00$) than they felt toward a student with undeserved achievements ($M = 3.93$, $SD = 1.32$), $F(1, 84) = 5.89$, $p < .05$. Mediation analyses showed that the effect of perceived deservingness of achievements on schadenfreude was fully mediated by the perceived deservingness of the subsequent misfortune ($Z = -2.70$, $p < .01$). The mediated pathway was marginally significant for sympathy ($Z = 1.76$, $p < .10$). These findings indicate that people’s emotional reactions toward the downfalls of high achievers are more benign when they perceive those initial achievements as being deserved. Moreover, these findings provide further evidence for the effect of perceived deservingness on schadenfreude and sympathy toward other people who suffer misfortunes.

AUTHOR NOTES

Wilco W. Van Dijk is an associate professor in the Department of Social Psychology at VU University Amsterdam. His main research interests are emotions and interpersonal processes. Jaap W. Ouwerkerk is an associate professor in the Department of
Communication Science at VU University Amsterdam. His main research interests are media-based schadenfreude and group processes. Sjoerd Goslinga is a researcher at the Dutch Tax and Customs Administration. His work focuses on compliance, persuasive communication, and enforcement strategies.

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