



Politics, *schadenfreude*, and ingroup identification: The sometimes happy thing about a poor economy and death

David J.Y. Combs*, Caitlin A.J. Powell, David Ryan Schurtz, Richard H. Smith

Department of Psychology, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY 40513, United States

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ABSTRACT

Political campaigns are often characterized by the various events occurring that move the tide in favor of one candidate or another. Each event, depending on which candidate it favors or harms, produces either happiness or sadness for those who care about the outcome. This research examined whether such reactions would hold for events that are misfortunes for other people and even when they negatively affect society more broadly regardless of political party affiliation. Ingroup (i.e. political party) identification was examined as an important moderating variable. In four studies, undergraduate participants gave their emotional reactions to news articles describing misfortunes happening to others (e.g. poor economic news and house foreclosures). Party affiliation and the intensity of ingroup identification strongly predicted whether these events produced *schadenfreude*.

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When other people suffer misfortunes, observers usually feel sympathy and express it openly. But this is not always true. Sometimes, the misfortunes of others can be pleasing (e.g. Brigham, Kelso, Jackson, & Smith, 1997; Feather & Sherman, 2002; Gorman, 2006; Hareli & Weiner, 2002; Leach, Spears, Branscombe, & Doosje, 2003; Smith et al., 1996; van Dijk, Ouwerkerk, Goslinga, & Nieweg, 2005). Although scholarly claims about this kind of feeling go back as far as the ancient Greeks (e.g. Aristotle, 350 BCE/1991) and have continued through the present (e.g. Portmann, 2000), the English language has no word for it. As a result, English speakers often borrow the German term *schadenfreude* (Ben Ze'ev, 2000), which derives from the combined terms *schaden*, meaning “harm,” and *freude*, meaning “joy.”

What circumstances most readily produce *schadenfreude*? Understandably, *schadenfreude* is more likely to arise when people deserve their misfortunes (Feather, 2008; Feather & Naim, 2005; Feather & Sherman, 2002; Portmann, 2000; Singer et al., 2006; van Dijk et al., 2005) and when misfortunes happen to people who are disliked (Hareli & Weiner, 2002; Heider, 1958). A less socially appropriate circumstance is when the suffering person is envied (Brigham et al., 1997; Smith & Kim, 2007; Smith et al., 1996; van Dijk, Ouwerkerk, Goslinga, Nieweg, & Gallucci, 2006), though the evidence for this connection is inconsistent (e.g. Feather & Sherman, 2002; Hareli & Weiner, 2002; Leach, 2008; Leach & Spears, 2008).

Schadenfreude as an intergroup emotion

Schadenfreude, as well as other emotions, can also occur at the intergroup level (Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005; Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2008; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002; Harris, Cikara, & Fiske, 2008; Leach & Spears, 2008; Leach et al., 2003; Spears & Leach, 2004). For example, a series of studies conducted by Leach et al. (2003) assessed the effects of domain interest and ingroup inferiority as possible predictors of intergroup *schadenfreude*. Soccer fans in the Netherlands rated their happiness when they read that a rival outgroup (i.e. the German national team) had lost a key match. As expected, the greater the participants' domain interest (i.e. “I enjoy watching soccer on television,” “I am interested in soccer,” “I have regularly watched/listened to the World Cup”) in soccer, the happier they were when reading about Germany's loss. Also, greater *schadenfreude* resulted when previous Dutch losses were highlighted beforehand, making the inferiority of the Dutch team salient. Although there was no obvious ingroup benefit for the Dutch ingroup as a result of the German team's defeat, this defeat may have allowed Dutch participants to feel less inferior in terms of their social identity (Leach, 2008; Leach & Spears, 2008; Tajfel, 1981), and, therefore, to be more pleased by the defeat.

In a theory developed by Smith and his colleagues (Mackie, Silver, & Smith, 2004) known as Intergroup Emotion Theory (IET), identification with one's ingroup is a key predictor of how and when intergroup emotions occur. According to the theory, when people strongly identify with an ingroup they commonly appraise events from an intergroup rather than interpersonal perspective. Specifically, Mackie et al. (2004) suggest that “when social identification occurs, appraisals are intergroup, rather than personally

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: djamescombs1@yahoo.com (D.J.Y. Combs).

concerned. Emotions are experienced on the behalf of the group” (p. 229) rather than the individual, and “arise as a result of events and interactions that reflect the relative well-being of the group independent of [one’s] personal involvement in the event” (p. 227). Ingroup identification is key to the occurrence of intergroup emotions, because when individuals strongly identify with their group they become a part of the group, and the group becomes a part of the self, consequently, events that affect the group, for good or for ill, “acquire affective and emotional significance” (p. 229). A number of studies have tested Smith’s framework and have generally (e.g. Garcia, Tor, Bazerman, & Miller, 2005; Mackie, Devos, & Smith, 2000) but not always (Gordijn, Yzerbyt, Wigboldus, & Dumont, 2006) been supportive. Although previous research has not found support for IET with regard to intergroup *schadenfreude* (see Iyer & Leach, 2008, for a review), theoretically, one would expect individuals that identified strongly with an ingroup to experience greater pleasure when a misfortune event would serve to benefit the group, even if the event may be harmful to innocent others or harmful for the individual themselves.

Politics and intergroup *schadenfreude*

Politics is one arena where the outcomes of ingroups and outgroups may be so closely linked that an ingroup member might appraise an outgroup setback as directly benefiting the ingroup. Politics is often a kind of “blood sport” in which party affiliation and partisan instincts carry the day more often than bipartisan sentiments. In the context of a political campaign, particularly as election night approaches, all events (misfortunes or otherwise) may largely become appreciated for their implications for victory or defeat of one’s own party (especially for those who strongly identify with their party) – *even though* there may be otherwise negative, undeserved consequences for others. For example, a downturn in the economy would seem to have no positive effects for anyone, and yet for partisans rooting for their challenger to defeat an incumbent President, it might be good news indeed. Bad news for the political leader of the outgroup is good news for one’s ingroup. This should especially hold true if the opponent is an incumbent and thus is attributed a certain amount of responsibility for the state of the economy. The “objective” negative features of the event, whether it is an economic downturn, missing explosives in Iraq (McIntyre, Malveaux, Labott, & Neisloss, 2004), or a national shortage of flu-shots (Sanger & Harris, 2004) may be beside the point, politically. Even if an outcome may be objectively negative for all involved, including the individual, there are times when such an outcome may signal a potential political windfall for that individual’s group looking to gain an advantage – and, thus, produce *schadenfreude*.

Of course, when such objectively negative events occur, norms of appropriate emotional reactions dictate that people should feel sad not happy. Regardless of who is gaining or losing politically, all are required to show genuine concern and to put on a long face (their actual feelings notwithstanding). The suspected inconsistency between actual and presented feelings is probably why politicians and their allies sometimes accuse their opponents of actually experiencing unseemly pleasure when negative events bring good political news. In her recent book, the ultra-conservative columnist and author Coulter (2006) went as far as to suggest that several women widowed on September 11 partly enjoyed their husband’s deaths, presumably because the deaths of their husbands brought forth a good deal of fame and political capital for the widows. Coulter further suggested that the widows were using their husband’s deaths to score political points. Coulter’s brand of commentary is beyond the pale by most standards; however, this repellent case aside, it may be true that political motiva-

tions can often produce hidden *schadenfreude* that is, masked by mock concern.

People are likely to resist admitting any semblance of pleasure as a result of obvious tragedies. Nonetheless, we suspect that events containing objective misfortunes might produce *schadenfreude*, provided the misfortune also brings with it the possibility of ingroup benefit, and especially for those who strongly identify with their ingroup. The primary purpose of the present research was to examine this possibility.

In four studies, we assessed participant’s political party affiliation and their strength of identification with their party. We also assessed their reactions to news articles detailing misfortunes happening to others of their own or opposing party. The misfortunes described were objectively negative and hurtful to innocent bystanders (e.g. a downturn in the national economy, US troop casualties), or were more narrowly embarrassing to either the Republican or Democratic Party (e.g. President George W. Bush falling off a bicycle or John Kerry wearing an unbecoming NASA space suit). In Study 1, the reactions were reported just before the 2004 US Presidential election; in Study 2, reactions were reported just before the 2006 US midterm election. Studies 3 and 4 were both conducted during the 2008 US Presidential primaries. In each of the studies, we expected that party affiliation and level of party identification (Mackie et al., 2004), would predict the amount of *schadenfreude* felt by participants.

Study 1

The main purpose of Study 1 was to conduct a preliminary examination of our hypotheses. We took advantage of the 2004 Presidential election season to conduct an in-class exercise in which we asked participants to complete a political affiliation and strength of identification measure at the beginning of the fall semester. Two months later, just prior to the election, they gave their reactions to a series of news articles detailing recent political misfortunes. Two of these articles were largely embarrassing in nature, either linked with incumbent Republican President George W. Bush (his falling off a bicycle), or Senator John Kerry (a photo of him wearing an odd-looking NASA outfit), the challenger for the Democrats. A third article was objectively negative (a downturn in the economy) and was damaging to the Republican cause. During this time period, because Republicans controlled both branches of the elected federal government, we were unable to find naturally occurring events that clearly hurt the Democratic cause which could then be causally linked to Democrats. We expected that Democrats would report more *schadenfreude* over the economic downturn than Republicans, given that the misfortune could be expected to help their ingroup. Also, as would be predicted by IET, we expected that Democrats who were highly identified with their political party would report more *schadenfreude* than would individuals less strongly identified with the party. We expected a similar pattern for Democrats when reacting to the Bush mishap, and for Republicans when reacting to the Kerry photo.

Method

Participants

Participants were approximately 80 Introductory Social Psychology students from the University of Kentucky. However, 35 participants were dropped from the analysis because they either forgot their code names used to link the two parts of the exercise, did not attend class on both days the study was conducted, or were members of minor political parties. Thus, 45 undergraduates, 23 Republicans, and 22 Democrats were included in the analysis.

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