

Schadenfreude

Schadenfreude (/ˈʃɑːdənfrɔɪdə/; German: [ˈʃaːdn̩ˌfʁɔʏ̯də][ⓘ] listen[ⓘ]); lit. 'harm-joy') is the experience of pleasure, joy, or self-satisfaction that comes from learning of or witnessing the troubles, failures, or humiliation of another



Return to the Convent, by Eduardo Zamacois y Zabala, 1868. Note the group of monks laughing while the lone monk struggles with the donkey

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Etymology

Schadenfreude is borrowed from German; it is a compound of *Schaden* 'damage, harm' and *Freude* 'joy'. The German word was first mentioned in English texts in 1852 and 1867, and first used in English running in 1895.^[1] In German, it was first attested in the 1740s.^[2]

Though common nouns are normally not capitalised in English, *Schadenfreude* is sometimes capitalised following the German convention.

Synonyms

Schadenfreude has equivalents in other languages (for example, German, Dutch, Arabic, Hebrew, Czech and Finnish), but no commonly used precise English single-word equivalent. There are other ways to express the concept in English.

"Sadism" Is a commonly used precise English single-word equivalent of Schadenfreude, except that in addition you also feel sexual tension.

"Epicaricacy" is a seldom used direct equivalent,^[3] borrowed from Greek *epichairekakia* (ἐπιχαίρεκακία, first attested in Aristotle^[4]), from ἐπί *epi* 'upon', χαρά *chara* 'joy', and κακόν *kakon* 'evil'.^{[5][6][7][8]} When transliterated from the Greek, it may also be spelled "epicharikaky", but this would not follow usual English conventions.

A *Roman holiday* is a metaphor from Byron's poem *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, where a gladiator in ancient Rome expects to be "butchered to make a Roman holiday" while the audience would take pleasure from watching his suffering. The term suggests debauchery and disorder in addition to sadistic enjoyment.^[9]

"Morose delectation" (*delectatio morosa* in Latin), meaning, "The habit of dwelling with enjoyment on evil thoughts".^[10] was considered by the medieval church to be a sin.^{[11][12]} French writer Pierre Klossowski maintained that the appeal of sadism is morose delectation.^{[13][14]}

An English word of similar meaning is "gloating", where "gloat" means "to observe or think about something with triumphant and often malicious satisfaction, gratification, or delight" (e.g., to gloat over an enemy's misfortune).^[15] Gloating is differentiated from *Schadenfreude* in that it does not necessarily require malice (one may gloat to a friend about having defeated him in a game without ill intent), and that it describes an action rather than a state of mind (one typically gloats to the subject of the misfortune or to a third party). On the other hand, unlike *Schadenfreude*, where the focus is on another's misfortune, gloating often brings to mind inappropriately celebrating or bragging about one's own good fortune without any particular focus on the misfortune of others.

"Sadism" specifically involves the subject deriving pleasure from *personally inflicting* the usually physical but also just as likely emotional, social, economic pain on another, whereas *Schadenfreude* entails only the observance of humiliation or embarrassment of that other.

Related concepts

Permutations of the concept of pleasure at another's unhappiness are: pleasure at another's happiness, displeasure at another's happiness, and displeasure at another's unhappiness. Words for these concepts are sometimes cited as antonyms to *Schadenfreude*, as each is the opposite in some way.

Pleasure at another's happiness is described by the Buddhist concept of *mudita*^{[16][17][18]} or the concept of "compersion" in the polyamory community.

Displeasure at another's happiness is envy or perhaps jealousy. The recent coinage "freudenschade" similarly means sorrow at another's success.^{[19][20]}

Displeasure at another's unhappiness is sympathy, pity, or compassion.

Tall poppy syndrome is a cultural phenomena where people of high status are resented, attacked, cut down, or criticized because they have been classified as better than their peers. This is similar to begrudgery, the resentment or envy of the success of a peer. When someone feels joy with the victims' fall from grace, they experience *Schadenfreude*.

Neologisms and variants

Neologisms and portmanteau words were coined from the word as early as 1993, when Lincoln Caplan, in his book *Skadden: Power, Money, and the Rise of a Legal Empire*,^[21] used the word *Skaddenfreude* to describe the delight that competitors of Skadden Arps took in its troubles of the early 1990s. Others include *spitzenfreude*, coined by *The Economist* to refer to the fall of Eliot Spitzer^[22] and *Schadenford*, coined by *Toronto Life* in regard to Canadian politician Rob Ford.^[23]

Literary usage and philosophical analysis

The Book of Proverbs mentions an emotion similar to *schadenfreude*: "Rejoice not when thine enemy falleth, and let not thine heart be glad when he stumbleth: Lest the LORD see it, and it displease him, and he turn away his wrath from him." (Proverbs 24:17–18, King James Version).

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle used *epikhairekakia* (ἐπικαίρεκακία in Greek) as part of a triad of terms, in which *epikhairekakia* stands as the opposite of *phthonos* (φθόνος), and *nemesis* (νέμεσις) occupies the mean. *Nemesis* is "a painful response to another's undeserved good fortune", while *phthonos* is a painful response to any good fortune, deserved or not. The *epikhairekakos* (ἐπικαίρεκάκος) person takes pleasure in another's ill fortune.^{[24][25]}

Lucretius characterises the emotion in an extended simile in *De rerum natura*: *Suave, mari magno turbantibus aequora ventis, e terra magnum alterius spectare laborem*, "It is pleasant to watch from the land the great struggle of someone else in a sea rendered great by turbulent winds." The abbreviated Latin tag *suave mare magno* recalled the passage to generations familiar with the Latin classics.^[26]

Caesarius of Heisterbach regards "delight in the adversity of a neighbour" as one of the "daughters of envy ... which follows anger" in his *Dialogue on Miracles*.^[27]

During the 17th century, Robert Burton wrote in his work *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, "Out of these two [the concupiscible and irascible powers] arise those mixed affections and passions of anger, which is a desire of revenge; hatred, which is inveterate anger; zeal, which is offended with him who hurts that he loves; and ἐπιχαιρεκακία, a compound affection of joy and hate, when we rejoice at other men's mischief, and are grieved at their prosperity pride, self-love, emulation, envy, shame, &c., of which elsewhere."^[28]

The philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer mentioned *schadenfreude* as the most evil sin of human feeling, famously saying "If envy is human, to savor *schadenfreude* is diabolic."^[29]

Rabbi Harold S. Kushner in his book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* describes *schadenfreude* as a universal, even wholesome reaction that cannot be helped. "There is a German psychological term, *Schadenfreude*, which refers to the embarrassing reaction of relief we feel when something bad happens to someone else instead of to us." He gives examples and writes, "[People] don't wish their friends ill, but they can't help feeling an embarrassing spasm of gratitude that [the bad thing] happened to someone else and not to them."^[30]

Susan Sontag's book *Regarding the Pain of Others*, published in 2003, is a study of the issue of how the pain and misfortune of some affects others, namely whether war photography and war paintings may be helpful as anti-war tools or, whether they only serve some sense of *schadenfreude* in some viewers.

Philosopher and sociologist Theodor Adorno defined *schadenfreude* as "... largely unanticipated delight in the suffering of another, which is cognized as trivial and/or appropriate."^[31]

Scientific studies

A New York Times article in 2002 cited a number of scientific studies of *schadenfreude*, which it defined as, "delighting in others' misfortune". Many such studies are based on social comparison theory, the idea that when people around us have bad luck, we look better to ourselves. Other researchers have found that people with low self-esteem are more likely to feel *schadenfreude* than are people who have high self-esteem.^[32]

A 2003 study examined intergroup *schadenfreude* within the context of sports, specifically an international football (soccer) competition. The study focused on the German and Dutch football teams and their fans. The results of this study indicated that the emotion of *schadenfreude* is very sensitive to circumstances that make it more or less legitimate to feel such malicious pleasure towards a sports rival.^[33]

A 2011 study by Cikara and colleagues using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) examined *Schadenfreude* among Boston Red Sox and New York Yankees fans found that fans' showed increased activation in brain areas correlated with self-reported pleasure (ventral striatum) when observing the rival team experience a negative outcome (e.g., a strike out).^[34] By contrast, fans exhibited increased activation in the anterior cingulate and insula when viewing their own team experience a negative outcome.

A 2006 experiment about justice served suggests that men, but not women, enjoy seeing "bad people" suffer. The study was designed to measure empathy, by watching which brain centers are stimulated when subjects observed via fMRI see someone experiencing physical pain. Researchers expected that the brain's empathy center of subjects would show more stimulation when those seen as "good" got an electric shock, than would occur if the shock was given to someone the subject had reason to consider "bad". This was indeed the case, but for male subjects, the brain's pleasure centers also lit up when someone got a shock that the male thought was "well-deserved".^[35]

Brain-scanning studies show that *schadenfreude* is correlated with envy in subjects. Strong feelings of envy activated physical pain nodes in the brain's dorsal anterior cingulate cortex; the brain's reward centers, such as the *ventral striatum*, were activated by news that other people envied had suffered misfortune. The magnitude of the brain's *schadenfreude* response could even be predicted from the strength of the previous envy response.^{[36][37]}

A study conducted in 2009 provides evidence for people's capacity to feel *schadenfreude* in response to negative events in politics.^[38] The study was designed to determine whether or not there was a possibility that events containing objective misfortunes might produce *schadenfreude*. It was reported in the study that the likelihood of experiencing feelings of *schadenfreude* depends upon whether an individual's own party or the opposing party is suffering harm. This study suggests that the domain of politics is prime territory for feelings of *schadenfreude*, especially for those who identify strongly with their political party

See also

- *Masochism*
- *Bullying*
- *Downward counterfactual thinking*
- *Gallows humor*
- *Griefer*
- *Karma*
- *Katagelasticism*, a psychological condition in which a person excessively enjoys laughing at others
- *Mudita*, the appreciation of the success (rather than the suffering) of others
- *Sadism*
- *Revenge*
- *Slapstick comedy*


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