



## Comments

# Schadenfreude and Gluckschmerz Are Emotional Signals of (Im)Balance

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## Abstract

Smith and van Dijk (2018) explore the relationship between the emotions *schadenfreude* and *gluckschmerz*, and why people experience these emotions. Their perspective is valuable and adds to a better understanding of how people respond to the fortunes of others. In this manuscript I try to further these ideas by arguing that *schadenfreude* and *gluckschmerz* are best seen as signals that indicate that a balance in how we would want the world to be is restored (for *schadenfreude*) or violated (for *gluckschmerz*).

## Keywords

gluckschmerz, schadenfreude

In this manuscript I try to further the valuable ideas of Smith and van Dijk (2018) on *schadenfreude* and *gluckschmerz* by arguing that these emotions are best seen as signals that indicate that a balance in how we would want the world to be is restored (for *schadenfreude*) or violated (for *gluckschmerz*). For an explanation of the role of balance in *schadenfreude* and *gluckschmerz* I refer to the explanation of Smith and van Dijk (2018).

*Schadenfreude* and *gluckschmerz* are *double* opposites, as they are opposed in both how pleasant they feel as well as in the presumed value of the other. Despite being double opposites, *schadenfreude* and *gluckschmerz* have much in common. As Smith and van Dijk argue (2018), both arise when the situation was not caused by the person experiencing it. To me, another similarity is that both *schadenfreude* and *gluckschmerz* are clearly emotional feelings, but do not seem to have action tendencies associated with them. Most emotions are characterized by eliciting specific action tendencies that help an organism deal with a situation (Frijda, 1988; Keltner & Gross, 1999). Functional accounts of emotions argue that specific emotions arise in response to specific threats (or chances) in the environment, and activate specific action tendencies to deal with that threat (or chance). The emotions in the fortune-of-others emo-

tion category that *schadenfreude* and *gluckschmerz* are part of (see Ortony, Clore, & Collins, 1988) trigger such action tendencies as well. For example, resentment arises from unfair situations and the resentment fuels a desire to take action against this unfairness (Folger & Martin, 1986). Every emotion has a function that helps the organism. But what could be the function of the rather passive experiences of *schadenfreude* and *gluckschmerz* that seem to lack action tendencies?

One function of emotions lies in the action tendencies they trigger, but another function is that they serve as signals to an organism that something important is going on that requires attention (Keltner & Haidt, 1999). *Schadenfreude* and *gluckschmerz* might best be understood as signals that something of interest occurs in situations where another person gets a favorable or unfavorable outcome. The commonality between *schadenfreude* and *gluckschmerz* is that they are responses to an outcome of another person that creates (for *schadenfreude*) or violates (for *gluckschmerz*) a balance, or an *ought* situation in Heider's (1958) terms. Let me elaborate.

## Gluckschmerz

If someone we see in a negative light receives a good outcome, this creates an imbalance as it violates how we think the world ought to be (a world where good things happen to good people and bad things to bad people, see also the explanation by Smith & van Dijk, 2018). An imbalance is something we want to avoid, and the negative feeling of *gluckschmerz* is a signal that an imbalance exists that requires attention. Negative emotions typically arise for threats to our goals, and they focus our attention to help us interpret the situation and look for potential solutions (Fredrickson, 2001).

*Gluckschmerz* is the feeling that arises when this imbalance is relatively unspecific; if the situation is about more specific threats, I would argue that more specific emotions would arise. For example, when the outcome is really unfair, resentment is more likely to arise; whereas when we focus on the imbalance

that the other has something that I do not have, envy is more likely to occur. If we feel *gluckschmerz*, we focus our attention on the situation and we then might realize that we feel so bad because the situation is thought to be unfair, transmuting the *gluckschmerz* into resentment and activating the action tendencies associated with that emotion. This is how it functions as a signal: the situation is different from how we think it should be, and the negative feeling makes us focus on this situation to reappraise it to see if further action from us is needed.

### Schadenfreude

From this balance perspective, *schadenfreude* likely arises in situations in which an imbalance already exists (the other is in a position in which we do not think [s]he ought to be), but a misfortune of the other restores this balance again. In this case, the positive feeling of *schadenfreude* serves as a signal that all is well again. This fits the idea of the broaden-and-build model of Fredrickson (2001), that positive emotions in general serve as a signal that things are going well and that we can broaden our attention.

As an example of how *schadenfreude* can work as a signal, consider the situation in which one is envious of another person. In a situation with envy, there is an imbalance between how we would want the world to be and how it actually is (we feel bad because the other is better off than we are and we want that to be different). When the envied person suffers a misfortune, people tend to feel *schadenfreude* and subsequently the felt envy towards that person is reduced (van de Ven, 2018). This fits the idea that *schadenfreude* is a signal that everything is well and that our attention can be diverted away from the imbalance that we focused on before.

### Conclusion

To summarize, I argue that the function of *schadenfreude* and *gluckschmerz* lies mainly in their signalling function. These

feelings indicate to the person experiencing them that another person received an outcome that restores balance (for *schadenfreude*) or creates an imbalanced situation (for *gluckschmerz*). *Schadenfreude* serves as a signal that all is well again, and the situation needs no further attention. *Gluckschmerz*, in contrast, is a signal that further attention to the situation is needed, and perhaps reappraisal might lead to this feeling transmuting into other emotions with more direct action tendencies to help restore the imbalance if desired.

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## Why Are Schadenfreude and Gluckschmerz Not Happiness or Anger? Or Are They?

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### Abstract

This comment on Smith and van Dijk's discussion of the antecedents and consequences of *schadenfreude* and *gluckschmerz* considers these emotions in an appraisal framework and discusses the usefulness of naming emotions that do not come with ready-made labels in many languages.

### Keywords

emotion, goal, jealousy, motivation

Smith and van Dijk (2018) discuss the antecedents and consequences of two emotions, *schadenfreude* and the more recently