



Schadenfreude and outgroup derogation: Two sides of the same coin?

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1. Background

Intergroup emotions theory (Smith, 1993; Mackie & Smith 2002)
When social identity is salient group-based cognitive and affective appraisals of the social context determinate the emotions that groups are likely to experience. Specific emotions give rise to specific intergroup action tendencies, for instance, anger will triggers action tendencies related with intergroup confrontation.

Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979)
Groups strive for a positive social-based self-esteem, if the social comparisons do not favor the own group, social behavior (eg. derogation) is triggered in order to restore the threatened positivity of the social self.

Group-based Schadenfreude or malicious pleasure at the suffering of another group (Leach et al, 2004): Groups can experience opportunistic schadenfreude at the misfortune suffered by an out-group.

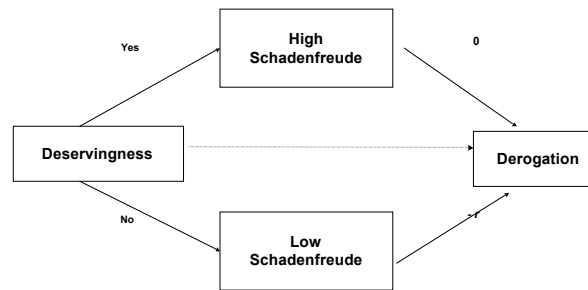
Schadenfreude and deservingness (Van Dijk et al, 2005)
Interpersonal schadenfreude results when the misfortune of the out-group is perceived as deserved.

General questions of the current study:
Can inter-group schadenfreude be a mechanism aimed at enhancing a threatened social identity?
Is deservingness a mediator for group-based schadenfreude as it is at the interpersonal level?

3. Context

Eurovision song contest (ESC)
Nations compete to present the most appealing song. Traditionally Finland has had poor performances (has won only once) and Sweden has had good showings (won four times), so upward comparisons result be threatening for the Finns. Schadenfreude at the poor score of the Swedish entry will be the target of the study.

2. Model



The appraisal of deservingness would trigger schadenfreude, but an undeserved failure may be associated with a lower level of the emotion and a higher level of derogation. If schadenfreude helps to restore a threatened positive identity, it should be associated with a lower level of derogation; the opposite should be true: after derogating a relevant outgroup the level of schadenfreude should be lower.

4. Method

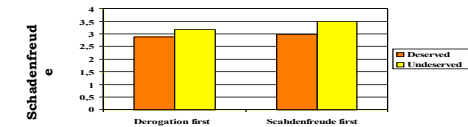
Design

The design manipulated the appraisal of deservingness by making the misfortune of the out-group appear either as deserved or as undeserved, and whether the participants could express first their group-based emotions (Schadenfreude condition) or out-group derogating behaviours (derogation condition). Emotional expression in this case, can be mean to restore the positivity of a threatened social identity and should thus reduce derogation.

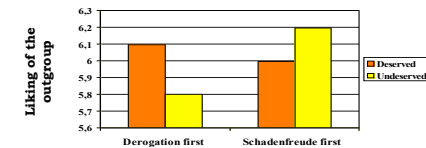
Procedure

391 Participants, mostly students at Helsinki University, responded to a web based survey asking about their attitudes and feelings in relation to Eurovision and the Finnish and Swedish contestants. In the "deserved" condition they are told that the poor showing of the Swedish contestant was expected by critics and producers, in the "undeserved condition" the failure is presented as completely unexpected. Participants in the derogation condition first responded to items measuring action tendencies towards the out-group such as how willing they would be to vote for the entry of the other nation (3 items, $\alpha = 0,84$). After this they responded to 15 scales rating inter-group emotions (the scales measured schadenfreude, sympathy and responsibility). The order two the two measures was reverted for the Schadenfreude condition

5. Results



Schadenfreude according to condition, main effect of deservingness (F=4,3; p=0,38)



Liking of the outgroup according to condition, interactive effect of deservingness x order of the ratings (F=4,1; p=0,41)

6. Discussion

Schadenfreude was moderated by the perception of deservingness, however the effect was not in the direction proposed by previous research on interpersonal schadenfreude (van Dijk et al, 2005), the undeserved loss of the out-group triggered more schadenfreude. This may be due to a manipulation of deservingness that makes the failure of seem more relevant for the out-group (they will be more disappointed because their entry was favourite to win), the identity enhanced role of schadenfreude would be optimized by a failure that is more relevant for the out-group.

The interaction between deservingness and order of presentation seems to agree with the proposed hypotheses. An opportunity to express a negative emotion has an affect of the liking of the group. The out-group was liked the better after an undeserved loss that was celebrated with malicious pleasure, and the worst when the chance to express schadenfreude was not available and the out-group was exposed to an unexpected disappointment.

Overall schadenfreude seems to share similarities with other mechanisms aimed ad maximizing the positive image of the own group when threatening comparisons are present; Strategies improving the own group image the most will be preferred.

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van Dijk, W. W., Ouwerkerk, J. W., Goolinga, S., & Neeuw, M. (2005). Deservingness and Schadenfreude. *Cognition and Emotion*, 19, 933-939.