Impact of deservingness on schadenfreude and sympathy: Further evidence

van Dijk, W.W.; Ouwerkerk, J.W.; Goslinga, S.

published in
The Journal of Social Psychology
2009

DOI (link to publisher)
10.3200/SOCP.149.3.290-292

document version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Link to publication in VU Research Portal

citation for published version (APA)

General rights
Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

• Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
• You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
• You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

Take down policy
If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

E-mail address:
vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl

Download date: 09. Apr. 2022
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
Van Dijk, Ouwerkerk, & Goslinga (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.

**REFERENCES**


*Received December 20, 2007*

*Accepted March 2, 2008*