Sharing schadenfreude and late adolescents’ self-esteem: does sharing schadenfreude of a deserved misfortune enhance self-esteem?

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the effects of sharing schadenfreude with friends on late adolescents’ self-esteem. University students (242 men; 238 women) were presented with scenarios depicting a deserved failure of a superior rival classmate and sharing schadenfreude. Participants’ state self-esteem was measured both before the rival’s misfortune and after sharing schadenfreude and was compared with that of participants presented with the non-sharing scenario. Whereas experiencing schadenfreude enhanced late adolescents’ state self-esteem regardless of the level of envy toward the rival, sharing schadenfreude with a best friend was not associated with further increases in self-esteem. When discussing the very well-deserved misfortune of others, the listener will likely react similarly to the expresser; thus, expressing schadenfreude may not bring about a sense of being understood and accepted by friends.

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Introduction

Schadenfreude, the joy that is experienced when individuals observe others’ misfortunes, has been described as a socially undesirable emotion (Heider, 1958). Because schadenfreude is an emotion deeply related both to others and to the self, it is elicited in the process of maintaining self-evaluation and is associated with an individual’s self-esteem (e.g. van Dijk, van Koningsbruggen, Ouwerkerk, & Wesseling, 2011). As compared to individuals with high self-esteem, those with low self-esteem are more vulnerable to self-evaluation threats by superior others and consequently feel stronger schadenfreude when the superiors fail or face hardship (Sawada, 2008; Watanabe, 2016), whereas schadenfreude is moderated when such individuals with low self-esteem are provided an opportunity for self-affirmation (van Dijk et al., 2011). A recent study involving scenarios (Ouwerkerk & Johnson, 2016) also demonstrates that stronger schadenfreude is likely to be experienced among individuals who follow others on social network sites (e.g. Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter) for the purpose of comparing themselves with those they perceive as inferior or less fortunate than themselves to maintain a positive self-evaluation (i.e. downward social comparison).

As distinct from private experiences of schadenfreude, individuals who express feelings of schadenfreude tend to be perceived as incompetent, immoral, and cold by those around them (Jung & Karasawa, 2016). That is, openly expressing or sharing schadenfreude with others is accompanied by the risk of both deteriorating social relationships and also being viewed as immoral or inferior to the target of schadenfreude. However, people express feelings of schadenfreude with close third parties who are not directly related to the concerned misfortune despite the
above-mentioned risks and likelihood of highly personal information being easily spread by the receiver (Petronio & Bantz, 1991). Although factors evoking or associated with schadenfreude, such as envy, dislike, hostility toward others, and deservingness of misfortune (Brigham, Kelso, Jackson, & Smith, 1997; Feather & Sherman, 2002; Hareli & Weiner, 2002), have been investigated so far, little previous research has focused on sharing schadenfreude, and the psychological outcomes of sharing malicious pleasure evoked by others’ misfortune have not virtually been examined. What happens if individuals share schadenfreude with others? The present study explores the effect of sharing schadenfreude with intimate others on late adolescents’ self-esteem.

Although the specific effect of sharing schadenfreude on self-esteem has not been sufficiently investigated, general relationships between sharing emotions and self-esteem have been reported. In sum, disclosing and sharing emotional experiences results in an intimate interpersonal relationship (e.g. Fischer & Manstead, 2008). Because individuals generally express and share their emotions with those they trust or with those expected to respond appropriately to their needs (Fischer & Manstead, 2008; Yang, 2014), both individuals who express and who listen to personal emotions tend to evaluate each other favorably (Rimé, Finkenauer, Luminet, Zech, & Philippot, 1998). This positive reciprocal interaction brought about by the expresser’s selection of the right person might be one of the reasons spurring people to share schadenfreude despite the potential interpersonal risks. Although the role of verbally sharing emotions on enhancing intimate relationships seems to be especially emphasized in Western cultures (Kim, 2009), a similar effect has also been observed in studies conducted in Asian cultures. For example, Kosaka, Ikeda, Hayama, and Satoh (2010) found that sharing emotions among Japanese adolescents, both in the case of positive and negative emotions, is positively associated with stronger interpersonal bonds and motivation for a better life. Indeed, while there are cultural differences in the degree of open expression of emotions due to culture-specific factors, such as the frequent use of emotion suppression as an emotion regulation strategy in Asian cultures (e.g. Butler, Lee, & Gross, 2007; Matsumoto, 2006), it may be that sharing emotions also leads to similar positive effects on Asians’ self-esteem.

Furthermore, gaining acceptance from others enhances self-esteem, regardless of sharing emotions (e.g. Leary, Haupt, Strausser, & Chokel, 1998). As argued by Leary, Tambor, Terdal, and Downs (1995), an individual’s self-esteem depends on the likelihood of being accepted or rejected from a social group. In this sociometer theory, individuals enjoy high self-esteem if there is low possibility of rejection from others, whereas their self-esteem decreases if a high likelihood of rejection is perceived. Therefore, if the listeners agree with the expressed schadenfreude, an individual might feel understood and accepted, contributing to higher self-esteem.

If sharing emotional experiences has a role in strengthening the interpersonal bonds between the expresser and listener, this study predicts that an individual’s self-esteem will increase as a result of sharing schadenfreude. However, the result of the previous study of Watanabe (2014) was not consistent with this prediction. In a study focusing on changes in state self-esteem before and after experiencing and sharing schadenfreude, she asked undergraduates to imagine themselves in a scenario and presented participants with a fictitious superior rival classmate. In the scenarios presented in that study, the classmate failed an interview for a scholarship for an undeserved reason, and the participant imagined expressing and sharing feelings of schadenfreude with their best friend. Only individuals with low state self-esteem experienced an increase in state self-esteem after experiencing schadenfreude, a finding consistent with that of Brambilla and Riva (2017). However, sharing a feeling of schadenfreude with an intimate friend did not bring about a further increase in their state self-esteem despite the best friend’s agreement with the expressed feeling of schadenfreude.

Why, then, did the previous study of Watanabe (2014) fail to demonstrate further increases in adolescents’ self-esteem by sharing feelings of schadenfreude with intimate friends? During adolescence, the importance of friendship gradually increases as adolescents spend more time with friends, and high-quality friendships contribute to their self-esteem (e.g. Richards, Crowe, Larson, & Swarr, 1998; Thomas & Daubman, 2001). However, the previous study presented...
adolescent participants with an undeserved misfortune of the target of schadenfreude. While both sharing personal feelings and peer acceptance is generally related to higher self-esteem, good friends may not share in the pleasure of undeserved misfortune of others; therefore, sharing schadenfreude consequently might have not led to higher self-esteem.

Prior research has demonstrated an association between schadenfreude and perceived deservingness of misfortune: deserved or justifiable misfortunes are more pleasing than undeserved misfortunes (e.g. Piskorz & Piskorz, 2009; van Dijk, Goslinga, & Ouwerkerk, 2008). For example, Dasborough and Harvey (2017) studied the willingness to share schadenfreude in the workplace in three scenarios by controlling for two variables: social status of the target of schadenfreude (i.e. CEO vs. employee) and perceived deservingness of the misfortune (i.e. high, medium, and low). At lower levels of perceived deservingness, the misfortunes of high-status individuals (i.e. CEO) were found to be shared more willingly than those of lower status employees, whereas social status was not associated with the degree of willingness to share schadenfreude when the misfortunes were perceived as well-deserved.

This willingness is in part caused by just world belief, and according to Smith (2013), ‘the objective details of deservingness nicely satisfy the just world motive (p.82).’ Just world belief is the belief that individuals get what is deserved (Lerner & Miller, 1978). In other words, individuals with good conduct and effort get better outcomes than those who do wrong or do not make any effort. The maintenance of the just world belief results in individuals continuously putting effort into achieving their goals (Lerner & Miller, 1978). Pietraszkiewicz (2013) threatened adolescents’ just world belief by presenting a character who worked hard but failed. In comparison with participants who were presented with stories consistent with the just world belief, their counterparts whose just world belief was threatened were more likely to perceive the character’s misfortune as deserved in order to bridge the gap between the described outcome and their belief, leading to stronger schadenfreude. Distinct from behaviors related to being pleased at and sharing others’ undeserved misfortunes, there exists a notion of justice at the root of schadenfreude toward deserved misfortunes of others. Therefore, sharing pleasure in others’ misfortune with intimate friends does not necessarily signify a bad friendship, and it is consequently predicted that sharing schadenfreude toward deserved misfortunes of others will promote adolescents’ self-esteem.

Therefore, the present study examines the effects of sharing schadenfreude with friends on adolescents’ self-esteem by presenting a target highly responsible for misfortunes. In the present study, ‘sharing schadenfreude’ is defined as verbally expressing feelings of schadenfreude and receiving a positive response from others. The schadenfreude that is shared in this study was imaginative and occurred in scenarios rather than in real life. Because we have almost no research on sharing schadenfreude, this study builds upon the previous work of Watanabe (2014) and explores the effect of sharing schadenfreude with intimate others on late adolescents’ self-esteem and fundamentally focuses on a competitive situation in the educational domain, just as in the previous study. It is hypothesized that experiencing schadenfreude regarding well-deserved misfortunes of a perceived superior will enhance late adolescents’ self-esteem, and that adolescents who share a feeling of schadenfreude will show further increases in self-esteem than those who do not engage in sharing behaviors.

Method

The study procedure was reviewed and approved by the ethics committee of the author’s institution. The study procedure was explained to participants before their participation in the study and participants signed a letter of informed consent.

Participants

Undergraduates at a private university in Japan (242 men and 238 women) participated in the study for course credit. Participants’ mean age was 20.30 (SD = 1.13) years.
**Materials**

**Scenarios and the target of schadenfreude**
The outline of a series of scenarios is shown in Figure 1.

The experimental story comprised three scenarios, and the target of schadenfreude was described as a superior rival classmate of the same sex. Scenario 1 depicted a conversation between the study participant, addressed in the second person as ‘you,’ and an academic adviser about an examination for full tuition exemption that would be held in a week. The participant was presented with a scenario in which another applicant (the target of schadenfreude) was determined to be the smarter in class, thus suggesting the high possibility of the participant losing his or her full tuition exemption. In scenario 2, it was revealed that another applicant, Taro, cheated on the examination. Taro was excluded from the candidate pool and experienced other consequences due to his deceptive behavior, which led to you winning the full tuition exemption. In scenario 3, you had a conversation with your best friend, Yuji, at a café. Because Taro is your mutual classmate, you discussed Taro's cheating behavior on the examination and subsequent consequences. You honestly expressed your happy and satisfied feelings about Taro's difficulties. Yuji offered you his congratulations on your winning the exemption, and said that Taro's exclusion from the candidacy was well-deserved. Your best friend responded very positively and sympathetically to your pleasure toward Taro's misfortune.

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Figure 1. Flowchart of the series of scenarios. The character names ‘Taro’ and ‘Yuji’ were presented for male participants, with the names ‘Hanako’ and ‘Tomomi’ substituted, respectively, for female participants.
applicant cheated on the examination and experienced difficulties due to his own unfair behavior, which led to the participant winning the tuition exemption. Scenario 3 had two versions: sharing schadenfreude or non-sharing schadenfreude. In the sharing version of the scenario 3, the participant was given the scenario of conversing with his or her best friend about winning the exemption and another applicant’s unfair behavior. In this sharing version of scenario 3, the participant was asked to imagine both honestly expressing his or her happiness and feeling funny at the rival’s loss, and the best friend completely agreeing with the participant’s pleasure at the rival’s misfortune. In the non-sharing version of scenario 3, the participant was given the situation of recalling on his or her own another applicant’s unfair behavior and feeling pleased at this individual’s misfortune.

In addition to the above-mentioned experimental story, a control version of scenario 1 only describing the fact that the participant and a classmate are applying for the same tuition exemption was also prepared for a manipulation check for a perceived superior target of schadenfreude.

**State self-esteem and schadenfreude**

State self-esteem was measured with the State Self-Esteem Scale developed by Abe and Konno (2007). This scale is largely identical to the items from the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), except that some phrases (i.e. ‘on the whole,’ ‘at times,’ and ‘all in all’) were replaced with the word ‘now,’ and one item of ‘Now, I wish I could have more respect for myself’ was excluded as a result of tests of its validity and reliability (Abe & Konno, 2007). Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with each item on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The state self-esteem score was the sum of the nine items, and its possible range of scores was 9–45. The Cronbach’s alpha coefficients for this scale were .89 for the period prior to and .88 for the period following the experience of schadenfreude.

Seven adjective items assessed schadenfreude (Sawada, 2008): ‘happy,’ ‘laughable,’ ‘enjoyable,’ ‘pleasing,’ ‘deserving,’ ‘contented,’ and ‘funny.’ Six filler items regarding empathy (‘heartbreaking,’ ‘unlucky,’ ‘pity,’ ‘sad,’ ‘hard,’ and ‘distressing’) were also randomly presented with the schadenfreude items mentioned above. Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they experienced each feeling toward the target of schadenfreude on a 6-point scale, ranging from 1 (I am totally not like that) to 6 (I am totally like that). The schadenfreude score was the mean of the seven items, and the possible range of scores was 1–6. The Cronbach’s alpha for items composing schadenfreude was .89.

**Procedure**

Each participant was randomly presented with either the experimental story or the control story (hereinafter called ‘experimental group’ and ‘control group,’ respectively). First, all participants were asked to imagine themselves in the situation of the individual referred to as ‘you’ in the series of scenarios. After participants read scenario 1, the extent of their envious feelings toward the classmate (‘How envious do you feel toward your rival classmate described in a scenario?’) was assessed using the visual analogue scale (VAS; 0–100mm: 0 = not at all, 100 = extremely). In addition, the level of state self-esteem was assessed using the State Self-Esteem Scale. Thereafter, participants were asked to read scenario 2 and then evaluate the items regarding schadenfreude toward the misfortune of the rival. Finally, about half of the participants in the experimental group (69 men and 45 women) read the sharing version, and the other half (73 men and 68 women) read the non-sharing version of scenario 3 prior to evaluating the items for state self-esteem again. Similarly, about one-half of the participants in the control group (71 men and 58 women) read the sharing version, and the other half (29 men and 67 women) read the non-sharing version of the scenario 3 before their state self-esteem was measured.
Results

First, 30 individuals with incomplete data were excluded, and then the final data of 450 individuals were analyzed. A manipulation check for the perception of a superior target was performed by calculating and comparing the mean scores of envy and schadenfreude between the experimental and the control group. The mean envy and schadenfreude scores were 63.65 (SD = 27.23) and 3.92 (SD = 1.46) for the experimental group, and 40.13 (SD = 30.18) and 3.70 (SD = 1.41) for the control group. To examine if there were differences in the levels of envy and schadenfreude between the two groups, t-tests were performed. Both envy and schadenfreude scores for the experimental group were higher than those for the control group, respectively: $t(448) = 8.69, p < .001, d = 0.82$, and $t(448) = 3.40, p < .001, d = 0.32$. This result indicates that the target of schadenfreude described in the experimental story was perceived as a more self-threatening and envy-evoking superior classmate than the target depicted in the control story.

Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations of state self-esteem scores calculated by group, sharing behavior, and time measured.

A three-factor analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted with the effects of group (2: experimental or control) and sharing behavior (2: sharing or non-sharing) as between-participants factors, and with the effect of time (2: before and after experiencing schadenfreude) as a within-participants factor. There were significant main effects of time, $F(1, 446) = 80.38, p < .001, \eta^2_p = 0.15$, and of group × time interaction, $F(1, 446) = 13.10, p < .001, \eta^2_G = 0.14$, but no other main effects or interactions were significant. Follow-up analyses indicated that the simple main effect of time was significant both for the experimental and the control group, respectively: $F(1, 446) = 82.88, p < .001$, and $F(1, 446) = 13.68, p < .001$. For both groups, state self-esteem scores after experiencing schadenfreude were higher than those before experiencing schadenfreude (see Figure 2).

Discussion

The present study hypothesized that experiencing schadenfreude regarding the deserved misfortune of an envy-evoking superior would enhance late adolescents’ self-esteem, and that sharing schadenfreude would result in further increases in self-esteem than not sharing. The results indicated that, regardless of whether the target of schadenfreude was an envy-evoking superior rival or not, and regardless of expresser’s engaging in sharing behaviors, state self-esteem increased after experiencing schadenfreude regarding the deserved misfortunes of a rival. Schadenfreude can also be experienced in cases in which individuals gain from the misfortune of others (Smith, Powell, Combs, & Kim, 2009). Even though individuals in the control group were not presented with a scenario featuring an envy-evoking superior rival classmate, they were presented with the scenario in which they were selected as an exceptional student and won the full tuition exemption owing to a rival’s failure, which enhanced self-evaluation; thus, the observed changes in state self-esteem were in some way reasonable.

However, no association was found between sharing behavior and further increases in state self-esteem, a finding inconsistent with the hypothesis. This is possibly due to the high deservingness of the misfortune presented in the scenario. The experiences that entail feelings of
shame, guilt, and a sense of personal responsibility are less likely to be shared with others (Finkenauer & Rimé, 1998). However, the target of schadenfreude in the present study failed due to his own unfair behavior, and participants were not given any descriptions associated with a feeling of shame or guilt or perceive any personal responsibility for their rival’s misfortune. In addition, owing to just world belief, this well-deserved misfortune may have contributed to the perception of the acceptability of sharing schadenfreude with a friend. Whereas these characteristics of misfortune have been found to promote expressing and sharing schadenfreude with less hesitation (Dasborough & Harvey, 2017), this may reduce the special sense of being understood and accepted by friends at the same time, which is one of key contributors for higher self-esteem during adolescence (e.g. Richards et al., 1998). This may result from the expectation that the listener might feel the same way about the clearly well-deserved misfortune and therefore agree with the expresser. This finding indicated that honestly expressing and sharing a feeling of schadenfreude regarding the deserved misfortunes of others, which is similar to sharing common feelings and therefore less likely to be linked with personal expression of emotion or a relationship representing a special intimacy, does not lead to higher increases in late adolescents’ self-esteem. This tendency is observed consistently despite the levels of envy toward the target.

Furthermore, non-sharing behavior in the present study did not refer to doing nothing but instead referred to recalling the rival’s unfair conduct alone and feeling pleased at the misfortune. Recall of positive memories generally plays a role in improving or enhancing mood (Joormann & Siemer, 2004; Joormann, Siemer, & Gotlib, 2007). Individuals must recall their emotional experiences in order to share them with others; however, in the sharing version of the scenario 3, only descriptions regarding expressing and sharing schadenfreude with the best friend was included. In other words, whereas the sharing version of the scenario mainly depicted the intimate interactions between the participant and the best friend, the non-sharing scenario emphasized the individual’s positive memory; thus, we cannot rule out the possibility that this positive memory in the non-sharing scenario was associated with the unexpected results. The effect of sharing schadenfreude on self-esteem can be more precisely defined by strictly controlling the degree of memory recall, as well as considering the meaning of not sharing schadenfreude.

Overall, the present study demonstrated an increase in late adolescents’ state self-esteem after experiencing schadenfreude regardless of the level of envy toward the target of schadenfreude. Moreover, sharing schadenfreude with friends did not specifically contribute to further increases in self-esteem if the misfortunes of others were well-deserved. As very few studies on sharing schadenfreude have been conducted, the findings of the present study are meaningful and help
to suggest the direction of future study on the relationship between schadenfreude and adolescent self-esteem.

However, the present study used a scenario reading task requiring participants to imagine themselves in the situation described; therefore, future research could elaborate on the findings by developing a valid experimental design to share and measure schadenfreude, in addition to considering strategies to reduce social desirability effects. Furthermore, it is possible that characteristics of the relationship between expressers of schadenfreude and their best friends may influence the effects of sharing schadenfreude on self-esteem. The present study did not provide descriptions with regard to the characteristics of best friends (i.e. whether they typically say bad things about other people, or how often and how deeply their best friends have accepted the expressed personal feelings of the individual referred to as ‘you’ in the scenario). This may have made it more difficult for some participants to imagine the sharing scenario, which might have contributed to no association being formed between sharing schadenfreude and self-esteem. For future research, manipulation of personal characteristics and general behavior patterns of listeners would be helpful.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Hitomi Watanabe is the author currently lectures at Kochi University. Her primary research interests are identity development, schadenfreude, and benefit-finding. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Hitomi Watanabe, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Kochi University, 2-5-1, Akebono, Kochi, 780-8520 JAPAN [email: hiwatana@kochi-u.ac.jp].

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