

Schadenfreude: The prerequisites of malicious glee

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Shame and Laughter

According to Leonid Karasev (1996), shame is the «negative modus» of laughter. Shame and laughter both overcome us involuntarily and intermittently. It is as hard to control an outburst of shame as it is to stop a laughing fit. But shame and laughter occupy two opposite poles: Shame reflects an emotional state of inferiority, whereas laughter is a powerful signal indicating feelings of superiority. The cramps of severe shame are implosive and «covered up». On the other hand, the spasms of laughter burst out like explosions, expressing a bodily-experienced supremacy mixed with relish and self-affirmation.

Shame is, without a doubt, a painful self-conscious emotion. It signifies indignity, defeat, and inferiority. Scheff and Retzinger (2000) compared guilt and shame as follows: «In guilt, one is angry at oneself, but one also feels powerful: powerful enough to have hurt another, and perhaps powerful enough to make amends. In this way, guilt can serve as a mask for shame, which is a *feeling of weakness* to the point of impotence or powerlessness. There are many words that can be used as substitutes for shame [...]: feeling insecure, blank, anxious, ridiculous, foolish, silly, stupid, or absurd are some examples.»

Shame arises when the individual is not sufficiently esteemed by his or her social partners. Ashamed individuals feel degraded and disparaged by their social peers. Therefore, they are evaluating themselves as *less worthy* in comparison to others. The need to compare oneself to others is phylogenetically quite old, and biologically very powerful. When individuals unfavorably compare themselves to others who are seen as more successful, they will undergo a shaming self-devaluation coupled with feelings of inferiority and perceiving oneself as an object of ridicule.

To sum it up, laughter is accompanied by elevating emotions that trigger an «upward psychological spiral» going, whereas shame is accompanied with depressing feelings that trigger a «downward psychological spiral».

Social Comparisons as a Source of Inferiority Feelings

When a person undergoes inferiority feelings, this simply means that he or she considers him- or herself to be low in comparison with others. Over a century ago, psychiatrist Pierre Janet has coined the term «sentiment d'incomplétude» (feeling of incompleteness). The famous psychiatrist Ernst Kretschmer (1952) described the same type of emotions as follows: «The inferiority feeling results from the individual's speculation about how others would judge him or how he is assessing himself in regard to common moral or performance-related standards. All acts of self-assessment are, by principle, dependent upon relating oneself to fellow human beings. Therefore, comparison is the original source of the feeling of inferiority.»

An important compensatory means for coping with inferiority feelings is to set up a scenario that involves a *downward comparison*: In order to feel superior, the individual in question therefore looks for someone else who is timid, easily embarrassed and insecure, and whose conduct is comparatively inferior. This self-enhancing downward comparison usually produces malicious amusement and mirth and may be accompanied by gloating laughter. The ancient theories of comedy reflect this dynamic. In Plato's (1993) «Philebus», the failures, sufferings and humiliations endured by others are perceived to be the primary source for hearty laughter. In his «Poetics», Aristotle (1970) declares that the actors in comedies are generally perceived to be in a worse or lower position than the average spectator.

Social Comparison Theory

Social Comparison Theory was formulated in 1954 by Leon Festinger. According to this theory, humans have an inclination for continuous self-evaluation. Therefore, any comparison with others has a direct influence on self-esteem. A discouraging *upward comparison* occurs when one compares oneself to someone who is better off (Baumeister, 2008). An amateur swimmer comparing his or her lap times to those of an Olympic swimmer is an example of an upward comparison.

A passive (i.e. an «internal») *downward comparison* occurs when one individual compares oneself to someone who is worse off. Comparing one's grade on an exam with fellow students who received lower grades is an example of a passive downward social comparison. This type of comparison generally makes one feel better about oneself (cf. Martin et al., 2001). An *active* downward comparison occurs either through overt derogation or by causing harm to others. Derogation occurs when an individual belittles the target of his or her comparison, with or without that target's knowledge. By actively causing harm to others, individuals

can intentionally create situations in which others will be worse off than themselves, thus providing the opportunity to make downward comparisons (Smith, 2000; Wills, 1981).

Derogatory Laughing in Active Downward Comparisons

Laughing at people who are perceived as inferiors is an essential ingredient of the so-called superiority or disparagement theories (Keith-Spiegel 1972). Such theories state that humor is derived from attaining a feeling of superiority over others who are perceived to be weak, infirm, or ridiculous. Thomas Hobbes (1651, chapter VI) has already stated: «Sudden glory, is the passion which maketh those grimaces called laughter; and is caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleaseth them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves.»

Hobbes affirms that human are engaged in a constant power struggle, and that it should not be surprising that victory goes to the one who laughs. Such laughter is the compensatory means for relieving the unremitting heavy downward pull of the sense of inferiority (cf. Ludovici, 1932, p. 109).

For Stendhal, this type of derogatory laughter is typical for mankind's general psychic activity. The ego feeds upon a multitude of consolations and recompenses: It feeds upon the sorrows of one's fellow man in an unending comparison of self and others (Bishop, 1975, p. 50). In his *Filosofia Nova*, Stendhal (1931, p. 117) writes: «La passion qui excite à rire n'est autre chose qu'une vaine gloire fondée sur la conception subite de quelque excellence qui se trouve en nous par opposition à l'infirmité des autres. » [«The passion that excites one to laugh is nothing but a vain glory founded upon the sudden conception of some excellence in ourselves as opposed to the infirmity of others.»]

Albert Rapp (1949) theorized that ridicule was the first and only form of laughter for a lengthy period of human history. The caveman laughed at the physical misfortunes of others, as they foretold of a coming victory in battle. Subsequently, intentional mockery began to supplant the battle, and probably became one of the ways in which the defeated could take revenge.

The great and diverse world of derogatory laughter continued its unbroken cycle from the ancient world through to the carnivals of the Middle Ages, leading up to the modern April Fool's jokes and hoaxes (Bakhtin 1994; cf. Lachmann et al. 1989). In this context, Ruch and Proyer (2009) coined the term «katagelasticism». Katagelasticists actively seek and establish situations in which they can laugh at others. There is a broad variety of things that

katagelasticians would do, starting from harmless pranks to truly embarrassing and even harmful, mean-spirited jokes.

Downward Comparison as a Source of Schadenfreude

When an individual has succeeded in placing a rival in an inferior position, he or she may experience a feeling of malicious joy. The German term «Schadenfreude», which also exists as a loanword in the English language, is used to describe the enjoyment obtained from the misfortunes of others.

Schadenfreude is related to envy, is fed by feelings of inferiority, and operates through a mechanism by which the individual looks for indications of inferiority in others. When one witnesses the misfortunes, the deformities or other forms of weakness of another person, this will inevitably trigger a favorable personal evaluation resulting in a pleasant feeling of superiority, which frequently provokes laughter (Billig, 2005, p. 51f).

Sibling Rivalry as the Psychodynamic Origin of Schadenfreude

Psychodynamically, Schadenfreude is a relic from our childhood and is bound up with sibling rivalry. Imagine a first born child who has been «dethroned» by a younger sibling. This child understandably experiences jealousy and rage as he or she watches the younger sibling being coddled or treated with special care. Evidently, this child is constantly evaluating how he or she is positioned in relation to his or her rival. When the older child realizes that he or she is not entitled to receive the same privileges as the younger child, an upward comparison might arise that makes the child feel ashamed. Therefore, this child becomes strongly motivated to look for an ego-strengthening downward comparison. In a ceaseless quest for social importance and personal acceptance, this child begins to look for downward comparisons that confirm his or her psychological significance and subsequently result in the wicked glee of Schadenfreude. Cruel and heartless power struggles may arise during this process, in the course of which aggressive mockery and derision are used as effective weapons. In this context, two forms of Schadenfreude can be differentiated.

Type 1: Schadenfreude as an Expression of a Malicious Glee

The older child gloats over the fact that he or she is in a more competent and advantageous position than less competent children (younger siblings, playmates, dull-witted children). In this context, less competent children are

interpersonally exposed to being made fun of.

The laughter that arises from this variant of Schadenfreude is, in principle, apt to raise the mocker's self-esteem. Ancient comedy as well as the farces and burlesques of the Middle Ages were specifically aimed at this effect of malicious glee whereby the fool (a forerunner of the modern clown) took the role of the incompetent child and was cast as an object of derision and downward comparison. The modern comedy scene with its mix of show, talk, action and a mocking cynicism offers countless possibilities for experiencing amusing downward comparisons. In post-modern comedy shows, the entertainers perform as virtuoso players on the keyboard of type-1-Schadenfreude.

Similarly, the current fare of television sitcoms with their illustrations of repeated blows of fate are continuously making downward comparisons. Downward comparisons are also at play in «Reality Television» and other shows featuring marginalized individuals. Another well-known example is the comedy-channel's *Comedy Central*, with shows like «Candid Camera», «Pranked TV Show», «Little Britain» or «Crank Yankers».

Type 2: Compensational Schadenfreude

This type of Schadenfreude is specific to the younger and less competent child. When interacting with superior older siblings or playmates, younger children usually lose out and experience themselves to be in the position of inferiority. This generates the younger child's shame and powerless rage. However, such feelings are immediately compensated for when the younger child realizes that the hitherto superior child often comes off the worst. In this instance the proverbial joyous feeling of obtaining ultimate justice will prevail, which ensures social equality and the immediate compensation of prior inferiority feelings.

This type of Schadenfreude is part of humanity's basic psychological equipment and constitutes an important compensatory mechanism for addressing self-esteem problems as in the case when individuals in a low status position witness the fall of a high-status person who was initially perceived as mighty, supercilious, or immoral (cf. Combs et al., 2009). Classic cabaret, as well as the related genres of satire, parody and caricature, also make use of the liberating effect of compensational Schadenfreude. They aim at uncovering weaknesses in the powerful in order to impart the pleasure of equalizing justice upon the audience. This intention is typically used in German *Kabarett*, which must not be confused with the classic American cabaret. Instead, *Kabarett* encompasses the performance of political satire in a theater atmosphere that could be either

formal or informal if it is integrated into a night club act. Kabarett artists focus almost completely on political and societal topics that they shred to pieces by using irony and sarcasm. In Kabarett, the socially powerful are brought into a downward position that enables the audience to experience Schadenfreude.

In this sense, compensational Schadenfreude is a social leveler. It enables the socially inferior person to temporarily experience the joy of superiority in relation to those who are supposed to be in a better social position due to higher social status, better income, physical attractiveness, or high popularity rankings. Last but not least, compensational Schadenfreude provides poetic justice whereby one can comment about the powerful in good conscience: «He or she deserves this thrashing.» For example, we are usually delighted when a thief did not get away with his criminal behavior (Kristjánsson, 2006). Norman Feather (2002) states that this type of Schadenfreude emerges from our sense of fairness. We resent seeing anyone achieving a success that is not deserved. This is especially relevant for underprivileged individuals.

According to a recent study, 79% of Germans aged 14 years or older experience Schadenfreude when a powerful persons has a mishap. 95.1% of the 14-19 year-old population have already experienced Schadenfreude, but only 53.6% of those over 70 years of age report that they are enjoying Schadenfreude. (Representative study of GfK, Nürnberg, 2006)

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