



## Pleasure with malice

### Description

**Tour de Schadenfreude.** Yet another celebrity suffers disgrace. Cyclist Lance Armstrong at last admits to winning all those Tour de France titles while taking performance enhancing drugs. Interest in this celebrity's confession was massive. Around 28 million people watched the tv [interview](#) in which he admitted guilt. Tweets and joke websites pile on the derision.

Social media and prosumer culture encourage everyone to play the role of celebrity, at a small scale to create a personal brand, manage private and public disclosures, develop a following, and entertain. Are we too opening ourselves to social derision?

The manufacture of celebrity is an exaggerated version of what all of us experience at a smaller scale anyway. Psychologists tell us it's about social comparison, in which the negative emotion of *envy* plays a major part. When someone you envy falls from grace, slips up, loses status or is embarrassed, then you are likely to experience *schadenfreude*, a feeling of pleasure at the misfortune of others. Psychologists can apparently pick up this relationship in fMRI brain scanning.

### Where is Schadenfreude?

Neuroscientists Hidehiko Takahashi and colleagues set out to test the idea that a misfortune happening to an envied person produces greater brain activation associated with *schadenfreude* than misfortune happening to a person who is not envied. In their study they recorded activation levels in the part of the brain where cognitive conflicts or social pain are processed (the ACC area).

In their study the researchers presented a group of students with various scenarios. Each student was to imagine someone with superior or inferior levels of ability in sports, music, art, academic achievement, earning money or popularity. The researchers confirmed that people are most envious of others who are on their own territory of achievement and do better at it, ie I'm probably not envious of someone who writes superb poetry if I've never thought of myself as a poet. An aspiring but mediocre cyclist might envy someone else who always wins at cycling.



Of course, it might not be the cycling with which we identify,

but the money, the adulation, the popularity. According to the brain scan activation measures for the students in the study, it's those we envy most for whom we are inclined to feel pleasure when they lose a game, suffer food poisoning, or get caught in a scandal.

Takahashi argues that envy motivates us to close social gaps. It prompts you to either enhance your own performance or to sabotage an opponent's performances. Observing the misfortunes of another brings a degree of pleasure as it contributes to narrowing the gap between us and our rivals.

In so far as anyone trusts the mapping of cognitive processes to regions of the brain, the place where Takahashi detected greater activation, the dorsal part of the anterior cingulate cortex (the ACC), is associated with error detection and conflict monitoring. It seems that envy and schadenfreude are *not* autonomous and automatic feelings triggered by circumstances and events. We really are torn between conflicting emotions. Admiration, envy, and schadenfreude are primarily associated with conflict.

## Schadenfreude and familiarity

Perhaps it's easier to give full vent to feelings of schadenfreude when its target is distant from our own ken and those in whose lives we don't have any real investment ie celebrities. We are more inclined to allow ourselves to enjoy their demise, or at least to gain enjoyment from the confessional, which narrows the gap between the spectacularly successful and the rest of us. Familiarity diminishes schadenfreude, or at least its effects. Socially adjusted adults manage to suppress the temptation to delight in their friends' misfortunes. So perhaps familiarity creates some degree of immunity from schadenfreude for social media users that and the circulation of *humour*.

Conflict, exaggeration and humour provide keys to how we respond to schadenfreude. In his introduction to Freud's account of jokes, John Carey says, "By making our enemy small, inferior, despicable or comic, we achieve in a roundabout way the enjoyment of overcoming him to which the third person, who has made no efforts, bears witness by his laughter" (xxi).

At least now anyone can achieve their dream of winning as many Tour de France titles as Lance Armstrong! (This is one of the least unsavoury jokes sourced and adapted from [sickipedia.org](http://sickipedia.org).)

## References

- Carey, John. 2002. Introduction. In S. Freud (ed.), *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*: vii-xxviii. London: Penguin.
- Takahashi, Hidehiko, Motoichiro Kato, Masato Matsuura, Dean Mobbs, Tetsuya Suhara, and Yoshiro Okubo. 2009. When your gain is my pain and your pain is my gain: Neural correlates of envy and Schadenfreude. *Science*, (323)937-939.

## Note

- Here's a better joke, nothing to do with schadenfreude: I can't believe how thick the snow is out there. I asked a snowman for the time and he just stared at me.
- Also see blog post on [Empathy](#), and posts tagged [Brain](#).
- *Schadenfreude* is a culturally loaded term. It's German for a start, and without a single-word synonym. I'm skeptical of the idea that a cultural meme like *schadenfreude* can be extracted from the field of complex human relationships, identified as a singular function, and attributed to a region of the brain. Can we locate Internet addiction, liking kittens, holidaying in France, bike repair or shopping in the same way?

## Category

1. Media

## Tags

1. brain
2. envy
3. Schadenfreude

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