



DON BAYLEY/GETTY

A rogue banana peel creates the potential for a bout of *Schadenfreude*.

SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

The gloat factor

Dan Jones mulls over a study of why we enjoy the misfortunes of others.

In the summer of 2012, best-selling science writer Jonah Lehrer suffered a dramatic and public fall from grace. It became apparent that Lehrer had recycled the words of at least one other writer and had even invented quotes from Bob Dylan in his most recent book, *Imagine: How Creativity Works* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012).

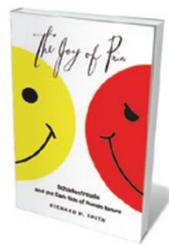
Lehrer lost his new job at *The New Yorker*, his publishers pulled his books and writers across the Twitterverse and blogosphere referred to him with scorn. Yet beneath the righteous indignation of his many critics lurked a sense of pleasure in seeing this young, hip, successful author cut down to size.

Why do the misfortunes of others give us a lift? This is the question explored by social psychologist Richard Smith in *The Joy of Pain*, a breezy but serious exploration of the phenomenon. Smith's answer is that *Schadenfreude* — an emotion as ignoble as envy or spite, from the German for harm (*Schaden*) and joy (*Freude*) — pays psychological dividends by enabling us to feel better about ourselves, and our social worth and rank, through “downward comparison” with others.

For Smith, *Schadenfreude* is grounded in our evolved social psychology. Life is a competitive game, with winners and losers

in the search for status, mates and much else; and as far as natural selection is concerned, what matters is not your absolute level of success, but how much better or worse you are doing relative to everyone else. So humans are keenly aware of how our attributes, skills and successes stack up against the game's other players and when we come off badly in these social comparisons, our self-esteem takes a hit.

Likewise, seeing those who are above us in social rank take a fall boosts our own relative standing and makes us feel good. Smith discusses experimental studies by social psychologist Wilco van Dijk and his colleagues that show that when people's self-esteem is challenged (by being given bad but false feedback on a test they've taken), they are more likely to take pleasure in hearing about a successful person coming undone. Similarly, the researchers showed that people



The Joy of Pain: Schadenfreude and the Dark Side of Human Nature
RICHARD H. SMITH
Oxford University Press
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with pre-existing low self-esteem who take part in studies are prone to *Schadenfreude*.

Smith describes many routes to *Schadenfreude*, from the relatively passive — such as comparing ourselves to people who are down and out, and exaggerating negative qualities (or dismissing positive qualities) of those more successful than us — to actively bringing about the misfortune of people we envy.

He also notes a number of factors that prime us for *Schadenfreude*. It is likely to bubble up when we think that someone's misfortune is a case of just deserts, and never more so than when the person is revealed to be a hypocrite — such as the many evangelical preachers exposed as indulging in the behaviours they condemn in others.

Envy also amps up *Schadenfreude*, as memorably articulated by writer Clive James's poem ‘The book of my enemy has been remaindered [and I am pleased]’ (see go.nature.com/gr5kdf). Conflicts and competition between groups are likely to bring out *Schadenfreude*; think of sport, in which pleasure in the misfortune of rivals is socially acceptable. Psychologist Charles Hoogland and his colleagues, for example, have shown that committed basketball fans are pleased when rival team members suffer even severe injuries. And brain-imaging studies by psychologist Susan Fiske and others revealed that when fans of baseball team the Boston Red Sox witness their team beating arch-rivals the New York Yankees (or vice versa), their brains show more activation of reward systems than when their team beats a more neutral opponent, underscoring the importance of competitive drive in *Schadenfreude*. Politics is yet another rich seam: recall the celebratory parties that erupted when former UK prime minister Margaret Thatcher died earlier this year.

Schadenfreude fuelled by a combination of resentment and our divisive tendency to form exclusive, competitive groups can be especially potent, bringing out the darkest sides of human nature and leading people to actively engineer misfortune in other groups. Smith suggests that such a process plausibly had a role in Nazi propaganda, which was explicitly designed to arouse resentment, envy and enmity towards Jewish people, and so to offer a specious justification for their subsequent extreme mistreatment and incalculable suffering.

Smith's portrait of this complex response combines experimental studies with many well-chosen examples drawn from political scandals, biographies, reality-television shows, literature, sitcoms, cartoons and the observations of comedians and satirists. *The Joy of Pain* is a real joy to read — and completely painless. ■

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