

Research Paper

When Justice Smiles: Exploring the Relationship Between Malicious Joy and Perceived Cosmic Justice in Young Minds

Sonam Sultana^{1*}, Bijoy Krishna Panda¹, Muktipada Sinha¹

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the psychological phenomenon of schadenfreude the pleasure derived from another's misfortune and its correlation with Just World Belief (JWB), the notion that individuals get what they deserve in life. The study examines the underlying psychological mechanisms, including social comparison, perceived justice, and victim-blaming tendencies. Additionally, the paper highlights the social and educational implications, particularly in childhood development and school environments. This paper investigates how these two concepts interact and what this reveals about human nature and social behavior. By reviewing existing literature and theoretical frameworks, this research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how JWB influences schadenfreude and its broader consequences in society.

Keywords: *Cosmic Justice; Malicious Joy; Victim Blaming; Schadenfreude; Just World Belief and Moral Reasoning*

Why do we sometimes feel a sense of satisfaction when others experience misfortune? While it may seem counterintuitive or even morally questionable, this phenomenon known as schadenfreude (Watanabe, 2022) reflects deeper psychological mechanisms tied to our perceptions of justice, social comparison, and personal insecurities. The idea that people deserve their outcomes, whether good or bad, is deeply ingrained in human psychology. Just World Belief (JWB) serves as a cognitive framework through which individuals rationalize life events. At the same time, schadenfreude, the experience of pleasure at another's suffering raises significant ethical and moral questions (Pietraszkiewicz, 2013).

Schadenfreude does not emerge in isolation. It is shaped by a range of cognitive and emotional factors, including envy, perceived justice, and an individual's self-esteem. When people believe that misfortune is deserved, they are more likely to experience schadenfreude rather than sympathy (Brigham et al., 1997). This aligns with the Just World Hypothesis (Lerner, 1980), which suggests that individuals have a psychological need to believe in a fair world, leading them to attribute others' hardships to their own actions (Wenzel, 2017). This cognitive bias provides a sense of order and predictability, reinforcing the belief that good

¹Department of Education, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, India

*Corresponding Author

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people are rewarded while bad people suffer the consequences of their actions. (Lerner, 2013)

However, such reasoning can have profound social and moral consequences. While sympathy encourages prosocial behavior and emotional support, schadenfreude leads to detachment, avoidance, or even hostility (Erzi, 2019). Individuals may justify suffering as deserved rather than offering help or empathy, leading to increased victim-blaming and reduced social cohesion. Furthermore, self-esteem plays a crucial role in shaping these emotional responses those with lower self-esteem are more prone to schadenfreude, particularly when comparing themselves to individuals they perceive as more successful or privileged (Akbar, 2022).

In the digital age, social media has amplified these psychological mechanisms (Cecconi et al., 2020), making schadenfreude more visible and socially reinforced. People often witness the misfortunes of celebrities, influencers, or even peers online, sometimes reveling in their downfall. The rapid spread of information and collective judgment on digital platforms reinforces Just World Belief by creating narratives of deserved consequences, further strengthening schadenfreude in social interactions. Additionally, schadenfreude in childhood and adolescence has implications for moral development, peer relationships, and bullying behaviors, raising concerns about its role in school environments (Correia and Dalbert, 2008).

Despite its prevalence, schadenfreude remains a less explored emotional response compared to empathy or sympathy. By examining its roots and its relationship with Just World Belief, this study aims to shed light on its impact on moral reasoning, social interactions, and educational settings. Understanding the mechanisms behind schadenfreude can help develop interventions that foster empathy and prosocial behavior (Greenier, 2021), particularly in younger populations. In doing so, this research contributes to a broader understanding of human nature, justice perception, and the complexities of moral emotions.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the psychological mechanisms underlying schadenfreude, including social comparison, perceived justice, and victim-blaming tendencies.
2. To investigate the relationship between Just World Belief (JWB) and schadenfreude, analyzing how the belief that individuals "get what they deserve" influences reactions to others' misfortunes.
3. To explore the social and educational implications of schadenfreude, particularly in childhood development and school environments.
4. To assess how schadenfreude manifests in different social contexts and its broader consequences on interpersonal relationships and societal attitudes.
5. To provide recommendations for mitigating the negative effects of schadenfreude and fostering empathy in educational and social settings.

Research Questions

1. What psychological factors contribute to the experience of schadenfreude?
2. How does Just World Belief influence individuals' perceptions of others' misfortunes?
3. In what ways does schadenfreude impact social interactions and relationships?

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4. How does schadenfreude manifest in childhood development and school environments?
5. What interventions can be implemented in educational settings to reduce schadenfreude and promote empathy?

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research approach to explore the relationship between schadenfreude, the Just World Belief (JWB), and victim-blaming behaviors, with a particular focus on their manifestation in childhood development and educational settings. The methodology is designed to provide an in-depth understanding of these psychological and social dynamics, as well as to propose educational interventions that foster empathy and mitigate negative competitive behaviors.

Context of the study

Why does such a negative emotion arise naturally in us? The phenomenon of schadenfreude the pleasure derived from another's misfortune has been widely studied, revealing multiple psychological underpinnings. One explanation is that individuals often find satisfaction in others' failures when it reinforces their own sense of superiority or success. Personal gain and social comparison play a significant role, as people unconsciously measure their self-worth relative to those around them. When someone else's downfall enhances one's relative standing, the backdrop of their suffering fades in comparison to the perceived benefit (Anthes, 2010).

Another major factor is Just World Belief (JWB) the deeply ingrained notion that individuals get what they deserve. This belief leads people to perceive misfortunes as fair consequences of past actions, reinforcing the idea that justice is being served. (Smith et al., 2009) McNamee describes schadenfreude as the "Emotional Corollary of Justice," emphasizing how people experience a sense of satisfaction when perceived wrongdoers face retribution. However, this perspective also contributes to victim-blaming, where individuals justify another's suffering by attributing it to their own faults, even in cases where they had no control over the situation.

The Just World Hypothesis (Giddens and Petter, 2020) (Lerner, 1980) explains why people rationalize negative events as deserved. According to this theory, individuals have a fundamental need to believe in a fair and orderly world, which helps them navigate life with a sense of stability and predictability. Without this belief, uncertainty and chaos would make it difficult to commit to long-term goals or adhere to social norms. However, when confronted with evidence that the world is not inherently just, people often experience psychological discomfort. To reduce this cognitive dissonance, they employ defensive strategies, such as shifting blame onto victims or rationalizing suffering as deserved (Giddens and Petter, 2020).

Additionally, envy particularly when driven by greed or feelings of inferiority fuels schadenfreude. When people perceive someone as more privileged or successful, their resentment can manifest as pleasure when that individual experiences failure or hardship. This reaction is especially pronounced in competitive environments, where social hierarchies are reinforced, and people seek validation through comparisons with others (Greenier, 2021).

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Ultimately, schadenfreude is a complex emotional response influenced by cognitive biases, social dynamics, and moral reasoning. Understanding its roots, particularly its connection to Just World Belief, provides critical insight into how individuals perceive fairness and justice in society (Jankowski and Takahashi, 2014). This exploration also sheds light on the broader implications of schadenfreude, including its impact on social interactions, empathy development, and ethical decision-making (Atak et al., 2025).

Schadenfreude: Understanding the Psychology of Malicious Joy

Schadenfreude is the pleasure derived from another person's misfortune. Unlike envy or spite, which involve resentment or a desire for harm, schadenfreude specifically refers to the enjoyment of another's suffering. It often emerges in competitive or comparative social contexts, where an individual's misfortune serves as a point of personal satisfaction for others. This emotion has been extensively studied in psychology and sociology, offering valuable insights into human social behavior. By exploring its psychological, neuroscientific, and sociocultural underpinnings, we can better understand how schadenfreude influences interpersonal relationships and ethical decision-making (Jankowski and Takahashi, 2014). Several psychological factors contribute to the experience of schadenfreude-

Social Comparison Theory

Schadenfreude often arises when individuals compare themselves to others, particularly when the misfortune befalls someone perceived as a rival or someone of higher status (Steinbeis and Singer, 2013). This comparison can make one's own position seem relatively better, reinforcing a sense of self-worth (Keller et al., 2003).

Justice-Based Emotions

People are more likely to experience schadenfreude when they perceive that the other person "deserved" their misfortune (e.g., a corrupt politician being jailed or an arrogant celebrity facing public disgrace). This reaction aligns with the Just World Belief, where individuals assume that actions lead to morally fitting consequences.

Self-Enhancement

Schadenfreude can serve as a psychological boost to self-esteem. Witnessing another's downfall may highlight one's own favorable position, reinforcing feelings of superiority or competence.

Understanding the Sociocultural Influences of Schadenfreude

Cultural norms and values shape how schadenfreude is experienced and expressed

Collectivist vs. Individualist Cultures

In collectivist cultures, which emphasize harmony and group well-being, schadenfreude may be less prevalent due to stronger social bonds and empathy. In contrast, individualist cultures, where competition and personal achievement are prioritized, may foster higher tendencies toward schadenfreude.

Media and Social Media Influence

Modern digital platforms can amplify schadenfreude by rapidly spreading news of others' failures. Public scandals, celebrity downfalls, and viral mishaps are often met with ridicule, reinforcing schadenfreude in social discourse.

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Neuroscientific Perspectives of Schadenfreude

Brain research has revealed that schadenfreude has a distinct neurological basis

Reward System Activation

Neuroimaging studies indicate that schadenfreude activates the brain's reward-related regions, such as the ventral striatum, which is also linked to pleasure and reinforcement learning.

Personality Correlations

The intensity of schadenfreude varies among individuals and is often associated with personality traits such as narcissism, low empathy, and higher competitiveness. Those with higher levels of these traits may experience stronger or more frequent schadenfreude (Cikara and Fiske, 2012).

Ethical and Social Implications of Schadenfreude

While schadenfreude is a natural human emotion, it poses significant ethical and social challenges

Empathy vs. Schadenfreude

A higher tendency for schadenfreude can diminish empathy, leading to social detachment and increased justification of harm (Brambilla and Riva, 2017). This has implications for social cohesion, particularly in competitive environments (Akbar, 2022).

Moral Development and Social Harmony

Understanding schadenfreude can help in designing interventions to foster greater compassion and prosocial behavior. Encouraging empathy-based education and promoting community-driven values can counteract its negative social effects (Greitemeyer et al., 2010).

Just World Belief: The Illusion of Cosmic Justice

The Just World Hypothesis refers to the belief that the world operates in a fair and just manner, where individuals receive outcomes that align with their moral actions. According to this perspective, those who engage in good deeds are rewarded, while those who commit wrongdoing are punished. This belief fosters the notion that a kind of cosmic justice or universal force ensures fairness in life (Wenzel, 2017). The Just World Belief serves two primary psychological functions

Rationalizing Fortune and Misfortune

Believing in a just world helps individuals make sense of events, attributing success or failure to a person's actions rather than external factors. This allows people to explain why some individuals thrive while others struggle (Watanabe, 2022) .

Providing a Sense of Control and Predictability

The belief in a just world reassures individuals that their own actions can shape their future. It reinforces the idea that hard work and effort will lead to success, making goal-setting and long-term planning more manageable (Hafer and Rubel, 2015).

Challenges to the Just World Hypothesis

Despite its psychological benefits, the Just World Hypothesis is often contradicted by real-world events. In reality, good people do not always receive rewards, and wrongdoers do not

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always face consequences. This discrepancy poses a threat to the belief system, leading individuals to engage in cognitive biases to maintain their worldview (Kong et al., 2021). One major consequence of Just World Belief is victim-blaming the tendency to hold individuals responsible for their own suffering. For instance, people in poverty may be blamed for their financial struggles rather than acknowledging systemic inequalities. Victims of domestic violence may be held accountable for their abuse rather than recognizing external factors such as power dynamics and societal structures (Pedersen and Strömwall, 2013).

The Reality of an Unjust World

The Just World Hypothesis is constantly challenged by everyday experiences. The world is not inherently fair, and individuals are often subjected to circumstances beyond their control. While Just World Belief can provide comfort and motivation, it also risks distorting reality, leading to oversimplified moral judgments and a lack of empathy for those facing misfortune. Recognizing the limitations of this belief is crucial for fostering a more nuanced and compassionate understanding of human experiences (Dalbert et al., 2001).

Correlation Between Schadenfreude and Just World Belief

Schadenfreude the pleasure derived from another's misfortune is closely linked to the Just World Belief (JWB). Research suggests that people experience schadenfreude more intensely when they perceive that the person suffering misfortune "deserves" it. This perception aligns with the Just World Hypothesis, which assumes that individuals receive outcomes that correspond to their actions. When people strongly believe in a just world, they are more likely to attribute others' suffering to personal responsibility, reinforcing feelings of schadenfreude (Feather, 2014).

The Role of Just World Belief in Schadenfreude and Victim Blaming

The relationship between JWB and schadenfreude becomes evident in victim-blaming tendencies. Individuals who believe the world is fundamentally fair often assume that victims are responsible for their own suffering. This cognitive bias justifies misfortune, reducing feelings of empathy and increasing moral disengagement. As a result, rather than offering support, individuals may derive pleasure from others' failures, reinforcing schadenfreude. However, research distinguishes between two forms of Just World Belief (Correia and Dalbert, 2008).

Personal Just World Belief (BJW-P) that justice prevails in one's own life. Studies suggest that BJW-P correlates with honest, prosocial, and moral behavior, as it fosters a sense of personal responsibility (Duong et al., 2024). And General Just World Belief (BJW-G) that the world, in general, is fair and just. This broader belief is often associated with antisocial tendencies, dishonesty, and victim-blaming, as individuals assume that those suffering deserve their fate (Tan et al., 2024).

Thus, while personal BJW can be adaptive, general BJW can be maladaptive, promoting schadenfreude and reducing compassion.

The Role of Schadenfreude in Social and Educational Contexts

Schadenfreude is not limited to adult behavior; it is also prevalent among children and adolescents. Research shows that children who believe in a just world may be more likely to justify bullying, reasoning that victims somehow "deserved" their suffering. This has serious

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implications for education and social development, as it fosters a culture of exclusion and moral disengagement. Teachers and educators must recognize these psychological tendencies to promote empathy and reduce harmful social comparisons (Steinbeis and Singer, 2013).

Understanding the intersection between schadenfreude and JWB has several practical implications-

Bullying and Victim-Blaming Prevention

Awareness of JWB can help educators develop interventions to reduce victim-blaming tendencies in schools (Correia and Dalbert, 2008).

Media and Public Perception

News and social media should be analyzed critically to understand how public narratives shape schadenfreude responses (Bacile et al., 2024).

Workplace Dynamics

Recognizing these psychological patterns can improve workplace relationships and reduce unhealthy competitive behavior (Brigham et al., 1997).

DISCUSSION

In today's highly competitive academic landscape, children are often conditioned to prioritize achievement over personal growth, fostering an environment where success is equated with outperforming others rather than self-improvement. This emphasis on competition over collaboration can lead to the early emergence of schadenfreude, where children experience pleasure in their peers' failures rather than focusing on their own accomplishments. Parents and educators, often unknowingly, contribute to this behavior by reinforcing meritocratic ideals that emphasize success as a measure of worth. While a healthy level of competition can motivate students, excessive pressure can have detrimental effects on children's mental health, leading to heightened stress, anxiety, and depression. Research suggests that children who are constantly exposed to competitive social environments may develop a fear of failure, which further promotes defensive attitudes, reduced empathy, and victim-blaming tendencies. The Just World Belief (JWB) plays a crucial role in this process. When children internalize the idea that success and failure are solely the results of effort and merit, they may attribute misfortune to personal failure rather than external circumstances. As a result, children who struggle academically may be blamed for their own difficulties rather than receiving support and understanding. This not only reinforces victim-blaming behaviors but also erodes social cohesion by fostering a mindset where people are less inclined to help others in need.

Limitations

This study has certain limitations. Firstly, the research primarily relies on qualitative analysis, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to broader populations. Secondly, the study does not incorporate empirical data or large-scale statistical validation, making it difficult to establish causal relationships. Additionally, cultural and contextual differences may influence the perception and manifestation of schadenfreude and Just World Belief, which were not extensively explored. Lastly, the study focuses primarily on educational settings, and its applicability to other social contexts remains an area for future research.

Recommendations

Fostering Empathy in Education: The Role of Teachers

To counteract schadenfreude and victim-blaming attitudes, interventions must begin in educational settings. Teachers serve as key influencers in shaping children's emotional and social development, making classrooms a critical space for promoting empathy and reducing harmful competitive hostility. By fostering a more collaborative learning environment, educators can encourage students to view success not as a zero-sum game but as a shared journey where mutual growth and support are valued.

1. One approach to mitigating schadenfreude in educational settings is by integrating social-emotional learning (SEL) into the curriculum. SEL programs emphasize the development of emotional intelligence, self-awareness, and empathy, equipping students with the skills necessary to navigate social interactions in a compassionate and ethical manner. Research suggests that students who engage in SEL programs demonstrate higher levels of emotional regulation, lower aggression, and greater prosocial behavior all of which are crucial in reducing schadenfreude and victim-blaming tendencies.
2. Furthermore, teachers can actively implement strategies to identify and address schadenfreude in students, such as:
3. Recognizing early signs of competitive hostility and addressing them through open discussions.
4. Encouraging cooperative learning models, where students work together toward common academic and social goals.
5. Challenging Just World Belief biases by introducing critical thinking exercises that explore the complexities of success and failure.
6. Providing emotional literacy training, helping students articulate their emotions in constructive ways rather than deriving satisfaction from others' struggles.

Beyond curriculum modifications, teacher-student relationships play a fundamental role in fostering empathy. When educators demonstrate compassion, fairness, and emotional support, students are more likely to internalize these values and apply them in their own interactions. In contrast, punitive disciplinary approaches that reinforce strict merit-based judgments may further contribute to schadenfreude and victim-blaming behaviors.

Towards a More Empathetic Society

By integrating empathy as a core life skill, schools can play a pivotal role in shaping future generations who are less likely to derive pleasure from others' misfortunes and more inclined to engage in prosocial, compassionate behaviors. The long-term benefits of fostering emotional intelligence and ethical reasoning extend beyond the classroom, influencing how individuals navigate social relationships, workplace dynamics, and broader societal issues. Addressing schadenfreude in childhood is essential not only for individual well-being but also for the creation of a more just, inclusive, and supportive society. As educators, parents, and policymakers recognize the importance of reducing competitive hostility and reinforcing collaborative values, we move closer to a world where empathy triumphs over schadenfreude, and victim-blaming is replaced with understanding and support.

CONCLUSION

The interplay between schadenfreude and Just World Belief reveals fundamental aspects of human morality, judgment, and social behavior. While JWB provides a psychological sense

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of order, it also has the unintended consequence of fostering schadenfreude and victim-blaming. Addressing these tendencies in educational and social settings is crucial for promoting fairness and empathy in society.

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Conflict of Interest

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