



The Role of Freudenfreude and Schadenfreude in Depression

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Editorial

Empathy and its failure shape relationships. Schadenfreude refers to the unattractive human tendency to take pleasure in the misery of others. Freudenfreude describes its opposite, the lovely enjoyment of another person's success. It is a subset of empathy, which seems to play an important role in sustaining relationships. This project explored the relationship between depression and both Schadenfreude & Freudenfreude.

Depression is a growing threat. In April 2018, the World Health Organization concluded a yearlong global campaign on depression. Depression is currently the leading cause of ill health and disability worldwide; more than 300 million people are now living with depression, an increase of more than 18% between 2005 and 2015 [1]. Long-term depression can have substantial harmful effects on the brain, including hippocampal loss and elevated inflammatory response [2]. Tragically, depression can result in suicide. A 2016 CDC report showed that suicides were at a 30 year high. Roughly 800,000 people die due to suicide every year. Luckily, depression generally responds to treatment involving psychotherapy, antidepressant medication, or a combination of these approaches. When these fail, ECT may be helpful. However, because of modest effect sizes, enhanced treatment options are needed.

In addition to various biological factors that confer vulnerability, research has shown that psychological factors, including cognitive style, affect risk. Differences between depressed and non-depressed individuals' reactions to their own failures and successes have been observed. This distinctive attributive style seems to contribute to depressed mood [3]. The current work extended this to investigate if those with depression also respond distinctively to others' failure and success. Humans care and compete. Empathy & competitive striving vie for emphasis in human relationships.

Others' success or good fortune can pit caring and competing against one another. Joy at their good fortune often mingles with envy. Therefore, managing the balance between these contradictory aspects of our nature is an important element of social intelligence. Learning how to be sensitive to others when they report good news, which requires selective suppression of our own competitive reaction, may be vital to mutually enjoyable relationships. When others report success to us, they generally hope for an empathic response of shared joy (Freudenfreude). If instead they get a negative, competitive reaction, they may respond with confusion, disappointment, irritation, or all three. Ongoing lack of Freudenfreude eventually can pose a fatal challenge to a relationship, and in turn, relationship failure often produces depression. We suspected that depressed folks might exhibit deficiencies in Freudenfreude.

In addition others' failure can be a challenge. Competitive striving can make us delight in another's defeat, rather than respond with compassionate caring. This might also be toxic to relationships. Might depressed folks express greater Schadenfreude? Might they damage relationships by reacting with greater glee to others' misfortune...which then possibly exacerbates their depression?

Administration of the Freudenfreude and Schadenfreude Test (FAST, Chambliss et al., 2012) and the BDI-II showed that undergraduates with mild depression scored lower on the Freudenfreude (joy in response to others' joy) scale of the FAST. A replication in Poland revealed similar findings [4]. In both the U.S. and Polish samples, more depressed participants also scored higher on the Schadenfreude scale.

These findings suggest that less of the Freudenfreude component of empathy, as well as excess Schadenfreude, may either increase risk of depression or be a consequence of depression or both. Low Freudenfreude (joy in response to others' joy) may hinder relationships. This lower Freudenfreude is expected to be associated with lower relationship satisfaction, since Freudenfreude

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is mutually reinforcing and fosters greater intimacy. Relationships work best when they are relationships. Failures of Freudenfreude may end relationships. The resulting social isolation and loneliness may increase risk of depression. Low Freudenfreude may stem from competitive resentment, painful competitive comparisons, and/or lack of investment in others.

In order to address this factor that may contribute to depression, an intervention aimed at enhancing Freudenfreude was developed. Informal pilot work indicated that consciously displaying Freudenfreude when others share their successes (sharing joy, or “shoy”) enhanced perceived relationship closeness. Other work suggested that teaching people to insert an expression of gratitude to the listener following episodes of sharing news about personal success (something dubbed “bragitude”) enhanced the listener’s likelihood of showing Freudenfreude. Both a Pre-post Effectiveness Study and two Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs) found improved mood and relationships to be associated with group administered Freudenfreude Enhancement Training (FET) based on these shoy and bragitude practices, combined with active listening instructions.

1. Shoy: intentionally sharing the joy of someone relating a success story by showing interest and asking follow-up questions.

2. Bragitude: intentionally tying words of gratitude toward the listener following discussion of personal successes.

Since investing in others, through parenting, teaching, advising, mentoring, coaching or other supportive interactions, seemed likely to increase empathic responding, another study was conducted to evaluate the association between nurturance and Freudenfreude. When we nurture others, perhaps we are more likely to feel we can share some of the credit for their successes, which may serve to maximize experience of Freudenfreude. In order to evaluate this, 83 participants were informed about a recent success by six confederates. Contact was either in person, by phone conversation, or via texting or online social media. Roughly equal numbers of high and low

nurturant participants were selected by each confederate, in order to permit assessment of the relationship between nurturance and display of Freudenfreude. The responses to the success information of all participants were evaluated using the 6-point Behavioral Freudenfreude Scale. An independent samples t-test comparing low and high nurturance respondents revealed differences in expression of Freudenfreude. Those who were rated as more nurturant to the successful other responded more positively following reported success. These findings raise the possibility that the observation of low Freudenfreude among mildly depressed individuals may in part be due to their nurturing and investing less in their relationships with others. In addition to encouraging use of “shoy” and “bragitude”, it may helpful to promote nurturance of others when attempting to reduce depressive symptoms. This work supports incorporation of the following three recommendations when assisting those with depressive symptoms:

1. Increase your expressions of shared joy when others report a success or positive experience.

2. Increase your sharing of credit when you report your own successes to others.

3. Increase your nurturance of others.

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