



Keeping It Real: Unmasking Evidence of Delight in Others' Misfortune

A Review of

The Joy of Pain: Schadenfreude and the Dark Side of Human Nature

by Richard H. Smith

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Why do people driving down the highway in rush hour traffic slow down to look at a terrible accident? Despite the fact that this behavior always contributes additional traffic problems, delays, and sometimes other accidents, it invariably happens. Why are television shows such as *Maury*, in which primarily blue-collar people air their complex family problems, including embarrassing paternity test results, so popular and continue to be shown on daytime television? Why are tabloids that feature horrendous stories of the bizarre and the ridiculous so popular at grocery store checkout stations?

The answers to these questions can be found in Richard H. Smith's *The Joy of Pain: Schadenfreude and the Dark Side of Human Nature*. I am grateful that a credible scientist has endeavored to approach this controversial subject. I don't think that I am overreaching when I state that all human beings on earth should understand this concept and acknowledge that it is a part of the human condition, no matter how much we try to deny it.

What is *schadenfreude*? *Schadenfreude* is a German word translating directly as "harm joy" and is defined as taking pleasure in the misfortune of others. I am sure, given this definition, few would admit to consciously taking pleasure in the misfortune of others. However, Smith aptly draws from his experiences, evidence in published and other research, literature, and popular culture to demonstrate that *schadenfreude* is an unquestionably human trait that has probably always been a part of the human psyche. But, in the current screen-based culture of Internet access, 24-hour news channels, and reality television shows, it has risen to the level of art form in spectator cruelty. Smith breaks the concept down into its component parts to help the reader understand its importance and how it is related to other emotional responses.

Chapters 1 and 4 approach the very human characteristic of self-superiority. Chapter 1 covers this concept beautifully and highlights a fatal flaw in humanity that is often overlooked or underconsidered. All human beings—no matter the race, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, educational attainment, and so on—consciously or unconsciously

make comparisons with the “other,” no matter how the *other* is defined. Each human being making the comparison rates him- or herself as better than the other. I saw this in conducting my research with female illicit drug users of all races and ethnicities. Most of the women I interviewed would be sure to convey to me that, “I might be a drug user, but I am not as bad as ‘so and so’ down the street.” The White users thought they were better than the Black users. The ones who used heroin thought they were better than the ones who used crack cocaine. The ones who engaged in prostitution once or twice per week thought they were better than the ones who engaged in prostitution every day.

Rating oneself as better than a euphemistic other is as human as the desire for love. One only need consider the current debate in the United States regarding immigration policy for a clear demonstration of the way ingroup–outgroup bias is expressed en masse (Lee & Ottati, 2002). Concomitantly, the belief in self-superiority or group superiority undergirds much of the racial/ethnic, religious, and other conflicts around the globe. Smith also suggests that these kinds of social comparisons are an integral part of the natural selection process. “Much of life comes down to a competitive striving for superiority on culturally prized dimensions: to gain the status and many-splendored spoils following from such status” (p. 10). Thus, we compare ourselves with others to gain status in our social groups. Going further, gaining status confers upon us social benefits.

If you have any doubts about this, consider the emerging body of literature on social determinants of health (Marmot, 2006; Sharpe et al., 2012). This body of evidence suggests a strong link between good health and high social status. I found particularly interesting the experiment Smith conducted in his graduate seminar (p. 11) on the role of physical attractiveness and mate selection. Feeling that we are better than others makes us feel good about ourselves and makes our condition, no matter how that is defined, more tolerable.

Chapters 2 and 3 focus on the concept of the “other.” People have a tendency to view others or those outside of their self-defined group as different or somehow not as equal. These ready-reference groups provide sources of comparison for boosting one’s self-esteem. Consider the American obsession with sports teams. This multimillion-dollar industry absorbs the thinking and conversations of millions of fans annually as they banter about whose team is the best and lambaste competitors. Sporting events are easy venues for observing *schadenfreude*, as the game winners and their fans gloat and celebrate victory over the losing team. As Smith suggests, some fans are even capable of being pleased when an opposing team member is injured (p. 41).

I’ve observed *schadenfreude* as some people I know strongly identify with their colleges, fraternities, or sororities while denigrating (most of the time good-naturedly) those who attended other colleges or pledged different organizations. In dealing with others, Smith reminds us that most of the time, people put self-interests above the interests of others.

Smith explores in Chapters 5 and 6 designation of those who deserve judgment for wrongdoing and those whose perceived shortcomings engender delight when they receive their comeuppance. He features examples from the media to help the reader understand how we enjoy seeing persons who deserve misfortune—notorious financial swindler Bernie Madoff, for example (p. 68)—get what’s coming to them. Another choice example is when alleged religious hypocrites, who are literally caught with their pants down (p. 71), are exposed.

Readers will see very clearly how judgment of others is applied in the United States daily. Our country has yet to form a united populace toward the greater good for all or most of its people. Instead, the country is made up of a multitude of interest groups, the stronger and more affluent of which are able to lobby Congress and have their will levied upon the masses. Schadenfreude enters into the political arena as particular groups are vilified and deemed unworthy to receive social benefits. Despite overwhelming evidence that single mothers with children are dramatically overrepresented among the poor, political extremists contend that these women and children should not receive help as they are unworthy of it.

In Chapter 7 Smith discusses the bevy of reality shows in which individuals embarrass themselves doing ridiculous and potentially dangerous stunts or in which people who think they have talent perform before a panel of experts and publicly embarrass themselves to find out they don't. These shows have become a mainstay of prime-time television, and high ratings indicate public approval of opportunities to engage in schadenfreude. I think the concept can be applied to other television shows as well, for example, court case shows and even seemingly innocuous shows such as the *Antiques Road Show*. (Don't we just love to see someone have a family heirloom, treasured for decades, deemed worthless by the experts!)

Envy is the topic of Chapters 8 and 9, something few admit to feeling, but probably felt by most people at some time or another. Why do we feel envy? We feel envy because despite the human tendency to rate some others as lower than ourselves (as in the self-superiority concept), we also have the tendency to see some others as greater than ourselves and thus as threats to our self-esteem. Public figures who strive for perfection, Martha Stewart, for example (p. 117), are ready targets for the full impact of widespread schadenfreude from the masses who revel in their downfall. Smith provides words of wisdom: "As much as people admire competence in other people, when it comes to actually liking them, too much competence becomes a handicap" (p. 119).

The human psyche is complex, fraught with competing paradigms and emotions. Smith's easy-to-read and entertaining volume begins a dialog that should take place in the United States and around the globe. We should dig deeply into why we harbor ill will concerning people we identify as "other" and realize that we are the "other" for folks who define themselves differently. I found it refreshing that in Chapter 11, Stanley Milgram's (p. 166) classic experiments on obedience to authority are referenced. These studies, conducted in the early 1960s, demonstrated that under certain conditions people can be pushed to be very cruel to others, and they still have relevance for today's scholars and others (Milgram, 1965).

The Joy of Pain has potential for wide application in academia, particularly the social sciences. However, specialty courses such as ethics in public health and medicine would also benefit from frank discussions of this subject. The text is written in a conversational style, giving it mainstream popular appeal. Every sentient being should read it as an introduction to self-examination.

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