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## If at First You Don't Succeed...Your Coworkers Just Might Be Pleased: A Story of Workplace Schadenfreude

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If at First You Don't Succeed...Your Coworkers Just Might Be Pleased:

A Story of Workplace Schadenfreude

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
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## ABSTRACT

Two emotions that employees often experience in the workplace are schadenfreude (a positive reaction to others' misfortune) and freudenschade (a negative reaction to others' good fortune). Results of an ANOVA indicate that participants asked to imagine that they are employees were more likely to experience schadenfreude toward a hypothetical coworker if that coworker were arrogant, underperforming, rude, or deceptive. They were more likely to experience freudenschade toward a target when there was an issue involving justice. Results of an ANCOVA illustrated a negative relationship between the experience of schadenfreude and the personality variable Just-World Beliefs, but no association was found between schadenfreude and Equity Sensitivity or between freudenschade and Just-World Beliefs or Equity Sensitivity. Those reporting higher schadenfreude were more likely to enjoy their job and want to continue working there, as indicated by the results of a pooled within-group correlation controlling for condition. Those reporting higher schadenfreude were also more likely to believe that the target's success at the job could impede their own success and that the target's failure could be of benefit to the participant. Those higher in freudenschade were less likely to enjoy their job and want to continue working there. They were also more likely to believe that the target's success or failure could personally affect their own success or failure at the organization. In this study, schadenfreude and freudenschade were shown to be emotions that should be given consideration in the workplace.

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

While the workplace might ostensibly be ruled by reason and rational processes, it is also a place fraught with emotion. Emotions are physical and psychological responses to stimuli in the environment, which often ready the individual for action of some sort (Frijda, 1988). It follows that the experience of emotions may trigger adaptive response behaviors (Schwarz & Clore, 1983). Thus, emotions can be important antecedents to workplace behavior. Many emotions have been extensively researched in the workplace context, but one that has been largely ignored is schadenfreude—the experience of pleasure at someone else’s misfortune. This research seeks to remedy this by exploring schadenfreude as it occurs in the workplace. The purpose of the current research is to gain an understanding of the qualities of an individual that may be related to coworkers’ likelihood of feeling schadenfreude toward them. Conversely, this research also seeks to determine some qualities of an individual that might make them more likely to experience schadenfreude toward their coworkers. How the schadenfreude experience may affect an employee’s perception of the schadenfreude target and the workplace as a whole is also explored. Another potential construct ignored by the literature is the opposite of schadenfreude—the experience of displeasure at another’s good fortune. While this construct has no formal name, it is referred to as freudenschade in some online blogs and forums as well as the Urban Dictionary. While some may claim that this emotion constitutes envy, it is more than that, as this dissertation will discuss.



## Emotion

Schadenfreude is an emotional experience. Emotions help individuals respond to the environment in an adaptive manner; emotional experiences are both subjective states of feeling and inducers of action (Fredrickson, 2001). Emotions are comprised of three parts—a subjective component, which is how an individual experiences the emotion; a physiological component, which is the physical reaction of the body; and an expressive component, which is the behavioral reaction to the emotion (Frijda, 1988). According to Gross, Sheppes, and Urry “emotions are generated when a person-situation transaction compels attention, has a valenced meaning to an individual, and gives rise to a coordinated yet malleable multi-system response to the ongoing person-situation transaction” (2011, p.766). Mesquita and Frijda (2011) refine this in stating that the person-situation transactions will attract the attention of the individual and have valence, but this will occur only as much as the transactions are relevant to the concerns of the individual. Also, emotional states are coordinated in that different states of action readiness are elicited by different emotions (Mesquita & Frijda, 2011). It is also possible that more than one emotion—or multiple modes of action readiness—can occur in response to the same emotional event. Many events will be relevant to multiple concerns. Hence it is possible that when your coworker gets promoted you can feel happy for her because you like her and wish her well, while at the same time feel envious of her because you would have liked that promotion yourself, and at the same time feel concerned because this narrows work opportunities for you, while at the same time feel threatened because your social status with this person is becoming more unbalanced. When multiple modes of readiness are generated from one emotional event, emotional regulation will occur, with the strength of each emotion in relation to the others determining the direction of the

regulation (Mesquita & Frijda, 2011). One of the primary reasons for emotions is to assess what is to be gained or lost from various responses so as to determine the most beneficial action response (Oatley, 1992).

### **Appraisal Theory**

The appraisal theory of emotion espouses that emotions evoke different reactions from individuals based on their evaluation or appraisal of the situation (Smith & Kirby, 2009). Therefore, two people with different appraisals of the same event could have different emotional reactions to the event; additionally, an individual could have different emotional reactions to the same event on different occasions (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). While schadenfreude might be categorized as an atypical type of joy, in that joy is satisfaction or pleasure regarding a seemingly desirable event, and schadenfreude is satisfaction or pleasure regarding an undesirable event for someone else (Ortony, Clore, & Collins, 1988), based on appraisal theory schadenfreude would very much be considered a joyful emotion. An event such as an underperforming employee being fired from their job would be subjectively interpreted by all involved. The employee might be angry and embarrassed, their spouse might be worried and dismayed, their supervisor might be relieved to see them go, former coworkers who also underperform might be sympathetic and/or relieved it wasn't them and/or worried they might be next, and higher-performing coworkers might be sympathetic or they could possibly be happy to see the former coworker get what he or she deserved. The emotional reaction evoked would depend on the subjective stance of the individual experiencing the emotion. Individual differences in emotion reflect individual differences in appraisal (Smith & Lazarus, 1993). This makes it difficult to determine what events may trigger which emotions, because it could be different for everyone (Roseman & Smith, 2001). The one certain commonality is that in order for an emotion to be evoked, the

event must hold some importance or significance to the observer (Roseman & Smith, 2001). In order for an individual to experience schadenfreude, the event triggering the emotional reaction must be in some way meaningful to them.

### **Schadenfreude**

There is a wide gamut of emotional experiences that may occur in the workplace. Some are positive—such as happiness when a coworker gets married or has a child, respect for a valued and trusted mentor, or admiration for a team member who delivers a sought-after client. Others are negative—such as sorrow at a coworker’s loss of a family member or pet, envy when a rival wins a coveted promotion, or anger when an employee feels they are being treated unfairly. Others are of a possibly even darker nature—such as schadenfreude, or “harm-joy.” Schadenfreude would be considered a positive emotion because the person experiencing it feels pleasure, but it could also be viewed negatively because this pleasure is at someone else’s expense.

Schadenfreude is the affective experience in which an individual derives pleasure from another’s misfortune (van de Ven, Hoogland, Smith, van Dijk, Breugelmans, & Zeelenberg, 2015). The term is a compound word composed of the German words *schaden* (harm) and *freude* (joy). Historically, the word was capitalized, but as it has been adopted by other cultures the tendency has been to treat it as a common noun. Terms with a similar meaning exist in other languages, such as the Greek *epichairekakia*, the French *joie maligne*, the Russian *zloradiye*, the Danish *skadefryd*, the Dutch *leedvermaak*, and the Hebrew *simcha la-ed*. The Estonian, Hungarian, Mandarin Chinese, Slovenian, and other languages have a word for this feeling as well. It is the belief of van Dijk and Ouwerkerk (2014) that all of these words are derived from the Greek, German, or French terms. Many other languages, such as English, Italian, Spanish,

and Japanese, do not contain a native word for schadenfreude. It has been argued by some that this is because people in these cultures do not experience such a feeling, but this is certainly untrue (van Dijk & Ouwerkerk, 2014).

Those who have claimed that English does not have a word for schadenfreude because it is not an emotion that exists in western culture argue so because the experience of schadenfreude is for many considered a moral failing; they would rather contend that they and theirs don't succumb to such a base emotion. Most individuals would attempt to hide feelings of schadenfreude, or if they admit to these feelings they would do so sheepishly or defensively. Many emotions that are considered negative are indeed negative for the person experiencing the emotion, such as grief, worry, loneliness, and fear. These are not, however, shameful emotions; people would generally pity others experiencing these negative emotions. Other negative emotions are more condemnable, such as hatred, envy, anger, and wrath. People usually do not pity those experiencing these emotions—quite the opposite—but those individuals experiencing the emotions usually get nothing of tangible value out of these feelings either. It is actually possible that there can be some benefit of almost every emotion, as will be discussed further in this dissertation, but ostensibly an individual does not gain from the experience of, for example, jealousy; in fact, most negative emotions are unpleasant to experience. Schadenfreude is a rare emotion that is demonized while at the same time being a positive experience for the individual experiencing it. It is positive from the perspective of the person feeling it; but it is perceived negatively by society. Yet some argue that it is not an immoral emotion. They posit that because the individual experiencing schadenfreude did nothing to incur the target's misfortune, and the experience is harmful to no one, it is not immoral (Spurigin, 2015; Ben Ze'ev, 2000; Portmann, 2000).

Spurgin (2015) contends that schadenfreude is morally permissible because not only is it not the fault of the person experiencing it and not harmful to anyone, but that individuals experiencing it need to have the emotional freedom necessary to explore their feeling of schadenfreude without guilt or fear of judgment. They must feel free to experience the full range of their emotions in order to explore their meaning and more fully understand themselves. Through the experience of schadenfreude, they could potentially learn something about themselves that could be of benefit to them or others. Nussbaum (2001) contends that appraisals or value judgments of emotions can be psychologically harmful; it can be dangerous to have expectations of emotional morality when we often have so little control over our emotions. Spurgin (2015) and Nussbaum (2001) assert that it is preferable to refrain from passing moral judgment on emotional experiences and rather use them in an attempt to better understand ourselves, our cognitions and our motives, and use this information about ourselves to take steps to improve our own morality. For example, if your coworker gets chastised by your supervisor for not completing a project on time and you experience schadenfreude, rather than shamefully trying to suppress your feelings you should explore them, and possibly come to an understanding about yourself, your coworker, and/or your working conditions that could motivate you to take action to improve the situation.

Other researchers do not so much insist on the value of schadenfreude but still contend that it is not an immoral emotion. Ben-Ze'ev (2000) and Portmann (2000) assert the moral permissibility of schadenfreude because the emotion stems from the perception of inequity and deservingness, that it results when the individual believes the other person deserves their misfortune due to their own failings. Ben-Ze'ev (2000) and Portmann (2000) also both note that schadenfreude is a passive experience; there is no active personal involvement. If the misfortune

were to occur at one's own hand then it would be offensive, even if the person deserved it; it is the passivity which makes it morally permissible (Ben-Ze'ev, 2000). Schadenfreude must involve a situation not of one's own creation, or it becomes cruelty, retribution, or some other immoral act, and any pleasure stemming from the misfortune of the individual is morally reprehensible, regardless of whether justice is being served (Portmann, 2000).

The moral permissibility of schadenfreude is in essence a moot point. The existence of schadenfreude cannot be denied (although many might attempt to do so). The moral aspect would likely have an effect on individuals' personal reactions to schadenfreude, as asserted by Spurgin (2000), and may also make it a difficult construct to study due to people's reluctance to admit to or discuss their experience of the emotion, but the moral aspect does not prevent the occurrence of the emotion itself.

The literature indicates several precursors to schadenfreude, including envy (van Dijk et al., 2006), deservingness (Feather & Sherman, 2002), liking (Hareli & Weiner, 2002), and self-enhancement (Feather & Naim, 2005), as well as situations in which the observer has something to gain from the target's failure (Smith et al, 2006). Deservingness is often characterized as justice or social justice, and self-enhancement is often interchanged with self-evaluation or social identity, but these constructs are similar in nature. Resentment and inferiority are also often said to cause schadenfreude, but both can be related to deservingness, self-enhancement, and envy.

### **Envy**

Everyone has what might be considered a personal baseline of expectations. When events happen to us that put us above our baseline, we experience positive emotions, and when events occur that put us below our baseline, we experience negative emotions (Smith & Kirby, 2009). A person might experience happiness because they received a bonus at work, putting

them above their expected baseline. These evaluations also often contain a comparative component, and evaluations of comparative states often override evaluations of absolute states (Smith & Pope, 1992). If an individual has an expectation of receiving a yearly bonus, they might only experience happiness if they get a larger sum than in the previous year, and actually experience negative emotions if it's smaller. People also often compare their current state not only to previous states but to their ideal or "ought" states—the reality that they would like to achieve or that they think they should achieve (Roseman & Smith, 2001). If they think the increase in their bonus should have been more, they will experience a negative emotional reaction. Individuals also compare themselves not only to their previous, ideal, or ought states, but to those of others (Roseman & Smith, 2001). If an employee compared his or her bonus to a coworker's and found that the coworker received less than he or she did, he or she could have a positive emotional reaction. Or they might find that the coworker received more and be disappointed and angry, and they might feel envy.

Smith and Kim define envy as "an unpleasant, often painful emotion, characterized by feelings of inferiority, hostility and resentment caused by an awareness of a desired attribute enjoyed by another person or group of persons" (2007, p.46). When an individual perceives another person to be superior to them in some way, they often feel negative about themselves (inferiority), negative toward the envied other (hostility), and a sense of injustice (Smith & Kim, 2007). There is support in the literature that envy is a precursor to schadenfreude, in that when an envied other experiences some sort of setback, it provides a release for some of this envy; the individual experiencing the envy sees the envied other in an unenviable position and the unpleasant feeling of envy is diminished. When participants were told of a scenario in which a negative event happened to an enviable target, brain activation associated with reward and

pleasure occurred more than when the negative event occurred to a target who was not depicted as enviable (Takahashi, Kato, Matsuura, Mobbs, Suhara, & Okubo, 2009).

Many researchers support the idea that envy exists in two forms, or at least that envy exists on a continuum with these two “types” of envy occupying opposite ends of the spectrum. Benign envy is envy that spurs the person experiencing it to engage in behavior that is likely to enable the individual to achieve the status of the envied other; this is envy as a positive motivational force (van de Ven et al., 2009). While still unpleasant, this type of envy is non-hostile and is related to admiration—where the person feeling envy wants to be like the envied other or have what the envied other has and chooses to emulate the envied person in an endeavor to achieve the envied state. Envy researchers van de Ven, Zeelenberg, and Pieters (2009) would call this “leveling up.” The other form of envy is malicious envy, in which the person experiencing envy wishes the envied other to fail or suffer, or to lose whatever the status is that makes them envied (van de Ven et al., 2009). The individual experiencing malicious envy wants the target of their envy to “level down,” or be brought down to their level. Obviously, benign envy can be productive, while malicious envy is potentially destructive. Both benign and malicious envy can be related to feelings of frustration and inferiority (van de Ven et al., 2009).

While envy has been found to be associated with *schadenfreude* in many studies (Cikara & Fiske, 2012; Krizan & Johar, 2012; van Dijk et al., 2006), support has been inconsistent (Feather & Sherman, 2002; Feather, Wenzel, & McKee, 2013; Leach & Spears, 2008). However, there are numerous studies indicating that while malicious envy is associated with *schadenfreude*, benign envy is not, so studies not finding a link may be eliciting or recalling benign envy rather than malicious envy, whether this was intentional and conscious or not (van de Ven et al., 2011). Van de Ven and colleagues (2015) found in a sample of college students in



the Netherlands—where in the Dutch language there are two different and distinct words for benign envy and malicious envy—that only malicious envy predicts the occurrence of schadenfreude. Some researchers argue that those studies that fail to show a connection between envy and schadenfreude are not measuring malicious envy (Powell et al., 2008).

It is important to note that envy is multifaceted, and for this reason may be difficult to pin down. Smith and Kim's (2007) definition of envy includes the terms inferiority, hostility, and resentment, which are not the same thing, and are all describing malicious envy, not benign envy. Inferiority, hostility, and resentment could all on their own lead to schadenfreude, whether or not they combine in a way to contribute toward envy. Envy could also evolve from any one of them separately, which could be a different facet of envy, such as inferiority envy, hostility envy, and resentment envy. These would all be very different emotional reactions with very different antecedents. If one person's feeling of envy is based on inferiority and another person's is based on resentment, you are not measuring the same thing. It is the belief of Feather (2012) that envy would only be a predictor of schadenfreude if it is aligned with anger and resentment arising from injustice, which would add a hostile note to the feeling of envy. Therefore envy would only lead to schadenfreude if a lack of deservingness was perceived (Feather, 2012).

### **Deservingness**

Regardless of the mixed support for envy as a precursor for schadenfreude, it makes sense logically that if a person covets another's attributes or assets (envy), then they might find happiness in the other's loss of such (schadenfreude). If an individual cannot enjoy the same good fortune as a peer, perhaps the next best thing is for the peer to lose that good fortune himself or herself. But that begs the question of whether it is good "fortune" or some other entity

at work. The question of whether the envied person has worked hard and expended effort or done little to earn their envied state is a question of deservingness.

Since our playground days, we humans are concerned with what is fair, with getting what we deserve. We learn that actions have consequences, and we also learn that certain actions are supposed to have predetermined consequences, while other actions net different results. Working hard is supposed to pay off and cheaters are never supposed to win. We want our “just rewards” and we want others to get theirs too. But what happens when we don’t get the rewards we think we deserve, and what happens when others get “rewards” we think they don’t deserve? It could be that deservingness underlies a lot of incidents of schadenfreude. It may be that a person who is perceived as deserving of the accomplishments they’ve achieved and the possessions they’ve acquired would be met with pity and sympathy if they experienced a downfall, while someone who is felt to have gained their superior status through ill-gotten means or through no effort of their own might be the target of schadenfreude if they encounter failure. For instance, if an employee who was hired only because she is the boss’s niece is a victim of cutbacks and is let go, there might be schadenfreude on the part of her ex-coworkers, while if the employee who is let go had earned her position through hard work there likely would not be. Deservingness is especially germane to schadenfreude when the unfortunate event is somehow the fault (or not the fault) of the target (Feather, Wenzel, & McKee, 2013). If the firing previously mentioned were due to embezzlement, schadenfreude might occur whether the victim was the boss’s niece or the hardworking coworker. Feather, McKee, and Bekker (2011) found that perceived deservingness was related to the experience of schadenfreude when an individual was passed over for a promotion. Losses and setbacks that occur to those we dislike, resent, or otherwise see as undeserving will more likely be perceived as justly deserved, and we like seeing people’s

negative actions negatively rewarded as much we like seeing people's positive actions positively rewarded—possibly even more so. Observing misfortune occur to someone who deserves it may elicit schadenfreude because it is in keeping with our sense of justice (Smith et al., 2009).

## **Justice**

Organizational justice stems from equity theory and is related to deservingness.

Organizational justice is composed of distributive justice, procedural justice, and interactional justice (Colquitt et al., 2001). Distributive justice is concerned with how the benefits and the burdens are apportioned in the organization (Druckman & Wagner, 2016), or whether the distribution of tasks and rewards is fair. Rewards can be tangible, such as money, or intangible, such as praise (Colquitt et al., 2012). An individual will usually form their perception of distributive justice from one of three viewpoints: merit, in that more rewards should go to those who work the hardest and perform the best; need, in that more rewards should go to those who need them the most; or equality, in that everyone deserves an equal share (Greenburg, 1993). In western culture, merit tends to dominate. If an individual believes that their efforts are not adequately rewarded, that not enough resources are allocated to them, or that others in the organization are receiving more than is fair, they may perceive a lack of distributive justice. This may make them more likely to feel schadenfreude toward either the manager who is being unfair or the coworker who is unfairly receiving more benefits.

Procedural justice is the perception that the manner in which the decisions are made that lead to outcomes for employees is just (Greenburg, 2011). Employees want these processes to be determined fairly. Accuracy, consistency, ethics, and lack of bias are important for procedural justice (Leventhal, 1980). If their own opinions on the matter are listened to and taken into account, employees will be more likely to perceive procedural justice (Brockner et al., 2007). A

very important aspect of procedural justice is the feeling of being heard by superiors, that they are attentive to your opinions—this is called voice (Price et al., 2006). If an employee believes that management is biased or inconsistent in their allocation of benefits or the assignment of work tasks, the employee may perceive a lack of procedural justice. For instance, if employees with children are excused from working holidays while childless employees are expected to cover those shifts, the childless employees may see this procedure as unfair and be more likely to experience schadenfreude toward either the manager who enacted the policy or their coworkers with children who take advantage of the policy.

The third type of justice is interactional justice, which refers to the treatment that employees receive as decisions are being made-- whether information is relayed with respect, sensitivity, and dignity (Colquitt et al., 2012). If employees feel that management is being honest and forthright and treating them politely and with dignity, then they will likely perceive interactional justice (Greenberg, 2011). Interactional justice is comprised of two components: interpersonal justice and informational justice (Colquitt, 2001). Interpersonal justice refers to how polite and respectful the treatment is of the employees during the process, while informational justice refers to the adequacy of the information and explanations given to the employees—whether they are honest, comprehensive, and timely. If employees perceive management as rude or untruthful they may be more likely to experience schadenfreude toward them. Organizational justice has been found to be related positively to commitment, satisfaction, and trust, and negatively related to theft, turnover intentions, and conflict (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001), so it would seem likely that it would also be related to schadenfreude.

## Equity theory

Equity theory, an early theory of justice, concerns workplace motivation that is affected by perceptions of fairness. It asserts that workers will desire a fair balance between the effort they put into their jobs (input) and the rewards they receive for the work (output) (Adams, 1965) as compared to that of others. Inputs are such things as effort, commitment, time, and loyalty; outputs are such things as pay, recognition, security, and praise. Equity is measured by assessing the ratio of inputs to outputs and comparing this ratio to that of the other party in the relationship, for example, the supervisor. If an employee feels overworked in comparison to how they are rewarded compared to the supervisor, he or she will likely experience dissatisfaction and possibly hostility, while if they feel overpaid in relation to the supervisor he or she might experience guilt (Huseman et al., 1987). It would be likely that when an employee is conscious of inequity between themselves and someone else, he or she might be more likely to experience schadenfreude toward management or other superiors he or she feels are responsible for the inequity.

There are individual differences between where people prefer to stand in the balance, as it is posited that not everyone desires a completely fair balance. An individual who experiences satisfaction when the balance is even between the amount of input they are investing and the amount of rewards the organization gives back compared to others is referred to as equity sensitive. Someone who prefers to be under-benefitted in their ratio of giving to receiving relative to others is called a benevolent. An employee who is unsatisfied unless they are over-benefitted compared to others is referred to as an entitled (Huseman et al., 1987). It is possible that benevolents might be less likely to experience schadenfreude while entitleds would be more likely to, with equity sensitives somewhere in the middle. The comparison can also occur

between the employee and coworkers. If employees perceive a balance between the rewards they receive for their work in relation to the rewards their coworkers receive for their work, they will experience a feeling of fairness, but when employees perceive an inequity between the ratio of effort they are expending to the compensation they receive in comparison to that of fellow employees they may experience dissonance (Wagstaff, 1994).

### **Self-enhancement**

There are four self-evaluation motives that have been identified: self-assessment is the drive to have an accurate self-concept, self-verification is the drive for an individual's self-concept to be in line with their identity, self-improvement is the drive to better your self-concept, and self-enhancement is the drive for high self-esteem and regard for oneself (Beauregard & Dunning, 1998). People are motivated to enhance their own sense of personal worth. People often do this by exaggerating the importance of or the degree of positive qualities they possess, as well as downplaying the significance of positive qualities they do not possess. They may also achieve self-enhancement by criticizing others or making others look bad so they themselves appear more favorable by comparison (Beauregard & Dunning, 1998). The experience of schadenfreude is one that can assist in a person's self-enhancement, as when another person experiences failure it makes it easier for an individual to make comparisons that cast themselves in a favorable light. Social comparison theory states that people are driven to attain accurate self-evaluations of themselves (Festinger, 1954), and social comparisons are often made to seek self-esteem or improve self-enhancement. When people make upward social comparisons they are comparing themselves with people who are in some way superior to them, which may cause them to experience lower self-esteem. However, at times when making these upward comparisons people may find attributes they have in common with individuals they think are

superior to them, and by identifying these common traits feel better about themselves. When making downward social comparisons, people compare themselves to those to who are in an inferior position to themselves, in order to feel better about themselves. Therefore, striving for a positive self-evaluation may make people more susceptible to experiencing schadenfreude (van Dijk et al., 2011). Feather (1994) found that tall poppy syndrome—which is the phenomenon of a high achiever being “cut down to size,” to the delight of observers witnessing the downfall, and as such is similar to schadenfreude—was more strongly experienced by those with low self-esteem. Individuals whose self-enhancement is vulnerable or has been bruised have been found to be particularly susceptible to schadenfreude (Van Dijk et al., 2011).

Related to self-enhancement is the fact that there could possibly be some material advantage for the individual experiencing schadenfreude as a result of the downfall of the target (Smith et al., 2006). In some cases, one person’s loss is another person’s gain. If one employee is passed up for a promotion, another will likely get it; if one person gets less of a bonus it may be that this money is going to someone else. Standing to gain from another’s misfortune could make an individual happy to see it occur.

## **Liking**

Regardless of whether an individual is perceived as deserving of success based on their efforts and actions, if they are disliked they may become the subjects of schadenfreude. People have an evolutionary compulsion to evaluate others on the basis of whether or not they may present a threat; they need to establish the beneficence or maleficence of others’ intentions (Brambilla & Riva, 2017). Someone who is “nice” is non-threatening, therefore liking for another equates to safety. People who are considered warm are less likely to be targets of schadenfreude (Cikara & Fiske, 2012). Warmth has been shown to be composed of two

components: morality and sociability, with morality related to benevolence and sociability related to pleasantness and friendliness (Brambilla & Leach, 2014).

### **Workplace Schadenfreude in the Literature**

There is little research on schadenfreude in the workplace context, and even the few existing studies don't really look at the circumstances under which schadenfreude occurs in the workplace; most just utilize workplace scenarios. For example, in a study primarily on envy, Tai, Narayann, and McAllister (2012) found that as with envy, employees are more likely to experience schadenfreude toward coworkers who are perceived as cold or as belonging to an outgroup. This supports the position that liking is a precursor to schadenfreude.

Likewise, a relationship between deservingness and schadenfreude was established regarding promotion and hiring decisions. In hypothetical scenarios, employees or applicants who were considered most deserving of promotion or hiring were less likely to be subject to schadenfreude when they were passed over for the promotion or for being hired (Feather, 2008; Feather, McKee, and Bekker (2011). Somewhat related is a study of customer schadenfreude toward service employees, in which customers felt sympathy for service employees whom they witnessed experiencing customer incivility when the employee did nothing wrong, but felt schadenfreude toward the customer service employee when the employee had extended poor service (Beck & Voorhees, 2018). When the employee deserved the uncivil treatment, observing customers were pleased; when the employee did not deserve such treatment, they were sympathetic.

Another study of workplace schadenfreude looks at interorganizational schadenfreude. Wiesenfeld, Wurthmann, and Hambrick (2008) developed a model depicting how corporate failure by professional elites leads to their stigmatization and devaluation by other professionals



and by other members of the public rather than sympathy or compassion. Often when catastrophe strikes in an organization, such as a major security breach, a drastic downslide in sales, or the failure of a product, the CEO or other leader is looked to to “take the fall,” whether the blame can be entirely laid at their feet or not. Characteristics of the elite make them more prone to blameworthiness, with part of this reason being that they are in a position that is vulnerable to schadenfreude. The public does not mind seeing the mighty fall, in fact they often relish it, and peers of failed professional elites often tend to judge their contemporaries harshly for similar reasons.

Probably the extant paper most directly relevant to the workplace context is Li, McAlister, Ilies, and Gloor (2019) who developed, but did not test, a process model of the emergence, development, and consequences of schadenfreude in the workplace (Figure 1). Li et al (2019) discuss that often observers of mistreatment in the workplace will experience a reactive feeling of stress and injustice in a sympathetic response to their coworker’s trauma, yet we know that this is not always the case, that sometimes there is a divergence between the perspective of the observer and the victim. Sometimes observers of victims not only withhold assistance or even sympathy but go further and perpetuate the harm via gossip, ostracism, or other hurtful mechanisms. The authors state that schadenfreude is a prototypically incongruent social emotion stemming from appraisal theory, in that people’s emotional reactions to events are based on cognitive appraisal. The model is purely conceptual but proposes that initial schadenfreude emerges when employees appraise incidents of employee mistreatment as relevant and conducive to their goals. Then, following a secondary appraisal of the deservingness of the target, the observing employees’ feelings of schadenfreude emerge into either righteous or ambivalent schadenfreude, based on whether observers perceive the mistreatment as deserved or

not. The authors further posit that coworkers who experience righteous schadenfreude will be likely to perpetuate further mistreatment of the target employee, through both active (i.e. gossip, hostility, undermining) and passive (i.e. withholding assistance or other resources) manners, and those who experience ambivalent schadenfreude may perpetuate further mistreatment through passive means or may attempt to avoid the target employee. The researchers additionally propose that these relationships will be moderated by the climate of civility of the organization as well as their own values. Li and colleagues (2019) point out that although generally third party observers would respond with sympathy to the mistreatment of others, and in fact experience injustice and stress themselves via secondary trauma, the very workplace dynamics that make employee mistreatment so prevalent—envy, competition, and interpersonal/intergroup tensions—also indicate that the typical victim/observer relationship may not apply. This is based on appraisal theory as previously discussed; although people’s typical response to mistreatment may be one of sympathy and righteous indignation, if their appraisal of the situation tells them that there is a personal benefit to experiencing another emotion, that may be what occurs. This has been pointed out in the schadenfreude literature repeatedly—people will respond to an unfortunate incident of another based on their own appraisal—if they are envious of the individual, if they feel the person either does not deserve their good fortune and therefore the unfortunate incident is just, or that the individual is generally undeserving and therefore the unfortunate incident is just, or if the misfortune of the target increases observer self-enhancement, or possibly some combination of these assessments, then the observer will be likely to take pleasure in the suffering of another. Li et al (2019) point out that such appraisals may be even more likely to occur in the environment of the workplace where people are primed to be self-serving and

perceive competition and injustice, and in which envy of others' accomplishments is likely to flourish.

### **Freudenschade**

Freudenschade has an entry in the *Urban Dictionary* and the *Online Slang Dictionary*. There is a question regarding it on the trendy Q&A website *Quora*, an article about it in the edgy online magazine *Slate*, and a mention of it can be found in a handful of blogs and editorials, but you won't find any peer-reviewed journal articles about freudenschade in a PsychINFO search. It is annoying that every time I type "freudenschade" I get a red "error" line underneath it; Microsoft does not recognize it as a word.

Yet it is easy to intuit the meaning. If schadenfreude consists of schaden (harm) and freude (joy) and equates to harm-joy, or joy brought about by someone else's harm, then freudenschade is joy-harm, or being harmed by another's joy. The *Urban Dictionary* defines it as "the feeling of distress from seeing the successes or pleasures of others...also known as jealousy or envy." But does experiencing displeasure as a result of someone else's pleasure necessarily stem from jealousy or envy? There could be many other reasons someone might feel this way.

It isn't hard to imagine a workplace situation in which one employee's success could result in the displeasure of their coworkers. Competition is rampant in the workplace, and as Li et al (2019) pointed out, people in the workplace are primed to be self-serving. There are limited resources and rewards, and one employee's gain may be a coworker's loss. As there are currently no studies investigating freudenschade, nothing is known about how it might transpire in the workplace. In a study of workplace schadenfreude, it seems appropriate to also look into its opposite—workplace freudenschade.

## **CHAPTER TWO: THE CURRENT STUDY**

Hypothetical examples of schadenfreude in the workplace are often discussed in the schadenfreude literature as scenarios that might occur based on the researchers' proposed models and approaches, but when it comes to the research itself the design has usually involved a student sample and—more importantly, scenarios regarding the lives of students rather than employees.

The current research seeks to rectify the lack of workplace studies by using both a worker sample and workplace scenarios in the study. As almost nothing is known about how schadenfreude occurs in the workplace context, it was appropriate to first conduct a pilot study in an investigative approach that provides more ecological validity than relying solely on the non-workplace literature.

### **Pilot Study**

To date, scant research on schadenfreude has occurred in the workplace context, hence little is known regarding how schadenfreude might transpire at work. It would be beneficial to gain an understanding of what events in the workplace trigger schadenfreude as well as what qualities of the individuals on the receiving end make them more likely to be targets of schadenfreude. Likewise, nothing is known about how freudenschade transpires. To get an idea of how and when schadenfreude and freudenschade occur at work a pilot study was executed. This study looks at: 1) what misfortunes to the targets cause the feeling of schadenfreude 2) what traits make the targets susceptible to schadenfreude 3) what fortunate events of the targets cause the feeling of freudenschade 4) what traits make the targets susceptible to freudenschade.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk. Screening criteria were as follows: participants were required to work a minimum of 20 hours weekly in an organizational setting (outside the home) and had to answer “yes” to the question “Have you ever felt pleasure, happiness, or satisfaction when someone at your workplace experienced failure, humiliation, or misfortune?”

Information was obtained from 132 participants, with over 71% of the sample being male, and the average age being 32 ( $SD = 9.82$ ) for the schadenfreude sample. The sample size was 127, 71% male and an age of 31 ( $SD = 10.02$ ) for the freudenschade sample. The largest number of participants were employed in the technology industry at 20%, while 18% worked in sales, 16% worked in management, 10% were employed in construction or other blue-collar jobs, 9% worked in education, 7% in the service industry, 7% in finance, 4% in the medical field, and the remaining participants were employed in industries such as engineering, marketing, security, and others.

### Measures

**Schadenfreude.** Schadenfreude was assessed using the open-ended prompt: “Recall a situation where you felt pleasure, happiness, or satisfaction when someone at your workplace experienced failure, humiliation, or misfortune. Please describe the situation as fully as possible.” Text entry boxes were provided for participants to record their responses. Additional questions regarding the incident were also presented but will not be discussed here as they do not inform the proposed study.

**Freudenschade.** Freudenschade was assessed using the open-ended prompt: “Recall a situation where you felt displeasure, unhappiness, or negative emotion when someone at work experienced good fortune, success, or praise. Please describe what happened as fully as possible.” Text entry boxes were provided for participants to record their responses.

**Demographics.** Participants were asked their sex, age, and occupation.

## **Procedure**

The study was posted on Amazon Mechanical Turk’s website. Anyone who chose to participate received a link to an external Qualtrics survey. Potential participants were first presented with a consent form, which they were asked to read and acknowledge. After giving consent, participants were presented with the first open-ended prompt, followed by the series of further questions regarding the incident. Next, the participant came to the second open-ended prompt asking about their experience with freudenschade, which was also followed by questions regarding this experience. Finally, the demographic questions were presented. After participants completed the survey they were provided with a unique code which they could enter in order to receive their compensation of \$2.00. They were given the assurance that the information that had been obtained was confidential and for research purposes only, and that no names or other identifiable information were connected to their responses. Information was collected from 132 participants, with the data from 12 participants deleted for the schadenfreude scenario because they did not actually describe an incident of schadenfreude, leaving the data for 120 participants. For freudenschade, data were deleted for 3 participants who left the question blank and 14 who did not properly answer the question, leaving data for 115 participants.

Three coders conducted thematic analysis on the schadenfreude scenarios as delineated by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, the coders read each scenario and extracted relevant features

of the data, or the qualities about the target that appeared to influence the feeling of schadenfreude for the participant. These were referred to as descriptors. An example of one scenario is:

When I first starting working for my current company I had a supervisor named Henry. He seemed like a good guy at first but as time went on I realised he was manipulative and he lied about a lot of things. There were times when he would say things to me but throw me under the bus behind my back. Around December 2016 he was caught making fraudulent checks using the company's accounts. When he got terminated I felt satisfied because he made my job harder than it had to be.

In this case the descriptors that were extracted were “manipulative,” “lies,” and “throw me under the bus.” The event that triggered the schadenfreude was also noted, which in this case was “terminated.”

The agreement rate for all incidents was 92.5% for the descriptors and 100% for the events. Two of the coders then grouped the descriptors into overarching themes, discussing discrepancies until they reached agreement. If agreement was not met, the third coder made the final decision. For example, “arrogant,” “brags,” “know-it-all,” and “cocky,” as well as others, were grouped together under the theme of “arrogance.” Once the themes were determined, the third coder coded each participant’s response into one or more themes, with each response corresponding to at least one theme.

Ultimately, seven major themes emerged: underperformance, arrogance, deception/manipulation/hypocrisy, rudeness/dislike, bullying, bigotry, and envy.

***Underperformance.*** This theme appeared 40 times and was made up of 14 different descriptors. Underperformance of the target consists of behaviors that negatively affect job

performance, such as laziness, sloppiness, and incompetence. Many participants complained of targets who took too many breaks, came to work late, or did not know how to properly perform their tasks. An example of a scenario that was categorized under underperformance is:

My coworker was the worst. He goofed off and joked all the time. He was completely unreliable. Then he was promoted to my boss and was so incredibly inept that I was cleaning up his messes all the time. He ended up getting fired publicly in front of the whole office and I was just thrilled to see it.

**Arrogance.** This theme appeared 35 times and was made up of 6 different descriptors, with the word “arrogance” itself appearing 20 times. Arrogance included descriptors such as bragging, “know it all,” and condescension. An example of a scenario that was categorized under arrogance is:

One of my co-workers who always thought she knew everything and could do no wrong had a meeting with an important client. This client was so offended by her behavior that he called the company owner and asked that she no longer be involved with the account. I, and everyone else in the company was happy that this happened as she was not well liked.

**Deception.** This theme appeared 35 times and was made up of 18 different descriptors. This theme covers all descriptors that refer to the abuse of the truth. Scenarios that discussed lying, cheating, stealing, and blaming others for one’s mistakes were included in this category. An example of a scenario that was categorized under deception is:

One time at work I was in a competition to become team leader for a big project we had coming up. The competition was between myself and another longtime employee. I lost the competition but later found out that my competitor cheated. I didn't want to seem like



a sore loser so I didn't mention that he cheated to my supervisor. I felt great pleasure when he bombed the project. Karma got back at him with a vengeance.

**Rudeness.** This theme appeared 35 times and was made up of 23 different descriptors. This theme referred to instances in scenarios where participants appeared to have a personal dislike of the target's personality or they found certain behaviors of the target unpleasant or annoying. The terms "bitchy," "jerk," and "hard to get along with" were coded under this theme. An example of a scenario that was categorized under rudeness is:

I worked with someone who treated me poorly. She was unnecessarily bitchy. When our supervisor told her that she wasn't doing her job well, I felt satisfaction that she was finally being taken down a notch, as she has a big ego.

**Bullying.** This appeared 31 times and was made up of 14 different descriptors. Some descriptors were somewhat similar in nature to those coded as rudeness/dislike but the behaviors and attributes described were of a more severe degree, so a separate theme of bullying was created. Any scenario containing a descriptor such as "mean," or "cruel" were coded under the theme of bullying. An example of a scenario that was categorized under bullying is:

I use to have this one annoying co-worker that would constantly tease me about my masculinity. I know I'm short, and feminine in my appearance, I can't help that. But she constantly feels the need to point it out in front of all my co-workers and embarrass me in front of my female co-workers. Finally one day, she got pregnant, and 3 months afterwards she was fired for missing too many work days and really hurting the company financially by failing her position on one of our important client projects...I felt she deserve extra karma for the year plus of humiliation and bullying.

**Bigotry.** This theme appeared 7 times and was made up of 2 different descriptors. Four targets were described as racist and 3 targets were described as sexist. An example of a scenario that was categorized under bigotry is:

There's a guy at work named Pat. He is quite the jerk. he tells racist jokes and thinks there's something wrong with you if you don't think they are funny. He is sexist and proud of it. He's one of those people who say thank you when you call them an asshole. There was a day when he asked a girl that I kind of like out for drinks. She didn't even say no, she just made a grossed out noise and walked away. I laughed so hard I almost cried. I loved every second of that and it made me even more attracted to that girl.

**Envy.** This theme appeared 3 times and was made up of the descriptors envy and jealousy. An example of a scenario that was categorized under envy is:

When one of my close co workers started training to become a manager I started feeling extremely jealous. I feel like she might be better than me and will move further than me in the company. The problem I have with her is her age, this is her first job. I have been with the company 4 years and she's been here one year and she is already where it took me almost 3 years to get to. But then she got put manager nights and nobody wanted to do that and I couldn't help but being glad.

After the themes representing the characteristics of the target that made them susceptible to schadenfreude were established, the unfortunate events that occurred to the targets were recorded. This process was done similarly as above, with two coders extracting descriptors of the events and then creating overarching themes into which to place the descriptors, with the third coder placing the scenarios into the themes. There was no disagreement with the coding for this

task. Six major themes emerged: reprimand, job loss, failure, embarrassment, non-promotion, legal difficulties, and falling down. Only three scenarios did not fit into one of these themes—one employee was robbed, one caught his wife cheating on him, and one was turned down for a date.

**Reprimand.** Scenarios where the target was a victim of schadenfreude after an event in which they were reprimanded, yelled at, or in some way “got in trouble” were categorized under this theme. There were 41 events under this theme.

**Fired.** Scenarios in which the target lost their job were categorized under this theme. There were 25 such incidents.

**Failure.** Scenarios in which the target failed or was unsuccessful at a work endeavor were categorized under the theme of failure. This did not include those who were fired or turned down for promotions. There were 24 events under this theme.

**Embarrassment.** There were 11 events in which the target of schadenfreude experienced embarrassment.

**Non-promotion.** There were 9 cases in which the schadenfreude was triggered by the target failing to be promoted.

**Legal difficulties.** There were 5 cases of theft, 2 arrests, and one target was sent to jail, making a total of 8 incidents of legal difficulties.

**Falling down.** There were 2 scenarios in which the target tripped and fell down.

Next, the coding process was begun anew for the freudenschade scenarios. The process was completed similarly to that for schadenfreude, but as these scenarios were much less complex than the schadenfreude scenarios and the reason for the emotion experiences much more apparent, the step of listing the descriptors was skipped. Coders placed scenarios directly

into categories. There was close to 98% agreement and differences were discussed until agreement was met. Almost all scenarios fit under two categories—injustice/deservingness and envy. Some scenarios contained both. Only four scenarios did not fit under one of these themes. One person was unhappy to see her mentor accept a promotion at another organization because she would miss him, one was displeased to see a “physically repulsive” coworker with “bad hygiene” receive a promotion, one person was unhappy to get a very qualified boss because it meant he would never get promoted to that position, and one individual was displeased to have a person she disliked promoted to night shift manager because the participant enjoyed working nights and would now either have to work under this manager or switch to day shift.

**Justice.** There were 83 instances of justice. An example of a scenario that fits this theme is:

A coworker, another math instructor, who I knew to pass even students who barely did their work, was praised for having a high passing rate in his classes. I knew that this instructor was extremely lenient to the point of passing anyone who showed up to class, no matter what aptitude they had. I felt this was unfair, and that our supervisors were just happy to have "good numbers" rather than having a good instructor.

**Envy.** There were 23 instances of envy. An example of a scenario that fits this theme is:

A small part of my job is performance based. Me and a few other employees are tasked with bringing in more projects for our company. When my co worker E found the biggest project for us last year I felt unsatisfied. I felt kind of jealous because I knew he would get a large bonus right before the end of the year.

Table 1. A taxonomy of schadenfreude and freudenschade.

<b>Schadenfreude</b>	<b>Examples Used</b>	<b>Freudenschade</b>	<b>Examples Used</b>
Underperformance	Incompetence Goofing off	Justice	Unfair Didn't deserve it
Arrogance	Braggs Know-it-all	Envy	Jealous I want that
Deception	Lies Chests Blames others		
Rudeness	Jerk Hard to get along with		
Bullying	Mean Nasty		
Bigotry	Sexist Racist		
Envy	Jealous Envious		

### Conclusions

The findings of this qualitative pilot study were intriguing, pointing to a variety of factors contributing to the experience of schadenfreude at work. The most common reason participants experienced schadenfreude was underperformance. This could be due to the possibility that coworkers must carry the weight when one employee slacks off or is incompetent. This also supports the stance of the literature that deservingness is a major precursor to schadenfreude—others would be likely to take satisfaction in the failure of a poorly performing coworker or supervisor as they would not seemingly deserve success. A coworker engaging in practices of deception/manipulation/hypocrisy would similarly inspire schadenfreude because they would be deserving of failure due to their negative workplace behaviors. The themes of rudeness/dislike, bullying, and bigotry appear to involve the participants' personal feelings toward the target rather than their feelings regarding the work performance of the target—they just don't like that coworker and are happy to see them experience a downfall. This supports the literature's stance

that liking is related to schadenfreude. Most interesting to note is that although envy is generally viewed as a major contributing factor toward schadenfreude, this study found only three cases of envy as a precursor to workplace schadenfreude. While it is possible that participants chose more socially acceptable examples of schadenfreude to report than those involving envy, the fact remains that when asked about their experiences of schadenfreude at work, only a handful of participants mention envy. Discounting the possibility that participants avoided incidents of envy due to self-serving bias is the fact that envy was very frequently reported as a driver of freudenschade, illustrating that participants in this study were not reluctant to divulge their feelings of envy. This pilot study indicates support for deservingness/justice and liking as precursors to workplace schadenfreude, but offers little support for envy as a driver of schadenfreude at work. While not reported by participants, a fourth precursor of schadenfreude according to the literature—self-enhancement—is probably harder to pin down. A participant who experienced self-enhancement by comparing themselves favorably to an unsuccessful coworker may not be self-aware enough to recognize this process and may likely report something else. In order to study self-enhancement as a driver of workplace schadenfreude it would likely be necessary to ask more pointed questions than this open-ended method allowed for.

Another interesting observation is the fact that there were only three scenarios in which the participant did not establish some inferior or unpleasant quality about the target before stating what the negative event was that happened to the target that caused the participant pleasure. It was as if they could not admit to enjoying someone else's misfortune without first explaining why it's understandable and acceptable for them to feel this way.

There are far fewer factors contributing to freudenschade than schadenfreude. Probably most interesting is that although it was anticipated that this feeling of “joy-harm” – or deriving displeasure from someone else’s positive experience at work—would basically turn out to be envy, this did not prove to be the case. While envy was part of the construct, a much larger part consisted of justice/deservingness. While this could in part be due to impression management, in that participants were less likely to discuss situations in which they were envious and more likely to discuss situations in which they felt wronged, it is likely that this construct is more complicated than expected.

### **Hypotheses**

As Li et al (2019) posited in their theoretical model of third-party observer schadenfreude, the primary cognitive appraisals that predict schadenfreude have structural, relational and social bases. The pilot study initiated at the beginning of this research discovered a number of such appraisals that appear to constitute the precursors to schadenfreude in the workplace. The next step was to test some of the most commonly occurring of them-- underperformance, arrogance, deception, rudeness, and bullying. For the sake of parsimony it seemed acceptable to combine rudeness and bullying into a single category, as bullying was essentially rudeness/dislike at an extreme. Therefore, the hypotheses are as follows:

#### **Hypothesis 1**

Employees in the workplace will experience a greater degree of schadenfreude toward an underperforming coworker than a coworker who does not underperform.

#### **Hypothesis 2**

Employees in the workplace will experience a greater degree of schadenfreude toward an arrogant coworker than a coworker who is not arrogant.

### **Hypothesis 3**

Employees in the workplace will experience a greater degree of schadenfreude toward a deceptive coworker than a coworker who is not deceptive.

### **Hypothesis 4**

Employees in the workplace will experience a greater degree of schadenfreude toward a rude coworker than a coworker who is not rude.

Whether or not the gender of the target affects the level of schadenfreude reported toward them was also of interest, although there was no reason to believe this might go in any particular direction, therefore this was phrased as a research question.

### **Research Question 1**

Will the degree of schadenfreude experienced be related to the gender of the target?

While most of the schadenfreude research has focused on situational factors leading to schadenfreude, individual differences that may make some people more likely to experience schadenfreude than others have garnered some interest. Some research has indicated the existence of a relationship between schadenfreude and what is called the Dark Triad—a composite of Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy (James, Kavanagh, Jonason, Chonody, & Scrutton, 2014; Porter, Bhanwer, Woodworth, & Black, 2014). Greitemeyer, Osswald, and Brauer (2010) found that participants who played a prosocial video game were more likely to experience empathy and less likely to experience schadenfreude. Van Dijk, van Koningsbruggen, Ouwerkerk, and Wesseling (2011) found that low state self-esteem was related to schadenfreude, but James et al (2014) found there to be no correlation between schadenfreude and trait self-esteem. Greenier (2018) also found no correlation between self-esteem and schadenfreude, but did find a relationship between schadenfreude and lower empathy and lower



agreeableness and higher Dark Triad measures as well as Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy individually. Agreeableness was the only Big Five personality trait to indicate a correlation with schadenfreude (Greenier, 2018). Greenier (2018) also investigated dispositional envy—the tendency to experience envy on a regular basis in a variety of life contexts—and did not find a relationship with schadenfreude. There is still much to be learned regarding the relationship between personality variables and schadenfreude.

As part of the secondary cognitive appraisal in their theoretical model, Li et al (2019) assert that implicit processing such as belief in a just world will lead to an appraisal of the victim's deservingness. Just-World Belief is the viewpoint that people get what they deserve, that the world is fair and just (Lerner & Miller, 1978). In a study in which some individuals read scenarios that threatened their belief in a just world, they consequently spent more time engaged in reading funny stories featuring people's failures than people whose Just-World Beliefs had not been threatened (Pietraszkiewicz, 2013). It would be likely that those who have a higher belief in a just world would be more likely to attribute blame to the subject of a negative experience.

### **Hypothesis 5**

Individuals lower in Just-World Beliefs will be less likely to experience schadenfreude in the workplace.

Linked to deservingness is the idea of equity; different people have different ideas of what constitutes equity and what individuals deserve. Schadenfreude essentially stems from a comparison with an inferior person (Smith, 2000), and one individual difference that plays an important role in influencing the social comparison process is equity sensitivity (Huseman, Hatfield, & Miles, 1987). Equity theory claims that people want a fair balance between the effort they put forth and the rewards they receive (Adams, 1965), yet not everyone has the same view

of what is fair. Some individuals are more sensitive to under-reward while others are more tolerant of it. It would follow that employees who are tolerant of inequity would be less likely to experience schadenfreude as a result of a coworker's misfortune.

### **Hypothesis 6**

Employees lower in equity sensitivity will be less likely to experience schadenfreude in the workplace.

While it is of interest to discover the individual differences and situations that drive schadenfreude in the workplace, an even more useful investigation may be into what results from its occurrence. While Li et al. (2019) suggest behavioral reactions ranging from avoidance to active mistreatment, no studies have investigated the outcome of schadenfreude at work.

Employees' reactions to the target of the schadenfreude and the workplace in which it occurred would be interesting to assess. Therefore, this study posed some additional questions.

### **Research Question 2**

Will schadenfreude be related to how much an individual enjoys working at the organization?

### **Research Question 3**

Will schadenfreude be related to how much an individual enjoys working with the target?

### **Research Question 4**

Will schadenfreude be related to how much an individual would want to continue working at the organization?

### **Research Question 5**

Will schadenfreude be related to how much an individual would want to continue working with the target even if they had not been fired?

### **Research Question 6**

Will schadenfreude be related to how much an individual thinks the success of the target could prevent himself/herself from achieving success?

### **Research Question 7**

Will schadenfreude be related to how much an individual thinks the failure of the target could prevent himself/herself from achieving success?

Only two prevailing themes were found to correspond with almost all of the scenarios depicting freudenschade—justice/deservingness and envy. However, envy differs from the other themes addressed in this study in that a scenario can be written in which an individual underperforms or manipulates others or is arrogant or rude, but an envious situation cannot be described—envy is an internal state that has to be induced, experienced, or recalled. Including envy in this study would require a different sort of procedure than what would be most effective for the other themes. For this reason, the relationship between envy and freudenschade was not investigated in this study. Therefore:

### **Hypothesis 7**

Employees in the workplace will experience a greater degree of freudenschade toward an undeserving coworker than a coworker who is not undeserving.

Gender of the target was also investigated.

### **Research Question 8**

Will the degree of freudenschade experienced be related to the gender of the target?

For similar reasons to those regarding schadenfreude, it would be expected that individuals who believe the world is just would be less likely to perceive freudenschade as a result of a coworker's good fortune.

### **Hypothesis 8**

Individuals higher in Just-World Beliefs will be less likely to experience freudenschade in the workplace.

Likewise, employees who are less sensitive to inequity would be less likely to react to a coworker's good fortune with freudenschade.

### **Hypothesis 9**

Employees lower in equity sensitivity will be less likely to experience freudenschade in the workplace.

The study also investigates the relationship between freudenschade and participants' feelings about their workplace, their intent to remain employed there, their desire to continue working with the target of the schadenfreude, and their perception of how much the target of the freudenschade could prevent them from achieving success at the workplace.

### **Research Question 9**

Will freudenschade be related to how much an individual enjoys working at the organization?

### **Research Question 10**

Will freudenschade be related to how much an individual enjoys working with the target?

### **Research Question 11**

Will freudenschade be related to how much an individual would want to continue working at the organization?

### **Research Question 12**

Will freudenschade be related to how much an individual would want to continue working with the target even if they had not been promoted?

### **Research Question 13**

Will freudenschade be related to how much an individual thinks the success of the target could prevent himself/herself from achieving success?

### **Research Question 14**

Will freudenschade be related to how much an individual thinks the failure of the target could prevent himself/herself from achieving success?

## CHAPTER THREE:

### METHOD

#### Participants

Participants were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk. Mechanical Turk research participants have been shown to replicate findings from previous studies using other methods of recruitment (Horton, Rand, & Zeckhauser, 2011), and they perform well in concentration and attention checks (Berinsky, Huber, & Lenz, 2010). Mechanical Turk data has indicated good scale reliability in studies (Burmeister, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011), as well as good test-retest reliability (Holden, Dennie, & Hicks, 2013). Participants were required to work at least 20 hours weekly in an organizational setting (outside the home). A total of 300 participants responded, with data for 19 participants excluded for failing the attention check or for completing the survey in a less than reasonable timeframe, leaving 281 participants. Participants were 65% male and 35% female. Seventy-two percent were white, 12% were black, 6% were mixed-race, 3% were Asian, 1% were Hispanic, less than 1% were American Indian, and the remainder reported race as “other.” Participants ranged in age from 20 to 73 ( $M = 36$ ,  $SD = 8.62$ ) and represented a wide variety of occupations, including retail/sales, technology, education, construction, and medical fields.

#### Measures

##### Schadenfreude

In order to assess schadenfreude, participants viewed a short video in which they were asked to imagine that they worked at an organization called Fidd Industries and that either “Bob”

or “Jane” (depending on the gender condition) is their coworker. Bob or Jane exhibit behavior corresponding to each condition and eventually get fired; this is explained in more detail in the Procedure section of this paper. Following the video, participants were asked to respond on a 7-point scale (1= strongly disagree to 7=strongly agree) to a series of statements. Both the male and female versions of this scale demonstrated high internal consistency reliability ( $\alpha = .94; .92$ ).

The items were as followed:

Seeing Bob/Jane get fired made me happy.

Seeing Bob/Jane get fired pleased me.

Seeing Bob/Jane get fired made me smile.

Seeing Bob/Jane get fired made me unhappy (Reverse).

Seeing Bob/Jane get fired made me feel bad for him/her (Reverse).

Seeing Bob/Jane get fired made me frown (Reverse).

### **Freudenschade**

The process to measure freudenschade was similar to that used to measure schadenfreude, only the target was promoted instead of fired. Internal consistency reliability for the male and female versions was high ( $\alpha = .96; .91$ ). The following questions were asked:

Seeing Bill/Julie get promoted made me unhappy.

Seeing Bill/Julie get promoted displeased me.

Seeing Bill/Julie get promoted made me frown.

Seeing Bill/Julie get promoted made me happy (Reverse).

Seeing Bill/Julie get promoted made me feel pleased for him/her (Reverse).

Seeing Bill/Julie get promoted made me smile (Reverse).

### **Just-World Beliefs**

The 12-item Scale of Belief in a Just World (Dalbert, 1999) was used to measure just-world beliefs. This measure is scored on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). An example of an item is “I think that generally people get what they deserve.” The full scale is provided in Appendix A. The scale demonstrated high internal consistency reliability ( $\alpha = .95$ ).

### **Equity Sensitivity**

The 16-item Equity Preferred Questionnaire (EPQ) (Sauley & Bedeian, 2000) was utilized to measure equity sensitivity. Participants respond from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) to items such as “I am most satisfied at work when I have to do as little as possible.” The full scale is provided in Appendix B. Internal consistency reliability was good ( $\alpha = .88$ ).

### **Attitude Toward Job/Target**

Participants responded from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) to how much they agreed with six items measuring various aspects of their attitude toward the job and the target of schadenfreude/freudenschade. These items were measured separately, not combined as a scale.

The items were as follows:

I enjoy working at Fidd Industries.

I enjoy working with (the target).

I want to continue working at Fidd Industries.

I would want to continue working at Fidd Industries even if (the target) had not been fired/promoted.

(The target's) success at Fidd Industries could prevent me from achieving success.



(The target's) failure at Fidd Industries could help me achieve success.

## **Demographics**

Participants were asked their age, sex, race, and occupation.

## **Procedure**

After reading and agreeing to the informed consent, participants were asked how many hours per week they work outside of the home environment. The process was ended for those who responded with anything under 20 hours, while those who responded that they worked 20 or more hours were taken to the beginning of the survey. Participants were informed that they would watch two short videos followed by questions.

Although hypothetical scenarios have been criticized as tapping into normative or stereotypical views regarding expected emotional reactions (Parkinson & Manstead, 1993), such normative emotional responses have a basis in reality (Feather et al., 2011). Furthermore, research suggests that studies using hypothetical scenarios and those using recalled experiences have findings consistent with each other (Robinson & Clore, 2001). While the external validity of scenario studies may possibly be lower, the internal validity will be enhanced, as the researcher can manipulate the fictitious situation and its players so as to control for other sources of emotional reactions that may occur in real-life situations (Feather et al., 2011). It is impossible to know all the factors that may be occurring when a participant is asked to recall an incident, and it is difficult to control for the great variety of incidents that various participants will be drawing from, as well as the degree or extent of whatever quality of the target contributes to the schadenfreude. When each participant is basing their responses to the study questions on a different scenario, there is no uniformity. In the current research, videos were utilized to ensure the greatest degree of fidelity in eliciting schadenfreude.

The design of the study was 5 x 2 between-subjects with random assignment to condition. The first video represented one of five conditions: rudeness, arrogance, underperformance, deception, or control, with the sex of the target of the video also randomized for this condition but retained for the second video. Each video introduced a company called Fidd Industries and asked the participant to imagine that they work there. Then Bob or Jane was introduced as a coworker of the participant. Bob or Jane were depicted in the video as being either rude, arrogant, underperforming, deceptive, or nondescript for the control condition. At the end of the video Bob or Jane is fired from their job. The videos were made in PowerPoint and consist of still cartoon images with captioning and voice-over. An example is as follows for the male/underperformance condition: “This is Fidd Industries (image of an office building). This is Bob (image of a businessman). Bob works at Fidd Industries (image of Bob walking into the office building). Bob works with a team of people. Imagine that you work at Fidd Industries and are on Bob’s team (image of office workers sitting around a conference table). Bob can sometimes be difficult to work with (another image of Bob). Sometimes Bob is lazy. Sometimes he naps or plays video games instead of working (image of Bob dozing in his chair with his feet propped up on his desk and his head leaned back in his arms). Sometimes Bob doesn’t seem to understand the work he is supposed to be doing. Sometimes Bob’s work doesn’t get done on time or is not done very well (image of frustrated Bob tossing papers around). Sometimes Bob leaves work earlier than he is supposed to (image of Bob dashing out a door under an exit sign, briefcase in hand). One day Bob loses Fidd Industries a big account. Bob is fired (image of angry boss pointing a finger at a flustered Bob).” That is the end of the video. In the control condition Bob is simply described as working in an office down the hall from you, you sometimes see him in the breakroom, etc.

The videos for the rudeness, arrogance, and deception conditions were very similar to that for underperformance except Bob/Jane exhibited behaviors that suggested the appropriate descriptor. The control condition was also very similar but the participant was told that the target works down the hall from [you], that [you] sometimes see him/her in the break room, and that [you] often have meetings with him/her. Full text of all videos is in Appendix G.

After the first video came an attention check asking the participant to describe Bob or Jane in a word or two, to ensure that they had watched and listened to the video. Then came the items measuring schadenfreude. Following this were the items regarding participants' attitude toward working at Fidd Industries and working with Bob or Jane.

Next, participants were randomly presented with either the justice or the control condition video for freudenschade. The sex of the target of the freudenschade video was the same as the sex of the target in the schadenfreude video. If it was Bob in the schadenfreude video, it was Bill in the freudenschade video, and if it was Jane in the schadenfreude video, it was Julie in the freudenschade video. The justice video depicted Bill and Julie as getting away with unfair behaviors, followed by getting promoted to team leader at the end of the video. After watching this video, participants received an attention check question asking them to describe Bill or Julie, then were presented with the freudenschade items. Following this were the items assessing attitude toward working at Fidd Industries and working with Bill or Julie.

After the two videos and associated items, the scales for just-world beliefs and equity sensitivity were presented, followed by the demographic questions. After this the survey ended and participants were presented with a unique code to submit for payment of \$3.00.

## CHAPTER FOUR:

### RESULTS

#### Schadenfreude Conditions

Hypotheses 1-4 were tested with an ANOVA that was run in SPSS to test the mean levels of schadenfreude (the dependent variable) reported by the five conditions (the independent variables). There was a significant effect for condition ( $F(4, 272) = 42.68, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .39$ ). Means, standard deviations, and confidence intervals are reported in Table 2. The results of Duncan's post hoc test show the control condition alone in the first subset; arrogance, rudeness and underperformance in the second subset; and rudeness and underperformance overlapping with deception in the third subset. Therefore, all conditions in which the target was depicted as exhibiting one of the schadenfreude themes elicited significantly more schadenfreude than the control condition in which the target is depicted neutrally. Hypotheses 1-4 are supported.

There was a significant effect for gender of the target  $F(1, 272) = 12.14, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .04$ , with participants reporting more schadenfreude toward a male target ( $M = 4.93, SE = .11$ ) than toward a female target ( $M = 4.28, SE = .10$ ), but there was no significant effect for the interaction between gender and condition  $F(1, 272) = 0.47, p = .78, \eta_p^2 = .01$ . Therefore, the answer to Research Question 1 is that the degree of schadenfreude experienced is related to the gender of the target of the schadenfreude in that male targets evoke more schadenfreude.

Table 2. Means, Standard Deviations, and Confidence Intervals of Schadenfreude by Condition

Condition	Mean	SD	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper
Control	2.34 <sup>a</sup>	1.07	2.00	2.75
Arrogance	4.63 <sup>b, c</sup>	1.23	4.34	4.92
Underperformance	4.94 <sup>b, c</sup>	1.32	4.54	5.37
Rudeness	5.07 <sup>b</sup>	1.28	4.79	5.37
Deception	5.30 <sup>c</sup>	1.26	5.01	5.60
Female	4.28	1.63	4.00	4.41
Male	4.93	1.43	4.51	4.95

Table 3. Analysis of Variance of Schadenfreude by Condition

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	$\eta_p^2$
Condition	4	252.79	63.2	42.68	.000	.39
Gender	1	17.98	17.98	12.14	.001	.04
Interaction	4	2.81	.70	.47	.755	.01

### Freudenschade Conditions

Hypothesis 7 was tested with an ANOVA that was run in SPSS to test the mean level of freudenschade (the dependent variable) reported by the two conditions (the independent variables). There was a significant effect for condition ( $F(1, 278) = 702.28, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .72$ ), with the justice condition reporting more freudenschade ( $M = 5.95, SE = .09$ ) than the control condition ( $M = 2.55, SE = .09$ ). Hypothesis 7 was supported. There was not a significant effect for gender or for the interaction between gender and condition, so the answer to Research Question 8 was that the gender of the target was not related to the level of freudenschade experienced toward them. Results are reported in Table 4.

Table 4. Means, Standard Deviations, and Confidence Intervals of Freudenschade by Condition

Condition	Mean	SD	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper
Justice	5.95	1.09	5.78	6.13
Control	2.55	1.07	2.36	2.73
Female	4.35	1.98	4.08	4.43
Male	4.29	2.06	4.06	4.42

Table 5. Analysis of Variance of Freudenschade by Condition

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	$\eta_p^2$
Condition	1	816.70	816.87	702.28	.000	.72
Gender	1	.03	.03	.03	.871	.00
Interaction	1	2.1	2.1	1.8	.180	.01

### Attitudes Toward Job/Target: Schadenfreude

Research Questions 3-7 were tested by running pooled within-group correlations to control for condition in SPSS to determine if schadenfreude is related to attitudes toward the job and the target. The critical value of  $r$  for this sample is 0.10. The correlation between schadenfreude and the first item “I enjoy working at Fidd Industries” was above this threshold at  $r(274) = .114, p < .05$ ; therefore, there was a significant relationship between how much schadenfreude individuals experienced and how much they reported that they enjoyed the job. There was also a significant relationship between “I enjoy working with (the target)” at  $r(274) = -.474, p < .05$ , in that participants who reported higher levels of schadenfreude were less likely to enjoy working with the target. Conversely, individuals higher in schadenfreude were slightly more likely to “want to continue working at (their job)” at  $r(274) = .204, p = .05$ ; however, they were less likely to want to “continue working at (their job) even if (the target) had not been fired”  $r(274) = -.369, p < .05$ . Items 5 and 6 were reverse-coded to keep them in the expected direction as the first four items. Item 5, “(the target’s success at (the organization) could have prevented me from achieving success” was negatively correlated with schadenfreude  $r(274) =$

-.236,  $p < .05$ , meaning that individuals higher in schadenfreude were more likely to think that the target's success could hamper their own. Likewise, schadenfreude was related to "(the target's) failure at (the organization) could help me achieve success" such that those who reported higher levels of schadenfreude were more likely to believe that the target's failure could be personally beneficial  $r(274) = -.292, p < .05$ .

Table 6. Pooled Within-Group Correlations Between Attitudes Toward the Job/Target and Schadenfreude. \*  $p < .05$

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. I enjoy working at Fidd Industries.						
2. I enjoy working with Bob/Jane.	.13*					
3. I want to continue working at Fidd Industries.	.44*	-.12*				
4. I would want to continue working at Fidd Industries even if Bob/Jane had not been fired.	.37*	.4*	.21*			
5. Bob's/Jane's success at Fidd Industries could prevent me from achieving success.	-.03	.02	-.15*	.08		
6. Bob's/Jane's failure at Fidd Industries could help me achieve success.	-.24*	-.04	-.34*	-.05	.48*	
7. Schadenfreude	.11*	-.45*	.2*	-.37*	-.24*	-.3*

### Attitudes Toward Job/Target: Freudenschade

Research Questions 9-14 were tested by running pooled within-group correlations to control for condition in SPSS to determine if freudenschade is related to attitudes toward the job and the target. The critical value of  $r$  for this sample is 0.10. The correlation between the first item "I enjoy working at Fidd Industries" and freudenschade was above this threshold at  $r(274) = -.5, p < .05$ ; therefore, there was a significant negative relationship between how much freudenschade individuals experienced and how much they reported that they enjoyed the job. There was also a significant relationship between "I enjoy working with (the target)" at  $r(274) =$

-.61,  $p < .05$ , in that participants who reported higher levels of freudenschade were less likely to enjoy working with the target. Individuals higher in freudenschade were also significantly less likely to “want to continue working at (their job)” at  $r(274) = -.52, p = .05$ ; however, there was no significant relationship between freudenschade and how much they would want to “continue working at (their job) even if (the target) had not been promoted.” Items 5 and 6 were reverse-coded to keep them in the expected direction as the first four items. Item 5, “(The target’s success at (the organization) could have prevented me from achieving success” was negatively correlated with freudenschade  $r(274) = -.44, p < .05$ , meaning that individuals higher in freudenschade were more likely to think that the target’s success could hamper their own. Likewise, freudenschade was related to “(the target’s) failure at (the organization) could help me achieve success” such that those who reported higher levels of freudenschade were more likely to believe that the target’s failure could be personally beneficial  $r(274) = -.15, p < .05$ .

Table 7. Pooled Within-Group Correlations Between Attitudes Toward the Job/Target and Freudenschade. \*  $p < .05$

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. I enjoy working at Fidd Industries.						
2. I enjoy working with Bill/Julie.	-.5*					
3. I want to continue working at Fidd Industries.	.79*	.64*				
4. I would want to continue working at Fidd Industries even if Bill/Julie had not been promoted.	.31*	.23*	.36*			
5. Bill’s/Julie’s success at Fidd Industries could prevent me from achieving success.	.24*	.19*	.29*	-.07*		
6. Bill’s/Julie’s failure at Fidd Industries could help me achieve success.	.01	-.1*	-.02	-.12*	.46	
7. Freudenschade	-.5*	-.61*	-.52*	-.01	-.44*	-.15*



### Just-World Beliefs and Equity Sensitivity: Schadenfreude

Hypotheses 5 and 6 were tested with ANCOVA in SPSS to test the mean levels of schadenfreude (dependent variable) reported in relation to Just-World Beliefs and Equity Sensitivity (independent variables) while controlling for condition. There was a significant effect for Just-World Beliefs ( $F(1, 275) = 4.70, p = .03, \eta_p^2 = .02$ ) but there was no significant effect for Equity Sensitivity. There was a significant correlation between Just-World Beliefs and Equity Sensitivity  $r(274) = -.12, p < .05$ . Hypotheses 5 was supported; Hypothesis 6 was not.

Table 8. Analysis of Covariance of Just-World Beliefs/Equity Sensitivity and Schadenfreude by Condition.

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	$\eta_p^2$
Just-World Beliefs	1	7.15	7.15	4.7	.03	.02
Equity Sensitivity	1	.18	.18	.12	.74	.00
Condition (JWB)	4	10.93	2.73	1.8	.13	.03
Condition (ES)	4	7.12	1.78	1.15	.33	.02
Condition-JWB	4	5.51	1.38	.91	.46	.01
Interaction						
Condition-ES	4	4.39	1.1	.71	.59	.01
Interaction						

### Just-World Beliefs and Equity Sensitivity: Freudenschade

Hypotheses 8 and 9 were tested with ANCOVA in SPSS to test the mean levels of freudenschade (dependent variable) reported in relation to Just-World Beliefs and Equity Sensitivity (independent variables) while controlling for condition. There was no significant effect for either Just-World Beliefs or Equity Sensitivity. Hypotheses 8 and 9 were not supported.

Table 9. Analysis of Covariance of Just-World Beliefs/Equity Sensitivity and Freudenschade by Condition.

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	$\eta_p^2$
Just-World Beliefs	1	2.46	2.46	2.14	.15	.01
Equity Sensitivity	1	3.26	3.26	3.27	.07	.01
Condition (JWB)	1	53.53	53.53	46.68	.00	.14
Condition (ES)	1	.53	.53	.54	.47	.00
Condition-JWB	1	.04	.04	.04	.85	.00
Interaction						
Condition-ES	1	41.81	41.81	42	.00	.13
Interaction						

### Sex of Participant

Although no hypotheses were posited regarding the sex of the participant, this was also tested. There were no significant effects of sex of the participant for schadenfreude. For freudenschade, there was no main effect but there was a significant interaction with condition ( $F(1) = 4.80, p = .03$ , with females reporting significantly higher levels of freudenschade than males in the justice condition and significantly lower levels of freudenschade than males in the control condition.

## CHAPTER FIVE:

### DISCUSSION

Considering the competitive nature of the workplace due to the limited amount of resources and opportunities available, schadenfreude and freudenschade are two emotional experiences that would be expected to occur often at work. Schadenfreude is the experience of pleasure as a reaction to another's pain, while freudenschade is the experience of pain as a reaction to another's pleasure. In this study, schadenfreude in the workplace was measured as a pleasurable reaction to a coworker being fired, and freudenschade was measured as a painful reaction to a coworker being promoted.

A pilot study of schadenfreude indicated that certain themes appear to exist in workplace schadenfreude that act as triggers for schadenfreude: underperformance, rudeness, deception, and arrogance. A similar pilot study of freudenschade uncovered two themes: justice and envy. Envy is a construct that is not easily measured in the manner that the other themes can be and thus was not investigated in this study.

A higher degree of schadenfreude was experienced by participants who were in experimental conditions in which the targets exhibited traits and actions representing the themes found in the pilot study than by those who were in the control condition. Rudeness, underperformance, arrogance, and deception all contribute toward the experience of schadenfreude, with deception having a stronger relationship with schadenfreude than arrogance. The results of the post hoc test did not determine a significant difference between arrogance, rudeness, and underperformance, or between rudeness, underperformance, and deception.

Participants also reported more freudenschade in the condition in which the target behaved in a manner that could be perceived as unfair than in the control condition, so it appears that justice is a predictor of freudenschade. This supports the supposition established by the pilot study that the concept of freudenschade exists on its own beyond being just a novel term for envy. Although it was not possible to study envy in this study and this would very likely be a component of freudenschade, this new construct is not composed of envy alone.

Having established likely precursors to schadenfreude, it is of even greater interest to look at possible ramifications of its occurrence in the workplace. A series of questions asking participant “employees” about how they would feel about their jobs and their “coworker” after experiencing schadenfreude uncovered that schadenfreude is positively related to enjoyment of the job and the desire to want to continue working there. This indicates that aside from being a positive personal experience, schadenfreude may cause employees to enjoy their jobs more. This may be in part due to the fact that schadenfreude is also related to how much these employees believe that their coworker’s success or failure could affect their own success at the organization. It may be that there is some combination of the enjoyment relished from the incident of schadenfreude along with the belief that their coworker’s demise could be self-advantageous that leads these employees to want to stay with this organization, perhaps along with the fact that although this flawed coworker was allowed to remain for a while in the organization, in the end they were let go. Participants did not enjoy working with the errant coworker and they reported that they would not want to continue working at the organization if the problematic coworker were still working there. To this effect it appears that enjoyment of the feeling of schadenfreude at work may lead employees to like their jobs more and have a greater intent to stay on, but perhaps only if the punishment of the errant coworker is severe enough. It would be interesting

to test further conditions with lesser degrees of punishment for the coworker—such as a demotion or loss of a coveted account but stopping short of termination—to see if employees still want to remain working in an organization that retains these troublesome employees.

As freudenschade is an unpleasant emotion to experience, reactions of participant “employees” to its occurrence were different. The experience of freudenschade at work led employees to not want to work with the problematic coworker; moreover, they liked their job less and were less likely to want to continue to work there. Those higher in freudenschade also were more likely to believe that their coworker’s success or failure could have an effect on their own success at the organization. It is possible that some combination of being unhappy about seeing an unfairly advantaged employee be rewarded coupled with the perception that this coworker’s success could impede their own success led these employees to dislike working for this organization. As up to now there have been no studies of this construct this is particularly interesting information. Envy is a much-studied variable in the workplace context and there is quite a bit of extant information in the literature; based on what was discovered in this study it might be wise to consider justice in tandem with envy in future research. What may be interpreted as an envious reaction to a coworker’s good fortune could in reality be at least in part due to a perception of injustice.

The discovery of possible personality factors or individual differences that may cause some employees to perceive schadenfreude or freudenschade more than others was also of interest. In this study, Just-World Beliefs and Equity Sensitivity were investigated. Just-World Beliefs does appear to be related to the experience of schadenfreude, although none of the other relationships were significant. As suggested by Li et al (2019), Just-World Beliefs would be expected to contribute to the observer’s cognitive appraisal of the target’s deservingness,

occurring as part of the process determining the degree and quality of schadenfreude that would be directed toward the target as well as the behaviors enacted toward the target. This part of Li et al's (2019) theoretical model is upheld by the current research. This is a positive contribution as this model of workplace schadenfreude is a significant part of what little exists in the literature regarding workplace schadenfreude, yet it remains untested.

### **Limitations**

There are several limitations to this study. The study relied on self-reported measures; it is possible that participants could be reluctant to admit to feelings of schadenfreude or freudenschade and mitigated their responses in an act of social engineering. If this is the case and if it were possible to get at participants' true degree of schadenfreude and freudenschade this might have increased the strength of some results and made some nonsignificant results significant.

Schadenfreude and freudenschade were also evoked using scenarios rather than real incidents. Studies indicate that scenarios often do not elicit the same degree of emotion as real-life situations. Asking participants to imagine they work for a company with someone as their coworker is not likely to create the same cognitions and emotions as a similar situation would in real life. However, in a study of this design the only alternative would have been to have participants evoke a memory of an incident of workplace schadenfreude on their own, in which case experimental control would have been greatly diminished. Based on the incidents of workplace schadenfreude reported in the pilot study, it would have been very difficult to make meaningful comparisons between the varied reports.

## Future Research

Moving forward with this line of research, it would be a further contribution to more extensively test Li et al.'s (2019) model of workplace schadenfreude. Although this study examined attitudes that would be felt toward the workplace and the coworker as a result of schadenfreude, determining specific actions that might be enacted on the part of the employee toward the object of the schadenfreude would be a valuable addition to what was discovered. Li et al (2019) posited that these actions would be determined by the type of schadenfreude—whether it is righteous or ambivalent—so investigating this differentiation would be informative.

It would also be of interest to investigate how employees' attitudes toward the organization and the target would differ as a result of incidents of schadenfreude when the trigger of the experience of schadenfreude is not as drastic as an incidence of the target being fired. In this study, "employees" were reacting with their feelings regarding the job and the target once the target had been fired from the organization and would no longer be a problem. In this situation, employees experiencing schadenfreude were more likely to enjoy their job and want to continue working there. It would be informative to probe whether this would still be the case if the target had only been reprimanded or mildly punished.

Further study of freudenschade in any capacity would also be beneficial, as this is the first study of this construct and almost nothing is known regarding freudenschade in the workplace. A study designed to include envy as well as justice would be helpful, as envy was found to be a driver of freudenschade in the pilot study. It would also be interesting to investigate the types of events that may trigger freudenschade and their relationship with the ramifications of freudenschade. In this study, "employee" participants did not enjoy working at the organization and would not want to continue working there after the experience of freudenschade, but in this

study the organization rewarded the targets with a promotion. If the target's good fortune were not related to organizational justice it's possible that the employee's attitude toward the job and the organization might be different—if, for instance the target were to score very high on an assessment or to win the lottery or other reward that was not given by the organization.

### **Implications**

It might be thought that schadenfreude would have negative ramifications in the workplace, in that an environment that fosters such emotions might not be a healthy one, yet in this study it was found that employees were more likely to enjoy working at the organization and want to stay on after an experience of schadenfreude. It may be that there is an element of organizational justice involved, in that employees are happier with an organization that enacts justice. It could also be possible that the positive experience of schadenfreude could release workplace stress in some way, similar to cyberloafing. It appears that in addition to being a pleasant emotion for an employee to experience, it could be a positive occurrence for an organization.

However, employees who experienced freudenschade were unhappy at the workplace and did not want to continue working there. This is hardly surprising, but underscores the fact that justice is important to employees and they are not happy when coworkers get unfair advantages. In the pilot study, many participants reported incidents of an undeserving coworker receiving a raise or a promotion. This was reported from the perspective of the participant so it is entirely possible that the coworker had earned the raise or promotion and the participant was not in a position to realize this, but perceptions are important. When employers award resources and rewards they should be sure to make it clear how these allocations are determined and why some employees receive them while others do not.



## Conclusion

Schadenfreude and freudenschade in the workplace are emotional reactions to incidents that happen to employees' coworkers, and these emotions influence employees' attitudes toward their organization and their coworkers. How employees feel about their jobs and their employers depends not only on how they themselves are treated in the organization; employees are watching how their coworkers are being treated as well. If they think their coworkers deserve ill treatment, it will likely please them to see this occur and they may like their job even more. If they think their coworkers are enjoying unfair advantages and being rewarded, it will likely displease them and they may like their job less. While the expectation may be that employees would respond to their coworkers' misfortune with sympathy and their good fortune with celebration, human nature dictates and science informs that this will not necessarily be the case, and gaining a further understanding of how and why schadenfreude and freudenschade may occur and what it means for organizations is beneficial for everyone.

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## **APPENDIX A:**

### **BELIEF IN A JUST WORLD (DALBERT, 1999)**

I think basically the world is fair.

I believe that people generally get what they deserve.

I am confident that justice prevails over injustice.

I think that in the long run people will be compensated for injustices.

I believe that injustices are the exception rather than the rule.

I think people try to be fair when making important decisions.

I believe that I mostly deserve what happens to me.

I am usually treated fairly.

Overall, events in my life are fair.

In my life injustice is the exception rather than the rule.

I believe that most things that happen in my life are fair.

I think that important decisions that are made concerning me are usually fair.

## **APPENDIX B:**

### **EQUITY PREFERRED QUESTIONNAIRE (EPQ) (SAULEY & BEDEIAN, 2000)**

I prefer to do as little as possible at work while getting as much as I can from my employer.

When I have completed my tasks for the day, I help out other employees who have not finished.

I am most satisfied at work when I have to do as little as possible.

Even if I received low compensation from my employer I would still try to do a good job.

When I am at my job, I try to think of ways to get out of doing my work.

If I could get away with it, I would try to work a bit slower than the boss expects.

I feel obligated to work more than I am paid to do at my work.

At work, I feel uneasy when there is little or no work for me to do.

If I had to work hard all day at my job I would probably quit.

It is better to have a job with lots of duties and responsibilities than one with few of them.

It is really satisfying to me when I can get something for nothing at work.

At work, my greatest concern is whether I am doing the best job that I can.

I would become very dissatisfied with my job if there was little or no work to do.

Smart employees get as much as they can while giving as little as possible in return.

A job that keeps me busy is better than one with a lot of loafing.

A wise employee is more concerned with what they can get than with what they can give.

**APPENDIX C:**  
**SCHADENFREUDE**

Seeing Bob/Jane get fired made me happy.

Seeing Bob/Jane get fired pleased me.

Seeing Bob/Jane get fired made me smile.

Seeing Bob/Jane get fired made me unhappy (R).

Seeing Bob/Jane get fired made me feel bad for him (R).

Seeing Bob/Jane get fired made me frown (R).

**APPENDIX D:**  
**FREUDENSCHADE**

Seeing Bill/Julie get promoted made me unhappy.

Seeing Bill/Julie get promoted displeased me.

Seeing Bill/Julie get promoted made me frown.

Seeing Bill/Julie get promoted made me happy (R).

Seeing Bill/Julie get promoted made me feel pleased for him/her (R).

Seeing Bill/Julie get promoted made me smile (R).

## **APPENDIX E:**

### **ATTITUDES TOWARD WORK/TARGET (SCHADENFREUDE)**

I enjoy working at Fidd Industries.

I enjoyed working with Bob/Jane before he/she was fired.

I want to continue working at Fidd Industries.

I would want to continue working at Fidd Industries even if Bob/Jane were still working there.

Bob's/Jane's success at Fidd Industries could have prevented me from achieving success.

Bob's/Jane's failure at Fidd Industries could help me achieve success.



## **APPENDIX F:**

### **ATTITUDES TOWARD WORK/TARGET (FREUDENSCHADE).**

I enjoy working at Fidd Industries.

I enjoy working with Bill/Julie.

I want to continue working at Fidd Industries.

I would want to continue working at Fidd Industries even if Bill/Julie had not been promoted.

Bill's/Julie's success at Fidd Industries could prevent me from achieving success.

Bill's/Julie's failure at Fidd Industries could help me achieve success.

## **APPENIDX G:**

### **VIDEO TEXT**

Rudeness (male):

This is Fidd Industries.

This is Bob.

Bob works at Fidd Industries.

Bob works with a team of people. Imagine that you work at Fidd Industries and are on Bob's team.

Bob can sometimes be difficult to work with.

Sometimes Bob is rude or annoying.

Bob can be hard to get along with.

Sometimes Bob treats people badly, teasing them or making fun of them.

One day Bob loses Fidd Industries a big account. Bob is fired.

Underperformance (female):

This is Fidd Industries.

This is Jane.

Jane works at Fidd Industries.

Imagine that you work at Fidd Industries and are on Jane's team.

Jane can sometimes be difficult to work with.

Sometimes Jane is lazy. Sometimes she naps or plays video games instead of working.

Sometimes Jane doesn't seem to understand the work she's supposed to be doing. Sometimes Jane's work doesn't get done on time or is not done very well.

Sometimes Jane leaves work earlier than she is supposed to.

One day Jane loses Fidd Industries a bog account. Jane is fired.

Arrogance (male):

This is Fidd Industries.

This is Bob.

Bob works at Fidd Industries.

Imagine that you work at Fidd Industries and are on Bob's team.

Sometimes Bob can be difficult to work with.

Sometimes Bob brags about how good he is at his job.

Sometimes Bob acts like he is the most important member of the team and that he is right about everything.

Sometimes Bob acts like a know-it-all and talks down to his coworkers.

One day Bob loses Fidd Industries a big account. Bob is fired.

Deception (female):

This is Fidd Industries.

This is Jane.

Jane works at Fidd Industries.

Imagine that you work at Fidd Industries and are on Jane's team.

Sometimes Jane can be hard to work with.

Sometimes Jane is dishonest.

Sometimes Jane takes credit for work someone else did or blames others for her mistakes.

Jane has been known to cheat to get ahead.

One day Jane loses Fidd Industries a big account. Jane is fired.

Control/schadenfreude (male):

This is Fidd Industries.

This is Bob.

Bob works at Fidd Industries.

Imagine that you work at Fidd Industries and are on Bob's team.

Bob's office is down the hallway from yours.

Sometimes you see Bob in the break room.

Sometimes you have meetings with Bob and the rest of your work team.

One day Bob loses Fidd Industries a big account. Bob is fired.

Justice (female):

This is Fidd Industries.

This is Julie.

Julie works at Fidd Industries.

Imagine that you work at Fidd Industries and are on Julie's team.

Julie doesn't work very hard. Sometimes she naps or plays video games or goes home early.

Julie never seems to get in trouble for this.

Julie doesn't have a heavier workload than you and the rest of the team, but all she has to do is complain and others are told to help her.

One day Julie is promoted to team leader.

Control/freudenschade (male):

This is Fidd Industries.

This is Bill.

Bill works at Fidd Industries.

Imagine that you work at Fidd Industries and are on Bill's team.

Bill's office is down the hallway from yours.

Sometimes you see Bill in the breakroom.

Sometimes you have meetings with Bill and the rest of your work team.

One day, Bill gets promoted to team leader.

**APPENDIX H:**  
**IRB EXEMPTION LETTER**

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RESEARCH INTEGRITY AND COMPLIANCE  
Institutional Review Boards, FWA No. 00001669  
12901 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., MDC035 • Tampa, FL 33612-4799  
(813) 974-5638 • FAX (813) 974-7091

4/15/2019

Kim Johnson, B.A.  
Psychology  
17862 Arbor Greene Dr.  
Tampa, FL 33647

RE: **Exempt Certification**  
IRB#: Pro00038315  
Title: Positive reactions to co-worker failure

Dear Ms. Johnson:

On 4/13/2019, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) determined that your research meets criteria for exemption from the federal regulations as outlined by 45 CFR 46.104(d):

(2) Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests(cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:(i) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the

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human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; (ii) Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation; or (iii) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by 45 CFR 46.111(a)(7).

As the principal investigator for this study, it is your responsibility to ensure that this research is conducted as outlined in your application and consistent with the ethical principles outlined in the Belmont Report and with USF HRPP policies and procedures.

Please note, as per USF HRPP Policy, once the exempt determination is made, the application is closed in ARC. This does not limit your ability to conduct the research. Any proposed or anticipated change to the study design that was previously declared exempt from IRB oversight must be submitted to the IRB as a new study prior to initiation of the change. However, administrative changes, including changes in research personnel, do not warrant an Amendment or new application.

We appreciate your dedication to the ethical conduct of human subjects research at the University of South Florida and your continued commitment to human research protections. If you have any questions regarding this matter, please call 813-974-5638.

Sincerely,



Melissa Sloan, PhD, Vice Chairperson  
USF Institutional Review Board