

## Schadenfreude and Gluckschmerz: A Case of Sentiments of Contempt?

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### ABSTRACT

This short note uses a qualitative mixed-mode comparative analysis of the major characteristics/features of negative sentiments to explore a possible link between contempt and schadenfreude and gluckschmerz. Findings showed that the investigated sentiments share many of the important characteristics suggesting a possible relationship in the form of higher level of contempt might trigger higher level of schadenfreude and gluckschmerz.

**Keywords:** Negative sentiments, Contempt, Schadenfreude and Gluckschmerz

### INTRODUCTION

Schadenfreude and gluckschmerz (hereafter S&G) are widely regarded as interconnected and ambivalent emotions (e.g., feeling somewhat negative, but simultaneously quite positive [1]. Existing scholarship articles reveal confusions concerning the fundamental nature of the two. Smith and van Dijk [2] have recently laid out a novel analysis that inspired rejoinders and comments by Roseman and Steele [3] and Hess [4], concerning the debate on the two fascinating sentiments in human relations. van Dijk and Smith [5] argued that the two emotions have some overlaps with joy (happiness) and sadness (or anger), but "...schadenfreude and gluckschmerz differ from joy and anger" (p. 263). In addition, their own and others research made them conclude that S&G are ubiquitous and complex affective experiences asking, "should both considered distinct emotions?" (p. 263). Similar questions were raised on the emotion "contempt" [6]. Contempt like S&G was proven to be difficult to define in concrete and easily accessible terms, however, one knows it when she feels it. In this commentary we offer a (partial) answer to the above conundrum. We suggest that contempt and S&G are linked and share many functional characteristics/features. Therefore, this review focuses on the many commonalities between contempt and S&G and summarizes the relevant empirical literature that advances our claim.

S&G are interrelated social reactions to (dis)pleasure events [7]. As a phenomenon, S&G are potent, negative social forces that have been implicated in accounts of rivalry in sports, politics, and management to name a few [8]. There is widespread agreement that the two are atypical and negative social reactions. For example, Heider [9] regarded S&G as unique types of emotional discordance. Cikara [1] described the two as complementary emotions, which comprise a case

of empathy bias as well as ambivalent emotions. Smith and van Dijk [2] regarded the two as passive but improper emotions as well as hostile feelings. Massin [10] as malicious pleasure/displeasure and Gervais and Fessler [6] even suggested that they are "emotional pluripotent". All these lead Johnson [11] to recently define the two as "counterfeit emotions".

Evidently, not everyone feels happy when another person or entity is happy, nor does everyone feel sad when another is sad. Hudson [12] suggested that schadenfreude is best operationalized as how good participants felt about a negative event happening to a protagonist (Rating Task = Good, and Event Valence = Negative). Gluckschmerz how bad they feel about a positive event happening to a protagonist (Rating Task = Bad, and Event Valence = positive). Therefore, as depicted in **Table 1**, both Schadenfreude and Gluckschmerz are indeed atypical emotions in the form of positive/negative and negative/positive responses to events.

To elaborate, what is so atypical about S&G is that the experience of both is subjectively positive or negative, but the observable expression of pleasure or displeasure is

negative. This might also explain why the two are seldom accounted for by commonly used frameworks of emotions, including Ekman basic emotions framework, and also are

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not part of the standard terms of most languages [5]. Indeed, it seems that there is a wide agreement that S&G are complex social phenomena that might take part in situations of blend or mix of feelings [4,13].

Contempt is regarded as a functional combination of attitudes and emotions towards negative moral or traits of others [6,14]. It manifests itself as a lack of respect that activates a negative response. Contempt is not simply a basic emotion or an attitude, but rather a functionally integrated

network in the form of emotions and attitudes. Accordingly, contempt is only one of a number of distinct sentiments conceptualize as the absence of the sentiment respect. Contempt generally follows from appraisal of others deficiencies. Feeling contempt toward another entity leads to an atrophy of feelings [15]. The concept of contempt can include contradictory facets like, positive "liking" or negative "sadness" [14,16] and might occasionally take part in a blend or mix feelings [13].

**Table 1.** Emotions in the form of positive/negative and negative/positive responses to events of Schadenfreude and Gluckschmerz.

		Social Emotions	
		Positive	Negative
Events	Positive	e.g., joy, respect, pride etc.	<b>Glückschmerz</b> (malicious sadness) e.g., malicious envy, hostility
	Negative	<b>Schadenfreude</b> (malicious joy) e.g., malicious envy, hostility	e.g., sadness, anger, fear, etc.

**INDIRECT EVIDENCE**

In a recent pilot study, using a forced-choice judgment task, we found converging evidence, across different groups of participants, that the lay person perception of experiencing S&G, their related emotions, as well as their semantic conceptualizations, are blur and inconclusive. Language plays a constitutive role in emotion perception and considered as "grammar of social living" [17], and words ground the otherwise highly variable instances of an emotion category. Therefore, to fully express the two concepts, the words *schadenfreude* and *gluckschmerz* ("Reverse *schadenfreude*" [18]) were included in vignettes. Participants were presented with six brief vignettes describing a product/brand setback or success followed by a list of 24 emotional terms (words) adopted from Scherer and Fontaine [19]. All participants were executives of German background and intimately familiar with the two concepts and fluent in English. The only significant results were that the terms "envy" and "contempt". The first received very high and the second medium statistically results. Terms like "disgusting", "fearful", and "pride", received zero scores.

There is also some indirect evidence in the literature on a possible link between contempt and S&G. For example, Rudolph [20] used a Hierarchical Cluster Analyses to analyze differences and similarities between moral emotions across eight variables. Results provided some indications to similar patterns between contempt and S&G on different important clusters of moral observer emotions (cognitive, adaptive, and motivational aspects) as well as the interactions between the elements. Scherer and Moors [21] showed a relative high contempt result by an observer towards betraying friend who took part in an unpleasant conversation (high emotion episode) about this individual. In

an unrelated study manipulating high emotions episodes, Hornik [22] found high observer S&G reactions to a (mis)fortune towards a betraying friend using similar scenarios employed by Scherer and Moors [21]. Hence, it is reasonable to suggest a link between contempt and S&G possibly in the form of higher level of contempt will trigger higher level of S&G. In other words, given that contempt emerges during events in which individuals believe that another entity caused them harm, it is reasonable to assume that when the same entity is inflicted by a (mis)fortune, the individual will experience S&G.

The recent literature strongly suggests that like S&G contempt cannot be afforded as a basic emotion because both do not meet the three criteria proposed by Levenson [23] - distinctness, hard-wiredness, and functionality. These three criteria were only found in six emotions (enjoyment, anger, disgust, fear, surprise, sadness). Following Gervais and Fessler [6] we regard contempt and S&G as sentiments. Sentiments are largely considered functional networks that are the basis of all social affects that follow attitudes [4]. Given that S&G, like contempt, are based on both attitudinal and emotional components, in the following we propose to also integrate S&G under the rubric of sentiments.

**COMPARATIVE ANALYSES**

Our aim is to compare and show the common characteristics and social functions of contempt and S&G, as inferred from their similar motivational, behavioral, and relational characteristics. We propose that contemptible feelings probably breed S&G. In other words, we show that S&G are strongly linked to contempt and that contempt often co-occurs and, therefore, might be considered as an antecedent to S&G. We argue that contemptuous feelings predict a

greater desire to negatively evaluate an entity (mis)fortune. In the feeling of contempt, there is an element of condescension and feeling of superiority to another entity, whether that entity is above the person socially or professionally or not.

To test our proposition, we employed several commonly used and recommended qualitative mixed comparative methods [24]. We reviewed the findings regarding the antecedents and functional consequences of S&G and contempt independently, and show how they relate to each other. We use several important research contributions as references. Most of the relevant studies have focused on isolated influence of a few characteristics. Therefore, in this commentary we choose to integrate the studies and highlight results that show commonalities with contempt and S&G. Analytically, we employed a mix of Scherer and Moors [21] component differentiation procedure (Appraisal of events; action tendencies; conscious representations; and, semantic profiling). Also, the following methodologies were used: The functionalist theory of emotions and the common features approach [6,25]. Attitude-Scenario-Emotion (ASE) model that provides a useful framework to show the overlap between S&G as contempt sentiments on eight features. Wagner [16] three-prong criteria defining contempt as interpersonal, involve feeling of superiority, and view the target as negative.

We also embrace the novel idea that there are many distinct sentiments, and that sentiments are emotionally pluripotent Gervais and Fessler [6]. Therefore, sentiments like G&S and contempt might be conceived and modeled as mental experiences constructed from more specific and basic emotions that vary across different social contexts.

**FINDINGS**

Based on the analytical approach we were able to detect the widely shared characteristics among theories along the

appraisal process that determines the nature of the remaining stages in the sentiments sequence. In other words, our approach provided us with the variables that were found in previous studies to be related independently to contempt and S&G, but showed similar roles and patterns of expressive behaviors (action tendencies) summarized in **Table 2** and mapped as:

Contempt and S&G are likely to emerge under special multiple conditions such as attitudinal antecedents towards a disliked entity. The negative sentiments will intensify in a competitive (rivalry) situation following a passive and moral appraisal ((un)deservingness) of entities, by the way of “down looking” at them. All these will lead to counter-empathic and negative social sentiments towards out-groups with whom one does not have a relationship and no control on their behavior. Contempt and S&G are considered socially aversive sentiments with derogatory action tendencies, commonly leading to reproach expressions like hate speech and malicious negative WOM. In many cases high contemptuous and S&G sentiments are linked to personality traits like low self-esteem. Also, individuals who have dark traits (as measured by the Dark Triad scale), will more likely feel contempt and S&G.

We used the same logic to check possible similar overlaps between contempt or S&G and other basic emotions/sentiments. Not surprisingly, we found minor overlaps across many emotions, but not in the extent found between S&G and contempt. It should be noted that in some less important characteristics S&G and contempt differentiate. For example, in many cases contempt is a negative sentiment to an inferior entity whereas S&G are commonly a response to a superior entity (e.g., top dog; tall poppies).

**Table 2.** Supporting Literature for Common Features of S&G and Contempt <sup>(1)</sup>.

S No	Features	S&G: Supporting references <sup>(2)</sup>	Contempt: references <sup>(2)</sup>	Supporting
1	Social evaluation	A4; A42; A46; A15; A16; A57	B14; A27	
2	Entity appraisal: outgroup	A5; A8; A20; A37; A40	B11; B13	
3	Moral appraisal	A1; A12; A17; A21; B12; B16	B7; B12; B16; B26; B20; B21	
4	Competitive situation	A22; A24; A35; A42; A60	B5; B12	
5	Dislike of entity/negative disposition	A37; A46; A50	B4; B14; B15	
6	Negative sentiments	A25; A29; A53	B2; B3; B6; B11	
7	Counter empathy (“Cold”)	A7; A8; A26; A50	B12; B29	
8	“Looking down” at entity	A37; A38; A42; A46	B4; B20	
9	Appraisal: No control on target's Behavior	A5; A39	B11; B22; B23	
10	Action tendency: Leads to hate speech	A11; A32; A61	B5; B32	
11	Action tendency: Leads to negative WOM	A20; A44	B2; B5	
12	Follows emotion evoking events	A12; A18; A31	B5; B16; A18	
13	Pluripotent emotions/sentiments	B12; A40	B12	
14	Co-occurs with other negative emotions	A3; A36; A37; A42; A33; A48	B7; B8; B10	
15	Linked to same personality traits	B5; A2; A22; A58; A59		

(1) Partially based on ASE (attitude-scenario-emotion) and includes Gervais & Fessler [6] eight component features

(2) Examples only

## SUMMARY

Our mixed mode qualitative approach revealed significant shared characteristics between contempt and S&G pointing to a possible link between them. Our approach is within the more recent movement in emotion research. Move from a discrete emotion approach to an emotion process with an emphasis on the determinants or mechanisms underlining the unfolding of emotions events (For more see Scherer and Moors [21]). The negative social sentiments of S&G and contempt share the most salient and relevant comparative characteristics. The approach adopted in this commentary of identifying the functional elements and key characteristics of contempt and S&G seem to provide support to our proposition that S&G shares many of its functional features with contempt. Our results suggest that contempt might have strong influence on S&G. It is quite possible that contempt and S&G might even constitute blends or mixture of sentiments which are very common among social negative sentiments [17].

Much empirical attention was devoted to study the links relationships between malicious envy and S&G [26]. Similar attention should be given to our proposition. Despite our claim that contempt is linked to S&G, the way they are linked is an interesting and socially relevant venue for future empirical research. There are many doubts if the current research methods can provide reliable answers to our proposition Kron [27]. However, advances in emotion-related physiology and the mammalian precursors of the investigated sentiments might provide deeper insights into these issues across different emotional episodes.

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