SCHADENFREUDE: A COUNTERNORMATIVE OBSERVER RESPONSE TO WORKPLACE MISTREATMENT

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Although almost all employees have heard of or witnessed colleagues being mistreated, we have an incomplete understanding of how employees perceive and respond to such events. In previous research scholars established that observer emotions can be congruent with victim emotions, but we examine observer schadenfreude, an incongruent emotion that is also prevalent in organizations. Based on appraisal theories of emotion, we propose a process model of schadenfreude emergence and development: initial schadenfreude occurs when observers appraise mistreatment incidents as relevant and conducive to their goals; this initial feeling evolves into either righteous or ambivalent schadenfreude, depending on observers' secondary appraisals of victim deservingness. We also address the implications of schadenfreude for observer behavior and the moderating effects of observers' moral foundations and organizational civility climate. Our model extends current knowledge about observer reactions and helps us understand the persistence and pervasiveness of workplace mistreatment.

Modern organizations are interwoven systems of social interaction that can provide support and friendship when individuals are courteous and warm (Heaphy & Dutton, 2008), but they can also be sources of stress and conflict when individuals behave in hostile ways (e.g., incivility, abuse, undermining, and bullying). Research has documented the negative and potentially devastating consequences of workplace interpersonal mistreatment for victims (for a review, see Hershcovis, 2011). Because almost all employees hear of or witness incidents of workplace mistreatment (Olson-Buchanan & Boswell, 2008; Porath & Pearson, 2010), researchers have also broadened the scope of inquiry to address the perspective of and consequences for third-party observers (e.g., Mitchell, Vogel, & Folger, 2012, 2015; Skarlicki & Kulik, 2005).

Scholars have shown that observers of interpersonal mistreatment can be like victims in that they also experience stress and injustice. From a stress perspective, observers may experience secondary trauma from empathetic pain and fear of their own victimization (e.g., Miner-Rubino & Cortina, 2007; Porath & Erez, 2009; Robinson, Wang, & Kiewitz, 2014). From the perspective of deontic justice (Folger, 2001), observers regard mistreatment as unjust and respond with perpetrator-directed anger and sympathy for victims (e.g., O'Reilly & Aquino, 2011; O'Reilly, Aquino, & Skarlicki, 2016; Reich & Hershcovis, 2015; Skarlicki & Rupp, 2010). With mindful reflection, even observers who fail to fully grasp incidents of mistreatment at the outset may come to feel empathic concern for victims (Atkins & Parker, 2012). Thus, existing theoretical models bring observer and victim responses into alignment.

However, the workplace dynamics of competition, envy, and intergroup tensions that motivate interpersonal mistreatment (Kim & Glomb, 2014; Lam, Van der Vegt, Walter, & Huang, 2011; Venkatramani & Dalal, 2007) also imply that observer and victim perspectives may diverge. In truth, observers are not always moved by the plight of mistreated victims, and

they often withhold assistance (Mitchell et al., 2015). Indeed, the frequency with which mistreatment is delivered in a collective manner (e.g., gossip, ostracism, and mobbing) suggests that observers often favor perpetrators over victims. Such dynamics are all too prevalent and contradict current models of observers.

It follows that an exclusive focus on observer emotions that are *congruent* with victim emotions avoids the painful truth that observers may experience a prototypically *incongruent* social emotion—*schadenfreude*, or pleasure derived from another's misfortune (Blader, Wiesenfeld, Rothman, & Wheeler-Smith, 2010). We ground our conceptual understanding of observer emotions in appraisal theory, which explains people's emotional reactions in terms of their cognitive appraisals of events (e.g., Lazarus, 1991, 2001; Scherer, 1984, 2001). Scholars have used appraisal theory to explain observer emotions, such as perpetrator-directed anger (O'Reilly & Aquino, 2011) and victim-directed compassion (Atkins & Parker, 2012). We draw on this foundation to provide a complementary perspective on the psychological processes that govern schadenfreude.

Based on appraisal theories of emotion (Lazarus, 1991), we propose that observers may react quickly with schadenfreude when their primary appraisal indicates that a situation of interpersonal mistreatment is relevant and conducive to their goal attainment. After schadenfreude's emergence, observers' secondary appraisals of victim deservingness may alter the nature and intensity of this preliminary positive emotion. That is, secondary appraisals of mistreatment as deserved give rise to righteous schadenfreude, and secondary appraisals of mistreatment as undeserved give rise to ambivalent schadenfreude. As these evaluations and emotional experiences differ, so do their behavioral consequences.

In sum, we propose an emotion-based process model (see Figure 1) that depicts the appraisal processes underlying the emergence and development of observer schadenfreude, as

well as the subsequent behavioral consequences. By considering this counternormative feeling and addressing the combined roles of personal stakes and deservingness concerns, we advance current understanding of observer reactions to workplace mistreatment beyond the insights that stress and deontic justice theories afford. Furthermore, by showing the antisocial behavioral consequences of schadenfreude, we help explain how workplace mistreatment can persist and even become contagious. In the following sections we define schadenfreude and detail its underlying appraisal processes, behavioral reactions, and boundary conditions. We conclude with theoretical and practical implications, as well as directions for future research.

CONCEPTUALIZING SCHADENFREUDE

"Schadenfreude" comprises two lexical parts: *schaden,* meaning harm, and *freude,* meaning pleasure. This German word indicates counternormative and malicious joy. From antiquity, moral philosophers' perspectives on schadenfreude have varied. For example, Aristotle (1992/367–322 B.C.E.) saw it as a disguised expression of aggression, and Schopenhauer (1998/1840) asserted that schadenfreude is diabolical. However, Ben-Ze'ev (2001) argued that schadenfreude is neither a virtue nor a vice. To avoid demonizing this natural emotion, we define schadenfreude as "pleasure at the misfortunes of others," independent of whether it appears to be morally acceptable (van Dijk & Ouwerkerk, 2014a: 6).

Schadenfreude reflects a passive, indirect, and opportunistic reaction to others' misfortunes (Leach, Spears, Branscombe, & Doosje, 2003). It is distinct from *gloating*, a potential downstream consequence of schadenfreude in which witnesses gain pleasure from causing further adversity to the defeated (e.g., rubbing it in; Leach, Spears, & Manstead, 2015). Schadenfreude also differs from *pride* in achievement, *joy* triggered by pleasurable stimuli, and *relief* at a threat's removal (Lazarus, 1991; Leach et al., 2015).

Schadenfreude is a social emotion that reflects an incongruent emotional orientation with the target (Frijda & Mesquita, 1994). Social emotions can range on a spectrum, from perceiver-target congruence (e.g., sympathy and vicarious joy) to perceiver-target incongruence (e.g., contempt and envy; Blader et al., 2010). Schadenfreude belongs to the latter category, because the joy stems from the target's sadness, discomfort, or pain.

Research on schadenfreude has gained traction in social psychology (Smith, 2013; van Dijk & Ouwerkerk, 2014a), but researchers have largely overlooked the workplace as a context for schadenfreude, with the notable exception of Wiesenfeld, Wurthmann, and Hambrick (2008), who studied interorganizational schadenfreude. Thus, we extend the schadenfreude literature by theorizing about the emergence, development, and consequences of schadenfreude triggered by interpersonal adversity at work.

AN EMOTION-BASED PROCESS MODEL OF SCHADENFREUDE

Appraisal theories of emotion indicate that subjective appraisals of events influence emotional reactions (e.g., Frijda, 1986; Lazarus, 1991, 2001; Moors, Ellsworth, Scherer, & Frijda, 2013; Scherer, 1984, 2001). In life, our emotions are shaped by where we focus our attention, how we interpret and ascribe meaning to events, and what action implications we see. From this perspective, primary appraisals concerning the significance of events—whether they are relevant and conducive to a perceiver's goals—provide the basis for swift emotional response (Lazarus, 1991, 2001; Moors et al., 2013). However, there is also an emergent quality of emotions, since initial emotional states are informed by subsequent appraisals, including appraisals of deservingness and the legitimacy of triggering events (Lazarus, 1991; Scherer, 2001).

Building on this understanding, we address experienced schadenfreude as an unfolding emotional episode that includes awareness of a triggering event, cognitive appraisals, subjective

feelings felt initially and over time, and action tendencies (Elfenbein, 2007; Moors et al., 2013). We posit that initial schadenfreude is the product of primary appraisal, whereby observers see colleagues' mistreatment as being relevant and conducive to their goals. Initial schadenfreude then provides the impetus for a secondary appraisal of victim deservingness, the product of which is emergent schadenfreude, an updated emotional state with nuanced nature and intensity, which has implications for observer actions.

Primary Appraisal (Ego Involvement) and Initial Schadenfreude

Work environments are complex, and employees cannot be aware of or fully attend to all that happens around them. To cope with this complexity, they focus on people and events that are most relevant to their goals. Lazarus's (1991) concept of ego involvement captures perceivers' goal-related concerns—concerns for self-esteem and social esteem, aspirations (ideals), moral values, and the welfare of close others—that direct attention and prime appraisals. Beyond goal relevance, employees are concerned with goal conduciveness—namely, whether circumstances facilitate their goal attainment.

Appraisal theorists acknowledge the apparent automaticity of primary appraisals of goal relevance and conduciveness (e.g., Lazarus, 1991). Evaluations become automatic as people learn to associate stimuli with outcomes (Carlston, 2010). People focus their attention on actors and events that matter most to their ego involvement, and their learning through life experience is encoded in refined mental schemas that support swift responding. In response to witnessed workplace mistreatment, observers tend to feel congruent emotions, such as empathy and compassion, when their goals are aligned with victims' goals. However, when the goals of observers and victims are incompatible and observers gain at victims' expense, observers can experience incongruent emotions such as schadenfreude (Elfenbein, 2014).

Structural, relational, and social factors shape employees' ego involvement in organizational settings. Specifically, work arrangements, job requirements, and incentive structures couple ego concerns with work outcomes, and zero-sum or adversarial arrangements can generate competition and conflict (Connelly, Tihanyi, Crook, & Gangloff, 2014; Samnani & Singh, 2014). Furthermore, social comparisons regarding work inputs and/or rewards produce envy (Cohen-Charash & Mueller, 2007). Finally, ingroup loyalty is crucial for group preservation, but social identity can spawn partiality of ingroup members and mistreatment of outgroup members. Thus, we propose that competition, envy, and intergroup bias create a tension that is likely to generate initial schadenfreude in response to observed victimization.

Competition. Work designs, job descriptions, and performance incentives are powerful mechanisms that direct employees' attention and channel their behavior (Baker, Jensen & Murphy, 1988; Kerr, 1975). Systems that align ego involvement (e.g., feelings of self-worth, fulfillment of aspirations, and feelings of responsibility) with constructive job performance function best. However, zero-sum performance incentives and tournament career progression models, where one party gains at others' expense, create conditions for negative competition in which employees can succeed by sabotaging others (Connelly et al., 2014; Samnani & Singh, 2014).

Employees tend to focus on the actions and outcomes of competitors because of their implications for well-being (Labianca & Brass, 2006). When employees observe mistreatment of competitors, they may positively appraise such incidents and experience a surge of pleasant emotion in light of their potential personal benefits. For example, if two employees are competing for a promotion and one experiences supervisory abuse, the other may perceive the abuse as a sign of the leader's hostility and dislike, thus believing that they have a higher chance

to win the promotion. More generally, the setbacks of perceived competitors provide employees with opportunities for gain and, thus, afford a basis for joy.

> *Proposition 1a: Observers who perceive the targets of interpersonal mistreatment as competitors are more likely to appraise the mistreatment as relevant and conducive to their goals and, thus, feel initial schadenfreude.*

Envy. Modern theories of social comparison and envy indicate that employees constantly compare themselves with coworkers in terms of the quality of their achievements, possessions, and the treatment they receive from the organization (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007; Cohen-Charash & Mueller, 2007). Envy is social pain that arises "when a person lacks another's superior quality, achievement, or possession and either desires it or wishes that the other lacked it" (Parrott & Smith, 1993: 908; see also Tai, Narayanan, & McAllister, 2012).

We posit that envious employees will appraise mistreatment of envied parties as relevant and conducive to their goals. Envy includes feelings of inferiority and hostility, which focus increased attention on the activities of envied targets and motivate enviers to damage the targets (Crusius & Lange, 2014; van de Ven, Zeelenberg, & Pieters, 2009). When envied targets are mistreated, observers find satisfaction in knowing that upward social comparisons are leveled. More fundamentally, observed mistreatment serves as imaginary revenge against the targets' superiority (Nietzsche, 1967/1887). Thereby, observers have increased self-esteem and feel schadenfreude (van Dijk & Ouwerkerk, 2014b).

> *Proposition 1b: Observers who envy the targets of interpersonal mistreatment are more likely to appraise the mistreatment as relevant and conducive to their goals and, thus, feel initial schadenfreude.*

Intergroup bias. Employees' ego involvement within group or organizational settings partly depends on the importance they ascribe to social group membership (Brewer & Caporael,

2006). People tend to automatically classify themselves and others into social groups based on certain traits (e.g., occupation, gender, and ethnicity) and imbue these groups with meaning (Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Group membership has adaptive benefits because people extend depersonalized trust to all ingroup members owing to their shared qualities, beliefs, expectations about the group's purpose and knowledge of what membership means (Brewer, 2008). Thus, people tend to value their group memberships, view their groups' success as their own, and form their social identities around the prototypical qualities of the groups. However, such group identification can result in intergroup bias—namely, the tendency to favor ingroup members over outgroup representatives (Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002).

The implications of social identities for initial schadenfreude are clear. First, if a fellow group member is mistreated, the observer's sense of self-worth will be threatened and initial schadenfreude is less likely to occur. Second, when a victim is from a rival group that represents a threat to ingroup values, schadenfreude is more likely to occur (Smith, Powell, Combs, & Schurtz, 2009). Third, although ingroup favoritism may not bring about overt outgroup-directed hostility, it can still manifest in more subtle forms of discrimination—through reserving admiration, sympathy, and trust for ingroup members (Brewer, 1999). Thus, when group boundaries are salient and a group's status or power is threatened, established loyalty can rouse sufficient outgroup-directed negativity for schadenfreude to occur when an outgroup member is mistreated (Leach & Spears, 2008; Leach et al., 2015; Leach et al., 2003).

> *Proposition 1c: Observers who have high ingroup loyalty and perceive the targets of interpersonal mistreatment as outgroup members are more likely to appraise the mistreatment as relevant and conducive to their goals and, thus, feel initial schadenfreude.*

Secondary Appraisal of Deservingness and Emergent Schadenfreude

Acts of mistreatment violate established social norms that call for caring and respectful treatment. Thus, further reflection on the legitimacy of mistreatment conditions schadenfreude's nature (Kuipers, 2014; Spears & Leach, 2004). That is, beyond the primary appraisal associated with self-interested goal facilitation that induces initial schadenfreude, observers secondarily appraise whether victims bear some responsibility for and therefore deserve the treatment they received (Feather, 1999; Folger & Cropanzano, 2001; Lazarus, 1991). Observers can accomplish secondary appraisal through implicit or explicit means (Ellard & Skarlicki, 2002; Feather, 1999).

Implicit processing. In implicit information processing, cognitive heuristics or shortcuts leverage experience and social learning to expedite judgments (Ellard & Skarlicki, 2002). As with primary appraisals, implicit processing tends to be automatic, with little or no cognitive elaboration. Implicit processing is inherently biased toward confirming existing beliefs and reaching specific conclusions, often resulting in the underestimation of situational influences (Barclay, Bashshur, & Fortin, 2017; Ellard & Skarlicki, 2002). In line with this, we propose that belief in a just world and identification with perpetrators drive observers to implicitly blame victims because of the activation of justice and relational concerns (respectively).

Belief in a just world. In past research scholars established that individuals who believe that people get what they deserve are more inclined to attribute others' outcomes to internal reasons (Lerner, 1980). Those who believe in a just world have a sense of order and security about life and fairness and therefore become anxious when innocent parties are mistreated because it challenges their beliefs about reality. If they can assume that the victims themselves are responsible for their pain, they are reassured that the world is just (Lerner, 1980). Thus, to reduce aversive feelings resulting from injustice, they may rationalize mistreatment by derogating victims and affirming that victims deserved their pain, even when evidence of victim responsibility is lacking (Ellard & Skarlicki, 2002; Lerner, 1980; Skarlicki & Turner, 2014).

Proposition 2a: Observers who hold stronger beliefs in a just world are more inclined to blame victims and appraise the mistreatment as deserved.

Identification with the perpetrator. To maintain and enhance feelings of self-worth or social esteem, employees are motivated to become legitimate and respected social group members (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Because of intergroup biases, people tend to favor ingroup members in ambiguous situations (Brewer, 1999). Moreover, to avoid threatening their social identities, they will make external attributions for acts of injustice committed by ingroup members (Chaikin & Darley, 1973; Ellard & Skarlicki, 2002). Therefore, after an instance of mistreatment, they are likely to support an ingroup perpetrator and attribute responsibility to the victim, thus perceiving the victim as deserving of harm. Indeed, layoff survivors who have higher organizational identification tend to assign blame to those who lost their jobs rather than to the organization (Brockner & Greenberg, 1990).

Proposition 2b: Observers who have stronger identification with the perpetrator are more inclined to blame victims and appraise the mistreatment as deserved.

Explicit processing. Through explicit processing, observers investigate causes of interpersonal mistreatment and assign blame in a rational, effortful, and controlled mode (Ellard & Skarlicki, 2002). Specifically, observers weigh victims' behavior in light of the mistreatment received, and their judgments of responsibility are less affected by the desire to reach a specific conclusion (Barclay et al., 2017; Feather, 1999). For example, they will ascribe justice to positive outcomes following positive actions or negative outcomes following negative actions. Thus, witnesses who know of a victim's past misbehavior may appraise mistreatment as deserved. When firsthand information about a victim's character or past deeds is lacking, they may draw on others' perspective or knowledge (Barclay et al., 2017).

Victim misconduct. Observers may explicitly and rationally link the mistreatment of a victim with the victim's past misdeeds, such as poor work performance, absenteeism, or deviant behavior (Ellard & Skarlicki, 2002). When this occurs, observers may regard mistreatment as appropriate punishment that restores conditions of justice (Felson, 2004; Trevino, 1992) and, thus, appraise it as deserved.

However, observers will also incorporate information on intentionality and controllability of victim misconduct—whether victims intended to act badly and could have controlled the conditions preceding their misbehavior—into their appraisals of responsibility (Trevino, 1992). Perceivers consider intentional misconduct more severe because it breaks the social order and may recur (Miller & Vidmar, 1981). When misconduct appears intentional and controllable, observers are more likely to assign responsibility to the actor and appraise punishment as deserved (Trevino, 1992). For example, peers tend to reject low performers who are capable but lack motivation (Jackson & LePine, 2003). In this case observers may perceive that low performers deserve such rejection. Conversely, if misconduct is deemed to be unintentional or beyond personal control, observers are less likely to support punishment because they view the misconduct as arising from situational constraints rather than disregard of norms (Utne & Kidd, 1980).

> *Proposition 2c: Observers who know of victim misconduct, especially intentional and controllable misconduct, are more likely to blame victims and appraise the mistreatment as deserved.*

Other observers' appraisals. Observers often lack detailed background information and must rely on others' accounts, such as when they learn about incidents of mistreatment through the grapevine (Skarlicki & Kulik, 2005). Social information processing theory explains that cues from the immediate social environment affect beliefs (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). Thus, as

observers exchange information about events and discuss the reputations of involved parties, they provide one another with contextual cues for interpreting events and attributing responsibility (Latane & Darley, 1970; Skarlicki & Kulik, 2005). Ultimately, their judgments are based on a socially constructed reality (DeGoey, 2000).

Deservingness judgments can be contagious because information seeking and sharing may be mutually validating and reinforcing (Darley & Latane, 1968; Lamertz, 2002; Lind, Kray, & Thompson, 1998; Skarlicki & Kulik, 2005). Thus, we propose that responsibility attributions are susceptible to social influences and victim responsibility attributions may largely reflect the views of others.

Proposition 2d: Observers are more inclined to blame victims and appraise the mistreatment as deserved when other observers also blame victims.

Emergent schadenfreude: Righteous or ambivalent. Appraisal theorists maintain that later appraisals calibrate earlier feelings (Lazarus, 1991; Scherer, 1984, 2001). In our dynamic process model, deservingness appraisal adjusts initial schadenfreude. Specifically, when observers appraise mistreatment as deserved, their schadenfreude is intensified because restoration of justice induces pleasure (Feather, 2014). Indeed, neuroscience indicates that the brain's reward circuits are activated when individuals witness deserved punishment (de Quervain et al., 2004; Singer et al., 2006). In addition, deserved mistreatment justifies schadenfreude, allowing observers to believe that their pleasure transcends self-interest. Thus, when observers deem mistreatment deserved, initial schadenfreude becomes stronger and takes on a moral quality as *righteous schadenfreude* (Kuipers, 2014).

However, when observers find that victims are innocent or that mistreatment is disproportionate to victims' wrongdoing, they may question the morality of their pleasure (Spears & Leach, 2004). Thus, initial schadenfreude is tempered by legitimacy concerns, and

observers may feel emotions of self-reproach, such as embarrassment, guilt, and shame, for failing to live up to moral ideals and for valuing self-interests over morality. Therefore, when observers perceive mistreatment as somewhat undeserved, malicious joy lacks social legitimacy and initial schadenfreude manifests as *ambivalent schadenfreude*.

> *Proposition 3a: When observers appraise victim mistreatment as deserved, initial schadenfreude gives rise to righteous schadenfreude.*
>
> *Proposition 3b: When observers appraise victim mistreatment as undeserved, initial schadenfreude gives rise to ambivalent schadenfreude.*

Observers' Behavioral Reactions to Schadenfreude

Having discussed the appraisal process underlying the emergence and development of schadenfreude, and the factors shaping appraisals, we now address implications for behavior. Emotional states generate emotional expressions, with stronger emotions eliciting greater exuberance (Ekman & Friesen, 1969; Elfenbein, 2007). However, people are careful in how they express counternormative emotions such as schadenfreude (Butler & Gross, 2004). More generally, social emotions influence how a perceiver "approaches, interacts, and engages with the target (i.e., helps, cooperates, antagonizes, or avoids)" (Blader et al., 2010: 33). We address the emotional displays of schadenfreude and the implications of schadenfreude for interpersonal behaviors such as active and passive mistreatment and avoidance.

Emotional displays. Emotional display norms prescribe and regulate emotional expressions, and people comply with them by expressing socially appropriate emotions and not displaying inappropriate emotions (Butler & Gross, 2004). Although schadenfreude has a counternormative quality, we argue that perceivers expect stronger moral or social proscriptions against feeling and expressing ambivalent schadenfreude than against feeling and expressing righteous schadenfreude. This is because with appraisals that victims deserve mistreatment,

observers may justify their expressions of righteous pleasure as celebrating the restoration of justice instead of fulfilling personal interest, rendering this pleasure free of guilt. In contrast, feelings of guilt, shame, embarrassment, and an awareness of others' moral disapproval may accompany the displays of ambivalent schadenfreude. Thus, observers may withhold their expressions of joy to contain aversive feelings and avoid damaging their social image. Taken together, we theorize that observers will express righteous schadenfreude and suppress the improper joy of ambivalent schadenfreude.

Proposition 4: Observers who feel righteous (ambivalent) schadenfreude will express (suppress) the pleasure.

Mistreatment. From a functionalist perspective, emotions emerge as a consequence of progress in goal pursuit and evoke action tendencies that facilitate goal attainment (Frijda, 1986, 1988; Levenson, 1999). Within the sphere of social relations, schadenfreude differentiates and distances the self from others and prepares individuals for goal-directed actions that may entail further harm to victims (Fischer & Manstead, 2016). In support of this, the findings of functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) studies associate schadenfreude with activation of the ventral striatum (Takahashi et al., 2009), an area of the brain responsible for learning stimulus-reward associations and acquiring representations of predicted reward value (O'Doherty, 2004). Thus, for observers of interpersonal mistreatment, schadenfreude that surfaces knowledge of the linkage between mistreatment and personal gain may provide the impetus for further infliction of harm. However, whereas ambivalent schadenfreude elicits only passive mistreatment, righteous schadenfreude propels observers toward both active and passive mistreatment. The two forms of mistreatment differ in that active mistreatment involves agentic behaviors to harm the target through hostile treatment, such as negative social attention, rude comments, and interference

with work, whereas passive mistreatment entails acts of omission and disengagement, such as withholding help, support, and resources (Buss, 1961; Neuman & Baron, 2005).

Active mistreatment. In the case of righteous schadenfreude, observers appraise the victim's mistreatment as deserved and the perpetrator's actions as justified. Especially when observed mistreatment is not commensurate with past misdeeds, justification of the perpetrator's behavior provides license for others to also mistreat the victim. Under these conditions, observers may display active mistreatment through overt hostility, abuse, and undermining.

The dynamics of social justification that lead to active mistreatment suggest potential for social contagion and collective action. That is, when observers appraise initial acts of mistreatment as appropriate and join in, a "bandwagon effect" occurs in which collective action facilitates new forms of mistreatment, including mobbing and gossip. We focus specifically on gossip—an indirect form of active mistreatment—as an example of collective action.

Workplace gossip is "informal and evaluative talk in an organization, usually among no more than a few individuals, about another member of that organization who is not present" (Kurland & Pelled, 2000: 429). Negative gossip often discloses norm violations and damages reputations (Brady, Brown, & Liang, 2017). We associate righteous schadenfreude with negative gossip for two reasons. First, gossip may reinforce observers' perceptions of goal attainment as they replay victims' misfortunes and reaffirm victims' inferiority (Fine & Rosnow, 1978; Suls, 1977; Wert & Salovey, 2004). Ruminating and retelling the accounts may remind observers of the benefits from others' pain, thus prolonging their pleasure. Second, when people regard mistreatment as deserved, gossiping is a way to spread the information that it is a just world where wrongdoers get punishment. In functionalist terms, gossip may reinforce collective values and deter future misconduct (Dasborough & Harvey, 2017).

Proposition 5: Observers who feel righteous schadenfreude will further mistreat the target of this emotion through active means.

Passive mistreatment. Passive mistreatment implies harm through inaction—for example, through withholding assistance and valuable information from victims (Buss, 1961; Neuman & Baron, 2005). Relative to active mistreatment, it seems mundane, innocuous, less detrimental, and more acceptable. However, it causes even greater psychological harm (O'Reilly, Robinson, Berdahl, & Banki, 2015). Because few organizations have policies or sanctions against passive mistreatment, such behavior can occur with impunity. Furthermore, inaction is difficult to discern and plausibly deniable (Jensen, Patel, & Raver, 2014).

As the judgment that victims deserve mistreatment justifies further punishment, we predict that righteous schadenfreude provides impetus for not only active mistreatment but also passive mistreatment. In contrast, ambivalent schadenfreude will evoke fear of social repercussions from active mistreatment, so passive mistreatment is a functionally equivalent behavior that observers can perform with impunity.

Proposition 6: Observers who feel righteous or ambivalent schadenfreude will further mistreat the target of this emotion through passive means.

Avoidance. Since the joy in ambivalent schadenfreude results from others' unjustified expense, observers may feel accompanied negative emotions such as guilt, shame, anxiety, and embarrassment. To reduce such aversive feelings and to save face, observers may choose to socially distance themselves from victims. Social avoidance is a form of emotion-based coping (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010) in which observers avoid interaction with victims by working around them and finding alternative sources for information or resources that victims could provide (Nifadkar, Tsui, & Ashforth, 2012; Zapf & Gross, 2001).

Proposition 7: Observers who feel ambivalent schadenfreude will avoid the target of this

emotion.

Moral and Normative Regulation of Behavioral Responses

Righteous schadenfreude and ambivalent schadenfreude generate action tendencies that

have strong moral overtones. Drawing on moral foundations theory (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek,

2009) and the emerging scholarship on organizational climate (e.g., Clark & Walsh, 2016), we

theorize that observers' internally held moral standards and the normative expectations for

workplace behavior may either constrain or intensify behavioral responses to schadenfreude

(Jones, 1991; Trevino, 1986).

Moral foundations. In recent research in the fields of management (Brown & Mitchell,

2010; Weaver, Reynolds & Brown, 2014) and social psychology (Graham et al., 2009; Graham

et al., 2011) scholars have identified two distinct sets of moral concern that govern moral

behavior. One foundation is characterized by *individualizing values* that speak to the

community's duty to treat each person with care and fairness; the other foundation is group

focused, characterized by the *binding values* of loyalty, purity, and respect for authority that hold

communities together (Graham et al., 2009; Graham et al., 2011). Our contention is that the

extent to which observers subscribe to binding and individualizing values will moderate the

effects of righteous or ambivalent schadenfreude on observer behavior.

For observers who hold individualizing values, the moral imperative is to treat every

person with care and fairness. Thus, these observers will consider it inappropriate to express

schadenfreude and further mistreat or avoid a victim, irrespective of whether the mistreatment

already meted out was deserved (Greenbaum, Mawritz, Mayer, & Priesemuth, 2013). Moreover,

because concern for justice entails respect for due process (Silver & Silver, 2017) and a

preference for rehabilitating and restoring those who fall out of line (Brubacher, 2014), taking

justice into one's own hands through unilateral action is unacceptable for these observers.

In practical terms, individualizing values raise the moral bar for behavior and, thus,

dampen the associations of schadenfreude with emotional expression and antisocial behavior. In

support of this, Mitchell and colleagues (2015) found that in response to supervisory

mistreatment of a coworker, observer contentment was positively related to reported exclusion of

the coworker, but only for observers who had low endorsement of values such as care,

compassion, kindness, and fairness.

> *Proposition 8: For observers with stronger individualizing values, (a) righteous*
> *schadenfreude will be less strongly associated with emotion expression, active*
> *mistreatment, and passive mistreatment, and (b) ambivalent schadenfreude will be more*
> *strongly associated with emotion suppression and less strongly associated with passive*
> *mistreatment and avoidance.*

For people who hold binding values, the duties of group loyalty, purity, and respect for

authority are paramount (Graham et al., 2009). These people appreciate the security and tradition

that group membership affords (McCusker, 2016). When strongly held binding values take

priority over individualizing values, employees feel obligated to protect their groups and

organizations and are more willing to harm individuals when it furthers collective interests

(Hannah, Jennings, Bluhm, Peng & Schaubroeck, 2014; Teo & Chan-Serafin, 2013).

Thus, whereas individualizing values prescribe consistency in treating people with justice

and care, binding values suggest differential treatment to individuals, contingent on how they

affect group interests (Graham et al., 2009; Graham et al., 2011; Niemi & Young, 2016). In this

regard, the context of righteous schadenfreude is particularly salient for observers with binding

values. With the appraisal that victims deserve mistreatment, observers may judge victims

harshly since they already forfeited their rights as group members through prior misdeeds that may have harmed the group or brought dishonor or impurity to it. In this case observers who hold binding values may laud the perpetrator of mistreatment for responsible service to the group and may demonstrate the strength of their group loyalty not only through authentic expressions of joy but also by joining together with others in dispensing further mistreatment.

Proposition 9: For observers with stronger binding values, righteous schadenfreude will be more strongly associated with emotion expression, active mistreatment, and passive mistreatment.

Organizational civility climate. Through organizational socialization processes, employees internalize central organizational values regarding acceptable and prohibited behaviors (Schneider & Reichers, 1983). Thus, we argue that organizational civility climate conditions observers' behavioral reactions to schadenfreude. With strong civility climates, organizations prescribe courteous and respectful behavior, discourage social avoidance, prohibit mistreatment, and sanction perpetrators of mistreatment (Clark & Walsh, 2016). Therefore, observers are more likely to suppress their expressions of righteous and ambivalent schadenfreude and less likely to act on the schadenfreude-driven impulse to instigate mistreatment or show social avoidance.

In contrast, organizations with weak civility climates lack the resolve and means to deter mistreatment and social disengagement. Sometimes such organizations even have norms that promote rather than constrain misbehavior. When observers in these organizations feel schadenfreude, they are less likely to self-regulate their behaviors or feel moral condemnation.

Proposition 10: For observers in organizations with stronger civility climates, (a) righteous schadenfreude will be less strongly associated with emotion expression, active mistreatment, and passive mistreatment, and (b) ambivalent schadenfreude will be more

strongly associated with emotion suppression and less strongly associated with passive

mistreatment and avoidance.

DISCUSSION

William James (1890) mused that humans have two souls: one sociable and helpful and the other jealous and antagonistic. Researchers have argued that observers of interpersonal mistreatment tend to be sociable souls who empathize with targets, but they have failed to consider the incongruent, counternormative emotions of the antagonistic soul. To better understand this understudied darker side, we focus on observer schadenfreude as a prototypical and prevalent response. Our work advances research by establishing the conditions under which schadenfreude emerges and is transformed into righteous or ambivalent schadenfreude, the behavioral implications of schadenfreude, and the moderating effects of moral foundations and normative pressures. Our conceptual approach allows us to explain and predict behaviors that established models of observer behavior do not account for, and it offers a practical perspective on the persistence of individual and collective forms of workplace interpersonal mistreatment.

Implications for Theory

Our conceptual framework has substantive implications for scholarship on observer reactions to interpersonal mistreatment. First, we call attention to schadenfreude—an unsympathetic observer emotion that is incongruent with victim emotions. According to principles of deontic justice, moral accountability should cause observers to feel compassion for victims and to take steps to help them (Atkins & Parker, 2012; O'Reilly & Aquino, 2011). Although we acknowledge the potential for empathic observer responding, we caution that exclusion of a broader set of self-interested responses would be untenable and oversimplify the reality of interpersonal relations in organizations. This is because work environments are contested terrain and employees are self-interested parties with legitimate goals for enhancement

of social esteem and self-esteem. We predict that for observers who are in competition with or envy victims, and for those who see victims as outgroup members, learning of a victim's mistreatment will be a favorable stimulus that induces positive feelings.

Second, through the lens of appraisal theory, we provide a rich new perspective on the episodic nature of observer schadenfreude. Within our model, observers experience initial schadenfreude as a surge of positive emotion because of personal gain from victims' pain. This initial emotion has an automatic quality, because ego involvement primes attention to relevant circumstances and refined cognitive schemas allow observers to see the implications for personal benefit quickly. However, primary appraisal dynamics provide only the starting point for episodic schadenfreude, and feelings become nuanced as a result of the more deliberative secondary appraisal of responsibility and deservingness. That is, whereas schadenfreude takes on a righteous quality when observers appraise mistreatment as deserved, it takes on a more muted quality as an ambivalent emotion when observers view the mistreatment as unwarranted. Importantly, our work highlights the complex and dynamic nature of schadenfreude, and it points to the important role of observer attributions in the evolution of schadenfreude. Our perspective on the episodic quality of emotional experience is aligned with Kahneman's (2011) explanation of the fast and slow systems that jointly guide judgment and decision-making. However, whereas Kahneman boiled down the essentials to *thinking fast and slow*, we speak of *feeling fast and slow*.

Third, our work significantly broadens research on observers' behavioral responses to interpersonal mistreatment by challenging normative expectations for observer behavior. In contrast to research indicating that observers are motivated to actively sanction perpetrators and support victims, we show that observers have the potential for further active or passive mistreatment. We also suggest that active mistreatment is a unique consequence of righteous

schadenfreude, because observers who feel righteous schadenfreude regard active mistreatment as a defensible means to restore justice, whereas those who feel ambivalent schadenfreude may have concerns about plausible deniability and choose passive mistreatment and avoidance as strategic means to avoid the associated self-reproach.

Fourth, in modeling the antisocial behavioral consequences of schadenfreude, we see the potential for scholarship on observer reactions to address important issues that have to date, confounded workplace mistreatment researchers. If acts of mistreatment rouse observer anger and injustice appraisals (O'Reilly & Aquino, 2011), why do observers fail to intervene? And why do we see collective mistreatment, such as mobbing, gossip, and social ostracism? From our perspective, it is not uncommon for observers to appraise mistreatment in a positive light and feel joy. Furthermore, when observers respond with schadenfreude, they may not only side with and accord higher status to the initial perpetrators of mistreatment who brought about this joy but also become coinstigators. Through this process, mistreatment becomes contagious and spawns collective action. Thus, our conceptual work points to the potential for observers to reinforce rather than reverse the dynamics of workplace mistreatment.

Finally, in drawing attention to the role of binding and individualizing moral foundations (Graham et al., 2009; Graham et al., 2011), we challenge the view that moral elevation necessarily contains the proclivity to harm others (Mitchell et al., 2015). That is, although observers who hold individualizing moral values are less likely to inflict harm as a response to schadenfreude, observers who subscribe to binding moral values are more likely to express their pleasure and further mistreat victims when they feel righteous schadenfreude.

Directions for Future Research

Our conceptual work provides a starting point for research on observer schadenfreude, and we see the potential for further development of our model. First, the factors evoking primary

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and secondary appraisal are representative rather than exhaustive. For instance, witnesses are likely to consider the warmth and competence of victims, judging those who are competent but lacking warmth (i.e., competent jerks) as most deserving of mistreatment (Casciaro & Lobo, 2005, 2008). Also, the role of leaders merits further attention, because leaders provide particularly salient cues regarding appropriate behavior. The social learning perspective on aggression (Bandura, 1978) suggests that observers may perceive coworker mistreatment as more justified when leaders often display interpersonal injustice.

Second, regarding boundary conditions for the effects of schadenfreude on behavior, we have considered both individualizing and binding moral foundations at the individual-level but have addressed civility climate as an undifferentiated construct at the group-level. Just as individuals may embrace individualizing and binding moral foundations, work environments may vary in their collective endorsement of these values. Thus, research should address the moderating effects of binding and individualizing values as both individual- and organization-level moral foundations.

Third, we acknowledge the importance of examining schadenfreude's downstream consequences. For example, researchers should consider the adverse effects of suppressing the joy of ambivalent schadenfreude for observers' well-being. Although observers may effectively align their emotional expressions with established display rules by suppression, their inner feelings still remain (Kalokerinos, Greenaway, & Denson, 2015). Thus, suppressing emotions can evoke distressful emotional dissonance and feelings of inauthenticity (Grandey, 2000; Gross & John, 2003). Future research should also address whether gossip in response to righteous schadenfreude has prosocial effects, such as enhancing ingroup solidarity or preventing future norm violations.

Implications for Practice

As interpersonal mistreatment in organizations continues to increase (Porath & Pearson, 2013), managers and employees need to realize that if schadenfreude becomes pervasive, mistreatment could become normative. Thus, we offer suggestions for managers to reduce schadenfreude and prevent negative spirals of mistreatment.

Organizations should reduce structural, interpersonal, and intergroup tensions that cause initial schadenfreude. First, to counter the competition that generates schadenfreude, organizations should promote cooperation through shared visions and team-based incentives (Gomez-Mejia & Franco-Santos, 2015; Wong, Tjosvold, & Yu, 2005). Second, because envy is associated with schadenfreude, organizations should encourage practices that reduce envy. Managers should be aware that deservingness is a key determinant of emotional reactions to upward comparisons—that is, whereas undeserved advantages incur envy and resentment, deserved advantages elicit benign responses (van de Ven, Zeelenberg, & Pieters, 2012). Thus, procedural justice and distributive justice are essential for preventing high achievers from being targets of envy. Third, managers should promote inclusive climates to reduce intergroup tension (Marcus-Newhall, Miller, Holtz, & Brewer, 1993; Nishii, 2013).

Furthermore, managers should bear in mind that judgments of whether mistreatment is deserved are subject to attribution error, intergroup bias, and social influence. Therefore, we advise organizations to investigate incidents of mistreatment with a focus on establishing whether injustice was involved. For example, managers could provide observers with facts about transgressions and emphasize their inappropriateness to preempt the conclusion that a victim's mistreatment is deserved. Moreover, since deservingness judgments are socially constructed and close observers may share perceptions, managers should pay close attention to the views of opinion leaders within social groups. Even when a victim has provoked mistreatment, managers

should avert spirals of mistreatment through prudent intervention and an emphasis on forgiveness (Fehr & Gelfand, 2012).

Conclusion

We extend theory and research on observer reactions to workplace mistreatment by addressing the emergence, development, and consequences of schadenfreude, an incongruent social emotion. As much as we might wish that people would respond to workplace mistreatment with empathy and care, we also recognize the importance of theorizing about human nature as it is. We hope our conceptual work motivates organizational scholars to give systematic attention to counternormative emotions such as schadenfreude. Even Immanuel Kant, a scholar better known for his discourses on deontic justice and individuals' rights to just and caring treatment, embraced schadenfreude as appropriate in particular situations:

> If someone who likes to vex and disturb peace-loving people finally gets a sound thrashing for one of his provocations, this is certainly an ill, yet everyone would approve of it and take it as good in itself (1999/1788: 189).

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FIGURE 1

A Theoretical Model of Third-Party Observer Schadenfreude
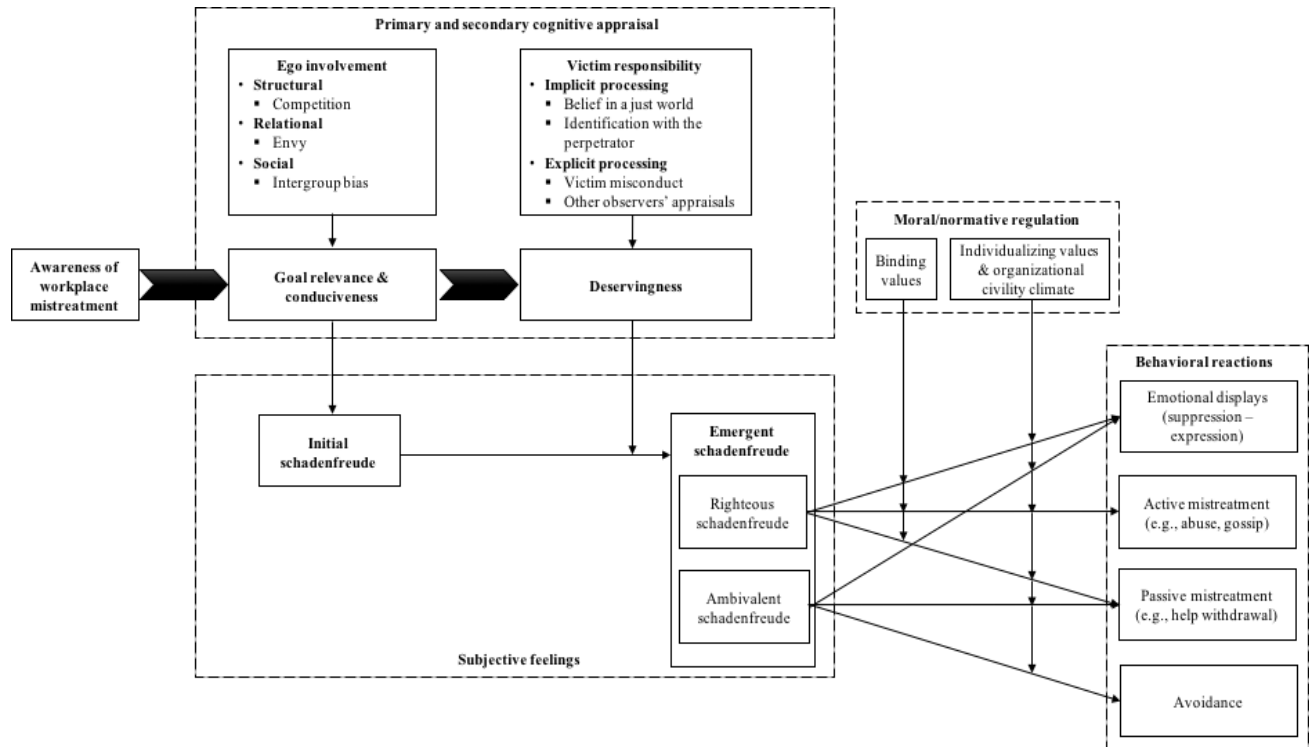
Note: The block arrows represent processes instead of causality.

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