



Ripples of contempt: aversive responses to others (mis)fortunes

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Abstract

In this short commentary we argue that feelings of contempt play a major role in schadenfreude (joy in the misfortunes of others) and “reverse schadenfreude”—gluckschmerz (sadness at the fortunes of others). We used 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, especially from the political partisan polarization literature have shown that the investigated sentiments share many of their important characteristics, suggesting a possible relationship in the form of higher level of contempt possibly triggering a higher level of schadenfreude and gluckschmerz.

Keywords Schadenfreude · Gluckschmerz · Contempt

Introduction

Negativity is common in social rhetoric, but its origins and effects are variable. Schadenfreude and gluckschmerz (hereafter S&G) are widely regarded as interconnected aversive sentiments (Cikara et al., 2014; Hornik, Satchi, & Rachamim, 2019). Existing scholarly articles reveal confusion concerning the fundamental nature of the two. Smith and van Dijk (2018) laid out a novel analysis that inspired rejoinders and comments by Roseman and Steele (2018) and Hess (2018), concerning the debate on the underlying emotions of these two fascinating sentiments in human relations. van Dijk and Smith (2019), for example, 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, leading them to

ask whether they should be considered distinct emotion (p. 263). Many studies on schadenfreude involve emotions as antecedents of schadenfreude, including envy (e.g., van Dijk et al., 2006), and resentment (e.g., Feather, 2012; Hornik et al., 2015). Less research has focused on other-condemning emotions such as anger (e.g., Hareli & Weiner, 2002), and especially contempt as possible elicitors of S&G. Like S&G, similar questions have been raised concerning the emotional foundations of contempt (Gervais & Fessler, 2017). Contempt like S&G has been suggested to be difficult to define in concrete and easily accessible terms (Haidt & Keltner, 1999). In this commentary we offer a (partial) answer to the above proposition. We argue that contempt and S&G are linked and share many characteristics/features. In particular, our political illustration and literature review suggest that contempt may be considered as an antecedent to S&G. Therefore, this study uses a qualitative mixed-mode comparative analysis (Vogt et al., 2014) to delineate the many commonalities between contempt and S&G and summarizes the relevant empirical literature that advances our claim. We have investigated several theories and conducted a comprehensive literature review to identify determinants of negative emotions and aversive responses. These studies have provided qualitative support for our proposition that there are major links and possible antecedent relationships between contempt and S&G.

S&G are interrelated (Hoogland et al., 2015) social reactions to (un)fortunate events. As a phenomenon, S&G are potent, negative social forces that have been implicated

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in accounts of rivalry in sports, politics, and management (e.g., Sundie et al., 2009) to name a few. There is widespread agreement that the two are *atypical* and negative social reactions. For example, Heider (1958) regarded S&G as unique types of emotional *discordance*. Cikara et al. (2014) described the two as *complementary* emotions, which comprise a case of *empathy bias* as well as *ambivalent emotions*. Smith and van Dijk (2018) regarded the two as passive but *improper emotions* as well as *hostile feelings*. Massin (2018) saw them as *malicious pleasure/displeasure*, while Gervais and Fessler (2017) even suggested that they are “emotional pluripotent”. All these led Johnson (2019) to 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 et al. (2019) 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), while *gluckschmerz* is defined as how bad people 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.

Events	Social Emotions	
	Positive	Negative
Positive	For example, joy, respect, pride, etc.	Gluckschmerz (malicious sadness) e.g., hostility
Negative	Schadenfreude (malicious joy) e.g., hostility	For example, sadness, anger, fear, etc.

What is so atypical about S&G is that the experience of both is subjectively positive or socially undesirable, but the observable expression of pleasure or displeasure is negative (Hornik, 2018; Hornik et al., 2019). This might also explain why the two are seldom accounted for by commonly used frameworks of emotions, including the Ekman basic emotions framework, and also are not part of the standard terms of most languages (van Dijk & Smith, 2019). Indeed, it seems that there is wide agreement that S&G are complex social phenomena (Hess et al., 2018) that might take part in situations of a blend or mix of feelings (Larsen & McGraw, 2011).

Contempt is regarded as a functional combination of attitudes and emotions (Bell, 2013; Gervais & Fessler, 2017) towards negative morals or traits of others. 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 conceptualized as the absence of respect to others (Gervais & Fessler, 2017). Contempt generally follows from appraisal of others’ deficiencies. Feeling contempt toward another entity leads to an atrophy of feelings (Russell, 1991). Like S&G, the concept of contempt can include contradictory facets like, positive “liking” or negative “sadness” (Bell, 2013; Wagner, 2000) and might occasionally take part in a blend or mix of feelings (Larsen & McGraw, 2011). Ekman and Friesen (1986) provided empirical evidence that contempt can be identified by a unique facial expression in the form of a unilateral raise in the lip corner—a sneer.

Indirect evidence

There is some indirect evidence in the literature on a possible link between contempt and S&G. For example, Rudolph, Schulz and Tscharktschiew (2013) used Hierarchical Cluster Analyses to analyze differences and similarities between moral emotions across eight variables. Results provided indications of similar patterns for 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. Similarly, a downward contrastive social comparison by Gervais and Fessler (2017) linked non-sympathetic responses like emotions of contempt and S&G. Scherer and Moors (2019) also showed a relatively high contempt result for an individual towards a friend he overheard taking part in an unpleasant conversation (high emotion episode) about the individual. In an unrelated study manipulating high emotions episodes Hornik (2019) found high S&G reactions using scenarios similar to those employed by Scherer and Moors (2019). These results also explain why, for example, there is joy over misfortune after feelings of contempt, as the motivational goal of contempt is to hurt the disliked other. If a misfortune befalls the rival this motivational goal is satisfied, triggering positive feelings (i.e., *schadenfreude*). Hence, it is reasonable to suggest a link between contempt and S&G possibly in the form of a higher level of contempt triggering a higher level of S&G (antecedent relationships). In other words, given that contempt emerges during events in which individuals believe that another entity is a rival, it is reasonable to assume that when the same entity is afflicted by a (mis)fortune, the individual will experience S&G. This strong linkage is well documented in the following comparative analyses, while the section on the behavioral responses to issues related to political rivalries provide theoretical evidence that more contempt leads to more S&G. In other words, in addition to

the comparative analysis, which is designed to show common characteristics between the three constructs, the political field is used as an illustration for our main proposition that higher levels of contempt might trigger higher levels of S&G.

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. Since social emotions such as contempt and S&G are predominantly experienced in social situations and involve social comparison, it is most likely that they involve common characteristics. To test our propositions, we employed several commonly used and recommended qualitative mixed comparative method (DeLeeuw, 2018; Vogt et al., 2014). The major goal of our comparative analysis was to accumulate and generalize results across studies in order to identify the current state of knowledge on the three substantive matters in order to identify areas of common characteristics and social functions. To ensure extensive and complete coverage we performed a two-stage comprehensive literature search. First, we searched electronic databases (*EBSCO*, *Science Direct*, *Emerald*, *ABI/INFORM*, *PsysINFO*, and our social sciences library search engine), using keywords such as “contempt”, “schadenfreude”, “gluckschmerz”, and “malicious envy”. We manually reviewed leading journals of social and behavioral research (e.g., *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*; *Emotion Review*). We further consulted the references of major research summaries on S&G. In addition, we searched the Social Science Citation Index and Google Scholar for articles referring to these summaries. Also, we searched the Internet (e.g., Google Scholar, SSRN database, key authors’ web pages) to retrieve unpublished work. We searched abstracts from annual meetings and conferences separately because they are not included in any of the electronic databases. There were no language or study design restrictions. The search strategy was adjusted for the syntax appropriate for each database. Second, we used the selected publications (listed in the “Appendix” as references to Table 1) to identify terms that capture concepts associated with both contempt and S&G in articles published from database inception to the date of the search (June 2020).

Results

Based on the analytical approach of phase 2 and component analysis (Scherer & Moors, 2019) we were able to detect components 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 1.

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 *competitive* (rivalry) situations following a *passive* and *moral* appraisal ((un)deservingness) of entities, in the form of “*looking down*” at them. All these will lead to *counter-empathic* and negative *social* sentiments towards entities with whom one does not have a relationship and over whose behavior one has *no control*. 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 highly 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.

Employing a component analysis approach that higher commonalities among components of different emotions indicate similarities among emotions (Scherer & Moors, 2019), 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 to the extent found between S&G and contempt.

Contempt and S&G in politics

In recent years, emotions have become widely recognized as important factors in voting and other political issues, especially during increased partisan polarization. Emotions toward candidates have been found to be more important determinants of voting than perceptions of the candidates’ traits (e.g., Abelson et al., 1982). S&G and contempt are constructs often manifested in political science. Evoking feelings of contempt toward an opposing candidate have been found relevant during candidate evaluations, negative advertising, and electoral outcomes (e.g., Combs et al., 2009; Peterson & Kagalwala, 2021). Nai and Otto (2021) suggested that a key purpose of many negative campaign ads may be to hold an opponent in contempt, not just to make voters feel anxious or angry, but to make them dismissive of the opponent. Peterson and Kagalwala (2021) showed that partisans hold aversive feelings, unfavorable views, inter-party animosity, and contempt for media they associate with the other party. In a different stream of studies, S&G were found as prominent negative responses during electoral campaigns and political discourse. For example, Webster, Glynn and Motta (2021) documented that some people experience what they term, “partisan schadenfreude” towards the opposing political party. Even though political scientists have been studying contempt and S&G independently and indirectly, empirical results suggest that the affective and behavioral outcomes are similar. Therefore, Fridkin and Kenney (2011)

speak of the importance of measuring contempt along with other affective responses like S&G while conducting surveys aimed at understanding and predicting voting.

In summary, as U.S. politics become more divisive, and social media are used to shame and denigrate targeted politicians, contempt and S&G can increasingly explain peoples' political behavior. A consensus has emerged that Americans are polarized along an affective dimension. Thus, regardless of whether citizens are ideologically polarized or moderate in their views, political scientists largely agree that party members increasingly dislike each other and express feelings of contempt to opposing (rival) parties and candidates. Independently, a growing body of work has shown that partisans tend to "take joy in negative information" about partisan others" (Nai & Otto, 2021). These separate findings may result from complexities in conceptualizing and measuring the clusters of emotion variables, especially aversive feelings and reactions (Brader & Marcus, 2013, p. 179). Given the increasing antagonism between political members, *schadenfreude* (Crysel & Webster, 2018) as well as contempt (Mattes et al., 2018), are especially relevant to understanding reactions to news about opposing political parties. The various arguments imply that exposure to good or bad news concerning the other party is the basis for oppositional hostility and contempt that frequently breeds S&G. Thus, S&G appear to be natural responses in contempt situations. More formally, political rivalry clearly suggests that more contempt leads to more S&G.

Notably, the recent literature strongly suggests that like S&G contempt cannot be regarded as a basic emotion because they do not meet the three criteria proposed by Levenson (2011): distinctness, hard-wiredness, and functionality. These three criteria have only been found in six emotions (enjoyment, anger, disgust, fear, surprise, sadness). Following Gervais and Fessler (2017), 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 (Hess et al., 2018). 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.

Summary

Several potentially consequences of contempt can be found in the literature. Surprisingly, S&G are not among the important results of contempt. Three qualitative studies supported the idea that contempt is associated with more intense S&G. First, indirect evidence from the relevant literature provides some initial information about the relationships between contempt and S&G. Second, the qualitative comparative approach provides evidence of a strong conceptual link between contempt and S&G. Third, the political illustration reveals not only significant shared characteristics between contempt and S&G,

but also evidence that contempt is most likely an antecedent to S&G. As illustrated, individuals are most likely to experience S&G toward a rival political party when they feel contempt, in addition to ideology. Thus, people who first feel contempt towards another disliked or rival entity, when receiving information indicating that the entity experienced a (mis)fortune, might develop S&G sentiments towards the entity. 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 the (mis)fortune of an entity. Like S&G, in the feeling of contempt, there is an element of condescension and a feeling of superiority to another entity, whether that entity is above the person socially or professionally or not. The present approach, which indicates that higher contempt promotes more S&G, implies that when a person tends to take (dis)pleasure in the (mis)fortunes of a rival entity, this (dis)pleasure follows disrespect feelings towards the entity. This effect is independent of other known antecedents of S&G, such as perceived (un)deservedness of the other's (mis)fortunes, perceived rivalry, and disliking of the other (Feather, 2012).

Our approach is within the more recent movement in emotion research, and is a move from a discrete emotion approach to an emotion process with an emphasis on the determinants or mechanisms underlying the unfolding of events involving emotions. S&G and contempt share the most salient and relevant comparative characteristics of negative social sentiments. The approach adopted in this commentary identifying the key characteristics of contempt and S&G along the political illustration, seems to provide support for our proposition that S&G share many of their features with contempt. Our results also suggest that contempt might have a strong positive influence on S&G. It is quite possible that contempt and S&G might even constitute a blend or mixture of sentiments which are very common among social negative sentiments (Keltner et al., 2019).

Much empirical attention has been devoted to studying the relationships between malicious envy and S&G (e.g., Lang et al., 2018). 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. Advances in emotion-related physiology and the mammalian precursors of the investigated sentiments might provide deeper insights into these issues across different emotional episodes.

Appendix

See Table 1.

Table 1 Supporting literature for common features of S&G and contempt⁽¹⁾

Features	S&G: Supporting references ⁽²⁾	Contempt: Supporting references ⁽²⁾
Social evaluation	A4, A42, A46, A15, A16, A57	B14, A27
Entity appraisal: outgroup	A5, A8, A20, A37, A40	B11, B13
Moral appraisal	A1, A12, A17, A21, A62	B7, B12, B16, B26, B20, B21
Competitive situation	A22, A24, A35, A42, A60	B5, B12
Dislike of entity/negative disposition	A37, A46, A50	B4, B14, B15, B33, B36, B37
Negative sentiments	A25, A29, A53	B2, B3, B6, B11
Counter empathy (“Cold”)	A7, A8, A26, A50	B12, B29
“Looking down” at entity	A37, A38, A42, A46	B4, B20, B33, B34
Appraisal: No control on target's Behavior	A5, A39	B11, B22, B23
Action tendency: leads to hate speech	A11, A32, A61	B5, B32, B37
Action tendency: leads to negative WOM	A20, A44	B2, B5, B36
Follows emotion evoking events	A12, A18, A31, A63	B5, B16, A18, B38
Pluripotent emotions/sentiments	B12, A40	B12
Co-occurs with other negative emotions	A3, A36, A37, A42, A33, A48	B7, B8, B10, B38
Linked to same personality traits	A2, A22, A58, A59, A63	B5, B34, B35

(1) Partially based on ASE (attitude–scenario–emotion) and includes Gervais and Fessler (2017) eight component features. (2) Examples only

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S&G

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