

Tall poppies, deservingness and schadenfreude

Norman Feather outlines his research journey

How people react to positive or negative outcomes in their lives or in the lives of others depends on a complex array of variables. This article focuses on some of these variables, especially a person's status along dimensions of achievement and self-worth, and whether positive or negative outcomes are perceived to be deserved or undeserved.

How do emotional reactions to outcomes, especially schadenfreude or pleasure in another's misfortune, relate to these status variables? And what is the influence of perceived deservingness?

question

To what extent do schadenfreude and deservingness depend on the context in which the other person fails (e.g. sport, politics, work, entertainment, school)?

resources

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Have you ever rejoiced, secretly or even publicly, when someone in a high position has experienced a fall from grace? Perhaps an important politician was caught out in a foolish act, or a high-profile business leader demoted or dismissed because of some misdemeanor, or a celebrity in the entertainment industry suffered a sudden decline in popularity. These people are called 'tall poppies' and the common belief is that we may feel a certain amount of satisfaction when tall poppies are cut down to size and suffer a major reverse in status.

Here, I want to describe the progress of a research programme I initiated at Flinders University more than 20 years ago, and where it has led me to. Research findings often take one in new directions in ways that might not have been predicted at the outset of the research programme. So I tell my tale with that narrative structure, starting from the early studies on tall poppies, and moving through to studies that focus more on deservingness and the emotions, with an emphasis on schadenfreude.

The early research

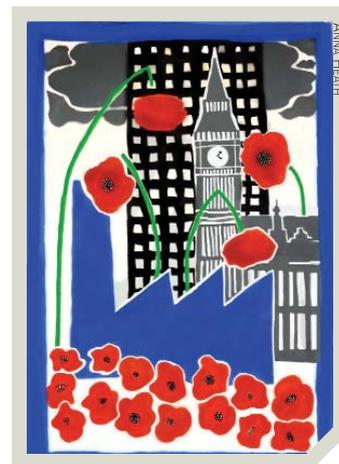
The early studies on tall poppies (e.g. Feather, 1994,

1996) fell into three main groups: (1) experimental studies that used hypothetical scenarios; (2) studies of real-life tall poppies in Australia who suffered a fall; and (3) correlational studies that used a Tall Poppy Scale that I constructed, which measured dispositions to favour the fall of tall poppies in general or to favour their reward. So I was able to assemble a large database that used different procedures.

One study (Feather, 1989) used a hypothetical scenario in which either a high or average achiever was caught cheating during an examination. The results showed that the participants reported feeling more pleased when the high achiever (or tall poppy) was caught cheating when compared with the average achiever, and also more pleased when the high achiever was punished by being expelled. The high achiever was also perceived to deserve the penalty more. Pleasure or schadenfreude about being detected and expelled was positively related to perceived deservingness.

A second example relates to some of the correlates of the 'favour fall' variable

from the Tall Poppy Scale. Those favouring the fall of tall poppies tended to be lower in global self-esteem and lower in power and achievement values. They also tended to judge the tall poppy as more deserving of the fall and they set a higher value on equality. They were more left-wing in their political orientation and they also reported more schadenfreude or pleasure about the



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fall. At the cultural level, Japanese students had higher favour fall attitudes and American students scored higher on favouring the reward of tall poppies when compared with Australian students, reflecting differences in cultural values.

This sampling of results from the early studies suggests new areas of research that concern how people react to status differences, whether these differences be achieved or ascribed.

Perceived deservingness

One variable that emerged consistently in this early research was perceived deservingness. To what extent did the tall poppy deserve his or her high status? During the 1990s this variable featured in many studies from my research programme, including studies of how people react to penalties for offences and how they react to another person's success or failure in an achievement context, such as an important examination. This interest in perceived deservingness led me into new areas concerned with the social psychology of justice. It also led me to think about how deservingness could be conceptualised using a psychological analysis (see Feather, 1999).

I proposed that deservingness related to an instrumental sequence in which either positive or negative actions led to either positive or negative outcomes. A positive outcome that followed a positive action would be perceived to be deserved. So would a negative outcome that followed a negative action. In both of these cases, the outcome is consistent or in balance with the action that produced it. In contrast, an outcome would be perceived as undeserved when the relation is inconsistent or unbalanced. You can think of examples that fit these four possibilities. A student who worked hard and achieved a high grade would be judged to deserve that grade. A business person who engaged in shady practices would be judged not to deserve moving up the corporate ladder.

This kind of analysis can be applied to

both other-related outcomes and self-related outcomes when conceptualising deservingness. Whether actions and outcomes were evaluated as positive or negative was assumed to depend on a person's needs and values and on the social norms that were dominant in the situation. In my early discussions, I drew upon Lewin's (1938) analysis of the valence of events and outcomes and focused more on the effect of a person's needs and values on how actions and their outcomes were evaluated. Later, I also emphasised the role of social norms as variables that influenced whether actions and their outcomes were perceived as positive and appropriate or negative and inappropriate. I further assumed in my analysis that degree of deservingness would be influenced by other variables such as like/dislike and ingroup/outgroup relations in the case of another person, and by positive or negative self-evaluation in the case of self. The analysis assumed a framework of personal causation where other or self was perceived to be responsible for the action and its outcome.

I ended up with a model that included different sets of relations (attitudinal and unit) in structures that differed in the degree to which they were balanced or unbalanced. Using Heider's (1958) principle of balance, an example of a completely balanced structure would be one where a liked ingroup member was responsible for a positive action that led to a positive outcome. The positive outcome would be judged to be deserved. So would a negative outcome that followed a negative action performed by a disliked outgroup member. Other structures would involve some degree of imbalance and, in those cases, outcomes would be judged as less deserved or undeserved.

I further distinguished deservingness from entitlement, the latter concept referring to outcomes that were linked to rights, regulations and other legal or quasi-legal principles rather than to outcomes that were deserved or undeserved on the basis of a person's actions. This distinction is also accepted by many legal theorists

and moral philosophers. The distinction between deservingness and entitlement presents a fertile area for interesting and socially relevant research (e.g. in research on affirmative action and in research on welfare dependence) (see Feather, 2003, 2008b).

The structural model of deservingness was not tied exclusively to tall poppies. It was a model that I assumed would apply generally, independent of a person's status. It contributes to the social psychology of justice, dealing with a system of relations assumed to underlie judgements of deservingness and undeservingness.

Deservingness and discrete emotions

Over the past few years I conducted a number of studies that tested hypotheses that were related to the structural model. Over time, my research findings led me to question how the different emotions that people report experiencing might be related to how they judge deservingness either for another person or for self. How do emotions such as pride, guilt, resentment, sympathy, disappointment and schadenfreude relate to the perceived deservingness or undeservingness of an outcome?

Surprisingly, I found that there was little in the research literature on discrete emotions that linked these emotions with justice-related variables such as deservingness and entitlement. Some emotion theorists had referred to variables such as norm-compatibility and perceived legitimacy as influences on the way situations were appraised (e.g. Roseman et al., 1996; Scherer, 1984) In motivation theory, Weiner (1986, 1995) had investigated associations between different emotions, causal attributions and judgements of responsibility. But the link between discrete emotions and perceived deservingness remained to be explored.

My analysis considered several discrete emotions that might be experienced by self or by other in relation to deserved or undeserved positive or negative outcomes.

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tall poppies

So I wanted to take in perspective effects in the analysis. Would the discrete emotions relating to perceived deservingness differ depending on whether they applied to self or to another person? Some emotions like guilt and regret apply more to self; other emotions like sympathy and resentment apply more to the other person.

The initial statement of the model (Feather, 2006) proposed links between emotions and deservingness to show, for example, that pleasure and pride for self are assumed to occur when self experiences a deserved positive outcome; disappointment when self experiences an undeserved negative outcome; anger and resentment when other experiences an undeserved positive outcome or when self experiences an undeserved negative outcome; guilt and regret when negative actions are performed by self; and sympathy when another's negative outcome is perceived to be undeserved. This is a strong model, but it is testable.

Schadenfreude

Here I want to focus on schadenfreude, or pleasure in another's misfortune. I propose that people experience this emotion when another person's negative outcome is judged to be deserved. So, for example, we would experience a degree of schadenfreude when a student cheats in an essay or examination and is found out and punished. We would feel happy when a dishonest trader or business person is caught out and punished for their dishonest actions, or when a candidate vying for promotion in an organisation is passed over because their performance on the job was not deemed to be up to standard.

Our pleasure would vary depending on the degree of perceived deservingness and on the other variables that I have described – like/dislike, ingroup/outgroup, perceived responsibility. So we would report more schadenfreude the more the other person was perceived to deserve the negative outcome or punishment, the less we liked the other person, the more the

other person was perceived as an outgroup member, and the more responsible they were seen to be for the negative action and its negative outcome. They received their just deserts and we feel pleased about that outcome.

The results of numerous studies from my research programme support this analysis. For example, in one study (Feather & Sherman, 2002) we presented hypothetical scenarios in which a stimulus person who was a student either worked hard or put in little effort when studying and received either high or average grades. In terms of my analysis, we would expect these grades to be judged as more undeserved following low effort than following high effort and that the outcome would elicit some degree of resentment towards the person in the low effort condition who obtained those grades. That is what we found, more so for the high achiever.

Subsequently, the stimulus person in the scenario was described as failing an important examination. We found in a path analysis that deserving the high or average grades was a negative predictor of both resentment and a wish to cut down or denigrate (i.e. less deserving predicted more resentment and more denigration of the high or average achiever). These two variables were positive predictors of schadenfreude or feelings of pleasure about the student's subsequent failure. So was a measure of the degree to which participants in the study perceived the student in the scenario as deserving the fail



Feelings of pleasure about another person's negative outcome relate to how much that negative outcome is seen to be deserved

grade that he or she obtained, consistent with the analysis that I have presented. Envy of the stimulus person in the scenario did not predict schadenfreude. Follow-up studies using similar procedures replicated these results (Feather, 2008a; Feather & Nairn, 2005). The results of other studies from my research programme, concerned with how people react to penalties for offences, are also consistent with my analysis (Feather, 1998).

Thus, there is strong and compelling evidence that feelings of pleasure about another person's negative outcome relate to how much that negative outcome is seen to be deserved. Schadenfreude is stronger when the other person suffers a deserved negative outcome, like getting a low grade, missing out on a promotion, or being punished for a crime he or she committed. The evidence also shows that some degree of anger and resentment is often part of the process when, in achievement contexts, a person is perceived as undeserving of their higher status on the ladder of achievement. Deservingness emerges as a key variable and findings from other studies from my research programme, also show that it has an important role in relation to other emotions, such as pride, guilt, regret,

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sympathy, and disappointment (Feather et al., 2011).

The research programme is continuing, and in the future we hope to include deservingness as a variable in the analysis of other topics such as forgiveness. Deservingness along with entitlement are central justice-related variables that feature in all walks of life that include achievement outcomes in schools and organisations, interpersonal relationships and political life to name a few. These variables are also involved in the different types of emotions that people report experiencing, as I have argued.

Other analyses of schadenfreude

I have taken you on a journey that began with research on tall poppies and then led to a conceptual analysis of deservingness, to a model concerned with relationships between deservingness and discrete emotions, and to a focus on schadenfreude in some of the later studies. It would be difficult to predict this sequence of events at the beginning. Curiosity and persistence leads one in new directions in research.

I want to focus now on how my analysis of schadenfreude relates to some other analyses that have been presented. For example, Richard Smith and his colleagues at the University of Kentucky have investigated the role of envy as a determinant of schadenfreude (Smith et al., 2009). Envy can take different forms. It can be benign when we admire someone who has achieved deserved high status along a dimension of comparison that we deem important for self. It can be hostile when it is blended with anger and resentment about the other's undeserved higher status.

From my point of view, envy would feature as a variable in schadenfreude when it is aligned with anger and resentment. Feelings of anger and resentment associated with a perceived injustice transform envy into the hostile kind. We found that those negative emotions were important in studies from my research programme. Envy did not predict schadenfreude, but resentment about another's undeserved status was an important variable. Hostile envy incorporates resentment. Benign envy is more likely to be associated with admiration, a positive emotion relating to other's deserved high status. It would lead to sympathy rather than to schadenfreude when the high-status achiever fails in some way (Feather et al., in press).

Another analysis by Leach and Spears (2008) relates schadenfreude at the group level to the pain of ingroup inferiority.

These researchers draw on ideas from the philosopher Nietzsche (1887/1967), to propose that '...the emotional pain individuals feel about their in-group's inferiority leads them to feel the pleasure of schadenfreude when a successful out-group fails' (p.1383).

A different but related view comes from van Dijk and his colleagues in the Netherlands (van Dijk et al., 2011). They argue that striving for a positive self-evaluation is an important motive for schadenfreude. The fall of a high achiever may help the less fortunate feel better about themselves. Recall that I found that favouring the fall of tall poppies and, by implication schadenfreude, was greater among those with lower self-esteem. In my view, the pain of inferiority would be linked to low self-evaluation and it may have its effects via resentment about one's own lower status, and resentment about the higher status of the other, especially if the status is perceived as undeserved. I have recent research findings to back that up (Feather et al., in press)

Moving outside the deservingness model

Finally, are there instances of schadenfreude that fall outside the deservingness model where schadenfreude is related to the other person's deserved negative outcome? Do people sometimes experience schadenfreude even when a negative outcome is perceived to be undeserved? There are certainly situations where people experience transient pleasure at another's undeserved misfortune, as, for example, when the other makes an accidental and unexpected error that may also generate momentary laughter. Consider weekly TV offerings such as *You've Been Framed* that present mishaps, some of them rather painful, on home video. However, these negative outcomes are usually outside of personal causality where intentions come into play and they may be attributed to external circumstances beyond the person's control or to bad luck. In that sense, they would be perceived as undeserved in my analysis and not part of personal causation. As the misfortune becomes more serious (e.g. the person broke a leg after slipping on a banana skin) the emotion would likely change from schadenfreude to sympathy.

We need more research on this sort of transient pleasure that may sometimes occur when we observe someone else's undeserved misfortune. When does it turn to sympathy and compassion? When is it malicious? Does it relate to negative outcomes that elicit surprise because they

are unexpected (see Feather et al., 2011)? Does relief follow when the other person narrowly avoids an undeserved misfortune and expectations about the potential negative consequences are therefore not confirmed (Feather, 1963; Sweeny & Vohs, in press)? Do minor misfortunes sometimes make the other person appear more human, balancing out the 'goods' and the 'bads' in life?

Some philosophers (e.g. Kristjánsson, 2006) propose that schadenfreude occurs not when another person's negative outcome is perceived to be deserved but when it is perceived to be undeserved. That is why it has a malicious flavour. The pleasure can't be justified when someone else suffers. So there are differences in the way schadenfreude is defined and conceptualised. As should now be abundantly clear, my interest is in the sort of pleasure that follows another's deserved negative outcome within a framework that implies personal causation.

A final question concerns the direction of relations between deservingness and schadenfreude. In my analysis the appraisal of deservingness is an important condition for the experience of schadenfreude. But one could argue that the relation goes in the opposite direction. That is, that we experience the immediate pleasure about other's negative outcome and then rationalise or justify this pleasure by claiming that the negative outcome was deserved.

It is probably the case that causality can go in either direction, consistent with the argument that relations between cognition and emotion are reciprocal so that affect can also have an effect on deservingness judgements (Feather, 1999, 2006). I have found that in some of my studies (e.g. Feather & Johnstone, 2001). However, the main focus in my research has been on the effects of deservingness on subsequent affect and discrete emotions. But both are intertwined and difficult to separate.

So research throws up new ideas and leads us in new directions. That has been my experience over many years and it is very evident in the journey from tall poppies, through the analysis of deservingness and entitlement, and into the realms of justice and the emotions.



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