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Schadenfreude And April's Fools: The Prerequisites Of Malicious Glee

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Shame and Laughter

According to Karasev (1996), shame is the «negative modus» of laughter. Shame and laughter both overcome us involuntarily and intermittently. It is as hard to control an outburst of shame as it is to stop a laughing fit. But shame and laughter occupy two opposite poles: Shame reflects an emotional state of inferiority, whereas laughter is a powerful signal indicating feelings of superiority. The cramps of severe shame are implosive and «covered up». On the other hand, the spasms of laughter burst out like explosions, expressing a bodily-experienced supremacy mixed with relish and self-affirmation.

Shame is, without a doubt, a painful self-conscious emotion. It signifies indignity, defeat, and inferiority. Scheff and Retzinger (2000) compared guilt and shame as follows: «In guilt, one is angry at oneself, but one also feels powerful: powerful enough to have hurt another, and perhaps powerful enough to make amends. In this way, guilt can serve as a mask for shame, which is a *feeling of weakness* to the point of impotence or powerlessness. There are many words that can be used as substitutes for shame [...]: feeling insecure, blank, anxious, ridiculous, foolish, silly, stupid, or absurd are some examples.»

Shame arises when the individual is not sufficiently esteemed by his or her social partners. Ashamed individuals feel degraded and disparaged by their social peers. Therefore, they are evaluating themselves as *less worthy* in comparison to others. The need to compare oneself to others is phylogenetically quite old, and biologically very powerful. When individuals unfavorably compare themselves to others who are seen as more successful, they will

undergo a shaming self-devaluation coupled with feelings of inferiority and perceiving oneself as an object of ridicule.

To sum it up, laughter is accompanied by elevating emotions that trigger an «upward psychological spiral» going, whereas shame is accompanied with depressing feelings that trigger a «downward psychological spiral».

Social Comparisons as a Source of Inferiority Feelings

When a person undergoes inferiority feelings, this simply means that he or she considers him- or herself to be low in comparison with others. Over a century ago, psychiatrist Pierre Janet has coined the term «sentiment d'incomplétude» (feeling of incompleteness). The famous psychiatrist Ernst Kretschmer (1952) described the same type of emotions as follows: «The inferiority feeling results from the individual's speculation about how others would judge him or how he is assessing himself in regard to common moral or performance-related standards. All acts of self-assessment are, by principle, dependent upon relating oneself to fellow human beings. Therefore, comparison is the original source of the feeling of inferiority.»

An important compensatory means for coping with inferiority feelings is to set up a scenario that involves a *downward comparison*: In order to feel superior, the individual in question therefore looks for someone else who is timid, easily embarrassed and insecure, and who's conduct is comparatively inferior. This self-enhancing downward comparison usually produces malicious amusement and mirth and may be accompanied by gloating laughter. The ancient theories of comedy reflect this dynamic. In Plato's (1993) «Philebus», the failures, sufferings and humiliations endured by others are perceived to be the primary source for hearty laughter. In his «Poetics», Aristotle (1970) declares that the actors in comedies are generally perceived to be in a worse or lower position than the average spectator.

Social Comparison Theory

Social Comparison Theory was formulated in 1954 by Leon Festinger. According to this theory, humans have an inclination for continuous self-evaluation. Therefore, any comparison with others has a direct influence on self-esteem. A discouraging *upward comparison* occurs when one compares oneself to someone who is better off (Baumeister, 2008). An amateur swimmer comparing his or her lap times to those of an Olympic swimmer is an example of an upward comparison.

A passive (i.e. an «internal») *downward comparison* occurs when one individual compares oneself to someone who is worse off. Comparing one's grade on an exam with fellow students who received lower grades is an example of a passive downward social comparison. This type of comparison generally makes one feel better about oneself (cf. Martin et al., 2001). An *active* downward comparison occurs either through overt derogation or by causing harm to others. Derogation occurs when an individual belittles the target of his or her comparison, with or without that target's knowledge. By actively causing harm to others, individuals can intentionally create situations in which others will be worse off than themselves, thus providing the opportunity to make downward comparisons (Smith, 2000; Wills, 1981).

Derogatory Laughing in Active Downward Comparisons

Laughing at people who are perceived as inferiors is an essential ingredient of the so-called superiority or disparagement theories (Keith-Spiegel 1972). Such theories state that humor is derived from attaining a feeling of superiority over others who are perceived to be weak, infirm, or ridiculous. Thomas Hobbes (1651, chapter VI) has already stated: «Sudden glory, is the passion which maketh those grimaces called laughter; and is caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleaseth them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves.»

Hobbes affirms that human are engaged in a constant power struggle, and that it should not be surprising that victory goes to the one who laughs. Such laughter is the compensatory means for relieving the unremitting heavy downward pull of the sense of inferiority (cf. Ludovici, 1932, p. 109).

For Stendhal, this type of derogatory laughter is typical for mankind's general psychic activity. The ego feeds upon a multitude of consolations and recompenses: It feeds upon the sorrows of one's fellow man in an unending comparison of self and others (Bishop, 1975, p. 50). In his *Filosofia Nova*, Stendhal (1931, p. 117) writes: «La passion qui exite à rire n'est autre chose qu'une vaine gloire fondée sur la conception subite de quelque excellence qui se trouve en nous par opposition à l'infirmité des autres. » [«The passion that excites one to laugh is nothing but a vain glory founded upon the sudden conception of some excellence in ourselves as opposed to the infirmity of others.»]

Albert Rapp (1949) theorized that ridicule was the first and only form of laughter for a lengthy period of human history. The caveman laughed at the

physical misfortunes of others, as they foretold of a coming victory in battle. Subsequently, intentional mockery began to supplant the battle, and probably became one of the ways in which the defeated could take revenge.

The great and diverse world of derogatory laughter continued its unbroken cycle from the ancient world through to the carnivals of the Middle Ages, leading up to the modern April Fool's jokes and hoaxes (Bakhtin 1994; cf. Lachmann et al. 1989). In this context, Ruch and Proyer (2009) coined the term «katagelasticism». Katagelasticists actively seek and establish situations in which they can laugh at others. There is a broad variety of things that katagelasticists would do, starting from harmless pranks to truly embarrassing and even harmful, mean-spirited jokes.

Downward Comparison as a Source of Schadenfreude

When an individual has succeeded in placing a rival in an inferior position, he or she may experience a feeling of malicious joy. The German term «Schadenfreude», which also exists as a loanword in the English language, is used to describe the enjoyment obtained from the misfortunes of others.

Schadenfreude is related to envy, is fed by feelings of inferiority, and operates through a mechanism by which the individual looks for indications of inferiority in others. When one witnesses the misfortunes, the deformities or other forms of weakness of another person, this will inevitably trigger a favorable personal evaluation resulting in a pleasant feeling of superiority, which frequently provokes laughter (Billig, 2005, p. 51f).

Sibling Rivalry as the Psychodynamic Origin of Schadenfreude

Psychodynamically, Schadenfreude is a relic from our childhood and is bound up with sibling rivalry. Imagine a first born child who has been «dethroned» by a younger sibling. This child understandably experiences jealousy and rage as he or she watches the younger sibling being coddled or treated with special care. Evidently, this child is constantly evaluating how he or she is positioned in relation to his or her rival. When the older child realizes that he or she is not entitled to receive the same privileges as the younger child, an upward comparison might arise that makes the child feel ashamed. Therefore, this child becomes strongly motivated to look for an ego-strengthening downward comparison. In a ceaseless quest for social importance and personal acceptance, this child begins to look for downward comparisons that confirm his or her psychological significance and subsequently result in the wicked glee of

Schadenfreude. Cruel and heartless power struggles may arise during this process, in the course of which aggressive mockery and derision are used as effective weapons. In this context, two forms of Schadenfreude can be differentiated.

Type 1: Schadenfreude as an Expression of a Malicious Glee

The older child gloats over the fact that he or she is in a more competent and advantageous position than less competent children (younger siblings, playmates, dull-witted children). In this context, less competent children are interpersonally exposed to being made fun of.

The laughter that arises from this variant of Schadenfreude is, in principle, apt to raise the mocker's self-esteem. Ancient comedy as well as the farces and burlesques of the Middle Ages were specifically aimed at this effect of malicious glee whereby the fool (a forerunner of the modern clown) took the role of the incompetent child and was cast as an object of derision and downward comparison. The modern comedy scene with its mix of show, talk, action and a mocking cynicism offers countless possibilities for experiencing amusing downward comparisons. In post-modern comedy shows, the entertainers perform as virtuoso players on the keyboard of type-1-Schadenfreude.

Similarly, the current fare of television sitcoms with their illustrations of repeated blows of fate are continuously making downward comparisons. Downward comparisons are also at play in «Reality Television» and other shows featuring marginalized individuals. Another well-known example is the comedy-channel's *Comedy Central*, with shows like «Candid Camera», «Pranked TV Show», «Little Britain» or «Crank Yankers».

Type 2: Compensational Schadenfreude

This type of Schadenfreude is specific to the younger and less competent child. When interacting with superior older siblings or playmates, younger children usually lose out and experience themselves to be in the position of inferiority. This generates the younger child's shame and powerless rage. However, such feelings are immediately compensated for when the younger child realizes that the hitherto superior child often comes off the worst. In this instance the proverbial joyous feeling of obtaining ultimate justice will prevail, which ensures social equality and the immediate compensation of prior inferiority feelings.

This type of Schadenfreude is part of humanity's basic psychological equipment and constitutes an important compensatory mechanism for addressing self-esteem problems as in the case when individuals in a low status position witness the fall of a high-status person who was initially perceived as mighty, supercilious, or immoral (cf. Combs et al., 2009). Classic cabaret, as well as the related genres of satire, parody and caricature, also make use of the liberating effect of compensational Schadenfreude. They aim at uncovering weaknesses in the powerful in order to impart the pleasure of equalizing justice upon the audience. This intention is typically used in German *Kabarett*, which must not be confused with the classic American cabaret. Instead, *Kabarett* encompasses the performance of political satire in a theater atmosphere that could be either formal or informal if it is integrated into a night club act. *Kabarett* artists focus almost completely on political and societal topics that they shred to pieces by using irony and sarcasm. In *Kabarett*, the socially powerful are brought into a downward position that enables the audience to experience Schadenfreude.

In this sense, compensational Schadenfreude is a social leveler. It enables the socially inferior person to temporarily experience the joy of superiority in relation to those who are supposed to be in a better social position due to higher social status, better income, physical attractiveness, or high popularity rankings. Last but not least, compensational Schadenfreude provides poetic justice whereby one can comment about the powerful in good conscience: «He or she deserves this thrashing.» For example, we are usually delighted when a thief did not get away with his criminal behavior (Kristjánsson, 2006). Norman Feather (2002) states that this type of Schadenfreude emerges from our sense of fairness. We resent seeing anyone achieving a success that is not deserved. This is especially relevant for underprivileged individuals.

According to a recent study, 79% of Germans aged 14 years or older experience Schadenfreude when a powerful persons has a mishap. 95.1% of the 14-19 year-old population have already experienced Schadenfreude, but only 53.6% of those over 70 years of age report that they are enjoying Schadenfreude. (Representative study of GfK, Nürnberg, 2006)

The April Fool as Seen From the Perspective of Type-1-Schadenfreude

The malicious activities displayed on April Fool's Day (April 1) precisely aim at the ego-strengthening effect of type-1-Schadenfreude. On this occasion, those who want to document their intellectual strength or their cunning and their wit (in short, their superiority) go looking for gullible individuals who can be

fooled and may be intellectually weaker than the originator of an April Fool's hoax. Naïve or less experienced individuals like young apprentices are the ideal objects of malicious glee. This mechanism is grounded upon a successful downward comparison, which asserts: «Despite all my problems, thank God I am not as dumb as the one who has been fooled!»

April Fool's Day

April Fool's Day builds on the self-affirming joy of not being positioned as low in the social hierarchy as the person who is scoffed at. The objects of ridicule here are persons placed in intellectually or socially inferior positions like an inexperienced or gullible child/adolescent who obeys ridiculous «fool orders».

In Germany, young trainees are the prime victims of April fool jokes. Because German companies take on new trainees on April 1, these individuals regularly receive «fool orders» from their older colleagues, which may take hours to execute. For example, on his first day at work one apprentice was sent out to a neighboring division to ask for an aluminum magnet. This department was notified by telephone to tell this apprentice that they had run out of aluminum magnets. The young man was sent once again to another section where he was told the same thing. Thus, this new apprentice was made fun of all day long by the employees of the different departments at the company. Of course, the aluminum magnet was nowhere to be found for the simple reason that there is no such thing as a magnet made of aluminum!

Other unsuspected April fools were instructed to look for digital dimmers, a banknote ironing machine, a concrete magnet, a special soap for diabetics, buckets of compressed air, hammers with adjustable heaviness, a copper magnet, a rectal breathing machine, a vein-spreader, and water powder.

Different Forms of April Pranks

The tradition to make fun of gullible persons on April 1 can be traced back to the introduction of the Gregorian calendar at the end of the 16th Century in Europe when the New Year was moved from April 1 to January 1. Some backwoodsmen, who were not aware of this historic change, continued to celebrate the New Year on the eve of April 1. Therefore, they were made out to be the laughing stocks or the «April Fools» by their more educated contemporaries. The phrase «to send someone into April» was used for the first time in Bavaria in 1618, giving rise to many subsequent pranks. This tradition

was later brought to North America by European immigrants. Here are some classical April pranks:

An unknown 16-years old beauty allegedly wrote a letter to the French king Henri IV asking for a secret rendezvous in a discrete pleasure palace. When King Henri appeared to this tête-à-tête, he was surprisingly welcomed by the assembled court, headed by his wife Maria de Medici. It is reported that she humbly thanked her husband that he had accepted her invitation to the «Fool's Ball.»

In Portugal and the Canaries, a disrespectful sign is attached to the back of the April fool on the pretext of powdering the victim's face.

A particular batter pudding is filled with mustard or chili sauce and offered to the April fool.

The April fool is tripped up with disgusting prank items such as snakes, spiders, or plastic dog feces.

Northern Germany features the «bucksen» tradition: The April fool has to undress his buckses (= trousers) which are supposedly needed to catch some precious animal. The trousers are then held before an opening in the stable through which this animal might slip. In reality, a shovel of dung is thrown through this opening.

In Eastern Prussia, the *buckses* had been used to hunt the fictional «Rosenbock». The April fool was asked to build a special trap with his trousers. While he was busy completing this job, a bucket of water was poured over his head.

The April fool is teased with a tall story in the tradition of the legendary Baron von Münchhausen, or he or she is teased by someone proclaiming: «Yikes, your fly is open», or «Your car has a tire», or «A button is missing on your jacket.»

Hoaxes Reported in the Media

The term «hoax» was used for the first time in 1796. Its origin cannot be clearly traced. But it is assumed that this term is derived from «hocus», which is in turn a shortening form of «hocus pocus». The neologism hocus pocus is probably a corruption of the Latin conversion formula in the Catholic Mass: *Hoc est enim corpus meum* (Because this is my body). As far as content is concerned, hoaxes are identical to many of the typical April pranks.

The first specific hoax has been made public in Germany in 1726 and dealt with the Würzburg scientist Johann Beringer. This complacent university professor stated in his «Lithographia Wirceburgensis» that strange fossils were supposedly discovered in the hills surrounding the Franconian capital. The stones in which the fossils were found contained «petrifications» of copulating frogs, spiders in their webs, bees, flowers, and even alphabetical characters. But the real creators of these «iconolithes» were three students who made the

credulous professor an April Fool. Beringer only became suspicious when they brought him a fossil on which his name had been inscribed.

Another early report about an April Fool's hoax appeared in a German newspaper on 1 April, 1774. In this report, readers were informed about how to breed chickens who could lay different colored eggs. In order to accomplish this, the living environment of each chicken would need to be painted in the desired egg color to be laid by each chicken.

On April 1, 1957, the BBC reported the beginning of «spaghetti harvesting» in Switzerland. A film was shown in which a family appeared for the annual spaghetti harvest. The film showed a woman gently picking the spaghetti while a man put the strips out to dry in the sun. Many viewers fell for this hoax and even wanted to know where they could buy a spaghetti bush!

For decades, news agencies reported on April 1 that the environmental toxin dihydrogen monoxide (H₂O), «a major component of acid rain,» had been found in tumors and nuclear power plants. They warned that when inhaled, this substance would be lethal!

A few years ago, a radio station of the German state of Schleswig-Holstein called upon its listeners to donate water for the North Sea-Baltic Canal, which was allegedly threatening to dry up. Hundreds of willing donors appeared with buckets full of water!

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