HA HA, Schadenfreude! Malicious joy at the earthquake in Van



(https://theanchor9.files.wordpress.com/2011/11/yunus_van_earthquake.jpg)
13 years old boy, Yunus who was caught in the earthquake at an Internet cafe in Van was rescued from the ruins after almost 24 hours, taken by Reuters photo

In psychological science, we describe the 'malicious pleasure' when we see others suffer, with the term 'schadenfreude'. It is defined as the glee of individuals when they see envied others fail. For example, think about a colleague you don't like from the office and imagine them accidentally spilling a drink all over themselves. You see the annoyance on their face and you start giggling, don't you? You may think that this reaction is totally acceptable and nothing is wrong with it. And now you may be asking how this could possibly be relevant to the earthquake of the title? Let's have a look at how it could be

The picture of 13 years old Yunus shown above become a symbol of hope immediately after the destructive 7.1. magnitude earthquake which hit Van in eastern Turkey on Sunday, 23 October 2011 at 13:41 local time. 11,232 buildings sustained damage in the historic Turkish city, 6,017 of which were uninhabitable as a consequence. Up to 60,000 people could have been left homeless. The earthquake was a terrible tragedy for the Kurdish people, however the schadenfreude of some Turkish citizens certainly exacerbated the situation. The people of Van were the target of some blatantly racist comments in the media and social networks. Some Turkish people even took pleasure in sending 'aid packages' to the Kurdish victims, with food and other necessities replaced by Turkish flags and stones.

I am sure the reports of the earthquake caused you great distress. You would assume that the emotions which people mostly felt in response to the earthquake were sadness, pity, fear, worry, affection, empathy, and so on. And you are right! What else could a human being possibly feel in response to this terrible disaster? Let me ask you a question more directly – is it possible that you would feel pleased that the people of Van were suffering? Or would you possible feel happy when you heard about the earthquake in the news while sitting comfortably, watching television and drinking coffee in your safe home? I know you want to say to me that you can't even imagine such a thing. But unfortunately some people did for the people of Van!

The earthquake not only hit the historic east-Turkish city but also hit a city which is densely populated by the minority Kurdish people. There has been intractable conflict between the Kurdish people and the state, which has led to the death of more than 40,000 people since 1984 in the province, the historic city of Van lying at the heart of it. Just one week before the earthquake, the


(https://theanchor9.files.wordpress.com/2011/11/van-earthquake-turkey-26295470-414-300.jpg)
the misery of a women in front of rubble, taken by an unknown photographer

conflict was kept on the boil by the news that 26 soldiers were killed by the PKK, an illegal pro-Kurdish organization. But how is it possible that an individual can politicize this natural disaster which caused the death of many people including children, women, men, the elderly, infants and so on? That was the question that came to mind when I started to read some of the comments on social networking sites. Immediately after news of the earthquake was announced in the media, some people wrote: "I am happy about what happened in Van, now they understand what throwing stones at police forces, killing soldiers, and not paying taxes means" or "I am sorry for only 6 per cent of people in Van" (because the other 94 per cent voted for the BDP, the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party, in the last election in 2011). These comments were appearing on my Facebook wall. It seemed to me that some people I grew up with, even some with whom I was singing at a march for peace and equality in the past, have a strong sense of schadenfreude.

Although schadenfreude is commonly known as a concept relating to the individual, we can talk about the same process for inter-group schadenfreude. Feeling schadenfreude towards people who belong to 'other' groups occurs most strongly when that group represents a threat of status inferiority to your group. This could be an explanation for why some Turkish people may feel glee towards this natural disaster even though they have not made these blatantly racist comments. Increasing schadenfreude may provide then with a psychological benefit by taking revenge on the Kurdish people who are threatening to change the exclusive definition of Turkish citizenship for ethnic Turks. Another element influencing schadenfreude towards other groups is the degree of identification with your own groups. When they feel a strong sense of Turkishness, the schadenfreude towards Kurdish peoples' misfortune might become strongest. Then it may turn into blatantly racist comments and even joking about the consequences of the earthquake. That could also be an explanation for why some of those people even went so far as to send false aid packets to the earthquake's victims. Of course neither interpersonal schadenfreude nor schadenfreude among groups are inevitable psychological processes and emotions for us. We do not have to be slaves to these automatic processes – you can control them by just thinking about how you yourself would feel in this situation and by being a bit more aware of your own schadenfreude in everyday life.

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Further reading:

"Malicious pleasure: Schadenfreude at the suffering of another group" (http://www2.uni-jena.de/svw/igc/studies/ss03/leach_spears_branscombe_doosje_2003.pdf)by Colin Wayne Leach, Russell Spears, Nyla R. Branscombe, and Bertjan Doosje (PDF)

"Stereotypes and Schadenfreude: Affective and Physiological Markers of Pleasure at Outgroup Misfortunes" (http://www.princeton.edu/~mcikara/Cikara2011SPPS.pdf)by Mina Cikara and Susan T. Fiske (PDF)

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