

SCHADENFREUDE: ON THE DISCURSIVE STRUCTURE OF AN EMOTION

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ABSTRACT

Not only in the Arab world was joy expressed in the suffering inflicted on Americans with last year's September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon. Such *Schadenfreude* was expressed by many Chinese citizens as well. This paper analyzes a sample of texts from postings on the Beijing University bulletin board system. Following Rom Harré's discursive approach to social psychological study of emotion, we consider discourse as the means whereby power relations are asserted and maintained. These power relations provide a field within which actions and emotional displays are understood. Based on the texts analyzed here, *Schadenfreude* can be understood as an emotional display by an "observer" of an event. This event must be recognized in terms of a "discursive history" within which a bully (here, the United States) has repeatedly violated the rights of bullied parties. In accordance with this discursive history, the event is "seen" as a reversal in which a traditionally bullied party violates something the bully believes to be its right. Finally, the observer must identify with the bullied party (or, "disidentify" with the bully). As an emotional display, *Schadenfreude* not only comprises the overt performance of the observer's taken-for-granted understanding of the bully-as-bully, but also displaces any potential sympathy other observers may have for any target of such an event. This approach to the analysis of emotions is a fundamental departure from the more essentialist or psycho-physiological conceptions that have been prominent in the literature on the sociology of emotions.