

Schadenfreude in Gaza

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The Washington Post:

Joshua Tucker: The following is a guest post from social psychologists Jay Van Bavel (New York University) and Mina Cikara (Harvard University)

As the Gaza-Israel conflict began escalating last month, there were widely circulated reports that Israeli spectators had gathered on garden chairs and old sofas to cheer as bombs rained down on people living in Gaza just a few miles away. This expression of malicious glee is hardly unique to Israelis; Palestinians have also been seen standing on rooftops and celebrating when Hamas fires rockets at cities in Israel.

Though these displays of schadenfreude — in which people exhibit pleasure at others' pain — often garner widespread condemnation, records indicate they have a long history. According to some accounts, people similarly sat in chairs on hillsides and watched the slaughter unfold during the American Civil War. A poem published in the Boston Herald in 1861 vividly captured the revelry:

Have you heard of the story so lacking in glory,
About the Civilians who went to the fight,
With everything handy, from sandwich to brandy,
To fill their broad stomachs and make them all tight.

There were bulls from our State street, and cattle from Wall street,
And members of Congress, to see the great fun;
Newspaper reporters (some regular shorters)
On a beautiful Sunday went out to Bull Run.

New research in social psychology helps explain these responses and offers one way we can help restore empathy for our enemies.

In a forthcoming paper in the Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, with our colleagues Emile Bruneau and Rebecca Saxe at MIT, we found evidence that this intergroup empathy gap — the tendency not only to empathize less with out-groups but also to feel pleasure in response to their pain — is a consequence of basic group dynamics.

Read the whole story: [*The Washington Post*](#)