

# Delighting in Others' Disaster: Development of Schadenfreude in Middle Childhood

Candace Lapan\*, Janet J. Boseovski\*, Sarah Creech\*, Sarah Mofford\*, and Morgan Jewells<sup>†</sup>

\*The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, <sup>†</sup>Appalachian State University

## Introduction

- Little is known about the development of schadenfreude, which can be defined as the experience of pleasure at another's misfortune.
- Adults report greater schadenfreude toward individuals who receive undeserved privileges, are responsible for their own misfortune, and those who are disliked (Feather & Sherman, 2002).
- Similarly, children experience schadenfreude more frequently toward people whose misfortune resulted from their own negative behavior (Schulz, Rudolph, Tscharaktschiew, & Rudolph, 2013).
- Drawing on findings from the child and adult literatures, we examined whether contextual cues (i.e., privilege, responsibility, and trait information) increased children's experience of schadenfreude relative to a situation in which no contextual information was available.

## Method

- 118 7- to 10-year-olds heard four vignettes about characters whose video game controller broke.
- Baseline experiences of schadenfreude were established with a comparison story (i.e., it contained no contextual information).
- The other three vignettes included privilege (i.e., the character had a vast toy collection relative to peers), responsibility (i.e., the controller broke because the character threw it repeatedly), or trait cues (i.e., the character was described as a mean child who bullied other children).
- Children were asked "How much do you like what happened to [actor]?" and "How much do you like [actor]?" Questions were answered on a 3-point scale (0 = *Not at all*, 1 = *A little*, 2 = *A lot*).



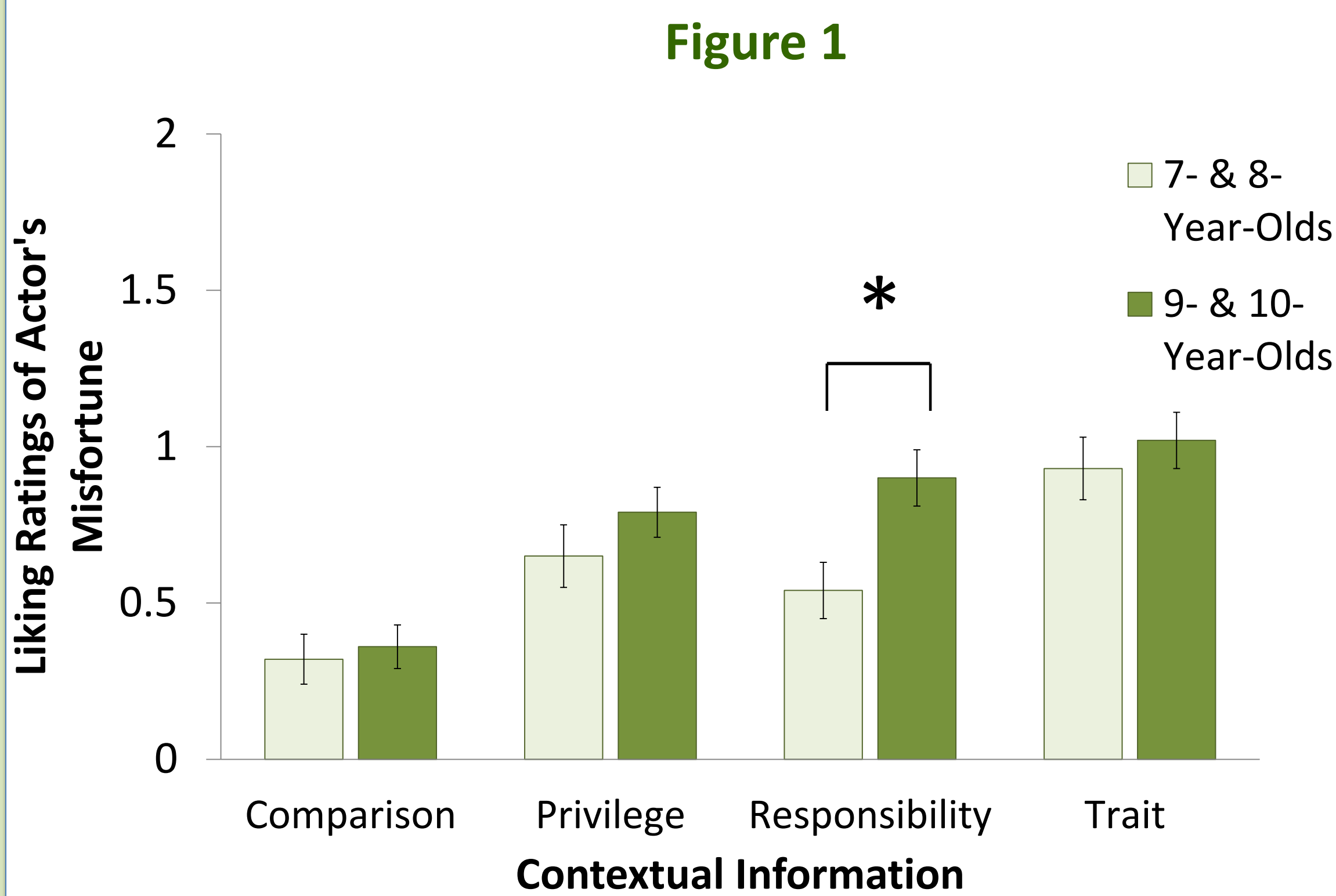
"This is Kelly. She has a wii that she really likes. She can play rock band, bowling, or Mario with it; wiis can do so many things."



"One day, Kelly notices that the wiimote has stopped working and she has no idea why this happened. She is very upset that she can't use the wii any more."

## Results

- A series of 2 (age group: 7- to 8-year-olds and 9- to 10-year-olds; between-subjects) x 2 (gender: male and female; between-subjects) x 4 (story type: comparison, privilege, responsibility, and trait; within-subjects) mixed ANOVAs were conducted on children's liking ratings of the actor's misfortune (i.e., schadenfreude) and their evaluations of the actors.

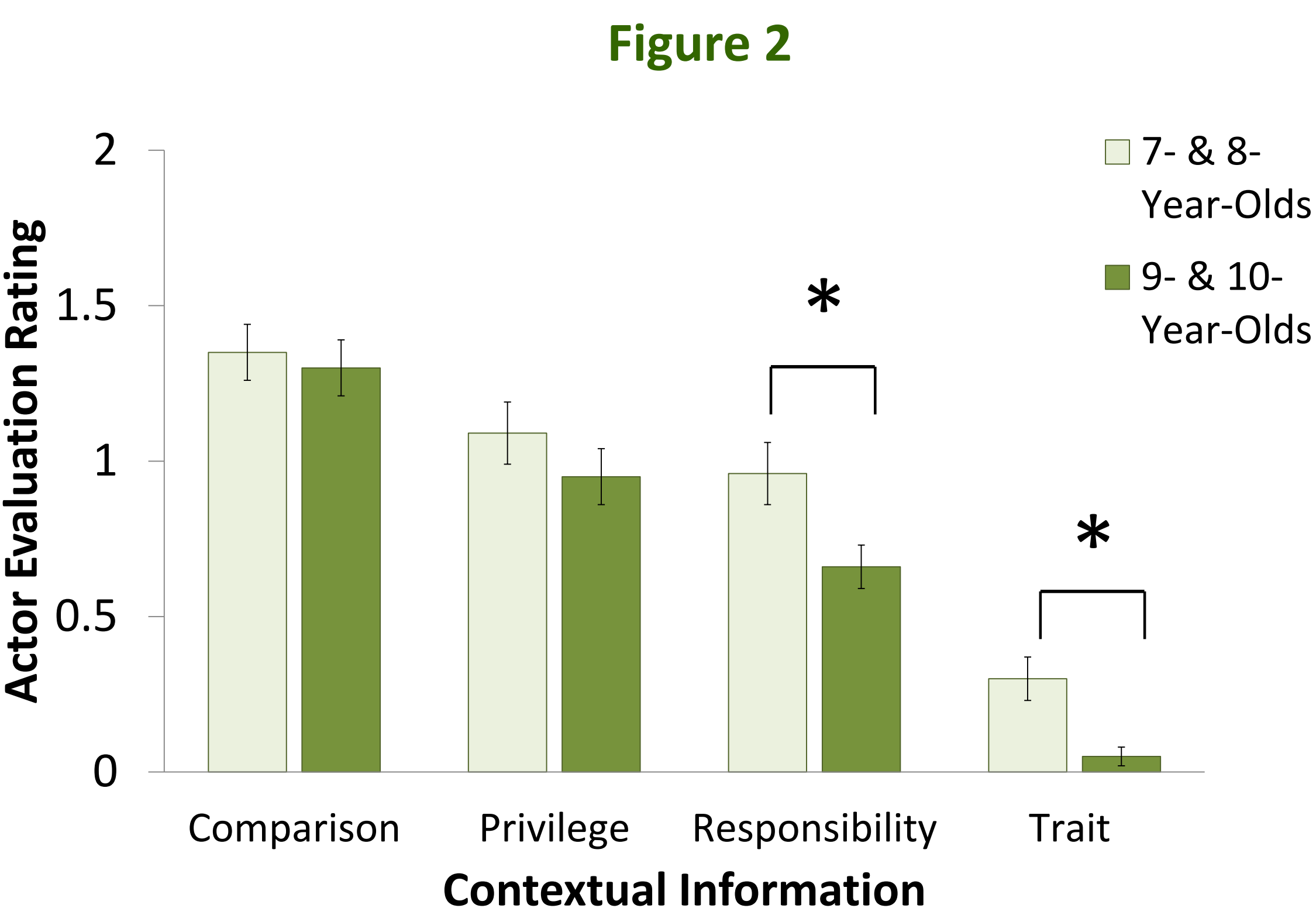


### Schadenfreude

- Older children experienced higher levels of schadenfreude than younger children,  $F(1, 116) = 3.43, p < .05$ . The different stories evoked varying levels of schadenfreude,  $F(3, 348) = 22.60, p < .01$ . Post-hoc paired t-tests indicated that the privilege, responsibility, and trait stories resulted in greater schadenfreude than the comparison story,  $p$ 's  $< .01$ . Further, the trait story resulted in more schadenfreude than the privilege and responsibility stories,  $p$ 's  $< .01$ .
- The interaction between age and story type was not significant, but a difference in children's levels of schadenfreude by age was evident for the responsibility story: older children reported higher levels of schadenfreude than younger children,  $t(116) = -2.76, p < .01$ ; see Figure 1. Conversely, there were no age related differences for any of the other stories,  $p$ 's  $> .10$ .

### Actor Evaluation

- Older children made more negative evaluations of the actor than younger children,  $F(1, 112) = 3.65, p = .06$ . The trait story resulted in the most negative evaluations,  $F(1, 112) = 127.97, p < .01$ . Finally, an interaction between age and story,  $F(1, 112) = 6.42, p < .05$ , indicated that older children provided significantly more negative evaluations of the actor than younger children in the responsibility story,  $t(116) = 2.51, p < .05$ , and the trait story,  $t(115) = 3.10, p < .01$  (see Figure 2). There were no age differences in children's evaluations of any of the other actors,  $p$ 's  $> .10$ .



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GREENSBORO



## Discussion

- By 7 years of age, children are able to integrate contextual cues into their reasoning about others' misfortunes and this ability becomes more refined with age.
- The inclusion of negative trait information resulted in the highest reports of schadenfreude. Unlike in previous research (Schulz et al., 2013), this trait information was unrelated to the misfortune of the individual (i.e., the character's meanness was unrelated to the breakage of the controller) and the label still had a strong influence on children's experience of schadenfreude.
- The potent influence of traits on children's social judgments is consistent with findings that traits serve as stable category labels that children use to interpret and organize social information (Boseovski & Lee, 2006; Gelman & Heyman, 1999) and non-social information (Booth, 2014).
- The age-related changes in children's responses to the responsibility story suggest that, unlike younger children, older children view irresponsible acts as descriptive behaviors rather than reflections of a negative disposition. As children come to view irresponsibility as a trait, this cue may become more influential to their social reasoning.
- It is possible that the privilege information provided to children did not elicit a strong enough emotional response by participants (e.g., envious feelings). Indeed, when children are not emotionally engaged in a situation, inequitable situations are unlikely to influence their experience of schadenfreude (Steinbeis & Singer, 2013).

## References

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