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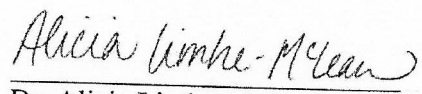
A STREETCAR NAMED ENVY AND AGGRESSION

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY
In partial fulfillment of the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

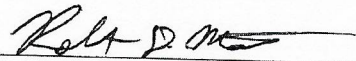
A Streetcar Named Envy and Aggression

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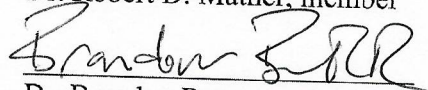
APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY



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Abstract

Envy is a well-known unpleasant emotion that is often characterized by inferiority and resentment and appears when individuals compare themselves to others (Parrott, 1991). Jealousy occurs when individuals fear losing an important relationship whereas envy occurs when a materialistic item is desired (Parrott, 1991/1993). Envy's operational definition in science has been linked to aggression but has provided little to no empirical evidence that envy and aggression are linked. To help better understand the nature of envy, this study aims to examine the link between envy and aggression amongst 108 females. An ANOVA demonstrated that females with the malicious envy prime reported higher levels of aggression than females with a neutral prime (and there were no other significant effects found).

A Streetcar Named Envy and Aggression

Envy is viewed as a negative emotion that is destructive to relationships with others and to individuals' psychological states. The two components that must be present for envy to occur are cognitive appraisal and feeling (Cohen-Charash, 2009). The first component is the cognitive appraisal component and is focused on the negative comparison with the envied person. The cognitive appraisal component focuses on the cognition aspect of the comparison along with their perspective. For example, when teenagers see their friends receive a new car from their parents, they experience thoughts (such as whether they deserve the new car) about the event. The second component is the feeling component about the experience. For example, teenagers may conclude that their friends do not deserve the new car, and now feel angry and hostile to their friends because the cognitive appraisal has determined the cars are undeserved. This comparison examines the envious person's inferior feelings to the envied person and explains that the cause is due to the envious person not having the desired item of the envied person. Previous research has argued that coping strategies need to be formulated to combat this destructive emotion; however, other and newer research has argued that envy may have positive implications. The purpose of this research is to provide information on envy, including definitional, future directions, and implications for the negatively conceived emotion. The ultimate goal of this is to clearly distinguish envy from other emotions and to provide academic evidence to the arguments presented over envy.

Background

One problem that arises when studying envy is the difficulty of providing a strong operational definition for the emotion. The most common definition of envy defines it as an "unpleasant emotion that is often characterized as feeling inferiority, hostility, and resentment

that is produced when awareness of another person has a desired item or position” (Parrott & Smith, 1993, p. 906). However, several arguments have arisen from whether this is a strong operational definition. One reason for this disagreement has to do with envy being connected and grouped with other related emotions, such as shame, jealousy, and admiration (Ortony, Clore, & Collins, 1988; Smith & Kim, 2007). Some of the confusion is semantic, meaning that they stem from confusing the similarities with other emotions (Smith & Kim, 2007). This confusion creates a problem distinguishing the characteristics of envy from other emotions. Scholars argue that people also use the word envy interchangeably when they are experiencing another emotion. For example, it is not uncommon for people to say that they are envious of some success that their friend has recently received. However, this does not mean that envy is the true emotion that is being felt in that instance. The proper emotion could very well be admiration or jealousy depending on several variables such as the amount of aggression and respect felt towards the individual and whether the individual deserves the item being evaluated. Envy also contains many parts – such as benign envy, malicious envy, episodic envy, and dispositional envy – which are all connected but different elements of the complex emotion (Foster, 1972). Malicious and benign envy are compared to one another because they examine the emotional aspect of envy. Dispositional and episodic envy are compared to one another because they examine whether envy is a personality trait or an emotional state (i.e., the stability of the feeling of envy).

Benign envy. Non-malicious envy or benign envy is a nonaggressive emotion that is closely related to admiration (Foster, 1972; Silver & Sabini 1978). Benign envy has been associated with empathy because individuals acknowledge that they would like to be like someone else. Individuals encountering envy may tell the envied person openly that they feel

envious of the desired item (Quintanilla & Jensen de Lopez, 2012). Benign envy is defined as an unpleasant emotion that not only triggers a painful experience but also motivates individuals to improve their situations through hard work. Benign envy is often recognized as the softer side of envy due to its lack of hostility (Parrott, 1991). Accepting benign envy may skew the essence of envy because it differs in the feeling appraisal component of proper envy (Smith & Kim, 2007). This type of envy is also more common in everyday language but is not of interest to the scholarly community. The lack of an unpleasant feeling may antisepticise envy for what it really is as an emotion (Ashwin, 2005).

Individuals experiencing benign envy are less likely to become hostile than individuals experiencing malicious envy because individuals experiencing benign envy feel that the person they envy deserves that item. When individuals believe that the target person deserves the item of interest, they are less likely to be aggressive towards that person (Smith & Kim, 2007). However, even though benign envy lacks hostility, it is still envy because the same frustration and pain is caused by another's success (Foster, 1972). Even though benign envy motivates individuals to improve their situations through comparison to others, benign envy is different from admiration (Van de Ven, Zeelenberg, & Pieters, 2009).

The experience of benign envy is also cross-cultural. For example, the Russian and Czech languages have distinct and separate words for white (benign) and black (malicious) envy (Van de Ven et al., 2009). The Dutch language also distinguishes the two: "benijden" for benign envy and "afgunst" for malicious envy. These languages suggest that the experience of envy (and the distinction of the types) is universal.

Malicious envy. Proper envy or malicious envy is an unpleasant emotion characterized by hostile or aggressive behaviors and occurs when individuals upward compare unfavorably

with others. The uncomfortable psychological state could cause maladaptive behaviors to occur. Envy – in general – is thought of as a destructive emotion that harms the envied person and the envier and should be avoided. Malicious envy is the most common and recognized definition of envy. Malicious envy is an “unpleasant emotion that is often characterized as feeling inferiority, hostility, and resentment that is produced when awareness of another person has a desired item or position” and is characterized mainly by containing hostile actions and or feelings towards the envied person (Parrott, 1993, p. 906). For example, individuals experiencing malicious envy have reported feeling cold and frustrated towards the person with the desired item (Van de Ven et al., 2009). Individuals feeling malicious envy also tend to complain more and tended to be motivated down. That is, rather than trying to “level up” to where the envied individuals were, individuals experiencing malicious envy report wanting the envied individuals to “level down” to where they are.

Envy is often viewed negatively because of its reference in crimes, intergroup conflicts, and literary tales of sabotage and murder (Beck, 1999; Schoeck, 1969; Thernstrom, 1998). For example, several forensic cases have all been influenced by the emotion malicious envy (Schoeck, 1969). Literary tales also utilize malicious envy to progress stories of sabotage and assassination, which can be found in many mystery novels such as *And Then There Were None* and *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (Christie, 1926/1938). Envy has also been seen in several biblical events and writing (Aquaro, 2004). These examples provide a reference for why envy occurs and is viewed negatively, and describes the inferiority experienced by the envying individuals. Understanding these cases and examples proves that this is not a new phenomenon and that inferior feelings are created when the envying individuals have less than those in their social circle (Smith & Kim, 2007).

Correspondingly, individuals' perspective on whether the person with the envied item deserves it can also influence the type of envy experienced. Part of the reason why people experiencing malicious envy may become hostile is their perception that those individuals have not earned the same desired item (Smith & Kim, 2007). When individuals feel like they deserve the material goods more than other individuals, they may experience malicious envy (and the desire for the other individual to "level down" to where they are).

Dispositional and episodic envy. Dispositional and episodic envy also plays a role in the comprehension of envy. Dispositional envy has been defined as a trait being exhibited that causes one to feel negative when individuals do not compare favorably with their comparison (Cohen-Charash, 2009). That is, dispositional envy represents a personality trait rather than an emotional state. People described as having dispositional envy tend to socially compare themselves constantly and perceive themselves as not measuring up with the rest of society and might be described as highly competitive. Competitive people will socially compare themselves to others constantly to understand where they rank with others (Eisenkopf & Teyssier, 2013). If during this social comparison they perceive that they are measuring unfavorably, they may exhibit envy as a personality trait rather than an emotional state.

Envy is more than just a personality trait, however (Schoeck, 1969). Even people who are not predisposed to experience envy may sometimes experience it because of a specific social comparison in which they compare badly to other individuals (Schalin, 1979). Unlike dispositional envy, episodic envy is an emotional state that triggers behavioral responses solely due to an external stimulus rather than traits already experienced by individuals. There are two components to episodic envy (Cohen-Charash, 2009): cognitive appraisal and emotion. These two components must be experienced together, or the emotional experience is not envy. If social

comparison occurs (cognitive appraisal) but the result is not negative (emotion), this is not envy. Similarly, if there is a negative feeling towards an individual but no social comparison, aggression (and then hate) can occur, but it is not envy (Ben-Ze'ev, 2000). In this situation, the emotional responses cannot be interpreted as envy because there was nothing for the individual to desire (i.e., no social comparison or cognitive appraisal).

Viewing individuals negatively before social comparison of desired items could have effects different than envy. Dissociative groups are defined as groups with whom individuals do not want to be associated and whose use of a particular product could potentially deter other buyers (Hammer, 2001). Consumers will avoid products with negative symbolic implications and exhibit negative attitudes toward lifestyles they wish to avoid (Lowrey et al., 2001; Muniz & Hammer, 2001). This behavior occurs in the book *The Outsiders* in which two rival gangs actively avoid each other because they have negative attitudes toward each other, and items favored by one group are actively avoided and seen as lesser by the other group because of their hatred of each other.

Envy and other emotions. Definitions of envy have been convoluted and have caused an overlap with other emotions, making it difficult to distinguish other emotions from envy. However, by understanding the four components of envy, future research can separate similar emotions. One of the emotions that often gets confused with envy is jealousy. The traditional distinction between the two emotions is that envy occurs when a person lacks some superior quality, possession, or achievement and desires the lacked item (Salovey & Rodin, 1984). Jealousy occurs in a more relational context. Jealousy happens when a person fears losing an important relationship to a rival (Hupka, 1991). Unlike jealousy, envy is more likely to motivate individuals to change their situations, either by “leveling up” or “leveling down” (Van de Ven et

al., 2009). Jealousy, however, focuses specifically on a relationship and has a more theft mentality, such as feeling that another person is “stealing” a loved one or threatening the relationship (Parrott & Smith, 1993; Smith & Kim, 2007). Even regarding items, jealousy would more likely motivate individuals to steal what others have rather than motivate them to “level up” or “level down” to match the status of others (Parrott & Smith, 1993; Van de Ven et al., 2011).

Admiration also gets confused with benign envy (Smith & Kim, 2007). Admiration is often viewed as respect and warm approval and is associated with a pleasurable experience. Algoe and Haidt (2009) defined admiration as the emotional response to non-moral excellence. Although benign envy and admiration share the similar experience of socially comparison, the emotional states that result are different. Benign envy is characterized as an unpleasant experience that focuses on the desired items more than the individuals possessing the items and occurs when envying individuals want to improve their situations to match others’ (Van de Ven & Zeelenberg, 2011). In this way, benign envy feels frustrating whereas admiration feels pleasurable. When individuals experience admiration, the lack of negative emotion may not result in a desire to change individuals’ own situations. Moreover, there is less involvement of the self in admiration than envy (due to the lack of social comparison).

Purpose of envy. The purpose of envy is to see the advantages others are receiving, so that changes can be made to increase the highest living achievable for the self. Status contributes a lot to see who gains the most prized and influential items in life and provides information that helps individuals form inferences about the self (Festinger, 1954). Status cues provide information that indicates success or failure and are important to understand so that individuals know what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior (Kelly, 1967). The purpose of envy is to

help individuals acknowledge failure, create self-dissatisfaction, and motivate individuals to better themselves (Hill & Buss, 2008). Therefore, even though the emotion is uncomfortable, it provides people with useful information that increases motivation to reach the highest standard of living.

Envy occurs when individuals or groups compare themselves to others and notice a deficit in resources. An upward social comparison causes envy when there is a gap between two individuals (Van de Ven et al., 2009). This comparison occurs when people want to know where they rank in relation to others who are like them (Festinger, 1954). People's comparison to one another decides a vast number of outcomes that are important in life (Suls & Wheeler, 2000). Social comparison can help people correct wrongs that could potentially harm the self or the success of the self. For instance, acting unusual can cause people to reject or remove individuals from the group. Rejection from groups increases the likelihood of threats, such as depression (Leary et al. 2003). The fear of being removed from intergroups can drive people to change their behaviors (Schoeck, 1969).

Targets of envy. Envy is more than experiencing random negative comparisons and then triggering motivation (Collins, 1996). Individuals experience envy more when the targets are similar to them than when they are dissimilar, such as on dimensions such as gender, age, and social class (Parrott, 1991). In other words, individuals might believe that it would be nice to be as rich as Bill Gates, but because they are not of the same social class already, the self-concept is not injured through the comparison and the resulting emotion is likely admiration instead of envy.

When individuals compare themselves to people in their outgroups, envy often becomes schadenfreude (Fisk, 2010). That is, individuals tend to experience "malicious joy" as they seek

information that tells them about how they compare to individuals who are not a part of their own circles of influence. Scorn may also result from this comparison experience.

Current Study

The concept of envy and aggression being linked is not a new concept. Malicious envy is described as creating behaviors with hostile and aggressive intent (Parrott, 1991). However, there is little to no research examining the type of aggression each individual would experience when exposed to envy. There is research, however, over why people tend to aggress and male and female differences when it comes to aggression. Law enforcement officers have long noted individuals' experiences becoming aggressive over even trivial matters (Wolfgang, 1958). Aggression may also have occurred as a tactic to acquire basic resources (Griskevicius et al., 2009). It is possible that the cold and frustrated feelings associated with malicious envy (cf. Van de Ven et al, 2009) could lead to hostile behaviors towards the targets of that envy as well.

Males and females differ on the types of aggression they engage in when feeling frustrated (Griskevicius et al., 2009). Males tend to use direct forms of aggression, such as hitting or punching, whereas females tend to prefer more indirect forms of aggression, such as spreading a rumor or telling a lie about someone. However, both males and females report the same reasons for engaging in aggressive behavior. That is, both males and females engage in aggressive behavior for the acquisition of mates and resources.

Although researchers have made great strides in understanding the different types of envy and how envy differs from other types of emotions, little is known about the link between envy and aggression. Demonstrating envy and aggression are linked in an empirical setting could provide new avenues of research for envy and aggression and help understand how the two emotions link in crime. Thus, the purpose of the current research is to gain a better

understanding of the role that envy plays in aggression. I hypothesize that those who are primed with envy, whether it be malicious or benign, will be more aggressive than those who are not primed with envy due to inferior feelings that result from social comparison.

Method

Participants

One hundred and eight females responded to a Facebook advertisement (in exchange for a chance to win a \$25 Amazon gift card) or a Sona-Systems announcement (in exchange for partial credit towards a class requirement) and participated in this study. Due to low response numbers, male participants were not included. The participants for this study ranged in age from 18 to 72 ($M = 28.87$, $SD = 11.06$). Slightly over half of the participants identified as White/Caucasian (68.3%). Of the remaining participants, 3.2% were Black/African American, 10.3% were American Indian/Alaska Native, 4.0% were Asian, 7.9% were Hispanic/Latinx, 5.6% were multiracial, and 0.8% identified “other” race/ethnicity. Of the 108 female participants, 49.2% indicated they were not in a relationship, 40.5% were married, 2.4% were legally separated, 7.1% were divorced, and 0.8% were widowed.

Materials

Envy. An envy writing prime task was used to generate feelings of envy in participants (cf. Van de Ven et al., 2009). Participants were randomly assigned to a writing prime control group, benign envy group, and malicious envy group. For the control group, participants were asked to write about their day for at least three minutes, from the time that they wake up to the time they go to sleep. Those who were in the benign envy manipulation were asked to write about a time in their life in which they wanted something someone else had in such a way that they wanted to *level up* to be the same as that other person. The following example was

provided: "...you may have desired the same car that your friend received for a 16th birthday when you did not get one. Write about the situation for at least three minutes. How did it make you feel"? In the malicious envy writing prime, participants were asked to describe a time in their life in which they wanted something someone else had in such a way that they had wanted that person to *level down* to be the same as them. The following example was provided: "...you may have wished that you had gotten the car a friend received for a 16th birthday instead of your friend getting it. Write about the situation for at least three minutes. How did it make you feel"?

Aggression. To assess aggression, participants read situations such as "You're at a party and a man/woman you know from one of your classes carelessly spills a drink on you and does not apologize" and then rated their likelihood of engaging in gender-specific aggressive behaviors on a scale of 1 (extremely uncharacteristic of me) to 9 (extremely characteristic of me; cf. Griskevicius et al., 2009). For each scenario, participants rated the likelihood that they would hit the person, insult the person, lie about the person, try to exclude the person from a social group, get in the person's face, tell a friend an embarrassing secret learned about the person, and talk about the person behind the person's back.

Procedure

University of Central Oklahoma students and Facebook volunteers registered to complete a survey in Qualtrics either through Sona-Systems or through an anonymous link posted on Facebook to participate in this study. Students at the University of Central Oklahoma were given instructions on how to complete the survey to receive one credit for their psychology classes. Facebook volunteers were given the following status update that read as follows: "Hello everyone! We are working on a research study regarding attitudes that have been approved by the University of Central Oklahoma Institutional Review Board. (#2020-034). We need as many

people as possible to complete some questionnaires. Please complete the whole study found at https://uco.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_em36BgPC4t2kQK1. Participants must be 18 years of age or older. Participation in the study is completely confidential. Feel free to share the link as well. Thanks for participating"! Once participants clicked on the Qualtrics link, they indicated their consent to participate and then completed the envy prime task, aggression measure, and demographic questions (in that order).

Results

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to examine differences in aggression by envy prime. There was a difference in aggression by envy prime, $F(2, 105) = 3.37, p = .04$. Tukey HSD multiple comparison tests indicated that individuals in the malicious envy condition ($M = 81.85, SD = 17.49$) reported more aggression than individuals in the control group ($M = 71.70, SD = 14.74$). Individuals in the benign envy condition ($M = 77.24, SD = 16.75$) were not significantly different from the malicious envy or the control conditions.

Discussion

In the current study, females primed with malicious envy reported statistically significantly higher ratings of aggression than those who were not primed with envy. While benign envy did increase aggression levels slightly, it was not enough to be statistically significant compared with the control group and benign envy. Therefore, the results partially supported the hypothesis that those who were primed with malicious envy would be more aggressive than those primed with benign envy or no envy at all.

The link between malicious envy and aggression supports previous research and understanding in the field. Malicious envy is described as creating behaviors with hostile and aggressive intent (Parrott, 1991). However, there was little to no research examining actual

empirical evidence of aggression and envy together. This study helped demonstrate that among adult females if primed with malicious envy they would rank as being more aggressive than those who were not primed with envy.

The outcome of benign envy and aggression in this study did partially support previous research that participants would feel frustrated. Benign envy is characterized as an unpleasant experience and tends to focus on the desired item more so than the individual (Van de Ven & Zeelenberg, 2011). Benign envy occurs when the situation presents the individual as being deserving of the desired item and increases the envier's motivation to improve oneself. In the current study, females in the benign envy manipulation fell somewhere in between malicious envy and the control group, but was not significantly different from either. One possible explanation for this outcome is that in benign envy, the person experiencing it finds the individual to be also deserving of that item (Van de Ven & Zeelenberg, 2011). Although the self may feel inferior and still experience negative emotions from benign envy, individuals experiencing benign envy view the person that has the item as being worthy of it. In contrast, because individuals experiencing malicious envy do not find that person as being worthy of the item, stronger negative feelings arise and increase the likelihood of aggression (Parrott, 1991).

Limitations and Future Directions

Although the results of this study indicate a clear difference in aggression by envy prime, there are limitations to the study design that should be noted. First, the participants used were all female, so these results cannot be generalized to males. Second, this study did not take into account other variables that may be at play between envy and aggression. For example, this study did not differentiate between dispositional envy and episodic envy amongst participants but rather focused on introducing an emotional state of envy (i.e., episodic envy only). That is,

this study did not investigate the relationship between dispositional envy and aggression.

Finally, it is possible that the lack of finding for benign envy is due to ambiguity in the envy primes themselves; that is, it may have been difficult for individuals to provide a time in which they felt the emotion. Future research should examine these limitations by including both males and females, linking dispositional envy to aggression, and utilizing additional measures of each.

Future research should also investigate how other concepts are linked to envy and aggression and could possibly explain the relationship between them. Life History Theory (LHT) is a theory from evolutionary biology that explains the strategic distribution of bioenergetics and material resources among various factors of fitness (Figueredo, 2006). Due to limited resources, individuals must make decisions between various options to successfully reproduce (Sear, 2006). The r-K model for reproduction strategies (commonly referred to as slow and fast life strategies) can be arranged on a continuum to see the differences in individual tradeoffs (Buunk, Pollet, Klavina, Figueredo, & Dijkstra, 2009). People who fall more closely with fast life strategists tend to have high numbers of offspring and little interest in their welfare. Those who are slow life strategists tend to have fewer offspring but are highly invested in the nurturing of those offspring. Both strategies are effective when it comes to natural selection, but they do differ in the type of reproductive success. Scholarly interest in dark personality traits has also partially stemmed from its integration into LHT (Jonason, Zeigler-Hill, & Okan, 2017). For example, fast life strategies have been connected to the seven vices of selfishness, aggression, and short-term exploitive strategies. Dark personality traits have also been linked with individual differences when discussed with deadly sins (Veselka et al., 2014). In the same vein, LHT might be useful in understanding differences in dispositional and episodic envy (including malicious and benign envy) as well as links to subsequent aggression.

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