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I want what you have!

When envy becomes a motivation factor

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1 Short Introduction

Whether it is the well trained body of a stranger passing by, an impressive athletic performance of someone you saw during your last jogging session, a classmate's good grade in school, or the delicious breakfast just lately posted on Instagram, while you are having some nasty stuff —we often find ourselves in situations in which we lack the superior fortunes that others possess. Obviously nowadays modern societies provide abundant opportunities to compare one's own situation with those of other people.

In this paper I'm going to discuss the behavioral economic approach of envy as a motivation factor to cause a person to behave in a specific way. Assuming that a positive form of envy is existing, this form could increase the individual performance of a person. Based on this assumption I am going to deal with the following research questions: How can envy play out in a positive way? What are the reasons behind its occurrence? And how does it become a motivation factor?

In order to analyze this, I am going to use different theories of envy, their contexts and set an own framework in this paper. First I am going to describe the meaning of "envy" and how it could be differentiated from admiration. Next I will distinguish between the two different types of envy and explain how those influence human behavior. To demonstrate how benign envy could affect a persons motivation I will present two examples. Based on my findings I will then give the reader an excitation to think of other situations in our environment and especially our economy in which envy could be one of the most important roots to influence one's motivation.

2 A thematic Introduction

2.1 Conceptual approximation and thematic containment

After introducing the content of this seminar paper, it is necessary to define what exactly is meant by “envy” and “motivation” regarding this context. Next, a distinction between envy and admiration is made.

2.1.1 Definition of envy & motivation

“Envy is defined as a negative emotional response to another person’s superior quality, achievement, or possession, in which the envier either desires the advantage or wishes that the envied person lacks it.” (Parrott & Smith 1993: 906)
It is usually constituted as a complex and multifarious emotion that follows from an upward social comparison and results in a variety of thoughts and feelings, such as the sense of inferiority, discontent and frustration, anger, or even ill will (see Miceli & Castelfranchi 2007: 449-479). Furthermore envy stems from an upward social comparison and is accompanied by the purpose to diminish the difference with the superior other. Downsizing such a gap can either be attained by moving oneself up (benign envy) or by pulling the other down (malicious envy) (see Van de Ven et al. March, 2011: 785).

To investigate whether motivation could be a result of envy, it is essential to also understand what is defined by motivation. Dunn and Rakes characterize motivation as a process through which individuals instigate and sustain goal-directed activity (see Dunn & Rakes 2010: 79).

2.1.2 Distinction between benign envy and admiration

Benign envy is seen as a motivational force that drives people to work harder to get what others already have (see Foster 1972: 165-202). Whereas admiration is considered as a feeling of delighted approval of the accomplishment or character of another person and is argued to have inspiration as its motivational output (see Algoe & Haidt 2009: 105-127). Inspiration is an overall positive feeling, whereas benign envy still feels negative and frustrating, but does lead to a desire for improvement as well (see Van de Ven et al. 2009: 426). In other words, admiration is likely to lead to feelings of connectedness to the other person, to openness, and to increased energy

levels (see Thrash & Elliot 2004: 957–973). Although both benign envy and admiration are felt when people are confronted with a superior other, there is a strong indication that their experiences differ (see Van de Ven et al. 2009: 423). Benign envy resembles admiration, but upon closer examination the differences are severe. Benign envy feels frustrating and unpleasant, while admiration is a pleasant emotion to experience. Furthermore, unlike admiration, benign envy is related with more negativity towards the envied person and therefore was found to lead to action tendencies aimed at improving one's own situation (see Van de Ven et al. 2011b: 198). Put differently, admiring someone feels positive but may not lead to a motivation to improve oneself (happy self-surrender), whereas being (benignly) envious of someone feels frustrating and as such may promote a motivation to improve oneself (unhappy self-assertion) (see Van de Ven et al. 2011a: 784).

3 Envy as an inner conflict

In the following paragraphs I am going to take a closer look at each of the existing forms of envy and to examine the reasons and impacts of the occurrence in order to get a better understanding what hides behind the phenomenon of envy.

3.1 Benign envy vs. malicious envy

As already learned, envy can be expressed in two different ways. To distinguish these two ways it is essential to identify what triggers malicious and benign envy and how it influences human behavior.

3.1.1 What triggers benign envy?

The idea behind benign envy, motivating people to perform better when they are being outperformed, enhances the “no pain, no gain” principle put forward by Johnson and Stapel (2007a). According to them, some frustration and self-threat (“pain”) is crucial for upward comparisons to stimulate performance (“gain”) (see Van de Ven et al. 2011a: 785). In other words people first need to feel frustrated about another's superiority in order to get motivated in improving their own position. People tend to experience benign envy if the advantage of the other is perceived as being deserved (see Van de Ven et al. 2011b: 199). Moreover, for benign envy to develop, it is necessary that people believe that their individual improvement is

under their own control. If improvement is thought to be outside of one's control or difficult to achieve, people tend to feel more admiration and as a result do not become motivated to accomplish their aims (see Van de Ven et al. 2011a: 790).

3.1.2 What triggers malicious envy?

Malicious envy arises, when a situation is perceived as undeserved and the envier feels low control about adjusting his or her own position (see Van de Ven et al. 2009: 426). Based on Smith's ideas, it was found that the eliciting patterns of benign and malicious envy mainly differ in whether a person feels that injustice is being done (Smith 2004: 43–63).

3.2 Malicious envy as a de-motivation factor leading to abasement of the envied person

As already indicated malicious envy is a negative experience. People who experience malicious envy tend to feel frustrated and wronged. As a consequence they are more likely to actually try to hurt the other, and hope that the superior one would fail. Recapitulated, persons who recalled being maliciously envious reported to have experienced action tendencies aimed at abasing the other person. Such a motivation, which results from malicious envy, can illustrate why envy is considered as one of the seven deadly sins. What is interesting about it, is that people only feel moderately ashamed for their thoughts and additionally even consider their feelings to be morally justified. This discrepancy of an emotion condemned by others, justified by oneself, which results in behaviour aimed at hurting another person can have a serious impact on oneself and on others (see Van de Ven et al. 2009: 426).

The experience of malicious envy therefore cannot be seen as a motivation factor leading to increased individual performance but as a destructive type of motivation aimed at damaging the position of the superior other.

3.3 Behavioral economic approach: benign envy as a motivation factor leading to increased performance

Envy is likely to arise when one's social situation is endangered by another person

who is superior in a certain domain, which is important to the self perception of the envier. To restore one's position after such an endangerment is crucial to the self-assurance of individuals. Benign envy and the motivations it activates helps to do so. What is more, individuals are naturally inclined to compare themselves to other individuals. If relative deficiencies are perceived, the individual's aim is to minimize the gap between herself and the other person. Most important, they want to improve their own position by increasing their individual performance. Surprisingly, even though they experience a high level of frustration and inferiority, the effects of benign envy are rather positive. As pointed out in the experiment conducted by Van de Ven, Zeelenberg & Pieters, in 2009 this kind of frustration is exactly what elicits the positive motivation. Frustration matters insofar as it is considered as a signal to the person that the desired outcome is worth striving for. The frustration resulting from this upward comparison feels negative but does motivate to attain more for oneself (see Van de Ven et al. 2009: 423).

Based on Parrott and Smith's (1993) definition of envy, I believe that these findings allow more specific definitions of the two types of envy: benign and malicious envy are both unpleasant and frustrating experiences that arise from a realization that one lacks another person's superior quality, achievement or possession. Benign envy results in a motivation to gain the coveted object for oneself as well, whereas malicious envy results in a wish for the other to lose it (see Van de Ven et al. 2009: 426).

Now after all the theoretical background and analysis of the two forms of envy and its influences to human behaviour, I want to illustrate the impacts by means of two different examples, which relate to almost everyone's day-to-day life.

4 Behavioural Economic approach of increased performance – Example

After examining the different types and effects of benign and malicious envy, I will now focus on exemplifying, so that the reader will get a better understanding of, in particular benign envy as a motivation factor which use to occur in reality. At first I

will give an example of a Study which was conducted with students of a University concerning a specific task. With the second study I will indicate, that the occurrence of envy and its result, leading to higher motivation could also be transferred to other life situations, such as sport and as it turned out also especially when individuals are confronted with conditions of competition.

4.1 Job and Study: Remote Associates Task (RAT)

In 2011 Van de Ven and Zeelenberg tested the hypothesis that only the emotion of benign envy motivates people to improve themselves, whereas the emotions of admiration or malicious envy do not. The three studies found that only benign envy was related to both variables, the motivation to study more and the actual performance on the Remote Associates Task, a test of creative potential. The first study was to examine whether experiencing benign envy does indeed lead to a motivation to improve oneself. Therefore, they estimated the students planned effort to study in the upcoming semester after the students had made an upward social comparison. Regarding the upward comparison, all participants were asked to recall a state in which someone else was better than they were (see Van de Ven et al. 2011a: 785).

To measure the performance, a purportedly unrelated study started, which was the Remote Associates Task. The RAT consisted of 18 questions, in which each participant is asked to think of a word that relates to three given words (e.g., for coffee, cake, butter, the word cup would be the correct answer). It was introduced as “an important instrument used to measure creativity and leadership.” (Van de Ven et al. 2011a: 786).

When participants are more motivated, e.g. when they tend to be more focused or spend more time on the task, performance could increase. It was expected that participants who recalled an experience of benign envy would become more motivated to perform better and to answer more items correctly as a result.

In a previous study, they measured the emotions experienced after an upward social comparison was made. In the second study they induced the emotions via an emotion

recall task. Recalling a situation in which a certain emotion was experienced reactivates the emotion and thereby also the motivational tendencies associated with that emotion.

If only benign envy leads to the motivation to improve oneself, it was expected that only participants who recalled being benignly envious would perform better on the RAT, compared to those who recalled admiring someone, being maliciously envious, or even those in a control group (see Van de Ven et al. 2011a: 786).

Study three uses said situation for all participants and asks them to imagine and describe how they would feel and react if they would experience benign envy, admiration, or malicious envy in that situation. Again the RAT was used as the measure of performance. But the difference was that also the time participants worked on the task was recorded, allowing them to explore whether the superior performance in the benign envy condition was caused by a motivation to work longer on the task.

Figure 1: Motivational effects

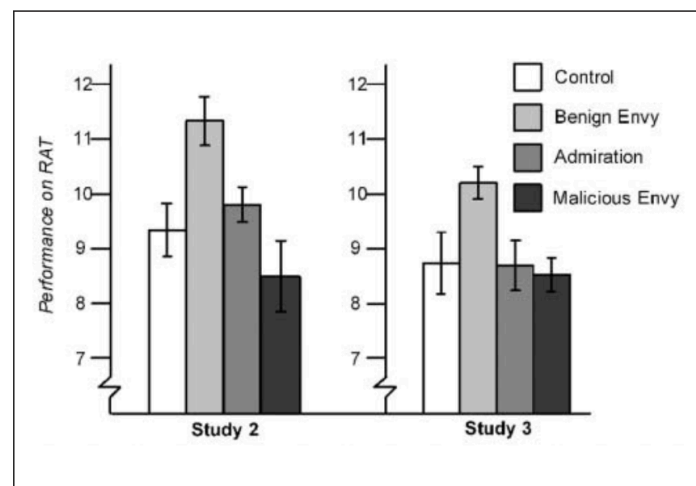


Figure 1. Motivational effects per emotion condition in Studies 2 and 3

Note: Error bars represent ± 1 SE of the mean. Post hoc analysis found that in each study, the benign envy condition differed from the other conditions; none of the other conditions differed significantly. RAT = Remote Associates Task.

As presented in the right panel of figure 1, the predicted differences between conditions in performance on the RAT revealed that participants in the benign envy

condition performed better ($M = 10.21$) on the RAT than those in the admiration ($M = 8.71$), malicious envy ($M = 8.54$), and control ($M = 8.75$) conditions (see Van de Ven et al. 2011a: 787).

The time participants spent on the RAT was positively related to the number of correct answers on the RAT. This shows that spending more time on the task had a positive effect on performance. Yet, even after controlling for the longer time spent working on the RAT, benignly envious participants still performed better than the participants in the other conditions. This indicates that participants in the benign envy condition not only worked longer but also “smarter,” which is an intriguing finding (see Van de Ven et al. 2011a: 787). Concerning my central research question I can prove with this study, that benign envy could truly lead to higher motivation.

4.2 Sports: Marathon runner

In regards to activities in sports, an upward comparison typically leads to more training effort to reach one’s own goal. Benign envy occurs among competitive individuals and may have beneficial effects regarding the individual performance.

As the previously mentioned study has shown, benign envy is mostly associated with a general motivational tendency to strive for outstanding performance. This study now deals with the issue of whether this finding also corresponds to other life situations, such as the actual performance of long-distance runners in an important race. As runners practice more than two times per week and are often exposed to several upward comparison standards during training sessions as well as during their final races, these upward comparisons could trigger envy. It is assumed that a connection between dispositional benign envy and hope for success should lead to a striving for maximum performance. In other words, benign envy should increase goal setting during training and furthermore should result in spurring the motivation to improve during training sessions as well as in the final race. To evaluate this assumption, participants’ benign and malicious envy was measured just before they started to run a marathon. Also the goal they had set themselves for the race was queried. It was hypothesized that benign envy would predict higher race performance induced by higher goal setting (see Lange & Crusius 2015: 290). The

average running speed in kilometers per hour was used as a dependent variable and the runners' time goal was transformed into a speed goal. As assumed, benign envy was positively related to higher goal setting and performance during the race, whereas dispositional malicious envy was unrelated to these variables. It was then tested in what way the goal which runners had set for themselves before the race influenced the relationship between benign envy and race performance.

In summary, higher goal setting reinforced the association of benign envy and race performance. The result serves as evidence of correlation between dispositional benign envy and real-world behavioural outcome. Furthermore it was also found that malicious envy predicted the active prevention of a particular race goal. Together, these findings strongly support the hypothesis that benign and malicious envy are related to distinct motivational dynamics (see Lange & Crusius 2015: 291). Now that also studies have proven the existence of relations between envy and motivation I want to dig a little bit deeper and would like to give the reader a suggestion to think about situations in life in which envy could be the root of a certain behaviour.

5 Discussion

Yes, I want what you have. – If envy exists in a benign way, motivation will result in improving one's own situation. People tend to downsize the gap between themselves and the superior one, no matter in which context. Either they start to work out, keep to a diet or increase their performance by doing things more frequently. In general envy is associated with a negative emotion, but if benign envy occurs, this could be one of the most important factors which triggers better performance and an improvement of skills. And this in turn is a big finding concerning competition.

Competition obviously occurs through constant upward comparisons of an inferior one. They lack the superior fortunes that others possess and therefore try to increase their individual performance to stay competitive. Regarding open market economy this could be one big constituent of the explanation why firms constantly strive for growth and try to come up with innovations. If one firm has rolled out a new technology, the other firm needs to come up with another new one as well –

otherwise the firm will retire from the market. One famous example is the invention of smartphones. Apple was the first company which came up with the idea of a smartphone, nowadays followed by Huawei, Samsung and many others. Envy may have been one of the factors which had triggered such innovations, because benign envy seems to be the origin of motivation.

To conclude my work it is proven that the existence of envy could have a big impact of the behavior of an individual but could the occurrence of envy also be used on purpose to improve the efficiency of a countries economy or living standards? If it could, how can governments, firms, managers and even workers make use of it? If you think further there could emerge some interesting ideas to make use of the fact that motivation can be a result of benign envy. For example human resource development can create new types of workshops for young executives by establishing benign envy provoking situations in which talents measure up to each other and therefore tend to lead to improve their performance.

This is just one idea how the results of this paper can be applied into praxis. But nevertheless this still needs to be proven by further research.

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