



Self-esteem and envy: Is state self-esteem instability associated with the benign and malicious forms of envy?



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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present research was to investigate whether trait self-esteem level and state self-esteem instability were associated with benign envy (i.e., the desire to improve one's own position) and malicious envy (i.e., the desire to damage a superior person's position). In the current study ($N = 182$), we extend previous research in this area by examining the possibility that state self-esteem instability would moderate the associations that trait self-esteem level had with the benign and malicious forms of envy. The results indicate that (1) trait self-esteem level was negatively associated with both benign and malicious envy, (2) state self-esteem instability was positively associated with benign envy, and (3) state self-esteem instability moderated the association between trait self-esteem level and malicious envy such that individuals with stable high self-esteem reported lower levels of malicious envy compared to those with unstable high self-esteem or low levels of trait self-esteem (regardless of whether their low self-esteem was stable or unstable). Taken together, these findings suggest that trait self-esteem level and state self-esteem instability have important connections with the benign and malicious forms of envy.

1. Introduction

Envy is a deeply unpleasant emotion that arises from upward social comparisons that reflect poorly on the self (e.g., Parrott & Smith, 1993). Envy is rooted in an individual's realization that he or she lacks something valuable that belongs to another person such as a personal attribute (e.g., intelligence, beauty), an accomplishment (e.g., winning an election), a relationship (e.g., having an attractive spouse), or a possession (e.g., financial wealth; Parrott & Smith, 1993). The sorts of upward social comparisons that tend to trigger feelings of envy are those that involve threats to one's feelings of self-worth because they reflect an erosion of one's relative social position (Salovey & Rodin, 1984). That is, individuals are most likely to experience envy when they perceive themselves as being inferior in some way to another individual (see Lange, Blatz, & Crusius, *in press*, for a review).

Feelings of envy often motivate individuals to attempt to overcome their perceived inferiority (Salovey & Rodin, 1984). In essence, there are two approaches for leveling the differences between oneself and the envied individual (e.g., Lange & Crusius, 2015). The first approach is referred to as *benign envy* which involves the desire to attain the advantage that the superior person possesses (i.e., the goal is to bring oneself up to the level of the superior person). The existence of this benign form of envy is supported by research showing that envy is

associated with positive thoughts about superior others (van de Ven, Zeelenberg, & Pieters, 2009), hopes for future success (Lange & Crusius, 2015), and shifts in attention toward means that are beneficial for fostering one's own achievements (Crusius & Lange, 2014). The second approach is referred to as *malicious envy* which involves the desire to deprive the superior person of his or her advantage (i.e., the goal is to pull the superior person down to one's own level). The existence of the malicious form of envy – which has been the focus of most previous research concerning envy – is supported by a wide array of results including those showing envy to be associated with certain aspects of narcissism (Lange, Crusius, & Hagemeyer, 2016), hostility and antagonistic thoughts about superior others (van de Ven et al., 2009), and fear of failure (Lange & Crusius, 2015).

Individuals are most likely to experience envy when they perceive themselves as being inferior in some way to another individual but not everyone relies on these sorts of social comparisons to the same extent. For example, individuals with low levels of trait self-esteem are more likely to make upward social comparisons than individuals with high levels of trait self-esteem (Wayment & Taylor, 1995) which may explain the negative association between trait self-esteem level and envy that has often emerged in past studies (e.g., Rentzsch, Schröder-Abé, & Schütz, 2015). Although previous research has examined the connection that trait self-esteem has with envy, the results of those studies are

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at least somewhat limited because they did not distinguish between individuals with stable and unstable forms of self-esteem.

1.1. State self-esteem instability

The vast majority of past research concerning self-esteem has focused exclusively on its level (i.e., whether trait self-esteem is high or low; e.g., Zeigler-Hill, 2013). However, researchers have recognized that self-esteem is a complex construct that cannot be adequately understood by simply attending to its level (see Jordan & Zeigler-Hill, 2013, for a review). One important aspect of self-esteem is its temporal variability (i.e., fluctuations in moment-to-moment feelings of self-worth over time) which is often referred to as *state self-esteem instability* (e.g., Kernis, Grannemann, & Barclay, 1989). State self-esteem instability is typically operationalized as the magnitude of change in the level of state self-esteem that emerges across repeated measurements. It is important to note that the form of state self-esteem instability that is the focus of the present study is often referred to as *barometric instability* because it concerns relatively short-term fluctuations in feelings of self-worth (e.g., those that occur over the course of a week) rather than *baseline instability* which deals with long-term changes in self-esteem (e.g., those that take place over a period of years; Rosenberg, 1986).

The consideration of state self-esteem instability is important because high trait self-esteem has been shown to be a heterogeneous construct consisting of both a stable and an unstable form (see Jordan & Zeigler-Hill, 2013, for a review). The stable form of high self-esteem appears to be “secure” because it reflects positive attitudes toward the self that are realistic, well-anchored, and resistant to threat. Individuals with stable high self-esteem are believed to have a relatively solid basis for their feelings of self-worth that does not require a great deal of external validation. In contrast, the unstable form of high self-esteem appears to be at least somewhat “fragile” because it reflects feelings of self-worth that are vulnerable to challenge, require constant external validation, and rely upon some degree of self-deception. Individuals with unstable high self-esteem are believed to be preoccupied with protecting and enhancing their vulnerable feelings of self-worth. It is important to note that state self-esteem instability may also play a role in distinguishing between different forms of low self-esteem (i.e., stable low self-esteem vs. unstable low self-esteem; e.g., Zeigler-Hill & Wallace, 2012) but these effects have been less consistent across studies (e.g., Kernis, Lakey, & Heppner, 2008).

Previous research has shown that state self-esteem instability – either alone or in conjunction with trait self-esteem level – predicts a wide variety of important outcomes including defensiveness (Kernis et al., 2008), anger and hostility (Kernis et al., 1989), aggression (Zeigler-Hill, Enjaian, Holden, & Southard, 2014), and psychological adjustment (Zeigler-Hill & Wallace, 2012). Taken together, these studies have allowed for a more nuanced understanding of self-esteem by showing that individuals with unstable high self-esteem seem to view their feelings of self-worth as being constantly at risk which likely contributes to their increased reactivity to potential threats.

1.2. Overview and predictions

The purpose of the present study was to gain a better understanding of the connection between self-esteem and envy by examining the possibility that state self-esteem instability may moderate the associations that trait self-esteem level had with the benign and malicious forms of envy. Utilizing state self-esteem instability to distinguish between individuals with stable high self-esteem and those with unstable high self-esteem is an important extension of previous research concerning self-esteem and envy because there are often considerable differences between individuals with these distinct forms of high self-esteem. At the most basic level, we expected our results to replicate those of previous studies showing that trait self-esteem level would have a

negative association with the malicious form of envy (e.g., Rentzsch et al., 2015). The rationale for this prediction was that individuals with low trait self-esteem may be especially likely to employ hostile strategies in order to avoid the loss of their seemingly precious self-esteem resources following these unpleasant upward social comparisons. We did not have a clear prediction regarding the connection between trait self-esteem level and benign envy. One possibility is that individuals with high trait self-esteem may be more likely to experience benign envy because it may serve as an impetus for self-improvement. This is consistent with past research showing positive connections between trait self-esteem and behavioral indicators of benign envy (e.g., greater persistence on a difficult task following an upward social comparison; Smallets, Streamer, Kondrak, & Seery, 2016). However, past research has shown that benign envy is associated with an array of negative outcomes (e.g., negative affect; Crusius & Lange, 2014) that are inconsistent with high trait self-esteem (e.g., Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995). Thus, we sought to clarify the relationship that trait self-esteem level had with benign envy by including it in our analyses for exploratory purposes.

We expected that the associations that trait self-esteem level had with the benign and malicious forms of envy would be qualified by its interaction with state self-esteem instability. We expected that individuals with unstable high self-esteem would report relatively high levels of both the benign and malicious forms of envy that would be similar to the levels of envy reported by those with low trait self-esteem (regardless of whether their low self-esteem was stable or unstable). The rationale for this prediction was that individuals with unstable high self-esteem tend to be highly responsive to potential threats (e.g., Jordan & Zeigler-Hill, 2013) and may consider both forms of envy – which are not mutually exclusive – to be viable strategies for protecting their fragile feelings of self-worth from these potentially threatening upward social comparisons. Lastly, we controlled for narcissism in our analyses because past research has found it to be associated with envy (Lange et al., 2016) and to sometimes be associated with state self-esteem instability (see Southard, Zeigler-Hill, Vrabel, & McCabe, *in press*, for a review). As a result, we believed that this was important in order to determine whether trait self-esteem level and state self-esteem instability had unique associations with benign and malicious envy that extend beyond what could be explained by narcissism.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were 182 undergraduates (91% female) in the Midwestern region of the United States who were enrolled in psychology courses. Initially, 594 participants completed measures of trait self-esteem level, narcissism, and envy – along with other instruments that are not relevant to the present study (e.g., pathological personality traits) – via a secure website in exchange for partial fulfillment of course-required research participation credits. These 594 participants were offered the opportunity to earn additional research credit for completing a measure of state self-esteem – along with other instruments that are not relevant to the present study (e.g., daily transgressions) – via a secure website at approximately 10:00 pm each evening for up to seven consecutive days. We only included participants in the study who completed data for three or more days – regardless of whether these daily measures were consecutive – because this is the minimum number of data points that is required to calculate a statistically sound and valid estimate of variability (see Zeigler-Hill & Showers, 2007, for a similar strategy). Of the 594 initial participants, 182 participants completed the daily measures for three or more days (i.e., a completion rate of 31%). This completion rate may seem low but it is important to note that completing the daily measures of state self-esteem was optional for participants rather than being a required element of their participation. The final 182 participants completed a total

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