



Bringing you down versus bringing me up: Discrepant versus congruent high explicit self-esteem differentially predict malicious and benign envy



Stephanie Smallets^{a,*}, Lindsey Streamer^b, Cheryl L. Kondrak^b, Mark D. Seery^{b,**}

^a USC Marshall School of Business, 3670 Trousdale Parkway, Los Angeles, CA 90089, United States

^b Department of Psychology, University at Buffalo, SUNY, Park Hall, Buffalo, NY 14260-4110, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 28 July 2015

Received in revised form 2 January 2016

Accepted 4 January 2016

Available online xxxx

Keywords:

Explicit self-esteem

Implicit self-esteem

Malicious envy

Benign envy

Social comparison

ABSTRACT

Recent research supports the existence of two faces of envy: malicious envy, characterized by the desire to bring an envy target down, and benign envy, characterized by the desire to bring oneself up to the level of an envy target. In the current study, we investigated discrepant high self-esteem (high explicit, low implicit self-esteem) and congruent high self-esteem (high explicit, high implicit) as antecedents of malicious versus benign envy, respectively. Participants with discrepant high self-esteem were particularly likely to rate a target negatively across a variety of attributes and as deserving to fail when the target was an upward rather than downward social comparison, consistent with malicious envy. In contrast, unlike other participants, those with congruent high self-esteem tended to persist longer at a difficult task after an upward rather than downward social comparison, potentially consistent with benign envy. These results suggest novel antecedents of the two faces of envy and novel consequences of self-esteem.

© 2016 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

“One day when the queen asked her mirror: ‘Mirror, mirror, on the wall, Who in this land is fairest of all?’ It answered: ‘You, my queen, are fair; it is true. But Snow-White is a thousand times fairer than you.’”

[Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, *Little Snow-White*]

In this classic children's fairy tale, an evil queen becomes so overwhelmed with envy for Snow White that she plans to kill her with a poisoned apple. This literary representation of envy is a frequent theme in both fiction and reality: a person so riddled with envy attempts, and sometimes succeeds, in eliminating an advantage that another person possesses. However, despite the compelling negative connotation of envy, recent research has supported that two faces of envy exist: the culturally prominent malicious envy and a more positive face, referred to as benign envy (Van de Ven, Zeelenberg, & Pieters, 2009). The purpose of the current research was to examine a possible antecedent of experiencing malicious and benign envy: discrepant versus congruent high explicit self-esteem (H-ESE).

The current research is novel in several respects. First, previous investigations (e.g., Van de Ven et al., 2009) focused on establishing malicious envy and benign envy as valid constructs by assessing the consequences of the two states after inducing aspects of them. In contrast, we sought to identify antecedents of these emotions in the form of individual differences that should predispose people to experience one or the other. Second, Lange and Crusius (2015a) investigated an individual difference antecedent, but they assessed participants' self-reflections on their likelihood of experiencing feelings of malicious and benign envy. We instead examined a distinct construct with no such direct relationship to envy: self-esteem. Third, previous research on self-esteem has found that discrepant H-ESE is associated with greater defensive responding than congruent H-ESE (Jordan, Logel, Spencer, & Zanna, 2006). However, measuring indicators of both malicious and benign envy—which represent separate dimensions rather than opposite ends of a single continuum—provides an opportunity to assess both responses consistent with defensiveness (malicious envy) and those consistent with beneficial constructiveness (benign envy) in the same individuals. Fourth, previous research linking defensiveness to discrepant H-ESE typically relied on inducing an obvious and personally relevant threat, such as in the form of administering negative feedback (Jordan, Spencer, & Zanna, 2005; Lambird & Mann, 2006) or making salient personal shortcomings (Kernis, Lakey, & Heppner, 2008) or an unresolved personal dilemma about which participants felt very uncertain (McGregor & Marigold, 2003). In contrast, we tested participant responses after inducing a more subtle threat: upward comparison in a domain in which participants had not actually performed. The current

* Correspondence to: S. Smallets, University of Southern California, USC Marshall School of Business, 3670 Trousdale Parkway, Los Angeles, CA 90089, United States.

** Correspondence to: M.D. Seery, University at Buffalo, The State University of New York, Department of Psychology, Park Hall, Buffalo, NY, 14260-4110, United States.

E-mail addresses: smallets@usc.edu (S. Smallets), mdseery@buffalo.edu (M.D. Seery).

investigation thus has implications for understanding envy and self-esteem.

1.1. The two faces of envy

Envy is a feeling of inferiority that occurs when one person wishes to attain another person's favorable attributes and experiences (Smith, Parrott, Diener, Hoyle, & Kim, 1999; Smith & Kim, 2007). Social comparison is a necessary component of envy (Smith et al., 1999). People engage in social comparison when they evaluate the extent to which they are better or worse than another individual (Festinger, 1954). Social comparison occurs frequently (Wheeler & Miyake, 1992) and has profound impacts on everyday life by influencing people's self-evaluations (e.g., Morse & Gergen, 1970; Brewer & Weber, 1994), affect (e.g., Epsude & Mussweiler, 2009; Higgins, 1987), goal-pursuit (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 2000; Van Yperen & Leander, 2014) and interpersonal relations (e.g., Dunn, Ruedy, & Schweitzer, 2012; Moran & Schweitzer, 2008). In order to be meaningful and provoke envy, the social comparison must be made to a similar other in an important domain, thereby creating a potential threat to one's self-concept (Salovey & Rodin, 1984; Van de Ven, Zeelenberg, & Pieters, 2012). Although envy and jealousy are used interchangeably in the English language (Smith, Kim, & Parrott, 1988), they have distinct meanings. Envy involves two people and entails the desire of one person to possess the other's favorable attributes, whereas jealousy involves at least three people and entails the fear of losing ground in a meaningful relationship with one person to another (Smith et al., 1999).

Malicious envy represents the conventional view of envy, characterized by the desire to bring the envy target down (Van de Ven et al., 2009). Benign envy, in contrast, is characterized by the desire to bring oneself up to the level of the envy target (Van de Ven, Zeelenberg, & Pieters, 2011b). Although both benign and malicious envy involve a desire to eliminate the advantage the envy target has over oneself, the methods of accomplishing this goal depend on the specific type of envy experienced.

Historically, envy research has focused on malicious envy. Previous studies have associated envy with deleterious consequences such as undermining others to hinder their positive relationships or reputation (Duffy, Scott, Shaw, Tepper, & Aquino, 2012), social loafing (Duffy & Shaw, 2000), decreased cooperation during social dilemmas (Parks, Rumble, & Posey, 2002), and happiness at others' misfortunes (Van Dijk, Ouwerkerk, Goslinga, Nieweg, & Gallucci, 2006). Even though most of the research on envy has neglected benign envy, it is not a new concept in psychology (Rawls, 1971). There has been debate as to whether or not benign envy actually constitutes "envy," because it lacks hostility (Smith & Kim, 2007), but Van de Ven et al. (2009) provided evidence that both malicious and benign envy are indeed two variations of the same emotion. Malicious and benign envy share overlapping core characteristics, including high perceived similarity to the envy target, high self-relevance of the envy domain, and an explicit comparison to the envy target (Van de Ven et al., 2009).

Despite their similarities, malicious and benign envy have been shown to produce divergent responses. Van de Ven et al. (2009) prompted participants to recall the most recent time they experienced either malicious or benign envy and found that participants who recalled an instance of malicious envy reported more motivation to hurt the envy target, more hope that the envy target would fail, and a greater inclination to derogate the envy target than those who recalled benign envy. In Van de Ven, Zeelenberg, and Pieters (2011a), participants who imagined feeling malicious envy (vs. benign envy) toward a person in an advertisement were willing to pay significantly less for the advertised product, interpreted as a derogation of anything affiliated with the envy target. Additionally, research focusing on benign envy (Van de Ven et al., 2011b) revealed that participants who imagined feeling benign envy toward the subject of an article anticipated that they would spend significantly more time studying in the future compared

to those who imagined feeling malicious envy. Furthermore, those induced to experience benign (vs. malicious) envy persisted longer at a difficult task, presumably in an attempt to improve themselves. Altogether, this research suggests that malicious envy is marked by the desire to remove the advantage an envy target possesses, whereas benign envy is marked by the desire to acquire an advantage comparable to that of an envy target.

1.2. Self-esteem as a predictor of envy

The purpose of the research reviewed above was to determine the motivational, behavioral and emotional outcomes that are associated with benign and malicious envy (Van de Ven et al., 2011a, 2011b; Crusius & Lange, 2014). In contrast, the current study investigated an individual difference variable as an antecedent to the experience of malicious versus benign envy; specifically, whether people with discrepant H-ESE are more likely to experience malicious envy and those with congruent H-ESE are more likely to experience benign envy.

H-ESE is discrepant when combined with low implicit self-esteem (L-ISE), whereas it is congruent when combined with high implicit self-esteem (H-ISE). Consistent with a dual-attitude perspective (e.g., Epstein, 2006; Wilson, Lindsey, & Schooler, 2000), ESE reflects self-views that are conscious and deliberative, whereas ISE is typically thought to reflect a nonconscious and automatically activated attitude toward the self (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Jordan et al., 2006). Although the precise nature of ISE and its measures has been debated (e.g., Buhrmester, Blanton, & Swann, 2011; Olson, Fazio, & Hermann, 2007), perspectives converge to suggest that discrepant H-ESE entails a fragility in positive self-views that manifests as defensive responding (Jordan et al., 2006; Olson et al., 2007). For example, relative to congruent H-ESE, discrepant H-ESE has been associated with greater self-enhancing responses (Bosson, Brown, Zeigler-Hill, & Swann, 2003), a more boastful self-presentational style (Olson et al., 2007), larger in-group bias in a minimal group paradigm (Jordan, Spencer, Zanna, Hoshino-Browne, & Correll, 2003), greater dissonance reduction in the form of larger postdecision spread of alternatives (Jordan et al., 2003), greater expressions of conviction after a threat (McGregor & Marigold, 2003), greater derogation of out-group members (Jordan et al., 2005), poorer self-regulation (Lambird & Mann, 2006), greater verbal defensiveness when discussing a personal shortcoming (Kernis et al., 2008), more behavioral self-handicapping (Lupien, Seery, & Almonte, 2010), and greater attention to defensiveness-related words (Haddock & Gebauer, 2011).

In sum, existing research demonstrates that people with discrepant H-ESE are more likely than those with congruent H-ESE to respond with defensive compensatory measures, especially when their positive self-views are threatened. Theory (Kernis, 2003; Kernis et al., 2008) suggests that discrepant H-ESE reflects H-ESE that is fragile, in that self-worth is positive but vulnerable, requiring validation by meeting external criteria, such as by feeling superior to other people. In contrast, congruent H-ESE reflects H-ESE that is secure, based on deep-seated authenticity and self-acceptance, without a need to compete with others. We therefore propose that individuals with discrepant H-ESE should be particularly likely to view a successful other as a threat to positive self-views. On the other hand, we propose that individuals with congruent H-ESE should be particularly likely to see a successful other as a guide for self-improvement. This logic comports well with findings by Lange and Crusius (2015a) regarding envy. Specifically, malicious envy is associated with fear of failing to fulfill a high standard of performance established by an envy target, whereas benign envy is associated with optimism that one can achieve this high standard. The fear in malicious envy seems to parallel the fragility, uncertainty, and desire for superiority in discrepant H-ESE that presumably motivates defensiveness. In contrast, the confidence in benign envy parallels the lack of such fragility, uncertainty, competitiveness, and hence defensiveness in congruent H-ESE. It thus follows that individuals with discrepant H-ESE should be

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7250361>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7250361>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)