Envy mediates the relation between low academic self-esteem and hostile tendencies

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ABSTRACT

In previous research, there has been little discussion about mediators or moderators that affect the negative relation between self-esteem and hostile tendencies. In the current article, we propose a model in which envy mediates that relation in the academic context. Across three studies, with correlational (N_1 = 303), experimental (N_2 = 76), and round-robin designs (N_3 = 330), results revealed that academic self-esteem indirectly influenced hostile tendencies through envy. In Studies 2 and 3, the indirect effect was moderated by the performance context. Results suggest that individuals with low academic self-esteem may exhibit hostile tendencies because of feelings of envy, especially in highly competitive contexts. Findings are discussed with respect to theoretical implications for research on personality and interpersonal perceptions.

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1. Introduction

Self-esteem is a basic domain of human functioning (MacDonald & Leary, 2013) and plays an important role in social interaction (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995; Stinson et al., 2008). It has been shown that self-esteem is associated with mental health (Marsh, Parada, & Ayotte, 2004; Orth, Robins, & Roberts, 2008; Vohs et al., 2001) and the quality of social relationships (Stinson et al., 2008). Previous findings suggest a negative relation between self-esteem and hostile tendencies.[1] For example, self-esteem negatively predicted antisocial behavior of early adolescents over a 2-year period (Donnellan, Trzesniewski, Robins, Moffitt, & Caspi, 2005; see also Trzesniewski et al., 2006). Similarly, low self-esteem is related to externalizing problems such as aggression (D'Zurilla, Chang, & Sanna, 2003; Russell & Hulson, 1992),

interpersonal conflict (Marsh, Parada, Yeung, & Healey, 2001), bullying (Byrne, 1994; O'Moore and Kirkham, 2001; Rigby & Cox, 1996), and disparaging others (Collange, Fiske, & Sanitioso, 2009; Murray, Rose, Bellavia, Holmes, & Kusche, 2002).

In the academic domain, self-esteem is extremely important. For example, research suggested that poor academic performance, bad school adjustment and hostile behavior in the school context are related to low self-esteem (Marsh, Trautwein, Lüdtke, Köller, & Baumert, 2006; Marsh et al., 2001; Rosenberg, Schooler, & Schoenbach, 1989). Furthermore, bullying or antisocial classroom behavior have been shown to be related to low academic self-esteem (Hay, 2000; Salmivalli, 1998).

Particularly within the academic context, there has been a long tradition of theorizing about the relation between self-esteem and hostile tendencies. For example, Rosenberg et al. (1989) argue that low self-esteem fosters hostile behavior as a means to enhance self-esteem in a domain in which it is relatively easy to succeed such as gaining respect from others (see also Kaplan, 1975). Marsh et al. (2001) suggest that self-esteem is negatively related to hostile tendencies toward peers, with hostility reflecting an attempt to restore self-image. Students seem to anticipate the positive attention that they receive when they engage in deviant behavior (see also Staub, 1999).

Despite sufficient evidence on the relation between low self-esteem and hostile tendencies, most of the previous research has not empirically tested potential mechanisms through which low self-esteem is linked to hostility (cf. Donnellan et al., 2005).

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[1] Another line of research proposes a positive relation between self-esteem and hostile outcomes (e.g., Bushman & Baumeister, 1998). Studies of that research tradition, however, specifically investigate the construct of narcissism as an extreme form of heightened self-esteem. Although sometimes used synonymously, we draw a difference between the constructs of narcissism and of high self-esteem. Indeed, previous research has shown that on average narcissism is only weakly to moderately correlated with positive self-esteem (Leising et al., 2013).

Examination of mediators is needed to advance understanding of the phenomenon and its underlying mechanisms. In the present research, we examine the relation between self-esteem and different forms of hostile tendencies and propose a mediation model to elaborate the underlying mechanisms. We focus on the academic context, as this domain is an important area that individuals draw upon for their self-evaluations (Wayment & Taylor, 1995).

Several authors proposed that hostile reactions based on low self-esteem reflect attempts to restore self-esteem (e.g., Marsh et al., 2001; Rosenberg et al., 1989; Staub, 1999). People generally try to maintain a positive self-image, restore it when damaged, or protect it when threatened (Steele, 1988; Tesser, 1988). Thus, low self-esteem has the potential to trigger a motivation to protect the self-image. People can try to maintain their self-esteem in different ways, for example, in the context of unfavorable social comparisons, by altering the importance of the comparison domain, changing the level of performance, or distancing themselves from the comparison target, for example by devaluing the source of the threat (Tesser, 1988, 2000). Tesser (1988) theorized that negative emotions, such as shame, sadness or envy, mediate attempts to protect self-esteem. It has been argued that negative self-evaluations are associated with negative emotions which are in turn related to self-esteem maintenance strategies, such as devaluing others. With respect to mechanisms underlying the link between self-esteem and hostility, these assumptions have not been empirically tested, however.

As hostile reactions reflect a phenomenon that happens in social relationships, the mechanism underlying the self-esteem hostility link must be social as well. Especially social emotions that are based on other people's thoughts, feelings or actions have been shown to determine social behavior (Hareli & Parkinson, 2008), and thus seem to be candidate mediators of the self-esteem hostility link. Among social emotions, a specific one that has been discussed as stemming from feelings of inferiority and entailing the motivation to derogate others is envy (Smith & Kim, 2007).

Envy is a social emotion that arises from a negative upward social comparison with another person (Ben-Ze'ev, 2000; Parrott, 2001; Silver & Sabini, 1978). It is an intense feeling of discomfort that arises when a person realizes that someone else owns something that the person longs for, strives for, or desires (Parrott & Smith, 1993). Envy is supposed to function as a means of informing the individual about his or her inferior position relative to another person. This is consistent with an evolutionary psychological perspective (Hill & Buss, 2008) that emphasizes that the function of envy is to signal the advantages or disadvantages of others—which is important since individuals who are oblivious to these subtle aspects of interpersonal relations face the risk of losing access to resources and mating partners.

Since envy is very uncomfortable (Takahashi et al., 2009), people who experience that emotion are motivated to overcome this unpleasant feeling and activate reactions that might help to improve their inferior status, for example by denigrating the superior person (e.g., Salovey & Rodin, 1984). Indeed, research has revealed that envy is correlated with measures of hostility (Kim & Glomb, 2014), lack of cooperative behavior (Parks, Rumble, & Posey, 2002), Machiavellianism (Vecchio, 2005), tendencies to devalue others (e.g., undermine the reputation of others; Schaubroeck & Lam, 2004), schadenfreude (van Dijk, Ouwerkerk, Goslinga, Nieweg, & Gallucci, 2006), and aggression (Hofer & Busch, 2011).

Because envy has the potential to activate hostile reactions and stems from unfavorable comparisons with others, we perceive this emotion as particularly relevant for the association between low self-esteem and hostility. Thus, based on envy's connection to social comparison processes which are especially relevant for self-esteem maintenance, we expect that this emotion is an important factor that underlies the self-esteem–hostility link.

Dovetailing with that argument, previous studies suggest that self-esteem affects the tendency to draw on social comparisons for one's self-evaluation. For example, research revealed that low self-esteem is linked to an increased interest in social comparison (Wayment & Taylor, 1995; Wood & Lockwood, 1999) and to individual differences in comparison orientation (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). People low in self-esteem are also more likely to engage in social comparisons with respect to ability than people high in self-esteem (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). Considering the direction of the comparison, individuals can compare themselves with others who are not doing as well as they are (downward comparison; Wills, 1981) or with others who are doing better than they are (upward comparison; Festinger, 1954). With respect to individual differences in self-esteem, it has been shown that people low in self-esteem tend to make more upward than downward comparisons, which apparently also entails the risk of negative self-evaluations (Wayment & Taylor, 1995). Thus, low self-esteem seems to be a risk factor for painful social comparison outcomes which eventually might be associated with the experience of envy toward the target of the comparison.

Here, we propose a mediation model that integrates previous findings on self-esteem with theoretical perspectives on envy. Because envy is a social emotion that is linked to negative self-evaluations (Rentzsch & Gross, in press; Smith & Kim, 2007) and has the potential of hostile reactions against the comparison target, we expected envy to be a candidate mediator underlying the link between low self-esteem and hostile tendencies. Self-esteem can be assessed as a global measure of self-worth but also as a multidimensional construct that entails domain-specific facets (Marsh & Shavelson, 1985; Shavelson, Hubner, & Stanton, 1976). Previous research showed that specific facets of self-esteem can predict specific outcomes better than global self-esteem can. For example, academic self-esteem is much more strongly related to academic achievement and educational attainment than global self-esteem is (Marsh & O'Mara, 2008). We thus expected that within the academic context, hostile reactions are strongly associated with academic self-esteem, and less so with global measures of self-esteem.

1.1. The present research

There has been only limited discussion of the mediators that underlie the relation between low self-esteem and hostile tendencies. In the present research, we focus on an affective process underlying that relation. We hypothesize that the relation between self-esteem and hostile tendencies is, partially, mediated by envy. In our studies, we use three different methods, i.e., a correlational design in Study 1, an experimental design in Study 2, and a large round-robin design in Study 3.

As hostility is a broad construct that covers different aspects such as assault, indirect hostility, irritability, negativism, resentment, suspicion, and verbal hostility (Buss & Durkee, 1957), each study includes a different aspect of hostile tendencies, namely trait hostility, disparagement and labeling. Disparaging another person's positive outcomes or denigrating the other person are also considered components of hostile reactions (Chen & Young, 2013; Salovey & Rodin, 1984; Schaubroeck & Lam, 2004; van Dijk et al., 2006).

Furthermore, we compare the effects of global self-esteem vs. academic self-esteem on hostile tendencies in different contexts, in order to explore the domain-specificity of this relation.

We also investigate boundary conditions of the proposed mediation by examining contextual moderators. A study by DelPriore, Hill, and Buss (2012) revealed that envious responding is fueled by contexts in which gaining and maintaining one's status is very important. Our argument about the process underlying the self-