Envy: The Motivations and Impact of Envy

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Abstract

Background: Evidence suggests that envy may be linked to negative mental health outcomes such as poor self esteem and depression, yet few studies have attempted to evaluate its cognitive, behavioural and emotional components outside of a laboratory setting.

Aims: In this research we aimed to explore the lived experience of malicious envy from the envier’s perspective including cognitive and emotional aspects and behavioural responses.

Method: A thematic analysis was conducted on the responses to open-ended questions in a written format designed to assess the motivations and impact of envious thoughts.

Results: In 50 participants the analysis resulted in delineating 6 categories and 33 themes relating to the experience of envy.

Conclusions: This research provides detailed information on the specific cognitive, emotional and behavioural components of envy.

Key words: Envy, Cognitive behavioural and emotional components of envy.

Introduction

Envy is an unpleasant emotional experience that is said to occur when a person perceives that they lack another’s superior quality, achievement or possession and either desires it or wishes the other lacked it” (Parott and Smith, 1993).

Envy is thought to be prevalent in all societies and all individuals to a greater or lesser degree. The universality of envy is supported by the identification of terms to describe it in almost all languages from Arabic through Western dialects to Chinese and Japanese (Schoeck, 1969).

Envy has been described as the cause of primal sin, as a driving force in shaping social structures and as a motive for revolution and murder (Foster, 1972). These powerful claims highlight the distinct motivational tendencies historically associated with envy namely ill will, hostility and a desire to destroy that which is envied (Smith et al, 2007).
More recently, it has been argued that the experience of envy can be divided into two distinct states, malicious and benign. The findings of one study suggest that the experiential content and behavioural implications of malicious envy are to attempt to drag down the envied person or object, whereas for benign envy it is to try to move up to gain the desired attribute (Van de Ven et al, 2009). International advertising agencies (Young & Rubicam, 2009) have described actively using benign envy as a marketing tool, reporting that products which evoke this type of envy sell best. The benign envy of the consumer seemingly promotes desire for and acquisition of the envied object where malicious envy would motivate ill will and hostile actions.

Envy is considered to be a social emotion. Whether benign or malicious it is thought to be embedded in a natural propensity to compare one’s own qualities, possessions and circumstances with those of others (Alicke et al, 2008). Smith (2007), proposes that an upward social comparison with a person or group of people who share attributes such as social class, gender, or age is a necessary precondition for envy to arise.

The invention of social networking sites (SNS) has magnified the opportunity and information available for such social comparison. With an estimated 30 billion pieces of content being shared each month, the unprecedented scale of information sharing on SNS presents a potential global breeding ground for envy. Individuals are no longer restricted to comparing themselves with their immediate neighbours but may also do so with their global counterparts (Alicke et al, 2008). A recent study suggests that envy about the holidays, successes or abilities of others is frequently triggered via this platform and shows associations with decreased life satisfaction scores (Krasnova et al, 2013).

This is not the first time that envy has shown links with negative mental health outcomes. There is some evidence of a negative correlation with self esteem and life satisfaction and a positive correlation with depression and anger (Smith et al, 1999). However none of these studies differentiates the type of envy being measured. It would seem reasonable to assume that malicious envy would show the strongest links to negative mental health outcomes, but benign envy may motivate a constant striving which may equally affect wellbeing (Van de Ven et al, 2012).

Most authors agree that there are several elements integral to the experience of envy. Empirical evidence suggests that when a person feels envious they are likely to believe that the envied other benefits from an underserved advantage in an area important to their own goals (Smith, et al 2004, Van de Ven et al, 2012). The inequality of the situation is perceived as unjust motivating feelings of ill will and anger in the reaction of the envier (Smith et al, 2004).
This hostile side to envy has been explored in a study by Silver and Sabani, (1978). Their findings suggest that the average person believes that inappropriate hostile reactions to another person’s advantage are a key characteristic of envy.

Thoughts of inferiority are a further component of envy. Thought to be the culmination of a reflective process through which the envious individual interprets what’s lacking as their own failing. These types of thoughts have been found to strongly predict depressive feelings as accompanying the experience of envy (Smith et al, 1994).

In this research we aimed to investigate the lived experience of malicious envy, specifically the cognitive, behavioural and emotional components from the perspective of the envier. We hypothesised that malicious envy would arise in situations whereby one individual perceived that another had something that they lacked yet desired. We further predicted that the envious individual would experience thoughts of inferiority and self downing pertaining to the unfairness that the other person has the object or quality which they lack yet desire. We also reasoned that they would have thoughts which denigrate the person or object of their envy and of destroying or depriving the person of that which is envied. Furthermore this would manifest itself in a range of behaviours whereby the envious person would verbally denigrate the envied person or object to others. Although we predicted that the envious individual would have thoughts of destroying or depriving the person of that which is envied, we hypothesised that very few people would act on this as they would recognise the reaction as extreme. We concluded that the experience of malicious envy would be accompanied by other emotions, particularly anger and depressive feelings.

The method chosen to test this hypothesis was a qualitative questionnaire study. This was chosen as it was felt that interviewing people face to face may have elicited shame or embarrassment and people may have been inhibited in their admissions. Although envy is not an unusual experience research has found that people are often reluctant to admit to feeling it and go to great lengths to conceal it (Silver at al, 1978).

Although this method is susceptible to the limitations inherent in retrospective accounts, it has the advantage of asking participants to report on a naturally occurring emotional experience rather than a hypothetical one. We thought this was important given that the majority of research on envy has occurred in the laboratory. In addition a "healthy" population was chosen in order to examine how common experiences of malicious envy were.
Method

Design

A thematic analysis was conducted of the responses given to open-ended questions in the context of a written questionnaire. The process of thematic analysis meant that themes could be identified, compared and contrasted and built into a theoretical model which could then be compared to our initial hypothesis.

Participants

A convenience sample was recruited using the snow ball technique which involves individuals asking friends and their friends asking friends.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed by the project team to gain specific information on the experience of envy. It contained 12 open-ended questions asking the participant for details about a specific example of when they felt envious to the extent that it upset them. Subsequent questions focused on a description of the situation in which the person felt envious, their relationship to the envied person and their associated thoughts and behaviour at the time. Further questions focused on what feelings, other than envy, the person had experienced and whether they discussed their feelings of envy with anyone. Please see fig.1 for examples of these questions.

Figure 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Please choose a situation in which envious feelings have upset you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. What event triggered these feelings of envy? Please describe in as much detail as possible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Focusing on this situation, what did you feel most envious of?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. If you felt envious of a person please describe your relationship to them and why you felt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>envious?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. If it was not the person you were envious of, what was it and why?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Please describe what thoughts went through your mind when you felt envious in this situation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Please describe how you acted when you felt envious?</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. List anything you felt like doing but did not actually do.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Did you have any other feelings in this situation?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Why did you not do this?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Did you talk to anyone about your feelings of envy?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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11. If so who did you talk to and what did you say?
12. If you did not discuss your feelings of envy why not?

The use of open-ended questions has several advantages. Firstly this style delivers richer information and does not frustrate the respondent by imposing a fixed choice answer. It has also been suggested that the respondent is not forced into responding in an all or nothing way and therefore leads to less ambiguous responses. Finally this type of questioning is often considered more realistic. As Coolican states "We rarely have to agree or disagree, or say how strongly, without giving our reasons" (Coolican, 1999 P155).

Analysis

The qualitative data collected via the questionnaire was analysed using Ritchie et al’s thematic analysis framework (Ritchie et al, 2003) assisted by Nvivo version 9.2 (http://www.qsrinternational.com). This method of analysis was chosen because it is suited to yielding a thorough description of the data generated in response to our key questions. Thematic analysis using Ritchie et al’s framework (2003) involved three broad stages in the analytical process. Firstly, initial themes were identified by “indexing” the answers given by the participants to each question within the questionnaire. These developed from simple codes to concepts and emergent themes. These themes then guided the formation of a framework within which further material was summarised. Finally, patterns of association were explored. No new themes were emerging from the data at the conclusion of the thematic analysis. The analysis of data was conducted independently by two researchers. This strategy was employed to check the reliability of the categories identified through the thematic analysis. Any disagreements were resolved through discussion and will be referred to in the results section.

Results

Participants

Approximately 60 people were asked to complete the questionnaire. 10 people declined to participate; the reason given for this was that they had not experienced envy before. Fifty individuals agreed to take part in the study. Eighteen were male and 32 female with ages ranging from 19-61, with the average age being 33.6. All lived in London. Fig 2 summarises the demographic data of the adult sample. None of the participants had any prior knowledge of the research topic other than by virtue of being human and having experienced the emotion of envy at points in their lives (Coolican, 1999).
Overview of reported experiences of envy

The initial analysis resulted in delineating 33 themes relating to the experience of envy. These were organised into 6 categories:

1) Focus of the envious feelings.
2) Cognitions associated with feelings of envy.
3) Behaviour associated with feelings of envy.
4) Emotions experienced other than envy.
5) Consequences: reasons for not acting on feelings of envy.
6) discussing feelings of envy. See fig 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Themes and Sub Themes</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focus of envious feelings</td>
<td>• Object financial resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Person Attribute or ability of person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitions associated with the experience of envy</td>
<td>Unfairness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self downing</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Denigrating the envied person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Denigrating the envied object</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Deprive the other of the envied object</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self pity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Convincing self I am happy with the situation</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Giving up- I’ll never get the envied object</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Wish them ill will</td>
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### Behaviour associated with the experience of envy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behaviour</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sulking</td>
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<tr>
<td>Withdrawing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoiding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbally disparaging to other the envied person and encouraging others to join in.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbally disparaging the object to other’s and encourage them to do the same</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actively attempting to take away the envied object from the other person</td>
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<tr>
<td>Acting normally shouting</td>
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### Emotions experienced other than envy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emotions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anger</td>
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<tr>
<td>Resentment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sadness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shame</td>
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<tr>
<td>Guilt</td>
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### Consequences: reasons for not acting on envious feelings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Would have been unfair to act on feelings</td>
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<tr>
<td>Would have been unreasonable to act on feelings</td>
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</table>

### Discussing feelings of envy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>Mother</th>
<th>Partner</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>Concern about being evaluated negatively for feelings of envy</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### Category 1) Focus of envious feelings

The described experiences of envy suggest that these feelings were provoked in situations whereby the envious individual identified that someone else had either an object or attribute that they lacked yet desired (Parrott et al, 1988). The object or possession most commonly found to be the focus of envy was others having greater financial resources.

“My neighbour having enough money to build a big villa.” (Respondent 20)

“My friend’s well paid job.” (Respondent 22)

A range of attributes were described as provoking feelings of envy for example:

“My sister - her success and intelligence” (Respondent 37)

“I am disabled and cannot play games (rounder’s). I was envious of my partner who...
could.” (Respondent 21)

Each of these descriptions suggest that the envier shared characteristics such as a age, social class or background with the person in possession of the envied object or quality. These accounts also suggest that the envier has compared themselves or their possessions with the envied other and identified themselves to be lacking on this prized outcome (Van de Ven, 2009).

2) Cognitions associated with envy

Participants’ descriptions of the thoughts that went through their minds when they felt envious yielded nine themes. One theme identified suggests that thinking it is unfair that the other person possesses the envied object or quality is a prevalent cognition.

“it’s unfair that some people are born into wealth. I have worked so hard for everything!”

(Respondent 33)

The findings also suggest that denigrating the self for not possessing the envied item or feeling sorry for oneself as a result is also a component of the experience of envy.

"I am worthless and wasting my life.” (Respondent 10)

A tendency to think critically or in a hostile way about the envied person or object was further identified.

“They were born with silver spoons in their mouths. That's why they have that car. They are superficial elitist people” (Respondent 32)

The most intense hostility was however demonstrated in descriptions of thoughts about eliminating or destroying the envied object or wishing the envied other ill will.

"thought about burning the graduation tent down with a blow torch.” (Respondent 28)

“Really hoped they would f*** it up.” (Respondent 17)

It also appears that some individuals try to convince themselves that they are happy with the situation or that they won't try to get the coveted object because there is no chance of getting it.

“told myself I was glad he was going as I could not have anyway. I have an essay to write so it’s fine that he goes and I do not.” (Respondent 4)

“Gave up studying, felt that I would never get the grades.” (Respondent 44)
3) Behavioural responses

Eight themes emerged from the actions participants reported when feeling envious. The most surprising of these concerned sulking, withdrawing from or avoiding the envious situation.

“I withdrew from the people who had what I wanted.” (Respondent 29)

“I wanted to cut all contact with my friend so that I did not run the risk of finding out anything else about her life.” (Respondent 3)

Hostile behaviours such as verbally disparaging to others the person or object that was envied and encouraging others to do the same was also a behavioural response reported.

“(I) slag her off to my colleagues and get them to agree that she is a bossy bitch.”

(Respondent 46)

The most intense hostile actions concerned actively attempting to take away that which was coveted from the other person.

“convinced my boss to take him (colleague) off the project, told the boss that my previous experience of this colleague was that he was lazy and disorganised which wasn’t true.”

(Respondent 7)

Another insight from these qualitative findings suggested that when envious, people often report acting as normal despite these feelings.

4) Emotional responses

A mixture of emotions were described as accompanying the experience of envy. The findings would suggest that when feeling envious, an individual is also likely to experience anger, depression, sadness, shame and guilt.

“I felt angry about the unfairness that I do not have lots of money.” (Respondent 11)

“I felt depressed about her getting the job, hated myself.” (Respondent 15)

5) Consequences: Reasons for not acting on envious feelings
For those individuals reporting that they did not act on their thoughts or feelings of envy, the rationale given was that it would have been unfair or unreasonable to do so.

“I didn’t act on these feelings as knew I was being unreasonable” (respondent 42)
“Didn’t think it would be fair to behave the way I felt like behaving ” (respondent 12)

6) Discussing feelings of envy

Individuals who described discussing their feelings of envy reported that the recipient was a family member or partner. Being judged negatively was the single theme identified as the rationale for not discussing these feelings with anyone.

“I felt too embarrassed.” (Respondent 16)
“afraid of being misunderstood.” (Respondent 5)
“worry what others would think.” (Respondent 35)

The data was independently rated by two researchers. Generally there was good agreement. There were only 4 disagreements out of 128 with the cognitive responses and 2 out of 49 disagreements relating to the behavioural responses. Each of these disagreements was resolved through discussion which clarified the definitions of each category.

Discussion

All of the categories and themes identified demonstrate thoughts and behaviours consistent with theories of malicious envy. No themes or categories expressed thoughts or behaviour which would be more indicative of benign envy and its more aspirational motivations (Van de Ven et al, 2012). This may tentatively suggest a high incidence of this problematic emotion amongst a healthy population.

All of the reported experiences of envy occurred in situations whereby one individual perceived that another had something that they lacked yet desired. This primary evaluation of the situation would therefore appear to be pivotal in creating feelings of envy replicating the findings from a multitude of earlier studies (Foster, 1972; Silver & Sabini, 1978 Salovey & Rodin, 1984; Parrott, 1991; ; Smith, 1991; Smith et al, 1999). From an evolutionary perspective it is adaptive for people to have an inclination to scan their environments for signs of threat. Unfavourable social comparisons are therefore likely to capture the attention as it signals to the individual that they are being out competed in an area important to their own goals or resource allocation (Hill et al, 2008).
Thoughts pertaining to the unfairness that the other person has the envied object or quality was a key cognitive theme identified in the analysis. Foster (1972), has suggested that this type of thinking serves to remove the locus of responsibility from the person who feels envious and places it outside of his/her sphere of control. The individual thus avoids thinking of themselves as inferior due to personal inadequacies. Instead, their perception of inferiority is attributed to uncontrollable agents or conditions that stack the odds against them. The other person's acquisition of the object of desire can thus be attributed to luck or fate or an unfair distribution of opportunity (Foster, 1972).

Whether this appraisal is primary or secondary in the emotional sequence of envy, it is likely to lead to feelings of anger (Smith et al, 2004). It is this combination which is widely believed to motivate and justify hostile behaviour. The results of this study support the presence of anger in the described accounts of envy which frequently contained profane language, particularly within the themes of denigrating the person or object either verbally or mentally and when wishing the envied person ill will. This type of language is associated with the expression of intense anger or frustration (Jay, 2009). A previous study by Smith et al, 1994, found that perceptions of injustice predicted hostile feelings in the reaction of the envier. In this study both perceptions of injustice and hostile actions were present in the described experiences of envy. In some cases the envier described wishing to destroy or take away the envied item.

A further cognitive theme evident in this study concerned thoughts with a self downing content. In this instance participants described devaluing themselves for lacking the envied object or quality. It could be argued according to cognitive theory that this type of evaluation will provoke feelings of sadness or depression (Lazarus R, 1991). One study has found that thoughts of inferiority predicted feelings of depression as accompanying the experience of envy (Smith et al,1994). The findings of this study support the presence of sadness and depression in the personal accounts of envy.

Whether the individual attributes the locus of responsibility for the absence of the envied object or quality to internal or external factors is likely to be influenced by the core beliefs that they hold about themselves and the world. Depending on the nature of these the process of envying could precipitate and maintain either episodes of low mood or of aggression. Envy may therefore be an underestimated component of a range of psychological and social problems such as clinical depression.

The results of this study identified a behaviour which we did not predict, namely withdrawing from or avoiding the envied person or person in possession of the envied object. This is not usually a behaviour associated with envy. Avoiding exposure to the envy producing situation may prevent the individual from acting on their feelings. This possibly suggests a reluctance to be seen as envious, in accordance with the
premise that doing so indicates the superiority of the other person in the mind of the envious individual (Foster, 1972).

The described experiences of envy also suggest that the participants recognise their reactions as extreme. For example some participants recognised that acting on their beliefs would have been unfair or unreasonable. Those choosing not to discuss these feelings did so because they believed others would judge them negatively. This supports the notion put forth by Smith et al (2007), that the envious person often recognises that their reaction is not completely acceptable.

The findings of this study suggest that the experience of envy is not a simple emotion, but an emotional sequence influenced by appraisals of fairness and self worth in relation to the lacking yet desired object or quality. It appears that envy can motivate hostile thoughts and actions, avoidance and withdrawal. Further research examining the association between envy and clinical mood disorders is warranted. This is particularly timely as social factors evolve to magnify the opportunity for social comparison.

**Strengths and Limitations.**

One of the strengths of this study is that the findings emerge solely from the described accounts of the lived experience of envy. The sample is sizeable and shows some diversity in its characteristics. However this method has its limitations and it is possible that there is a bias in the way the memory is recalled and described by the individual. Even in this instance it could be argued that these accounts continue to offer an insight into the envier’s processing of the experience, specifically the salient components which are stored as memory.

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