
The Meaning And Role Of Envy In Human Behaviour

How do people perceive the word envy? From a common viewpoint, envy breaks down the bonds between people, not only by propelling the need of wanting what someone else has, but also the desire that nobody else has it. Based on this information, most people perceive envy as a dysfunctional emotion that should be averted. Envy in social media is also commonly regarded as destructive to the common welfare of society. Although studies have supported this viewpoint, others have argued that envy can be also functional. Therefore, in order to better understand the importance of envy, it is essential to consider the various studies available on this subject and how my perspective has changed due to this research.

Envy can be defined as the painful or bitter awareness of a benefit enjoyed by another individual and the desire to have the same advantage (Merriam-Webster, 2019). According to Parrott, at the core of envy is social comparison, a familiar yet dominant influence on a person's mental image of himself/herself (2001, p. 308). Most people's self-esteem originates from comparison to others (Parrott, 2001, p. 308). When a person's skills, accomplishments, or goods compare inferior to those of another person, one's self-esteem can be affected (Parrott, 2001, p. 308). Nevertheless, there are other ways social comparison can lead to envy. As per Crusius and Mussweiler, spontaneous social comparisons with better-off others can trigger envious displeasure and a tendency to strive for their superior good under conditions of stretched capacity to exert self-control (2012, p. 148). These triggers and factors of envy serve as the avenue to explore the dysfunctional and functional aspects of envy in different settings including, social media.

Zeigler-Hill and Southard's "Self-esteem and envy: Is state self-esteem instability associated with the benign and malicious forms of envy" study focused on whether the instability of trait and state self-esteem levels were connected to benign envy (i.e., the desire to improve one's own position) and malicious envy (i.e., the desire to hurt a person with one or more superior aspects) (Vrabel, Zeigler-Hill, & Southard, 2018, p. 100). The participants of this study were undergraduates in the American Midwest and were registered in psychology courses (Vrabel et al., 2018, p. 101). Ultimately having a reasonable number of participants (i.e., 182), the researchers were able to concentrate on measuring the trait self-esteem level, state self-esteem instability, narcissistic admiration and rivalry, and benign and malicious envy (Vrabel et al., 2018, p. 102).

For the trait self-esteem level, the researchers used the reliable Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, a 10-item measure of trait self-esteem (as defined by Rosenberg), and instructed the participants to complete this assessment according to how they usually feel or to how they see themselves as a whole (Vrabel et al., 2018, p. 102). State self-esteem instability was evaluated using a modified version of the basic strategy developed by Kernis and his colleagues (Vrabel et al., 2018, p. 102). Concerning testing for the level of narcissistic admiration and rivalry, the researchers used the Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Questionnaire, an 18-item measure (as defined by Beck and her fellow colleagues) (Vrabel et al., 2018, p. 102). Researchers measured the levels of benign and malicious envy using The Benign and Malicious Envy Scale, a 10-item measure that provides an assessment of benign envy and malicious envy (Vrabel et al., 2018, p. 102).

The results for benign envy demonstrated a positive correlation for narcissistic admiration (Vrabel et al., 2018, p. 102). After controlling for narcissistic admiration and narcissistic rivalry, it was found that trait self-esteem level was negatively correlated with benign envy, and state self-esteem instability was positively correlated with benign envy (Vrabel et al., 2018, p. 102). The results for malicious envy illustrate a negative correlation for narcissistic admiration and a positive correlation for narcissistic rivalry (Vrabel et al., 2018, p. 102). After regulating for narcissistic admiration and narcissistic rivalry, it was revealed that the trait self-esteem level was negatively correlated with malicious envy (Vrabel et al., 2018, p. 102).

Jan Crusius and Thomas Mussweiler's "When People Want What Others Have: The Impulsive Side of Envious Desire" study provides a different perspective of what triggers envy. This study concentrated on whether unconstrained social comparison with another individual having a better good triggers an envious emotional reaction that comprises an strengthened, impulsive disposition to obtain this good (2012, p. 144). Crusius and Mussweiler performed four experiments to answer this question. In Experiment 1, they observed whether drinking an excessive amount of alcohol in a small time frame impacts the appearance of "envious discontent" (2012, p. 144). They used adult participants in the Cologne street carnival (Crusius and Mussweiler, 2012, p. 144). These participants were separated (and assigned) to either the better-off neighbor or a no-neighbor conditions (Crusius and Mussweiler, 2012, p. 144). For selecting which foods were desirable or not, the researchers asked an independent sample how much they would like to eat a particular food (Crusius and Mussweiler, 2012, p. 144-145). Based on their results, the researchers selected Nestle's Choco Crossies (a chocolate confection) as the more desirable food and "chewy candy" as the less desirable; subsequently, the participants were invited in pairs or alone (i.e., better-off and no-neighbor) to taste one of these different candies (Crusius and Mussweiler, 2012, p. 145).

According to Crusius and Mussweiler, during the better-off neighbor condition, denied-of-better-sweet participants were in the immediate presence of a confederate (someone who acts exactly as the researcher instructs), who received the "better" sweet (Crusius and Mussweiler, 2012, p. 145). In the no-neighbor condition, participants were also assigned to taste the chewy candy, but were alone (i.e., no confederate) (Crusius and Mussweiler, 2012, p. 145). The intensity of the participants' emotional responses was assessed by having them rate their happiness level when they received the chewy candy, their anger level when they did not receive the chocolate box, and their envy level of the participants who received the chocolate box (Crusius and Mussweiler, 2012, p. 145).

Experiment 2 explored whether an envy provoking situation increases the disposition to attain the superior good (Crusius and Mussweiler, 2012, p. 145). The researchers invited pairs of participants, who were strangers to each other, to perform taste judgments in the laboratory (Crusius and Mussweiler, 2012, p. 146). There were four different conditions: high load, low load, better-off neighbor, worse-off neighbor, and equal-neighbor (Crusius and Mussweiler, 2012, p. 145).

In the high load condition, participants had to recall a long number (Crusius and Mussweiler, 2012, p. 145). On the other hand, in the low load condition, the number was small (Crusius and Mussweiler, 2012, p. 145). In the better-off neighbor condition, participants were designated to taste the inferior food (butter biscuits), while their neighbor (in the worse-off-neighbor condition) was assigned to taste the desirable, superior food (ice-cream sundae) (Crusius and Mussweiler, 2012, p. 145). Participants and their partners in the equal-neighbor condition were assigned to

assess both foods (butter biscuits and ice-cream sundaes) in a different order (Crusius and Mussweiler, 2012, p. 145-146). Participants rated how deeply they envied their partner and specified their inclination to pay for the two foods before tasting them (Crusius and Mussweiler, 2012, p. 145).

In Experiment 3, all participants underwent “high cognitive load” to be under conditions in which envious reactions could possibly become apparent (Crusius and Mussweiler, 2012, p. 147). Similar to Experiment 2, the adult participants in this experiment were recruited at a college campus in Cologne (Crusius and Mussweiler, 2012, p. 147). The better-off neighbor condition and the no-neighbor condition each had almost half of the participants (Crusius and Mussweiler, 2012, p. 148). This procedure combined features of Experiment 2 and some experimental conditions as Experiment 1; however, a different pair of foods was introduced, which included sauerkraut juice (Alnatura Sauerkrautsaft) and a fruit smoothie (True Fruits Smoothie) (Crusius and Mussweiler, 2012, p. 148). These foods were judged to be either desirable (or undesirable) (Crusius and Mussweiler, 2012, p. 148).

The results for Experiment 1 indicated that for the better-off neighbor condition, the blood alcohol concentration level was correlated with the intensity of the negative emotional response, whereas in the no-neighbor condition, the blood alcohol concentration was not associated to the emotional response (Crusius and Mussweiler, 2012, p. 145). The results concerning envy within the high load condition indicated that, participants with a better-off neighbor conveyed more envy than participants with the other types of neighbors (Crusius and Mussweiler, 2012, p. 146). In contrast, under low load, participants’ envy with a better-off neighbor did not differ from the other neighbor conditions (Crusius and Mussweiler, 2012, p. 146). Furthermore, “high load conditioned participants with a better-off neighbor also reported more envy than low load participants with a better-off neighbor” (Crusius and Mussweiler, 2012, p. 145).

The results for Experiment 3 showed that participants who had a better-off neighbor were more prone to impulsively purchase the better product, unlike those without a better-off neighbor (Crusius and Mussweiler, 2012, p. 148). Due to the fact that an almost identical procedure elicited envy in Experiments 1 and 2, it is possible to interpret the findings in Experiment 3 as related to envy (Crusius and Mussweiler, 2012, p. 148). The results for Experiment 4 demonstrated that in comparison to “their approach tendency toward the neutral stimuli and the inferior food, participants in the high load condition had a stronger approach tendency toward the superior food when sitting next to a better-off neighbor, but not when they were alone” (Crusius and Mussweiler, 2012, p. 148-149). As for low load, with regards to their reaction toward the disliked food and neutral stimuli, participants were less inclined to approach the better food under the presence of a better-off neighbor (Crusius and Mussweiler, 2012, p. 149).

Besides addressing the triggers and factors that may lead to envy, it is also essential to discuss the dysfunctional and functional aspects of envy. One article, “Why Following Friends Can Hurt You: An Exploratory Investigation of the Effects of Envy on Social Networking Sites among College-Age Users,” discusses how envy can be dysfunctional in a social media setting. According to the article, two studies were conducted, with the first study focusing on qualitative data and the second study centered on quantitative data (Krasnova, Widjaja, Buxmann, Wenninger, and Benbasat, 2015, p. 593). On the one hand, Study 1 was used to illustrate whether there are differences between envy on social networking sites (i.e., SNS) and envy on the everyday physical setting (Krasnova et al., 2015, p. 593). On the other hand, Study 2 provides a detailed investigation of envy’s role in SNS and consumers’ behavior (Krasnova et

al., 2015, p. 593). Both studies' data were gathered using a "convenience sampling procedure" (online surveys advertised for a German university) aiming for young adults (i.e., college age individuals) SNS users (Krasnova et al., 2015, p. 593). Study 1's survey showed two question blocks (i.e., QB1 and QB2), which contained a combination of open and closed-ended inquiries (Krasnova et al., 2015, p. 594). While the purpose of QB1 was to produce the scale of envy, QB2's purpose was to improve the understanding of SNS-influenced envy rather than everyday physical setting (Krasnova et al., 2015, p. 594).

Study 2's survey depended on a commonly used "operationalization of situational envy by Vecchio (1995)" (Krasnova et al., 2015, p. 596). By knowing the intentions of envy on SNSs, the researchers were able to adapt this scale to the SNS context (Krasnova et al., 2015, p. 596). Envy emerged as important in question 1 of Study 1, with more than half of respondents revealing envy as a response to the social info of other individuals (can be perceived as admitting to envy) (Krasnova et al., 2015, p. 594). Moreover, with Study 1-Question 2, about one out of four of the respondents specified that they themselves experienced envy, which they think is a major negative emotional reaction (Krasnova et al., 2015, p. 594). Furthermore, in Study 2, it was shown that "the direct effects of social information consumption on an SNS are not significant for cognitive well-being and affective well-being" (Krasnova et al., 2015, p. 598).

A counterargument to Krasnova's article is found in "The Positive Side of Social Comparison on Social Network Sites: How Envy Can Drive Inspiration on Instagram" article. This article included social comparison, malicious and benign envy, inspiration, positive and negative effect, trait narcissism and trait self-esteem, were measured on fivepoint Likert scales, from 1 meaning "strongly disagree" and 5 meaning "totally agree" (Meier & Schafer, 2018, p. 413). Participants reported significant levels of inspiration on Instagram and higher levels of benign than malicious envy (Meier & Schafer, 2018, p. 413). Moreover, inspiration showed no relationship with most of the other investigated items (Meier & Schafer, 2018, p. 413).

After researching these articles, my perspective on envy has changed quite a bit. For instance, after reading about the chapter of guilt in "Emotions in Social Psychology," I expected that self-esteem was one of the triggers of envy. Nevertheless, I found how impulsiveness can also be a factor that may lead to envy. Furthermore, I also found that the dysfunctional and functional components of envy in social media platforms directly contrast one another. Personally, I find envy to be both dysfunctional and functional depending on the circumstances.

Overall, in order to better comprehend the meaning of envy, it is crucial to consider the various journal articles on this subject and how my perspective has changed due to this research. The topic of this research was beneficial to broaden the role of envy in human behavior. From understanding the triggers and factors that can lead to envy, to the dysfunctional and functional roles of envy in social media, these are all important to study and perform further research on.