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Master's Thesis of Jiyoung Choi

The Impact of Envy on Prosocial Behavior: The Mediating Effect of Connectedness toward Beneficiaries

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Abstract

Contrary to the common understanding, envy is multi-dimensional. Envy can elicit varying behavioral consequences ranging from prosocial behavior to harming actions, depending on its source and how it is perceived. In understanding the ambiguity of envy, this paper suggests that along with the type of envy, internal attribution orientation is a key personal factor in explaining the motivation and behavior following envy. This study examines how a feeling of envy influences the willingness to engage in prosocial behaviors and the moderating role of internal attribution orientation in this process. Connectedness to the beneficiary is suggested as the underlying mechanism of such an effect. The result indicates that the feeling of envy was positively related to a higher willingness to engage in prosocial behavior via connectedness towards beneficiaries only for people with high internal attribution orientation.

Keywords: Envy, Benign Envy, Internal Attribution Orientation, Prosocial Behavior

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Chapter 1. Introduction

“A sound heart is the life of the flesh: but envy the rottenness of the bones” –Proverbs 14:30

“Envy is the art of counting the other fellow’s blessings instead of your own” –Harold Coffin

The feeling of envy has been regarded as a naturally destructive emotion. It is very often cited as one of the major reasons behind crimes in media and one can easily think of social and historic disasters resulting from envy. Early studies on envy have emphasized such a negative side of envy, focusing on the hostility of envy. Arising from the comparison with the higher entity were hostility and resentment (Smith & Kim, 2007) and helplessness and antisocial behaviors (Behler et al., 2020). However, envy need not be interpreted as undesirable emotion. Rather, envy is a multi-faceted emotion which can also lead to positive behavior. For instance, research has shown that as a way of leveling the difference between the envier and the envied, motivation to improve (Parrott & Smith, 1993) is activated and envy also results in nonhostile inclinations (Crusius et al., 2020). It is

also found that increased performance (Cohen-Charash, 2009) and environmentally friendly behaviors (Wei & Yu, 2022) can also result from envy.

Therefore, envy is no longer thought to be a uniform emotion. The dual-envy theory suggests that there are two types of envy: benign envy and malicious envy (van de Ven, 2016). While both types of envy are induced by social comparison between the envier and the envied, the consequent behavior differs greatly. It is suggested that benign envy is elicited when the superior accomplishment of others is deserved and thereby resulting in the envier seeking self-improvement, whereas malicious envy, a more familiar type of envy, is elicited when the other's superior position is undeserved. As a common response to malicious envy, people are more likely to have negative feelings towards the envied and engage in harmful behavior. That is, malicious envy motivates the envy to level the relative inferiority by leveling the envied down.

At the same time, it is important to note that benign envy and malicious envy are directly opposed to each other. For instance, benign envy cannot be purely comprised of positive aspects such as self-improvement motivation. Rather, unlike admiration, benign envy does accompany negative affect from perceived inferiority. In the same light, malicious envy differs from resentment. In short, envy is a

nuanced emotion, which needs contextual and individual differences to be taken into consideration for in-depth understanding. I suggest the internal attribution orientation factors into the ramification of envy. In understanding such complex dynamics of envy, not only the types of envy are important, but also individual factors need to be considered.

Attribution orientation is an essential individual factor which determines cognition of a situation, consequent emotions, and following behavior (Weiner, 1975). According to attribution theory, cognitive factors mediate the traditional stimulus-response relationship. That is, when confronted with a certain stimulus, one organizes his experience in terms of a causal relationship, attributing the cause to either (1) personal, internal forces such as individual ability or effort which is more stable, or (2) situational, external forces such as the difficulty of the task or luck which is less stable.

In this study, I posit that feelings of envy would result in different cognition and behavior depending on the internal attribution orientation of the person feeling envy. That is, when experiencing envy, one with a high level of internal attribution orientation would orient the cause of the perceived inferiority to the self. This will highlight the perceived inferiority of the self, causing assimilating oneself to other inferior entities, the beneficiary of potential prosocial behavior. This would in turn lead the person to be more willing to

engage in prosocial behavior. This paper consists of a literature review of relevant theories and hypotheses, explanations of the study conducted and results, followed by a general discussion.

Chapter 2. Conceptual Development

Understanding Envy

Envy cannot be understood as a one-dimensional emotion. Rather, it requires a nuanced perspective for a thorough understanding of the mechanism and the effect of envy. Early research on envy tended to consider envy as a mere harmful emotion, as commonly portrayed in novels and media. It was thought that frustration which is inherent in social comparison draws hostility in envy (Smith & Kim, 2007). In line with such an idea, there have been numerous studies illustrating the destructive nature of envy. Envy was found to result in higher levels of counterproductive work behaviors (Cohen-Charash & Mueller, 2007), less helpful behavior, and a greater likelihood to engage in harming behavior (Behler et al., 2020), and deception (Moran & Schweitzer, 2008).

However, there have been other research findings showing the positive side of envy. Recent research has repeatedly shown that a person experiencing envy is more likely to donate because self-motivation is activated (van de Ven, 2016) and thus engages in moral behavior (Polman & Ruttan, 2012). Therefore, it is important to note

that contrary to what most people expect, experiencing envy does not always lead people to engage in destructive activities, but rather leads to activities involving a desire to “level oneself up, especially in the context of contemporary consumption (Belk, 2011). It has also been shown that envy increases self-improvement behavior (charitable giving) in private settings (Youn & Park, 2017), increases activation of process-focused self-improvement goals (Salerno et al., 2019) and promotes pro-environmental behavior (Wei & Yu, 2022).

The seemingly diverging consequence of envy is not to be surprised at. There has been a stream of research calling for the need to divide envy into two distinctive concepts (Dual Envy Theory), malicious envy and benign envy, to understand such varying consequences of envy. While both malicious envy and benign envy are caused by perceived inferiority of the self from any form of social comparison, benign envy is elicited when the other’s superior position is deemed deserving. Therefore, a common reaction of people feeling benign envy is to level the difference by leveling oneself up (van de Ven et al., 2009), for instance by engaging in prosocial behaviors encouraged by self-improvement motivation.

On the other hand, malicious envy is elicited when the other’s superior position is deemed undeserving. Therefore, the person feeling envy is more likely to level the difference between the self and

the superior one by pulling the superior one down, for instance by engaging in harming behaviors (Lange & Crusius, 2015). Furthermore, it has been further investigated the multi-facet of envy by elaborating on diverse values of envy, including instrumental value and non-instrumental value (Lange & Protasi, 2021). As such, studies on envy should be conducted in a nuanced manner, with both individual differences and environmental characteristics considered. However, there has been limited research on understanding what individual factors either attenuate or strengthen the relationship between envy and its consequent behaviors. Focusing on the positive side of envy, this paper proposes that while benign envy leads people to engage in prosocial behavior (Youn & Park, 2017), internal attribution orientation as an individual factor significantly affects the impact of envy on willingness to engage in prosocial behavior.

Internal Attribution Orientation

Weiner's attribution theory suggests that cognitive elements factor into one's interpretation of stimuli (Weiner, 1985). As people want to make sense of what they experience, they tend to organize their experiences in terms of causal relationships. That is, when experiencing any form of event, one tries to attribute the cause to either oneself or other factors to understand the situation (Martinko et

al., 2002). The most common attribution is to (1) personal, internal forces such as individual ability or effort, or (2) situational, external forces such as the difficulty of the task or luck.

The source of the feeling can make the impact of emotion stronger in one situation than in another (Machleit & Mantel, 2001). In other words, depending on the attribution style, one would interpret the situation differently, leading to dissimilar behavior. Chao et al. (2011) have illustrated the moderating effect of attribution style in reacting to a contract breach. It showed that how one perceives and attributes organizational failure is an important individual factor, which would significantly affect the future behaviors of individuals. Another study has demonstrated the moderating effect of internal attribution orientation, such that people with higher internal attribution orientation would feel more guilty after experiencing coworker incivility than people with lower internal attribution (Teng et al., 2021). This shows that an incident is interpreted in dissimilar ways depending on each person's internal attribution orientation and thereby leads to a different emotional state. As such, depending on the level of internal attribution orientation, a person would not only interpret and feel differently but also respond differently to a situation.

In this study, I would like to focus on internal attribution orientation, the degree of self-concern, and the tendency to attribute

the cause of things to oneself. I reason that internal attribution orientation is such an integral individual factor in understanding the impact of envy. As envy itself is such a nuanced emotion, depending on how envy is interpreted and perceived due to varying degrees of internal attribution orientation, motivation and behaviors arising from the emotion, envy, should differ across people.

To elaborate, a feeling of envy invariably comes from the perceived relative inferiority of the self. People with high internal attribution orientation would find the source of the experienced inferiority from the experienced envy in themselves. Therefore, the inferiority of the self will be highlighted, leading one to perceive oneself to be an inferior being, just like the potential beneficiary of prosocial behavior. This would in turn result in the envier feeling higher connectedness towards beneficiaries. On the other hand, people with low internal attribution orientation would not necessarily find the cause of experienced inferiority in themselves. Therefore, they would not particularly find themselves connected to the potential beneficiaries.

Hypothesis 1: Internal attribution orientation moderates the relationship between feeling of envy and connectedness towards beneficiaries such that this relationship is positive when the internal

attribution orientation is high as opposed to low.

Envy and Prosocial Behavior via Connectedness towards Beneficiary

Although volunteering by definition does not accompany remuneration, people still participate in volunteering for various reasons. The motivation behind volunteering includes helping others, feeling useful, self-development, and even meeting people (Anderson & Moore, 1978). There is even a functional approach to understanding the motivation behind volunteering, as different personal and social functions can be fulfilled through volunteering (Clary & Snyder, 1999). Other than the functional approach, certain emotions can also lead people to engage in prosocial behavior. Among many, sympathy is one of the frequently studied factors which leads to prosocial behavior and willingness to donate (Baberini et al., 2015; Batson et al., 1997; Davis et al., 1989). Indeed, it is not hard to imagine how a person feeling sympathy towards the need would be willing to make charitable giving or participate in volunteering to help the needy.

Sympathy is a social glue, which bonds and connects people in times of trouble (Clark, 1997). It reflects how people feel towards what others are going through and is essential to volunteering as it facilitates such bondship. Therefore, people feel motivated to help others, even those they do not know (Clark, 1997). However, there is

an important aspect of sympathy. Volunteering induced by sympathy implies an unequal relationship between the beneficiary and the volunteer. That is, it implies that the helper is positioned as a superior actor (Froyum, 2018) and that the beneficiary is in an inferior social position. In other words, connectedness and unequal position are important characteristics of sympathy. In this light, sympathy does not seem a suitable explanation for the underlying mechanism through which envy leads to prosocial behavior. Although it is found that benign envy leads to a higher willingness to show prosocial behavior (Youn & Park, 2017), there has been no study explaining the underlying mechanism. While sympathy is a widely accepted factor inducing volunteering, the fact that envy was the stimulus makes sympathy an inadequate mechanism underlying the relationship.

To further elaborate, when the feeling of envy is induced, the envier experiences relative inferiority from social comparison. Therefore, especially under high internal attribution orientation, the envier is likely to find the cause of the inferior position in oneself, perceiving oneself to belong to a low social group. Therefore, it is not plausible that the envier would be able to perceive oneself as superior enough to sympathize potential beneficiary. Rather, it would be mere connectedness towards the beneficiary, not sympathy, that is induced by feeling envy. Therefore, I reason that for a high internal attribution

orientation condition, the feeling of envy would make people feel connected to a beneficiary, and thus be more willing to engage in prosocial behavior. Such reasoning is consistent with the in-group versus out-group effect. Donors tend to give more to potential beneficiaries who share similarities with them as there is less perceived social distance between the donor and the beneficiary (Sudhir et al., 2016). As such, connectedness towards beneficiaries based on perceived inferiority would be associated with a willingness to engage in prosocial behavior.

Hypothesis 2: The indirect effect of the feeling of envy on prosocial behavior through connectedness towards beneficiary is moderated by internal attribution orientation such that the indirect effect is positive when internal attribution is high.

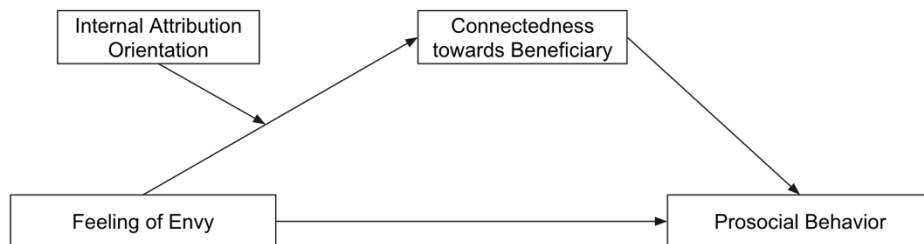


Figure 1 Theoretical Framework

Chapter 3. Study

The first objective of this study is to show that the feeling of envy leads people with a high level of internal attribution orientation to engage in prosocial behaviors. The second objective is to examine the connectedness towards beneficiaries as the underlying mechanism.

Method

Participants.

One hundred and ten participants residing in the United Kingdom were recruited via Prolific. Participants were provided with financial compensation for their participation. Four people were excluded as they failed to conduct the manipulation task, leaving the final sample of 106 participants (Mean age = 38.22, SD = 12.30; 71% females).

Procedure.

The study used a 2 (feeling of envy: control, envy) x 2 (internal attribution orientation: high, low) design. Participants were first asked to answer a questionnaire assessing their internal attribution tendency. Then, participants were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions (envy vs control). In the (benign) envy condition,

participants were asked to recall their experience of envying someone whose accomplishment was deserved. In the control condition, participants were asked to write what their typical day is like. Next, in an ostensibly different set of the survey, they were told that the study is conducted to understand how interested they are in helping others and for which cause. After reading a list of common causes of prosocial behaviors, participants were asked to freely write about any social causes that they would be willing to donate to, volunteer, and get involved in. Right after, they indicated how strongly they feel connected to the beneficiary, were sympathetic towards the beneficiary, and are interested in donating some of my time in helping others. Lastly, participants answered demographic questions.

Measures

Internal Attribution Orientation.

Participants indicated to what extent they agree to the following statement to measure internal attribution orientation (For one to succeed, personal factors (ability and effort) are more important than situational factors; 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). The higher value would indicate that the person is more likely to attribute the current achievement to internal factors.

Envy and Mood.

As a manipulation check for envy, participants answered the following question: Currently, I feel (1 = not at all envious; 7 = envious). Then to rule out mood as an alternative explanation, the overall mood was also measured: Currently, I feel (1 = very negative; 7 = very positive).

Dependent Variables.

Participants indicated how strongly they agree with the following statement on a 7-Likert scale: (1) I feel connected to the beneficiary (2) I feel sympathetic towards the beneficiary (3) I am interested in donating some of my time in helping others.

Control Variables.

Lee & Chang (2007) investigated various factors affecting people's likelihood of volunteering and donating respectively. Age was found to be a significant factor affecting the likelihood of volunteering such that younger people are more likely to participate in volunteering than older counterparts. Additionally, the relationship between income and volunteering was significant and negative (Lee & Chang, 2007). Therefore, these two variables were also measured and controlled throughout the analysis.

Results

Manipulation Check.

Manipulation of envy was successful as there was a significant difference in the feeling of envy between the envy group and the control group ($p < .05$). However, there was no significant difference in mood.

Connectedness towards Beneficiary.

A 2x2 ANCOVA on connectedness towards beneficiary indicated the two-way interaction of feeling of envy (Envy) and internal attribution orientation was significant, with age and income controlled. The moderating role of internal attribution orientation (IAO) is clearly shown in Figure 2. As shown in Figure 2, the simple slope of the relationship between envy and connectedness was significant and positive for the high internal attribution orientation condition ($b = 0.99$, $p < 0.01$) while it was not significant for the low internal attribution orientation condition ($b = -0.50$, $p = 0.26$). Taken together, Hypothesis 1 was supported. Additionally, the 2x2 ANOVA model on sympathy towards beneficiaries was not significant ($p = 0.47$), ruling out sympathy as an alternative explanation. Including age and income as control variables did not change the result ($p > 0.10$).

Outcome Variable: Connectedness towards Beneficiary

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Overall model	23.4989	5	4.6998	2.2135	0.059
Envy	2.1811	1	2.1811	1.1216	0.292
IAO	1.0263	1	1.0263	0.5278	0.469
Age	6.3315	1	6.3315	3.2558	0.074
Income	3.2004	1	3.2004	1.6457	0.202
Envy * IAO	10.7595	1	10.7595	5.5328	0.021
Residuals	198.3569	102	1.9447		

Table 1 ANCOVA on Connectedness towards Beneficiary

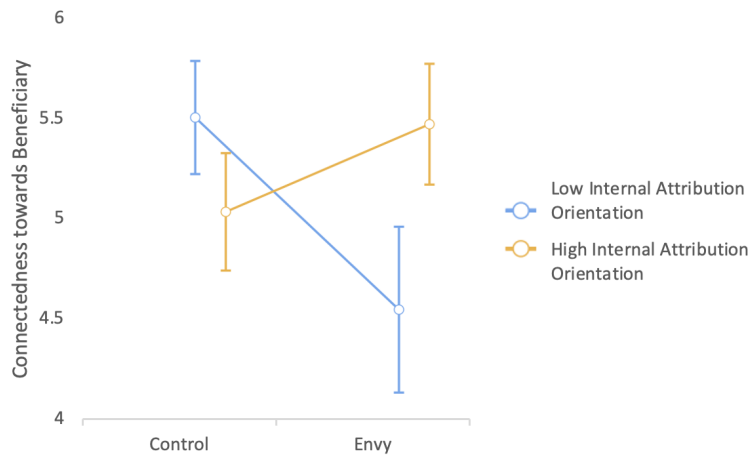


Figure 2 Comparison of Connectedness towards Beneficiary across conditions. The error bars indicate standard errors.

Mediation.

Next, a mediation analysis using the variables and willingness to volunteer as a dependent variable was conducted using Process Model 7 (Hayes, 2012). This model was tested whereby the feeling of envy affects the connectedness toward the beneficiary and where the effect of the mediator on the willingness to engage in prosocial behavior depends on the level of internal attribution orientation. Age and income were controlled for the testing. Bootstrap sampling employed to test conditional indirect effects confirmed the mediating effect. The 95% confidence interval for the index of moderated mediation did not contain zero ($b = 0.53$, $SE = 0.34$, 95% CI: [0.0395, 1.3253]), suggesting that there were differences between the indirect effects between the different levels of the moderator. The conditional indirect effect of envy on volunteer willingness was significant and positive for the high level of internal attribution orientation ($b = 0.35$, $SE = 0.20$, 95% CI: [0.0309, 0.7913]), 95% confidence interval excluding zero. However, the conditional indirect effect of envy on volunteer willingness was insignificant for the low level of internal attribution ($b = -0.18$, $SE = 0.21$, 95% CI: [-0.7008, 0.1012]). Taken together, Hypothesis 2 was supported. The direct effect of the feeling of envy on willingness to engage in prosocial behavior was not significant ($p=0.3825$) when controlling for the mediator, indicating full mediation.

Outcome Variable: Volunteering				
R = .3416	R-sq = .1167	MSE = 2.3963	F(4, 101) = 3.3366 (p=.0131)	
Model				
	Coeff	Std. Error	t	Confidence Interval
Constant	3.7108	.7231	5.1319	[2.2764, 5.1452]
Feeling of Envy	-.2454	.3114	-.7880	[-.8631, .3723]
Connectedness	.3561	.1073	3.3194	[.1433, .5689]
Age	-.1012	.1186	-.8531	[-.3364, .01341]
Income	.0387	.1168	.3310	[-.1931, .2705]
Direct Effect of Envy on Prosocial Behavior				
	Coeff	Std. Error	t	Confidence Interval
	-.2454	.3114	-.7880	[-.8631, .3723]
Indirect Effect of Feeling of Envy on Prosocial Behavior through Connectedness towards Beneficiary				
Internal Attribution	Effect	Bootstrap SE	Confidence Interval	
Low	-.1769	.2116	[-.7008, .1012]	
High	.3525	.1995	[.0309, .7913]	

Table 2 Results for moderated mediation hypothesis

Chapter 4. General Discussion

This study provided empirical support for how envy and internal attribution orientation interact to affect one's willingness to take part in prosocial behavior. It also advanced previous research on the impact of benign envy on prosocial behavior by identifying connectedness towards the beneficiary as an underlying mechanism. Taken together, this research adds to our understanding of the complex dynamics of envy by providing theoretical contributions to the study of envy.

Specifically, it was clearly shown that there is a significant difference in cognition of envy and consequent behavior depending on internal attribution orientation. A feeling of envy was associated with higher connectedness towards beneficiaries only for high internal attribution orientation but not for low internal attribution orientation. In other words, the mere experience of envy cannot explain the consequent behavior and the cognition process behind it. Rather, an individual difference such as the tendency to attribute the cause of the experienced emotion to the self greatly influences the following behavior tendency. The second part of the analysis also examined the

indirect effect of envy on prosocial behavior via connectedness towards the beneficiary for high internal attribution orientation. Envy is such an interesting emotion as it can result in varying consequences and this paper contributes to expanding the multifaceted nature of envy.

Limitations and Future Directions

Although there was no direct theoretical support for the proposition that a feeling of envy would be associated with connectedness towards beneficiaries for high internal attribution orientation, it was empirically demonstrated. However, this research has limitations in that it did not directly test whether the connectedness towards beneficiaries arises from perceived inferiority, as postulated. Therefore, future studies could conduct more thorough investigations by measuring the perceived inferiority of the self, thereby directly demonstrating that the envier felt a connectedness with the beneficiary as he perceived both the self and the beneficiary to be a relatively inferior being. Moreover, when measuring the intention to engage in prosocial behavior, participants were asked to freely write for which causes they are willing to volunteer, most of which were helping the homeless, underprivileged kids, poverty, who are in need, children, food banks, dogs, and healthcare. Although these

causes may imply the relative inferior position of beneficiaries, it does not directly show whether they do perceive those beneficiaries to be inferior beings. Therefore, it would have been a stronger study if a numerical measurement to test whether the beneficiaries represent inferiority was included.

Lastly, although attribution theory itself is widely researched, internal attribution orientation has not been actively investigated. Therefore, active studies on internal attribution orientation are needed to construct a stronger theoretical development. I hope that this research stimulates future studies regarding the moderating effect of internal attribution orientation in various contexts.

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국 문 초 록

시기심은 그 근원과 인식 방법에 따라 친사회적 행동에서부터 해로운 행동에 이르기까지 다양한 행동 결과를 이끌어낼 수 있다는 점에서 다차원적인 감정이다. 본 논문은 시기심의 모호성을 이해함에 있어 시기심의 유형과 더불어, 내적 귀인 지향성이 시기심에 따른 반응과 그에 따른 행동을 설명하는 데 있어 핵심적인 개인적 요인임을 시사한다. 이 연구는 시기심과 친사회적 행동 사이에서 내적 귀인 지향성의 조절 역할과 매개변수로서 수혜자와의 연결성의 효과를 살펴보고자 한다. 실험 결과, 시기심은 내적 귀인 성향이 높은 사람들에게 한 해 수혜자에 대한 연결성을 통해 친사회적 행동과 긍정적으로 관련이 있는 것으로 나타났다.

주요어: 시기심, 선의적 시기심, 내적귀인성향, 친사회적 행동

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