



# Bringing You Down Versus Bringing Me Up: What Underlies Malicious and Benign Envy?

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## Introduction

### Background

•Van de Ven et al. (2009) contradicted the entirely negative connotation of envy by establishing two faces of the emotion:

- Malicious envy**, in which people want to bring their envy target down by derogating them in some way
- Benign envy**, in which people want to improve themselves to obtain a comparable advantage to their envy target
- Previous research supporting the existence of the two faces of envy has focused on the defining characteristics of the emotions and behaviors associated with them
- However, it is not yet clear what antecedents lead a person to experience malicious versus benign envy

## Study 1

### Purpose

•Examine explicit and implicit self-esteem as individual differences that predispose people to experience malicious versus benign envy

### Background

•Self-esteem (SE) refers to one's global feelings about oneself (Brown & Mankowski, 1993)

- Explicit SE**- conscious and self-reportable
- Implicit SE**- unconscious and not self-reportable (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995)
- Congruent high SE** = high explicit, high implicit SE
- Discrepant high SE** = high explicit, low implicit SE
- People with discrepant high SE are defensive and engage in compensatory action when there is a threat to their positive self-concept
  - Being exposed to an upward social comparison (envy target) should threaten people with discrepant high SE, thus eliciting malicious envy
  - People with congruent high SE are confident in themselves and when faced with an upward social comparison should exhibit benign envy

## Method

### Participants

•109 University at Buffalo undergraduates (71 women)

### Procedure

- Participants completed the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1960) online outside of the lab to measure explicit SE
- Upon arrival to the lab, participants completed the Name-Letter task (Nuttin, 1985) to measure implicit SE
- Participants were exposed to a manipulation of social comparison:
  - Upward vs. Downward Social Comparison** (matched for gender)
    - Read a fake article about a peer who either received a prestigious internship (upward) or was denied a prestigious internship (downward)

### Dependent Variables

- Participants then completed measures of malicious and benign envy
- Rating of the envy target and a difficult anagram task to assess task persistence

### Hypotheses

- Discrepant high SE**: exhibit malicious envy after upward comparison
- Congruent high SE**: exhibit benign envy after upward comparison

## Results

### Analytical Strategy

•Multiple regression analyses were used to assess the relationship between explicit SE, implicit SE, and indicators of malicious and benign envy

### Rating of Envy Target (Derogation)

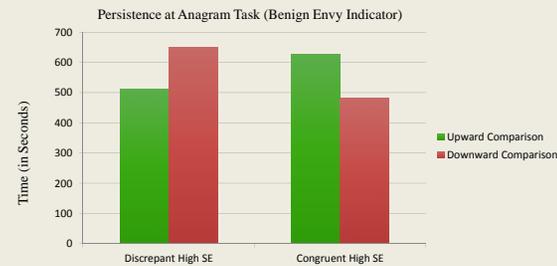
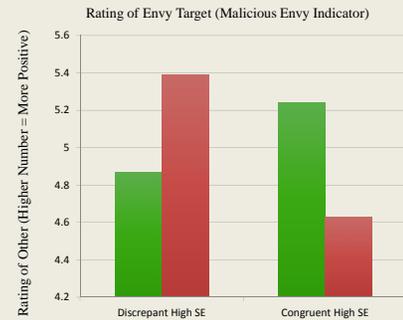
•As expected, the three-way interaction was significant ( $p = .001$ ), as was the two-way interaction between condition and implicit SE within high SE ( $p < .001$ )

- Consistent with predictions, participants with discrepant high SE exposed to upward comparison rated the target more negatively relative to (1) when they were exposed to downward comparison ( $p = .03$ ) and (2) congruent high SE exposed to upward comparison ( $p = .082$ )

### Task Persistence (Attempting to Improve Oneself)

•As expected, the three-way interaction was significant ( $p = .002$ ), as was the two-way interaction between condition and implicit SE within high SE ( $p = .029$ )

- Although not significant, participants with congruent high SE exposed to upward comparison tended to persist longer relative to (1) downward comparison ( $p = .104$ ) and (2) discrepant high SE ( $p = .214$ )



## Summary

- Consistent with predictions, participants with discrepant high SE exhibited indicators of malicious envy after an upward comparison
- Partially supporting predictions (hypothesized interactions reached significance but simple effects did not), participants with congruent high SE tended to exhibit indicators of benign envy after an upward comparison

## Study 2

### Purpose

- Examine the social comparison processes of contrast and assimilation as the underlying psychological mechanisms of malicious and benign envy, respectively
- Noninvasively assess personal resource evaluations *while* participants are performing a task after being exposed to an upward or downward social comparison

### Background

•People obtain information about themselves by comparing themselves to others (social comparison; Festinger, 1954)

- Contrast and assimilation are two social comparison processes
  - Contrast** occurs when people notice the differences between themselves and others and then base self-evaluations on these differences (Morse & Gergen, 1970; Mussweiler, 2003)
    - Malicious envy involves distancing oneself from the envy target
  - Assimilation** occurs when people notice the similarities between themselves and others and base self-evaluations on these similarities (Brown, Novick, Lord & Richards, 1992)
    - Assimilating to someone with an advantage should instill confidence and lead to motivation to improve oneself, consistent with benign envy

•The biosychosocial (BPS) model of challenge and threat assesses psychological processes by measuring physiological responses (Blascovich & Tomaka, 1996).

- Challenge** (a positive state) occurs when personal resources are evaluated as higher than or equal to perceived situational demands
  - Marked by higher heart rate (HR), higher ventricular contractility (VC), higher cardiac output (CO), and lower total peripheral resistance (TPR)
- Threat** (a negative state) occurs when personal resources are evaluated as lower than perceived situational demands
  - Marked by higher HR, higher VC, lower CO, and higher TPR

## Method

### Participants

•119 University at Buffalo undergraduates (68 women)

### Procedure

- Participants were attached to physiological sensors and sat for a 5-minute resting baseline period
- Participants were randomly assigned to two manipulations:
  - Contrast vs. Assimilation Effects**
    - Wrote down all the differences (contrast) or similarities (assimilation) between two pictures for two minutes
  - Upward vs. Downward Social Comparison**
    - Same manipulation as Study 1

### Dependent Variables

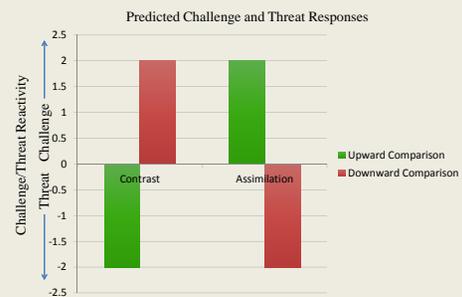
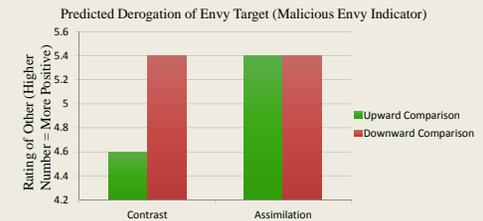
•Speech about college internships and rating scales of envy target

### Hypotheses

- Contrast**: exhibit self-doubt (threat) and malicious envy after upward comparison
- Assimilation**: exhibit confidence (challenge) and no malicious envy after upward comparison

## Analytical Strategy

- An ANOVA will use prime and social comparison to predict indicators of malicious and benign envy, as well as the cardiovascular markers of challenge/threat
- Data has been collected and analyses are underway



## Summary

- If results are consistent with predictions, contrast and assimilation effects will be supported as underlying psychological processes of malicious and benign envy, respectively
- In addition, self-doubt would be supported as an antecedent to feeling malicious envy

## Conclusion

- Altogether, Study 1 and Study 2 attempt to uncover what leads to malicious versus benign envy. This research extends the current research on malicious and benign envy by focusing on the antecedents of the emotions, rather than simply associated characteristics.
- Future research in this area could investigate:
  - Malicious and benign envy across genders
  - The role of physical attributes in malicious and benign envy
  - Additional antecedents of malicious and benign envy, such as promotion vs. prevention-focused mindsets

## Slide 1

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**MS16** Mark Seery, 4/17/2014

**MS33** Mark Seery, 4/17/2014

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**2** Stephanie Smallets, 4/18/2014

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