

## Envy and Its Transmutations

Richard H. Smith

A routine fact of life is that we often meet people who are superior to us in some way. When their superiority matters to us, we can feel envy. Here is Shakespeare's Cassius, a literary prototype of the envying person, as he protests the honors being heaped on Caesar:

Why, man, he doth bestride the narrow world  
 Like a Colossus, and we petty men  
 Walk under his huge legs and peep about  
 To find ourselves dishonorable graves. (Shakespeare, 1599/1934, p. 41)

These words show an important quality of envy. The envying person notices another's advantage or superiority and feels *inferior*. Caesar was an exceptional man who had achieved military and political greatness, and Cassius felt undersized and trivial next to his grand presence. Envy begins with an unflattering social comparison resulting in a quick, painful perception of inferiority (e.g., Foster, 1972; Parrott, 1991; Salovey & Rodin, 1984; Silver & Sabini, 1978; Smith, 1991; Smith et al., 1999).

It is worth dwelling on why an unflattering social comparison might catch our attention and then create a painful emotion such as envy. From an evolutionary point of view, it is highly adaptive for people to have an inclination to scan their environment for threats of all kinds. In terms of potential threats from others, this also means that people should have the capacity and the inclination to assess their rank (e.g., Beach & Tesser, 2000; Buunk & Ybema, 1997; Frank, 1999; Gilbert, 1999; Smith, 2000). This would be especially true in situations where group members must compete for limited resources tied to sustenance and mating, as may have been typical when current human tendencies evolved (e.g., Gilbert, 1999). Low ranking signals that one should act submissively; high ranking enables dominance. There are potentially severe consequences for misjudging rank. Individuals who believe they can dominate a group, when in fact they cannot, will find

that group members possessing actual superiority will assert themselves, perhaps with hostility and aggression. Those who exaggerate their rank on characteristics that matter in mate selection may find themselves rejected, unappealed, and made fools. Not surprisingly, empirical evidence indicates that assessments of rank are made quickly, at the earliest stages of social interactions, and, perhaps without much explicit cognitive processing (Kalma, 1991).

Social comparisons serve decisive inferential functions in ability assessments. As Festinger (1954) argued in his now classic analysis of social comparison processes, human beings are motivated for adaptive reasons to assess their abilities and opinions. Because objective, nonsocial standards are actually lacking for most such assessments, people typically look to others as a standard instead. Not only do social comparisons inform us about whether we have performed well or poorly, but they also localize the cause of our performance (e.g., Kelley, 1967). The more our performance is discrepant from how others have done, the more something about ourselves becomes the "cause" of our performance. An unflattering social comparison creates a direct route to a negative inference about the self, and so it is only natural for such a comparison to create an emotional reaction like envy.

It is difficult to overemphasize the broad and potent role of social comparisons in social life. Considerable research confirms Festinger's insights into the nature of self-evaluative judgments (see Buunk & Gibbons, 1997; Suls & Wheeler, 2000, for reviews). We need at least some sense of where we stand on important attributes because our effectiveness in group settings partly depends on it. It matters, and often matters profoundly, how we compare with others. The outcomes we receive across important domains of life, from work to romance, frequently result in no small way from where we fall on local distributions of valued traits and abilities (Frank, 1999). The accumulating pattern of these outcomes is a central contributor to our sense of self-worth and to the emotions we feel as we interact with others (Smith, 2000).

Paradoxically, the importance of social comparisons in self-evaluation may help to explain why research also shows that people use social comparisons not only for accurate self-assessment but also for self-enhancement (e.g., Brickman & Bulman, 1977; Wills, 1981). Especially when the implications of social comparisons threaten our self-esteem, we tend to select or construe comparison information in a biased, ego-enhancing manner serving our vanity as much as our need for accurate self-knowledge (see Suls & Wheeler, 2000, for recent reviews). The self-esteem implications of social comparisons can be so menacing that concerns over accurate self assessment take a back seat. There is a basic antinomy between using social comparisons to assess our abilities and using them to maintain an ego enhancing sense of superiority. As will be outlined later, that accuracy can

be trumped by self-enhancement may help to explain how the invidious pain of an unflattering comparison can transmute itself into an emotion more bearable to the envying person's self-image.

#### **WHAT ARE THE MAIN CONDITIONS NECESSARY FOR ENVY?**

##### **Similarity**

We envy people who are similar to ourselves (e.g., Aristotle, 322 B.C/ 1941; Heider, 1958; Parrott, 1991; Tesser, 1991). Social comparisons, in general, work this way. We seek social comparisons and are affected by social comparisons with people who are like us (Festinger, 1954). Otherwise, we are unlikely to find social comparisons with them useful or consequential (e.g., Goethals & Darley, 1977). Envy involves "potter against potter," to use Aristotle's words. Cassius shares with Caesar commonalities of military background and patrician class, and so he is primed by such similarities to find Caesar's superiority invidious.

##### **Self- Relevance**

Envy also requires that the domain in question be self-relevant. We must link part of our core self-worth with doing well in this domain. This makes sense as it would be improbable for a social comparison to create an emotion of any kind unless it is linked to something important to the self. Without this self-relevance, the disadvantaged person will feel little erosion in his or her sense of self. Cassius has military and political ambitions of his own that are typical for the social class that Caesar and he share, and so the enveloping shadow cast by Caesar's successes creates a personally charged contrast. Research by Tesser (1991) and by Salovey and Rodin (1984) confirms the important role of self-relevance. In fact, Tesser's research shows that low self-relevance, together with similarity or closeness, actually produces the opposite of envy - a kind of "pride in other" (Tesser, 1991).

A study by Salovey and Rodin (1984) offers especially good evidence for the importance of both similarity and self-relevance in envy. College student participants received feedback on a career aptitude test suggesting that their career prospects in their chosen field were promising or poor. Then, they were given the career aptitude information of another student (i.e., a comparison person of similar background), who had done well or poorly on either the same or different career domain. Envy arose only when the participants, having received negative feedback, compared themselves with the student who had done better on a self-relevant career domain.

The combining of similarity and self-relevance probably helps to account for why the other person's advantage matters when we envy. The

advantaged person, most of whose attributes we see in ourselves, nonetheless has something that we want but do not possess. Part of envy involves a painful, inferiority-tinged longing for something dearly wished for but enjoyed by another who is otherwise much like ourselves (Parrott & Smith, 1993).

### **Low Control**

People feeling envy must also believe that the desired attribute is beyond their power to obtain (Smith, 1991). This feature may seem contradictory. On the one hand, people are more likely to envy those who are similar to themselves - which implies that the envying person should be able to imagine the possibility of possessing the desired attribute. As Elster (1998) notes, envy "presupposes that I can tell myself a plausible story in which I ended up with the envied possession," which is why "princes may envy kings and star lets envy stars, but most people envy neither, or, only weakly" (p. 169). On the other hand, this sense of possibility is more characterized by it "could have been me" rather than it "will be me." The envying person believes that obtaining the desired attribute is unlikely even as he or she can imagine what it would be like to have it. It is near in one's imagination, but unreachable as a sober prediction. When we envy, we feel inferior because another person possesses something that we long for - and to make matters worse, it is a frustrated longing. Control over altering one's inferiority is an important though little studied aspect of envy. However, it does appear that emotional responses to unflattering comparisons will tend to be free of inferiority and frustration if the advantage seems changeable (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997; Testa & Major, 1990).

### **Fairness of the Advantage**

A final antecedent condition of envy concerns perceptions of fairness. Envy seems to have a resentful quality to it. When we envy, we often feel that the envied person does not quite deserve his or her advantage (e.g., Heider, 1958; Scheler, 1915/1961; Smith, 1991), or, at least that our disadvantage is undeserved (Ben-Ze'ev, 2000). But envy is not resentment proper (Rawls, 1971). Generally, if the advantage is unfair, especially in terms of *objectively* derived and agreed upon standards, the full-blown emotions of resentment and indignation rather than envy will result (e.g., Walker & Smith, 2002). Envy occurs when the advantage is painful but fair by such objective standards. Envy seems linked with a sense of injustice, but this sense of injustice is qualitatively different from that which produces indignation and resentment in their unalloyed forms. It is *subjectively* derived and nurtured. This notion of subjective injustice will be discussed further, but the key point here is that envy seems flavored by resentment, but of a kind qualitatively

distinct from the feelings aroused by objectively unfair advantage. When we envy, we feel inferior because another person, otherwise like ourselves, possesses something that we long for but cannot have. Also, in a subjective sense, we usually feel that this advantage is not quite deserved.

#### **THE HOSTILE COMPONENT OF ENVY**

Definitions of envy and scores of scholarly treatments also point to the hostile side of the emotion. Cassius' envy is characterized by feelings of inferiority, painful longing, frustration, and subjective injustice, but he also feels hostile.

. . . What trash is Rome,  
What rubbish and what offal, when it serves  
for the base matter to illuminate  
So vile a thing as Caesar! (Shakespeare, 1599/1934, p. 52)

Hostility is a defining component of the envy. Without it, the emotion might better take another label, such as "admiration." Those who have studied envy usually acknowledge nonhostile forms (e.g., Parrott, 1991; Rawls, 1971; Silver & Sabini, 1978) but also argue that these benign varieties are less prototypic and are more straightforward to grapple with as an object of study (e.g., Foster, 1972). It is the hostile component of envy that moves the envious Cassius to bring Caesar down, that explains why envy is one of the seven deadly sins (e.g., Schimmel, 1993; Silver & Sabini, 1978), that accounts for why envious people will sacrifice their own outcomes to diminish the envied person's advantage (e.g., Zizzo, 2000), that suggests the reasons why envy is such a strong predictor of malicious joy when the envied person suffers (Brigham et al., 1997; Smith et al., 1996), that explains why people often worry when they are the targets of envy (e.g., Foster, 1972; Schoeck, 1969), and that, in general, shows why envy may produce a multitude of antisocial behaviors (e.g., Beck, 1999; Duffy & Shaw, 2000; Schoeck, 1969).

Why is envy a hostile emotion? If we feel inferior because of an unflattering comparison, why not simply surrender to this reality? Why not feel happy for the advantaged person and find ourselves inspired?

#### **Defensive Reaction to Self-Esteem Threat**

One approach to understanding the hostile component of envy is to see it as a defensive response (e.g., Beck, 1999; Schimmel, 1993). Many perspectives on human motivation claim that people have a strong desire to maintain a positive self-evaluation (e.g., Beach & Tesser, 2000). Invidious comparisons oppose this goal. The unflattering comparison either creates self-diminution or keeps in view a previously conceded sense of inferiority.

The resulting emotional pain may command a defensive reaction. It seems only natural to want to rid oneself of this pain, and an immediate, gut response may be to lash out at the spur cause of this pain, the envied person.

Perhaps the most simple way to channel such defensive ill-will and, at the same time, to repair the damage done to one's self-estimation is to find ways to derogate the envied person (Salovey & Rodin, 1984; Silver & Sabini, 1978; Tesser, 1991). What may often happen is that an envy-producing comparison on an ability dimension produces derogation on a moral dimension (D. Montaldi, unpublished data). It may be difficult to deny an ability difference, to convince oneself that a self-relevant domain is unimportant, or to do much to close this difference. But it may be quick and easy to construe the envied person as morally flawed. These perceived moral flaws can become an effective point of convergence for one's angry feelings. In social comparison terms, the experience of envy may begin with an upward comparison on a *nonmoral* dimension, which then inspires an immediate downward comparison on a moral dimension (Wills, 1981). The sting of the envied person's advantage yields to one's own quick-developing superiority on more "important" moral domains.

The study by Salovey and Rodin (1984) already cited provides good evidence for this downward comparison process. Participants who felt envy because they compared themselves with a fellow student who had outperformed them on their own career domain tended to derogate this person. The derogation emerged both on rating scales and in open-ended written comments. Salovey and Rodin (1984) cite one particularly telling comment:

no matter how much I tried to get on with the task, my mind kept returning to that below-average profile. Soon, I was feeling a bit worried and very sensitive about my abilities. Then, when I tried to read the other guy's story, I couldn't help but think, 'If he's such a hot-shot premed and does so well in his classes, I bet he's really just a nerd: I bet he's one of those unfriendly, antisocial weenies that hang out in the library 20 hours a day; he probably couldn't have an interesting conversation with anyone.' (p. 790)

### **Violation of an "Ought" Force**

Unfair advantages, judged by objective standards, create indignation and resentment proper rather than envy. But, as noted earlier, envy also appears to have a sense of injustice allied with it - a sense qualitatively different from that found in indignation and resentment proper. The envious individual does not quite believe that the envied person's advantage is fair. Heider (1958) argued that this is because envy will typically occur between people who are similar in terms of background, class, and the like, the first antecedent condition for envy mentioned previously. Psychological balance forces require that similar people should have similar outcomes, a

principle that Heider called an "ought" force. The envious person feels a sense of injustice because the envied person's advantage violates what "ought" to be. Naturally, a person who feels unfairly treated will feel angry (Brown, 1986). Note again that this sense of unfairness captured by Heider is distinct from "objective unfairness" described earlier. Objective unfairness follows from clearly unjust procedures and is backed by the consensual power of local standards and norms. Such backing should whip up especially open and vigorous hostility. Violations of an "ought" force of the type that Heider describes are more private, much less consensual, and lead to bottled and constrained hostility, but hostility nonetheless.

If we go by how Cassius reacts to Caesar, we can see the process that Heider describes at work. Although Caesar's great achievements and talents make Cassius feel inferior, at the same time he also feels similar to Caesar in terms of background and experience. He tries to bring Brutus into his circle of conspirators by bringing Caesar down to a position of similar background and worth to Brutus.

I was born free as Caesar: so were you:  
 We both have fed as well, and we can both  
 Endure the winter's cold as well as he .... (Shakespeare, 1599/1934, p. 40)

Cassius goes further to suggest that he is *more than* Caesar's equal in certain respects. He describes how "once, upon a raw and gusty day" Caesar dared Cassius to swim with him across the Tiber. They both plunged in, but before they reached the other side, Caesar cried for help. Cassius carried the "tired Caesar" from the waves to the shore. It frustrates and infuriates Cassius that a man of such a weak constitution should "get the start of the majestic world, and bear the palm alone" (p. 41).

And this man  
 Is now become a god, and Cassius is  
 A wretched creature, and must bend his body  
 If Caesar carelessly but nod on him. (Shakespeare, 1599/1934, p. 40)

Across the board, the envy-inspired conspiracy that fells Caesar is cobbled together by men who think of themselves in his general league. The ways in which they believe they are similar to Caesar contribute to the envy-rooted indignance they feel over his rise to an almost god-like status.

### Subjective Injustice

As noted earlier, envy is more likely in situations in which the envying person has little power to change things. In many cases, the domain of comparison is also one in which the envying person feels little to blame for his or her inferiority either. People often envy another person's greater inborn talents, for example. Caesar is superior to Cassius in certain natural

qualities, many of which may partially explain Caesar's ability to soar in popularity and power. Cassius is blameless for his natural inferiority (Ben-Ze' ev, 2000). Furthermore, Caesar should hardly be praised in a moral sense for his natural gifts. The consequences of natural superiority amplify over time if both the advantaged and the disadvantaged persons pursue their goals with equal intensity - just as a person with a longer stride makes quicker progress than a person with a shorter stride (Rousseau, 1754/1984). Although the envying person has no legitimate cause for making a public claim against the envied person's advantage, as most societal norms include natural ability as a legitimate basis for determining merit, the resulting sense of injustice can remain in the form of secret protest even so. Like violations of the "ought force," this subjective sense of injustice is also distinct from resentment proper. Resentment proper arises from obvious cases of unfairness in which societal norms support the outward display of indignation. But regardless of its societal legitimacy, because subjective injustice is still a justice-based phenomenon, hostile feelings can flavor the envying person's reactions. The focus of these hostile feelings is on the envied person who has the "unfair" advantage (Smith, 1991).

There is an existential complaint at the bottom of this subjective sense of injustice. In Parrott's (1991, p. 14) words, "One's place in the world, one's lot in life, is not quite what one wants, and it all seems the luck of the draw." Another person enjoys an advantage longed-for by oneself, and one feels impotent to attain this advantage. Furthermore, there seems no clear reason why this person is more deserving of this advantage than oneself. Any number of unspoken phrases can repeat themselves in an internal dialogue often infused with anger and ill-will, phrases such as: "Why does he deserve all the talent? It's not fair that she has such good looks!" We rarely voice these sentiments, especially if they contain explicit ill-will. If we do, observers will find them ignoble and illegitimate and will attribute them to envy (Silver & Sabini, 1978).

Some evidence for the role of subjective injustice in the hostile aspect of envy, as well as feelings of inferiority-caused discontent, emerged in a study by Smith et al. (1994). Participants wrote detailed, narrative accounts of experiences in which they felt strong envy. They then completed a set of items asking them to assess whether the envied person's advantage was "objectively" unfair (e.g., "Anyone would agree that the envied person's advantage was unfairly obtained."), "subjectively" unfair (e.g., "It seemed unfair that the person I envied started out in life with certain advantages over me."), and whether this advantage created a sense of inferiority (e.g., "The discrepancy between the person I envied and me was due to my own inferior qualities."). Additional items assessed the degree to which participants felt hostile toward the envied person and discontented because of this person's advantage. Beliefs about personal inferiority strongly predicted discontent but not hostile feelings, suggesting that feeling inferior alone is

insufficient for the full experience of envy. Beliefs about objective injustice predicted hostility but not discontent, suggesting that obvious unfairness should create hostility, but should have little connection with seeing oneself as inferior and feeling depressed as a result. Beliefs about subjective injustice predicted both discontent and hostility, suggesting that subjective injustice is linked to both of these defining aspects of the experience of envy.

### **Envy and Shame**

Yet another explanation for the hostility associated with envy stems from the affinity between envy and shame and the frequent co-occurrence of these emotions. Shame can be defined as "painful feeling of having lost the respect of others because of the improper behavior, incompetence, etc., of oneself" (*Webster's New World Dictionary*, 1982, p. 1308). Whether the emotion arises from moral or nonmoral failings, a large part of the shame involves a sense that the self has been rendered defective, and at least implicitly, inferior. Like envy, shame involves some form of negative self-evaluation (see Gilbert, 1998, and Tangney & Dearing, 2002, for reviews), although this negative self-evaluation need not have relativistic origins. Envy, of course, requires an unflattering social comparison. Even so, Kaufman (1989) has dubbed shame the "affect of inferiority," and work by Gilbert and his colleagues shows shame to be highly correlated with measure of unfavorable social comparisons (Gilbert, 1998). It may be that any sense of being defective tends to imply a relativistic judgment.

Shame is different from envy in that it involves a more constant self-focus (Smith, 2000). Whereas envy seems to produce a dual focus, on both the self and the envied person, shame emerges from situations in which the defective self dominates one's attention, without a necessary regard to the conspicuous presence of a particular unflattering social comparison. Another distinctive aspect of shame is that it is often the public exposure of moral or nonmoral failing that encourages this sharp focus on a negative self-appraisal (but see Tangney & Dearing, 2002); in fact, it may be that such public exposure can prick the emotion in the first place (Smith et al., 2002). Hence, the close connection that exists between shame and shaming. Although public exposure directs concerns toward what others think of the self (in this sense the focus is external rather than internal), the spotlight is still directed at the self - and a negative aspect of the self.

Research evidence suggests a strong link between shame and anger (Tangney & Salovey, 1999), especially among people who are dispositionally shame-prone (e.g., Tangney, 1995). This link is surprising, at least in one sense. A consistent focus on one's own defects and failings should produce nonhostile, depressive responses (Gilbert, 1992) rather than anger.

However, the fact that shame is strongly associated with anger suggests that a person who is suffering a devalued self will tend to lash out at others. With shame, the focus of hostility, if it is not turned inward, may be on the person who seems to trigger or aggravate the feeling, perhaps the person who brings the moral or nonmoral failing out into the open, through shaming (Smith et al., 2002).

How might shame help to explain the hostile aspect of envy? First of all, if it is true that shame is one frequent result of a devalued self, then any instance of envy, which by definition creates a sense of inferiority, has the potential to create shame as well, along with the potential for hostility often associated with shame. Strictly speaking then, part of invidious hostility can be shame-based, rather than envy-based alone. However, when an unflattering social comparison is the dominating impetus for the overall affective state, the label of envy may be the best summary term to define the experience.

Shame enters into an explanation for the hostility associated with envy in another way. Envy violates a powerful social norm requiring that we be happy, rather than displeased and hostile, when others succeed (Heider, 1958). This is one reason why people feeling envy report thinking that others will disapprove of their feelings (Parrott & Smith, 1993). Thus, when we feel envy, we tend to be ashamed of it. The further combining of shame and envy may then lead to an even more painful self-diminishment, and perhaps an even more vigorous hostility directed outward as a result.

D. Montaldi (unpublished data) argues that some cases of envy involve shame exactly because the envying person feels both inferior and also to blame for his or her inferiority. That is, the envied person's superiority is something that might have been obtained if one had only done the necessary things to make it happen. One's sense of inferiority is compounded by the knowledge that one could have and should have done certain things but, in fact, did not. Montaldi labels this "merit" envy because there is a clear recognition that the envied person's superiority is deserved. However, positive feelings of admiration often fail to result because the superiority is such a threatening affront to the self. Envy arises instead, along with shame, originating from at least three sources: the shame of feeling envy and its concomitant sense of inferiority and hostility, the shame of realizing that one is to blame for one's inferiority, and the shame of feeling shame.

## **ENVY AS AN EMOTION EPISODE AND ITS TRANSMUTATIONS**

Explanations for the hostile component of envy highlight the challenge of understanding the emotion generally. It is tempting to examine any emotion at the narrow point in which it is first evoked; in the case of envy,

this point is at the first recognition of one's inferiority and the painful longing, frustration, subjective injustice, and ill-will that quickly follow. Perhaps for many emotions, this approach is adequate. But as Parrott (1991) argues, envy is best understood as an evolving episode, "unfolding in time" (p. 12). It begins with unflattering comparison, and it can then proceed in various directions as the envying person grapples with the fact of his or her inferiority, the presence of hostile feelings, and the arousal of other, overlapping emotions, such as resentment proper and shame. The end point of this process can be a felt emotion very different from the incipient experience, attracting a label different from envy - from the envying person's point of view if not from an observer's perspective.

One reason why envy has the capacity to proceed in different directions comes back to the initial and repeated point made about envy, namely that it starts with the recognition of inferiority on a self-relevant domain – and that, again, the envying person will be motivated to resist this conclusion. As noted previously, inferiority is too painful a condition for most people to bear, for both internal and self-presentational reasons. When made to feel inferior because of an unflattering social comparison, people appear capable of numerous defensive maneuvers to turn the tables on this conclusion (e.g., Elster, 1998; Tesser, 1991).

An additional reason comes back to the second key point made about envy, its hostile nature. People are taught that it is wrong to feel hostile toward another person, even if they believe that on some subjective level, the envied person's advantage is not quite fair. As with inferiority, they will resist owning these feelings in their private mind, as well as in their public selves. It is certainly improper, in most cultures, to openly express envious hostility. It is shameful. Thus, people find ways to reframe or relabel these hostile feelings as well.

The repugnant nature of envy is an important point to highlight. As Silver and Sabini (1978, P: 106) note, "calling someone envious, like calling him greedy, arrogant, lazy, or gluttonous, is far from complimenting him . . . . Envy is one of seven deadly sins." It has a "vicious character" (Elster, 1998, p. 165), and "few things are more destructive to our self-image" (Foster, 1972, p. 165).

The self-threatening, abhorrent nature of envy works against its emerging in anything but an altered form. It is "normally suppressed, preempted, or transmuted to some other emotion" (Elster, 1998, p. 165). As Farber (1966, p. 36) puts it, envy has "protean character" and a "talent for disguise" and is "often simply impossible to recognize." This often seems true from the observer's point of view and "also for the envious one himself, whose rational powers may lend almost unholy assistance to the need for self deception" (Farber, 1966, p. 36). Once again, an episode of envy will take

different turns that depend on how the envious person reacts to the painful self-implications of the emotion and its socially repugnant nature.

People feeling envy will suppress the emotion to various degrees. At the one extreme are people who recognize their envy for what it is and who manage to avoid its suppression. They recognize their inferiority, acknowledge that it hurts, and own up to the ill-will that comes with it (Elster, 1998). Even if they feel a private sense of injustice, this sense is quickly discounted as an appropriate avenue for coping with the feeling. Any shame that arises works to diminish hostile feelings rather than aggravate them. At the other extreme are people who are so well-prepared with creative defenses that envy is suppressed before it can break through into consciousness. These people will feel hostile toward the envied person, but see no connection between this hostility and envy, and will feel no shame over feeling this ill-will. Awareness of the underlying cause of their ill-will is bypassed, and they see the envied person's advantage as unambiguously unfair and the advantaged person as worthy of hate. In between these extremes are perhaps the more typical cases in which the emotion is at least half-acknowledged for what it is. But, over time, it is either reframed to lessen the hurt (Parrott, 1991; Silver & Sabini, 1978; Tesser, 1999) or transmuted into another emotion, such as resentment proper, selected because it has more socially acceptable attributes (Elster, 1998).

None of the conspirators who assassinate Caesar construes their motives as envious. The sentiments expressed by Cassius (inferiority, painful longing, frustration, subjective injustice, and hostility) are all hallmarks of envy, but he sidesteps using the label of envy to characterize his motives, in his private soliloquies or in his public exhortations as he recruits Brutus into the conspiracy against Caesar. Rather, he focuses where he can on attributes of Caesar that he sees as inferior, such as noting Caesar's feeble inability to best him in swimming. He highlights the similarities between his own background and Caesar's and evokes memories of experiences in which he in fact seemed superior to Caesar. Finally, he paints Caesar as arrogant and ambitious. All these construals provide ways for Cassius to lessen any sense that he is actually inferior to Caesar. Thus, he can come to believe that he is feeling outraged rather than merely envious.

The envying person may be able to transmute the feeling and thus succeed in self-deception, but often fails to convince observers (Silver & Sabini, 1978). There is something in envy that creates emotional leaks, despite efforts to hide its presence. Antony sees the telltale signs of envy in Cassius. In the classic speech following Caesar's assassination and in his retrospective remarks at the end of the play, Antony undermines the envy-inspired assumption on the part of the conspirators that Caesar was ambitious. He suggests that "private grievances" are the clearer motive for the conspiracy, rather than legitimate complaints. At the very end of the play, he sums up the motives of the conspirators, except for Brutus, as doing "that

they did in envy of great Caesar" (p. 134). Caesar, himself, also saw Cassius as envious by disposition and sensed the danger in it:

Yond Cassius has a lean and hungry look ... Such  
men as he be never at heart's ease Whiles they  
behold a greater than themselves

And therefore are they very dangerous. (Shakespeare, 1599/1934, p. 43)

One of the illuminating aspects of *Julius Caesar* is how envy invades so much of the play, even when it goes unstated. Cassius, seemingly in his every word and action, is vigorously pursuing the envy-triggered goal of ridding Rome of Caesar. Yet, he never uses the label of envy to identify his motives, even in his private moments. He seems to realize that the attribution of envy would undermine his conspiratorial goal, and this is especially evident in his method of recruiting Brutus into the fold. He knows that acting out of envy would seem vicious, small-minded, and unjustified - a shameful motive. His recruiting of Brutus is crafted to appeal to Brutus' high-minded sense of himself, the "noble" Brutus. He warns against the flatterer even as he flatters Brutus, reminding Brutus of the high regard people have for him and his ancestors. He makes it seem as though it would be impossible for Brutus to take an action that was sullied by base motives. Then, after arguing that Caesar has no natural superiority over Brutus in terms of character and worth, he makes the case that Caesar has overshot himself and that his ambition is dangerous to Rome - while those around Caesar decline in power and suffer a "falling sickness." The lure works, and Brutus, now "whetted against Caesar," joins the conspiracy.

Was Brutus envious? If so, it was very well defended. To the end, he fashions an impervious wall of honorable motives to deflect both the public and private attribution of envy. Yet, it seems that one of the interesting aspects of envy is that it can come in such buried forms. When it does, it may be most dangerous. Brutus, convinced of his pure motives, now throws himself into the collective task of murder, damning Caesar for crimes that may be committed rather than ones already committed - all the while repeating phrases, such as "I have no personal cause to spurn at him."

And therefore think him as a serpent's egg  
Which hatched, would as his kind grow mischievous,  
And kill him in the shell. (Shakespeare, 1599/1934, p. 56)

Interestingly, although Brutus is loath to conclude that he has a hint of envy toward Caesar, he is nonetheless very aware of how best to act so as to fend off its apparent presence. Brutus is acutely aware of appearances. As the conspirators plan the assassination of Caesar, the question arises whether others, such as Antony, should die with Caesar. But Brutus worries that their "course will seem too bloody" and that, afterwards, it will seem

motivated by "wrath in death and envy" (p. 61). He worries further that they should kill Caesar "boldly" rather than "wrathfully."

Let's carve him as dish fit for gods,  
 Not hew him as a carcass fit for hounds .  
     . . . This shall make  
 Our purpose necessary, and not envious ....  
 We shall be called purgers, not murderers. (Shakespeare, 1599/1934, p. 62)

There seems to be a special danger in the full suppression of envy, because its latent presence may motivate all the more hostile actions precisely because the underlying, baser motive never surfaces. In terms of awareness, Brutus gets nowhere close to admitting his envy. It is Cassius, perhaps sensing latent envy in Brutus, who provides the building blocks for moral outrage, giving the noble Brutus the noble motive of serving his ancestors and serving Rome. He urges Brutus to take action, emboldened and validated by a consensus born of conspiracy.

This analysis of the envy felt by Cassius and Brutus is largely speculative, as there is no direct empirical evidence for various turns that envy can take. Nonetheless, it suggests the noxious role of envy in social interactions. The more people can avoid the label of envy to describe their feelings, the more they might end up acting inappropriately because they are convinced of the righteousness of their cause. It takes a truly base nature to *know* that one is envious, and then to say "I will act on this envy." As Elster notes, "I do not know of any society in which an individual would consciously confess to envy . . . that is, hostility towards the nonundeserved fortune of another, and justify aggressive or destructive behavior in terms of the motivation" (1998, p. 169). The person who correctly sees his or her destructive behavior as envy-based, embraces this motivation, and acts destructively in this spirit, seems a truly evil person, a dispositional attribution the self usually shuns with the greatest of passions. We can also look to Shakespeare for an example here. Iago, another immortal literary prototype of the envious person, envies Othello and confesses this motivation to himself and to those who join him in luring Othello into the abyss of morbid sexual jealousy. He seems to feel no shame over the nature of his motivation and, at the end of the play, among the human wreckage that he has caused, shows no remorse. Othello looks down at Iago's feet to check for the cloven hooves of the devil.

#### **THE ENVY EPISODE**

To summarize, any episode of envy begins with noticing a desired advantage enjoyed by another person. The advantage produces envy when the envied person is similar in background characteristics, when the advantage resides in a self-relevant domain, when prospects of obtaining the

advantage seem unchangeable or blocked, and when the envying person is unable to claim that the advantage is objectively unfair. We want what the other person has, believe (subjectively but not objectively) that our similarities in background suggest that we should have it, but conclude that is beyond our grasp. All of these features appear necessary for envy to occur. Low similarity will tend to make the comparison inconsequential (Testa & Major, 1990). A comparison domain of low-self relevance creates admiration and basking in reflected glory (Tesser, 1991). The belief that the advantage is changeable creates inspiration and emulation (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). Construing the advantage as objectively unfair brings about full-blown indignation and resentment proper (Walker & Smith, 2002).

Once the basic conditions are met, envy should result. Then, as the episode of envy evolves, as various other emotions come on board, and as the awareness of feeling envy waxes or wanes, it will take one of a number of forms. For example, if the focus is on one's own blameworthy inferiority, then, to use Montaldi's suggestion, "merit" envy results. The typical path for such envy to take may be a downward comparison on moral domains. This deflects a focus on one's inferiority, providing a justification for any lashing out at the envied person in a hostile manner. Such a course may be expanded further if envy arises in conjunction with shame, as this may create the potential for further defensive ill-will. However, to the extent the envying person can remain conscious of the unjustified nature of his or her hostile feelings, perhaps more constructive responses will occur - such as working hard to overcome the disadvantage, despite the odds, or, downplaying the importance of doing well on the domain (e.g., Tesser, 1991). Guilt, an emotion that seems less likely to induce self-degradation and defensive ill-will compared with shame (Tangney & Salovey, 1999), may help guide the emotion episode in this less hostile direction. Alternatively, a constant dwelling on one's own inferiority might lead to depression (Smith et al. 1994).

Another form of envy results when subjective unfairness of the advantage dominates the emotion. Privately, people feeling such envy will have a strong sense of being unfairly treated and may develop a simmering, frustrated resentment over their lot in life (Scheler, 1915/1961). They will avoid giving their feelings the label of envy, however, because this reduces the legitimacy of their hostility. They will sense that these feelings violate social norms and may realize that other people will quickly detect their hostility and attribute this hostility to envy. Thus, they avoid acting on their hostile envy, but are primed for feeling *schadenfreude* if misfortune befalls the envied person (e.g., Smith et al., 1996). Perhaps they will engage in backbiting, gossip, or indirect sabotage. Over time, if they keep a focus on the "unfair" advantage rather than their own contribution to the situation, they might be able to convince themselves as well as others that they have a legitimate cause for feeling hostile. If so, the attribution of envy will

fade into a distant public and private background. Once hostile feelings are legitimized, any residual envy becomes fully transmuted into righteous indignation and resentment proper, giving free license for direct and open actions designed to undermine the advantaged person's position. An observer might still try to attribute the envying person's behavior to envy, but this claim will be rejected as preposterous by the envying person - so far removed is the indignation from its invidious origins.

### **EVIDENCE FOR THE TRANSMUTATION OF ENVY AND IMPLICATIONS**

As noted earlier, the tracing of how episodes of envy might evolve remains largely speculative. Research by Smith and his colleagues suggests the role of subjective injustice concerns in hostile envy. Salovey and Rodin's (1984) work indicates that, under the conditions right for envy, people will express hostility. The research linking envy with *schadenfreude* (Smith et al., 1996) suggests how powerfully envious feelings are conducive to ill-will, even when the misfortune befalling the envied person is undeserved (Brigham et al., 1997). Studies by Tesser (1991) show how self-evaluation maintenance processes create disliking for the advantaged person or devaluing of the comparison domain. But no studies have examined precisely how envy might evolve over time and transmute itself.

One potentially fruitful approach to examining transmutational phenomena while also suggesting the value of understanding this process is suggested by a recent model of prejudiced responses (Fiske et al., 2002; Glick, 2000). In this model, prejudice directed at traditionally disadvantaged groups (Hispanics, African Americans) is distinguished from prejudice directed at advantaged groups (Asians, Jews). Both types of prejudice can have negative consequences, but Glick (2002) argues that envious prejudice can be uniquely virulent. Economically successful groups, if they are considered outgroups, tend to be viewed as both lacking in warmth and in competition with one's ingroup. The combination of coldness and competition suggests that the outgroup *intends* to use its success at one's own group's expense. A key feature of the model is that it is the *emotion* directed at the outgroup that will largely characterize the nature of prejudicial response. In the case of envious prejudice, there are a number of important implications.

Envious prejudice will be especially hostile if the envious person can find reasons to construe the envied outgroup as unfairly achieving its success. As would be expected, given the way that envy evolves, any hint of unfairness will be grasped quickly and held onto stubbornly. For example, envious prejudice will be especially strong if the majority group senses that its "social status has shifted downward" (Glick, 2002, p. 130) relative to the envied group, as if something rightfully its own has been taken away. Hostility will be enhanced still further if the envied group appears to have

traits, such as shrewdness and cunning, that seem to explain its increasing advantage, at least in part. These traits provide the convenient downward comparison on moral dimensions that deflects invidious comparison on nonmoral dimensions and provide justification for hostile feelings and actions.

A historical example of envious prejudice is the treatment of Jews by the Nazis (Glick, 2002). Prior to Hitler's rise, many Germans held negative attitudes toward Jews. Glick argues that these attitudes were in part based on envy directed at the perceived economic power and cultural influence of Jews in Germany. Hitler capitalized on this prior envious prejudice to make Jews "a socially plausible cause of Germany's problems" (Glick, 2002, p. 133). Hitler emphasized stereotypes of Jews suggesting both superiority (e.g., shrewdness, cunning, power grabbing), as well as moral inferiority (e.g., lazy and unclean) to fuel both fear and contempt. Remarkably, Jews were "simultaneously portrayed as possessing a superhuman potency and will to dominate, yet also as servile, parasitical, and inferior" (Glick, 2002, p. 134). Jews were cast as threats to Germany and inherently deserving hostile treatment. The threat that Jews seemed to represent together with their perceived vileness, all manufactured to suit social-psychological needs, masked the envy actually underlying the hostility. Hitler and many Germans hated the Jews, but were incapable of admitting or even realizing any role of envy in their hatred. The unconscious, yet all the more virulent, envy seems to explain the willingness and desire to exterminate the Jews, even at the expense of managing the war against the Allies. As the tide turned and Germany's military fortunes crumbled, Hitler took valuable resources away from the fighting to hasten the killing of as many Jews as possible. Of course, understanding the behavior of the Nazis resists single explanations, but envy provides a partial glimpse into the possible motivations capable of producing both genocide and self-destructive behavior.

## CONCLUSIONS

So many of the examples in this chapter come from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* that it is worth noting that Shakespeare, himself, was the target of envy. We can thank envy for providing us with the spur that then produced the first recorded reference to Shakespeare by another Elizabethan playwright, Robert Greene.

There is an upstart crow beautiful with our feathers that, with his 'tiger's heart wrapped in a player's hide,' supposes is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you; being an absolute Johannes Factotum, in his conceit the only shake-scene in a country. (Schoenbaum, 1975, p. 115)

Robert Greene was older than Shakespeare and yet less successful. He must have been envious of this "upstart crow" who, despite lacking the

university education of most of his peers, was not only writing spectacularly successful plays of three major types (histories, tragedies, *and* comedies), but was also strutting his "feathers" on the stage as an actor as well.

And so envy is a natural, common response to another's advantage, and Shakespeare knew it well. He realized that it could be a painful and repugnant emotion that has the capacity to transmute itself into other feelings better suited to our private and public selves. He also realized that in this transmuted form it could provoke extreme behavior, such as murder in the case of Caesar's assassination and pure evil in the case of Iago's bringing down of Othello. Once transmuted, hostile feelings and actions could take malicious flight, untethered by the social constraints that quell aggression linked merely to envy that is out in the open.

But envy is not the inevitable response to another's advantage, and we can see this in Shakespeare's life as well. It is impossible to be sure about the feelings Shakespeare aroused in those around him. But we do know that two friends collected his plays for him, some years after his death. One of these friends, Ben Jonson, a fellow actor and playwright who may also have envied Shakespeare while the bard was still alive, wrote a fond eulogy for this "swan of Avon" once called an "upstart crow." Evidently, Shakespeare could even win over the heart of a competitor, and, in the more than 400 years since, the rest has been adoration.

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# The Social Life of Emotions

Edited by

**LARISSA Z. TIEDENS**

*Stanford University*

**COLIN WAYNE LEACH**

*University of California, Santa Cruz*

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