

Brandishing our inner talisman

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Mexicans call it *mal de ojo*, and in Brazil it's *olho gordo*. Turks call it the Eye of Medusa and ward it off with the ubiquitous talisman called nazar. American Jews use the Yiddish phrase *Keyn aynhoreh* to counter the jinx.

Cultures all over the world, dating back to antiquity, have some version of the “evil eye” — the poisonous stare of those who envy others’ good fortune. We recognize these beliefs as magical thinking, of course, but as with any superstition that is so widespread, belief in the evil eye raises some intriguing questions: What psychological purpose do these beliefs serve, and what are their roots in human nature?

[Psychological scientists at Tilburg University in the Netherlands have an idea about this common fear and the magic used to fend it off.](#) Niels van de Ven and his colleagues wondered whether perhaps this superstition reflects a fundamental human wariness about envy — and an attempt to defuse its destructive power. If that’s the case, then we all probably try every day to defuse envy in more ordinary, less magical ways — perhaps by simply being nice.

In order to test this notion, the Dutch scientists had to create a laboratory version of enviable good fortune. To do this, they recruited a group of participants, each of whom was paired up with a partner for an experiment. In fact it was a sham experiment, and the “partner” was a hired accomplice. Each of the participants received a financial bonus, while their partner did not, thus creating a situation in which the participant might suspect that the partner would be envious.

Afterward, the scientists covertly measured the participants’ altruism toward the “envious” partner, in different ways. For example, the participants and their partners took a test — again a sham — and the partner asked for help. The scientists kept track of how much assistance the participants offered. In a variation of this study, the partner “accidentally” dropped something, and the scientists noted whether the participants helped pick it up.

Before crunching the data, however, the scientists asked the participants this important question: Were they worried that their partner would be envious in a malicious way? Or did they believe that their partner would be envious, but in a benign way? This was an important distinction because, after all, the volunteers had done nothing to deserve malice. They had simply been “luckier” in that they received money. The scientists suspected that the participants would use benevolence to fend off their partners’ supposed envy — but only if they suspected that the envy was malicious and threatening.

And that’s just what they found. The more the volunteers anticipated being envied in a threatening way, the more helpful they were. Interestingly, they were actually *less* helpful than controls if they anticipated *benign* envy, suggesting that their preemptive altruism was motivated by fear rather than sympathy for the less fortunate. The experimenters ran another version of this experiment in which some participants clearly deserved their good fortune and others clearly did not, and as expected, those who were

undeserving helped more to compensate for their unearned windfall.

Good fortune is tricky territory. We all want it, yet we don't want to be punished just for pulling the long straw. If generosity helps to ward off the envious, that's at least a talisman that we all carry in our bag of magic tricks.