

Fear of Being Envied Makes People Behave Well Toward Others

December 03, 2010

It's nice to have success—but it can also make you worry that the jealous people will try to bring you down. New research in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, has found that the fear of being the target of malicious envy makes people act more helpfully toward people who they think might be jealous of them.

In previous research, Niels van de Ven of Tilburg University and his colleagues Marcel Zeelenberg and Rik Pieters had figured out that envy actually comes in two flavors: benign envy and malicious envy. They studied people who showed these two kinds of envy and found that people with benign envy were motivated to improve themselves, to do better so they could be more like the person they envied. On the other hand, people with malicious envy wanted to bring the more successful person down. Van de Ven and his colleagues wondered what the experience was like for the people who are the target of the envy.

“In anthropology, they say if you are envied, you might act more socially afterward because you try to appease those envious people,” van de Ven says—by sharing your big catch of fish, for example. They wanted to know if these observations from anthropology held up in the psychology lab.

In experiments, he and his colleagues made some people feel like they would be maliciously envied, by telling them they would receive an award of five euros—sometimes deserved based on the score they were told they'd earned on a quiz, sometimes not. The researchers figured the deserved prize would lead to benign envy, while the undeserved prize would lead to malicious envy. Then the volunteer was asked to give time-consuming advice to a potentially envious person.

People who had reason to think they'd be the target of malicious envy were more likely to take the time to give advice than targets of benign envy.

In another experiment, an experimenter dropped a bunch of erasers as the volunteer was leaving; those who thought they'd be maliciously envied were more likely to help him pick them up.

“This sort of serves a useful group function,” says van de Ven. We all think better off people should share with others, “but that's not something we are inclined to do when we are better off.” This fear of envy can encourage us to behave in ways that improve the social interactions of the group.