

Turning Green to Gold: How Envy Can be Productive

Mark Bolinger, Indiana University, USA

Envy is a nearly universal feature of the human experience; it's everywhere you turn. Virtually every human who has ever walked the planet has at some time been envious of something that someone else has or has achieved. This is problematic, because experiencing envy is painful, and is often thought to be counterproductive. As the Ancient Greek Philosopher Antisthenes noted, "As iron is eaten by rust, so are the envious consumed by envy."

However, new research is now taking a closer look at envy and challenging the notion that it leads to exclusively negative outcomes. In their new paper, Mark Bolinger of Indiana University and co-author Alex Bolinger of Idaho State University argue that, under certain conditions, envy may serve as a powerful source of entrepreneurial motivation that facilitates personally and societally beneficial outcomes. For example, Rudolf Dassler, the founder of athletic shoe and apparel giant, Puma, started the company in 1948 as a result of a falling out he had with his brother and the founder of Adidas, Adi Dassler. The envy that he felt for his brother's company helped drive Rudolf to build Puma into the world's third largest sportswear manufacturer, worth an estimated \$4 billion, and providing jobs to over 14,000 employees.

So what determines whether envy will be a positive or negative force? The authors suggest that it depends on the envy type. Envy towards others often results from making "upward social comparisons," which is the act of comparing oneself to others who are perceived to be superior in some important way. If after making these comparisons, individuals conclude that they are inferior in the important characteristic, they can develop one of two types of envy: benign or malicious. Those experiencing benign envy want what the comparison party has, and are likely to be motivated to work harder or otherwise take action to ascend to the other person's level. This type of envy is usually experienced by individuals who have a "growth mindset," and believe that ascending to the other person's level is possible. In contrast, individuals who feel malicious envy tend to have a "fixed mindset," and think that they have no chance of equaling the other person due to unchangeable factors such as a lack of natural talent. As a result, they wish that the comparison person did not have what is being envied, and often experience ill will towards that person. Rather than motivating productive pursuits, this type of envy can manifest in potentially destructive and counterproductive ways such as the desire to undermine or even sabotage the other person.

However, there is a silver lining. The authors propose that malicious envy can transition to a more benign form, meaning that even envy that is initially malicious can be productive. For example, in 1994, Disney Animation Studios head Jeffrey Katzenberg was denied a coveted promotion at the Walt Disney Company. He responded by resigning, founding competitor DreamWorks Pictures, and using his knowledge of Disney's creative pipeline to rush "Antz" to theaters less than a month before Disney's topically and visually similar film, "A Bug's Life." In the years that followed however, Katzenberg and DreamWorks moved on from their origins as makers of knock-off films aimed at undermining Disney to become a legitimate competitor, with popular film franchises such as "Shrek" and "Madagascar" to their credit.

Furthermore, understanding the type of envy a person is feeling is important for more than just transitioning to more benign types. The research suggests that the type of envy determines how long the resultant envy-driven motivation lasts. For example, benign envy may motivate or even inspire someone to achieve a goal through steady, consistent effort as it did Rudolf Dassler, whereas malicious envy is more likely to inspire strong, urgent motivation like the desire for revenge that burns white hot, but then rapidly cools and is not sustainable.

The keys to harnessing envy for productive outcomes, then, are:

- 1) Recognizing the motivational potential of envy, and applying it to productive pursuits.
- 2) Embracing a "growth mindset" that you are capable of ascending to another person's level, even if you are currently experiencing more malicious forms of envy.
- 3) Recognizing that some types of envy allow for more persistent motivation than others, and being aware of and honest with yourself about what type of envy you are feeling. This information can be used to know whether your envy-driven motivation is likely to be intense and short, or less intense and more persistent, so that you can consider whether these characteristics will be acceptable for your application.

CONTACT: Mark Bolinger; markboli@iu.edu; (T): +1 812-856-0322; Indiana University; 1309 E. 10th Street, Suite 3100, Bloomington, IN, 47405-1701, USA.