

## Envy: On Meaning of Envy in her Psychodynamic and Psychosocial Aspects

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Received: May 18, 2019; Published: June 14, 2019

### Abstract

After a long meta-analysis of psychoanalytic and psychosocial studies addressing envy, the author comes to the conclusion that the expression 'recognizing envies' best fits the description of the envious feeling since envy - the worst and most unavowable of all emotions - proves to be a real theoretical puzzle.

After a historical excursus, he examines some different frameworks where envy has been studied: the correlation or non-correlation with gender difference, the innate or secondary dimension, the kind of envied object, the influence on personality structure, egosyntonic and egodystonic envy, envy as a defence against the upsurge of desire, envy as an aspiration to possess the other's qualities, the perverse aspects of envy.

The work ends with a review of the main psychosocial aspects of envy and on the dimensions of envy in institutions and work places, examining the relative defence mechanisms. It is to be hoped that in the future further research will be done for example on new forms of envy linked to netsurfing and its virtual features, where personal relationships are more difficult to handle.

**Keywords:** Psychodynamic; Psychosocial Aspects

### Introduction

A more suitable title for this issue should be 'Recognizing Envy' since envy - the worst and most unavowable of all emotions - proves to be a real theoretical puzzle.

This feeling is characterized by a number of different phenomenological features (ill will, anger, emulation, admiration or 'little envy', destructive envy, benign or malicious envy) and it is not easy to define each kind of envy univocally and find the right framework social, intra-psychic, relational, religious, philosophical, economic, etc. within which it can be identified.

The etymological dictionary defines it as a 'feeling of resentment and ill will for the other's good fortune, happiness or qualities' as well as a 'feeling of admiration for the other's possessions and qualities'. It comes from the Latin term *invidere* which means 'to look askance at'.

The envious person is full of regret and resentment when he or she feels unfairly excluded from those goods or when he or she owns them already but he or she would like to enjoy them exclusively.

### Historical excursus

The real meaning of life was created by the first act of envy in human history. In fact By the envy of the Devil, death came into the world (Wisdom 2,24); the Devil, already banished from Heaven, was envious because lower creatures had God's favour and for this reason he

lured Adam and Eve into sin. Following this first appearance of envy many others came along: the first murder was caused by Cain's envy of Abel, God's favourite; Esau envied Jacob because he was the firstborn and this feeling sowed dissension in his family; Joseph was sold as a slave by his envious brothers and David was persecuted by Saul; again, it was out of envy that the Hebrews handed Christ over to Pilate.

Probably envy was considered an almost unavoidable evil concerning everybody, children included. In fact Saint Augustine portrayed a very disquieting picture when he said: Myself have seen and known even a baby envious; it could not speak, yet it turned pale and looked bitterly on its foster-brother<sup>1</sup>.

Yet envy, the origin of many evils, is not included in the first list of deadly sins.

Pope Gregory the Great gave it prominence in his classification by ranking it second, just below pride. He had to include it to draw attention to its pervasiveness in human society [1].

In Catholicism, the deadly sins are seven and correspond to the main passions, all including a fleeting hint of pleasure and satisfaction which does not belong to envy: an envious person is someone who suffers, who does not find any pleasure in envy and when he or she surrenders to this passion he or she feels grudge and pain, instead.

It is not by chance that Dante puts the Envious in Purgatory and not in Hell: having already suffered enough on Earth because of envy, they do not deserve a more severe punishment in the afterlife. He did not know the term *schadenfreude* (pleasure derived from the misfortunes of others) but described it very precisely by having the eyes of the Envious sewn shut with wire.

The Protestant Reformation (especially Calvinism), the prelude to capitalism, turned envy into competitiveness [2] but in the following century, with the Council of Trent (1545-63), the Catholic Church would revive the concept of solidarity and charity typical of Early Christianity. This egalitarianism looked askance (envy) at those who wanted to stand out, rising above the rest. It tended to fight off individualism by promoting brotherly equality and by opposing the egotism and the wealth of the rich.

It was the Age of Enlightenment, industrialization and modernity that introduced a universal concept of otherness in a new context dominated by the production of material goods and the growing wealth of nations, dismissing altruism based on Christian charity. This shift led to major social changes as well as to the democratic spread of justice and social equality from which different aspects of envy would develop: envy between genders, trades, in politics, in the arts, etc [3].

The best way to analyse envy is to consider the symbolic value of money and property accumulation, two icons of modern society: the envious person desires possession and suffers because he or she cannot have goods or wealth which he or she thinks are 'unfairly' owned by others.

### Envy in human life: psychodynamic issues

Envy as a manifestation of primary destructiveness is an innate feeling belonging to every human being.

It is this very aspect which has made envy central to psychoanalytic research from the beginning, even though it has been given different meanings over the years.

At first envy was assimilated to other feelings such as jealousy or greed but then differences were finally acknowledged.

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<sup>1</sup>The Confessions of Saint Augustine translated by Edward Bouverie Pusey (Book I).

Envy always comes before jealousy; it is always directed towards a partial object<sup>2</sup> and it is not the outcome of a triangular relationship. On the contrary, jealousy is linked to the Oedipal triangle (father, mother, son or daughter) and is nourished by a hatred for the rival and a love for the object of desire. Greed, which is hinged upon introjection, aims at possessing everything perceived as valuable in the object, whereas envy aims at destroying its goodness and works through projective identification<sup>3</sup>.

Envy is generally acknowledged as a hostile feeling, culminating in ill will and malice, which stems from the perception of superiority or advantage held by another. A precondition then, for the feeling is the perception of difference, a situation in which some have and others have not!

An overview of the most influential psychoanalysts who have so far dealt with envy will offer some insight into the main theories concerning the different types of envy:

1. **The correlation or non-correlation with gender difference:** According to Freud [4], envy and ill will related specifically to gender, primarily as an expression, in the girl, of her narcissistic humiliation and hostile feelings about the boy's possession of a penis.
2. **Innate or secondary dimension:** Klein's ideas presented a radical revision. In her opinion, envy was neutral gender and central in the mother-son relationship. For Klein the original envy is that which one feels towards the first object of love, namely the maternal breast that nourishes: the breast is good when it gives nourishment, bad when it denies it and holds it back. Klein [5] defined envy as an oral-sadistic and anal-sadistic expression of destructive impulses, operative from the beginning of life, and [having] a constitutional basis.

Joffe [6] suggested that psychoanalytic theory should not accept the notion that a neonate, from birth, can distinguish between self and object. For him envy is too complex to be primary. Thus, he argued: Rather than being seen as a primary drive, it can be seen as a secondary motivating force which may have positive and adaptive consequences in ongoing development or may lead to the most malignant pathology. It has an intimate relation to the state of the individual's narcissism and self-esteem, and the essential stimulus to its development lies in disturbances within that domain.

Racker [7] always thought that envy cannot be felt without the existence of a moment previous to it when what the other has and one lacks is painfully recognized. The frustration which arouses the envious attack is caused by this first awareness that a difference exists.

Etchegoyen, *et al.* [8] agreed with Racker, but argued that often, separation anxiety depends on envy, because it is easier to attribute hostility to the object's absence than to recognize the envious attack which can be aroused by its presence.

In conclusion, it is the intolerance of object relationships and the infant's dependence which implies and encompasses envy. Envy does not become apparent unless it is adequately interpreted.

The envied object or the one against which the envious attack is directed: the penis, the mother's breast that is the mother's image of goodness, the member of another group, negative capability<sup>4</sup>, the Ego, the relationship, one's own desire or the other's, objects whose real nature is not even known, an idealized object.

According to Klein, the mother's breast, as a mental object of the maternal image, is not attacked enviously because of the good things it contains, its goodness, but because of the frustration caused by the fact that it keeps the coveted goodness for itself. Indeed, the breast can give milk and love, but it cannot transfer its patience and generosity to the infant - it keeps them for itself, and they cannot but arouse envy. The child feels he is completely shut out of this inexhaustible patience and generosity, the true goodness, which is precisely that "aristocratic superiority" he must disparage and destroy.

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<sup>2</sup>Parts of the body either real or fantasmatic and their symbolic equivalents are mainly involved. A person may even identify himself or herself or with a partial object.

<sup>3</sup>Inconscious mechanism by means of which the subject introduces his own self totally or partially inside the object, to damage, possess or control it.

<sup>4</sup>Negative capability is the ability to tolerate frustration believing that meaning can ultimately be found.

Bion [9] identified another major consequence of envy also in group dynamics. Within a particular group, defined 'parasitical' by the author, the predominant emotion is envy and the group tries to destroy the member, called 'the mystic', who brings creativity and new ideas.

In Attention and Interpretation [10] Bion pointed out that the most biting envy is aroused by the inability to tolerate ignorance and/or frustration.

In Cogitations [11] Bion, however, removes the Kleinian uniform when he writes: "envy contributes to the belief that external objects are the patient's thought. Since he cannot admit to being dependent on an external object, the patient pretends to be (in order to escape, ultimately, the feeling of envy) like a breast that feeds on itself, the producer as well as the consumer of what it depends on this life". He suggests that the envious attack is not directed against an object or a structure (the Ego or the mother's breast) but against the relationship. It is an attack on the link which implies that the relationship is real.

Here again, for Bion, envy is confusion/adherence between your desire and the desire of the other. On closer examination the feeling of envy proves to be a mirage: the other - his or her desire - represents a completeness and self-sufficient consistency from which you are excluded.

Rosenfeld [12] split personality into two parts: one which can bear dependence (defined as libidinal self), and another, dominated by envy, which tends to deny dependence and dreams about possessing everything it needs. At the core is the omnipotent fantasy to possess the mother's breast. In such situation, the destructive, envious part of personality is idealized, takes on enticing features and controls psychical mechanisms.

Rosenthal [13], from a Jungian perspective maintained that envious people are fascinated by the phallic mother archetype, a bisexual figure who 'has everything'. Such a figure is thought to belong to the imagination of the envious patient who struggles in vain to defend himself or herself against it by resorting to the mechanism of splitting.

Whereas Kleinian theory sees envy as involving two subjects, Lacanian theory approaches envy as a triangular relationship between an envied subject and a person who is only partially envious, watched by a 'big Other'. This theory helps understand that envy and narcissism are related and that they originate at the stage in psychic development that Lacan calls the 'mirror stage'. Whereas the Kleinian approach highlights the differences between the Envious and the Envied and the position of dependence of one on the other, Lacanian theory outlines the role of the 'double', the symmetrical position of the Envied and the Envious, and the alienation to the Other [14].

Lacan [15] argued: Everyone knows that envy is usually aroused by the possession of goods which would be of no use to the person who is envious of them, and about the true nature of which he does not have the least idea... Such is true envy.

### **Influence on personality structure**

Abraham considered envy as a firmly structured feature, the permeating feature of a personality which is extremely conflictual, narcissistic and dominated by sadistic drives. Individuals with this personality.... through obstinacy, envy and self-overestimation destroy all relationships in their environment, even their whole life [16].

### **Egosyntonic and egodystonic envy**

In her clinical experience Spillius [17] has found envious reactions in virtually every patient, usually unconscious and relatively mild, a type of envy she calls egodystonic.

Spillius thinks this envious reaction is 'ordinary' envy, inevitable and not usually destructive.

Spillius believes there is a second kind of envious experience which is qualitatively and quantitatively different, more severe and disturbing, and more integrated in the Ego (egosyntonic). It is experienced as grievance, or as what she also calls impenitent envy. Sado-masochistic feelings are central.

### Envy and False self

The relationship between pathological envy and False self<sup>5</sup> is more evident in the Narcissistic Personality Disorder as documented by divergent sources such as Kohut, Kernberg and the DSM - IV<sup>6</sup>.

### Envy as a defence against the upsurge of desire

Envy performs a protective function for the psyche, supplying internal limits which protect the psychism when desire increases [18]. Without the mediation of envy, there is no longer the distance necessary between one individual's unseen interiority (he or she envies silently, secretly), and the other's, a mirror imagine of one's desire. Often you can desire without knowing exactly what: envy gives us guidelines when this is the case.

### Envy as the aspiration to possess the other's qualities

In Group Psychology and The Analysis of the Ego Freud [19] argued: A little boy will exhibit a special interest in his father; he would like to grow like him and be like him and take his place everywhere. We may say simply that he takes his father as his ideal. This behaviour has nothing to do with a passive or feminine attitude towards his father (and towards males in general); it is on the contrary typically masculine. It fits in very well with the Oedipus complex, for which it helps to prepare the way.

This is the origin of envy as the other's desire. Freud does not mention it but describes it accurately pointing out its functional aspect ("for which it helps to prepare the way").

Envy leads us as if we were blind dowsers searching for desires, making us human. Our constant conflicts are the price we have to pay in order to be able to desire.

### Perverse aspects of envy

Although envy is a normal part of the emotional make-up of human beings and may stimulate a creative wish to emulate, when acted upon it is an emotion that is most clearly perverse. It is an emotion that in expression destroys self as well as other. In envy, we essentially want what we know the other wants or possesses; we are constantly in the thrall of the desire of the other. Envy holds an ambivalent stance toward the object, having simultaneously both the desire to possess it and the desire to destroy it in order to spite the (powerful) other. This powerful other is the one who possesses the desired object, or, more correctly, who embodies the desired characteristic, because the other is primarily envied for something he or she is, not simply what he or she has [20].

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<sup>5</sup>The false Self refers to that part of the personality structure which reflects the adaptation to the demands of the environment in the attempt to feel better accepted by the others.

<sup>6</sup>The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, published by the American Psychiatric Association, provides a common language and standard criteria for the classification of mental disorder.

Envy, however, being a human characteristic, can also act as a motivating force and stimulate - through emulation - the person to progress and improve.

To conclude these considerations on psychodynamic aspects of envy, we can quote a sentence by Melanie Klein [5]: "Freedom from envy constitutes the basis of the inner resources and adaptability that are noticed in those people who, even after serious difficulties and psychic suffering, regain peace of mind. An attitude of this kind, in which there is gratitude for the pleasures of the past and joy for what the present can give, manifests itself in serenity".

### The psychosocial aspects of envy

Durkheim claimed that no society can exist without a set of basic emotions. Following this line Parsons [21], the prophet of 'affective neutrality', pointed out that our society would be able to get rid of emotional participation as a result of its determination to resist emotions along with its - there again - unavowable fear of talking about envy.

Every historical period has its emotional culture. In our age, a lot of time is dedicated to investigating emotions. Social organizations direct their efforts towards an emotion focused training of their staff. Their aim is to obtain emotional control and make emotions less natural and more and more cultural; as a consequence, emotions become a series of rules, habits, situational standards (known by all members of a social group) governing the display of feelings: when and how someone can get angry, quarrel, criticize, etc.

From a psychosocial perspective the question is: to what extent does society (or more precisely the social context) foster envy? Would envy exist if social rules did not govern it? Or rather are both of them independent objects?

Primary emotions (anger, joy, fear) are universal and ubiquitous but how does envy manifest itself in different social environments?

According to Stearns and Stearns [22], in American society, anger is an enemy which has been overcome and removed whereas envy as an emotion that may result in aggressiveness has probably increased. On the other hand, the pursuit of success - regarded in Latin countries as a sort of shame and therefore denied - has definitely escalated.

It may be difficult to acknowledge that competition is useful, but a social system left to its own devices can boost envy which, stemming from admiration and identification, may thrive within close relationships. At this point, envy becomes apparent when one finds out he or she has been outdone by a peer he or she cannot emulate. What happens then? Does one acknowledge the other's success or begin wishing his or her ruin? From a phenomenological point of view, envy involves stopping any action aimed at reaching the object while focusing exclusively on the desire to prevent the other from reaching it too.

Nietzsche [23] and Scheler [24] describe accurately the grievance caused by the hatred for winners usually regarded as handsome, strong and powerful. Such emotion is so intense that the envious person tends to ascribe their success to vice rather than virtue!

Once again from a psychosocial standpoint, Parkin [25] elaborates the concept of social closure, arguing that it is based precisely on those elements which tend to boost envy: possessions, job titles, educational qualifications and, even though they are not explicitly referred to, lifestyles. According to Riesman, *et al.* [26], 'lifestyles' are the tool used by hetero-directed individuals to achieve a specific aim: to gain approval from significant others through standardization. This seems to be the glorification of the general perception of wellbeing, a sort of optimistic belief held by a person who sees himself or herself as rich in order not to fall into the depths of envy, which is therefore exorcised. Nowadays the habit of using low cost products allows people to control envy and becomes a consumerism within everybody's reach.

In institutions and work places there are various forms of envy. Jon Elster [27] defines the "formation of adaptive preferences" the individual's attempt to adapt his needs (and therefore some forms of envy) to his possibilities, as in the fable of the fox and the grapes.

Other social defences against envy are: making the envied ones stereotypes, consisting in the belittling of other attributes they have, different from the envied ones, the choice of a reference group composed of subjects who have little chance of provoking envy or creating inferiority complexes, a cognitive reformulation that may consent envy to be avoided or reduced; a deliberate abstention from behaviour that may arouse envy in others, even though it is often the very process of avoidance that arouses envy.

The most common “coping strategies” by which individuals and social groups react to the situations provoking envy may be divided into three categories: competition, that is overcoming the state of inferiority from which envy arises; compensation, which consists in evoking other areas in which the envious subject feels superior to the envied subject; and distraction, that is, evading from the unpleasant situation by taking refuge in different considerations and circumstances which are more gratifying [28].

Another field which should be investigated in the future in order to recognize envy is linked to the opportunities offered by the Net. In fact, as the Net is within everybody’s reach, it goes beyond inequalities and prompts comparison with the ‘rest of the world’, engendering new forms of envy. As the employed tool is virtual, these are not easy to handle.

The virtuality of the Net favours a standardization between users and creates an illusion of equality but does not coincide with reality where the differences between individuals cannot be hidden under a nickname or by an avatar.

### Conclusions

Ultimately, there are many kinds of envy, not just one, all included in a theoretical construct which is complex and hard to recognize.

In psychotherapeutic activity, one of the most difficult moments occurs when an attempt is made to interpret the patient’s envy. The patient, in fact, if envy is considered a primary emotion, he will have to take on the hostile impulses that are not due to frustration, but to his inability to be able to tolerate that the other has something good. If this goal is achieved, the analysand will have to accept that his conflicts are not only the consequence of another person’s behavior, but that they depend on him himself. The envious feeling, then, can be a cause of frustration to the extent that it prevents us from receiving what is available.

The relationship between these two feelings (envy and frustration) is a “double track”: frustration causes envy and envy leads to frustration [8].

Envious feelings, therefore, never manifest themselves directly and clearly, but are almost always masked; for this reason, it is important to recognize them distinguishing them from jealousy, greed, frustration and self-esteem.

Therefore, the importance of a good psychotherapeutic treatment consists precisely in knowing how to differentiate primary envy from frustration since they often occur together.

A psychotherapist might think that trying to analyze envy or negative transference can aggravate the problem instead of solving it. It is not so! We must avoid resorting to the logic of “don’t wake the sleeping can” because, if envy exists, not highlighting it and not trying to treat it only ensures a temporary reduction of anxiety but, in fact, leads to an increase in the effects of its attack. The patient may be led to believe that if the therapist does not interpret envy, it is because he is afraid of it. In cases where the psychotherapist is not sufficiently skilled or does not work well, he can happen that envy does not manifest itself during the course of treatment; an envious feeling can be proclaimed but, not being perceived, it will always remain split in the patient’s external world.

Envy must, therefore, always be highlighted, interpreted and analyzed whenever it occurs during psychotherapy without excessive concerns of tact and delicacy towards the analysand.

Etchegoyen [8], in this regard, says that “it is only through interpretative modulation that envy can gradually be stripped of its powerful destructive power”. Working with envy in the psychotherapeutic field is not, therefore, simple and when the destructive elements are prevalent, we can try to identify even some - even if minimum - positive aspect presents in envy.

In conclusion, on meaning of psychodynamic and psychosocial aspects of envy, it can be argued that envy keeps thriving between desire and pleasure, resentment and grudge where the theatre of human passions - masterfully depicted by Shakespeare later aptly defined as the theatre of envy by Girard [29] - takes place. Girard points out that In order to truly desire, we must have recourse to people about us; we have to borrow their desires.

But do we really need what we envy? According to Klein's theory, the answer is yes, envy is a matter of life and death. Lacan and Bion do not agree and argue that we do not envy what we really need but what we believe we need when we realize that it is desired by the other (see Girard's concept of "mimetic desire").

The envious person does not desire something the other owns; when he or she sees the other's desire he or she simply has to face his or her own lack of desire. The positive function of envy is based on this internal flow between fullness and emptiness; in so far as envy can be experienced, it still has enough mental scope for its defeat.

We could conclude with a few questions about the victim of the other's envy, which may throw further light on this issue. What does the analyst feel when his or her skills are envied by his or her patient? What does the envy of a group mean for a supervisor, or a manager? What does a son feel when he perceives his parents' envy?

Of course, all these questions can be reformulated reversing the terms.

Once envies are recognized, the problem is treating them and preventing their destructive effects. Many economists and a few mathematicians [30] have elaborated envy-free methods based on criteria for a fair division which should dispel the destructive effects of envy. Then why has envy not been defeated yet?

There is a 'subconfusional' narcissistic level in the human mind where the others are perceived as neither really separated nor different from us but are rather 'copies of ourselves', narcissistic mirror images representing us, sort of clones who, when we get to the point, will not create problems [31]. Bolognini argues that this mechanism allows us to reassure individuals about the centrality, the importance and the supremacy of their Self in comparison with the rest of the world. This is the very level which clashes with the efficacy of the criteria for a fair division elaborated by envy-free methods.

Is the solution hidden in psychopedagogic methods which have to be used in the family, at school and in other social environments? These methods can teach fair division to children and young people so that they can introject its basic principles as they grow up.

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**Volume 8 Issue 7 July 2019**

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