

ENVY TAKES YOU FURTHER: THE INFLUENCE OF BENIGN ENVY ON RISK TAKING

MIJIN KWON

Korea University

YOUNGJEE HAN AND MYUNGWOO NAM

Sungkyunkwan University

We conducted 2 studies to investigate whether or not benign envy prompts risk taking, suggesting that, compared to malicious envy, benign envy would motivate individuals to improve themselves and to be less sensitive to potential losses in risk taking. In Study 1 ($N = 111$), we found that individuals who experienced benign, as opposed to malicious, envy were more likely to engage in risk taking, even when the risky behavior was not directly related to the envy-eliciting situation. In Study 2 ($N = 57$), we replicated in a different domain this risk-taking tendency of benignly envious individuals, examined the process by which benign envy increases risk taking, and demonstrated that individuals who feel benign, compared to malicious, envy perceive less threat in risk taking. Our findings suggest that benign envy can lead to risk taking and self-improving behavior, owing to the motivation to improve oneself.

Keywords: benign envy, malicious envy, risk taking, perceived risk, self-improvement motivation, deservingness.

“Never underestimate the power of jealousy and the power of envy to destroy. Never underestimate that” (Stone, 1997, cited in Kreisler, 1997, p. 6).

“Pride, envy, avarice—these are the sparks that have set on fire the hearts of all men” (Alighieri, 1320/1867, verse VII).

Envy is a negative emotion that “arises when a person lacks another’s superior quality, achievement, or possession and either desires it or wishes that the other

Mijin Kwon, Department of Business Administration, Korea University; Youngjee Han and Myungwoo Nam, Department of Business Administration, Sungkyunkwan University.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Youngjee Han, Department of Business Administration, Sungkyunkwan University, 25-2, Sungkyunkwan-ro, Business Building #310, Jongno-Gu, Seoul, Republic of Korea. Email: yjhan@skku.edu

lacked it” (Parrott & Smith, 1993, p. 906). As Oliver Stone’s quote suggests, envy is generally considered to be a destructive force that makes people engage in behaviors that may harm or undermine others. However, as Dante Alighieri’s quote indicates, envy can also initiate a productive drive to accomplish desired objectives. What are the limitations of this drive? We argued that envy can motivate dangerous inclinations.

Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

Envy has typically been regarded as a destructive emotion that harms the envied one (Miceli & Castelfranchi, 2007; Smith & Kim, 2007) and induces impulsive behavior (Crusius & Mussweiler, 2012) and self-regulatory depletion (Hill, DelPriore, & Vaughan, 2011). Past researchers have attempted to distinguish between two types of envy and have, therefore, identified a constructive side that can motivate people’s efforts to improve themselves (e.g., Crusius & Lange, 2014; Falcon, 2015; van de Ven, Zeelenberg, & Pieters, 2009, 2011a, 2011b). *Benign envy* is productive because it motivates self-improvement without the presence of hostile feelings and ill will (Crusius & Lange, 2014; van de Ven et al., 2009, 2011b), whereas *malicious envy* is destructive and is associated with (a) preventing others from advanced accomplishments, and (b) hostility and ill will toward the envied one (van de Ven et al., 2009, 2015). We predicted that benign envy would be associated with increased risk taking because benignly envious people may try to achieve positive outcomes, such as increasing their stature to the level of that of the envied person. Thus, the desire for achievement could make benignly envious people choose a risky option to help them achieve their goal.

Both benign and malicious envy are negative feelings elicited by an unfavorable social comparison and can be reduced by decreasing the perceived gap between the self and the superior other. However, the two types of envy differ in terms of the determinants of feelings, motivational goals, and subsequent behavior (van de Ven et al., 2009). The key factor that influences whether benign or malicious envy emerges is the perceived merit of the other’s advantage (van de Ven et al., 2012). Specifically, benign envy is elicited when the superior other’s advantage is appraised as deserved. The merit of the other’s advantage signals that one can put in effort to narrow the gap and restore equity. Therefore, benign envy promotes motivation for the individual to engage in behaviors that will raise him- or herself to the other’s level (Lange & Crusius, 2014, 2015; van de Ven et al., 2011b), which is consistent with Crusius and Lange’s (2014) finding that benign envy is associated with attentional focus toward the means that can be used to improve oneself.

On the other hand, malicious envy is elicited when an envious individual appraises a superior other's advantage as undeserved (van de Ven et al., 2012). Because the advantage seems difficult to achieve with effort, malicious envy motivates the envier to diminish the envied rather than engage in self-improvement (Lange & Crusius, 2014; Rentzsch, Schröder-Abé, & Schütz, 2015). Further, Tai, Narayanan, and McAllister (2012) suggested that challenge- and threat-oriented action tendencies can be activated by envy. Benignly envious individuals are likely to perceive situations of envy in terms of challenge, thus increasing improvement motivation. Maliciously envious individuals, however, are likely to perceive more threat in such situations, which reduces their willingness to take action toward self-improvement.

Another difference in the appraisals that trigger benign or malicious envy is perceived control of the situation. van de Ven et al. (2009) identified perceived control, which contributes to the motivation to improve oneself, as being characteristic of benign, but not malicious, envy. Unless a situation is thought to allow for improvement, individuals are unlikely to be motivated to achieve their desired goals. Deservingness implies the attainability of the advantage shown by another person, whereas perceived control implies that the situation allows for improvement. These differences in situational appraisal suggest that people experiencing benign, as opposed to malicious, envy are more likely to progress further if there is a possibility that they will advance their own standing.

According to past researchers, people with improvement motivation perceive that success is the presence of gain and failure is the absence of it (Higgins, 1997); however, the absence of negative outcomes is not enough to induce the desire for advancement. As the absence of positive outcomes is considered to constitute failure, people with a desire for advancement worry little about the negative potentials of risk and are, thus, motivated to take any actions that would provide gain. Therefore, they generally seek risky options because these provide possibilities to advance from the status quo to a better state (Zou, Scholer, & Higgins, 2014). For example, Raghunathan and Pham (1999) investigated how people prioritize particular features of their options and found that when people have a choice between the option of a high-salaried job with low security or an average-salaried job with high security, those with improvement motives exhibited a gain-focused decision strategy and chose the job with the higher salary despite its low security. As benign envy promotes improvement motivation, benignly (vs. maliciously) envious people tend to be less sensitive to potential losses. Therefore, when making decisions involving risks and uncertainty, benignly envious people are more likely than maliciously envious people are to choose a risky option. Accordingly, we formulated the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: People who experience benign envy will be more likely to engage in risk-taking behavior than will those who experience malicious envy.

Hypothesis 2: The effect of benign envy on risk taking will be mediated by perceived risk, whereas the effect of malicious envy on risk taking will not.

Study 1

In Study 1, we examined whether people who experience benign envy would be more likely to engage in risk-taking behavior than would those who experience malicious envy.

Method

Participants and procedure. Participants were 111 undergraduates (43% men and 57% women, $M_{\text{age}} = 22.24$ years, $SD = 2.03$) at a university in South Korea. They received course credit for taking part in this study. Participants were randomly assigned to either the benign envy ($n = 38$), malicious envy ($n = 37$), or control ($n = 36$) conditions. We followed the procedure of van de Ven et al. (2011a), who manipulated benign and malicious envy by presenting different levels of deservingness. Instead of an iPhone, as in their study, we chose an Apple watch, which had been recently introduced to the market, as a product that triggers envy.

Initially, participants were told that the study objective was to investigate consumer experiences with wearable devices, and were given a brief description of the Apple watch. We also measured participants' desire for an Apple watch (1 = *not at all*, 10 = *very much*). As expected, participants' desire to own this product was above the neutral midpoint of the scale ($M = 6.34$, $SD = 2.41$), $t(110) = 3.68$, $p < .001$.

Following the procedure used by van de Ven et al. (2011a), participants were then asked to watch a videotape of a fellow student talking about his new Apple watch. In the control condition, participants watched a 42-second video clip, in which the fellow student was explaining the options on his Apple watch. In the benign and malicious envy conditions, an additional 25 seconds was inserted at the end of the control condition video, in which the fellow student explained how he had acquired the product. Consistent with previous researchers (van de Ven et al., 2011a, 2011b), we manipulated the type of envy by presenting different levels of deservingness of possessing an Apple watch. In the benign-envy condition, the fellow student stated that he saved money from his part-time job to buy his new Apple watch, making its possession more deserved and likely to arouse benign envy. In the malicious-envy condition, the fellow student said that the Apple watch was a gift from his father, who often bought him expensive products, making its possession less deserved and likely to arouse malicious envy.

Measures. After watching the video, participants answered questions about the Apple watch and indicated on a 7-point Likert scale to what degree they

felt their fellow student deserved to have this product (1 = *very undeserving*, 7 = *very deserving*). Next, participants were asked to indicate their likelihood of engaging in a series of recreational risky behaviors, as listed in the Domain-Specific Risk-Taking Scale (Blais & Weber, 2006; Weber, Blais, & Betz, 2002). We used this scale as a measure of risk preference because it was unrelated to our manipulation of benign/malicious envy. The items in the scale included “going camping in the wilderness,” “going down a ski run that is beyond your ability,” “going whitewater rafting at high tide in the spring,” “taking a skydiving class,” “bungee jumping off a tall ridge,” and “piloting a small plane” (1 = *extremely unlikely*, 7 = *extremely likely*). Responses to these items were averaged for analysis (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .81$).

Results

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) of the merit of the fellow student’s possession revealed that the envy manipulation was successful, $F(2, 108) = 7.62$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .12$. Participants in the benign-envy condition found the fellow student’s possession to be more deserved than did those in the malicious-envy condition, ($M_{\text{benign}} = 5.39$, $SD = 1.41$ vs. $M_{\text{malicious}} = 4.14$, $SD = 1.58$, least significant difference (LSD) post hoc test $p < .001$). Perceived deservingness did not differ significantly between the control and benign-envy conditions ($M_{\text{control}} = 4.89$, $SD = 1.19$ vs. $M_{\text{benign}} = 5.39$, $SD = 1.41$, LSD $p = .12$), but did differ significantly between the control and malicious-envy conditions ($M_{\text{control}} = 4.89$, $SD = 1.19$ vs. $M_{\text{malicious}} = 4.14$, $SD = 1.58$, LSD $p = .024$).

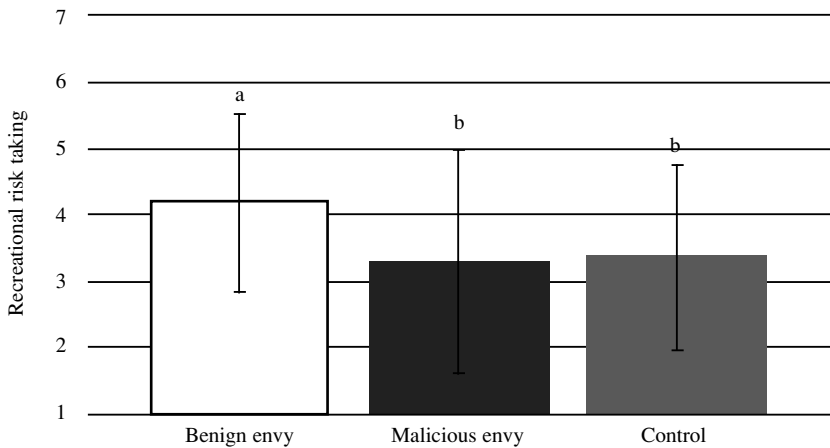


Figure 1. Likelihood of engaging in recreational risk taking (Study 1).

Note. Significant differences are indicated by letters, according to the performed analysis of variance and Fisher’s least significant difference post hoc analysis.

We next analyzed the effect of envy on recreational risk taking. Results of a one-way ANOVA showed a significant main effect of envy on risk taking, $F(2, 108) = 5.34, p = .006, R^2 = .09$. On the basis of the post hoc analysis results, participants in the benign, compared to malicious, envy condition were significantly more likely to engage in recreational risk-taking behaviors ($M_{\text{benign}} = 4.18, SD = 1.34$ vs. $M_{\text{malicious}} = 3.29, SD = 1.31, \text{LSD } p = .004$). These results support Hypothesis 1. In addition, relative to the control condition, the effect appeared to be driven by participants in the benign-envy condition, suggesting that benign envy fostered a significantly higher likelihood of risk taking, rather than malicious envy decreasing one's likelihood of risk taking ($M_{\text{benign}} = 4.18, SD = 1.34$ vs. $M_{\text{control}} = 3.35, SD = 1.30, \text{LSD } p = .008$; $M_{\text{malicious}} = 3.29, SD = 1.31$ vs. $M_{\text{control}} = 3.35, SD = 1.30, \text{LSD } p = .837$).

Discussion

The results we obtained in Study 1 support our hypothesis that benign envy promotes risk taking, with participants in the benign-envy condition being more likely to engage in risky behaviors than were those in the malicious-envy or control conditions.

Study 2

Our main objective in Study 2 was to investigate the underlying process by which benign, compared to malicious, envy is more likely to induce people to engage in risky behaviors. Specifically, we examined how perceived risk affects the relationship between benign envy and risk taking, hypothesizing that benignly envious people would seek risk, as they perceive less threat in decisions involving risks than maliciously envious people do. Our second objective in conducting Study 2 was to test the robustness of the envy effect on risk taking using the dependent measure of financial risk taking, instead of the recreational risk-taking measure used in Study 1.

Method

Participants and procedure. We recruited 57 undergraduate students (56% men and 44% women, $M_{\text{age}} = 22.32$ years, $SD = 1.73$) at a university in South Korea, who participated in this study in exchange for course credit. They were randomly assigned to either a benign ($n = 31$) or malicious ($n = 26$) envy condition. Participants came to the laboratory and were seated in separate cubicles with computers. As a cover story, we stated that the experiment was designed to investigate college students' interest in travelling. Participants were asked to read an article about Prague, Czech Republic, which included pictures of the city. In a pretest, we used a 7-point Likert rating scale to assess their inclination to take a

trip to Prague after reading the article (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). As expected, participants highly desired taking this trip ($M = 6.42$, $SD = 0.71$)

As in Study 1, benign envy and malicious envy were manipulated by distinguishing the level of merit in a fellow student's advantage. We presented participants with a scenario about a friend taking a trip to Prague who either deserved it (benign-envy condition) or did not deserve it (malicious-envy condition). After reading the abovementioned article, participants read a story about a friend taking a trip to Prague during the summer vacation. We described the friend as attending the same university as the participants. In the benign-envy condition, the story described how hard the friend had tried to earn money for the trip. In the malicious-envy condition, the friend received the funds for the trip from his parents and did not put extra effort into earning money.

Measures. Participants were asked to indicate whether or not they thought the friend deserved a trip to Prague (1 = *very undeserving*, 7 = *very deserving*). In this study, risk taking was measured in the financial domain by asking participants to indicate the extent to which they were willing to spend \$10 on buying lottery tickets. We also measured the perceived riskiness of the behavior by asking participants to indicate the extent to which they perceived risk in spending \$10 on buying lottery tickets (1 = *not at all risky*, 7 = *very risky*) and their willingness to engage in such behavior (1 = *extremely unlikely*, 7 = *extremely likely*).

Results

The manipulation check showed that the benign and malicious envy manipulations were effective. Participants in the benign (vs. malicious) envy condition found the advantage of the fellow student to be more deserved ($M_{\text{benign}} = 6.61$, $SD = 0.62$ vs. $M_{\text{malicious}} = 5.81$, $SD = 0.98$), $F(1, 55) = 14.25$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .21$.

A one-way ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of envy on risk taking, $F(1, 55) = 5.30$, $p = .025$, $R^2 = .09$. Participants in the benign-envy condition were more willing to spend \$10 on lottery tickets than were those in the malicious-envy condition ($M_{\text{benign}} = 4.65$, $SD = 1.78$ vs. $M_{\text{malicious}} = 2.58$, $SD = 1.68$), $t(55) = -2.30$, $p = .025$. Additionally, we found a significant main effect of envy on perceived risk, $F(1, 55) = 7.20$, $p < .01$, $R^2 = .12$. Participants in the benign-envy condition perceived significantly less risk in spending \$10 on lottery tickets than did those in the malicious-envy condition ($M_{\text{benign}} = 1.84$, $SD = 0.93$ vs. $M_{\text{malicious}} = 2.85$, $SD = 1.83$), $t(55) = 2.68$, $p < .01$.

We conducted a mediation analysis to test whether or not participants' perception of risk mediated the influence of envy on risk taking. Following Preacher and Hayes (2004), we performed a bootstrapping mediation analysis using 5,000 samples. As can be seen in Figure 2, the results revealed that perceived risk mediated the effect of envy on risk taking. The total effect of envy

(0 = *malicious envy*, 1 = *benign envy*) on risk taking was significant ($B = 1.0682$, $t = 2.3022$, $p = .025$), whereas when we controlled for perceived risk, the direct effect of envy on risk taking was nonsignificant ($B = 0.7054$, $t = 1.4807$, $p = .145$). The gap between the total and direct effects was the indirect effect through perceived risk, with a point estimate of 0.3628 ($SE = .2389$, 95% confidence interval [.0326, .9375]).

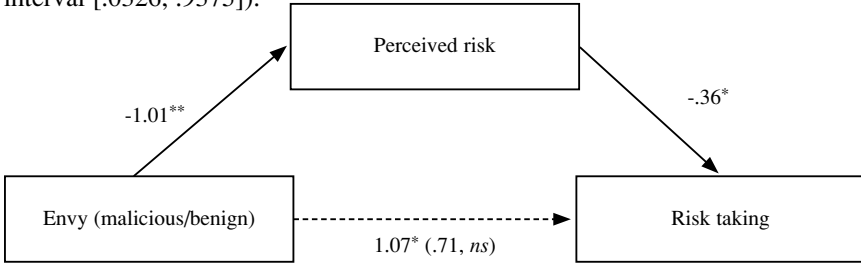


Figure 2. *Mediating role of perceived risk on risk taking: Buying \$10 lottery tickets (Study 2).*
Note. Numbers represent standardized regression coefficients for the relationship between envy and risk taking, as mediated by perceived risk. Numbers in parentheses represent the standardized regression coefficient between envy and risk taking, controlling for perceived risk. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Discussion

In Study 2, we identified the underlying mechanism by which benign (vs. malicious) envy increased willingness to take risks. Benignly envious people perceived less risk when making risky decisions than did maliciously envious people; thus, the perception of risk mediated the effect of envy on risk-taking tendency.

General Discussion

In two studies, we presented converging evidence that activating benign, as opposed to malicious, envy influenced individuals to take more risks in different domains. The results we obtained in Study 1 showed that the likelihood of engaging in risky recreational activities, such as going white water rafting, bungee jumping, and piloting a small plane, was greater in benignly envious individuals compared to both maliciously envious individuals and participants in the control group. In Study 2, the results replicated this higher tendency to take risks among benignly envious individuals in a different domain, that is, purchasing lottery tickets. In addition, in Study 2 we examined the process by which benign envy increases risk taking. The results demonstrated that perceived risk mediated risk taking, such that benignly envious individuals viewed purchasing lottery tickets as less risky than did maliciously envious individuals. Consequently, the lower

perceived risk prompted benignly envious people to take chances on the lottery.

By conducting these studies, we have made several contributions to the extant literature on envy. First, we demonstrated that benign envy makes people take more risks in domains that are not directly related to elicited envy. Prior researchers have shown that benign envy is associated with an attentional shift toward the means by which to accomplish the improvement goal (Crusius & Lange, 2014). Specifically, the techniques to which benignly envious individuals paid more attention were directly related to the elicited envy. For example, when envy was elicited in an academic achievement domain, participants paid more attention to cues such as desks, books, and pens (Crusius & Lange, 2014). Further, we found that benign envy motivates people to take risks in various other domains, such as recreational activities and lotteries. The wider array of domains in which benignly envious individuals take risks implies that benign envy initiates the achievement motive. A high standard attained by the envied person may initiate the achievement motive (McClelland, Atkinson, Clark, & Lowell, 1953), which is associated with risk-taking behavior (Atkinson, 1957). Zhou and Pham (2004) demonstrated that activating a promotion goal, which is associated with the approach motive, was positively associated with participants taking more risks in investment decisions. Our results are consistent with the view that the approach motivation increases risk taking.

We have also uncovered a mechanism by which benign envy increases risk-taking behavior. In Study 2, we showed that perceived risk mediated the effect of benign envy on risk-taking behavior, which is consistent with Atkinson's (1957) assertion that activated motivation may influence the expectancy of goal attainment. In our study, benign envy activated the motivation to achieve the standard of excellence of the envied person, which then increased the perceived probability of winning the lottery.

Although we obtained noteworthy findings, some limitations to our studies should be noted. First, we did not employ direct measures of achievement motive activation. Further research is needed to confirm that it is self-improvement motivation that promotes risk taking in benignly envious people. Prior researchers have argued that malicious envy leads to less risk taking because maliciously envious individuals want to differentiate themselves from the envied target (van de Ven et al., 2011a). If risk taking is perceived as gaining an advantage without putting in effort, then engaging in such behavior would make maliciously envious people similar to their envied target.

Second, the sample size was small, limiting the power and generalizability of the results. In Study 1, we observed no difference between the malicious-envy and control conditions; however, we advise caution in basing the argument on a null effect of this between-groups comparison. It is possible that feeling malicious envy decreased risk taking more than the control condition did. Lange

and Crusius (2015) found that malicious envy is related to the fear of failure, which would imply less risk taking. In addition, it could be argued that malicious envy can drive people to take risks when they have the opportunity to harm the superior other. In our studies, risk-taking behaviors were not found to be related to the envied person. If risk-taking behavior is directed at, or can harm, the envied person, malicious envy might then lead to risky choices, such as attempting to steal or damage the Apple watch (Study 1) without the owner noticing, which can carry the risk of being apprehended. This possibility represents a direction for further research. Future researchers could also examine the type of risky behavior as a moderator of the effects that we found in the current research. In addition, in our view, it would be worthwhile to address whether or not risky choices triggered by benign envy are constructive, or risky choices triggered by malicious envy are destructive.

Third, the gender of the person who triggers envy may affect the type and strength of envy induced in other people. In our empirical studies, the fellow student with the Apple watch and the friend who took the trip to Prague were male. van de Ven et al. (2012) demonstrated that social comparison provokes envy when the comparison is made to a similar other, and Salovey and Rodin (1984) showed that the more similar another person is, the more intense the envy is expected to be. Therefore, comparison to a person of the same gender may produce stronger envy, thereby increasing the risk-taking behavior of the envier if he or she perceives that the envied target is undeserving. On the other hand, van Dijk, Ouwerkerk, Goslinga, Nieweg, and Gallucci, (2006) suggested that envy can trigger *schadenfreude* (pleasure at another's misfortune) when the envied target is of the same gender as the envier. Because it is unclear whether comparison to a person of the same gender is more likely to produce benign or malicious envy, future researchers could explore the influence of gender on the type of envy induced and the subsequent effects on the envier's behavior.

Future researchers could also further investigate the generalizability of motivations induced by benign and malicious envy. We showed that improvement motivation induced by benign envy generalized to other domains; thus, future researchers should examine motivations elicited by malicious envy and whether or not those motivations are generalizable. The motivations triggered by malicious envy involve a specific target to be reduced or from which to separate; therefore, we speculate that motivations triggered by malicious envy may be limited to the comparison domain. Further work is necessary to clarify the asymmetry of benign and malicious envy in their effects on motivations and behavioral consequences.

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