

# Leveling Up and Down: The Experiences of Benign and Malicious Envy

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Envy is the painful emotion caused by the good fortune of others. This research empirically supports the distinction between two qualitatively different types of envy, namely benign and malicious envy. It reveals that the experience of benign envy leads to a moving-up motivation aimed at improving one's own position, whereas the experience of malicious envy leads to a pulling-down motivation aimed at damaging the position of the superior other. Study 1 used guided recall of the two envy types in a culture (the Netherlands) that has separate words for benign and malicious envy. Analyses of the experiential content of these emotions found the predicted differences. Study 2 and 3 used one sample from the United States and one from Spain, respectively, where a single word exists for both envy types. A latent class analysis based on the experiential content of envy confirmed the existence of separate experiences of benign and malicious envy in both these cultures as well. The authors discuss the implications of distinguishing the two envy types for theories of cooperation, group performance, and Schadenfreude.

*Keywords:* envy, emotion, experiential content, cross cultural

*"Envy is the great leveler: if it cannot level things up, it will level them down."* Dorothy Sayers (1949, p. 771)

People around us often do better than we do; your brother may be better in tennis, your neighbor drives a newer model of your car, and a colleague receives the prestigious prize that you were after yourself. Such upward comparisons often lead to the emotional experience of envy. Aristotle (350BC/1954) already defined envy as the pain caused by the good fortune of others. A more recent definition is that "envy arises when a person lacks another's superior quality, achievement, or possession and either desires it or wishes that the other lacked it" (Parrott & Smith, 1993, p. 908). Envy is generally frowned upon (Schoeck, 1969), and is for example one of the seven deadly sins in the Catholic tradition. Despite the apparent darkness of envy, it is "one of the most universal and deep-seated of human passions" (Russell, 1930, p. 82), and the tendency to feel envy is pervasive and seems to be present in all cultures (Foster, 1972; Schoeck, 1969).<sup>1</sup>

Interestingly, Sayers' (1949) opening quote suggests that envy might not be as homogeneous and may actually have two faces, one leveling up and the other leveling down. These two facets of envy, one being more positive and negative, have been speculated upon more often. On the more positive side, envy is seen as a motivational force that propels people to work harder to get what

others already have (Foster, 1972; Frank, 1999). Envy might be one of the causes of phenomena such as keeping-up-with-the Joneses (the strong desire to have what one's peers have) that spurs economic growth. An international advertising agency (Young & Rubicam, 2006) actively uses envy as a marketing tool in its campaigns, stating that products that evoke envy sell best. The negative side of envy is also often stressed. Envy is found to promote irrational decision-making (Beckman, Formby, Smith, & Zheng, 2002; Hoelzl & Loewenstein, 2005) and to hinder cooperation (Parks, Rumble, & Posey, 2002) and group performance (Duffy & Shaw, 2000; Vecchio, 2005). Schoeck (1969) proposed that the fear of being envied prevents people from striving for excellence, thereby hindering the progress of societies as a whole. The leveling up and leveling down parts of envy are also present in Parrott and Smith's (1993) previously mentioned definition that an envious person either desires the superior quality, achievement, or possession, or wishes that the other lacked it.

Envy stems from an upward social comparison and can be reduced by narrowing the gap between oneself and the other. This can be achieved by moving oneself up to the level of the other, and by pulling the other down to one's own position. We propose here that these two distinct envy experiences, one benign and the other

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<sup>1</sup> Envy is often equated with jealousy, but clear differences exist. Whereas envy arises when another person has something that one misses, jealousy arises when a person has something but is afraid of losing it to another person (Neu, 1980). Because it is common for people to use the emotion words envy and jealousy interchangeably in natural language, the few available empirical treatments of the experience of envy were aimed at distinguishing those two. Whereas at first the two experiences were thought to be similar (Salovey & Rodin, 1986, 1989), later research found clear differences in the experience of these emotions (Parrott & Smith, 1993; Smith, Kim, & Parrott, 1988). It is important to note that it was also found that the word jealousy was often used to indicate envy, but not the other way around. This implies that when asked about envy, people will not confuse this with jealousy.

malicious, elicit these different behavioral expressions. As explained hereafter, it appears that it is not just the case that in some situations envy will lead to moving-up and in other situations to pulling-down, but rather that the emotional experiences of benign and malicious envy differ, from the activated thoughts to the elicited actions.

The proposal of two different envy types has a longer history (e.g., Elster, 1991; Foster, 1972; Kant, 1780/1997; Neu, 1980; Parrott, 1991; Rawls, 1971; Smith, 1991; see for a review, Smith & Kim, 2007). However, ideas about two envy types have not been empirically tested, and these ideas differ in relevant aspects. Some theorists state that the distinction between types of envy is based upon the presence or absence of hostility, and that only envy with a component of hostility is envy proper (Rawls, 1971; Smith & Kim, 2007). According to them, envy without hostility resembles admiration and is therefore not a form of envy proper. Yet sometimes benign envy is considered to be envy as well (Foster, 1972; Neu, 1980), because despite this lack of hostility, benign envy also still contains the pain or frustration caused by another's superiority.

The issue therefore remains whether or not there are distinct types of envy and what their experiential contents and behavioral implications are. The current research aims to clarify this issue and advance emotion theory by studying the experiential content of benign and malicious envy. In the first study, we chose to investigate these types of envy in the context of two related but different emotions: admiration and resentment. Comparing benign and malicious envy to admiration and resentment is important because theory suggests that benign envy shares some resemblance with admiration, and malicious envy with resentment (e.g., Smith & Kim, 2007). We expected benign and malicious envy to differ from these related but different emotions, because envy typically arises after a frustrating upward comparison and this comparison is not necessary for either admiration or resentment.

When studying the potential two-facedness of the emotion of envy, it is interesting to note that whereas some languages have a single word, others have multiple words to refer to envy. Languages of the former kind are, among others, English (*envy*), Spanish (*envidia*), and Italian (*invidia*). Languages of the latter kind are, among others, Dutch (*benijden* and *afgunst*), Polish (*zazdrość* and *zawiść*) and Thai (phonetically, *it-chaa* and *rit-yaa*). The fact that some cultures have different words to indicate envy already indicates there might be different types (cf., Breugelmans & Poortinga, 2006). Languages that have multiple words for envy typically distinguish between a benign and a malicious form.<sup>2</sup> Although in English the default form of envy seems to be malicious envy, people often use it in a more positive way as well. People sometimes say "I envy you" to express that they are impressed and would like to also have what the other has. Based on these observations, we investigate whether the postulated two different emotional experiences of envy actually exist in languages and cultures with one as well as with two words for envy. To this end, we propose a new methodology based on the experiential content of the emotions combined with latent class analysis.

### Analytical Approach

To determine how envy can result in the very different actions of moving up or pulling down, we build on the idea that emotions have a pragmatic function by preparing and motivating a person

for certain actions, by means of the specific feelings that become activated (Arnold, 1969; Frijda, 1986; Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2006). To this aim, we analyzed the experiential content of envy, using a componential approach (Frijda, Kuipers, & Ter Schure, 1989; Roseman, Wiest, & Swartz, 1994).

Figure 1 provides an overview of the steps we took to analyze the two envy types. We first tested for differences between the two envy types in a culture that uses separate words and then determined whether the same differences can be found in cultures with a single word for envy. We conducted the first study in the Netherlands, which has different words for the two envy types: *benijden* (benign envy) and *afgunst* (malicious envy). Etymologically, *benijden* stems from the medieval word *beniden*, which means being unable to bear something, and *afgunst* stems from *niet gunnen*, which means to begrudge (Dutch Etymologic Online Dictionary, 2007).<sup>3</sup> The different origins of these Dutch words are consistent with the idea that the envy types indeed are likely to have different meanings. We first conducted a pilot study ( $N = 48$ ) to determine whether these different Dutch words for envy were actually perceived to be different. Participants read the following story:

Niels and Rik play in the first team of a good soccer club. Marcel, a teammate of Niels and Rik, is selected to play for a professional team. Niels feels benign envy toward Marcel [*benijdt Marcel*], Rik feels malicious envy [*Rik is afgunstig*].

Next, participants indicated whether they thought Niels or Rik would be more likely to feel or perform in a given way. The results in Table 1 reveal that *afgunst* is associated with the pulling-down motivation, whereas *benijden* is associated with the moving-up motivation.

This supports that indeed the two Dutch words reflect different forms of envy and that it is useful to pursue further testing. In Study 1, Dutch participants described a personal experience of *benijden* (benign envy) or *afgunst* (malicious envy), after which they responded to questions about the experiential content of their experience. We expected the experiences of benign and malicious envy to differ from each other and from the related emotions of admiration and resentment.

The next step was to use these key experiential content components to investigate whether the two envy types are also present in cultures with a single word for envy. In Study 2, we asked U.S. participants to recall an envy experience and answer questions regarding this experience. We used latent class analysis that detects different patterns of responses from a common set of data (McCutcheon, 1987; Vermunt & Magidson, 2005). If we were to find the same distinct pattern as in Study 1, it would constitute strong support for the existence of the two envy types, even in a language using a single word to describe both. Finally, Study 3 is a replication of Study 2 in another language and country that has one word for both types of envy, namely Spain.

<sup>2</sup> Translations of envy were derived from informal communications with students and faculty from the various countries and checked via Web dictionaries.

<sup>3</sup> Checking the translation website lookwayup.com, both *benijden* and *afgunst* translate into envy. Translating envy back to Dutch gives a few more possible translations, of which *benijden* and *afgunst* are by far the most common ones.

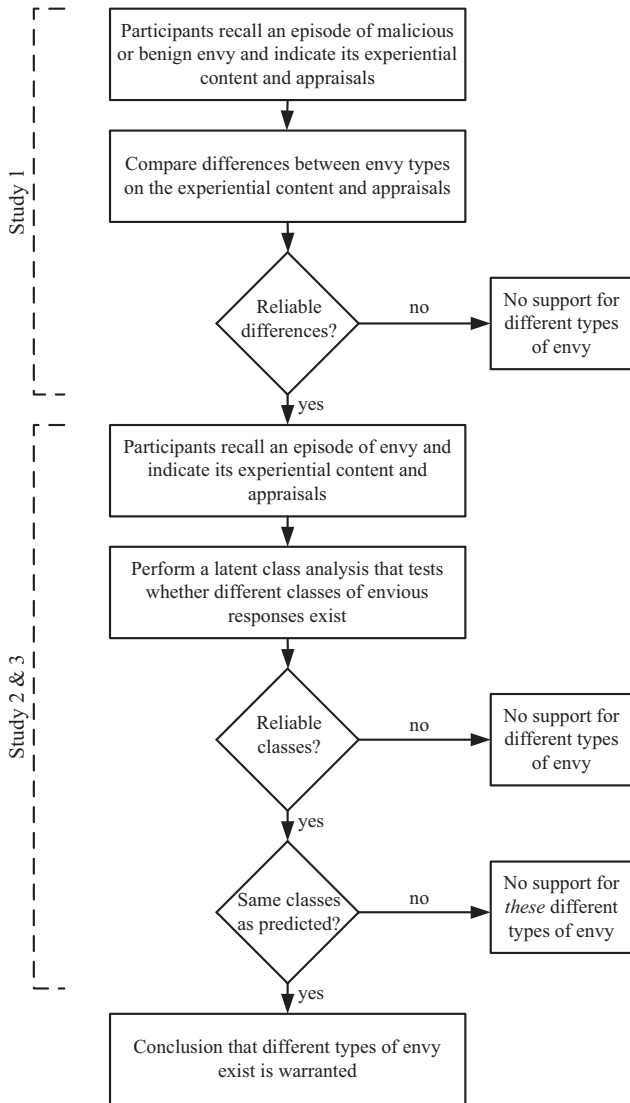


Figure 1. Analytic framework: identifying different types of envy.

### Study 1

Participants recalled an experience of benign envy, malicious envy, admiration, or resentment. Admiration and resentment are included to establish the discriminant validity with respect to related but different emotions. After describing these situations, the participants answered questions regarding the experiential content, using the procedure of Roseman et al. (1994). We content analyzed participants' descriptions on the presence of the four necessary preconditions that are thought to exist for envy (Smith, 2004). Smith proposed that being similar to the other, seeing the situation as self-relevant, perceiving to have low control over gaining the desired attribute and feeling that the other did not deserve the advantage, are all necessary preconditions for envy to arise. In addition, we also examined whether the participants mentioned an explicit comparison in their description of the emotional episode. We expected an explicit social comparison to be

characteristic of both types of envy, but not of resentment and admiration.

For the experiential content measures, we predicted malicious envy to feel more frustrating, thoughts to be more about injustice perceptions, and the resulting action (tendencies) to be aimed at derogating and hurting the other, for example by gossiping about the envied person. For benign envy, we predicted that people would like the other person more and would like to remain close to this other person, even though the emotion itself is a negative experience. Actions tendencies and actions were predicted to be aimed at improving one's own situation.

### Methods

Students at Tilburg University participated voluntarily (92 women and 68 men,  $M_{age} = 21$  years). The study had a four-group design (benign envy vs. malicious envy vs. admiration vs. resentment), with 40 participants per condition.

Participants were asked to recall and describe a situation in which they had a strong experience of benign envy (*benijden* in Dutch), malicious envy (*afgunst*), admiration (*bewondering*), or resentment (*rancune*). Next, participants rated on 9-point scales how intense the experience had been (*not at all* to *very*), how long ago it had happened (*a very long time ago* to *only a short while ago*) and how easy it was to recall the experience (*very difficult* to *very easy*). Differences in the intensity of the emotion could obscure any differences between the emotions (see, e.g., Parrott & Smith, 1993), and if any differences in intensity would exist, it should be included as a covariate to make valid inferences.

Next, participants answered questions regarding the experienced feelings, thoughts, action tendencies, actions, and emotivational goals (cf., Roseman et al., 1994). For each of these content types, four separate items were created based on our predictions, the first two hypothesized to be characteristic of malicious envy, the other two of benign envy. These questions are presented in Table 2.

### Results

Reported events. A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) with the recalled emotions as the between-subjects variable revealed no significant differences in the intensity of the

Table 1  
Number of Participants Indicating Whether a Person Experiencing Benign or Malicious Envy Would Be More Likely To React in a Given Way ( $N = 48$ )

Who would be more likely to	Niels: Benign envy	Rik: Malicious envy	Binomial test $p <$
<b>Malicious envy item</b>			
Commit a mean foul against Marcel if they would play against each other?	7	41	.001
Hope that Marcel will not make it as a professional player?	9	39	.001
<b>Benign envy item</b>			
Be more motivated to become a professional player himself?	38	10	.001
Start training more?	42	6	.001

Table 2  
*Experiential Content of Benign Envy, Malicious Envy, Admiration, and Resentment in Study 1*

Experiential content	<i>M (SD)</i>				Overall difference, <i>F</i> (3, 156)	Contrast significance levels		
	Benign envy, A	Malicious envy, B	Admiration, C	Resentment, D		AB	AC	BD
<b>Feelings</b>								
Felt frustrated	6.53 (2.15)	7.83 (1.22)	1.70 (1.24)	7.78 (1.41)	139.95***	***	***	
Felt shame for my thoughts	4.35 (2.65)	3.97 (2.77)	1.75 (1.33)	3.22 (2.28)	9.76***		***	
Felt admiration for the other person	6.25 (2.65)	3.57 (2.83)	7.35 (2.39)	1.67 (1.07)	48.37***	***	*	***
Felt pleasant	3.50 (2.03)	2.30 (1.40)	6.78 (1.99)	1.97 (1.52)	69.03***	**	***	
<b>Thoughts</b>								
Thought of injustice being done to me	3.82 (2.98)	6.30 (2.33)	1.87 (1.52)	7.45 (2.12)	47.34***	***	***	*
Thought negatively about myself	4.50 (2.73)	3.92 (2.69)	2.05 (1.62)	3.70 (2.60)	7.34***		***	
Thought positively about other	5.70 (2.57)	3.15 (2.75)	8.52 (0.75)	1.77 (1.37)	84.00***	***	***	**
Thought of improving my situation	6.25 (2.56)	5.13 (2.49)	5.65 (2.38)	5.38 (2.50)	1.52	*		
<b>Action tendencies</b>								
Wanted to take something from other	2.95 (2.51)	4.10 (2.73)	2.42 (2.21)	5.55 (2.42)	12.54***	*		**
Wanted to degrade other	2.90 (2.24)	4.47 (2.84)	1.70 (1.34)	6.55 (2.28)	35.10***	**	*	***
Wanted to improve own position	6.55 (2.65)	5.00 (2.62)	5.08 (2.90)	4.97 (2.76)	2.34*		*	
Wanted to be near other	6.43 (2.17)	3.05 (2.72)	7.10 (1.87)	2.12 (1.80)	51.28***	***		
<b>Actions</b>								
Tried to hurt the others' position	2.17 (2.09)	3.45 (2.56)	1.57 (1.30)	5.25 (2.43)	22.87***	**		***
Talked negatively about other	3.50 (2.76)	6.43 (2.56)	2.07 (1.83)	7.58 (1.69)	50.86***	***	**	**
Complimented the other sincerely	5.73 (2.61)	3.47 (2.78)	7.45 (2.38)	1.70 (1.16)	47.19***	***	***	***
Reacted actively	6.15 (1.97)	4.47 (2.47)	6.63 (1.93)	5.93 (2.19)	7.42***	***		**
<b>Emotivational goals</b>								
Hoped the other would fail in something	3.85 (2.82)	6.00 (2.60)	1.77 (1.44)	7.15 (2.14)	42.27***	***	***	*
Hoped for justice to be done	5.95 (2.35)	7.40 (1.72)	4.25 (3.05)	7.93 (1.31)	22.31***	**	***	
Hoped the other would do well	6.38 (2.34)	4.50 (2.72)	8.43 (0.93)	2.85 (2.02)	51.95***	***	***	***
Hoped to remain/become friends with other	6.63 (2.22)	4.15 (2.96)	7.48 (1.65)	2.87 (2.38)	33.15***	***		*

Note. Means and SDs of items regarding the experiential content (*n* = 40 per condition). All answers on a 9-point scale, ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 8 (*very much so*). The contrasts compare benign to malicious envy (AB), benign envy to admiration (AC), and malicious envy to resentment (BD). \* *p* < .05. \*\* *p* < .01. \*\*\* *p* < .001.

emotions recalled, how long ago it was that they had occurred, and the ease with which they could be recalled,  $F(3, 375) = 1.63, p = .11, \eta_p^2 = .03$ , which is desirable. Therefore, any differences we found between the conditions cannot be explained by differences in the intensity of the recalled experiences. All reported events and emotions were fairly intense ( $M = 7.34, SD = 1.08$ ), recent ( $M = 5.38, SD = 2.34$ ), and easy to imagine ( $M = 6.40, SD = 2.27$ , all measured on 9-point scales with higher scores indicating the situation to be more intense, more recent, and more easy to imagine).

For the content analysis, two independent judges indicated whether the participant (a) made an explicit comparison with another person, (b) indicated to be similar to the other, (c) indicated that the domain was relevant for his or her self-view, (d) indicated to have little control over the situation, and (e) thought something was unfair or undeserved. Average agreement between the raters was 86%, and remaining differences were resolved by discussion. The results of this content analysis (see Table 3) partly support Smith's (2004) idea about envy's necessary preconditions. The main finding is that similarity, domain relevance, low perceived control, and perceived unfairness are all characteristic of malicious envy, but only the first two are strong characteristics of benign envy. The content analysis also revealed that an important aspect of envy is whether people made an explicit comparison between oneself and another person. Such comparisons were made

in virtually all stories of benign and malicious envy, whereas hardly any direct comparisons were made in the admiration and resentment stories. For example, one of the benign envy stories stated, "My friend graduated with a 9 (out of 10). I felt benign envy as my own graduation was a tough and difficult experience, and I will probably barely pass it with a 6." A typical admiration story stated, "I admired a 14-year old swimmer who competed in the last Olympics."

*Experiential content.* All results are presented in Table 2. We performed a MANOVA with emotion condition as the between-subjects variable and the experiential content questions as the dependent variables. As expected, there was a strong general effect of recalled emotion on the experiential content,  $F(60, 410) = 8.16, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .54$ . Contrast analyses between benign and malicious envy indicated that 18 out of the 20 questions differed significantly, all in the predicted direction. We will discuss some of the main findings further in the general discussion.

*Discussion*

These findings provide consistent support for distinguishing the experience of the two types of envy, a benign and a malicious form, and that these envy types also differ from closely related other emotions. The effects on the actions taken and the emotivational goals are especially pronounced, and these support the



Table 3  
Content Analysis of Recalled Emotional Episodes in Study 1

Present in story?	%				$\chi^2(3)$	<i>p</i>
	Benign envy ( <i>n</i> = 40)	Malicious envy ( <i>n</i> = 40)	Admiration ( <i>n</i> = 40)	Resentment ( <i>n</i> = 40)		
Explicit comparison	70.0 <sup>b</sup>	62.5 <sup>b</sup>	12.5 <sup>a</sup>	2.5 <sup>a</sup>	60.65	<.001
Similar to other	92.5 <sup>bc</sup>	97.5 <sup>c</sup>	67.5 <sup>a</sup>	77.5 <sup>ab</sup>	16.72	<.001
Self-relevance of domain	90.0 <sup>b</sup>	97.5 <sup>b</sup>	22.5 <sup>a</sup>	97.5 <sup>b</sup>	89.55	<.001
Low perceived control	52.5 <sup>b</sup>	82.5 <sup>c</sup>	0 <sup>a</sup>	77.5 <sup>c</sup>	68.74	<.001
Perceived unfairness	30.0 <sup>b</sup>	77.5 <sup>c</sup>	0 <sup>a</sup>	97.5 <sup>d</sup>	94.56	<.001

Note. Percentages indicate the number of stories in which the statement was deemed present. Different superscripts indicate significant differences between the emotion conditions, with  $p < .05$ .

apparent paradox between the views of envy as a sin aimed at degrading the superior other and an envy that is a motivational force that drives aspiration levels. Whereas the moving-up motivation of benign envy leads to positive improvement for oneself, malicious envy can be harmful to others because the motivations are aimed at pulling-down the other from the superior position.

Unexpectedly, malicious envy did not elicit more feelings of shame, nor did people think more negatively about themselves than those in the benign envy condition. A reason for this might be that people who experience malicious envy do not feel that ashamed, because they feel that their negative attitude toward the other is justified. People who feel benign envy might still feel somewhat ashamed of their thoughts, not because they feel negative toward the envied person, but because they realize that they are in an inferior position. This remains speculative however, and additional research might clarify when and why experiencing envy elicits feelings of inferiority or shame, and when it does not.

The two types of envy also systematically differed from the related emotions of resentment and admiration, which is important. Malicious envy resembles resentment in some ways. Parrott and colleagues (Parrott, 1991; Smith, Parrott, Ozer, & Moniz, 1994) already reasoned that malicious envy and resentment are much alike, but that they differ in the justifiability of the emotion. Indeed, we find that the negative feelings and consequences are more pronounced for resentment, and this is likely because the emotional experience is attributed more to the willful behavior of the other person. A more important difference in our view, however, is that malicious envy arises after an explicit comparison between oneself and the other, while resentment does not contain such a comparison.

Benign envy resembles admiration, although benign envy feels unpleasant and frustrating while admiration is a pleasant emotion to experience. Furthermore, with benign envy there is more negativity toward the other, and it is more motivating than admiration. A reason for these differences might be that when one admires a person an explicit comparison is not necessarily made, while this is the case for benign envy. The resulting frustration from this upward comparison feels negative but does motivate to attain more for oneself.

## Study 2

Now that the typical experiential differences between the two types of envy are established, we wanted to make sure that the

distinction is not just based upon concepts that only exist in the Dutch language. Therefore, we conducted a study to test our hypothesis in the United States, where the single label of envy refers to both types. We expected that if people were asked to describe an experience of envy, some would describe benign envy and others would describe malicious envy. To explore this, we used latent class analysis (LCA; McCutcheon, 1987). LCA attempts to create subgroups with different response patterns that arise from a common condition, in this case the usage of the emotion word envy. LCA is similar to cluster analysis, but instead has statistical criteria to determine the optimal number of classes (notably the Bayesian Information Criterion, BIC). Another advantage of LCA is that it uses model-based probabilities to classify cases, whereas cluster analysis groups cases only via the distance between the cases, without firm statistical criteria (for a recent application of LCA in psychology, see Quaiser-Pohl, Geiser, & Lehmann, 2006). Thus, to support the idea that two types of envy exist, the LCA should find two firm classes of which the response patterns closely resemble those of benign and malicious envy that were found in Study 1. The lower part of Figure 1 summarizes these steps of our analytic approach.

## Method

Seventy undergraduate students of Cornell University in the United States (37 females,  $M_{\text{age}} = 20$  years) participated in this study that had a one-group design. They were asked to write one or two sentences about a situation in which they experienced envy. Next, they answered questions selected to differentiate between benign and malicious envy, based on the findings of Study 1. There were six items related to the experiential content (three for both types of envy), and one for the item in the content analysis that distinguished the types of envy best, namely a feeling of unfairness (see Table 4).

## Results and Discussion

All items were entered as indicators in the LCA. We ran the LCA for one to four subgroups (classes), using the program LatentGOLD 4.0 (Vermunt & Magidson, 2005). Of the four analyses, the solution with the lowest BIC value was chosen (see Raftery, 1996, for model selection based on BIC values). As hypothesized, the solution with two classes had the lowest BIC value (the values were 1264, 1214, 1216, and 1222 for a one-,

Table 4  
*Results of Latent Class Analysis on the Experiential Content of Envy in the United States in Study 2*

Question	<i>M (SD)</i>		Effect of cluster on Indicator		
	Class 1: Benign envy	Class 2: Malicious envy	Wald	<i>p</i>	<i>r</i> <sup>2</sup>
I liked the other	6.42 (1.57)	4.78 (2.09)	-0.24	.001	.15
I felt inspired by the other	4.45 (2.53)	2.44 (2.09)	-0.20	.001	.20
I tried harder to achieve my goals	5.26 (2.04)	4.44 (2.23)	-0.13	.055	.06
The experience felt frustrating	3.50 (2.00)	6.50 (1.24)	0.59	.001	.51
I wanted to hurt the other	0.24 (0.49)	2.88 (2.24)	0.53	.001	.27
I hoped that the other would fail something	0.82 (1.45)	4.84 (2.00)	0.39	.001	.41
I considered the situation to be unfair	2.76 (2.53)	4.25 (2.50)	0.25	.004	.27
<i>n</i> =	38	32			

*Note.* The Wald statistics indicate the size of the effect of the clusters on the indicators. Means are the average responses of the cases in each class. Responses were provided on a 9-point scales, ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 8 (*very much so*). Because our predictions specify the direction of the differences between the classes, one-sided *p*-values are reported.

two-, three-, and four-subgroup solution, respectively). The estimated percentage of classification errors for this solution was only 4%, which indicated that the two classes are well separated (Vermunt & Magidson, 2005). Table 4 presents the effects of the classes on the indicators and the average scores on the questions for each class. As becomes clear from the table, the differences in means of the two classes fit the distinction between benign and malicious envy remarkably well. Malicious envy felt much more frustrating, the experience led to a motivation to hurt the other, and one hoped that the other would fail in something. For benign envy, the other was liked more, the situation was more inspiring, and one tried harder to attain more for oneself (the latter being marginally significant).

The results of Study 2 show that even though the English language has only a single word for envy, the two types of envy can be distinguished reliably. Of interest, when asked to report on envy, about half of the participants described an emotional experience of benign envy, the other half one of malicious envy. Although the LCA could potentially indicate any number of classes between one and four, the distinction in two classes was best, which is reassuring. Combined with the close resemblance to the results of Study 1, the current findings support the hypothesis that two different kinds of envy exist and that these are expressed in distinct experiential patterns.

### Study 3

Study 3 was conducted to address three potential limitations of the earlier studies. First, Study 3 measures the experiential content of envy at the same day the emotion was experienced. In our previous studies, we asked participants to recall an episode in their life in which they had experienced envy. This could have influenced the results as participants might have only been able to recall experiences of extreme envy, or we might also have “forced” people who hardly ever experience envy to come up with an instance of it. To prevent this, the participants in Study 3 answered a short question every evening, namely whether they had experienced envy that day. If they indicated that they had, they were subsequently asked to answer the questions regarding the experiential content of that envious experience. Earlier research has

shown that such end-of-the-day recall methods may be more precise than other methods of measuring emotional events over a longer period of time (Ptacek, Smith, Espe, & Rafferty, 1994) and yield practically similar results as direct experience sampling at the moment itself would (Kahneman, Krueger, Schkade, Schwarz, & Stone, 2004).

Second, because some of the questions we used in Study 2 could also be interpreted as appraisals of the situation instead of the experiential content of the emotion, we used different questions in Study 3. The questions now explicitly stated “When I experienced envy” to focus the attention to the experience itself, not the situation that had elicited the emotion. Using this statement follows suggestions by Roseman et al. (1994), who explained the importance of asking for the experience to measure the experiential content of an emotion. This way, we explicitly tapped into the experience of the types of envy and not the appraisals of the situation that led to them, as could have potentially been the case in Study 2.

Finally, we ran the current study in Spain, another country with only a single word for envy (*envidia*). Finding support for the two types of envy in yet another culture with a different language would strengthen the case for a distinction between benign and malicious envy, at least in three distinct western cultures.

### Method

Forty-nine participants indicated on a daily basis whether they had experienced envy that day for a period of 2 weeks. Of these participants, 10 indicated that they had not experienced envy during the period of study and were therefore dropped from the analysis. The remaining sample consisted of 25 females, 10 males, and 4 of which the gender was unknown ( $M_{\text{age}} = 25$  years). Twenty-six lived in Bilbao (in the northwestern part of Spain) and 13 in Valencia (in the southeast of Spain).<sup>4</sup> The study again had a one-group design.

<sup>4</sup> There was no difference between the regions on the experiential content questions,  $F(7, 31) = 1.08, p = .402$ , nor on the distribution of the types of envy,  $\chi^2(N = 39) = 1.95, p = .163$ .

Table 5  
Results of Latent Class Analysis on the Experiential Content of Envy in Spain in Study 3

When I experienced envy. . .	M (SD)		Effect of cluster on indicator		
	Class 1: Benign envy	Class 2: Malicious envy	Wald	p	r <sup>2</sup>
It felt pleasant	-0.20 (0.41)	-1.00 (0.00)	4.47	.017	.61
I felt inspired by the person whom I envied	0.20 (0.68)	-0.88 (0.34)	8.07	.003	.48
I tried harder to achieve my goals	0.54 (0.52)	-0.23 (0.71)	4.42	.018	.36
I complimented the other for his or her success	0.67 (0.62)	-0.54 (0.72)	8.96	.002	.46
I felt cold toward the person whom I envied	-0.80 (0.41)	-0.04 (0.91)	5.71	.009	.21
It felt frustrating	-0.20 (0.68)	0.33 (0.82)	5.56	.039	.10
I hoped that the person whom I envied would fail something	-1.00 (0.00)	-0.46 (0.72)	2.38	.060	.19
I complained to someone else about the person whom I envied	-0.87 (0.35)	-0.08 (0.93)	3.11	.009	.21
n =	15	24			

Note. The Wald statistics indicate the size of the effect of the clusters on the indicators. Means are the average responses of the cases in each class. Responses were scored on a 3-point scales, with -1 (*no/not much*), 0 (*somewhat*), and + 1 (*yes/a lot*). Because our predictions specify the direction of the differences between the classes, one-sided *p*-values are reported.

Participants received a questionnaire on which they indicated every evening whether they had experienced envy that day. If they had, they were instructed to open a sealed envelope that contained another questionnaire on envy. On this questionnaire, the participants first briefly described their experience of envy, after which they answered a number of questions regarding the experiential content. All questions were introduced with the term “When I experienced envy” to make it explicit that the questions were about the experience of envy itself, not about the eliciting conditions. The questions can be found in Table 5. Questions were scored on a 3-point scale, with -1 (*no*), 0 (*somewhat*) and 1 (*yes*).

## Results

On average, the participants who had experienced envy did so on average after 5.21 days ( $SD = 3.40$ ).<sup>5</sup> The median response of all participants, including those that indicated that they had not experienced envy, was also 5 days.

A LCA on the experiential content of the Spanish experiences of *envidia* confirmed the findings of Studies 1 and 2 that two types of envy exist. Similar to what we had found in Study 2, the solution with two clusters of responses was the best having the lowest BIC (211, 163, 164, and 185 for a 1, 2, three, and four class solution respectively). The estimated number of classification errors was again very low (2%). As the results in Table 5 reveal, the pattern of responses neatly maps onto the two types of envy found before, thereby replicating the results of the previous studies. Those who were maliciously envious felt cold toward the envied person and frustrated, hoped the envied person would fail in something, and complained to someone else about this person more than those experiencing benign envy. Participants who experienced benign envy felt less unpleasant, more inspired, indicated to have tried harder to attain something similar for themselves, and complimented the envied person more than those who experienced malicious envy. Of these participants, 15 out of 39 (38%) reported on an instance of benign envy, the others on malicious envy.

## Discussion

When asked to recall a situation of *envidia*, the Spanish word for envy, these recalled episodes could again be classified as either

benign or malicious envy. Furthermore, participants recalled and rated these experiences on the day that they had experienced the emotions. This overcomes a potential limitation that recalling situations from a relatively longer time ago might have, and thereby strengthens the case for the two types of envy.

## General Discussion

We provide empirical evidence for two qualitatively different types of envy that differ in their experiential content. In Study 1 we found that people in the Netherlands describe different types of envy if they report on *benijden* (benign envy) or *afgunst* (malicious envy). Study 2 and 3 replicated these findings in the United States and Spain respectively, where a single word denotes the emotion of envy. A latent class analysis found that people in these countries actually still describe two distinct envy types that are fully consistent with the distinction found in Study 1. Both types of envy are aimed at leveling the difference between oneself and the superior other. Yet, the experience of malicious envy leads to action tendencies aimed at pulling-down the superior other; whereas the tendencies of benign envy are aimed at moving-up to the superior position oneself. Let us first describe the experiences of benign and malicious envy, before continuing to the implications of these findings.

### What Envy Is

**Current findings.** Benign envy is the more uplifting type of envy: people like and admire the comparison other more, want to be closer to this other person, and give more compliments than those experiencing malicious envy. On top of this, they want to improve their own position by moving-up. It is striking that they still feel a high level of frustration and inferiority, but the other aspects of the experience and the consequences are rather positive. We expect that exactly this frustration is what triggers the positive motivation that results from benign envy, as the frustration signals

<sup>5</sup> There was no difference in the number of days it took for a person to experience benign envy (5.20 days,  $SD = 3.28$ ) or malicious envy (5.21 days,  $SD = 3.55$ ),  $F(1, 37) < .01$ ,  $p = .994$ .

to the person that the coveted object is worth striving for (see also Johnson & Stapel, 2007, for a similar finding in research on social comparisons). Although benign envy did not receive much attention in the literature so far, the finding that about half the participants in the United States and one in three participants in Spain spontaneously thought of an experience of benign envy when prompted for envy, indicates that it is an important facet of envy. Note that the exact percentage should be interpreted with care of course, as it is also the more socially desirable answer.

Benign envy seems to be a big motivator for people, inspiring them to attain more for themselves. As such, this emotion could be the driving force of phenomena such as “keeping up with the Joneses,” the idea that people want to keep up with what their peers have. Although a continuous need to want more certainly has its drawbacks (Frank, 1999), additional research into an emotion that might spur economic growth seems important.

Malicious envy is clearly a negative experience. People experiencing this emotion feel frustrated, think that injustice is being done to them, are more willing to degrade, take something from and gossip about the comparison other, are more likely to actually try to hurt the other, and hope that the other would fail something. Although the pulling-down motivation that results from malicious envy can explain why envy is often seen as a sin, people do not seem to experience it that way for themselves. People only feel moderately ashamed for their thoughts and they even consider their feelings to be morally justified. This discrepancy is what makes malicious envy such an interesting topic for further research; an emotion condemned by others, justified by oneself, which results in behavior aimed at hurting another person can have serious consequences for oneself and for others.

Given the obtained differences on all aspects of the experiential content, we are confident to conclude that it is not the case that envy merely leads to different behavior in different situations, but that the entire experience of malicious and benign envy is different. Benign and malicious envy differ on the elicited thoughts, feelings, and action tendencies. Based on Parrott and Smith's (1993) definition of envy, we believe that the current research allows proposing more specific definitions for the different types of envy: benign and malicious envy are both unpleasant and frustrating experiences, that arise from a realization that one lacks another's superior quality, achievement or possession, but benign envy results in a motivation to gain the coveted object for oneself as well, whereas malicious envy results in a wish for the other to lose it.

So far, we have studied three western cultures and the question remains whether the two types of envy also exist in nonwestern cultures. Some hints exist that suggest that this is likely to be the case, as some other cultures have two words for a more positive and a more negative envy as well (e.g., Polish and Thai). Still other languages might not have a single noun for benign envy, but do use combinations of words to express it. For example in Russia, an experience of benign envy is called “white envy.”

An interesting question is whether the two types of envy are mutually exclusive experiences, or whether these experiences can overlap. The latent class analysis suggests that two separate, mutually exclusive classes exist. However, the latent class analysis forces cases into a cluster, which might obscure the idea that they can co-occur. If we take a closer look at the ratings, we find that a combined score of the questions for benign envy and those of

malicious envy are correlated negatively;  $r(70) = -.36, p = .003$  in Study 2 and  $r(39) = -.49, p = .001$  in Study 3. This suggests that, in general, the more one experiences one type of envy, the less one experiences the other type. Furthermore, a median split on both these combined measures shows that across the experiments, only 13% is classified as scoring high on both types (the far majority of cases scores high on one type of envy and low on the other). This suggests that it is possible to experience both types of envy at the same time, but that it does not occur often.

Given the reluctance of people to admit that they are envious, the current research also provides some guidance to measure envy in future research. Especially the questions used in Study 3 are good for measuring differences between malicious and benign envy in a relatively indirect way by asking for the experiential content instead of the socially undesirable concept of envy. Furthermore, asking whether someone actually compares him- or herself to another person is good for contrasting both types of envy with other emotions, such as admiration and resentment.

*Fit with previous findings.* Besides contrasting malicious and benign envy, we also tested how they differ from the related emotions admiration and resentment. Smith (2000) described how emotions that can result from social comparisons differ on three factors (upward vs. downward comparison; self vs. other vs. dual focus; high vs. low perceived control). In that conceptualization, admiration and resentment are both emotions that arise from an upward comparison, with a focus on the other person. Resentment is placed on the “contrastive” comparison side, with envy next to it. The difference with envy, hypothesized Smith, is that envy arises from a dual focus (on oneself and the other person), while resentment mainly arises from a focus on the other person. Admiration is placed on the “assimilative” comparison side, with inspiration next to it. They differ in the same way that resentment differs from envy; inspiration has a dual focus and admiration focuses on the other person. Our current findings suggest that having a dual focus is a defining feature of both types of envy. We think that what Smith labeled as envy is actually malicious envy. Furthermore, besides inspiration we would like to position benign envy as an assimilative upward comparison with a dual focus. Whereas inspiration is an overall positive feeling, benign envy still feels negative and frustrating, but does lead to a desire for improvement as well.

The analysis of the content of the personal emotional episodes gives some support for Smith's (2004) idea concerning the necessary preconditions for envy to arise. Both types of envy are more likely after one compares to the other person, as is the case when one is more similar and the domain is relevant (Tesser & Smith, 1980). However, Smith's idea that it is characteristic of envy to perceive the situation as unfair and to feel low control is actually only characteristic of malicious envy. This indicates that envy can result without feelings of unfairness and perceived low control, but the resulting envy will be benign envy and not malicious envy.

Based on Smith's (2004) ideas, we found that the eliciting patterns of benign and malicious envy mainly differ on whether a person feels that injustice is being done. Previous studies (Feather, 1994; Smith et al., 1994) found an effect of feelings of undeservedness and subjective injustice on the hostility in envy. We find something similar, where malicious envy (which leads to hostility) is more likely to be elicited in undeserved situations, while benign envy is more likely to be elicited in situations that are deserved.



Everything that influences whether people think it is deserved for the other person to have what he or she has should increase the likelihood of eliciting benign envy over malicious envy. In this way, we predict that for example liking the other person more lowers the chance for malicious envy to arise, because people are probably more likely to consider a liked person to deserve something more than a disliked person.

Besides investigating this subjective injustice-hostility link in envy, Smith et al. (1994) also found that feelings of inferiority were related to depressive feelings. Their research investigated whether these feelings were related within an experience of envy, but not whether these experiences were different types of envy. A person can think the situation is undeserved and therefore hostile, but at the same time feel inferior and subsequently depressed. We do not contest that a link between feelings of inferiority and depression exists in envy, but our data suggests that this is not a separate type of envy. If this would have been the case, an envy type that had *less* motivational tendencies for self-improvement should have been found in our latent class analyses. Feelings of inferiority were present in both malicious and benign envy (see Study 1), and some depressive feelings are thus likely to exist in both types of envy.

Elster (1991) linked envy to counterfactuals, stating that anything that increases the chances of thinking “it could have been me” increases envy. Based on the differences in the perceived undeservedness characteristic of malicious envy, malicious envy seems characterized by thoughts like “it *should* have been me,” while benign envy seems characterized more by thoughts like “it *could* have been me.” Earlier research has already found that small differences in counterfactual thought can evoke qualitatively different emotions. Counterfactual thoughts like “if only I weren’t” evoke shame, while thoughts like “if only I hadn’t” evoke guilt (Niedenthal, Tangney, & Gavanski, 1994). Because envy is inherently a comparison-based emotion (one compares one’s own situation to that of another), it is potentially fruitful to link the theories on counterfactuals to those of envy.

### *What Envy Does*

The effect of envy on behavior has been explored in various domains, and in some of those the current distinction between types of envy can help to clarify or extend earlier findings. For example, a study by Parks et al. (2002) found that people experiencing envy became less cooperative in a social dilemma game. However, it remains unclear in their study which motivation caused this drop in cooperative behavior: did people want to pull-down the superior other by not cooperating, or did they want to move-up by being selfish? In the paradigm used by Parks et al. both these motivations lead to the selfish behavior found in their study, but in other settings the separation of these motives might lead to different behavior. Similarly, a longitudinal study for the effects of envy on group performance (Duffy & Shaw, 2000) found a negative effect of envy on group performance, group cohesion, and social loafing. The envy measure consisted of questions measuring malicious envy (e.g., feelings of frustration, unfairness, and perceived injustice), and was thus not surprisingly related to these negative effects. The effects of benign envy on group performance are harder to predict. Although it motivates people to try to improve one’s own position, it can result in positive behavior for

the group (extra effort) or in behavior that is potentially harmful (selfishness).

There is a debate on the possible role of envy as a cause of Schadenfreude (the pleasure at the misfortune of others). Some research finds that envy promotes Schadenfreude (Smith et al., 1996; Van Dijk, Ouwerkerk, Goslinga, & Nieweg, 2005), while other research suggests that other negative feelings such as disliking the other (Hareli & Weiner, 2002) or resentment (Feather & Sherman, 2002) are better predictors of Schadenfreude. Van Dijk, Ouwerkerk, Goslinga, Nieweg, and Galucci (2006) reviewed the previous work on the envy-Schadenfreude link, and noticed that research finding an effect of envy on Schadenfreude used hostility-related questions as a measure of envy, while research not finding such an effect used more desire-related questions. Linking the idea of Van Dijk et al. to our current research, it seems straightforward to predict that malicious envy is related to feelings of Schadenfreude, while benign envy is not.

### *The Current Approach*

Our current findings are consistent with the findings of Breugelmans and Poortinga (2006) that it is not necessary to have a word for a certain emotion for it to be experienced. They studied the Rarámuri (Mexican Indians), who have only one word that indicates both shame and guilt. Breugelmans and Poortinga used the following procedure to investigate whether the Rarámuri experience this emotion for which they do not have a word. First, emotion specific situations were created among the Javanese (Indonesia) who do have two words for the emotions, to come up with stories that should elicit either shame or guilt. They then asked other Javanese and Dutch students to rate the emotion components, as a baseline for comparison with the responses of the Rarámuri. Finally, the Rarámuri rated the stories, and it was found that despite not having two words for these experiences, they were still clearly felt. Such an elaborate procedure of creating the stories was necessary to prevent biases that might result from using stories created in western countries as test material for the Rarámuri.

Our current approach (as depicted in Figure 1) provides a potentially less elaborate way of studying emotions (or other concepts) cross-culturally. Instead of creating emotion-specific stories in one culture and using those to test for the existence of the emotions in another, the two-step approach proposed here allows to directly investigate cultures that have a single word for multiple concepts, by using the idiosyncratic situations and experience of the participants themselves. For example, the Rarámuri could be asked to recall a situation in which they experienced *riwérama* (their word for both shame and guilt). We speculate that latent class analyses on question ratings regarding this story would separate experiences of shame and guilt. In this way, the emotional experience itself is used for analysis, which we believe to be purer, because it is in this experiential content where the difference between emotions resides. Thus, we believe that the methodology proposed here holds further promise for theory development on distinguishing related emotion constructs, both within and between cultures.

## Conclusion

To conclude, we found empirical support for the existence of two types of envy. One is a malicious envy that motivates to damage the position of the envied person, while the other is benign envy that motivates to attain more for oneself. The current research is consistent with the conceptualization of envy as “the great leveler” as put forward by the opening quote of Sayers (1949). Or, to be more precise, envy *are* the great *levelers*: whereas benign envy levels things up, malicious envy levels them down.

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