

# Warding Off the Evil Eye: When the Fear of Being Envied Increases Prosocial Behavior

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## Abstract

The fear of being envied makes people act prosocially, in an attempt to ward off the potentially destructive effects of envy. In three experiments, people who were in a superior position and could be envied were more likely than control participants to give time-consuming advice to a potentially envious person or to help a potentially envious person pick up erasers she had accidentally scattered. However, helping behavior increased only if envy was likely to be malicious rather than benign. People who were better off did not increase their helping behavior toward people in general, but increased their helping only toward the potentially envious. This finding is consistent with the idea that the better off act more prosocially as an appeasement strategy. The fear of being envied serves useful group functions, because it triggers prosocial behavior that is likely to dampen the potentially destructive effects of envy and simultaneously helps to improve the situation of people who are worse off.

## Keywords

envy, social comparisons, outperformance, prosocial behavior

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While studying Polynesian fishers, Firth (1939) noticed something odd. When one fisher caught fish and others did not, he would give away all of his catch. If he did not, the others would talk negatively about him back in the village. This sharing behavior was called *te pi o te kaimeo*, the blocking of envy. Here, we report three experiments in which we investigated such possible reactions to being better off than other people. Specifically, we tested whether people act more prosocially after outperforming others because they fear being envied.

Outperforming others leads to mixed feelings. A high achiever can feel happy, because doing better than others increases one's social standing (Festinger, 1954; Smith, 2000). However, one's own rise in standing also leads to a lower relative standing for others, which elicits negative affect in them (Tesser, 1988). People do not like to cause negative feelings in others and therefore can be distressed by their own outperformance. One specific emotion that arises when a person is outperformed is envy. Envy "occurs 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. 906). Envy is a frustrating experience that may lead to strong dislike (Schaubroeck & Lam, 2004) and even vicious behavior, such as a willingness to destroy the envied person's money (Zizzo & Oswald, 2001). Hence, there is good reason to feel distress when outperforming others and expecting them to become envious. Because envy is a common emotion (Smith

& Kim, 2007), it seems plausible that humans have developed a mechanism that protects against these destructive effects.

We examined whether the fear of being envied makes people act more prosocially, to appease the envious. If this is the case, the envy literature provides a good basis for making predictions about what they will do specifically (e.g., Smith & Kim, 2007). For example, there are two types of envy that both activate the goal to level the difference between oneself and the envied person (Cohen-Charash, 2009; Parrott, 1991; van de Ven, Zeelenberg, & Pieters, 2009): For *benign envy*, the motivational tendencies are productive and aimed at improving one's own position, whereas for *malicious envy*, the motivational tendencies are destructive and aimed at pulling down the envied person. It seems likely that an outperformer fears being maliciously envied, but not being benignly envied. In our previous work (van de Ven et al., 2009), we observed that deservingness was the main appraisal that determined whether a situation triggered benign or malicious envy. A deserved advantage led to benign envy, whereas an undeserved advantage led to malicious envy. Envy research thus generates

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specific predictions as to when an outperformer is likely to behave more prosocially.

The behaviors of people who believe they will be envied have largely been ignored in the literature. This is unfortunate because inequalities occur often, and envy can be a serious threat to relationships and group cohesion. Possible strategies to prevent the negative consequences of envy are to conceal the advantage, downplay it, avoid the envious person, or show that in another domain the envious person is actually the one who is better off (Parrott & Rodriguez-Mosquera, 2008). Such strategies come at a cost: Downplaying or hiding an advantage causes some of the status gains of outperformance to disappear. If these costs are too high, or if hiding the advantage is impossible, other coping mechanisms are likely to operate. Foster (1972) hypothesized that people who believe or fear they are envied would share their advantage, such as the Polynesian fishermen did, but this is often impossible because many envied advantages cannot be shared (e.g., a good grade on an exam). We speculated that people have a general motivation to appease the envious, for example, by becoming more helpful toward them. This possibility was consistent with earlier theorizing, but was untested.

We present three experiments revealing the effects of the fear of being envied on prosocial behavior and discuss alternative explanations in the General Discussion. Experiment 1 tested whether people who are better off than others and fear being maliciously envied become more helpful. Experiment 2 extended this inquiry by creating a situation in which people were likely to be maliciously envied and tested whether they indeed became more helpful. Experiment 3 replicated these findings with a different measure of helping.

## Experiment 1

In this experiment, some participants were made better off than others. We expected that the more participants thought that others were maliciously envious of them, the more they would behave prosocially toward those other people.

### Method

Experiment 1 was included in a series of unrelated experiments, in which 60 Dutch participants (33 females, 27 males; mean age = 21 years) took part. After they were seated in cubicles, participants entered their initials so “we could keep track of their scores.” The first task consisted of answering difficult multiple-choice questions. At the end, participants received their own actual score and the (identical) score of their “partner.” They thought this partner was another participant with whom they were coupled for the duration of the experiment, but the interaction was actually a series of preprogrammed responses. Participants were then told that for a study on the influence of financial incentives on performance, some would receive a €5 bonus, whereas others would receive nothing. All

participants learned that they were selected to receive the bonus. In the control condition ( $n = 20$ ), they were told that their partner would also get €5; in the envied condition ( $n = 40$ ), they were told that their partner would not get the bonus but knew that they had received it.

In the next study, after participants received their €5, their helping behavior was measured covertly using a multiple-choice task with seven questions. This time, participants were told that one member of each pair was allowed to ask the other for advice; the partner from the first task was always the one who was selected to be able to ask for help, and the partner ostensibly did so for every single question. Responding to each request took about 20 s (under the guise that this time was needed for the computers to connect and exchange information). After each request, participants could choose to send the answer they thought was correct, indicate that they did not know the answer, or ignore the request and stop providing advice from that point on. The main dependent variable was how often participants answered the requests for help (either by giving advice or by indicating that they did not know the answer).

We predicted that people in the envied condition would help more than those in the control condition only if they expected to be maliciously envied, and not if they expected to be benignly envied. To test this prediction, we asked participants afterward whether they had felt worried because the other person could be maliciously envious (*afgunst*) and whether they had felt worried because the other person could be benignly envious (*benijden*; see van de Ven et al., 2009). After this, a few additional questions were asked to test alternative hypotheses, which are discussed in the General Discussion.

## Results

We submitted the data to survival analysis (Kaplan & Meier, 1958) because helping behavior was nonnormally distributed and had a fixed endpoint. The analysis (see Fig. 1) confirmed our hypothesis that people in the control condition were less helpful than those in the envied condition, Breslow  $\chi^2(1, N = 60) = 3.57, p = .059$ . In the control condition, 60% of the participants helped their partner on all seven occasions ( $M = 5.25$ ), whereas in the envied condition, 83% did ( $M = 6.20$ ).

This difference was only marginally significant, which was likely because people in the envied condition could expect to be benignly or maliciously envied. We expected that only a fear of malicious envy would trigger prosocial behavior. To test our prediction, we analyzed how worried people were about being envied (see Table 1). As expected, participants' worry about envy differed clearly between the two conditions,  $F(2, 57) = 11.43, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .29$ . Participants in the envied condition were more worried than those in the control condition both that their partner could be maliciously envious and that their partner could be benignly envious, and these

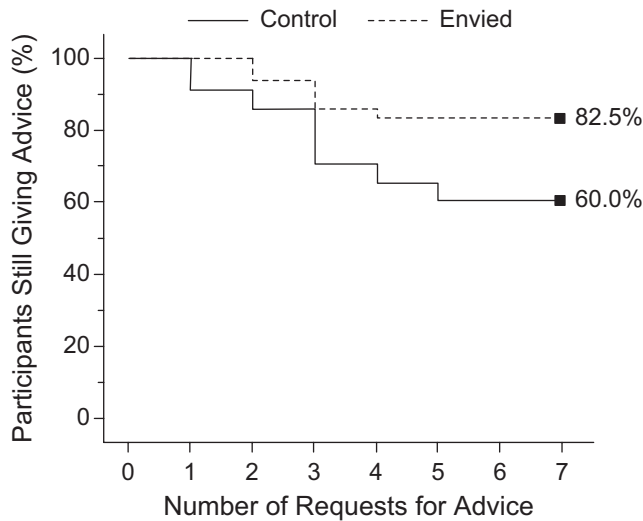


Fig. 1. Survival analysis of helping behavior in Experiment 1. Results are shown for the control and envied conditions. In the curves, downward steps from left to right indicate that some participants stopped helping at that point.

measures were correlated,  $r(60) = .65, p < .001$ . To examine whether only the extent to which people worried about being maliciously envied influenced their helping behavior (because it is malicious envy that potentially leads to negative behavior), we conducted a regression analysis within the envied condition. Indeed, the more participants expected to be maliciously envied, the more they helped,  $\beta = 0.45, p = .020$ , whereas increased expectations of being benignly envied actually made participants less helpful,  $\beta = -0.55, p = .006$ .

Experiment 1 found that people who were better off than others and who feared being maliciously envied became more helpful. However, it might be the case that people who fear being maliciously envied are also people with a more general tendency to be prosocial and that it is actually the latter tendency that accounts for the observed effects. Therefore, in Experiment 2, we chose to manipulate the advantage that the participants held in such a way that they expected to be either benignly envied (when the advantage was deserved) or maliciously envied (when it was undeserved).

## Experiment 2

### Method

Ninety-three participants (65 females, 28 males; mean age = 20 years) again received a bonus of €5. The control condition followed the procedure of the control condition in Experiment 1 (i.e., participants and their partners both received €5), with only one difference: Participants learned that they scored 1 point lower than their partner on the first task (instead of receiving an identical score). In the other two conditions of the three-group design, it was possible for participants to think that they were being envied because their partner had not received a bonus. In the benignly envied condition, this advantage was somewhat deserved, because participants were told that they had scored 1 point higher on the first task than their partner did; in the maliciously envied condition, the advantage was undeserved, as participants had scored 1 point lower on the first task.

A pretest confirmed the effectiveness of this manipulation: Forty participants (20 per condition) imagined being in the deserving and undeserving situations just described, but from the perspective of the disadvantaged (potentially envious) participant. Participants in the undeserved condition indicated that they would be more maliciously envious than those in the deserved condition ( $M_{undeserved} = 4.55$  vs.  $M_{deserved} = 3.35$ ),  $t(38) = 2.47, p = .018, d = 0.78$  (on a scale from 0 to 8); for benign envy, the pattern was reversed ( $M_{undeserved} = 3.40$  vs.  $M_{deserved} = 4.25$ ),  $t(38) = 1.92, p = .063, d = 0.61$ .

The main dependent variable of Experiment 2 was again how often participants honored the request for help on a subsequent task. After the second task, participants answered questions about the situation in which they had received the €5. We asked them how much they felt they deserved the bonus, whether they thought that their partner had been jealous, and whether they were afraid because of their partner's jealousy. In this experiment, we asked about jealousy (rather than benign and malicious envy) to counter the possibility that our previous findings were specific to the Dutch words for benign and malicious envy. In the English language, "jealousy" is generally used colloquially to indicate envy (Parrott

Table 1. Results for Ratings of Envy in Experiment 1

Item	Condition		F(1, 58)	p	$\eta_p^2$
	Control	Envied			
I felt worried because the other person might be maliciously envious	1.30 (0.73)	3.22 (1.70)	23.27	< .001	.29
I felt worried because the other person might be benignly envious	1.80 (1.32)	2.95 (1.55)	8.05	.006	.12

Note: For the two conditions, the table presents mean ratings, with standard deviations in parentheses. The response scale for the two items ranged from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much so).

& Smith, 1993; Smith, Kim & Parrot, 1988). This is also the case in the Dutch language; dictionaries explain both the Dutch word for benign envy and the Dutch word for malicious envy by referring to jealousy. Furthermore, participants in both conditions of the pretest indicated that they would be jealous ( $M_{\text{undeserved}} = 3.85$ ,  $M_{\text{deserved}} = 3.65$ ),  $t(38) < 1$ . We expected that participants in both the benignly envied condition and the maliciously envied condition would expect their partner to become jealous, but that only participants in the maliciously envied condition would be afraid of their partner's jealousy.

## Results

Table 2 presents the results for participants' ratings of deservingness and jealousy. A multivariate analysis of variance with the conditions as independent variables and the feelings ratings as dependent variables showed a strong effect of condition,  $F(6, 176) = 36.64$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .56$ . The manipulation worked, as participants in the maliciously envied condition found their advantage much less deserved than those in the benignly envied condition.

Figure 2 provides the data on the participants' helping behavior in the form of a survival analysis. As expected, the survival functions differed between conditions, Breslow  $\chi^2(2, N = 93) = 10.20$ ,  $p = .006$ . Participants in the maliciously envied condition ( $M = 6.77$ ) helped longer than those in the control condition ( $M = 5.32$ ), Breslow  $\chi^2(1, N = 62) = 7.88$ ,  $p = .005$ , and those in the benignly envied condition ( $M = 5.39$ ), Breslow  $\chi^2(1, N = 62) = 10.43$ ,  $p = .001$ . The helping behavior in these latter two conditions did not differ, Breslow  $\chi^2(1, N = 62) = 0.03$ ,  $p = .875$ . Thus, people who were undeservedly better off than another person were more helpful than those who were deservedly better off and those who were not better off.

We predicted that the process behind this difference in helping behavior would be the fear of being envied. Table 2 shows that the participants who were better off (i.e., the benignly envied and maliciously envied conditions) considered it likely

that the other person would be jealous of them. As predicted, the intensity of the expected jealousy did not differ between these conditions. What did differ, however, was how much participants feared the jealousy of the other person. Confirming our main hypothesis, those in the benignly envied condition were much less afraid of the jealousy of the other, compared with those in the maliciously envied condition.

Mediation analysis confirmed that it was the fear of being envied that drove the increased helping (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). The effect of being in the maliciously envied condition became insignificant ( $b = 1.42$ ,  $p = .109$ ) when fear of jealousy, expected jealousy, and perceived deservingness were added as mediators. Of the latter three variables, only fear of jealousy affected helping behavior ( $b = 0.29$ ,  $p = .053$ ); jealousy ( $b = -0.15$ ,  $p = .392$ ) and perceived deservingness ( $b = -0.05$ ,  $p = .737$ ) did not. The bootstrapping mediation procedure showed that this mediation by fear of jealousy was significant,  $p < .05$ .

In Experiment 2, participants were brought into a situation in which it was likely that they would be maliciously envied; as a result, they feared being envied and behaved more prosocially. Participants who were likely to be benignly envied also expected others to be envious of them, but they did not fear this envy and therefore did not become more helpful. In Experiment 3, we attempted to replicate Experiment 2 with a different measure of helping behavior to ensure generalizability.

## Experiment 3

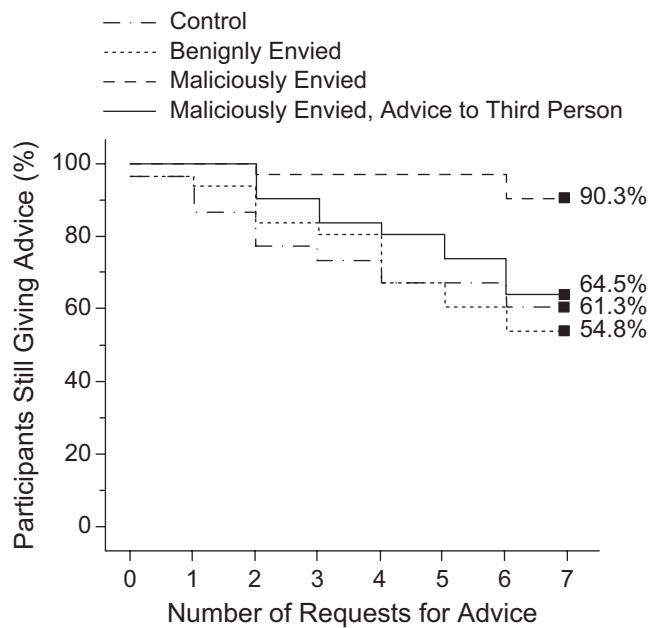
Sixty participants (49 females, 11 males; mean age = 20 years) took part in Experiment 3. As in Experiment 2, they completed a series of questionnaires, after which either they undeservedly received €5 while their partner did not (the maliciously envied condition;  $n = 29$ ) or both they and their partner received €5 (control condition;  $n = 31$ ). In the previous experiments, the participants never met their partner. In this experiment, they did, although the partner was actually a confederate. At the end of the experiment, the participants followed the

**Table 2.** Results for Ratings of Deservingness and Jealousy in Experiment 2

Item	Condition			$F(3, 134)$	$p$	$\eta_p^2$
	Control	Benignly envied	Maliciously envied			
I felt that the situation was deserved	4.16 <sub>b</sub> (1.75)	4.71 <sub>b</sub> (1.19)	2.03 <sub>a</sub> (1.11)	32.53	< .001	.42
I thought the other person would be jealous	1.65 <sub>a</sub> (1.08)	4.71 <sub>b</sub> (1.24)	5.23 <sub>b</sub> (1.18)	85.05	< .001	.65
I was afraid for the jealousy of the other	2.13 <sub>a</sub> (1.31)	2.52 <sub>a</sub> (1.29)	3.74 <sub>b</sub> (1.57)	11.29	< .001	.20

Note: For the three conditions, the table presents means, with standard deviations in parentheses. The response scale for the first item ranged from 1 (*very undeserved*) to 7 (*very deserved*), and the scale for the second and third items ranged from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much so*). Within a row, means with different subscripts differ significantly (least significant difference post hoc tests),  $p \leq .015$ .





**Fig. 2.** Survival analysis of helping behavior in Experiment 2. Results are shown for the control, benignly envied, and maliciously envied conditions, as well as for an additional condition that was identical to the maliciously envied condition except that a third person, rather than the previous partner, asked participants for advice. In the curves, downward steps from left to right indicate that participants stopped helping at that point.

experimenter outside of the cubicle to receive the €5 bonus. At that time, the confederate also left the cubicle, and accidentally tipped over a pile of 15 erasers that were on a table; the erasers scattered around the lab. The experimenter recorded whether participants helped pick up the erasers.

In the control condition, only 3 of 31 participants (10%) helped pick up the erasers. In the maliciously envied condition, 11 of 29 participants helped (38%), a significantly larger percentage,  $\chi^2(1, N = 60) = 6.69, p = .010$ . This result replicates our earlier findings that people who are likely to be maliciously envied by others become more helpful toward those others, and reveals that this pattern generalizes to a second type of prosocial behavior.

## General Discussion

People who anticipate being envied by other people become more helpful toward them. Compared with participants who had no reason to expect to be envied, those who thought that another person was maliciously envid of them were more likely to give time-consuming advice to that person (Experiments 1 and 2) and to help pick up something that person had dropped (Experiment 3). Participants who anticipated being benignly envied did not show the same increases in helping behavior.

If such helping behavior is truly instigated by the fear of being envied, and not by a generalized prosocial tendency or by sympathy for the other person, people should restrict their helpfulness to those who are (thought to be) maliciously

envid. To test this prediction, we ran 31 participants in an additional, fourth condition for Experiment 2. This condition was identical to the maliciously envied condition, except that participants received the help requests from a new partner instead of their old, envid partner. This new partner ostensibly had done better on the first task but had not received the €5 bonus. The new partner knew that some people had received a bonus, but not that the participant had received one. The participant knew that the new partner did not know about the participant's advantage. If people in the original maliciously envied condition became more helpful to appease the envid, participants in this additional condition would not show the same increase in helping behavior. If participants in the original maliciously envied condition helped because they felt sorry for the other person, participants in this additional condition would also exhibit an increase in helping behavior. As Figure 2 shows, the survival function for this condition did not differ from the survival functions for the control and benignly envied conditions, Breslow  $\chi^2(1, N = 62) \leq 0.91, ps \geq .34$ , but did differ from the function in the maliciously envied condition, Breslow  $\chi^2(1, N = 62) = 6.10, p = .014$ . Thus, participants who were better off increased their helping behavior only toward the potentially maliciously envid, not toward any other person. This indicates that helping behavior due to a fear of being envied is aimed at appeasing the envid.

## Alternative explanations

Our results point to the important role of the fear of being envied in the behavior of people who are better off than others. We do not argue that the desire to ward off envy is the only determinant of such people's behavior, yet it does appear to be a potent one. In this section, we discuss other theories that could predict helping following outperformance and clarify why they cannot account for our results.

First, it is unlikely that *inequality aversion* or *fairness concerns* account for the results. People do not like unequal or unfair situations and tend to try to prevent these from occurring (Messick & Sentis, 1985). However, if inequality aversion were the explanation, participants in the fourth condition of Experiment 2 (reported earlier in the General Discussion) should have helped their new, unequally treated partners more than participants in the control condition helped their partners, and they did not. Furthermore, in Experiment 1, a question measuring fairness of the distribution did not predict helping,  $\beta = 0.08, p = .624$ , nor did a question measuring how equal people found the situation to be,  $\beta = -0.05, p = .767$ . Finally, an inequality-aversion explanation would also predict increased helping in the benignly envied condition in Experiment 2, but there was no increase in helping in that condition.

Second, *noblesse oblige* is not likely to have been operating. It is conceivable that increases in helping arose from a general idea that the highly ranked should act honorably and beneficently toward the lower ranked (Fiddick & Cummins, 2007). However, this account would predict increased helping

in the benignly envied condition of Experiment 2, as participants in that condition not only were better off than their partners because they received €5 and their partners did not, but also scored better than their partners on the first task. If noblesse oblige played a role, it should certainly have led to helping behavior in that condition, but it did not.

Third, perhaps emotions other than envy played a role in promoting helping behavior. In Experiment 1, we checked for possible effects of other emotional feelings. Neither happiness with the bonus,  $\beta = -0.09$ ,  $p = .589$ , nor participants' feelings of guilt because they got €5 and their partner got nothing,  $\beta = -0.07$ ,  $p = .651$ , predicted helping behavior.

It is also unlikely that resentment caused the helping behavior. Resentment and (malicious) envy are related, but clearly different (Smith, Parrot, Ozer, & Moniz, 1994). We have three reasons to believe that fear of envy and not resentment caused the increased helping. First, resentment tends to arise if other people are to blame for the inequality, whereas malicious envy tends to arise if circumstances are to blame (Ben-Ze'ev, 2002). In our manipulation, the undeserved advantage was caused by the experimenter, not by the participant. Therefore, malicious envy seems more likely than resentment. Second, Smith et al. (1994) found that envy and resentment are triggered by different types of unfairness. Envy is caused by a distinctively private, unsanctioned, and subjective appraisal that the situation is unfair. Although an envious person finds it unfair that another has the advantage, he or she realizes that other people are likely to disagree with this perception. This is what makes people generally try to hide their envy of others. Resentment, in contrast, arises when a situation is perceived to be objectively unfair and other people are thought to agree. For example, a student is likely to envy another student who did not study for an exam but got a better grade (which is subjectively unfair); resentment is more likely if the other student cheated on the exam (which is objectively unfair). Because resentment is more strongly associated with perceptions of objective unfairness than envy is, a resentment explanation would predict a strong relationship between participants' ratings of perceived fairness and their helping behavior in Experiment 1, but we did not find such a relationship.

Moreover, we asked an additional sample of 40 participants to imagine being in either the benignly envied or the maliciously envied condition of Experiment 2. After this, they indicated how much they thought that the other person would be maliciously envious of them and how much they thought that the other person would resent them (both ratings made on a scale from 1, *not at all*, to 7, *very much so*). As predicted, people expected to be maliciously envied more in the maliciously envied condition ( $M = 4.50$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ) than in the benignly envied condition ( $M = 3.60$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ),  $t(38) = 2.20$ ,  $p = .034$ ,  $d = 0.71$ , but expected resentment did not differ between these conditions ( $M_{\text{maliciously envied}} = 3.85$ ,  $SD = 1.66$ , vs.  $M_{\text{benignly envied}} = 3.50$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ),  $t(38) < 1$ . Therefore, it seems unlikely that resentment caused the difference in helping between those conditions.

A broad framework that describes the consequences of out-performance is the STTUC model (Sensitivity about being the Target of a Threatening Upward Comparison; Exline & Lobel, 1999). Our approach is consistent with this model, but also differs from it in important ways. The STTUC model describes people's reactions to outperformance on a broader level, but we think one needs to zoom in to a more specific level to make predictions about how people will behave. According to the STTUC model, people experience distress after outperformance when they (a) realize that they outperformed another person, (b) perceive the other to be threatened by this, and (c) feel concern about this situation. It does not immediately follow from this model that people help more when they are likely to be maliciously envied, but not when they are likely to be benignly envied, as we found in our experiments. Furthermore, in Experiment 1, participants indicated the extent to which they "felt concern for the other because (s)he might feel threatened," and these ratings did not predict helping behavior,  $\beta = -0.12$ ,  $p = .445$ . The STTUC model integrates various findings in the literature on outperformance, but we believe that to predict the behavior of outperformers, it is crucial to look at the specific feelings they expect to trigger in the outperformed.

## Conclusion

The finding that people who fear being envied act more pro-socially helps to explain how people can function in groups in which inequalities occur frequently. After all, it is commonplace for a colleague to receive a nicer assignment, and for a friend to choose a better dish at a restaurant, and the grass of the neighbor's lawn does look greener than one's own. If such frequently occurring inequalities give rise to envy and its potentially destructive effects, preventing or dampening these effects has social survival value. The fear of being envied, and the behavior that follows from it, serves as a social lubricant that smoothes interactions and is likely to foster group cohesion.

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The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

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