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Self-esteem and envy: Is state self-esteem instability associated with the benign and malicious forms of envy?

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present research was to investigate whether trait self-esteem level and state self-esteem instability were associated with benign envy (i.e., the desire to improve one's own position) and malicious envy (i.e., the desire to damage a superior person's position). In the current study ($N = 182$), we extend previous research in this area by examining the possibility that state self-esteem instability would moderate the associations that trait self-esteem level had with the benign and malicious forms of envy. The results indicate that (1) trait self-esteem level was negatively associated with both benign and malicious envy, (2) state self-esteem instability was positively associated with benign envy, and (3) state self-esteem instability moderated the association between trait self-esteem level and malicious envy such that individuals with stable high self-esteem reported lower levels of malicious envy compared to those with unstable high self-esteem or low levels of trait self-esteem (regardless of whether their low self-esteem was stable or unstable). Taken together, these findings suggest that trait self-esteem level and state self-esteem instability have important connections with the benign and malicious forms of envy.

1. Introduction

Envy is a deeply unpleasant emotion that arises from upward social comparisons that reflect poorly on the self (e.g., Parrott & Smith, 1993). Envy is rooted in an individual's realization that he or she lacks something valuable that belongs to another person such as a personal attribute (e.g., intelligence, beauty), an accomplishment (e.g., winning an election), a relationship (e.g., having an attractive spouse), or a possession (e.g., financial wealth; Parrott & Smith, 1993). The sorts of upward social comparisons that tend to trigger feelings of envy are those that involve threats to one's feelings of self-worth because they reflect an erosion of one's relative social position (Salovey & Rodin, 1984). That is, individuals are most likely to experience envy when they perceive themselves as being inferior in some way to another individual (see Lange, Blatz, & Crusius, in press, for a review).

Feelings of envy often motivate individuals to attempt to overcome their perceived inferiority (Salovey & Rodin, 1984). In essence, there are two approaches for leveling the differences between oneself and the envied individual (e.g., Lange & Crusius, 2015). The first approach is referred to as *benign envy* which involves the desire to attain the advantage that the superior person possesses (i.e., the goal is to bring oneself up to the level of the superior person). The existence of this benign form of envy is supported by research showing that envy is associated with positive thoughts about superior others (van de Ven, Zeelenberg, & Pieters, 2009), hopes for future success (Lange & Crusius, 2015), and shifts in attention toward means that are beneficial for fostering one's own achievements (Crusius & Lange, 2014). The second approach is referred to as *malicious envy* which involves the desire to deprive the superior person of his or her advantage (i.e., the goal is to pull the superior person down to one's own level). The existence of the malicious form of envy – which has been the focus of most previous research concerning envy – is supported by a wide array of results including those showing envy to be associated with certain aspects of narcissism (Lange, Crusius, & Hagemeyer, 2016), hostility and antagonistic thoughts about superior others (van de Ven et al., 2009), and fear of failure (Lange & Crusius, 2015).

Individuals are most likely to experience envy when they perceive themselves as being inferior in some way to another individual but not everyone relies on these sorts of social comparisons to the same extent. For example, individuals with low levels of trait self-esteem are more likely to make upward social comparisons than individuals with high levels of trait self-esteem (Wayment & Taylor, 1995) which may explain the negative association between trait self-esteem level and envy that has often emerged in past studies (e.g., Rentzsch, Schröder-Abé, & Schütz, 2015). Although previous research has examined the connection that trait self-esteem has with envy, the results of those studies are

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at least somewhat limited because they did not distinguish between individuals with stable and unstable forms of self-esteem.

1.1. State self-esteem instability

The vast majority of past research concerning self-esteem has focused exclusively on its level (i.e., whether trait self-esteem is high or low; e.g., Zeigler-Hill, 2013). However, researchers have recognized that self-esteem is a complex construct that cannot be adequately understood by simply attending to its level (see Jordan & Zeigler-Hill, 2013, for a review). One important aspect of self-esteem is its temporal variability (i.e., fluctuations in moment-to-moment feelings of self-worth over time) which is often referred to as *state self-esteem instability* (e.g., Kernis, Grannemann, & Barclay, 1989). State self-esteem instability is typically operationalized as the magnitude of change in the level of state self-esteem that emerges across repeated measurements. It is important to note that the form of state self-esteem instability that is the focus of the present study is often referred to as *barometric* instability because it concerns relatively short-term fluctuations in feelings of self-worth (e.g., those that occur over the course of a week) rather than *baseline* instability which deals with long-term changes in self-esteem (e.g., those that take place over a period of years; Rosenberg, 1986).

The consideration of state self-esteem instability is important because high trait self-esteem has been shown to be a heterogeneous construct consisting of both a stable and an unstable form (see Jordan & Zeigler-Hill, 2013, for a review). The stable form of high self-esteem appears to be "secure" because it reflects positive attitudes toward the self that are realistic, well-anchored, and resistant to threat. Individuals with stable high self-esteem are believed to have a relatively solid basis for their feelings of self-worth that does not require a great deal of external validation. In contrast, the unstable form of high self-esteem appears to be at least somewhat "fragile" because it reflects feelings of self-worth that are vulnerable to challenge, require constant external validation, and rely upon some degree of self-deception. Individuals with unstable high self-esteem are believed to be preoccupied with protecting and enhancing their vulnerable feelings of self-worth. It is important to note that state self-esteem instability may also play a role in distinguishing between different forms of low self-esteem (i.e., stable low self-esteem vs. unstable low self-esteem; e.g., Zeigler-Hill & Wallace, 2012) but these effects have been less consistent across studies (e.g., Kernis, Lakey, & Heppner, 2008).

Previous research has shown that state self-esteem instability – either alone or in conjunction with trait self-esteem level – predicts a wide variety of important outcomes including defensiveness (Kernis et al., 2008), anger and hostility (Kernis et al., 1989), aggression (Zeigler-Hill, Enjaian, Holden, & Southard, 2014), and psychological adjustment (Zeigler-Hill & Wallace, 2012). Taken together, these studies have allowed for a more nuanced understanding of self-esteem by showing that individuals with unstable high self-esteem seem to view their feelings of self-worth as being constantly at risk which likely contributes to their increased reactivity to potential threats.

1.2. Overview and predictions

The purpose of the present study was to gain a better understanding of the connection between self-esteem and envy by examining the possibility that state self-esteem instability may moderate the associations that trait self-esteem level had with the benign and malicious forms of envy. Utilizing state self-esteem instability to distinguish between individuals with stable high self-esteem and those with unstable high self-esteem is an important extension of previous research concerning self-esteem and envy because there are often considerable differences between individuals with these distinct forms of high self-esteem. At the most basic level, we expected our results to replicate those of previous studies showing that trait self-esteem level would have a

negative association with the malicious form of envy (e.g., Rentzsch et al., 2015). The rationale for this prediction was that individuals with low trait self-esteem may be especially likely to employ hostile strategies in order to avoid the loss of their seemingly precious self-esteem resources following these unpleasant upward social comparisons. We did not have a clear prediction regarding the connection between trait self-esteem level and benign envy. One possibility is that individuals with high trait self-esteem may be more likely to experience benign envy because it may serve as an impetus for self-improvement. This is consistent with past research showing positive connections between trait self-esteem and behavioral indicators of benign envy (e.g., greater persistence on a difficult task following an upward social comparison; Smallets, Streamer, Kondrak, & Seery, 2016). However, past research has shown that benign envy is associated with an array of negative outcomes (e.g., negative affect; Crusius & Lange, 2014) that are inconsistent with high trait self-esteem (e.g., Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995). Thus, we sought to clarify the relationship that trait self-esteem level had with benign envy by including it in our analyses for exploratory purposes.

We expected that the associations that trait self-esteem level had with the benign and malicious forms of envy would be qualified by its interaction with state self-esteem instability. We expected that individuals with unstable high self-esteem would report relatively high levels of both the benign and malicious forms of envy that would be similar to the levels of envy reported by those with low trait self-esteem (regardless of whether their low self-esteem was stable or unstable). The rationale for this prediction was that individuals with unstable high self-esteem tend to be highly responsive to potential threats (e.g., Jordan & Zeigler-Hill, 2013) and may consider both forms of envy – which are not mutually exclusive – to be viable strategies for protecting their fragile feelings of self-worth from these potentially threatening upward social comparisons. Lastly, we controlled for narcissism in our analyses because past research has found it to be associated with envy (Lange et al., 2016) and to sometimes be associated with state self-esteem instability (see Southard, Zeigler-Hill, Vrabel, & McCabe, in press, for a review). As a result, we believed that this was important in order to determine whether trait self-esteem level and state self-esteem instability had unique associations with benign and malicious envy that extend beyond what could be explained by narcissism.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were 182 undergraduates (91% female) in the Midwestern region of the United States who were enrolled in psychology courses. Initially, 594 participants completed measures of trait self-esteem level, narcissism, and envy – along with other instruments that are not relevant to the present study (e.g., pathological personality traits) – via a secure website in exchange for partial fulfilment of course-required research participation credits. These 594 participants were offered the opportunity to earn additional research credit for completing a measure of state self-esteem – along with other instruments that are not relevant to the present study (e.g., daily transgressions) – via a secure website at approximately 10:00 pm each evening for up to seven consecutive days. We only included participants in the study who completed data for three or more days – regardless of whether these daily measures were consecutive – because this is the minimum number of data points that is required to calculate a statistically sound and valid estimate of variability (see Zeigler-Hill & Showers, 2007, for a similar strategy). Of the 594 initial participants, 182 participants completed the daily measures for three or more days (i.e., a completion rate of 31%). This completion rate may seem low but it is important to note that completing the daily measures of state self-esteem was optional for participants rather than being a required element of their participation. The final 182 participants completed a total

of 1056 daily measures of state self-esteem (i.e., an average of 5.8 daily measures for each participant) and they did not differ from those who did not complete at least three daily measures in terms of trait self-esteem level ($t = -0.15$, $p = 0.88$), narcissistic admiration ($t = 1.02$, $p = 0.31$), narcissistic rivalry ($t = -1.33$, $p = 0.19$), benign envy ($t = 1.36$, $p = 0.18$), or malicious envy ($t = -0.35$, $p = 0.73$). However, the participants who completed at least three daily measures were more likely to be female than those who did not complete at least three daily measures ($\chi^2[1] = 16.58$, $p < 0.001$). The mean age of the participants in the final sample was 19.64 years ($SD = 5.76$) and the racial/ethnic composition of the final sample was 80% White, 5% Black, 4% Hispanic, 3% Asian, and 8% other.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Trait self-esteem level

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) is a 10-item measure of trait self-esteem (e.g., "I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal basis with others" [$\alpha = 0.89$]). Participants were instructed to complete this measure according to how they generally feel or evaluate themselves overall. Responses were provided using scales ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). This instrument has been shown to possess adequate psychometric properties in previous studies (Zeigler-Hill & Wallace, 2012).

2.2.2. State self-esteem instability

State self-esteem instability was measured using a variation of the basic strategy developed by Kernis and his colleagues (see Kernis, 2005, for a review). Participants completed a modified version of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale via the internet at the end of each day for up to seven consecutive days that instructed participants to respond to each of the 10 items according to how they felt at that particular moment in order to capture state self-esteem. Participants responded using scales that ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 10 (*strongly agree*). The internal consistency of this instrument was $\alpha = 0.93$ averaged across the 7 days. It is important to note that the majority of previous studies concerning state self-esteem instability have used the within-subject standard deviation across the repeated assessments of state self-esteem as the index of state self-esteem instability with higher standard deviations indicating greater state self-esteem instability (see Kernis, 2005, for a review). However, Baird, Le, and Lucas (2006) raised concerns about simply using the within-subject standard deviation as an indicator of intraindividual variability because it conflates mean-level variance with fluctuations over time (i.e., extreme scores are constrained by the limits of the instrument which tends to make these scores less variable over time). In order to address this concern, we used the corrected standard deviation that was recommended by Baird et al. (2006) as the index of state self-esteem instability for the present study. This was accomplished by predicting the within-subject standard deviation of state self-esteem from the linear and quadratic effects of the average state self-esteem score for each participant and saving the standardized residual as an indicator of state self-esteem instability that is not confounded with mean-level information.

2.2.3. Narcissistic admiration and rivalry

The Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Questionnaire (Back et al., 2013) is an 18-item measure that was used to capture two distinct narcissistic strategies: narcissistic admiration (9 items; e.g., "I am great" [$\alpha = 0.81$]) and narcissistic rivalry (9 items; e.g., "I secretly take pleasure in the failure of my rivals" [$\alpha = 0.89$]). Participants responded using scales that ranged from 1 (*not agree at all*) to 6 (*agree completely*). This measure has been found to possess adequate psychometric properties in previous studies (e.g., Back et al., 2013).

2.2.4. Benign and malicious envy

The Benign and Malicious Envy Scale (Lange & Crusius, 2015) is a 10-item measure that provides an assessment of benign envy (5 items; e.g., "When I envy others, I focus on how I can become equally successful in the future" [$\alpha = 0.87$]) and malicious envy (5 items; e.g., "Seeing other people's achievements makes me resent them" [$\alpha = 0.89$]). Participants responded using scales that ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). Previous studies have found the Benign and Malicious Envy Scale to possess adequate psychometric properties (e.g., Lange & Crusius, 2015).

3. Results

The means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations are presented in Table 1. Two hierarchical moderated multiple regression analyses were conducted to determine whether state self-esteem instability moderated the associations that trait self-esteem level had with the benign and malicious forms of envy.[1] For both of the analyses, narcissistic admiration and narcissistic rivalry were entered as control variables on Step 1, the main effects of trait self-esteem level and state self-esteem instability were entered on Step 2, and the interaction of trait self-esteem level × state self-esteem instability was entered on Step 3. These analyses were followed by simple slopes tests to examine the interaction of trait self-esteem level and state self-esteem instability. Simple slopes tests were conducted using values one standard deviation above and below their respective means (e.g., unstable state self-esteem was represented by a value that was one standard deviation above the mean for state self-esteem instability, whereas stable state self-esteem was represented by a value that was one standard deviation below the mean for state self-esteem instability).

3.1. Benign envy

The results for benign envy revealed a positive association for narcissistic admiration ($B = 0.40$, $SE = 0.10$, $t = 3.83$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.19, 0.60]). After controlling for narcissistic admiration and narcissistic rivalry, trait self-esteem level was negatively associated with benign envy ($B = -0.29$, $SE = 0.13$, $t = -2.23$, $p = 0.03$, 95% CI [−0.54, −0.03]) and state self-esteem instability was positively associated with benign envy ($B = 0.19$, $SE = 0.09$, $t = 2.09$, $p = 0.04$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.37]). These results show that higher levels of benign envy were reported by individuals with high levels of narcissistic admiration, low levels of trait self-esteem, and unstable state self-esteem. No other significant main effects or interactions emerged from this analysis.

Table 1
Intercorrelations and descriptive statistics.

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Trait self-esteem level	–					
2. State self-esteem instability	0.07	–				
3. Narcissistic admiration	0.32***	0.08	–			
4. Narcissistic rivalry	−0.29***	−0.01	0.37***	–		
5. Benign envy	−0.06	0.16*	0.32***	0.20**	–	
6. Malicious envy	−0.40***	0.03	0.09	0.63***	0.15†	–
Mean	3.84	−0.05	3.54	2.21	3.87	2.07
Standard deviation	0.74	0.87	0.83	0.88	1.14	1.00

† $p < 0.10$.
* $p < 0.05$.
** $p < 0.01$.
*** $p < 0.001$.

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[1] We also examined the associations that trait self-esteem level and state self-esteem instability had with the two forms of envy without controlling for narcissistic admiration and narcissistic rivalry. The results of these analyses were highly consistent with those presented so we did not include these additional analyses in the interest of parsimony.

Fig. 1. Predicted values for malicious envy illustrating the interaction of trait self-esteem level and state self-esteem instability at values that are one standard deviation above and below their respective means. NS = not significant; ***p* < 0.01; ****p* < 0.001.

3.2. Malicious envy

The results for malicious envy revealed a negative association for narcissistic admiration ($B = -0.20$, $SE = 0.07$, $t = -2.77$, $p = 0.006$, 95% CI $[-0.35, -0.06]$) and a positive association for narcissistic rivalry ($B = 0.79$, $SE = 0.07$, $t = 11.36$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI $[0.65, 0.93]$). After controlling for narcissistic admiration and narcissistic rivalry, trait self-esteem level was negatively associated with malicious envy ($B = -0.27$, $SE = 0.09$, $t = -2.97$, $p = 0.003$, 95% CI $[-0.44, -0.09]$). These results suggest that higher levels of malicious envy were reported by individuals with low levels of narcissistic admiration, high levels of narcissistic rivalry, and low levels of trait self-esteem. However, the main effect of trait self-esteem level was qualified by the predicted trait self-esteem level × state self-esteem instability interaction ($B = 0.23$, $SE = 0.09$, $t = 2.59$, $p = 0.01$, 95% CI $[0.05, 0.40]$). The predicted values for this interaction are depicted in Fig. 1. Simple slopes tests found that the association between trait self-esteem level and malicious envy was significant for individuals with stable state self-esteem ($B = -0.50$, $SE = 0.13$, $t = -3.97$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI $[-0.74, -0.25]$) but not for those with unstable state self-esteem ($B = -0.10$, $SE = 0.11$, $t = -0.96$, $p = 0.34$, 95% CI $[-0.32, 0.11]$). Additional simple slopes tests revealed that the association between state self-esteem instability and malicious envy was significant for those with high trait self-esteem ($B = 0.26$, $SE = 0.10$, $t = 2.62$, $p = 0.01$, 95% CI $[0.06, 0.45]$) but not for those with low trait self-esteem ($B = -0.08$, $SE = 0.08$, $t = -0.91$, $p = 0.36$, 95% CI $[-0.24, 0.09]$). Taken together, this pattern shows that individuals with stable high self-esteem reported lower levels of malicious envy than individuals with unstable high self-esteem or those with low levels of trait self-esteem regardless of whether their low self-esteem was stable or unstable.

4. Discussion

The present study examined whether trait self-esteem level and state self-esteem instability were associated with the benign and malicious forms of envy. We found that trait self-esteem level and state self-esteem instability had unique associations with benign and malicious envy even when we controlled for narcissism. Trait self-esteem level was negatively associated with both the benign and malicious forms of envy. The fact that individuals with low trait self-esteem reported higher levels of benign and malicious envy extends previous research that had largely focused on the malicious aspect of envy (e.g., Rentzsch et al., 2015).

State self-esteem instability was positively associated with the experience of benign envy. That is, individuals with unstable feelings of self-worth were more likely to experience benign envy than individuals with stable feelings of self-worth. Although state self-esteem instability was not associated with malicious envy, it did moderate the association that trait self-esteem level had with malicious envy. As expected, individuals with stable high self-esteem reported lower levels of malicious envy than individuals with unstable high self-esteem or those with low levels of trait self-esteem. This shows that the people who are the most likely to experience malicious envy are those with low levels of trait self-esteem or those with high levels of trait self-esteem that are coupled with unstable state self-esteem. These results are consistent with those of previous studies showing that individuals with stable high self-esteem tend to report higher levels of psychological adjustment (Zeigler-Hill & Wallace, 2012) and lower levels of aggression (Zeigler-Hill et al., 2014) than those with unstable high self-esteem or low trait self-esteem (see Jordan & Zeigler-Hill, for a review). Overall, these findings suggest that researchers who are interested in studying the connection that self-esteem has with almost any outcome – including other social emotions that are similar to envy (e.g., jealousy, shame, guilt) – should carefully consider accounting for both trait self-esteem level and state self-esteem instability in their research.

One of the strengths of the present study is that it is the first to investigate whether state self-esteem instability moderates the associations that trait self-esteem level has with the two forms of envy. This approach revealed findings that have theoretical significance for the understanding of both self-esteem and envy. For example, Rentzsch et al. (2015) suggest that triggering negative emotions (i.e., envy) at the intrapersonal level may lead to negative or hostile behaviors at the interpersonal level for individuals with low levels of trait self-esteem. The present results suggest that envy may also play a similar role in understanding the aversive social behaviors (e.g., aggression) that characterize individuals with unstable high self-esteem. It will be important for future research to gain an even clearer understanding of the potentially important roles that the benign and malicious forms of envy may play in the connections that trait self-esteem level and state self-esteem instability have with an array of outcomes. For example, it may be helpful for future research to use multilevel modeling to examine whether experiencing benign or malicious envy impact daily associations between state self-esteem and negative social behavior (see Geukes et al., 2017, for a recent example of using multilevel modeling to understand fluctuations in state self-esteem).

Although the present study has a number of strengths (e.g., consideration of both trait self-esteem level and state self-esteem instability), it is important to note some of its potential limitations. The first limitation is that the direction of causality cannot be determined from the present data due to its correlational nature. The underlying process model for the present study was that feelings of self-worth caused individuals to experience certain forms of envy. However, it is possible that being predisposed to experience either benign or malicious envy may actually influence the development of self-esteem or that another variable may influence the development of both self-esteem and envy. Future research is needed to clarify the nature of the causal relationship between self-esteem and envy. The second potential limitation is that the study relied on a predominantly female undergraduate sample. Thus, these findings may be a better representation of the connections between self-esteem and envy for women than men, and for younger adults than older adults. This limits the generalizability of these findings because it is possible that the connections between self-esteem and envy may vary between men and women as well as across developmental periods (e.g., older adulthood). Future research would benefit from examining these connections in more diverse samples. Despite these limitations, we believe that the present study expands our knowledge regarding the connections that self-esteem has with the benign and malicious forms of envy.

5. Conclusion

The results of the present study revealed that trait self-esteem level and state self-esteem instability had unique associations with the two forms of envy. Further, state self-esteem instability moderated the association that trait self-esteem level had with the malicious form of envy such that individuals with stable high self-esteem reported lower levels than those with unstable high self-esteem or those with low levels of trait self-esteem. These results support the idea that state self-esteem instability plays an important role in whether individuals want to pull themselves up to match an envied person (i.e., benign envy) or bring the envied person down to their own level (i.e., malicious envy).

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