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Envy Up, Scorn Down: How Comparison Divides Us

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*Comparison compels people, even as it stresses, depresses,
and divides us. Comparison is only natural, but the collateral
damage reveals envy upward and scorn downward, and
these emotions, arguably, poison people and their relation-
ships. Summaries of several experiments—using question-
naire, psychometric, response-time, electromyographic, and
neuroimaging data—illustrate the dynamics of envy up and
scorn down, as well as proposing how to mitigate their
effects. Initial studies suggest the importance of status.
Other data show how scorn down minimizes thought about
another's mind; power deactivates mental concepts. Re-
garding envy up, other studies demonstrate that Schaden-
freude (malicious joy) targets envied outgroups. However,
counterstereotypic information, empathy, and outcome de-
pendency can mitigate both scorn and envy.*

Keywords: envy, scorn, status, power, social comparison

Americans like to think that we are beyond social class,
that only Europeans make class distinctions, as a rem-
nant of feudalism or maybe a by-product of restricted
mobility. We often hear that Americans mostly identify
as middle class, that we offer exceptional opportunity,
and that hard work pays off (Correspondents of The
New York Times, 2005; Lareau & Conley, 2008). Un-
fortunately, these cultural myths are less true than we
would like to believe. Received wisdom claims that
most Americans feel middle class, but this has not held
true since some of the first Gallup polls in 1939 (Gallup
Poll News Service, 1939; Hout, 2008). Mostly, we split
evenly between working class and middle class, leaving
10%–20% to the upper and lower extremes. Although
people's ability to move above their parents' social class
is limited and no better than it is in other places, we all
endorse the American dream (Kluegel & Smith, 1986).
Our collective belief is that America offers opportunity,
so the system is fair. In a meritocracy, people get what
they deserve. The irony is that if we think people get
the social class they deserve, then we should value
elites. If we believe in meritocracy, why is being elite a
liability in election years? Perhaps upward comparison
breeds envious resentment because people think elites
look down on them with scorn.

Social class is just one example of social comparison.
Psychological science is especially suited to address inter-
personal side effects of comparison. As in our political life,
so too do envy and scorn invade our social lives. People
do not always admit to comparison with friends, family,
and colleagues, but we all do it. To be sure, people differ
in their proclivity, but comparison is pervasive. People
compare to evaluate themselves, to improve their standing,
and to enhance their self-esteem (e.g., Taylor & Lobel,
1989; Wood, 1989).

If comparison contaminates, envy and scorn are worse,
but for better reasons. Comparison at least can be adaptive,
providing information and motivation, but the feelings that
follow can be poisonous. Envy says, "I wish I had what
you have," but it implies "And I wish you did not have it."
Scorn says, "You are unworthy of my attention, but I know
you are down there somewhere."

Comparison emotions can corrupt the comparer. Envy
humiliates and angers people (see Smith, 2008, for recently
collected research). Feeling below someone makes people
feel ashamed at their own inadequacy. If a peer can suc-
ceed, then people feel inadequate for not doing equally
well. Envy also makes people angry at the injustice of their
low-status positions. Those who succeeded must have had
unfair advantages. Envy correlates with depression, unhap-
piness, and low self-esteem.

Scorn likewise scars the perpetrator. Power self-centers
people (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003), so power
can desensitize the high status to the needs of others.[1]
Powerful people can be clueless about subordinates (Fiske,
1993; Goodwin, Gubin, Fiske, & Yzerbyt, 2000). Power
makes people focus on their own goals and needs, neglect-

[1] Power and status are not identical but are often correlated (Fiske, 2010;
Fiske & Berdahl, 2007).

Figure 1
Stereotype Content Model Cluster Analysis of Social Groups
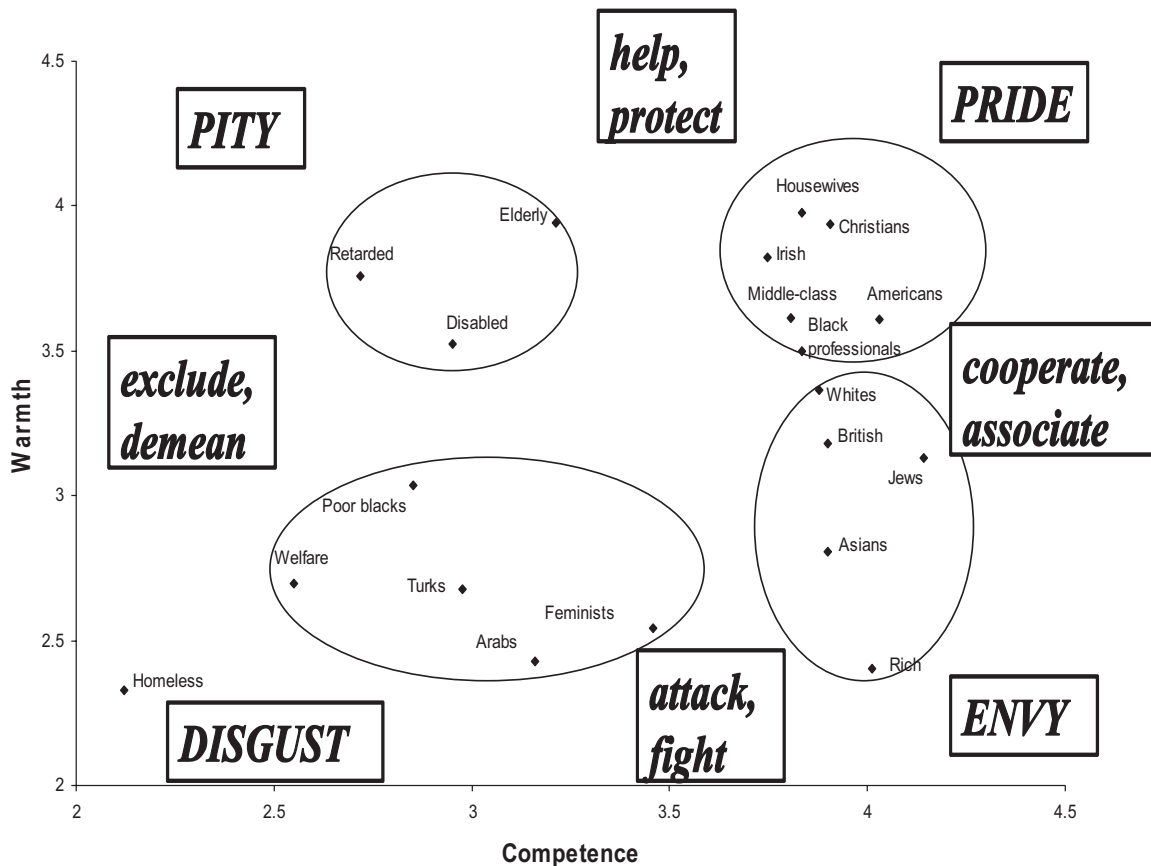
Note. High-status groups are on the right, and low-status groups are on the left; cooperative groups are in the top half, and competitive/exploitative groups are in the bottom half (according to ratings in Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002). Envy targets high-status outgroups (competent but not warm); in the current article, scorn combines reactions to lower status outgroups, both disgusting and pitied. Adapted from "The BIAS Map: Behaviors From Intergroup Affect and Stereotypes," by A. J. C. Cuddy, S. T. Fiske, and P. Glick, 2007, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 92*, p. 638. Copyright 2007 by the American Psychological Association.

ing people with less power, unless they are useful some-how (Fiske & Berdahl, 2007; Guinote, 2008). Thus, down-ward scorn contaminates interactions.

If envy and scorn are so toxic, how does their poison play out between people? In an ongoing program of re-search, my colleagues and I explore the interpersonal dy-namics of status divides caused by societal comparisons. We set out to shed some light on the comparisons that di-vide people from each other, focusing on envy up and scorn down. Even first encounters in psychology experi-ments reflect the stuff of social comparisons. The research program summarized here begins to describe the interper-sonal dynamics of people making sense of each other, in the context of contrasting social status. Using various methods, from online vignette studies to neuroimaging, we hope to triangulate on envy and scorn, as well as discover some cures to get people beyond comparing.

Background on the Stereotype Content Model

Our current ideas about envy and scorn emerged from our recent program of research on universal dimensions of so-cial perception, particularly prejudices (for a review, see Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007). Think about encountering an individual in a dark alley. People need to know two things about other people: First, does this person (or group) intend benefit or harm to me? If the other's intentions are benign, then the other is warm (friendly, trustworthy), oth-erwise hostile. Second, does this other have the capacity to enact those intentions? If so, the other is competent (capa-ble, skilled), otherwise incompetent. These two simple di-mensions account for the lion's share of the variance in impressions of individuals and groups, arguably for evolu-tionary reasons. In the stereotype content model (SCM), the two fundamental dimensions locate social groups rela-tive to each other (see Figure 1). As indicated, they predict intergroup emotions and behaviors.

In convenience samples of students and parents, as well as a representative sample survey (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2007; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002), ingroups and reference groups (e.g., the middle class) seem both warm and competent, eliciting feelings of pride and admiration as well as active help and passive accommodation. Society's "dregs" (e.g., homeless people) appear neither warm nor competent, provoking the most negative feelings of disgust and contempt, as well as the worst behaviors, both active attack and passive neglect. At the extremes, the high–high and the low–low groups receive unambivalent positive or negative reactions, as documented by standard prejudice research.

The off-diagonal groups provide the interesting case of ambivalence. Groups seen as warm but incompetent (e.g., older or disabled people) elicit feelings of pity—an ambivalent emotion—as well as a mix of active help but passive neglect (institutionalization comes to mind). Conversely, groups seen as competent but not warm (e.g., rich people) elicit feelings of envy—also an ambivalent emotion—as well as a mix of passive accommodation but active harm when the chips are down (e.g., under societal breakdown, as in genocide directed toward outsider entrepreneurs).

According to recent data, the warmth and competence dimensions represent a slight rotation of the classic semantic-differential dimensions for attitude measurement: evaluation (good–bad) and potency (weak–strong) (Kervyn & Fiske, 2010). Evaluation runs from the SCM low–low quadrant to its high–high quadrant (it is better to be either warm or competent than the reverse). Potency (often collapsed with activity in social perception) runs from the harmless warm-but-incompetent SCM quadrant to its threatening competent-but-cold quadrant. Other two-dimensional schemes converge with ours (space limits a full review; see Fiske et al., 2007).

Our prior research demonstrates that social structures—perceived intergroup status and competition, respectively—predict stereotypes of competence and warmth. Then, the stereotype combinations predict unique emotional prejudices (pride, disgust, pity, envy). The emotions in turn predict active and passive help and harm (Caprariello, Cuddy, & Fiske, 2009; Cuddy et al., 2007; Fiske et al., 2002).

Most relevant here are the predictors of warmth and competence. In dozens of global samples (Cuddy et al., 2009), people rated their society's most salient groups on stereotypic warmth and competence as well as structural status and interdependence (cooperation–competition). Reliably, perceived cooperation predicts stereotypic warmth (correlations averaging about .30). In these same samples, perceived status predicts stereotypic competence (averaging above .70). This remarkable correspondence between status and competence caught our attention.

Why do people think that high-status people are more capable than low-status people? Although competence might lead to status, success has other, situational causes. And low status may not reflect personal traits but can result from bad circumstances. Observers seem to make dispositional inferences for status, even though it has multiple determinants.

If the introductory social-class statistics apply to status more broadly, then few of us place ourselves at society's extreme top or bottom. So most of us are looking upward at some higher status people, and envy is the most frequently reported emotion. Conversely, most of us have people below us. Looking down on them, why do people think that low-status people are less capable? Contempt (for low-warmth groups such as homeless people) and pity (for high-warmth groups such as older people) are the most frequently reported emotions toward low-status people. Combined, contempt and pity seem like scorn (looking down on those less valued, whether one feels sorry for them or not). We started to worry about the dynamics of envy up and scorn down, as they do not seem to be the most constructive intergroup or interpersonal responses, yet they pervade our social lives. First, consider the evidence that people value others according to status, and then consider envy and scorn separately.

Status

Moral dilemmas force people to set priorities, choosing among difficult alternatives. The trolley dilemma in particular forces people to decide whether to divert a runaway tram, saving five people on the track ahead but sacrificing another person to stop the train. Rating that intervention as unacceptable, most people (typically 80% to 90%) reject the choice to push a person off a bridge, even though it would thereby stop the trolley from killing five people in its path.

Perhaps it depends on who is sacrificed and who is saved, we wondered (Cikara, Farnsworth, Harris, & Fiske, in press). Participants rated all pairs of eight stereotyped groups (two groups from each quadrant of the SCM above, using multiple exemplars of pride, pity, envy, and disgust outgroups). That is, they had to decide whether to sacrifice one allegedly contemptible person to save five other contemptible, five pitied, five envied, or five admired people; they also had to decide for one pitied person against all other combinations, and so on. These choices were ordered randomly. Thus, they had to decide each time whether sacrificing one (e.g., homeless person) to save five (e.g., rich people) was acceptable. Brain scans focused on each decision period.

Consistent with a status-valuation hypothesis, significantly more people found it acceptable in general to sacrifice a low-status person than a high-status person; 69% rated this as acceptable. And it was significantly more acceptable in general to save five high-status people than five low-status people; 77% rated this as acceptable.

What's more, combining the sacrificed/saved targets, participants found it most morally acceptable to save five pride-inducing ingroupers (e.g., middle class, high status, and warm) by sacrificing one extreme, disgust-inducing outgroup person (e.g., homeless, low status, and not warm). Indeed, the trade-off between saving ingroupers and sacrificing extreme outgroupers was acceptable for 84% of our participants, completely reversing the normal aversion to the generic trade-off. This particular dilemma activated a neural network previously associated with difficult moral decisions (lateral orbitofrontal cortex, dorsomedial to dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, anterior cingulate cortex; see Cikara, Farnsworth, et al., in press, for supporting references). Activation in these independently identified areas correlated with acceptability ratings ($r = .29-.31$).

The moral dilemma provides a tool for people to express relative value of other people's lives according to their status. Together with the brain-imaging data, the trolley dilemma provides a window onto otherwise unacceptable trade-offs.

Scorn Down

When people devalue lower status people, what are they thinking? Scorn mostly fails to think. The scorned do not merit attention, being worse than useless. People do not expect to interact with them because they hold neither resources nor prestige. Normally, people expecting to respond to another person engage in a little casual mind reading: What does this person intend? What kind of personality is this? What is this person feeling? These kinds of mind perceptions spontaneously come online and reliably activate a mind-perception network that features the medial prefrontal cortex (mPFC; e.g., Amodio & Frith, 2006; Mitchell, 2008). Other people are normally such an important feature of our environment that we spontaneously try to figure them out.

Power and Status Deactivate Mind Reading

Except we do not bother to mind-read some people, the lowest of the low. Our lab (Harris & Fiske, 2006) predicted that disgusting outgroups (low warmth/low competence) might not trigger this usual social cognition that attributes a mind to the other person. Precedent for this phenomenon came in Leyens and colleagues' (2003) insight that people infrahumanize outgroups by denying that they have typically human experiences, such as complex emotions. Dehumanization goes further, failing to consider their minds at all.

In the scanner, undergraduates viewed 48 pretested person photos representing the four SCM quadrants, two groups each represented by six instances. Their task was to choose which SCM emotion the picture most evoked in them (choosing among pride, envy, pity, or disgust; but the phenomenon does not depend on their making this judgment). We predicted mPFC activation for most groups, but not low–low ("disgusting") groups. Indeed, mPFC activated significantly for only three of the four quadrants, showing in the low–low case a nonsignificant effect size of about half that of the other quadrants. People's apparent indifference to the minds of homeless people and drug addicts also appeared in other participants reporting difficulty attributing a mind to them, rating them as less competent–autonomous and less warm–familiar, and not expecting to interact with them (Harris & Fiske, 2009).

Other low-status groups, such as sexualized women, apparently elicit related responses. Objectification of women's bodies may invoke some similarly depersonalizing responses (Cikara, Eberhardt, & Fiske, in press). Bikini-clad women, compared with bikini-clad men, appear less autonomous (to male perceivers but not to female ones), and for hostile sexists, they deactivate the brain's social cognition network. Dehumanization and objectification share a scornful inattention to the mind of the low-status, diminished other person.

Powerful people especially scorn others' minds. Power corrupts (or at least renders clueless). In social cognition, power itself should deactivate mental concepts because the perceiver does not expect to need the other person (Ames & Fiske, 2010a). Specifically, we hypothesized that seeing a person (but not an animal) automatically activates mental concepts for everyday mind reading, as would be expected from our preparation to interact with others. But the exception should be when people are primed with power.

In our study, some participants had to describe a time when they had power over another person's outcomes, whereas control participants merely described their day yesterday (a manipulation borrowed from Galinsky, Magee, Inesi, & Gruenfeld, 2006). In the control condition, seeing a human picture facilitated identifying mental-state words (e.g., *optimism*) but not physical words (e.g., *motor*). However, the power prime eliminated this differential sensitivity to mental-state concepts. And seeing animal pictures did not show this pattern.

Some studies, then, fit the idea that scorn directed downward diminishes consideration of another's mind. Those data indicate that people have trouble attributing a mind to or imagining interaction with homeless people or drug addicts. Those data also indicate that people have the same difficulties with poor people in general (another disgust-inducing outgroup) as well as older people and disabled people (pitied outgroups). Subsequent studies, next, focus on the predicament of particular low-status outgroups that are scorned, showing how scorn can be moderated.

Scorn Can Change

The dynamics of scorn include several low-status groups. The cases of classism, ageism, and anti-immigrant preju-

dices illustrate both scornful reactions and how they can change.

Poor people.   Classism appears in the stereotype that poor people deserve their fate because they are stereotypically incompetent (Russell & Fiske, 2008). Participants expecting to play an experimental game with another student learned, among other background information, that the person's parents had low- or high-prestige jobs, indicating social class. Participants rated the low-status partner as less competent than the high-status partner, even on "objective" indicators such as estimated SAT and GPA. They viewed low-status partners as less competent, regardless of whether they had evidence from having played the game (which was in fact rigged to hold constant the partner's performance). The low-status→incompetence attribution in effect blames the victim for a bad life outcome, creating anger and resentment toward the low-status person for not trying hard enough.

An external attribution, in contrast, would create sympathy for the bad circumstances (Zucker & Weiner, 1993). A poor person's responsibility therefore could either worsen or mitigate negative reactions. If a poor person is lazy, that should create more scorn, but if the person is hardworking, scorn should diminish. Work ethic should not polarize responses to a rich person because (lack of) work ethic is not central to the wealthy stereotype, and the person has no bad outcome to explain. (People are more prone to seek explanations for bad outcomes than good ones because others' unexplained misfortune threatens one's own security.) We decided to investigate the mitigating role of work ethic in classism (Russell & Fiske, 2009).

In an online study, participants rated their reactions to a vignette describing a college friend's roommate, who was from either a poor or a rich family and was either hard–working or lazy. As predicted, the lazy–poor person seemed more exploitative, undeserving, immoral, cold, unethical, and arrogant, compared with the hardworking–poor person. What's more, the lazy–poor person elicited more anger/resentment and attack/confront/criticize responses, as well as fewer admiration/pride, sympathy/pity, and assist/support/praise responses. Notably, work ethic made no difference for the rich people. This pattern of lower-class-specific polarization replicates for adults rating their peers and for other adults recommending job candidates. Thus, scornful (negative downward) responses exaggerate when the lower status person seems responsible, but the scorn can reverse when the person contradicts stereotypic expectations by working against misfortune. This polarization is most likely to hold when the other person is competing for resources because then people have the most need to explain the unequal status quo. Having explained away the poor's misfortunes (they are lazy), one can dismiss them.

Older people.   Scorn can polarize reactions toward another lower status group, even one that is pitied (rather than being disgusting) by default. Ageist stereotypes view older people as low status and incompetent but harmless and warm. When older and younger people compete for resources, prescriptive stereotypes can kick in, the younger pressuring the elder to share accumulated resources (North & Fiske, 2010). These prescriptive norms target older more than younger people because the elders control resources of several kinds. For example, passive consumption of health care by older people should exaggerate scorn-type reactions.

For an online sample of adults under 30, a vignette described Max, either old or young, and either stubbornly choosing an expensive, elective medical procedure, regardless of the cost to family and caregivers, or understanding others' concerns and deciding against the extraordinary procedure. When older Max chose the procedure, he seemed less warm/kind and competent/capable, as well as less appealing to cooperate/associate with. When he refused the procedure, reactions were more positive. But for young Max, the health care decision made no difference.

This pattern replicates for more active control over resources, namely the active succession norm that older people should pass along their wealth, not actively control resources. Older, stingy Max "has enough insurance and savings to comfortably handle his own expenses. But, despite his younger relatives' needs, he is reluctant to lend or share his money." Responses again polarized, relative to older generous Max but not to young Max, regardless of whether he shared his wealth with older relatives. Finally, the same pattern replicates for the identity-related use of age-group symbols, such as clubbing versus bingo and college versus retirement-home parties. In each case, the prescriptive norms target the lower status, older person, heaping negative reactions when he violates prescriptive norms but rewarding him when he complies.

Immigrants.   A third illustrative case of low-status groups is immigrants, who similarly elicit scorn in the default case but can change that scorn, depending on their own counterstereotypic attributes or on the perceiver's perspective. Generic immigrants stereotypically appear low status, incompetent, and also exploitative–competitive, not trustworthy. Immigrants who are undocumented, Mexican, or African also cluster in this part of the SCM space (Lee & Fiske, 2006).

Immigrants can move out of the low-status position by being associated stereotypically with high-status jobs (e.g., Asians as entrepreneurs or high-techies), though they do not gain perceived warmth and trust. Or they can move into the ingroup by being from high-status (White) ethnic groups described as Europeans or Canadians. Time heals: Third-generation immigrants are indistinguishable from other Americans. In various ways, status can change scorn to pride.

Empathy can also change scorn. Empathy relates to

sympathy, pity, and warmth but not to status/competence. Immigrant groups stereotyped as low status but harmless receive pity instead of disgust and contempt. Pity is still a condescending emotion, directed downward, but its negativity is mitigated by sympathy for those who have low status. Irish and Italian immigrants tend to elicit these stereotypes.

Another form of empathy comes from the eye of the beholder. Empathy, whether situational or dispositional, should enhance perceived warmth/trustworthiness, but not status/competence (Sevillano & Fiske, 2010). Online participants read an immigrant's blog, "In Residence," under empathy (perspective-taking) or neutral (objective) instructions. Participants' dispositional empathy was also measured. The predisposition to put oneself imaginatively into a fictional situation, combined with empathy instructions, raised the apparent warmth of the immigrant but not perceived competence. In effect, a double dose of empathy—both dispositional and situational—can change stereotypic warmth and trustworthiness, but not competence and status. The dispositional imaginative empathy also combines in another study priming immigrants as cooperative, again shifting warmth but not status–competence.

Interim Summary

Scorn sabotages normal spontaneous tendencies to mind-read in preparation for interacting with the other person. People value others by their status and then do not bother to engage actively in social cognition for low-status people. Power worsens this tendency, but it can be undermined by counterstereotypic evidence or softened by empathy.

Envy Up

Envy can be relatively benign (I wish I had what you have) or malicious (I wish you did not have what you have; Smith, 2008). Related to jealousy, resentment, and injustice, envy is directed up, toward the rich, professional, and entrepreneurial but also toward peers and allies doing better than the self. Envy is dangerous, dividing people in a different way than scorn does. Envy can lead to going along with the higher status and with more powerful others, but also to sabotaging and attacking them (Cuddy et al., 2007). Envy is harm waiting to happen.

Schadenfreude, joy in another's misfortune, should target envied groups especially (Cikara & Fiske, 2010). Envied outgroups seem high status and competent, but cold, not "us," so they are resented. Do these low-warmth/high-competence (envied) targets indeed elicit Schadenfreude? We hypothesized that people would feel good about these group members' bad events and feel bad about their good events.

Online, adults viewed a series of photographs of people from the SCM quadrants (envy, disgust, pity, pride), each target linked to either positive, neutral, or negative every-day events. For example, respectively, an elderly woman "ate a really good sandwich"; a drug addict "yawned twice in a row"; or a wealthy business man "sat in gum on a park bench." Participants rated each person–event pair: *If I saw this happening in real life it would make me feel* (1 = *extremely bad,* 10 = *extremely good*).

The envied groups received the least positive reactions to their good events and the least negative reactions to their bad events, compared with all other groups and a pre-test baseline. What's more, a replication measured facial electromyography (EMG), focusing on the zygomaticus major (ZM; the cheeks' smile muscles). The ZM activated more for negative events than for positive ones only for envied outgroup members. People can't help smiling a little when an investment banker "steps in dog poo." This is Schadenfreude.

But it is not inevitable. People may be able to empathize even with envied outgroups, short-cutting Schadenfreude. And, as noted, envy comes in a benign form that simply longs for another's status without wishing ill. Benign envy can inspire effort, as when a role model shows how good fortune is attainable (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). If people feel that the desired outcome is within their grasp, that they can control their own outcomes, then they may attend to the other in an adaptive fashion (Dépret & Fiske, 1999; Erber & Fiske, 1984; Ruscher & Fiske, 1990). People focus on the most surprising information, which is expectancy inconsistent, in an effort to integrate it and form a more accurate impression about someone who matters to them. Indeed, when people's outcomes depend directly on another, they effectively engage in mind reading, attempting to understand what makes the other person tick.

The brain's social-cognition network should reflect this activity, when another person controls valued resources (Ames & Fiske, 2010b). Participants came to our lab expecting to work for a prize with one peer who was expert at a collaborative task. Another expert would simply work independently on the same task. Even though the peers were not high status, they did differ on expert power—that is, control over knowledge necessary to the task. Participants indeed attended more to the person on whom their outcomes would depend. What's more, in the scanner, responses to that person uniquely distinguished between uninformative (expectancy-consistent) and surprising (expectancy-inconsistent) information. As predicted, the mPFC (that reliable center of the social cognition network) activated more to the surprising information, but only for the expert on whom their outcomes depended, not for the independent expert. Upward comparison can engage social cognition adaptively.

Conclusions

Looking upward and looking downward in social comparisons happens all the time, as a spontaneous human activity.

Often it informs, enhances, and motivates people. We have been most concerned with the potential side effects, when comparison divides people from each other. In the context of contrasting social status, people experience envy and scorn, according to a variety of evidence using a range of methods. Our work is only beginning; we do not examine any clinical implications and not many individual differences. We do not know how scorn moves between inattention ("beneath contempt") and self-satisfaction (at the other's expense). We do not examine the interplay between malicious and benign envy.

We do not know enough about how people feel about envying and scorning. In personal relationships people hope to avoid comparison, but they still routinely assess their standing relative to relevant peers, even their nearest and dearest (Exline & Lobel, 1999; Tesser, Millar, & Moore, 1988). We do not know how much people care about the side effects of their own envy and scorn. Granted, we do know that people publicly eliminate the negative and accentuate the positive (the warmth of pitied outgroups, the competence of envied outgroups) and that self-presentation pressures them to say something nice about nearly everyone (Bergsieker, Leslie, Constantine, & Fiske, 2010). But we do not yet know whether people exploit such innuendo strategically.

We also do not know how envy and scorn mix with people's societal–political ideologies. Americans believe that we minimize comparison because we are egalitarian, but still we pit Main Street against Wall Street in every political debate. Unprecedented income inequality provides the underlying conditions for scorn by the rich against the poor. Volatile political movements express resentful envy by the dispossessed against the affluent. Under the wrong circumstances, many ordinary people are capable of violence (Fiske, Harris, & Cuddy, 2004). To the extent that envy and scorn contribute, we need to get beyond compare.

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