

Envy: Everyday and Everywhere

SUE COWAN-JENSSEN, London, UK

ABSTRACT *In psychoanalysis the concept of envy describes a specific defence within an object relational structure that denies the subjectivity, need and entitlement of the other and is the antithesis of gratitude and satisfaction. Yet how far is envy both a representation of a psychological structure which is pathological and a culturally generated phenomenon? Should we not take into account the forces that amplify envy when considering the pathology of our 'envious' clients? With reference to social and political dynamics and a clinical vignette, this paper will consider whether envy can be as much a social disease as a psychopathology that requires psychotherapeutic treatment. It will look at three main areas. What are the conditions in our society that increase envious reactions? What are the economic and social consequences of envy, both negative and positive, and what of our own envy in relation to our colleagues and clients? Copyright © 2011 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

Key words: envy, therapist's envy, inequality, social justice, consumption, politics

There is barely a culture or language in the world that doesn't have a concept of envy. Amongst the ancients, even the gods could be envious. The concept of envy and its dangers has long been understood and yet when Helmut Schoeck, a sociologist, wrote his seminal book called *Envy* in 1969 he noted then how little work had been done on this subject, in either the field of sociology or psychology. Little has changed since then and envy is perhaps our secret shameful vice, which is normally hidden or disguised and rarely owned: 'The envious man will confess to almost any other sin or emotional impulse before he will confess to his own envy' (Schoeck, 1969, 142).

If envy is long standing, we have to accept that it is not only a clinical phenomenon, which we will normally observe in the consulting room, but is likely to be alive and well inside us all. Leslie Farber was one of the few psychotherapists who openly confessed to envying his more successful colleagues. He noted that envy is frequently disguised, not only from the observer but also from the envier him or herself. Because of our ability to rationalize, we can be very adept at self-deception. Farber recalled the first time he heard Harry Stack Sullivan give a talk. He could not remember the content of the lecture, which he pointed out was interesting: all he could recall was Sullivan fussing with his recording apparatus:

I was appalled that such a respected figure in our profession could so nakedly address himself to posterity . . . Inasmuch as envy rendered me impervious to . . . the content of his lecture, the object of

Correspondence: Sue Cowan-Jensen, West Hill House, 6 Swains Lane, London N6 6QS, UK.
E-mail: suejensen@blueyonder.co.uk

my disparagement, it will be noted, was his personal style . . . In brief, I detested his self-assertion, which is not an uncommon focus when envy takes the form of disparagement. (Farber, 1966, 234–5)

Telling his friend later about the lecture, he imitated Sullivan's affectations and phraseology. He emphasized that he knew how brilliant Sullivan was, just in case his friend thought he was being envious.

We should not underestimate the envy that flourishes in professions, and the profession of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy is absolutely no exception. It would be hard to argue that the more successful and well paid our colleagues, the more susceptible they are to being envied. The secrecy surrounding how much individual well-established psychotherapists or psychoanalysts charge is partly due, I suspect, to avoid the envy of their less successful colleagues. How do we feel about therapists who can charge clients more than we do especially if they are no more qualified or experienced than ourselves? Are we pleased for them? Do we think that they are setting a proper standard that we should aspire to, or does it us make us feel somewhat lacking? Do we perhaps think, how unfair, when we know they're not that exceptional? Here I suggest we might be denying our envy, which can quickly morph into moral indignation and self-righteousness. These therapists are greedy while we, who charge less, are not. As Erich Fromm wrote: 'There is perhaps no phenomenon which contains so much destructive feeling as moral indignation, which permits envy to be acted out under the guise of virtue' (Fromm, 1947, 253). It is not nearly so enjoyable 'putting down' one's colleagues once you realize you are exposing an envious core. Indeed, the term 'to put down' reveals the true intent of the act, which is to reduce the other in relation to oneself.

Luise Eichenbaum and Susie Orbach (1988) argue that this type of envy can be very useful because it identifies desires that are felt to be impossible. Once the longings are admitted to and owned for what they are, then one can raise the question: if it is possible and permissible for these people to do or have these things, why not me? For example, what is preventing me from charging more if that is what I would like to do? This is described as 'emulative envy'. Joye Weisel Barth (2008) writes of her experience of envying the creativity of one of her clients, but the realization of her envy inspired her to develop her own creativity, which she had neglected. She proposed that envy should be seen on a continuum that moves from fairly benign to more malignant and destructive.

We can understand that envy can take different forms and there will be a wide range of intensity. There is a difference between being sour about a colleague and hacking them to death! When sociologists or anthropologists or psychotherapists talk about envy, are they looking at the same thing? I rather think they are, but the intensity of envy, the level of its destructiveness and how it is acted out, will vary. However, there is often some damage even in relatively mild envy, both to the envier or the envied. When we experience envy, we can lose some compassion for the other and even perhaps rejoice in any ill luck that might befall them. We can thus lose some humanity in the process.

A definition in the *Oxford English Dictionary* describes envy as 'the feeling of mortification and ill-will occasioned by the contemplation of superior advantages possessed by another'. Interestingly, this definition of envy has barely altered over the centuries. There

has long been awareness of the dangers of envy, as the following proverbs and quotations reveal:

If you are rich and of high degree, you become proud and so expose yourself to inevitable ruin. If all goes well with you, it is expedient to keep yourself in the background. (Chinese proverb)

Jealousy is in some measure just and reasonable, since it merely aims at keeping something that belongs to us or we think belongs to us, whereas envy is a frenzy that cannot bare anything that belongs to others. (La Rochefoucauld, 17th-century French writer)

Envy is a pain of mind that successful men cause their neighbours'. (Onasander, AD 49, Greek philosopher)

One's own success is good, but another's misfortune is rather enjoyable too. (Norwegian proverb)

We can smile at these comments and proverbs but they still have potency. There is a real tension between the desire to succeed and the fear of retribution that might result from too much success. How many of us have not touched wood when we feel fortunate or lucky?

There is still much debate in the psychotherapy circles about the causes of envy: how much is innate, how much environmental? If it has such an ancient and culturally diverse history, could Melanie Klein be right? Could it be innate? Are we innately envious? Even prosperous, socially fair countries like Norway have proverbs about envy. For Klein (1975) it was innate, and the amount of envy that was stimulated could perhaps be determined by some environmental factors, but ultimately you would look to the envious traits in the infant. A more relational approach sees excessive envy as a result of a deficit when the infant's need for love and safety are not adequately met. The result can be a sense of deprivation and a lack of internal resources to soothe and comfort. This can result in compensatory fantasies of who or what could fill the lack. Yet Coleman reminds us that 'no mother/infant fit can be perfect, there must be some sense of a painful gap between self and other in us all, and into this gap flows envy' (Colman, 1991, 366).

According to this line of thinking, we all have the capacity for envy. Envy is also a result of individual perception. There are no objective criteria for what could or could not stimulate envy. In Joseph Epstein's witty book there is a sketch showing two ladies sitting in a garden, with one saying to the other: 'I envy you. I wish I were close enough to my family to be estranged' (Epstein, 2007, 10). Envy is experienced as a lack – that we are missing something, which if we possessed would make us feel better. We can all know this lack and it is shameful and painful to experience. However, I suggest that the wider and deeper 'the gap', then the greater, the more shameful and more damaging the envy.

We can all think of examples of destructive envy, and much clinical writing is devoted to clients whose envy prevents them from fully using therapy. But this paper is about the 'everyday' envy that we all experience, the ways in which it is manifested and how it is exacerbated. Plutarch, the Roman historian, seems to have had quite an understanding of 'everyday' envy. In his essay on 'Envy and Hatred', he wrote: 'For those who envy their relations and friends they would not wish them to come to ruin, or fall into calamity, but are only annoyed at their prosperity; and would hinder, if they could, their glory and renown but they would not bring upon them irremediable misfortunes: they are content to remove, as in the case of a lofty house, what stands in their light' (Plutarch, *Morals*, 313).

In the UK, when I was growing up, being called 'a show-off' was a serious reproach. Expressions such as 'getting too big for your boots' or 'getting above yourself' were ways of keeping aspiration, ambition and possibly envy in check. Too much pride in achievement would be called 'boasting'. These expressions are less common now and there was and still is a big cultural difference between the USA and the UK. Yet when we look at how hard it is to change social mobility in both countries, do we consider that fear of envy from our peers and family could be a factor? Why does academic ability provoke bullying in some schools? Perhaps because it evokes envy amongst the less gifted students.

How we manage longings, yearnings and envy will define the sort of culture we live in. However, we have to consider that, as Paul Wachtel writes: 'An economy primarily driven by growth, must generate discontent' (Wachtel, 1983, xi). This is because economic growth is never equally distributed. The result is that people often feel deprived even when the overall standard of living has risen because it does not rise equally and there is always someone who earns more. What were once luxuries now become necessities and we can have a sense of deprivation amidst what would once have seemed like plenty. We know that equality does not remove envy and that for some people any experience of inequality can generate envious feelings. Yet it is perhaps naïve to think that great inequalities will not stimulate potent and potentially unmanageable amounts of envy.

The psychoanalyst Walter Joffe noted that envy is often triggered by loss of self-esteem: 'Viewed from the vantage point of the ego, envy is a reaction to a painful feeling state intimately related to loss of self-regard, self-respect and self-esteem' (Joffe, 1969, 542). A culture that idealizes consumption and luxury will surely run the risk of damaging self-esteem. One of the pleasures of luxury is the pleasure of others not being able to afford similar items or lifestyle, which are seen as statements of status and success. It perhaps helps explain the sales of handbags that cost thousands of dollars. In *Ways of Seeing* John Berger writes: 'The happiness of being envied is glamour. Being envied is a solitary form of reassurance. . . . Glamour cannot exist without personal social envy being a common and widespread emotion' (Berger, 1973, 132–3).

What of this social envy? We know, for example, that reading fashion magazines with beautiful men and women for even a short period of time can lower the self-esteem of the reader, leaving them vulnerable to feelings of lack and emptiness. A consequence of this can be the increase in the urge to consume or diet in an attempt to repair the self-esteem that was damaged by the images in the first place. This is surely the darker face of emulative envy. Our economy requires that some difference and inequality are accepted, but we also have to understand that there will be a price to pay. A successful society must develop ways in which individuals can succeed without being threatened or destroyed by the excessive envy of others and where the price of such inequality is not considered too high.

In their book *The Spirit Level*, Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) collected global data from developed countries that linked the unequal distribution of income to increased health and social problems. The countries with the greatest inequalities of income came out worst statistically, with higher levels of mental illness, addiction, infant mortality, homicide levels and prison populations. Additionally, in these same countries there was lower life expectancy, poorer educational performance, lower levels of trust and less social mobility. Countries with relatively high inequalities, such as the USA and the UK, scored poorly on these criteria when compared to countries with less economic inequality such as Japan and the

Scandinavian countries. This correlation was replicated when applied to individual states in the USA. For example: 'Louisiana has a murder rate of 107 per million, more than seven times higher than that of New Hampshire and Iowa, which are at the bottom of the league table with murder rates of 15 per million' (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009, 137).

The politics of social justice, which tries to address inequality, is often sneeringly called the politics of envy. But the sneer and condemnation miss the point that too much inequality is dangerous and damages us all. It is interesting to note how in politics this reality seems to be recognized.

Politicians on both sides of the Atlantic seem to spend a lot of effort trying to appear 'ordinary' and no different from the people they are seeking to govern. To be called privileged or elitist is an insult and one which can be politically damaging. George W Bush worked hard to diffuse envy with his message that he was a really a regular Texan. He complained about an 'elite class' who was against him, as if being one of the richest and most powerful men on Earth did not make him part of the elite.

In his *State of Confusion: Political Manipulation and the Assault on the American Mind*, Welch (2008), a psychologist and Washington lawyer, writes about negative campaigning and why he thinks it works although voters claim not to like it. Welch believed it speaks to closet hatred and envy and as a result is a powerful weapon when unleashed. Welch called politicians who are able to convert envy into righteous anger 'gaslighters'. Welch identifies anti-elitism as part of an envious response. The world is increasingly complex and, as it becomes more incomprehensible, the less educated feel envy for those who seem to cope with it more successfully. In an episode of *The West Wing* when the intelligent President Bartlett was preparing to debate with his folksy rival loosely based on Bush, he is warned, 'no one likes the smartest kid in the class'. But why would you not want the brightest kid to be doing the toughest job?

In addition to living in a fast-moving world, we are also endlessly regaled with the benefits of having status, wealth, fame and beauty. Magazines showing the lives of the rich and famous have large sales. The function of these magazines is complex. Success is celebrated, consumption and emulation are encouraged, which is crucial to the economy. The magazines are full of compliments on the marvellous lives and lovely homes of the rich and famous. But compliments can be a covert means for expressing envy, as any Kleinian will know. The person complimented is being told that they have something that others would very much like to have. George Foster, an anthropologist, wrote a paper called 'The anatomy of envy' (Foster, 1972), looking at ancient Greece. He identified the mechanisms used to ward off envy, such as 'concealment', 'denial', 'true-sharing' and the 'sop'. The 'sop' is interesting because it is a token piece of generosity. It seems to me that it is a 'sop' that is offered in such magazines or by the television programmes that claim to show us the lives of celebrities. We are 'invited' into their homes and they 'share' their thoughts and feelings with us. The magazine or programme is thus a curious mix of encouraging envy by revealing wealth while pretending that it is 'shared' with us. Yet it is a difficult balance, encouraging and discouraging envy at the same time. It often does not work too well. One magazine issue might celebrate a celebrity wedding only to later gloat over the subsequent split in a later issue.

We are not original in our willingness to gloat. Plutarch the Greek biographer described it so well. He called our love of gossip and scandal 'malignancy': 'Since it is the searching out

of troubles that the busybody (gossiper) desires, he is possessed by the affliction called “malignancy”, a brother to envy and spite. For envy is pain at another’s good, while malignancy is joy at another’s sorrow’ (‘Talkativeness’, Plutarch, 2008, 232).

Envy and the enjoyment of gossip have the function of levelling down – in either fantasy or fact – the people who have things or qualities we do not have. If we can attack their position it is easier to manage our own, unanswered needs. Our society is ambivalent about material success. It is idealized, but because material success is available to relatively few, it also breeds envy. The mixture of idealization and envy is potent. As a society we reward success with money, power and fame, but envious attack is the powerful punishing force that can be unleashed when a person is seen as ‘undeserving’ of their good fortune. Idealization gives way to denigration, and the hostile forces of our collective envy and malice are unleashed. The tabloid bullying of those who are not liked can be relentless and extraordinarily punishing. Like the class thug who hates the clever child, the media and we the viewers and readers are invited to participate in the bullying and, like bullies, we are not encouraged to feel any empathy.

So let me return to what John Berger says about the role of envy in advertising and consumption. When we buy a product we imagine ourselves transformed into an object of envy for others, and this envy will tell us that we are worth loving. He says chillingly: ‘The publicity image steals her love of herself as she is, and offers it back to her for the price of the product (Berger, 1973, 134). Equally, the rich and famous can steal the love of us ordinary mortals for ourselves by casting us in a lesser light. Unlike a product, celebrity status cannot be purchased directly. However, we can try and emulate the appearance of glamour, and a lot of damage to self-esteem, mental and physical health can result.

As psychotherapists, we work with many clients who suffer from depression, anxiety, a sense of failure, feelings of unworthiness, body hatred, eating problems and difficulties in personal relationships. The list could go on. We see the social and psychological impact of the tide of images that carry the envy-inducing message – you as a person are reflected in the quality of your looks, possessions and achievements. It is a powerful message and it is hard to escape whether you are a therapist or a client. Little is written about the therapist’s envy of the client. Occasionally there is something mentioned about working with wealthy clients or famous clients. Andrew Morrison wrote about his anger with and resentment of his well women patients when his wife was dying. (Morrison, 1996). Yet as we can see, envy is pretty ubiquitous and we can envy almost anything. We all have richer clients, thinner clients, more beautiful clients, younger clients, pregnant clients, clients who have children, clients with more successful children or, as I shall now describe in a clinical vignette, healthier clients with more hair.

CLINICAL VIGNETTE

At the beginning of 2009 I was diagnosed with lymphoma. The diagnosis was a huge shock since I had always thought of myself as exceptionally healthy and resilient. My prognosis was fortunately good since the disease was caught early, but I was advised to start treatment immediately in order to optimize the chances of a cure. I knew that with my chemotherapy regime I would certainly lose my hair but I was advised that in all likelihood I would be able to continue working except for the few days following the chemotherapy infusion, which

would take place every three weeks. I decided that I would talk to my clients about my diagnosis, prognosis and treatment plan so that they could make an informed decision about whether they would want to continue seeing me during this period, given the possible disruption to their therapy. With one exception, they decided they wanted to carry on seeing me, with the understanding that I would only work if I felt well enough. Initially my clients wondered if I would still be as interested in them as I was before my diagnosis. Barbara Pizer (1997) and Amy Morrison (1997) both wrote about how important it was for them to continue with their work despite being treated for cancer. In fact, I was hugely relieved at still being able to work and in most cases felt as engaged as ever. The exception to this was Joanna.

I had been seeing Joanna for six months prior to my diagnosis. She was initially referred to me because she had suffered panic attacks at work. She worked for a woman's magazine but was finding her work increasingly unmanageable as she struggled with demanding schedules and her difficult relationship with her boyfriend. Joanna was an attractive young woman with a lot of charm and intelligence, but her tension and anxiety were apparent in her face and body language. She was the only daughter of a depressed mother and a father who was rarely at home. When she was 12 years old her parents divorced and her mother became increasingly agoraphobic and depressed. Joanna was extremely frightened when she found herself panicking in a way that reminded her of her mother's problems and it was at this point she sought professional help. When I first told Joanna about my illness I was concerned that she would find the uncertainty of my situation too difficult to manage. However, she was adamant that she wanted to continue seeing me while I was having treatment.

As I underwent chemotherapy, I felt I was working pretty well. I planned for the sessions I would be missing and felt pleased with how I was coping. I lost my hair after the second round of chemotherapy and I wore a replacement wig, which I disliked. It felt uncomfortable, I did not like the way it looked and I hated not being able to run my fingers through my hair. At this point I should mention that Joanna had long wavy hair, which always looked fabulous. Gradually, I noticed that, out of all my clients, I was finding it increasingly difficult to empathize with Joanna and the material she was bringing to her sessions. She would talk about work and how she thought her colleagues in the company did not pay her proper respect. I felt I had heard it before and I found myself wondering why I had not realized how narcissistic she was, and no wonder she had problems with work and boyfriends. Was I imagining it or was she tossing her hair about more than usual? In one session, I noticed that she was running her fingers through her hair. I could scarcely believe my eyes. I felt outrage at her insensitivity. Was she doing it deliberately? One obvious interpretation was that she was rubbing my nose in my hair loss in order to express her fury with my illness and that, like her mother, I had become unavailable and self-absorbed. Was Joanna expressing her envy of me who now had a 'serious' condition, thus perhaps rendering her undeserving of attention? Possibly, but it did not fully explain my own fury. What was less clear to me were my own reactions. Could I think of my response to Joanna in terms of Sandler's (1976) concept of 'role responsiveness' whereby I had become the unengaged mother who resented her functioning daughter? I was tempted by this interpretation but I knew that there was far more to my reactions than could solely be located in Joanna's story.

By the next session, it became clearer to me that what I was suffering from was my own bout of envy, which was none too edifying to reflect on. Joanna had lovely hair, I did not and

it was not making me feel kindly towards her. I could argue that my health problems made me less tolerant of more ordinary cares and woes, but I had not noticed being less involved with other clients. My lack of interest in her was aggressive and envious. Joanna and I were each punishing the other for what each was evoking in the other. She tossed her head, reminding me of my hairless state, and I became contemptuous and distant. I felt a deep reluctance to owning up that my reactions were due to my envious rage at her beautiful hair. But we do require our clients to look at their hateful and difficult feelings. Karen Maroda (1999) argued that the therapist's reluctance to give up control contributed to the client's unwillingness to let go of the control they might be holding onto.

I asked Joanna if she had noticed that I was less engaged than I had been. She admitted she had and it did make her angry, but she did not want to admit to it. I pointed out that although she did not say she was angry, had she noticed she was playing with her hair? She suddenly laughed and admitted she knew it would get to me. I told her it had and I had been quite overwhelmed by my envy of her lovely hair. What became apparent was how much my illness was a reminder of her mother's fragility and how much Joanna resented the attention her mother demanded and received because of it. She felt she could not say anything to me because, after all, I was going through so much and why should I be interested in her? There was real anguish in her voice as she said this, revealing far more fully the young girl who did not feel entitled to sympathy or care.

When I look back on the people that I have not worked well with, how much did my envy play a part? I was able to catch myself with Joanna because the situation was so extraordinary and my 'lack' so evident. As I wrote at the beginning of this paper, we as a profession do not often discuss our own envy since it feels shameful and painful. Yet, surely if we can acknowledge our own envious thoughts and feelings, then we can reflect on them and be more aware of how they might be impacting on our work, our sense of ourselves and our relationships with others.

REFERENCES

- Aeneas Tacticus, Asclepiodotus, Onasander. *The General*. Illinois Greek Club (trans). Cambridge, MA: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard, 1923.
- Berger J. *Ways of Seeing*. London: Penguin, 1973.
- Colman W. Envy, self-esteem and the fear of separateness. *British Journal of Psychotherapy* 1991; 7(4): 356–67.
- Eichenbaum L, Orbach S. *Between Women: Love, Envy and Competition in Women's Friendships*. New York: Viking Press, 1988.
- Epstein J. *Envy: The Seven Deadly Sins*. Cary, NC: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Farber L. *Faces of Envy: The Ways of the Will*. New York: Basic Books, 1966.
- Foster GM. The anatomy of envy: a study in symbolic behavior. *Current Anthropology* 1972; 13(2): 165–202.
- Fromm E. *Man For Himself: An Enquiry into the Psychology of Ethics*. London: International Library of Psychology, Routledge, 1947.
- Joffe W. A critical review of the status of the envy concept. *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 1969; 50: 533–545.
- Klein M. *Envy and Gratitude and Other Works 1946–1963*. Khan MR (ed). London: Hogarth Press, 1975.
- La Rochefoucauld F. *Maxims*. London: Penguin, 1959/1665.
- Maroda K. *Seduction, Surrender and Transformation*. Hillsdale, NJ: Analytic Press, 1999.
- Morrison AL. Trauma and disruption in the life of the therapist. In Gerson B (ed) *The Therapist as a Person*. Hillsdale, NJ: Analytic Press, 1996.

- Morrison AL. Ten years of doing psychotherapy while living with a life-threatening illness. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 1997; 7: 225–41.
- Pizer B. When the analyst is ill: dimensions of self-disclosure. *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 1997; 66: 450–69.
- Plutarch. *Morals: Ethical Essays*. Shilleto AR (trans). Charleston, SC: BiblioBazaar, 2008.
- Sandler J. Countertransference and role-responsiveness. *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 1976; 3: 43–7.
- Schoeck H. *Envy: A Theory of Social Behaviour*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1969.
- Wachtel P. *Poverty of Affluence: A Psychological Portrait of the American Way of Life*. New York: Free Press, 1983.
- Welch B. *State of Confusion: Political Manipulation and the Assault on the American Mind*. New York: Thomas Dunne, 2008.
- Weisel-Barth J. Analyst envy in working with an artist: Four scenes. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 2008; 18: 735–57.
- Wilkinson R, Pickett K. *The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone*. London: Penguin, 2009.