



The role of attachment styles in malicious envy



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ABSTRACT

The current study addresses the link between attachment styles and manifestations of malicious envy. One hundred twenty-four Israeli undergraduate students completed measures of attachment styles, self-esteem, social comparison, and participated in a subject manipulation tapping malicious envy using tools developed for the present study. These measures were developed to examine envy in a direct way while controlling confounding variables such as the general tendency to see others in negative ways. Our findings revealed that dismissive avoidants exhibited higher levels of malicious envy manifestations in comparison to fearful avoidants. Theoretical implications of the findings were discussed by the authors.

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1. Introduction

Psychoanalyst Melanie Klein defined envy as “the angry feeling that another person possesses and enjoys something desirable – the envious impulse being to take it away or to spoil it” (Klein, 1957). This definition relates to a sense of envy which is defined as malicious envy: A feeling of deficiency caused by the other’s superiority and contains hostile feelings demonstrated in a wish to pull down the envied other (Van de Ven, Zeelenbeg, & Pieters, 2009). Malicious envy, which is the main subject of this study, is different than benign envy, the feeling that is aroused by deficiency caused by the other’s superiority but does not contain hostile feelings. While the literature describes the different elements and manifestations of envy, its relation to other traits, and circumstances in which envy is elicited (see Smith & Kim, 2007, for a review; Van de Ven et al., 2009), the association between the wish to take the superior other’s advantage away (i.e., the wish to pull down the envied other) and the individual’s attachment style have not been empirically examined.

Hence our main goal in the current study is to examine the association between the attachment orientation of the individual and the manifestations of the wish to pull down the superior other as a result of envy. For this purpose, we will provide an overview of the wish to pull down the envied person while referring to

attachment theory and discuss the difficulties in measuring the manifestations of malicious envy.

An individual’s wish to pulling down the envied other does not necessarily mean that the envious person has a concrete plan or action to hurt the envied person. Yet, it holds the perception that taking the envied person’s advantage away by derogating his or her value or disparaging his or her success can be a substantial part of coping with the upward comparison (Salovey & Rodin, 1984; Silver & Sabini, 1978). Van de Ven et al. (2009) have shown that coping with upward comparison can be achieved by moving oneself up to the level of the other or by pulling the other down to one’s own position. While previous studies have shown that upward comparison can create positive results such as self-improvement (Gruder, 1971; Wilson & Benner, 1971), pulling the other down does not enhance adaptive coping. It focuses on the elimination of the specific feeling of distress by diminishing the significance of the deficiency arousing situation and not on the reason for the other’s success in order to improve oneself. Therefore, the wish to pull down the envied person can interfere with self-learning and self-improvement mechanisms.

1.1. The application of the attachment theory to the wish to pull down the envied other

Examining the interpersonal experience of malicious envy from the perspective of attachment theory introduces a theoretical basis for the question of why some people harbor the basic wish to pull down the envied person as a way to diminish the significance of the distressful situation. Previous studies have shown associations between attachment styles and elements that are most relevant to

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the wish to pull down the envied other. For example, an unconstructive response to distress, a response that includes angry or hostile feelings and a tendency to blame the other. Therefore, we will introduce relevant literature regarding the attachment styles while addressing the above mentioned question.

According to attachment theory, repeated experiences of the individual with his or her protective other (i.e., attachment figure) results in a consolidation of chronically accessible working models that lead to the formation of relatively stable individual differences in interpersonal interactions (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Research indicates that attachment styles can be measured along two orthogonal dimensions, attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). Low levels in the two dimensions reflect secure attachment while high levels in one or two dimensions reflect insecure attachment.

Securely attached individuals have confidence of their self-value and that others will be available and helpful when needed (see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007, for a review). They can turn insoluble problems into meaningful and growth-promoting challenges (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003) with a constructive style. They actively address sources of distress, cope with them and retrieve emotional balance without creating negatively associated social or emotional side effects (Epstein & Meier, 1989). These studies imply that securely attached individuals may view uncomplimentary upward comparison in a way that enhances adaptive coping and promotes self-improvement. Empirical studies on anger and jealousy, feelings that resemble envy in the sense that they are both strong negative feelings directed toward the other, supports this implication. In a series of studies using self-reports and implicit lexical decision tasks that measure anger indirectly, Mikulincer (1998) showed that securely attached individuals cope more efficiently with anger feelings by expressing the anger in a controlled manner and by trying to fix the relationship with their partner. Sharpsteen and Kirkpatrick (1997) demonstrated similar results using self-report measures showing that in jealousy related situations securely attached individuals tend to express their anger directly to their partners in order to maintain the relationship.

While taking these studies into account, it appears that the securely attached individuals' basic confidence in their value and being loved for who they are, may prevent them from viewing uncomplimentary comparisons as a threat to their self-worth. Thus, they may see this kind of comparison as an opportunity to grow, even in the presence of strong negative feelings towards the superior other. Therefore, it is less plausible that securely attached individuals would have a wish to pull down the envy-provoking other. However, the picture is rather different when considering insecurely attached individuals.

Attachment anxiety reflects the degree to which a person worries about the availability of his or her relationship partner in times of need, while adopting "hyperactive" strategy that includes intensive effort to achieve love, care and support from the relationship partner (the attachment figure). Anxiously attached individuals worry about the availability of their attachment figure in times of need and tend to rely on coping strategies that are based on emotions, which increase the distress experience (see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007, for a review). Unlike securely attached individuals, anxiously attached individuals address anger provoking situations in unconstructive ways. Empirical research using self-report and implicit measures has shown that anxiously attached individuals tend to: Attribute negative intentions and resentment to others, reveal uncontrolled and elevated accessibility to feelings of anger (Mikulincer, 1998) and have a difficulty in expressing their anger in a constructive manner (Sharpsteen & Kirkpatrick, 1997). It appears that anxiously attached individuals may experience deficiency provoking comparisons in a way that aggravates the distressful experience and leads to an unconstructive expression of

negative feelings towards the other. This does not mean that anxiously attached individuals tend to blame the other for this occurrence. On the contrary, self-report studies have shown that anxiously attached individuals tend to attribute failures to general and stable inner causes associated with negative self-perception (Kennedy, 1999; Man & Hamid, 1998).

Uncomplimentary comparisons may elicit strong distressful feelings within anxiously attached individuals. As part of the "hyperactive" strategy, they focus on their own failure and ongoing need of support or comfort from significant others. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that in the face of uncomplimentary comparison, the anxiously attached individuals' emotional reaction will be based upon strong negative feelings towards the self and other, while their main concern will be to seek for comfort rather than diminish the superior other's success.

Finally, attachment avoidance reflects the degree to which a person distrusts the good will of the attachment figure, struggles for independence and keeps emotional distance from his or her relationship partners. Avoidantly attached individuals adopt "deactivation" strategies that include denying attachment needs and suppressing emotions (see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007, for a review). They tend to cope with distress by remaining cognitively and behaviorally aloof (Berant, Mikulincer, & Florian, 2001; Lussier, Sabourin, & Turgeon, 1997; Torquati & Vazsonyi, 1999) and subsequently, use escapist coping methods in response to the anger-provoking experience (Mikulincer, 1998). These studies imply that avoidantly attached individuals will not report or be aware of high levels of distress in deficiency arousing situations.

The literature also shows that avoidantly attached individuals tend to attribute failures to external causes, blame others for their occurrence and reduce their meaning and importance (Kennedy, 1999; Man & Hamid, 1998). Subsequently, in Sharpsteen and Kirkpatrick's (1997) study on jealousy-related situations, avoidantly attached individuals tended to report feelings of anger towards the third person in the situation – the person with whom their partner had the jealousy-arousing relation. Finally, a study examining the way participants evaluate and rate other people's traits showed that avoidants attribute to others characteristics which they personally would not want to possess (Mikulincer & Horesh, 1999). That is, while avoidantly attached individuals have low accessibility to negative self-perception they also have high accessibility for seeing the other negatively (see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007, for a review).

It appears that while facing distressful situation such as uncomplimentary comparison, the avoidantly attached "deactivation" strategy may include denying the need for support or comfort, suppressing emotions and rejecting feelings of inferiority. Thus, the low accessibility to negative self-perception and the need for others stands in contrast to the upward comparison meaning, and therefore is applicable only if the avoidantly attached diminishes the significance of this comparison by pulling down the superior other.

Bartholomew (1990) expanded scholars' views on attachment avoidance by categorizing it to dismissive and fearful avoidance. Dismissive avoidance is characterized by high levels of attachment avoidance and low levels of attachment anxiety, while fearful avoidance is characterized by high levels of attachment avoidance and high levels of attachment anxiety (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). According to this model, fearful avoidants see themselves as well as the others in a negative view while dismissive avoidants see themselves in a positive way but see others negatively. As in Bartholomew's model, dismissive avoidants are more likely to pull down the envied other since they do not possess the anxious "ingredient" of seeing themselves negatively which can buffer the need to reject feelings of inferiority by pulling down the superior other. Subsequently, in their study on clinical sample Jamieson

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