



## Dispositional envy inhibits prosocial behavior in adolescents with high self-esteem



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### ABSTRACT

Previous studies demonstrate that dispositional envy leads to unethical behavior in adults. The present study aimed to further examine whether dispositional envy was negatively associated with prosocial behavior and whether self-esteem moderated this association in earlier developmental stages, namely, adolescence. A total of 358 adolescents between 12 and 15 years old completed the Prosocial Tendencies Measure, Dispositional Envy Scale and Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. The results showed that in general, dispositional envy negatively predicted prosocial behavior in adolescence. Moreover, the relationship between dispositional envy and prosocial behavior was moderated by self-esteem. Dispositional envy negatively predicted prosocial behavior in adolescents with high self-esteem rather than in those with low self-esteem. Thus, the present study indicates that dispositional envy may inhibit prosocial behavior and that high self-esteem may strengthen the negative role of dispositional envy in prosocial behavior in adolescents.

### 1. Introduction

Prosocial behavior is considered a kind of behavior aimed at benefiting others voluntarily (Carlo, Hausmann, Christiansen, & Randall, 2003; Carlo & Randall, 2002; Holmgren, Eisenberg, & Fabes, 1998). Prosocial behavior becomes increasingly important for adolescents. As some researchers have noted, adolescence is a period containing “biological, psychological, and social contextual changes” (Carlo, Fabes, Laible, & Kupanoff, 1999, p.142). When individuals enter adolescence, on the one hand, they are more capable of offering help to others physically and cognitively; on the other hand, they have a greater need to develop and maintain relationships with peers through behaving prosocially (Carlo, Eisenberg, & Knight, 1992; Fabes, Carlo, Kupanoff, & Laible, 1999; Greener, 2000).

#### 1.1. The relationship between envy and prosocial behavior

To display prosocial behavior, one must care more about others and try to help them improve their condition regardless of his or her own needs (Twenge, Baumeister, DeWall, Ciarocco, & Bartels, 2007). Nevertheless, some individuals may focus only on their own benefit and even feel pleasure when others have misfortune. Envy reflects such reactions that are contrary to prosocial behavior. For individuals who envy others, others' gain is their pain, and others' pain is their gain (Takahashi et al., 2009). Therefore, these individuals are less likely to

display prosocial behavior toward others. In general, envy describes feelings of inferiority, resentment and hostility that some individuals have when they compare themselves with others who are more advantaged (Salovey & Rodin, 1991; Smith & Kim, 2007). Envious either desire what the advantaged others have or wish that the advantaged others lacked it (Parrott & Smith, 1993). This kind of emotional reaction that is experienced in certain situations toward certain targets is called episodic envy (Cohen-Charash, 2009; Smith, Parrott, Diener, Hoyle, & Kim, 1999).

Previous studies have indicated that episodic envy can lead to less prosocial behavior toward advantaged others who are envied. For example, it has been found that undergraduates who envied their partners carried out less dishonest helping behavior, i.e., overstating their partners' grades (Gino & Pierce, 2009). Another study showed that envy reduced employees' voluntary helping behavior, such as organizational citizenship behavior toward coworkers (Kim, O'Neill, & Cho, 2010). Consistently, previous studies have shown that episodic envy can cause several reactions contrary to prosocial behavior, including unethical behaviors such as deception (Moran & Schweitzer, 2008) and Schadenfreude (Brigham, Kelso, Jackson, & Smith, 1997; Smith et al., 1996), antisocial behavior such as aggressive behavior (Hofer & Busch, 2011; Strandmark & Hallberg, 2007; Van de Ven, Zeelenberg, & Pieters, 2009) and hurting behavior (Gino & Pierce, 2009), and even criminal behavior (Gold, 1996; Habimana & Massé, 2000).

Compared with episodic envy, dispositional envy is triggered not by

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a specific individual or event but by “an overall way of looking at other people and their fortunes” (Cohen-Charash, 2009, p. 2132), with a chronic feeling of inferiority and ill will toward advantaged others (Smith et al., 1999). Thus, dispositional envy is a stable personality trait that differentiates individuals in terms of intensity and frequency of envy. This emotional personality trait has proved to exist in young adults (Gold, 1996; Rentzsch & Gross, 2015; Smith et al., 1999). Furthermore, it has been found that dispositional envy can predict episodic envy (Smith et al., 1996). Individuals with high dispositional envy often have feelings of inadequacy and hostility toward advantaged others (Smith et al., 1999). In other words, these kinds of stable feelings can extend toward a wide range of targets. Thus, dispositional envy may influence prosocial behavior more extensively. For individuals with high dispositional envy, helping others will decrease or eliminate their own relative advantages, and they may be confronted with a potential threat. Thus, individuals with high dispositional envy may be less likely to display prosocial behavior. Parks, Rumble, and Posey (2002) found that dispositional envy negatively predicted cooperating behavior in undergraduates, but more studies indicate that dispositional envy is related to some unethical behavior. For instance, young adults with high dispositional envy reported more Schadenfreude (Krizan & Johar, 2012) and counterproductive work behavior consisting of political deviance and personal aggression (Cohen-Charash & Mueller, 2007). Service employees with high dispositional envy reported engaging in more harmful behavior toward the organization and other employees (Kim, Jung, & Lee, 2013).

Thus, whether dispositional envy is negatively associated with prosocial behavior needs to be further examined. Moreover, little is known regarding the relationship between dispositional envy and prosocial behavior in adolescents. Previous studies have mainly focused on episodic envy in adolescents and even in primary school children (e.g., Fehr, Glätzle-Rützler, & Sutter, 2013; Steinbeis & Singer, 2013). Due to the connection between episodic envy and dispositional envy, dispositional envy may also develop significantly in early adolescence as a stable personality trait. Furthermore, adolescents have more emotional reactivity than children and adults, showing exaggerated amygdala activity (Hare et al., 2008). Compared with adults, adolescents have poorer emotion regulation abilities (McRae et al., 2012) and cognitive coping strategies (Garnefski, Legerstee, Kraaij, Kommer, & Teerds, 2002). Thus, adolescents with high dispositional envy may not be skilled at controlling or holding back their envy and may be less likely to treat others prosocially. Dispositional envy may be negatively associated with prosocial behavior in adolescence. Evidence of this hypothesis will reveal an emotional personality factor that inhibits prosocial behavior.

### 1.2. Relationships between self-esteem, dispositional envy and prosocial behavior

Moreover, some individuals' behavior might be more easily influenced by envy than others. As mentioned above, for individuals with high dispositional envy, they are more likely to feel displeasure toward others' superiority (Salovey & Rodin, 1991). If these individuals hold a stronger sense of their own value at the same time, they may experience more conflict in their mind and are more likely to restrict their prosocial behavior toward others to resolve the conflict. The conception of one's own value and global attitude toward the self is termed “self-esteem” (Rosenberg, 1965). It is a subjective evaluation of the self. Thus, dispositional envy may be especially negatively associated with prosocial behavior for individuals with high self-esteem. In addition, after reviewing plenty of studies, Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, and Vohs (2003) concluded that high self-esteem is related to greater initiative and that individuals with higher self-esteem are more confident in doing most tasks. Thus, dispositional envy may be negatively associated with prosocial behavior especially for individuals with high self-esteem because these individuals are more capable of taking action to resolve

the conflict in their mind. Taken together, dispositional envy may inhibit prosocial behavior in individuals with high self-esteem. By contrast, individuals with low self-esteem lack initiative and confidence in performing tasks. Among these individuals, those with high dispositional envy might not refuse to behave prosocially. Thus, there may be no relationship between dispositional envy and prosocial behavior in individuals with low self-esteem.

Self-esteem is more important for adolescents. The major developmental task in adolescence is the development of the identity (Erikson, 1968). Self-esteem, as the attitude toward one's own value and importance, can motivate adolescents to take initiative and positively explore who they are. Self-esteem is usually considered a sign of positive adjustment in adolescence. Low self-esteem is related to many negative outcomes, such as poor mental and physical health (Trzesniewski et al., 2006), depression (Orth, Robins, & Roberts, 2008) and aggressive behavior (Donnellan, Trzesniewski, Robins, Moffitt, & Caspi, 2005). However, adolescents with high dispositional envy may experience more conflict in their mind when they have high self-esteem, and thus may restrict their prosocial behavior toward others in order to resolve the conflict. From this perspective, self-esteem may play negative roles in prosocial development during adolescence. Therefore, investigation into the relationships between self-esteem, dispositional envy and prosocial behavior will help to clarify the multifaceted aspects of self-esteem in adolescents.

### 1.3. The present study

In summary, the present study aimed to clarify how dispositional envy was related to prosocial behavior and how this relationship was influenced by self-esteem in adolescents. It was hypothesized that in general, dispositional envy was negatively associated with prosocial behavior in adolescents. It was also hypothesized that self-esteem moderated the relationship between dispositional envy and prosocial behavior. Specifically, a negative relationship between dispositional envy and prosocial behavior existed in adolescents with high self-esteem rather than those with low self-esteem. Furthermore, the relationships between dispositional envy, self-esteem and six different types of prosocial behavior were also explored for preliminary exploration for further studies.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Three hundred fifty-eight adolescents (178 females; 180 males) were recruited from a junior high school in Beijing. The ages of these adolescents ranged from 12.07 to 15.80 years ( $M = 13.73$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ). Among the participants, 37.71% were in Grade 7 ( $n = 135$ ), 33.80% were in Grade 8 ( $n = 121$ ), and 28.49% were in Grade 9 ( $n = 102$ ). The study was approved by the Research Ethics Board of our university.

### 2.2. Measures and procedure

#### 2.2.1. Prosocial behavior

The Prosocial Tendencies Measure (PTM; Carlo & Randall, 2002) is a classic assessment of prosocial behavior. The 26-item Chinese version of the PTM was used in the present study, and the reliability (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ ) of the altruistic, anonymous, compliant, dire, emotional and public subscales in the original study were 0.76, 0.78, 0.74, 0.56, 0.73 and 0.71, respectively (Kou, Hong, Tan, & Li, 2007). There are four items on the altruistic subscale (e.g., “I donate goods or money not for rewards from others”), five items on the anonymous subscale (e.g., “I prefer to donate money anonymously”), five items on the compliant subscale (e.g., “I never hesitate to help others when they ask for it”), three items on the dire subscale (e.g., “I tend to help people who hurt themselves badly”), five items on the emotional subscale (e.g., “I tend to help

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