

ENVY, FEAR OF ENVY, AND LIBERALIZATION OF POLITICAL ATTITUDES

by

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### Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between envy, fear of envy, and political attitudes.

Background literature suggests that political attitudes have very nuanced and complex roots, coming from many different influences, from genetic to generational, with specific reference to party identification. The research in the paper found no significant correlation between attitudes of envy or fear of envy and political attitudes, but contains hypotheses for future research on the subject, with consideration on how various components of the study may have affected the results and what should be corrected for future studies into the topic of envy in regards to political attitudes.

*Keywords:* Envy, Fear of Envy, Political Attitudes

## ENVY, FEAR OF ENVY, AND POLITICAL BELIEFS

Political ideology is a complex amalgam of psychological and sociological factors. Past research has identified genetic, environmental, and individual differences in personality that may influence beliefs, specifically in regards to political beliefs and attitudes. For example, genetic factors play a large role in the development of political and social beliefs, showing trends that political attitudes transmit genetically rather than environmentally from parents to offspring, with a substantial proportion of this genetic variance being accounted for by genetic variance in personality traits (Hatemi et al, 2010). Generation-specific environmental sources have also been found to increase the resemblance of political beliefs in both twins and spouses, as well as nonrelatives within generational groupings (Kandler, 2012).

Age differences in political beliefs and attitudes are largely overestimated by stereotypes, as people of all ages have been found to respond to political issues based on early socialization and immediate social and economic circumstances, including factors such as positive self-identification and race (Campbell, 1971; Binstock, 2009). Partisan identification has been shown to have a large effect on peoples' attitudes towards social policies presented by political platforms. Even under a variety of conditions, attitudes towards a social policy in many cases depended almost exclusively on the stated position of one's political party. Party alignment overwhelmed the impact of a given social policy's objective content, as well as the participant's own self-identified ideological beliefs. Participants denied that they were influenced by their party identification, though held a strong belief that other participants (especially those of the opposing party) would be strongly affected, showing strong indications of group influence in the formation of political attitudes (Cohen, 2003).

The relationship between socioeconomic status, political views, and political participation is mediated by personal variables such as locus of control, self-esteem, and political efficacy rather than a direct cause-effect relationship (Cohen, 2001). For members of the middle class, social mobility is a primary factor for political attitudes (Leventoğlu, 2014). Other personal factors, such as a strong traditional religious orientation, are associated with political conservatism, while factors such as a strong humanitarian orientation are associated with political radicalism (DeFronzo, 1972). Men and woman have also been found to define political ideologies differently and focus on different issues. Women are more likely than men to lean left on a political spectrum and are influenced by religion differently than men due to their different ideological focuses (Norrander, 2008).

Other psychological factors include disgust, which plays an important role in conservatives' moral and political judgements. Those with liberal attitudes regulate disgust reactions through emotional reappraisal moreso than conservatives, and emotional reappraisal of disgust is more indicative of judgements than disgust sensitivity (Feinberg, 2014). Higher perceptions of social dangers and greater emphasis on moral foundations are also associated with explicitly and implicitly measured conservatism. Conservative patterns of moral attitudes mediate the relationship between perceived social dangers and political conservatism, while social dominance orientation and right-with authoritarianism additively and interactively predict increasing levels of political conservatism (Van Leeuwen, 2009; Wilson, 2013).

One factor that has not been studied in regards to political attitudes is the envy of others, and peoples' fear of being envied. Envy is an emotion that is known to affect behavior (Hill, DelPriore, & Vaughan, 2011; van de Ven, N., Zeelenberg, & Pieters, 2009). For example, people tend to behave in spiteful ways towards people that they envy, victimizing high performing

peers and rejoicing in the downfalls of those that they envy (Kim & Glomb, 2014; van de Ven et al., 2015; Wobker, 2015). Given that envy can lead to negative social evaluations and consequences, it is no surprise that the fear of being envied has also been found to impact enviable people's behaviors (O'Connor, Berry, Weiss, & Gilbert, 2002; Rodriguez Mosquera, Parrott, & Hurtado de Mendoza, 2010). For this project, we sought to examine the role of envy and fear of envy on political behaviors. We predicted that compared to a control group, people who were primed with envy would favor liberal policies (as these policies emphasize economic fairness and wealth re-distribution), while people who fear being envied would also favor liberal policies (as a way to appear socially desirable to those who might envy them).

## Method

### **Participants**

This research was designed to study the effects of envy and fear of envy on political ideologies. Participants in the study were recruited from the Texas Christian University psychology participant pool on a voluntary basis, and were compensated with course credit for participation. Participants were also allowed to withdraw from the study at any time. 124 participants from the Texas Christian University undergraduate population were recruited and evenly divided randomly into one of three groups. An equal proportion of males and females was placed in each group.

### **Materials and Procedure**

Participants completed the study using a survey built in Qualtrics. Participants were randomly assigned to write about four times that they: (a) were envious of someone, (b) felt someone else was envious of them, or (c) that they experienced physical pain (the control

condition), and write in detail one of those four times. Participants then answered several questionnaires that assessed various demographic, mood and personality information. These questionnaires included various scales that failed to show any significant differences between conditions in the experiment. Upon completion of the experiment, participants were thanked by the researcher, granted course credit for completing the study, and were dismissed.

### Results and Discussion

The results of our target analyses (examining the impact of envy and fear of envy on participants' political attitudes) did not yield any differences in political attitudes based on priming condition ( $ps > .05$ ). Contrary to expectations, participant's political attitudes did not appear to be influenced by whether they were reminded about a time that they had experienced envy or were concerned with others' feeling envious of them.

There are several reasons why the results of my study may have failed to find differences between groups in political attitudes. One reason for this could simply be because political attitudes are much more complex and deeper rooted than could be affected by a superficially imparted mood. The previous literature on the subject pointed to numerous factors that play a role in the formation of political attitudes, with some research finding that they are heavily transmitted genetically (Kandler, Bleidorn & Riemann, 2012; Hatemi, et. al., 2010). This research found that a large portion of genetic variance in political attitudes could be attributed to the genetic variation of personality traits. Personality traits are a human characteristic that is not easily changed, especially by something as simple as recalling a memory of envy. This could be one of the factors that prevented any differences between the experimental conditions. In improving the design of the study in regards to this factor, selection of participants on the basis

of personality traits (e.g. how envious a given participant measures) may provide better results than a superficial prime.

Another notable factor is how prevalent group influence was in the literature in regards to political beliefs. In repeated studies, participants were blind to the group influence they were affected by, and biased in thinking others were more affected by group influence than themselves. This previous research showed that group influence was a significant factor in reporting political attitudes, even under a variety of conditions. In fact, the research strongly suggested that it was the main factor (Cohen, 2003). Of four studies conducted in the research on policy versus party, participants showed that they chose the social policy that matched with their self-identified party over their own ideologies and the actual objective content of the social policies surveyed. Once a policy was socially defined as liberal or conservative, the objective content of the policy no longer mattered. If political party identification could be such an overwhelming factor in the expression of political attitudes, even going against one's own stated ideology, it is not a leap to think that envy or fear of envy would be able to overwhelm that factor. In any other studies seeking to explore any effect envy or fear of envy may have on political attitudes, care should be taken to isolate and reduce this overwhelming affect—something this study in retrospect failed to do.

The demographics of the participants could have played a role in the failure of the study to induce a change in reported political attitudes between groups. Many of the students that participated in the study were from similar backgrounds, of a similar age group, and were generally not representative of the entire population. This was a limitation of the study, as it was restricted to Texas Christian University's undergraduate program. Generational grouping is a factor in political attitudes, and since almost all of the undergraduate participants are of the same



generation, with similar backgrounds, they may have expressed more similar views even across groups than a study across various generational groups may have found. It would be interesting, in a follow up study, to compare participants from clearly defined generations or demographic groups, such as those who are currently college-aged, those young adults in the labor force, older adults in the labor force, and retired adults. Based on the research on sources of political orientation, I would expect the generational-specific environmental sources would play a role in how envy and fear of envy affect the political attitudes of participants (Kandler, Bleidorn & Riemann, 2012). It was also noteworthy that many participants in the fear of envy condition reported that they were not so much afraid of the envy, but that they felt others were rightfully envy of them, with an amount of pride evident in some of their responses. A relatively large portion of the Texas Christian University population are from wealthy backgrounds, as it is an expensive, private institution, and these background demographics may have corrupted the intent of the prime in some participant's responses.

It is possible that the survey was designed in such a way that the prime was not effectively felt by participants. Participants engaged in a fairly high amount of questionnaires after being primed with either envy or the fear of envy, and it is possible these questionnaires may have diluted the effects of the prime or unintentionally primed for different moods based on the content of the questionnaires. It is also possible that answering similar questions repeatedly induced fatigue in the participants to where the prime was no longer relevant. There are multiple possibilities that the survey had unintended effects on the participants, and in future studies I would not only reduce the amount of questionnaires to be more manageable, but focus more on isolating possible confounds rather than analyzing how the variable of envy affected participants across a plethora of scales.

Previous literature showed that the ability to reappraise feelings of disgust separates liberals from conservatives (Feinberg, Antonenko, Willer, Horberg, & John, 2014). The emotional reappraisal of disgust was the important factor, not the actual feelings of disgust. It is possible that this could be the case for envy as well, an attitude that elicits similar negative feelings. Perhaps the study should have focused on participant's ability to reappraise their feelings of envy, or feelings of fear of envy, rather than simply attempting to induce the feeling in them. Similarly, due to the negative emotional archetype of the two different feelings, it is possible that they share the common characteristic of liberal's reappraising. It could be the case that those in the study who identified as liberal quickly reappraised their feelings of envy and fear of envy without the study measuring this action.

A final factor I wish to consider is the impact confidentiality may have had on the experiment. Envy and fear of envy are social emotions, and can change behavior depending on context. In the laboratory situation in which participants were isolated from one another, participants were able to answer questions honestly in a way that social factors of their peers also in the experiment had no influence on their behavior in answering the questions. Fear of envy can function to motivate people to engage in behaviors designed to increase one's likeability and reduce the appearance of the advantage that is being envied, and so fear of envy helps a given person mitigate negative social consequences (van de Ven, Zeelenberg, & Pieters, 2009). When the fear of negative social consequences is removed from the equation by giving participants privacy, the motivation for fear of envy to change behavior is taken away. Perhaps if participants believed that their peers would see their answers and evaluate them negatively, participants' behavior may have changed accordingly given the primes of envy and fear of envy. In a future

experiment, doing just that may change the outcome of the priming procedure to more closely resemble the hypothesized effects of envy and fear of envy in a social situation.

Of these multiple possible causes for the study failing to create any interesting results, and more that I may not have considered, I believe the study creates multiple possible angles for which to approach the design of a new study on political attitudes. There are numerous factors that were not tested for or controlled for that could produce interesting results in a follow up study. Qualitative analysis of the responses in the various prime conditions showed that people experience envy in vastly different ways, and I hypothesize that there is still an as-of-yet unknown factor that envy plays in the formation and expression of political attitudes.

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