

On the Epistemic Effects of Envy in Academia

Felipe Romero*

University of Groningen

Abstract. Envy is pervasive in academia. What are its epistemic effects? I present a characterization of envy that captures some of its essential features according to the philosophical literature. I use this characterization to illustrate a classic argument that views envy as collectively disadvantageous. Then, based on insights from the social epistemology of science, I evaluate this argument in the context of academic research. I argue that given the nature of epistemic goods, the best strategies available to the envious academic typically lead to collective epistemic benefits. I conclude by presenting a challenge for the design of epistemic institutions: it is difficult to restructure institutions to reduce envy without severe epistemic drawbacks.

Spending plenty of time on something can be the most sophisticated form of revenge.

— Haruki Murakami, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*

Introduction

Do a quick Google search. Type “envy” and “academia.” You will find many anecdotes of envious academics in opinion pieces, blog entries, forums, and social media posts. Some of these anecdotes are bitter, and some are heartbreaking. But they all reveal the same: Academics often feel miserable because of their colleagues' success. They compete and compare themselves with others, envying positions, grants, research visits, paper acceptances, conference travels, awards, and the like. If you are an academic, the odds are that you have been in that situation at some point. If that doesn't sound familiar, you are an exemplar of equanimity. Or, perhaps, you don't experience much envy because you are one of those who inspire it.

* To contact the author, please write to: Department of Theoretical Philosophy, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Groningen; c.f.romero@rug.nl

Here I'm going to focus on envy that academics experience *qua contributors to the production of knowledge*. I will refer to this kind of envy as "academic envy." With this focus, I intend to explore the *epistemic effects* of academic envy. This approach is not the only possible one to explore envy in academia. From a general perspective, and contrary to a romantic ideal, academia since the 20th century has increasingly become a work environment like many others. (Indeed, many universities increasingly resemble corporations.) As such, some of the insights from the vast psychological literature on envy in the workplace may apply. However, my approach here puts at the forefront one aspect distinctive of academia and less present in other work environments, namely, the centrality of epistemic work. My motivation is social epistemological. Work on the social epistemology of science reveals how various contextual factors govern academics' work and affect epistemic outcomes, factors such as communication protocols, institutional structures, and researchers' particular conditions. One contextual factor that deserves attention is that researchers are not dispassionate machines that produce knowledge but human beings with rich emotional lives. Given the pervasiveness of academic envy, I believe it is a helpful entry point to study how such emotional lives impact academics' work and, ultimately, epistemic progress.

I proceed as follows. First, I give a characterization of envy that captures prototypical cases of envy according to the philosophical literature. Second, I use this characterization to present a classic argument according to which envy is collectively disadvantageous and, therefore, an emotion that we should prevent from arising in society. Third, before evaluating whether this argument holds in the academic context, I discuss distinctive aspects of the academic environment based on work on the economics and social epistemology of science. These aspects concern the features of the groups within which academics compare themselves, the kind of goods that researchers envy, and the strategies that the envious academic employs to eliminate her envy. Fourth, based on these distinctive aspects, I argue that the argument from collective disadvantage doesn't apply to the academic context. On the contrary, I suggest that the best strategies available to the envious academic to reducing her envy typically lead to collective epistemic benefits. Finally, I briefly discuss whether we should restructure academic institutions to reduce envy. This question constitutes a challenge for the design of epistemic institutions as it reveals a tension between

epistemic and social values. I argue that while it is desirable to modify the social structure of science to reduce the adverse psychological effects of social comparisons between academics, it is difficult to do so without severe epistemic drawbacks.

1. What is Envy? Three Components

I will say that envy consists of three core components. But I do this with a methodological caveat. I am not proposing a definition of envy in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions by stating these components. In general, providing such definitions for emotions runs the risk of imposing more structure on our emotional life than it has. (Notice, however, that such clear-cut definitions can be helpful for modeling in some contexts despite their descriptive shortcomings, such as AI or economics.) In particular, envy often overlaps with other emotions triggered by unfavorable social comparisons. When you feel envy, you may also feel jealousy, resentment, schadenfreude, or selfishness. The boundaries are often unclear. To make matters harder, different languages carve the space of these emotions with words that are not easily inter-translatable (Protasi 2021, 28). Hence, I acknowledge from the outset that some cases of envy may escape my characterization, and for them, more refined analyses would be in order. Nonetheless, despite these difficulties, I extract some common aspects of envy that philosophers highlight, as they give us a good starting point to talk about appraisals and manifestations of the emotion in academia.

The first component is an *assessment of relative disadvantage*. Envy arises when the person compares herself to another with respect to specific goods (e.g., possessions, qualities, status), and the comparison is unfavorable. This component is common in classic characterizations of the emotion (Aristotle 1967, 1386b; Hume 1757/1898, sec. III, 4). The relativity aspect is crucial because envy arises even if the person's absolute position with respect to an envied good is favorable. Even in such cases, the unfavorable comparison leads to a state of distress. The envious person is in pain because she does not have the desired good and, importantly, because the other person has it.

The second component is an *assessment of proximity*. We certainly do not envy all of those who have something we desire. For instance, Mr. P does not envy everyone who has a Porsche, but it could be painful for him to see his coworker in one. In line

with this familiar idea, several authors state that the comparisons that trigger envy are restricted to a specific group of others that we consider equals in relevant subjective ways, such as competitors, professional peers, and even friends. “Potter to potter and builder to builder,” as Aristotle says (Aristotle 1967, 1381b; see also Hume 1757/1898, sec. IV, 5 and Ben-Ze’ev 1992, 557). The intricacies of how proximity works are subtle, though. Being similar in terms of traits is not sufficient for us to experience someone as proximal if the traits are not part of our self-conception. For instance, you can be a lawyer to pay the bills but an artist at heart and hence not care about how similar other lawyers are to you. Also, how evident the other person’s traits are to you (e.g., due to mere physical proximity) can increase the perception that the comparison is relevant to you even in the absence of more substantive similarity.

The third component is a *desire that the disadvantage be eliminated*. This component is one of the most intriguing aspects of envy. As D’Arms and Kerr say, “the function of envy is to benefit the envious agent’s standing in some status hierarchies by motivating him to improve his comparative position” (D’Arms and Kerr 2008, 44).¹ Notice that this desire does not always arise when the previous two requirements, i.e., disadvantage and proximity, are in place. The kind of relationship that people have can prevent this desire from arising. For instance, Mr. P may have this desire if one of his competitors gets a job, but he may not have this desire if his wife is also a competitor and she gets it. It’s also worth noting that, thus stated, this component is relatively neutral. The desire alone does not entail a disposition to act to eliminate the disadvantage. In particular, the desire alone does not entail a malicious disposition, contrary to a possible perception of envy. Also, even when people have a malicious disposition, they often do not act against the people they envy. Several reasons operate as a brake: acting maliciously out of envy is socially condemned; envy involves a second-order emotion (i.e., the envious often feels terrible about feeling envious) which may prevent action; and other moral considerations may do the same.

Let’s assume that the person wants to reduce her envy as my discussion focuses on these cases. How can she reduce her envy? Let’s look at it in terms of the components. The first way is to try to reduce or block the weight of the assessment of relative disadvantage. The person can try to convince herself that the disadvantage is not so

¹ This functional account of envy is endorsed by Niels van de Ven in: "The Envious Consumer" and also by Jens Lange and Jan Crusius in: "How Envy and Being Envied Shape Social Hierarchies," both contributions to this volume.

significant or that the envied good is unimportant to her. The second way is by trying to block or reduce the effects of the assessment of proximity. According to the literature on envy in the workplace, participants in psychological studies report adopting different mindsets to disengage from the people they envy (Vecchio 1997). These include, e.g., looking for support from other colleagues or discharging their feelings with friends. Thus, the person increases the psychological distance with respect to the envied and perceives that the disadvantage matters less.

The last way to reduce envy is to satisfy the desire by reducing or eliminating the relative disadvantage itself. An intuitive possibility is that the envious may engage in malicious behaviors. However, this need not be the case. Envious people have other strategies to improve their comparative position. Some authors regard these as different types, kinds, or varieties of envy (Crusius and Mussweiler 2012; van den Ven 2016; Protasi 2021). Table 1 illustrates these strategies with an example. (The list may not be exhaustive but suffices for my purposes.) Suppose we have two agents, a and b . Agent a envies b . Let's say that we are considering just one particular good that they have. Let's say a has one unit of this good, b has two, and a feels very envious.

	A	b
<i>Envy (initial state)</i>	1	2
<i>Self-destruction</i>	0	0
<i>Destruction</i>	1	1
<i>Emulation</i>	2	2
<i>Construction</i>	3	2
	3	3

Table 1: Strategies to Eliminate Envy

Starting at the initial state in the table, i.e., (1,2), a may adopt a *self-destruction* strategy that leaves everyone with no goods, i.e., (0,0). Imagine two kids playing. One damages all the toys in the game, including her own, just to make the other lose her

toys too. The *destruction* strategy eliminates the advantage the other has (1,1). *Emulation* involves closing the gap by obtaining what *b* has (2,2). And the *construction* strategies involve resolving envy by surpassing the rival (3,2) or lifting everyone (3,3). With this characterization, we can now move to the arguments that regard envy as an emotion that we should prevent from arising.

2. Envy as Collectively Disadvantageous

We can identify two kinds of arguments suggesting that we should prevent envy from arising, given the *negative consequences* of situations in which people feel envy. (Importantly, these arguments are not against feeling the emotion itself since it is arguably apt to feel it in some situations.) First, some arguments concern the psychological well-being of the individual who feels envy. From this perspective, envy is an emotion that we should prevent from arising, given the distress and pain that it brings. Envy updates our self-conception; it tells us what our accomplishments mean and highlights what we haven't been able to obtain yet, which can be illuminating but also frustrating. Additionally, envy produces shame; that's why it is usually covert. And envy creates a painful second-order emotion, as mentioned before: we feel bad about feeling envy. I'm going to put this individual perspective aside for a moment, but we will revisit it in Section 5.

The second kind of argument against envy concerns the effects of envy in collective life. The general idea of these arguments is that we should prevent envy because it is collectively disadvantageous. Such a collective disadvantage results from envious agents' preference for *suboptimal allocation of resources*. Let's look at it in terms of the example in Table 1. Suppose the agent has a strong desire to eliminate the relative disadvantage. The strategies that the agent has to satisfy the desire could lead to very different outcomes. For instance, on the one hand, construction makes everyone better off or, at least, improves the envious' situation without harming others. In other words, construction leads to improvements in which no agent loses. On the other hand, self-destruction makes everyone worse off. (In economic distribution terms, construction Pareto-dominates self-destruction.) When many agents apply a mixture of these strategies indistinctively (i.e., regardless of whether more efficient strategies are available), the overall outcome is suboptimal.

The fact that suboptimal allocations satisfy the envious' desire is arguably irrational when we consider that most inequalities don't affect the utilities of what we have (except positional goods that acquire their value given their uncommonness.) For instance, if *a* has one Euro, her Euro has the same value regardless of whether *b* has two or three. But as an envious agent, *a* would prefer a distribution in which she has, for instance, zero if that means that *b* loses the advantage as well.

Rawls (1971/1999) notoriously gave arguments against envy in the same vein (for discussion, see D'Arms 2016). His arguments rely on the observation that envy makes everyone worse off due to agents' disposition to level down even at a personal cost (It's worth noting that not all authors share Rawls' observation.) The first argument is that envy should be excluded from his "original position" because it could lead us to adopt the wrong principles of justice Rawls (1971/1999, sec. 25). The second argument concerns the social conditions that produce envy. For him, envy is not likely to be strong in a well-ordered society. That is, if the principles of justice succeed in creating a well-ordered society, the circumstances that give rise to envy would be mitigated if not eliminated.

Now the question is, to what extent do these collective considerations against envy apply to the academic context?

3. Academic Envy

To assess the argument against envy in the academic context, I will first explore how the general definitions discussed so far translate to such context. I will begin with the most straightforward one: the assessment of proximity. Who are the academics that we consider proximal? Similar to general cases of envy, you don't envy everyone who obtains what you want. (e.g., it would hurt more after you are denied a prestigious grant if the obnoxious show-off colleague with whom you share your office gets it.) Here it is helpful to think in terms of a *league*, i.e., academics who share contexts with you and hence make comparisons of relative disadvantages salient. Here is a non-exhaustive list of such contexts: (1) graduate school classmates (as opposed to academics who went to graduate school at a different university), (2) colleagues at the same department, (3) colleagues at the same career stage, (4) other academics in your field, (5) close collaborators, and (6) academics of your gender and race. As an academic, you tend to

envy more academics in your league and less those above or below your league. Now, notice that leagues are not “all or nothing” simply because, thankfully, nobody is too similar to you: while there could be substantial overlap in the contexts that you share with someone, there are contexts that you don’t share. Notice also that the evaluation of who is in our leagues is very subjective. Some contexts may matter more to you than to other academics. The colleague down the hall might give a lot of weight to the fact that you two attended the same high school (he hasn’t gotten over it), but you might give more weight to the fact that you are both at the same career stage now.

But what do we envy as academics? Recall that here I focus on envy that academics experience qua contributors to the production of knowledge. This focus leaves out other kinds of envy that academics experience, e.g., as workers in an office environment or as members of a company. As producers of knowledge, understanding what academics envy requires looking at what we are rewarded for and how rewards work for epistemic work. Academics get rewarded for producing *epistemic goods*: scientific findings, theories, arguments, models, experimental designs, etc. But not everyone who produces these goods is rewarded. Sociologists of science, and more recently social epistemologists, have studied the reward system of science, and one of their insights is that rewards in science are based on priority. (The literature talks about “science,” but the essential insight applies to all research fields.) Their key observation is that only the first researcher that produces a novel epistemic good for the community is rewarded, while second runners get very little or nothing. This reward system is known as *the priority rule* (Merton 1957; Strevens 2003). Evidence for this rule comes from many episodes in the history of science in which researchers have fought viciously with others to establish priority over findings, from Newton and Leibniz and their disputes over calculus to the recent battles between scientists at MIT/Harvard and UC Berkeley over CRISPR/Cas9.

The primary reward that academics receive for their novel epistemic goods is *prestige*, that is, recognition from their colleagues about their priority. Since the 20th century, scientists have established priority via peer-reviewed publications (this will be important later.) Prestige comes in different forms: eponymy, prizes, academic positions, grants, invitations to speak, citations, teaching buyouts, a bigger office, and so on.

Notice that this reward system is imperfect in practice. First, priority ascriptions are primarily a function of what the community perceives, and these perceptions can be erroneous. Non-epistemic factors may lead the community to perceive a person as the producer of a novel finding when they are not. For instance, a researcher can be merely in the vicinity of a finding without being the actual producer but gain credit, e.g., for doing a better job than the producer at popularizing the finding or for being the principal investigator in the laboratory that carried out the research without contributing to it. Hence, some priority ascriptions can be controversial.

Second, the prestige that academics acquire does not necessarily track the epistemic value of their contributions. This is understandable in light of the fallibility of science and the fact that assessing epistemic value is difficult and requires time (arguably years). Some goods seem very valuable right when they are published and make their producers famous at that time, but such assessment of high value might radically change decades later. Likewise, valuable goods can be largely ignored and rediscovered after years.

Many academics are aware of these imperfections in the reward system. Nonetheless, the community preserves and protects the practice of ascribing priority and prestige. They do so not by grounding prestige attributions on the value of epistemic goods per se (which, again, would be hard) but by focusing on tangible outputs, such as articles in selective journals, books published with prestigious presses, and the like. In practice, the community assumes that such outputs are reliable proxies of epistemic value and ascribes prestige accordingly. This is evidenced by how central such outputs are in hiring, promotion, and award decisions. Most researchers don't get those prizes only from having great ideas but from having them published in prestigious venues.

Notice also that even if prestige is the reward that academics want, the acquisition of prestige is intimately connected to the production of epistemic goods. If this weren't the case, academics would feel satisfied with acquiring prestige undeservedly, i.e., with no epistemic grounds or tangible outputs. While this is an empirical matter, I'd say that this is not the case for most academics. (This is not to say that some academics are primarily motivated by prestige.) For example, I'd conjecture that most academics wouldn't perceive it as a reward to be suddenly promoted to a higher position without meeting the requirements for promotion or winning an award that they clearly do not

deserve. Furthermore, undeserved promotions or awards could arguably contribute to an academic's impostor syndrome.

With these ideas in mind, I suggest that *academic envy is triggered by an assessment of relative disadvantage with respect to the prestige that other academics in your league have*. Three clarifications are in order. First, some academics do not envy prestige, but other material resources and goods (e.g., research funds, reduced teaching loads, access to facilities, etc.) Nonetheless, envy in those cases is mediated by prestige because prestige allows academics to access these goods. Only when these qualities result in actual epistemic achievements, and hence prestige, they trigger the most envy. Second, such described, academic envy leaves out kinds of envy experienced in academia qua workplace. For instance, you might envy your colleague because of some quality (e.g., their intelligence, their presentation skills, writing style, and so on.) These qualities could lead to the production of knowledge, but they don't track differences in prestige. Third, this focus also leaves out envy that you may experience because of your colleagues' success in other academic activities, such as teaching and service.

I will now make other remarks about the nature of epistemic goods that will be helpful to evaluate the argument from collective disadvantage. Epistemic goods are taken to be *public goods* in the economics of science literature (Arrow 1962; Dasgupta and David 1994; Stephan 2012). As such, they have two special features that make them different from goods produced in other spheres in society. The first one is that they are not used up when consumed. This is referred to as *non-rivalry*. The second one is that once they are built, anyone can use them. This is referred to as *non-excludability*. The classic example that illustrates these two features is a lighthouse. First, once you construct a lighthouse, the light that it provides is not used up. Second, it doesn't matter whether there is one boat or one hundred boats on the coast. Any of them can use the light, and you can't prevent some in particular from using the light.

The non-excludability of epistemic goods implies that a researcher cannot appropriate the epistemic goods she produces. That is, once a finding is published in a peer-reviewed publication, anyone from the scientific community can (leaving publisher paywalls aside) benefit from it, i.e., get inspired by it and use it. This is one of the reasons why the priority rule has become the reward system of science. The priority rule, the story goes, solves the problem of incentivizing research. The discoverer can't appropriate and sell the finding, but she can appropriate the right to

priority, which results in other derived benefits. (While I focus here on academic research, it's worth noting that industry research since the 20th century circumvents the public character of knowledge with the patent system.)

Another feature of epistemic goods that grounds the priority rule is that they have diminishing returns (Peirce 1967). When a researcher produces a novel epistemic good, further reports of the same discovery provide very little epistemically. For instance, a second person could make the same discovery independently, contributing to the confirmation that that finding is correct. (Recent discussions about replicability show that the contribution of second runners often is understated.) However, as we iterate in that process of repetition, the contributions become negligible. The 100th person reporting the same good likely contributes very little.

The final feature that I will mention is that, unlike other public goods, *you can't destroy epistemic goods*. Once you produce and publish an epistemic good, you can't reverse its propagation. To make sense of this idea, contrast epistemic goods with public goods as the lighthouse. You can demolish a lighthouse, but once a paper reporting a new result is out there, it is virtually impossible to prevent it from reaching others. Maybe burning libraries and books could have achieved this at some point in the remote past, but this is no longer practically feasible.

4. Reducing Academic Envy and Collective Disadvantage Revisited

We can now discuss how we can reduce academic envy. I will do this, again, in terms of the general components of envy presented earlier, i.e., an assessment of relative disadvantage, an assessment of proximity, and a desire that the disadvantage be eliminated. First, we can try to reduce the weight of the assessment of relative disadvantage. Your colleague has published two papers on your topic, and you have one. But thinking about it, the disadvantage is not so significant: his work has lower quality than yours, and it's not only quantity that matters to you, right? The second way to reduce envy is to reduce the weight of the assessment of proximity. Recall that one of the coping strategies for envy in the workplace is to distance ourselves psychologically from the envied. As academics, such disengagement could involve reevaluating whether the envied and you belong to the same league. She is a computer scientist, and you are a philosopher. The publication rules of her field are very different;

hence the comparison does not make sense. Disengaging could also involve avoiding the envied, looking less at her CV online, etc.

The last way is to try to satisfy the desire to eliminate the relative disadvantage. According to my analysis, we have four strategies to do this in general cases of envy (i.e., self-destruction, destruction, emulation, and construction.) The question is, do these strategies apply to the academic context? Answering requires evaluating whether the envious academic can employ them effectively. Recall that the production of epistemic goods and prestige are intimately related (with the caveat that, in practice, we rely on imperfect proxies to assess the value of epistemic goods.) Hence, changes in prestige could eliminate envy when they track changes in epistemic goods. Having this in mind, I suggest that *the envious academic can only apply strategies in which she can eliminate the epistemic grounds of her relative disadvantage*. This poses a limitation for the applicability of the self-destructive and destructive strategies. Since we can't destroy epistemic goods, the self-destructive and destructive strategies are not a mechanism to change the envied academic's prestige and hence can't effectively reduce envy.

This point has crucial implications for the argument from collective disadvantage discussed earlier. Recall the argument: envious agents may adopt self-destructive and destructive strategies to get rid of their envy, and these strategies lead to suboptimal distributions of goods. However, if envious academics can't adopt these strategies, envy is not collectively disadvantageous in their context. Under the assumption that they want to reduce their envy, the remaining options are emulative and constructive strategies.

Emulation may reduce envy, but it depends on how you interpret it. Recall that epistemic goods have diminishing returns. Hence, simple imitation in epistemic terms is insufficient to help the envious academic match the prestige of her competitor.² That is, reporting goods that are the same or too similar to already existing ones will not grant her an equal amount of prestige. To emulate the competitor's prestige, the envious academic has to produce an epistemic good deemed novel by the community. So understood, the emulative strategy is collectively advantageous.

² For a general argument that emulation is not mere imitation, see Niccoli and Vaccarezza's contribution to this volume: "Let the donkeys be donkeys: in defense of inspiring envy."

We can make similar remarks about the construction strategy. In epistemic terms, some forms of construction imply collaboration. For instance, collaboration involves building on top of the work of others, opening research avenues for others, or working together with those you envy towards a common goal (think of adversarial collaborations), all of which are collectively advantageous.

Notice, however, that my remarks do not imply that it is easy to get rid of academic envy. Emulating and constructing to the point that matches the envied person's prestige can be difficult. The low-hanging fruits have already been taken in many fields, making it less likely for researchers to develop equally valuable epistemic contributions in succession. Given these difficulties, emulation and construction may fall short, leading to what Protasi calls "inert envy" (Protasi 2021), that is, a state of envy in which the person's incapability to act causes her further frustration. Nonetheless, we have to think specifically about what we envy. If you envy the prestige of a Nobel prize, perhaps you are doomed to feel inert envy. If you envy prestige that results from less exclusive academic achievements, such as papers and grants, the motivation to emulate or construct can get you there. And even if you don't fully resolve your envy, your attempts to emulate and construct may still bring epistemic benefits for others.

You might still think that some behaviors inspired by envy can be destructive in academia. Hence, I will discuss in what sense they are harmful and their epistemic relevance.

4.1. Destructive but Epistemically Irrelevant Behaviors

One possible kind of destructive behavior is available to the envious academic: malicious behaviors with no direct or indirect epistemic consequences (e.g., burning your envied colleague's car.) For these, I'd say that their prevalence is low, not only because they also entail violations of other sorts of norms, but also because they wouldn't reduce the relative disadvantage regarding prestige and hence wouldn't reduce or eliminate envy effectively.

4.2. Seemingly Destructive but Epistemically Beneficial Behaviors

You might think that there is something very close to destruction: you can *criticize* epistemic goods. The close competitor working on your same topic published a paper in *The Journal of The Best*. But his paper overlooks a crucial aspect that makes his argument fundamentally flawed. You have to respond. You have to criticize the paper,

show the error. Destructive as it may seem, that kind of action is not destructive when interpreted in epistemic terms. In fact, from an epistemic perspective, *criticizing someone else's work is collectively advantageous*. When we criticize someone else's work correctly (i.e., without inducing errors ourselves), we contribute to what the community knows around the original finding.

Consider two specific examples. The first one is replication work in experimental science. When someone conducts a replication of someone else's experiment, even in the unwelcome scenario in which the finding does not replicate, the replicator contributes to the collective good of having adequately confirmed theories. The second is the case of articles that present objections to existing articles, as it is common in the humanities. Such articles benefit the community by providing a more subtle understanding of the domain in question.

There is one extreme case in which the envied researcher's prestige is the product of careless or even fraudulent work. Another researcher motivated by the underserved prestige may try to blow the whistle and take her down. This action could indeed damage the reputation of the first researcher but wouldn't be suboptimal or destructive epistemically.

4.3. Destructive Behaviors with Indirect Epistemic Effects

You might also think that envy could motivate destructive behaviors with indirect epistemic effects. Consider the following: recommending the rejection of a paper you are refereeing when you shouldn't; recommending rejection of a grant proposal you are reviewing when you shouldn't; voting against a person in a hiring or promotion committee when you shouldn't; not citing your colleague's work when you should; burdening your colleague unfairly with extra work; engaging in fraud to fail to replicate someone else's work intentionally.

These behaviors occur for sure in academia. But is envy primarily to blame when they happen? To some extent, this is an empirical question, but I conjecture that envy wouldn't be primarily to blame. These behaviors constitute severe violations of norms of academic integrity, and most academics subscribe to such norms. When the norms that prevent these behaviors are violated, the person must have an inclination to play outside of them. Envy could exacerbate such an inclination, but envy alone wouldn't lead to malicious action.

You may have another worry related to the potential indirect epistemic drawbacks of trying to disengage to reduce the assessment of proximity. As academics, you may worry that, in extreme cases, if people disengage too much, they may decide to quit academia altogether. This observation could seemingly explain why people quit. Nonetheless, it's necessary to identify the different causes of quitting and their connection to envy. I would say that the most likely culprit of people disengaging and quitting is the pressure from hyper-competition. Academics, in particular early-career academics, have to be very productive to stay afloat. This pressure is draining and likely enough reason for many to decide to leave, even when they don't feel particularly envious of their peers' accomplishments.

There is one reaction to envy in the academic context that you could think is epistemically harmful indirectly: *gossip*. Gossip, in general, can be very damaging (or convenient) for an academic career. However, the epistemic effects of gossip are less obvious. I'd conjecture that gossip is not very effective in damaging the epistemic goods that academics produce. The gossip that could have such an effect would have to be related to the epistemic import of the academic's work. It is true that some academics form impressions about others' work based on gossip. However, when ascribing prestige, the community as a whole evaluates the epistemic import of others' work directly by looking at it. Perhaps the content of gossip could cause epistemic damage when it is widely accepted. Still, in such cases, such content would be arguably grounded in actual epistemic aspects (e.g., problems or merits) of the person's work.

5. Envy and Epistemic Institutions Design

Should we restructure academia to reduce envy? So far, my assessment of envy might seem optimistic. However, recall that this assessment concerns a collective and epistemic perspective. At this point, it is worth returning to the arguments against envy from the perspective of the individual's psychological well-being, which I mentioned in passing in Section 2. Importantly, envy correlates with depression, neuroticism, and hostility (Smith et al. 1999), and it is associated with low self-esteem (Vecchio 2000). These alone, I believe, give us reasons to want to restructure academia in a way that leads to more healthy mindsets.

One condition that reduces the possibility (and pain) of comparison is when inequalities are much larger. As Hume remarks, "a great disproportion cuts off the relation of the ideas, and either keeps us from comparing ourselves with what is remote from us, or diminishes the effects of the comparison" (Hume 1757/1898, sec. IV, 5). Consider two options for intervention that take on board this idea. The first option is to *intervene to decrease the possibility of proximity assessments between academics*. That is, we might try to create conditions in which academics do not compare themselves to others, or at least not in a way that produces pain. While intuitively desirable, it is hard to achieve such a restructuring without worrisome drawbacks. In academia, such a restructuring would entail, for instance, making the academic hierarchy more stratified, introducing larger gaps between the different levels. This could reduce envy but lead to concentration of power in the hands of a few and less democratic decision-making within institutions.

A second option is to *intervene to decrease the relative epistemic disadvantages that lead to prestige differences*. In practice, this could mean reforming the publication system and funding allocation procedures in a way that reduces productivity gaps between academics. (E.g., imagine a scenario in which everyone is allowed to publish at most N number of articles per year.) Another possibility could be to separate academics' rewards from their epistemic contributions. Thus, differences in epistemic contributions would not lead to envy, but probably at the expense of removing part of academics' motivation to produce novel research.

While we could refine these intervention options, the general worry about them is straightforward. Interventions like these may introduce injustices while being collectively disadvantageous in epistemic terms.

Conclusion

I characterized academic envy as the envy of the prestige that results from the production of epistemic goods by academics in one's league. I have suggested that this type of envy, unlike envy in other spheres in society, is not collectively disadvantageous. From a collective perspective, the general arguments against envy do not apply to the academic context. The reason is that the strategies that would reduce envy by leading to collective disadvantages are not readily available to the envious

academic, given the nature of epistemic goods. Furthermore, the remaining strategies are usually collectively advantageous in epistemic terms. This creates a tension between the individual and collective assessments of envy and constitutes a challenge for reforming academia to make it a space in which envy is not prevalent.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to Sara Protasi, Chloé de Canson, and Daphne Brandenburg for their valuable comments on previous drafts. I also thank the audience at the Moral Psychology of Envy Workshop, May 2021, and audiences at Tilburg University and the University of Groningen for helpful discussion.

References

- Aristotle. 1967. "Rhetoric (Translated by w. Rhys Roberts)". <http://www.public.iastate.edu/~honey1/Rhetoric/index.html>.
- Arrow, Kenneth J. 1962. "The Economic Implications of Learning by Doing". *The Review of Economic Studies* 29, no. 3: 155–173.
- Ben-Ze'ev, Aaron. 1992. "Envy and Inequality". *The Journal of Philosophy* 89, no. 11: 551–581.
- Crusius, Jan, and Thomas Mussweiler. 2012. "When People Want What Others Have: The Impulsive Side of Envious Desire." *Emotion (Washington, D.C.)* (United States) 12, no. 1: 142–153.
- D'Arms, Justin. 2017. "Envy". In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Spring 2017, ed. by Edward N. Zalta.
- D'Arms, Justin, and Alison Duncan Kerr. 2008. "Envy in the Philosophical Tradition." In *Envy: Theory and Research*. Ed. by Richard H. Smith, 39–59. Series in Affective Science. New York, NY, US: Oxford University Press.

- Dasgupta, Partha, and Paul A. David. 1994. "Toward a New Economics of Science". *Research Policy* 23, no. 5: 487–521.
- Hume, David. 1757/1898. "Dissertation on the Passions". In *The Philosophical Works of David Hume*, ed. by T.H. Green and T.H. Grose, II:138–166. London and New York: Longmans, Green, and Co.
- Merton, Robert K. 1957. "Priorities in Scientific Discovery: A Chapter in the Sociology of Science". *American Sociological Review* 22, no. 6: 635–659.
- Peirce, Charles S. 1967. "Note on the Theory of the Economy of Research". *Operations Research* 15, no. 4: 643–648.
- Protasi, Sara. 2021. "Varieties of Envy". In *The Philosophy of Envy*, 26–65. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rawls, John. 1971/1999. *A Theory of Justice, Revised Edition*. Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Smith, Richard H., et al. 1999. "Dispositional Envy". *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 25, no. 8: 1007–1020.
- Strevens, Michael. 2003. "The Role of the Priority Rule in Science". *Journal of Philosophy* 100, no. 2: 55–79.
- Van den Ven, Niels. 2016. "Envy and Its Consequences: Why It Is Useful to Distinguish between Benign and Malicious Envy". *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 10, no. 6: 337–349.
- Vecchio, Robert P. 1997. *It's Not Easy Being Green: Jealousy and Envy in the Workplace*. 562. Leadership: Understanding the Dynamics of Power and Influence in Organizations. Notre Dame, IN, US: University of Notre Dame Press.
- 2000. "Negative Emotion in the Workplace: Employee Jealousy and Envy". *International Journal of Stress Management* 7, no. 3: 161–179.