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The Insidious Nature of Envy

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INTRODUCTION – THE INSIDIOUS NATURE OF ENVY

“Envy is everywhere… we are surrounded by envy at every turn” (Sorge, 2003) wrote Bob Sorge, author of the book, “Envy: The Enemy Within.” Likewise, noted anthropologist, George Foster described envy as “a pan-human phenomenon, abundantly present in every society, and present to a greater or lesser extent in every human being.” (Mishira, 2009)

Consider the following findings by writer, Julia Taylor, Jan Frazier, 32, a physical therapist in San Diego, admits she was so envious of the attention her recently published author cousin was getting that she refused to read her novel and missed the book party. When Kelli Stephen's friend got a job making six figures as a Wall Street trader, "I was so envious, I accused her of being concerned only with making money," recalls Stephen, 29, a Washington, D.C., high-school teacher. (Taylor, March 1998)

While it seems envy is prevalent, envy has also been known to have her dark side. Writer, Limberis said, “Envy looks insignificant from the outside, but no suffering more destructive than envy grows in the souls of humanity.” (Limberis, April 1991) In fact Limberis called envy, “the most insidious of the evils.” (Limberis, April 1991)

The Catholic Church calls envy one of the seven deadly sins. Bob Sorge considered, “envy the most underrated weapon in satan’s arsenal.” (Sorge, 2003) The Early Church Fathers used strong words to decry envy. Saint Cyprian, bishop of Carthage and Saint Basil the Great, bishop of Caesarea, described envy as “deeply rooted, taking on a relentless life of its own within the hidden recesses of the self. Both portray envy as linked in an entire chain of vices, and as ultimately driving its subject towards violence or murder.” (Blowers, January 2009) Saint John Chrysostom, archbishop of Constantinople said, “As a moth gnaws a garment, so doth envy consume a man.” In Gregory the Great’s enumeration of the offspring of this deadly sin, “he points out that envy gives rise not
only to malice and misery, but also to rumor-mongering, gossip and hate. (Bringle, Winter 2001)

However, in spite of the insidious nature of envy, there seems to be the trivialization of envy. Envy is herald as something noble and good in the competitive world we live in. According to an article published in the Cosmopolitan Magazine, the article’s opening statement exhorts the power and value of envy. “That do-in-your-best-friend [envy] can do you a world of good. Here's how your green eyed monster can deliver the swift kick in the butt you need to go for the gold yourself.” (Taylor, March 1998). The underlying statement of this article suggests that envy will help one climb the corporate ladder to success. Harper’s Magazine cited a case of Robert Coles, a psychiatrist whose therapeutic response to a lawyer friend, struggling with envy, was to assure the client of his normalcy. Coles consoling words were, “Envy is part of our humanity. And if envy brings the pain of knowing what we lack, [it] can also leads us to reflection… [about] who we really are, and what we really want out of our life.” (Coles, August 1995) The struggles with feelings of envy is treated as normal and encouraged. In other words, “we [have] transform envy from ‘malicious’ into ‘delicious’; we [have] make it ‘work’ for us to make sure we get what we want.” (Bringle, Winter 2001)

Of great concern is writer, Bringle’s observation where, “envy, once serious enough to make it onto the Apostle Paul’s list of ‘works of the flesh’ that could keep us from inheriting the kingdom of heaven (Gal 5, I Cor 6) – now receive scant attention from our pulpits….”(Bringle, Winter 2001)
In the midst of these, Bob Sorge issued a clarion call to the Christian community, “I believe it is time for the body of Christ to wake up to the reality of envy and what it is doing to us. (Sorge, 2003)

This paper seeks to present that envy, if left unchecked, can leave a trail of disasters; on the envious person, the envied and the organization too.

THE NATURE OF ENVY

“Envy is the most difficult form of enmity to handle.” (Limberis, April 1991) To understand envy’s insidiousness, it is necessary to understand the nature of envy.

Oxford Dictionary describes envy as both a feeling and a desire; “a feeling of discontented or resentful longing aroused by someone else's possessions, qualities, or luck and a desire to have a quality, possession, or other desirable thing belonging to [someone else].” ("Oxford Online Dictionary," 2010) In other words, envy arises when one starts “to think of the things others have that we lack – look, talent, health, height, money, connections, and so on. And we think we have a problem with the person who possesses what we lack.” (Stanley, 2006) Parrott and Smith expanded further the depth of envy’s insidiousness saying the envious person will go to the extend to “wish that the other lacks it.” (Parrott & Smith, 1993) In other words, if one cannot have it, than the other person does not deserve to have it too.

Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines envy as, “the painful or resentful awareness of an advantage enjoyed by another joined with a desire to possess the same advantage.” ("Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary," 2010). Here, “envy stems from the human tendency to see our own well-being [advantage] overshadowed by someone else’s…. 
(Miceli & Castelfranchi, 2007) As a result the envious person suffers pain and resentment. However, in spite of the pain produced, “yet we habitually compare ourselves to others, using the lives, abilities and resources of our friends, neighbors and colleagues as a benchmark for our own situation.” (Reeves, September 2003)

**Envy & Jealousy**

"Envy" and "jealousy" are often used interchangeably in everyday language when in fact they are different. (Mishira, 2009) They stand for two different distinct emotions. Writer Richards identified “the possession factor as the clear basis for distinguishing the two.” (Richards, March 2000) Hence, “jealousy is the fear of losing something that one possesses to another person (a loved one in the prototypical form), while envy is the pain or frustration caused by another person having something that one does not have oneself.” (Nauta, February 2009) In Olsson’s words, “envy starts with empty hands, whereas jealousy starts with full hands.”(Olsson, 1962)

Anderson posited another difference that is looking from the “advantage” perspective. “In envy the other has the advantage, you do not…. In jealousy, you have the advantage and you want to keep a rival from taking the advantage from you.” (Anderson, 2002)

**Envy and Schadenfreude**

If envy insidiousness is left unchecked, the emotion may leads to “Schadenfreude,” the emotion that…delight in another’s failure or defeat.” (Epstein, 2003) Wikipedia defines it as “the rejoicing at, or taking joy in, or getting pleasure from the misfortunes of others. ("Wikipedia - The Free Encyclopedia,")) “Some psychologists believe that Schadenfreude is fueled chiefly by envy. Some psychologists of Schadenfreude tend to believe that those
who feel it most strongly are likely to be people who do not have a good opinion of
themselves and thus exult unduly in watching other people drag down.” (Epstein, 2003)

**WHY IS ENVY SO INSIDIOUS?**

Firstly, envy is so insidious is because envy is often denied. As a result, “envy is difficult
to manage, in part because it’s hard to admit that we harbor such a socially unacceptable
emotion. Our discomfort causes us to conceal and deny our feelings, and that makes
things worse.” (Johnson, October 1983) Sorge said, “We resist pinning the label ‘envy’
on the struggles of our soul because of the implications that word carries with it. If we
own up to envy, we are giving admittance to some powerfully indicting weaknesses.”
(Sorge, 2003) Writer Bedeian posited one such weakness, “Admitting to envy is
tantamount to conceding inferiority with respect to another. Such an admission, of
course, is often difficult without damaging one’s ego.” (Bedeian, Spring 1995)

Secondly, “envy is above all the hidden emotion – so hidden that, often, one isn’t aware
oneself that is, as it frequently can be, the motive for one’s own conduct.” (Epstein, 2003)

Thirdly, “the source of envy …, [Book of] James tells us, is not from above…. It is
earthly (rooted in the natural realm); sensual (based from data received from the five
senses rather than from the Spirit of God); and it is demonic [inflame by demonic
activity].” (Sorge, 2003) Envy’s carnality manifest itself in ways that contradicts the life
in Christ (Gal 5: 13-26)

If envy is allowed to fester, it will breed an assortment of pernicious tendencies. Below
are some examples:

First, James 3:16 say, “For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find
disorder and every evil practice.” (NIV) Some examples of the evil practices are, “the
envious person may be willing “to sacrifice one’s own outcomes in order to simply diminish the envied person’s relative advantage, a desire to destroy good things if the alternative is that others have them….” (Smith & Kim, 2007) In other words, an envious person is likely to undertake efforts in order to reduce the gap between himself and the envied person. The envious individual may invest in order to reduce the position of the envied individual. Zizzo and Oswald found that “people gave up large amounts of their cash to reduce others’ incomes.” (Zizzo & Oswald, 2001)

Immanuel Kant, described envy as the “intent on the destruction of the happiness of others” (Kant & Gregor, 1996) while Smith and Kim called envy “a feeling of malicious joy when the envied person suffers or when an envied group fails, even if the suffering is undeserved” (Smith & Kim, 2007)

Writer Plantinga stated, “The goal of envy is to strip and destroy. What an envier wants is for the other not to have it. If he cannot have heaven, he can at least raise hell in the lives of others.” (Plantinga, November 25, 1991)

Writer Johnson noted that “envy opposes and destroys friendships.” (Johnson, October 1983) In James 3:14, we are told that envy is bitter. It is empowered by an embittered heart and produces bitter fruit in relationships. (Sorge, 2003)

Dunn and Schweitzer posited, “Envy often leads people to devalue those they envy, and can increase schadenfreude, or pleasure at another’s misfortune. (Dunn & Schweitzer, 2004) Stein wrote, “some of the key unconscious motives in an envious attack include the desire to exert control over the other and the desire to prevent the other from exercising their … power or simply enjoying their good fortune.” (Stein, December 1997)

According to Pastor Stanley, the futile attempts to satisfy our desires will lead to an attitude of putting the blame on others. “To blame is to acknowledge dependence: If you don’t act a certain
way, I can’t be satisfied or content… [I] can never be happy until [I] am able to control the actions and reactions of everybody [I] come into contact with….“ (Stanley, 2006)

Second, envy has the tendency for the envious one to have impaired judgment. Writer, Nauta found that “in envy, one is envious of what another, in one’s eyes unjustly possesses.” (Nauta, February 2009) Likewise, Park found that “the soul seized by envy combines an active imagination with a distorted view of reality. It is perfectly capable of inventing its own invisible and intricate system of score keeping…. It can suffer wounds at the overheard report of a competitor’s victory, and find solace in the rumors of a colleague’s downfall.” (Park, Spring 2003)

Finally, Sorge warned, “when we envy one another in the Kingdom of God, we release dynamics that actually bind the progress of the Kingdom in our sphere, our region.” (Sorge, 2003)

**Examples of Envy**

“The first recorded case of envy is that of Cain killing his brother Abel. When Cain found that God accepted his brother, Abel’s offering and not his, he was envious. Cain acted out his envy when he killed Abel.” (Epstein, 2003)

I Samuel 18 was the worst case scenario of envy “that takes root and become insidious obsession and leads to self-destructive behavior. What began as a normal celebrative occasion became the seedbed of envy when Saul heard the women singing, “Saul has killed his thousands, and David his ten thousands” (I Samuel 18:7). In verse 9 we read that Saul eyed David from that day on.” (Park, Spring 2003)
In Matthew 27:18, we read “For he knew it was out of envy that they had handed Jesus over to him.” (NIV) Limberis gave a poignant but clear descriptive nature of envy that killed Jesus.

Jesus was the quintessential victim of envy, even though it was part of God’s plan. Why was Jesus envied? Because of the miracles…. The dead were raised, and the giver of life was slandered…. Demons were destroyed and smitter was plotted against. And finally they handed the joy of life over to death, and they whipped the liberator of humanity, and they condemned the judged of the universe. (Limberis, April 1991)

WHAT ARE THE DAMAGES OF ENVY?

Envy damages relationships, disrupts teams, and undermines organizational performance.

The damaged relationships involved both the envious and the envied. “When you are obsessed with someone’s success, your self-respect suffers, and you may neglect or even sabotage your own performance and possibly your career. (Menon & Thompson, April 2010) The envied will resort to negative measures if he realizes that he is the cause of workplace disharmony. Envy not doing damaged relationships but has adverse impact on the organizations too. Menon & Thompson have found that if envy is “left unchecked, this deadly sin can sabotage your company’s performance…. (Menon & Thompson, April 2010). Below are some examples the adverse impact of envy on damaged relationships and the organization.

Impact on Envious

“Envy can have unpleasant implications for individuals’ interactions with others and for their own general happiness. Because they persist in comparing their own situations with those of others, enviers seem to experience unflattering comparisons with greater frequency than their less envious counterparts.” (Bedeian, Spring 1995) As a result the “envious person resent the fact that somebody who was supposed to be similar to them is
actually better than them on a dimension that is important and desirable to them. This resentment may get manifested through decreased personal interactions towards the envied person.” (Mishira, 2009) Menon & Thompson have found such withdrawal behavior in a technology company where “managers who felt threatened by another group’s idea simply ignored it. At one investment bank, a senior banker was so envious of a colleague’s position and power that instead of talking to the colleague directly, he communicated through a go-between.” (Menon & Thompson, April 2010) Similarly, “people also tend to distance themselves from the objects of envy… the [envious] has difficulty learning from and collaborating with others. This can lead to disruptions or oversights at work.” (Menon & Thompson, April 2010)

Furthermore, “in an effort to protect themselves from being demeaned, envious individuals may venture to undercut their rivals by disrupting the efforts of competitors, negatively distorting competitor’s successes, or positively distorting their own accomplishments.” (Bedeian, Spring 1995) Likewise, Mishira concurred that “an envious person would direct his ire on the envied because the latter makes the former look bad. So the envious person may attempt to spoil the reputation of the envied, through malicious gossip and backbiting.” (Mishira, 2009)

Author Epstein found “that the very envious person is insatiable…. The [envious] have a restless competitiveness, which will not cease nagging away at them until they feel themselves clearly established as first among unequal.” (Epstein, 2003) Similarly, Schmidt found, “envious people spend their lives fighting for their fair share of life’s success, security, and happiness. The more they go after these things from others, the harder it becomes to be satisfied with what they have.” (Schmidt, June 1980) Hence,
envious people dispense a huge amount of their energy, resources, and time in futility to feed an insatiable appetite.

Payton found that “in the envious person the hatred engendered by unfulfilled entitlement and the aggressive desire to destroy what cannot be tolerated in others, masks a deep feeling of unworthiness and vulnerability – the “not-good-enoughness” – which accounts for the inbuilt failure of envy. (Payton, 2007)

Another adverse impact is the envious capacity of rational thinking and decision making will be impaired. “Envy blocks out clarity, both about oneself and the people one envies…. Envy clouds thought, clobbers generosity, precludes any hopes of serenity, and ends in shriveling the heart.” (Epstein, 2003) Likewise, Richard posited, “the envious becomes unable to acknowledge anything interesting or valuable coming from someone else.” (Richards, March 2000)

The envious will also lose the capacity to handle setbacks with wisdom. “When confronted with a serious setback or unchangeable sadness in one’s life, one is inclined to ask the obvious question, Why me? For the envious person, though, the question, when he or she sees someone who has had greater good fortune, is, Why not me?” (Epstein, 2003) As a result, the envious person “is pained at not having the good object, and envious of those who have.” (Richards, March 2000)

Last but not least, Dogan and Veechio found envious behaviors result in both direct and indirect costs

The direct costs are the time and energy expended by the resentful employees. The indirect costs are the unpleasant consequences that flow from the actions resulting from the emotions. The indirect costs of envy include the possibility of retaliation, a loss of reputation, and the emotional costs of possible discipline. Another important indirect cost is the loss of employee performance…. Also employees often have control over many additional discretionary behaviors that
are not included in formal job descriptions (such as going out of their way to help a coworker, protecting and conserving organizational property and assisting the supervisor in minor ways). Actions that are characteristic of ‘good citizenship’ may be diminished if employees are feeling resentment that is brought on by envy…”(Dogan & Veechio, March/April 2001)

**Impact on Envied**

When envied people are threatened by destructive envy, they can adopt several non-mutually exclusive strategies that can lead to the degradation of their situations. First, they can simply avoid success, because the costs of success are perceived to exceed the benefits, because of others’ envy. (Sutan, Mzoughi, & Grolleau, 2009) Likewise, Scheok found several cases where institutionalized envy prevented farmers from introducing innovations or more effective practices because no one dares to show anything that might lead people to think he is better. (Schoeck, 1987) Second, successful and envied individuals can attempt to disguise or deny their success. By doing so, they divert some resources from productive uses and deprive potential followers of useful information on the success route. (Sutan, et al., 2009) Third, envy-avoidance strategies can be complemented by apologizing for someone’s success in order to appease the envious individuals or by sharing the success fruits with the envious people…(Sutan, et al., 2009) Fourth, another related artificial mechanism or strategy for constraining envy is to maintain everyone at the same level, e.g., by leveling all incomes. (Sutan, et al., 2009) In other words, everyone is treated equal. However, when “destructive envy is not restrained and even encouraged or institutionalized individuals who innovate and have an entrepreneurial spirit are stigmatized and sometimes punished by others. The threat can prevent people from doing
something that will improve their relative position….” (Sutan, et al., 2009) As a result good workers potentials are never maximized or realized.

Impact on Organization

Hill and Bus in their research with a group of students found that, although celebrities, millionaires, and rulers may be in the most envious positions, individuals appear to reserve most of their envious feelings for those individuals with whom they directly compete in day-to-day transactions.”(Hill & Buss, 2006) This findings show that envy’s negative impact are mostly felt between colleagues working in the same organization. As a result, the organization’s performances are affected.

Envy in the workplace can have many consequences, typically dysfunctional in nature. (Bedeian, Spring 1995) Menon and Thompson found that “envy spreads negativity throughout the organization.” (Menon & Thompson, April 2010) Likewise, Michael Mitsopoulos has found in his research that there is a correlation between envy and market and institution growth. (Mitsopoulos, July 2009)

“According to equity theory, people are motivated to balance inequities through change in work inputs or work outcomes.” (Mishira, 2009) In other words, employees will regulate their performances to balance perceived or real inequities in the company. As a result, company outputs will be negatively impacted.

“Envy is above all a great waste of mental energy…envy tends to diminish all in whom it takes possession. Wherever envy comes into play, judgment is coarsened and cheapened. (Epstein, 2003) Thus, employees looses huge amount of mental energy to envy and this will diminish his performances thereby impacting the company too.
According to Jennifer Read, Envy’s Latin derivative is Individia, which means “imitation.” The effects of envy is a corporate culture that fails to innovate, and falls into the trap of imitating competitors….” (Read, April 2009) In other words, because of envy, the company strive to imitate her competitors’ successes instead of developing her own innovative strategies and products to stay ahead.

Because of envy that strained working relationships, the desire to remain at arm’s length from successful colleagues leads to missed opportunities and organizational inefficiency.

Menon and Thompson have found where envy breeds within the organization,

People want to learn more about ideas that come from other companies than about ideas that originate with rivals in their own organizations. The dislike of learning from inside rivals has a high organizational price. Employees instead pursue external ideas that cost more both in time (which is often spent reinventing the wheel) and in money (if they hire consultants). (Menon & Thompson, April 2010)

Besides the envious and/or the envied lower productivity output, “if the feeling of envy still persists and employee’s reaction does not change the situation, the resultant negative emotion may contribute to job withdrawal.” (Dogan & Veechio, March/April 2001)

According to Withey and Cooper, good people “leave when they are pushed out by dissatisfaction, low commitment, high voice costs, and the belief that improvement is unlikely.” (Withey & Cooper, 1989)

Mitsopoulos found that envy can have national economic impact, leaving countries impoverished. “Envy may motivate dictators and elites in some countries to block economic development not only because they want to defend their revenue… but because they want to defend their position of dominance.” (Mitsopoulos, July 2009)
WHAT IS THE SOLUTION TO ENVY?

According to I Peter 2: 1, “Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind.” This is the first step. Likewise Pastor Stanley said, “Ridding the heart of [envy] begins with taking a long, hard look in the mirror, not across the street or across the aisle. Focusing our emotion on somebody else fans the flame of [envy], focusing on our own hearts begins the process of quenching it.” (Stanley, 2006) Hence, the first step is to have an honest look at one’s own self and to get rid of anything that breeds envy.

The second step is the call for the envious person to celebrate or rejoice with the envied. Pastor Stanley prescribed, “You got to celebrate the success, size, and stuff of all those you envy. You need to go out of your way to verbally express your congratulations over their accomplishment(Stanley, 2006) Sorge asked a very pertinent rhetorical question, “If someone in our local church is suffering, it’s comparatively easy to come alongside that person and suffer with them, weep with them and comfort them. But “if one member is honored”- well that’s a different story. The test of envy is not another member suffers but when he or she is honored. Am I able to “rejoice with” that member who is honored? (Sorge, 2003) This bring to mind the words of the Apostle Paul, “And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it.” (I Corinthians 12:26, NKJV)

The Apostle Paul showed us the antidote to envy when he described in I Corinthians 13:4, “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.” In other words, we are challenged to “love those whom you hated before; esteem those whom you envied with unjust disparagements. Imitate the good, if you can follow them;
if you cannot follow them, surely rejoice with them and congratulate your better.”

(Blowers, January 2009)

One of the greatest aspects of King David’s legacy to us is how he modeled a godly response every time he met up with envy. He never avenged himself on those who envied him, even when he had opportunity. He showed us that we must honor and prefer those who envy us and we must never take our defense into our own hands.

Lewis Park beautifully describe the environment where envy can be destroyed is in the context of a Christian community. He said,

The final solution to envy is not an asylum where each of the inmates is lost in private fantasy. The final solution is a thriving community where those who live out their inner narratives “before God” ultimately experience community because God is one and God is able to orchestrate the unique energy of each individual’s experience of providence. The reign of God is a party where the elder brother of the prodigal son does in fact go inside and join the revelry (Luke 15: 11-32) (Park, Spring 2003)

In other words, it is there in the Christian community where God’s love and grace are manifested and “In him the whole building [all believers] is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit. (Ephesians 2: 21-22)
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