

Chapter 1

Comparing Ourselves to Others: Envy and Scorn Divide Us

I try to be good. But sometimes I see something and say, “Oooh, I want that.”
—Small-business owner

People tell us we are lucky, but we’ve worked really hard to make this happen.
—Same person

WE ARE constantly comparing ourselves with others, and comparison is only natural. Even dogs and chimps do it, as we will see. At the same time, comparisons divide and depress us by making us envy those above us and discount those below us. So why do we persist in making comparisons? Could we harness this tendency so that some good comes of it?

Chrissie and Steve own a coffeehouse in a small town in rural western New England. When they took over from the previous owners, the business needed paint, ran at unreliable hours, and carried unpredictable offerings. Fresh out of college and full of energy, the new owners turned the coffeehouse into a thriving business, now frequented by both locals who drink regular coffee and second-homers whose drink orders require more adjectives (for example, “a triple, skim, foamy, extra-hot cappuccino, in my travel mug”). Chrissie and Steve love all of their customers, but they live in a two-tier economy. Most of the locals work two jobs, and many of the local young people join the military for the pay and benefits. Second homes are common among the visiting flatlanders, and few of their children join the military. The locals are justifiably proud of their town, their history, and their dedication, and the visitors are justifiably proud as well, but their satisfaction runs more to individual accomplishment than to community ties. Although most encounters between the locals

and the second-homers are polite—with annoying exceptions of course—they remain divided into these two tiers.

Americans both recognize and minimize class distinctions. We pit Main Street against Wall Street, elites against the honest working people, lazy freeloaders against the deserving poor. The tensions generated by these distinctions have always occupied center stage during election years, but increasingly they pervade our society as it becomes ever more class-divided. The gaps between the top and bottom parts of the income distribution are wider than ever. We have become segregated by social class almost as much as by race, and because social class prejudices are less taboo than those based on race, religion, and gender, we often express social class biases without a second thought. What is more, the latest research reveals that status prejudices of all kinds—not just social class but any status dimension that pits people against each other, one up and one down—are prevalent and persistent in our society. All these observations underlie this meditation on comparison and how it divides us.

What, Me Worry?

For years, my collaborators and I have been studying how people form impressions up and down the status hierarchy. People's ordinary lives require forming efficient and effective impressions of incredible numbers of other individuals. Where is the pattern in this daily social challenge? In examining how people make sense of each other, both individuals and groups, my colleagues and I have discovered two apparently universal dimensions that differentiate people.¹ For regular people, researchers, and policymakers alike, these two fundamental dimensions organize the psychology of everyday social cognition: one is status (our focus here), and the other is intent to cooperate or not (providing the backdrop for people who do or do not trust each other, regardless of status differences).

Walking down a dark alley, you spot an approaching figure. What is the first thing you want to know? If you are a sentry, you cry out, "Halt! Who goes there? Friend or foe?" You need to know the stranger's intentions, for good or ill. If the person seems to be on your side—a friend—you assume that the person is trustworthy, friendly, and sincere. If the stranger seems like a foe, however, then you probably do not assume that the person has those warm traits, and indeed you may wonder whether the person has some bad ones besides. We decide who is on our side by knowing who intends to cooperate or compete with us—that is, who has goals compatible with ours and who has zero-sum goals.

After inferring the stranger's intentions, you will want to know whether he or she can enact those intentions. After all, why does an angry bunny matter (except in the Monty Python killer-rabbit episode)? If the stranger can act effectively, his or her intentions will matter to you. Curiously—and this is the key point—we decide who matters, that is, who can act effec-

Table 1.1 The BIAS Map: Stereotypes of Warmth (Friend-Foe) and Competence (Status)

	Low-Status– Incompetent	High-Status– Competent
Friend-warm (friendly, trustworthy)	Disabled people, older people	Middle-class people, Americans
Foe-cold (hostile, exploitative)	Poor people, addicts, homeless people	Rich people, professionals

Source: Author's compilation based on Fiske et al. (2002); Fiske, Cuddy, and Glick (2007).

tively, by knowing their status. Worldwide, people believe that high status confers competence (hard to believe sometimes when we consider some of the buffoons in charge.²) But in theory and usually in practice, we believe in meritocracy and think that other people generally deserve what they get. All over the world, high-status people, those who hold down prestigious jobs and have achieved economic success, are assumed to be more competent than low-status people. Amy Cuddy, Peter Glick, and I have developed these ideas into the BIAS Map shown in table 1.1.

The distinctions matter because they divide us from each other in our everyday encounters, whether in a New England village, Chicago's Gold Coast, the beaches of Waikiki, or anywhere in between. We have strong feelings about clusters of people in society. As shown in the top half of table 1.1, many of us feel pride about iconic middle-class Americans. On the other hand, we pity disabled people and older people. Although these reactions can disturb us, they mostly reflect benign intentions because these are all people who are on our side, whether they are allegedly competent (middle class, American) or allegedly not (older, disabled).

More bothersome is the bottom half of the BIAS Map. We all too often envy the rich and scorn the poor. Neither is an admirable reaction, but both are all too natural. These comparisons up and down the status system divide us from each other. What is most disturbing is that we persist in denying what ails us.

Americans Minimize Status Distinctions, So Aren't We All Equal?

Americans are famously egalitarian. Our founding documents confirm that we share equal starting points and equal rights to pursue happiness. Yet the reality is that we are less equal than we think we are. Americans are deeply divided by class and status.

After this chapter, the rest of the book focuses on more personal status divides, based in the everyday comparisons that bother us, from the hierarchies at work to the better bodies seen at the gym to the threatening

comparisons we make in close relationships. To get a good look at status in the big picture, let's start with the taboo topic of social class.

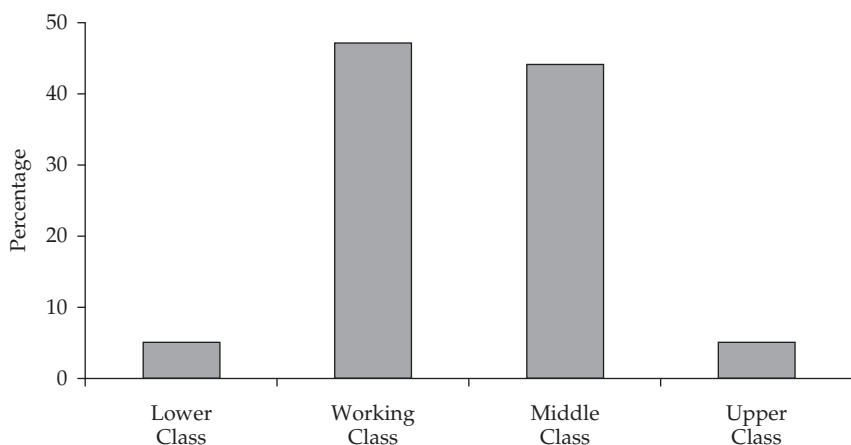
Aren't We All Middle Class?

We boast that we live in a classless society. In the United States, "the overwhelming majority of people identify themselves as 'middle class,'" according to no less than Bill Keller, executive editor of the *New York Times*.³ Informally, sociologists agree: many of us believe this received wisdom. That most Americans identify as middle class both reassures us that we are not a class-obsessed society and leads us to believe that we have escaped Europe's divisive class-conscious ideology. Two-thirds of us do not believe in strong class conflict.⁴ We minimize social class by trusting the middle class; 75 percent of us say that "most [middle-class people] can be trusted," unlike our beliefs about other named groups (for example, health maintenance organizations net only 20 percent trust).⁵ We trust familiar middle-class occupations (83 percent trust teachers, 76 percent small-business owners, 68 percent coaches, and 66 percent ministers) more than we trust people in general (only 41 percent). And we trust the middle class much more than CEOs (23 percent), lawyers (25 percent), and car dealers (16 percent). As the novelist Richard Russo put it in his study of small-town status systems, "The middle . . . was the real America, the America that mattered, the America that was worth fighting wars to defend."⁶ We all believe that Middle Class-R-U-S.

There is only one problem with this belief: the "we are all middle class" truism is not exactly true. "The myth of a classless society . . . is itself a myth," observes *Harper's* magazine editor Roger Hodge.⁷ To make his point, Hodge lists about one hundred terms in common usage, A-to-Y if not A-to-Z, from "artsy" and "blue-collar" to "wrong side of the tracks" and "yuppie." For decades, Americans have identified themselves about equally as "working class" and "middle class" (45 to 49 percent each) when pollsters provide these options along with "upper class" and "lower class" (see figure 1.1).⁸

In surveys, "middle class" still fails to describe fully half of us, so we cannot easily agree with Bill Keller's claim that the "overwhelming majority" of Americans identify as middle class. None of the polls in standard survey databases show most of us identifying as middle class. Nevertheless, we cannot help but believe that this myth deserves to be true. How did we come to this belief?

Maybe the origins of the "we are all middle class" myth trace back to the early days of polling, before World War II, when Gallup once asked the question about social class with a nice symmetrical list of possible answers—lower, lower-middle, middle, upper-middle, and upper class—that produced a lovely bell curve: 6, 12, 63, 11, and 5 percent, respec-

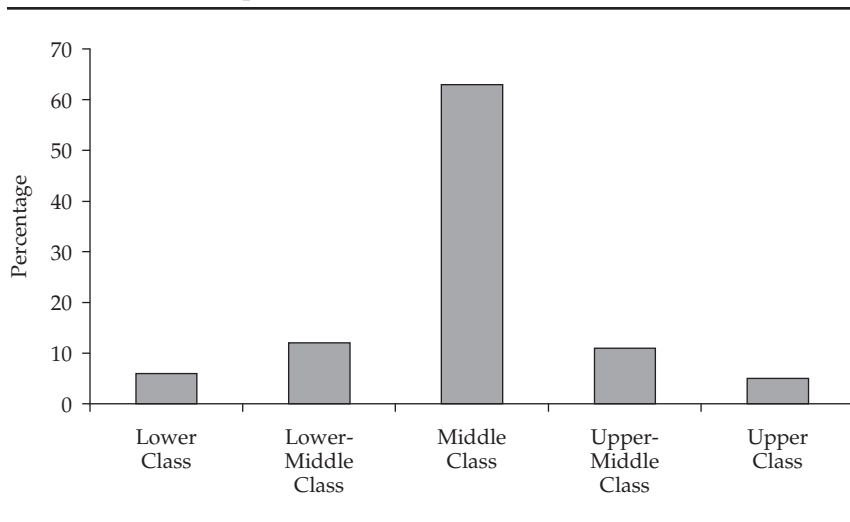
Figure 1.1 Most Commonly Self-Reported Social Class, 2000 to 2004

Source: Author's compilation based on Hout (2008) and data from General Social Survey (2000 to 2004).

tively.⁹ “Middle class” won a sizable majority, and if we collapse lower-middle, middle, and upper-middle into a generic middle, we do indeed get Keller’s “overwhelming majority” of 86 percent identifying as some version of middle class. Perhaps this is the result underlying the urban myth, but it has been holding on, evidence-free, for an average pollster’s lifetime. After 1939, Gallup and every other survey started tinkering, and pollsters soon agreed that “working class” sounded better than “lower-middle class,” so that term was never used again (see figure 1.2). One thing remains constant: Americans rarely call themselves “rich” or “poor” and are reluctant to place themselves at the unqualified *upper* or *lower* extremes.¹⁰

If in fact we have not been democratically middle class since early last century, how do we decide where we belong? In researching their essay collection, *Class Matters*, *New York Times* writers finally settled the class hand we’re dealt as including four suits: income, wealth, education, and occupation.¹¹ As *Times* writers Janny Scott and David Leonhardt put it, face cards in three suits can land you in the upper-middle class, just as 2s and 3s in several suits can demote you, so no one suit is necessary and sufficient.¹² Family income is the most important factor in our sense of social class, with occupation close behind, according to Hout’s data and going back to the earliest surveys.¹³ Because we decide what class we are based on income and occupation, we are just as likely to identify as “working class” as “middle class” on surveys, contrary to received wisdom.

Figure 1.2 The Last Middle-Class-Centered Bell Curve:
Self-Reported Social Class



Source: Author's compilation based on data from Gallup Organization, poll 150 (1939).

Not only do we not feel predictably middle class, but Americans certainly lack the “passionate middle-class” consciousness of Europeans, according to Louis Hartz: “A triumphant middle class . . . can take itself for granted.”¹⁴ In Hartz’s classic account, the American colonies had neither church canon nor feudal law to overthrow. The colonists had neither a uniform religion, having emigrated to protect the religious freedom of many small refugee sects, nor a hereditary nobility, having imported none. Alexis de Tocqueville observed that Americans were “born equal without having to become so.”¹⁵

More recent research also suggests that Americans are not strongly invested in social class identities. In ethnographic interviews, blue-collar people rarely talk spontaneously about class in daily life, though they do discuss race, immigrants, religion, region, and extreme wealth or poverty.¹⁶ In general, Americans do not overwhelmingly insist on a middle-class identity because they do need not to.

If We’re Not All Middle Class, Whatever Happened to the American Dream?

If claiming middle-class status does not unite us, at least the American Dream does. Right? Yes. We are nearly unanimous (85 percent of us) about what the American Dream means: at a minimum, having high-quality health care and being able to feed yourself and your family. But most of us

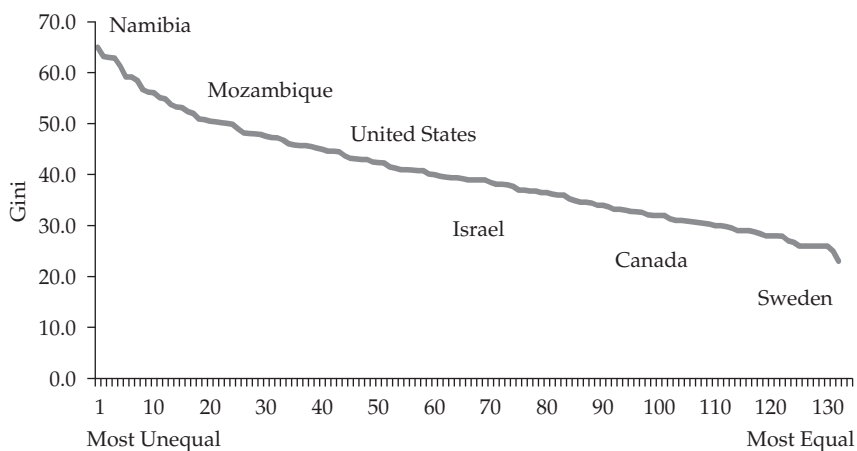
also think of loftier things as part of the American Dream, such as educational opportunities and freedom of speech.¹⁷ Our shared American Dream embraces inspiring values such as having freedom and opportunity and prioritizing our children's future, but not necessarily materialistic values such as personally becoming rich or even middle class.¹⁸

It is a good thing that money does not embody the American Dream because wealth and income divide us more than ever. Americans are less equal now than at any point in the last fifty years, as noted by Isabel Sawhill and Sara McLanahan.¹⁹ In our current "gilded era," CEO incomes average 185 times the average worker's income, compared with a mere 24-fold when many of those CEOs were in high school forty years ago. Over the last thirty years, the *after-tax* income of the super-rich (the top 1 percent) increased 129 percent, while the income of the lower class (the bottom fifth) increased only 4 percent. More concretely, in 2008 the bottom fifth received 3 percent of all household income, whereas the top fifth received a full 50 percent, according to the Census Bureau's current population report.²⁰

To cut through all these numbers, economists have developed a single-number measure of income inequality that predicts a lot else about a country. The Gini index goes from 0, a utopia of perfectly equal sharing of income, to 100, a dystopia of perfect inequality where one person holds all the income. Over the last decade, the United States has hovered around 47; the median has been the more-equal Israel at 39, the most equal has been Sweden at 23, and the least equal has been Namibia at 71. Mozambique represents the twenty-fifth percentile (very unequal) and Canada the seventy-fifth (very equal). Most of the unequal countries are less developed, and most of the more equal countries are highly developed. But the United States, flanked by Uruguay and Cameroon—not our typical comparisons—ranks almost among the least-equal third of countries (see figure 1.3).²¹ Around World War II, we were in the middle of the pack, but now our inequality outstrips all other developed countries.²²

We are a land of inequality; the American rich are far richer than the rest of us. Are we a land of opportunity—or at least status mobility? Most of us are never going to rise from our current location, according to mobility statistics. Men's incomes substantially reflect the incomes of their fathers.²³ In a different route to the same outcome, women's incomes depend critically on their husbands, and they tend to marry men whose income resembles their father's, so women's incomes also are substantially stable over generations.²⁴

The stability story is similar for jobs. Relative to their father's occupational prestige, only about one-third of sons rise above it, while one-third maintain it and one-third sink below it.²⁵ On the two common measures, income and occupation, American occupational mobility at best matches the world averages, and our actual earned-income mobility is much

Figure 1.3 Gini Inequality Ranks by Country

Source: Author's compilation based on data from Central Intelligence Agency (2010; see note 21, this volume).

lower. Contrary to our collective delusion, we are not leading the pack on opportunity.

So if the American Dream is not so devoted to material wealth as stereotype would have it, and if most of us cannot get rich anyway, we are clearly divided by our resources. What, if anything, unites us? Let's go back to the inspiring but elusive link of shared ideology: opportunity.

People Get the Class They Deserve

It is our national orthodoxy that America is the land of opportunity. According to a pivotal survey by James Kluegel and Eliot Smith, Americans' stable consensus endorses an opportunity syllogism:

- (a) Assuming equal opportunity, then
- (b) people get what they deserve, and
- (c) the system is fair.²⁶

The first step, *equal opportunity as a shared assumption*, wins a full 70 to 88 percent agreement, whether in 1952, 1966, or 1980.²⁷ More recent Gallup data show certainty declining from the peak of 77 percent who were satisfied with the level of opportunity in the United States in 2002 to 57 percent in 2009, but that still represents a comfortable majority.²⁸ Despite war and recession, Americans continue to believe that opportunity is available to almost anyone who works hard. Collectively, ensuring opportunity itself matters to twice as many of us (66 percent) as reducing actual inequality

(28 percent).²⁹ Nearly everyone (87 percent) thinks “our society should do what is necessary to ensure that everyone has an equal opportunity.”³⁰ Opportunity is our mantra.

The second step in our opportunity logic is that *people get what they deserve*. If opportunity arises only for those who work hard, then effort determines economic fate. We presumably control our own efforts, and when we have control we are not innocent victims of circumstances. Indeed, common explanations for poverty and wealth often blame the victim and credit the victor. About half of us (47 percent) blame people’s poverty on their lack of effort, whereas the other half of us (48 percent) blame poverty on circumstances beyond poor people’s control.³¹ At the other end of the spectrum, about half of us (54 percent) say that people who make a lot of money deserve it, whereas the other half of us (45 percent) disagree. A later section discusses this in more detail, but for now assume that at least half of us subscribe to the syllogism’s second step.

Consistent with the common idea that people get what they deserve, poor people around the world are viewed as intrinsically incompetent, whereas rich people are viewed as competent, according to data collected by Amy Cuddy, myself, and our international collaborators.³² What is more, poor people are especially blamed. As Ann Marie Russell shows, observers judge poor people more than rich people on their work ethic.³³ This pattern typifies what social psychologists call a controllable stigma. People with HIV/AIDS are blamed more if they contracted the disease through casual sex than if it was transmitted through a blood transfusion. If you bring about your own misfortune, others are angry with you and do not want to help you. On the other hand, if the misfortune seems to be beyond your control (caused by circumstances), others feel pity for you and do help, according to Bernard Weiner’s decades of research.³⁴ Indeed, the poor are pretty much universally seen as deserving their fates because they are lazy, immoral, and stupid.³⁵ We are particularly concerned about explaining bad outcomes, so it is poor people especially who provoke this kind of attributional gymnastics. But explanations for wealth also tend to credit the rich for their status. In short, meritocracy ensures that people seem to deserve their fates.

Undeniably, our belief in meritocracy is of two minds. How far we take it depends, first, on domain: we endorse meritocracy most highly in the economic sphere, where we tolerate inequality according to merit. In her interviews with both rich people and poor people, Jennifer Hochschild found that rich and poor both resist inequality in politics and social settings, where everyone should be equal. But they tolerate inequality in economic spheres because it merely expresses the value of effort.³⁶ Michèle Lamont’s interviews with the upper-middle class also distinguish between the economic sphere, which values competence and ambition, and the social sphere, which values friendliness and teamwork.³⁷ So we are of two minds about meritocracy, depending on domain.

Admittedly, we may be ambivalent *within* the economic domain. At the same time that we expect poor people to take individual responsibility for themselves, at least half of us also understand bad luck. For example, fully 56 percent of polled Americans view homeless people as victims of circumstances beyond their control.³⁸ Still, a popular alternative view (38 percent) holds them responsible for their situation. Earlier, we saw that half of us blame poor people in general and half do not. On balance, we say *both* individual and circumstantial causes of poverty are “very important.”³⁹ Most of us (85 percent) refuse to say explicitly that poor people somehow “deserve” to be poverty-stricken,⁴⁰ and 61 percent of us think that poor people work but cannot earn enough money.⁴¹ On surveys, our consensus on individual responsibility coexists with our support for social responsibility.⁴²

In our preferences, we compromise between an economic system that efficiently rewards individual effort (high incomes should serve as incentives) and one that provides income equality (incomes should be more equal).⁴³ Especially under the meritocracy that we all endorse, we not only show social responsibility toward the poorest but also reward individual effort. In answering the pollsters, we value opportunity and individual responsibility, although these values are tempered by social concern. All this supports our consensus that people mostly get what they deserve—the opportunity syllogism’s second step.

Now we arrive at the syllogism’s final step. Assuming equal opportunity and people getting what they deserve, *the current system is fair*: people succeed or fail according to their intrinsic merit. This assumption flies in the face of the evidence we have just seen that economic inequality is on the rise and upward mobility is at a standstill.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, by the syllogism’s meritocratic logic, the system is fair and people get what they deserve by individual effort.⁴⁵ If so, then we should admire elites because they represent everything we value; they deserve their prestigious status. But do we admire them?

If Meritocracy Rules, Why Do We Hate Elites?

During the 2008 presidential election season, “elite” was everyone’s favorite insult. Hillary Clinton hurled the term “elitist” at Barack Obama after he said that small-town Pennsylvanians, frustrated by economic inequality, “get bitter, they cling to their guns or religion or antipathy.”⁴⁶ “Elitist” usually appears alongside “out of touch,” as it did in Clinton’s critique. Obama countered, “No, I’m in touch.”⁴⁷

When Politico.com asked John McCain how many homes he owned, he could not answer; later estimates ranged from four to eight.⁴⁸ McCain’s campaign countered that Obama’s “mansion” had four fireplaces and a wine cellar. Obama’s campaign responded that his single mother had used food stamps when he was young. When McCain’s campaign replied that Obama’s income had cleared \$4 million, Obama’s defenders came

back with Cindy McCain's net worth of over \$100 million. Neither side wanted to be labeled "rich," though both were currently privileged—as was Hillary Clinton.

Clinton's campaign reminded delegates that previous Democratic nominees had been viewed as fatally out of touch. John Kerry allegedly lacked "the common touch."⁴⁹ Al Gore was just another of the "sons of privilege."⁵⁰ In a report that soon went viral, George H. W. Bush revealed his apparent ignorance about how grocery scanners work.⁵¹ Altogether, most candidates in recent presidential campaigns attended Ivy League schools, which, for many high-level jobs, might seem like a pretty good credential. But in American elections this background counts as an insult. Elites make us nervous. David Brooks of the *New York Times* notes that we want our "toffs" to lower themselves by campaigning at diners; we want Republicans to endorse Bible-belt cultural populism and Democrats to endorse working-class economic populism.⁵²

In polls, we do indeed sound like populist radicals: a stunning twice as many of us agree (versus disagree) that "inequality continues to exist because it benefits the rich and powerful."⁵³ A clear majority of us (71 percent) believe that the increasing wealth of the richest 1 percent is a "serious" or "very serious" problem.⁵⁴ Although we believe in equal opportunity, all the same, some of us seem more equal than others: most of us (63 percent) believe that upper-income people have had the greatest opportunity for financial gain.⁵⁵

Americans all know how it feels to resent elites. But do we all know how it feels to be resented? Ivy League students, when asked, mumble that they go to college "somewhere near Boston," "in Connecticut," or "in the city," because they know their Ivy identity can be a conversation stopper. As a Princeton professor, I prefer in social settings that this elite identity not be the first thing that people know about me. Professors already spend a lot of time deflecting the perception that they never work for a living. Ivy identity just makes the stereotype even worse. Most elite professionals defend their hard work, and so do most Americans, period. Americans hold up their heads when they view themselves as reflecting the mainstream values of seeking opportunity and putting in the hard work that earns results. If those efforts pay off, as one friend put it, "I don't want to be envied, but I don't mind being enviable." Deep inside, most of us believe that we are as down to earth as the next person.

Don't Look Now, but the Enemy Is US

Much as Americans may resent their elites, Americans themselves are the elite of the world. To our collective dismay, even as supposedly class-free Americans, we all risk getting a reputation as being out of touch and privileged in the global neighborhood. With our cultural belief in being a classless society and protecting opportunity, Americans feel free of arrogance,

but other countries often view us as clueless and opportunistic. Over the last decade, the Pew Global Attitudes Project has polled people in twenty-five countries on their views of the United States. We have not always fared well. In twelve countries, a majority view our economic influence as negative, and the median of the remaining countries hovers at a substantial 39 percent holding cynical views toward us.⁵⁶ In most countries (68 percent), a majority think that we do not consider their country's interests. Our influence is more often seen as negative than as positive. And these latest views are an improvement over the years of the George W. Bush administration, when the reputation of the United States was even more negative.

We run the world's most powerful economy and military.⁵⁷ This profile forces respect but does not win affection. Our power and competence are respected, but our intentions are distrusted, according to surveys of over five thousand respondents in eleven nations assembled by my collaborator, Peter Glick.⁵⁸ People in other countries view our government as competent but arrogant and cold. As a result, they report a mixture of admiration and contempt for us. This American experience of being resented as the global rich and powerful parallels the elite experience of being resented as the locally rich and powerful. While our country's high status has its advantages, it has reputational drawbacks as well.

Americans as citizens fare little better than our government; as a people, we are seen as dumber but nicer than our administration. David Brooks exaggerates this dynamic: calling us the "bimbos of the world" living *On Paradise Drive*, he notes that we are viewed as comfortable but empty.⁵⁹ Our materialism reflects our ambition, in his analysis, but we are saved from the stereotype of utter mindlessness by our utopian imagination, which keeps us focused on the future. We are driven, and our work ethic evokes both respect and resentment in global opinion. But why do other countries even care what we think, feel, and do? Why do we matter to them? Power is only part of the story.

Comparison Is Only Natural

The rewards . . . in this life are *esteem* and *admiration* of others—the punishments are *neglect* and *contempt*. . . . The desire of the esteem of others is as real a want of nature as hunger—and the neglect and contempt of the world as severe a pain as the gout or stone.

—John Adams, *Discourses on Davila* (1805), 341

People are obsessed by admiration and neglect, envy and scorn, the world over. We are divided from each other by the often correlated differences between power (resources) and status (prestige).⁶⁰ Elites within the United States and Americans in the world evoke envy and run the risk of scorning those who are less well off.

More generally, people in positions of power are vulnerable to neglecting those with less power. People without power, in contrast, focus closely on the powerful but may resent them. Just how do human beings understand the thoughts and feelings of other people who have more or less power? Does empathy allow us to understand and appreciate others despite the separations caused by individual, group, and national power differences? And when do power differences damage empathy and cause us to dehumanize each other? When do we scorn those below us and envy those above us? And what happens between us when we do?

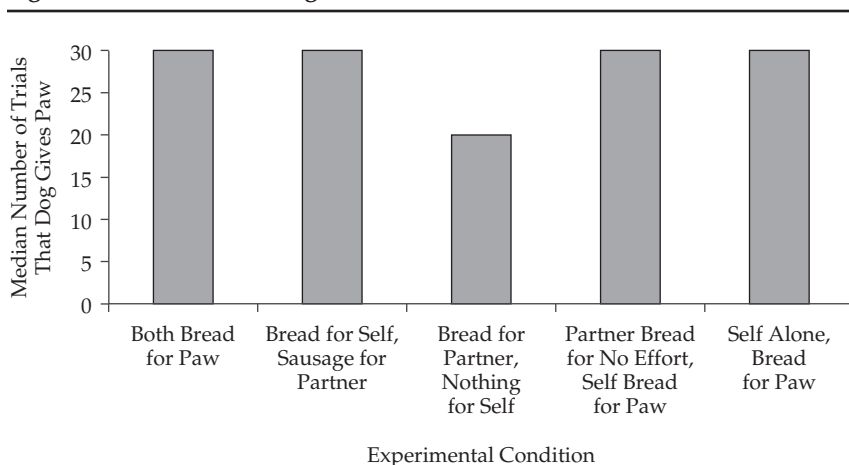
In “The Housebreaker of Shady Hill,” John Cheever describes Johnny Hake, a Westchester resident with a cash-flow problem. Just laid off and totally broke, he “had never yearned for anyone the way [he] yearned that night for money.” He envies and resents his wealthy neighbor (“rich . . . the kind of man that you would not have liked at school. He has bad skin and a rasping voice and a fixed idea—lechery. The Warburtons are always spending money, and that’s what you talk about with them”). After lifting Warburton’s loaded wallet, Hake scorns a coffee-shop customer who pockets the previous customer’s thirty-five-cent tip (“What a crook!”).⁶¹ While few of us are driven to burgle our neighbors, let alone the waitress, each of us is caught between those whose position we envy and those whose situation we scorn. We are comparison machines.

Even dogs know when another dog is getting something they themselves deserve. Friederike Range and his colleagues asked pairs of dogs to offer their paw for food rewards; the catch was that one dog received nothing after the other received a chunk of dark bread (this took place in Vienna).⁶² In the company of a rewarded partner, the cheated dog soon refused to perform for no reward. When both dogs received rewards—even if the other dog received that doggie manna, sausage, while the subject dog received only bread, or when both received bread—they cooperated. The totally unrewarded, cheated dogs showed more signs of canine distress: scratching, yawning, lip-licking, and avoiding the other dog’s gaze (see figure 1.4). Closer to humans, chimps and monkeys also monitor their peers’ relative rewards and boycott inequity, according to Frans de Waal and his colleagues.⁶³ Comparison seems only natural.

What about comparison’s side effect: envy toward those doing better than us and scorn toward those doing worse? Social psychologists have much to say about social comparison, but this book’s focus is specifically comparison’s by-products, envy and scorn. So let’s get specific, the better to decide the whether, how, who, when, and why of comparison.

Envy: I Wish That I Had What You Have (And That You Did Not)

Psychologists agree, notes Richard Smith, that envy combines hurt and anger.⁶⁴ A long-standing expert on the subject, Smith explains that a person

Figure 1.4 When Do Dogs Give a Paw?

Source: Author's adaptation of data from Range et al. (2009).

Note: The maximum number of trials was thirty.

who feels envy is experiencing an illegitimate threat to a deserving self.⁶⁵ The experience of illegitimacy provokes anger, and the threat to self creates hurt. Envy homes in on disadvantage. As Gerrod Parrott notes, envy involves seeing that another person has something you want and wishing that person did not have it because their having it makes you feel inferior.⁶⁶ Envy can be malicious when it focuses on taking something away from another person, not just obtaining it for yourself. Wanting to damage the privileged other person is the essence of envy because the envied person causes your disadvantage. Consider that paragon of envy, Shakespeare's Iago. Bypassed for the coveted post of Othello's lieutenant, Iago develops a deadly envy that catalyzes his revenge on Othello, his wife Desdemona, and his aide Cassio.⁶⁷ In wreaking havoc, Iago does not even wish to have Desdemona for himself but instead wishes to deprive Othello of her. Envy thus has both a passive side (longing) and a potentially active side (aggression).

Unfair disadvantage is irksome. Envious people resent the overprivileged person but also the fate that bestows that advantage. In his analysis of everyday reports of envy, Parrott found that we resent not only the human agent of our disadvantage but also the unfair circumstances. We say that envy means longing and frustrated desire, as well as distress over feeling inferior and anxiety over losing status.⁶⁸

Envious people sometimes are self-aware enough to feel guilty about it. Social norms frown on envy, so we are reluctant to admit to the feeling. In work on the emotions felt toward social out-groups, my colleagues and I

found that people are least willing to report envy, perhaps because to admit envy is to reveal a sense of inferiority.⁶⁹ Ironically, envy is pervasive precisely because all social systems entail inequality. Envy endures because social systems endure. As Molière observed, the envious will die, but never envy.⁷⁰ Envy survives even in our own allegedly classless American society. All kinds of social systems, not just our equality-oriented one, must condemn envy to keep the peace. An overtly class-driven society maintains stability by advising people that “knowing your place” is a humble virtue. Even in our allegedly class-free, mobility-driven society, expressing envy is bad form.

To avoid confusion, let’s agree on what envy is not. Envy is not jealousy. A jealous person fears losing a cherished personal relationship to a rival. Jealousy is more intense and more acute than envy because personal attachments change faster than the social system does. To be jealous is often to feel afraid, worried, threatened, rejected, suspicious, or betrayed, whereas the envious person more often feels inferior, ashamed, frustrated, bitter, or deprived, according to Parrott’s informants.⁷¹

Envy is also not admiration, at least not as most English speakers use the term. The Dutch, Polish, and Thai languages have a term for benign envy (“benijden,” “zazdrość,” and “it-chǎa”) that connotes emulation, inspiration, and motivation to improve.⁷² If malignant envy is “I wish you did not have what you have,” then benign envy is “I wish I had what you have.”⁷³ Sometimes people are inspired enough to admit someone else’s superiority, to admire it, and to strive to achieve it themselves. Benign envy may turn out to be part of the solution, but malicious envy is always part of the problem, as we will see.

Scorn: You Are Not Worth My Attention (And I Wish You Would Go Away)

The flip side of envy is scorn. Otherwise known as disdain, contempt, or disrespect, scorn is rarely studied, probably for two reasons. When we envy someone else, we are usually aware of it and ruminate about it; our envy bothers us. We are often unaware, however, of scorning others; precisely because scorn is thoughtless, it often does not bother us. Psychologists most often study what bothers them, and being people, they are more bothered by envy than by scorn.

Another reason psychologists do not study scorn is that it is often a matter of neglecting and ignoring someone. “Silence is the most perfect expression of scorn,” claimed George Bernard Shaw, who would know.⁷⁴ Scorn is the absence of respect, a lack of attention, a failure to consider. A failure to acknowledge another person provides evidence of scorn. In a famous story entitled “Silver Blaze,” Sherlock Holmes solves a case that hinges on “the curious incident of the dog in the night-time”: when a watchdog fails to bark at an intruder, Holmes deduces that the criminal

must be the dog's owner. In a variant on this absence-as-evidence, not only would a scornful dog not bark in alarm, but a scornful dog also would not even wag its tail in recognition.⁷⁵ Scorn is known by what it fails to do.

Political systems can create scorn: "The centrality of hierarchy suggests a link between contempt and indifference. The underling is pathetically weak, so contempt can take the form of dismissing him," according to the political theorist Don Herzog.⁷⁶ John Adams, always acutely attuned to (dis)respect, describes the shame of the poor man, who

is neglected and despised. He feels himself out of the sight of others, groping in the dark. Mankind take [sic] no notice of him. He rambles and wanders unheeded. In the midst of a crowd . . . he is not disapproved, censured, or reproached; *he is only not seen.*⁷⁷

To be sure, scorn does not stop with passive neglect. In its more active form, scorn is an aggressive wish to banish the scorned other. Thus, the scorned person does get a tiny bit of notice, but it is not good. Charles Darwin was the first scientist to describe the human facial expressions of scorn, disdain, contempt, and disgust: a sneer (uncovering the canine teeth on one side), a derisive, not-funny smile (all lips, no eye-crinkle), or a turning away ("puhleez!") all express disdain.⁷⁸ Disgust is conveyed when the muscles on the sides of the nose (the levator) are lifted; this expression wrinkles the nose, as if at a bad smell.

Paul Ekman, originator of the Facial Affect Coding System and consultant to the television program *Lie to Me*, claims that contempt is one of the very few facial expressions universally recognizable across all cultures. He describes the most common expression of contempt as a unilateral lip raise, also known as a half-smile. Contempt expressions appear reliably in certain situations, such as when we encounter "an acquaintance bragging about accomplishing something for which the acquaintance was not responsible." More generally, we express contempt when we are feeling "superior over another person, who has acted in a negative way."^{79,80}

Although we recognize contempt when the situation suggests it, contempt is a neglected emotion, in that people report expressing and encountering contempt the least of any emotions. Contempt is hardly polite. Its cousins—scorn, disdain, and disrespect—are even more rarely addressed in the social and behavioral sciences. Yet we know these emotions when we see them. And just as envy—though rarely admitted—clearly matters, so does scorn, because comparisons, both up and down, can be corrosive.

Comparison Corrupts

Keeping up is exhausting, and keeping others down has its own costs. Keeping up entails either emulating the trendsetters (benign envy) or, our

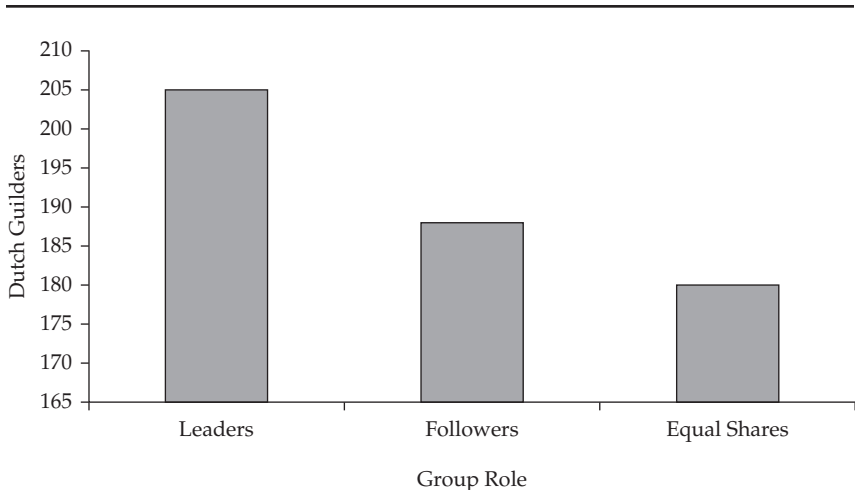
issue here, slowing them down (malignant envy). To keep others down, you must suppress them so that they know their (inferior) place. Neither process is good for your health, not to mention the health of your target. A closer look shows why.

Scorn Scars the Scornful

Powerful individuals frequently fail to be compassionate in dealing with others.⁸¹ For example, power increases exploitation, teasing, stereotyping, and even sexual harassment. Power-holders treat others instrumentally. In a study by Deborah Gruenfeld and her colleagues, some adults recalled a time when they had had power, and other adults, in a control condition, recalled a time when they had gone to the grocery store (not at all an experience of power).⁸² Writing an essay about a time when they had power reliably primed participants to act powerful: they were sensitized to self-interest, regardless of interpersonal concerns. Most people, for example, avoid a jerk (in this study, someone who had neglected to help a handicapped person); control participants avoided the jerk even when they would have made money from performing as a team. When they could make money off their monumentally unkind partner, in contrast, the power-primed participants were willing to tolerate the jerk who could benefit them. When there was no money in it for them, the power-primed participants rejected the jerk, as did the baseline control participants. The power-holders seemed perfectly willing to approach the jerk when it suited their own needs but rejected the person otherwise. Using someone this way is an expression of scorn.

Scores of studies show that power-holders act with self-serving scorn for the needs of others; in experimental games conducted by David De Cremer and Eric van Dijk, for instance, power-holders took more for themselves.⁸³ Whereas most players split profits about equally, people designated as “leaders” are more likely to appropriate the lion’s share. Leaders do the power grab especially when they feel legitimately entitled to lead, such as when leadership has been determined by a selection test—even if their position as leader actually was randomly determined by the experimenter (see figure 1.5).

Scornful power-holders are not only selfish but willfully clueless. Priming a powerful person has silly but also scary effects. Try this: Draw an upper-case letter “e” on your forehead. (If you are in public, do it in your imagination.) Which way do the “tines” of the e-fork face? Drawing the “e” so that it reads correctly from inside your head—with the tines pointing to your own right—correlates with failing to take the perspective of other people; drawing the “e” so that the tines point to your own left correlates with taking the perspective of other people outside your head. This demonstration and others come from the social psychology laboratory of Adam

Figure 1.5 Amount Allocated to Self by Designated Leaders, Followers, and an Equality Rule

Source: Author's adaptation of data from De Cremer and van Dijk (2005).

Galinsky and his colleagues.⁸⁴ Their scarier study shows that priming power makes us worse at reading other people's facial expressions. This attitude of "I couldn't care less about you" shows scorn.

Other power researchers have replicated Galinsky's priming results with people given actual power over other people.⁸⁵ In our experiments, Stephanie Goodwin, our colleagues, and I recruited students who were expecting to work with other students from various majors.⁸⁶ In this scenario, supposedly based on a Harvard Management Aptitude Scale but actually by random assignment, some students got to be "the boss" and others had to be "the assistant" on a joint task that included significant prize money as an incentive. In a preliminary management exercise, they were to judge a series of other students described only by college major and personality traits. (On campus, majors serve as shared stereotypes; consider the common images of engineers versus artists.) In their ratings, "bosses," as predicted, used their personal stereotypes about college majors more than "assistants" did. That is, they made superficial judgments. Conversely, assistants used the individually revealing personality traits more than bosses did. As in the other studies, then, these power-holders were less sensitive to others as unique individuals—yet another form of scorn.

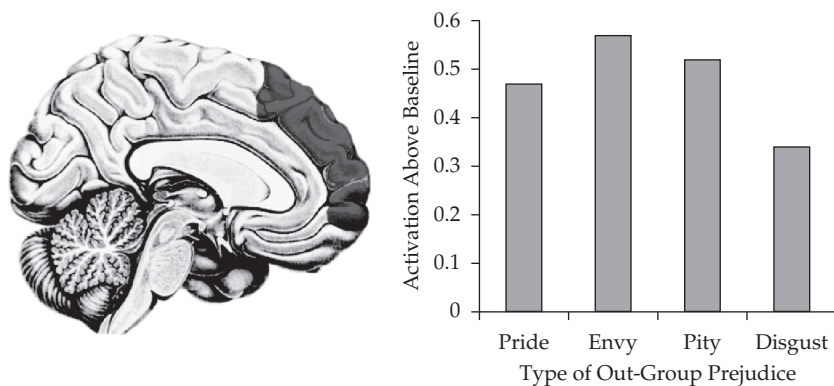
To be sure, power-holders sometimes can take responsibility for others, under the right circumstances. Power and status are always accompanied, however, by the risk of developing a scornful insensitivity to subordinates as power-holders control them, derogate them, fail to individuate them,

and undermine their agency, all the while being self-serving and instrumental.⁸⁷ Recent studies show that people induced to feel powerful develop deficits specific to understanding others' emotions and thoughts. They fail to identify others' emotional expressions, to consider others' perspectives, and to appreciate others' knowledge. Such disregard for people raises the disturbing possibility that power inhibits our ability to see others as fully human entities possessing minds; that is, power may allow scorn.

Consistent with this suggestion, people often view social out-groups as less than human, a scorn-filled judgment if ever there was one. The emotional logic runs like this: we are more human than *they* are because we have a more complex inner life. As Jacques-Philippe Leyens and his collaborators have shown, we more readily see the in-group as experiencing subtle, complex, uniquely human emotions such as love, hope, grief, and resentment.⁸⁸ Out-group members—people unlike us—seem to experience only the same simple, primitive emotions that animals do (such as happiness, fear, anger, or sadness). Viewing “them” as feeling momentarily sad but not deeply grieving over the loss of family members, for example, makes it easier to avoid worrying about their misfortunes. This infra-humanization dynamic dampened empathy in the Hurricane Katrina debacle. Generally, white and black observers reported the other-race victims as experiencing less of the uniquely human emotions (anguish, mourning, remorse). To the extent that observers did perceive those emotions, however, they were more likely to offer help.⁸⁹

Certain forms of social power reduce our ability to understand others' inner experiences (thoughts and feelings), thereby reducing our capacity for empathy and resulting in scorn directed downward. The social neuroscientist Lasana Harris and I took these ideas into the brain-scanning laboratory. Based on our lab's previous work, much of it with Amy Cuddy, we predicted that the least sympathetic, lowest-of-the-low out-groups would be homeless people and drug addicts. Look again at the BIAS Map (table 1.1). Homeless people are outliers, located the farthest from the center of society. In our survey data, they were so far away from all other social groups, along both negative dimensions, that, statistically speaking, they differed from all other humans in people's minds.⁹⁰

Brain scans confirmed precisely this pattern. How might brain patterns display scorn? Human brains have adapted beautifully to social life. The brain's social cognition network reliably activates (comes on line) when we encounter other people, especially when we are thinking about their thoughts and feelings.⁹¹ In particular, a swath of cortex curves vertically just behind the forehead (about where mystics locate the third eye, but I could be booted from social neuroscience for saying so). The medial prefrontal cortex (mPFC) lights up when we encounter people; this is our young field's most reliable finding. As a social psychologist, I love this result, which points to our neural attunement to other people.

Figure 1.6 The Medial Prefrontal Cortex (mPFC)

Source: Graph is author's compilation based on data from Harris and Fiske (2006).

Note: (Left) Shown in darker gray, the mPFC is typically the part of the brain involved in thinking about people. (Right) Levels of activation of the mPFC when exposed to people from different social groups. Alone among others, groups that elicit disgust (such as the homeless) do not activate the mPFC significantly above baseline.

However, some people do not light up our mPFC. Social groups that elicit contempt and disgust, alone among all other out-groups and in-groups, do not excite our mPFC in the way everyone else does. Harris and I built on the Fiske lab's finding that homeless people and drug addicts disgust other people—that is, people scorn them. After sliding into Princeton's scanner, our volunteers viewed dozens of photos of supposedly disgusting out-groups as well as other not-disgusting out-groups, such as older people or people with disabilities (who are pitied), rich people (who are envied), and in-groups, such as all-around Americans and college students (who inspire pride). The supposedly disgusting, most extreme out-groups failed to light up the mPFC (see figure 1.6).⁹² (This neural dog definitely did not bark.) In regular questionnaires, participants reported these supposedly disgusting out-groups to be less warm or familiar, less competent, articulate, or intelligent, and less typically human. They also reported having a harder time attributing a mind to members of these out-groups—just as the quiet mPFC would suggest—and they did not expect to interact with them.

This disgust-contempt-scorn response fits a dehumanizing neglect of the minds of certain other people. Admittedly, we not only scorn but also pity homeless and drug-addicted people, yet our pity is not as great as it is for old or disabled people. And disgust uniquely targets these social outcasts. Sadly, this unfortunate reaction is only natural. We need to avoid disgusting people and things because they often are contaminated, as Steve Neuberg and Cathy Cottrell have shown.⁹³ It makes adaptive

sense that we would avoid people who could endanger us. Cuddy's survey confirms this avoidance of disgusting out-groups: respondents reported that others will neglect and demean these lowest of the low, a kind of passive harm.⁹⁴ People also report that others will even attack them, a tragic kind of active harm that features all too often in incidents of unprovoked violence against the homeless. People in the lower left part of the BIAS Map space are allegedly "good for nothing."

When we dehumanize people, we deny them not only *typically* human attributes such as warmth and familiarity, but also *uniquely* human attributes, such as subtle emotions, articulate language, and complex minds. As in the earlier work on denying subtle emotions to out-groups, Nick Haslam describes this form of dehumanization as likening people to animals. People all over the world associate certain kinds of out-groups with animals automatically, not deliberately.⁹⁵ In a parallel reaction, people also withhold admiration and sympathy from some out-groups.⁹⁶ All these forms of dehumanization refuse to acknowledge the complex human experience of other people.

Not only are we clueless and unconscious when we scorn others, but we may also literally be making ourselves sick. According to an idea popularized in the 1970s, type A personalities, known for their driven styles, are at risk for heart disease; more recent work, however, identifies the hostility of this personality type as the main culprit. Health psychologists now blame a specific kind of hostility that is dominance-oriented.⁹⁷ This may be an extreme version of scorn. As Paul Ekman and his colleagues note, facial expressions of contempt (but not anger) relate to hostility in heart patients, a finding that supports a more focused hostility as the risk factor. If borne out, this would fit the idea that contempt or scorn is worse for your health than sheer anger itself.⁹⁸ Just as positive emotion promotes health, bitter emotions generally undermine it.⁹⁹ Although the current evidence for the link between scorn and health is admittedly tenuous, some enterprising researcher will soon demonstrate that contempt and scorn could be a major public health enemy.

A radical theory proposed by James Jackson fingers one type of scorn, namely racism, as a health risk to racists. Racial prejudice adds stress to a community as it reverberates between targets and racists, damaging the health of both.¹⁰⁰ All told, scorn can make high-status people exploitative, self-serving, insensitive, and unhealthy. Scorn scars the scornful.

Scorn Scars the Scorned

Being exploited, ignored, snubbed, and dehumanized obviously makes us unhappy—so obviously that a review of the evidence is hardly necessary. As later chapters will elaborate, ostracism and rejection are among the worst punishments that we can experience because we are such social beings. Beyond hurting and annoying, does scorn harm us in the long run?

Much circumstantial evidence does implicate racism as harming the health of its targets. The evidence often has to count as circumstantial because most of it shows a correlation at one moment in time. Most likely, being hassled about your race—in daily annoyances, in major life events, or in actual risks to life and limb—creates stress that undermines health. But we cannot conduct an experiment to establish causal direction, and to my knowledge the effects over time have not yet been documented, so we have to allow the possibility that stressed or irritable people more often evoke or perceive racism. Still, the racism-stress linkage seems likely.¹⁰¹

Being the target of any kind of stigma—marked for society’s scorn—endangers health.¹⁰² Involuntary physiological responses to stress can undermine heart health and immune function, whether in people or in primates.¹⁰³ Scorn can make its targets sick. Dehumanization damages all concerned, so scorn hardly seems adaptive.

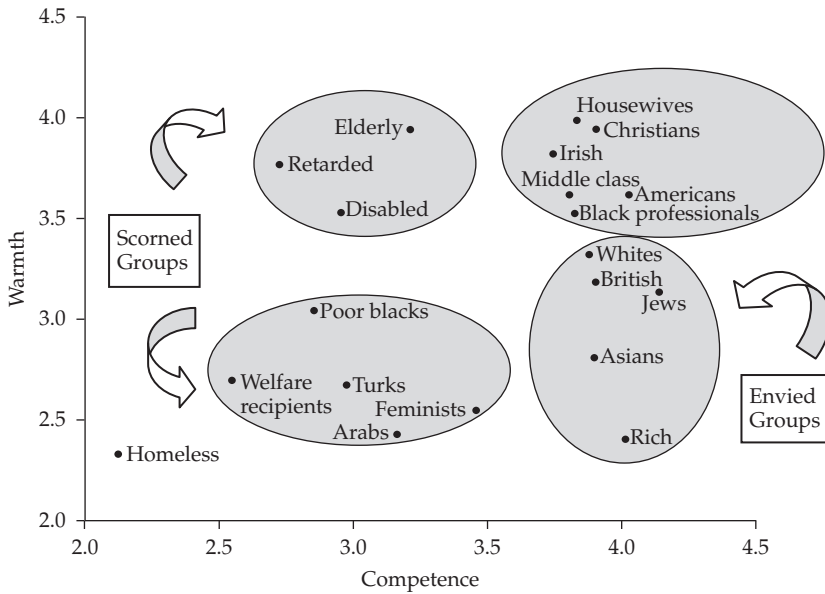
Envy Harms the Envied

What about envy, which is directed upward? While being envious of high-status, allegedly exploitative people might not seem important, in fact our feelings toward higher-status groups and individuals can catalyze a volatile mix of reactions toward those we grudgingly respect but dislike.

In Haslam’s system, a unique kind of dehumanization targets envied groups: they are denied the *typically* human attributes, such as warmth and sociality. These cold but effective out-groups are likened to robots. Perceived as threatening because they seem like automatons, out-groups dehumanized in this way are not so much disgusting as chilling. Think cyborgs. Businesspeople and their paraphernalia, from briefcases to suits, are associated in our minds with automatons, from androids to software.¹⁰⁴ On the downside, we link both businesspeople and robots to being cold, conservative, heartless, and shallow, though we acknowledge that they are also organized, polite, and thorough. What both CEOs and computers are *not* is typically human: curious, friendly, sociable, and fun-loving.

In our own work we have found that members of ethnic groups who succeed as entrepreneurs (Jews, Asians) and subordinate out-group members who succeed as professionals (middle-class blacks, career women) fall into this ambivalent space, eliciting envy and resentment. Society views them as sacrificing their humanity to get ahead, a finding that parallels the chilling cyborgs of Haslam’s system. In surveys, people report that members of these groups—often seen as rich—are cold but competent.¹⁰⁵ These particular out-groups also provoke more envy than other groups do. People in the lower right part of the BIAS Map are allegedly not on our side, but their competence makes them threatening (see figure 1.7).

The volatility of our mixed reactions to envied groups is dangerous. Envied groups are especially targeted when we make the common assump-

Figure 1.7 Envied Groups and Scorned Groups

Source: Author's adaptation of Cuddy, Fiske, and Glick (2007).

tion that they are conspiring. All too often we assume that the powerful are in cahoots to carry out their dangerous intents, that they are all of one evil mind. Recall that canard, "the Jews control the banking industry." In one study, Eric Dépret and I simulated a situation in which those in power hold all the cards and they all hang together, so that one feels helpless to influence them. In this scenario, undergraduates came into a study where they could earn money for their performance under the distraction typically inflicted by roommates. The distracters had either more or less power (they could interfere a little or a lot), and they came either from one college major (they were in cahoots) or from several majors (they were unlikely to conspire). Faced with a uniform bunch of high-powered math majors, psychology majors felt more unhappy and threatened than they did when dealing with a motley high-powered group comprising a math major, an art major, and a business major.¹⁰⁶ They perceived high-status outsiders as having minds, but cold, calculating, threatening, conspiring minds. In the worst case, such a perception would justify the elimination of a high-status group as a threat to "us."

When envy entails anger and resentment, it harms the envied other. At a societal level, people who report both envy and anger toward privileged

groups also report a greater tendency toward harming them.¹⁰⁷ At the individual level, envied out-groups are subject to *schadenfreude* (malicious glee at their misfortunes) and aggression.¹⁰⁸

Envy Eats at the Envious

In daily life, we all too easily blame the powerful. To explain their financial challenges, low-wage workers blame powerful institutions, such as government (blamed “some or “a lot” by 74 percent) and corporate America (64 percent), at least as often as they blame themselves (63 percent) and far more often than they blame fate (29 percent) or discrimination (30 percent).¹⁰⁹ Many of us blame the political system for the gap between low- and high-income Americans (63 percent).¹¹⁰ Feelings about inequality poison trust, and loss of trust, in turn, undermines participation in the local community.¹¹¹ Blaming the powerful arguably undermines our feelings of control, a loss that is well known to jeopardize health. Envy endangers the envious.¹¹²

Envy expert Richard Smith and his colleagues convincingly detail a “witch’s brew” of ways in which envy may make us sick.¹¹³ First, frustration is a component of envy, which is all about unresolved wanting, with an overlay of felt injustice. Giving in to the tendency to dwell on such grievances can undermine our well-being. Second, envy is self-destructive in that resentment, shame, and hostility can motivate us to hurt others, even at the risk of harming ourselves. For example, some people are willing to forgo personal profits if they can bring down the target of their envy. Third, envy damages close relationships that might otherwise provide an antidote to misery. Envy makes us feel inferior and probably prickly about receiving help or expressing gratitude.

Added to all these psychological risks is the totally scary low-status syndrome. Low status demands a vigilant attention to those with higher status, and this vigilance compromises health. Here’s why. Single-shot, acute reactions to temporary threats benefit from the body’s short-term stress responses, which ordinarily calm down after the danger has passed. If the body’s stress system stays on prolonged alert, however, as it does for people who are constantly vigilant, mental and physical health are damaged.¹¹⁴

As it keeps the nervous system on alert, with downstream risk to the cardiovascular and immune systems, vigilance becomes costly. Low-status people incur the costs of vigilance for good reason. People are chronically watchful when their lives feel out of control. Indeed, this is the cost of being lower in the hierarchy and looking up all the time at those who control one’s fate. Consistent with this analysis, men’s social class predicts their heart disease risk; in pathbreaking work, Michael Marmot and his colleagues, surveying the Whitehall sample of British civil servants, show that the risk rises with the experience of not having

enough control at work.¹¹⁵ Besides lack of control as a risk factor, negative emotions are implicated in this finding, because resentment, hostility, anxiety, hopelessness, and cynicism (emotions related to envy) underlie the harms wrought by loss of control.¹¹⁶

Envy may be worse than other negative emotions because lack of control automatically comes with it. Keeping up with the better-off requires constant effort and attention. The novelist Richard Russo illustrates:

My father had had a pretty good idea of our relative circumstances [compared with the neighbor family]. What had the Marconis acquired? How big were the economic strides they had taken? How much had those strides been offset by two more little Marconis? They were still renting, which meant something, but maybe they were saving for a down payment on a house. Were they close or still years away? My father had an inquiring mind.

Only peers doing slightly better are of interest:

You don't identify with people worse off than you are. You make your deals, if you can, with those who have more, because you hope one day to have more yourself. Understand that . . . and you understand America.¹¹⁷

The upward comparison of envy stresses people more than downward comparison does. The social neuroscientist Wendy Berry Mendes and her colleagues paired undergraduates in a cooperative word game.¹¹⁸ After meeting face to face, each participant completed the task alone; a random half of the participants then learned (falsely) that they had outperformed their partner, and the other random half learned that they had underperformed their partner. When participants had to work with their higher-ranked partner, their cardiovascular activity indicated an unmanageable threat, but when participants worked with their lower-ranked partner, their cardiovascular activity showed a more controllable challenge response.

Envy is more than upward comparison. The resentful vigilance of envy imports hostility, which, as noted, is a known risk factor in heart disease. Just as a specific type of hostility may explain the effect of scorn on health, so too a hostility subtype is likely to explain envy's corrosive effects on health.¹¹⁹ Hostile submission describes someone whose felt inferiority simmers with resentment. This condition also carries cardiovascular risks.

Mental health as well as physical health is at risk when we envy another. Across laboratory and real-world work groups, lower status creates performance anxiety.¹²⁰ Low levels of power specifically impair the mind's executive control functions: updating, concentrating, and planning.¹²¹ Thus, knowing that we sit below others—the situation conducive to envy—can impair our minds. In response, lower-status groups often specifically seek respect and care less about affection.¹²² But their ability to earn respect is precisely endangered by the dynamics of resentment

toward those on the rung just above their own rung on the social ladder. These dynamics undermine the very performance that might gain the desired respect. Envy eats the envious.

If Envy and Scorn Are So Toxic, How Prevalent Is Their Poison?

Status is everywhere, as the rest of this book will show. Creatures from orangutans to organizations arrange themselves in hierarchies.¹²³ This process is so basic that we automatically judge the dominance of another individual in a fraction of a second, using certain cues, such as physical strength.¹²⁴ Within close relationships, we compare and compete, ranking ourselves relative to each other, despite the damage this can do.¹²⁵ All known organizations gravitate toward status and power hierarchies because this structure makes them run more smoothly.¹²⁶ At the macro level, human societies stratify social groups by dominance hierarchies, especially social class.¹²⁷

Despite Americans' insistence on egalitarianism, opportunity, and classlessness, "there is an un-American secret at the heart of American culture: for a long time it was [and is] preoccupied by class."¹²⁸ As this chapter suggests, we like to think that we minimize class distinctions in the United States, but we attend to class more than we think. We do not overwhelmingly identify as one big happy, homogeneous middle class. Instead, we are acutely aware of class distinctions, and we endorse the opportunity syllogism, which suggests that people attain the class status they deserve. We deride elites as out of touch, but we do not notice that we are the elites of the world. Comparison is a fact of social life.

All men compare themselves with others. . . . Nature has ordained it, as a constant incentive to activity and industry, that, to acquire the attention and complacency, approbation and admiration of their fellows, men might be urged to constant exertions . . . to produce something.¹²⁹

John Adams, as usual, was on to something about comparison. Social comparison, especially upward, is universal. Even dogs and chimps do it. Where there is ubiquity, there are arguments for evolutionary adaptiveness. Perhaps in the competition to survive and thrive, humans must notice and be motivated by gaps between themselves and others who are doing slightly better.¹³⁰ Sarah Hill and David Buss argue that we have a "positional bias" that shows us our rank relative to relevant others. From this, upward envy alerts us to our rivals' advantages and motivates us to compete. Most societies condemn envy, as a "disturber of the peace."¹³¹ Nonetheless it persists.

Downward-directed scorn, likewise condemned, lurks on the other side of the comparison. "There is not in Human Nature a more odious

Disposition, than a Proneness to Contempt," according to the novelist Henry Fielding.¹³² We spontaneously express but rarely admit to feeling contempt and scorn. In close relationships, contempt is a killer, as is fear of contempt. Outside the home, we distance ourselves from our underlings by ignoring them and discounting their full humanity. Societies urge pity for those who are worse off, and we do pity certain unfortunates, but only those who have landed at the bottom through no fault of their own. Otherwise, under meritocracy, they deserve their fate and are beneath consideration.

Where We Go from Here

Is this just a grim litany of the inevitable? Not if we understand that we cannot change what we do not understand. Pulling envy and scorn out from the untamed undergrowth allows us to recognize them in our society, in our relationships, and in ourselves. Human nature makes status distinctions, and comparison will never go away, so we are better off understanding it. Perhaps both individual lives and society as a whole will be improved by removing the taboo from these topics.

In chapter 2, a closer look will reveal the particular neural, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral signatures of envy and scorn. Both regular people and scientists have systems for detecting these revealing reactions and have, in effect, everyday working definitions of them.

Then chapter 3 explores the scope of envy and scorn. Who experiences them the most, and who does not? Which individuals and groups act out these comparisons the most? And where have people been most prone to comparison? What cultures most display these dynamics?

To explain *why* humans compare themselves, each of the next chapters focuses on one of the various practical consequences of comparison: We compare in order to inform ourselves about where we stand. We compare to protect our self-esteem. We compare to identify ourselves with our peer group, those others who are similarly situated.

All these dynamics tell us when we are likely to compare ourselves to others, envying up and scorning down. Envy and scorn both have warmer siblings, which hint at alternative scenarios. Understanding these dynamics can inspire us to be more self-aware, more socially aware, and more culturally aware. Perhaps we can harness this understanding to move beyond our affinity for comparison.