

# Defining the relationship between gender and envy and providing possible explanations for gender envy

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## Abstract

While the study of envy has been an abundant area for psychological research as of late, there are still plenty of new questions being posed each day. Envy within the context of gender is a topic with plenty of nuance concerning its origin, as well as a multitude of implications for day-to-day life. Coinciding with the rise of scientific interest in envy, growing usage of social media has also provided a place for experiences previously undiscussed to become points of discourse and be used as new terms. One such instance is gender envy, a term for which neither previous research nor its users are clear on its properties. Gender envy is usually described as referring to the transgender experience of envy towards a gender they are transitioning to. However, envy within and between the genders has been found with interesting functional implications. With that in mind, the aim of this paper is to define what envy consists of and how it is formed as well as how it can be discerned from other emotions, such as admiration and resentment. In addition, it analyses the relationship between gender and envy as well as the functional reasons for envy's existence, primarily through an evolutionary lens, and touches upon the behavior envy leads to. Finally, it discusses possible explanations for gender envy in the context of transgender individuals and provides areas for further research.

Keywords: envy, gender, gender envy, transgender

## Introduction

Envy has always been the subject of great fear, historically and within popular culture (Lindholm, 2008). As one of the “seven sins”, its detriment to our well-being has long since been acknowledged. Cultural importance has also been placed on avoiding being either the victim or the perpetrator, as can be seen with the evil eye (Lindholm, 2008) and with fairytales such as Cinderella (Belk, 2011). Although it has existed in the cultural zeitgeist for centuries, its meaning has become tainted in the modern times, and its usage commonly interchanged with jealousy. However, as psychology developed, it soon became a source for speculation and thankfully, with time, empirical research. Simultaneously, as feminism gained steam and research started focusing on both male and female participants, theories began to develop regarding the differences in envy between the genders. The idea of envying another gender reaches back over a century, most famously presented by Freud as penis envy, where women create an “unconscious equivalence” between penis and baby (Freud, 1917, as cited in Burke, 2014). While envy, in the context of gender, has primarily been studied as women envying women and men envying men, there has been new research focusing on cross-gender envy. There is also the added factor of social media, which opened up spaces where marginalized people can freely discuss their experiences and identities, some of those including the LGBTQ+ community. This discourse has brought about new terms and concepts, previously unexplored by psychologists, simultaneously providing possible new areas of research. One of those is gender envy. Gender envy is a relatively new term “primarily used by transgender people to describe an individual they aspire to be like” that “often refers to having envy for an individual’s expression of gender” (PFLAG, 2024, Gender envy definition). It is a concept common on social media and in queer spaces, with most of the discourse regarding gender envy focusing on the specific people who are targets of this envy. However, it is still unclear what gender envy consists of. One of the recurring, core issues is simply defining gender envy, differentiating it from admiration, and explaining why it occurs. All of the previously mentioned areas of research pertaining to envy, as well as the rise in psychological interest towards previously marginalized groups, including transgender individuals, has created the conditions and the need for an overview and possible explanations of gender envy.

With that in mind, this article will explain envy and its characteristics, also focusing on the subtle differences between envy and other emotions. The article will also discuss the potential explanations for the occurrence of envy, specifically when discussing gender differences. Then, it

will touch upon the experience of gender envy in transgender and cisgender individuals and the possible reasons for its manifestation. Since gender envy is a term coined by laypeople, its assumed merit as a form of envy is dubious and should be taken with caution. As such, the article will try to discern if gender envy is the correct term for the feeling most of these individuals seem to be experiencing. Finally, the article will discuss the gaps within existing research and recommend areas that could be explored in the future.

## Defining envy

In philosophical texts, envy is an emotion commonly called the only sin that does not give pleasure to the sinner (Watney, 2022). That is in line with the idea that envy is elicited by a lack of, or a desire for something another person has (Parrott & Smith, 1993). It is often confused with jealousy and, in the interest of clarifying envy as an emotion, it is important to differentiate them. Smith and Kim (2007) note how the main difference consists of envy being driven by a lack while jealousy is driven by a fear of lack. They can be explained as equal opposites, in that both are aversive emotions, envy being a coveting of a good one lacks, while jealousy is protecting a good one has (Protasi, 2017). Thus, envy consists of two actors, oneself and the envied, while jealousy is common in romantic relationships and consists of three: oneself, a partner, and a rival (Smith & Kim, 2007). Smith et al. (1988) also found differences in feelings accompanying both emotions, with envy characterized by inferiority, wishfulness, self-criticism, dissatisfaction, and self-awareness. On the other hand, jealousy is followed by feelings of anger, hostility, hurt, fear of loss, suspiciousness, and lack of control, among other things. Considering their differences, the common misuse of the terms envy and jealousy can be explained by their co-occurrence. Parrott and Smith (1993) conducted an experiment on 149 undergraduate students using the students' reproductions of a time they felt either envy or jealousy, which was followed by a questionnaire including descriptors of both. Those set to remember jealousy-inducing experiences were found to also have experienced envy more than half the time (58,9%). On the other hand, envious experiences were rarely (10,5%) followed by jealousy (Parrott & Smith, 1993). These results point to an asymmetry in the confusion of the two emotions, with jealousy being more ambiguous and used as an umbrella term for both emotions. Since this ambiguity should best be avoided,

throughout the rest of this review, envy will be regarded within the parameters set by the previously explained research so as not to be confused with jealousy.

## Psychological framework of envy

There have been multiple theories regarding envy as explained by Lange et al. (2018), including the malicious envy theory, dual envy theory, and pain theory of envy. The malicious envy theory ties envy to inherently negative components such as inferiority, hostility, and resentment. Within that framework, malicious envy is the only “proper envy” while a “non-malicious envy” is seen as more similar to admiration (Smith & Kim, 2007). However, it has been found that such a conceptualization is unlikely since benign envy is an emotion separate to admiration (Van de Ven et al., 2012). The malicious theory of envy also assumes malevolent consequences, although it is often criticized for a lack of consistency in its operationalizations of envy (Lange et al., 2018). The dual envy theory is defined by two kinds of envy, one of which is benign envy which motivates the envier to try and improve their situation (Van de Ven et al., 2012). The second is malicious envy and its goal is to, in contrast, worsen the situation of the envied (Van de Ven et al., 2012). Linguistic differences found in several languages point towards these two different aspects of envy. One such example can be found in Dutch with the words *afgunst*, used for malicious envy, and *benijden*, used for benign envy (Van de Ven, 2016). Still, there is criticism regarding the operationalization of these aspects as inherent opposites such as benign envy consisting of positive thoughts about another and malicious envy of negative thoughts about another (Lange et al., 2018). The pain theory of envy presents envy as a pain-driven emotion with a singular motivational factor that can have positive or negative repercussions (Lange et al., 2018). It is similar to the dual envy theory in regard to its consequences, but it simply adds pain as a motivator for those outcomes.

Within their research, Lange et al. (2018) presented a new theory, The Pain-driven Dual Envy Theory (PaDE) that combines aspects of pain as a motivator with the duality of benign and malicious envy. It postulates that, in light of upward social comparison, pain occurs as an affective state that is short-lived and predicts two independent forms of envy. Malicious and benign envy are more long-term and similar to hostile or positive attitudes, respectively (Lange et al., 2018). It

is important to note that all of the mentioned theories agree that envy has a negative motivational aspect, providing the consensus that malicious envy exists. Benign envy is also recognized in most of the theories, and has been noted in empirical studies (Van de Ven et al., 2009; Crusius & Mussweiler, 2012; Van de Ven et al., 2012). Most empirical research of envy is not strictly defined by a single theory, but often points towards the dual envy theory, the pain theory of envy or their combination. Although The PaDE Theory could be interesting to pursue, it is comparable to the most common distinction in current research; that of malicious and benign envy.

With the dual envy theory in mind, the question of which type of envy will be triggered, malicious or benign, can be proposed, as well as where their similarities other end and when they start resembling other emotions. Such common examples consist of confusing benign envy for admiration and malicious envy for resentment. According to Van de Ven et al. (2011) both types of envy aim to minimize the disparity between the envier and the envied, specifically in the domains relevant to the self, such as interests and aspirations (Salovey & Rodin, 1984). To better understand both types of envy, we must first consider the theoretical background of envy. One important thing to note is appraisal theory where distinct emotions are considered the outcome of a combination of “appraisal components” or the ways in which a situation is perceived (Van de Ven, 2016). Core appraisals regarding envy are the perception of deservedness and the perceived control over the situation (Van de Ven et al., 2012). In the context of upward social comparison, when the envied was appraised as highly deserving of being better off and the envier had a high control of the situation, benign envy was the more likely outcome, while malicious envy was likely to occur when both were low. Within that framework, Van de Ven et al. (2012) found a precise differentiation of when malicious envy and resentment occur as well as admiration and benign envy. Admiration was likely when the person making the comparison was deservedly outperformed by the one they were comparing themselves to and they were not at risk of negative feedback because of it, while benign envy occurred when they were deservedly outperformed and it reflected negatively on them. Other research has also found that admiration is likely to occur when appraising a situation as one in which the envier lacks control since self-improvement seems more unattainable (Van de Ven et al., 2011). On the other hand, when being outperformed in comparison to another was appraised as undeserved, emotion was contingent on the one at fault. Resentment arose when the person outperforming was responsible, while malicious envy was

experienced when the circumstances were responsible. Those are some of the core distinctions in appraisal leading toward the two aspects of envy.

The other important theoretical basis for a complete overview of envy is the functional approach to emotions, according to which they arise as a product of circumstance and bring about the motivation to handle specific events (Van de Ven et al., 2011). In that context, distinct action tendencies, arising from either malicious or benign envy, are most likely a result of different emotions (Van de Ven, 2016). Therefore, it is relevant to discuss differences in the way malicious and benign envy manifest. Van de Ven et al. (2009) state that the difference in motivation is in the answer to the question of how the perceived injustice would best be solved. As previously mentioned, malicious envy strives to take away the benefits of the other. In that vein, it can be related to *schadenfreude* or pleasure derived from another's pain. In a way, *schadenfreude* can be regarded as a successful envy. Malicious envy, by definition, is the negative feeling coming from the inability to fulfill a desire, while *schadenfreude* is the positive feeling, a desire fulfilled. Van de Ven et al. (2015) found that only malicious envy increases *schadenfreude*, differentiating them from benign envy and proving a link that is expected due to the similar motivational aspect of these emotions.

Research has found a link between episodic envy, a construct adjacent to malicious envy, and aggression (Cohen-Charash, 2009). For example, envious women exhibit more indirect aggression toward the women they are comparing themselves to (Morgan et al., 2021). On the other hand, benign envy aims to improve oneself and thus minimize the inequality between the two actors. It has been found that benign envy motivates the person to take more actions toward becoming closer to the envied (Van de ven et al., 2011). Arnocky et al. (2015) found that envious women showed a more positive attitude towards plastic surgery, diet pills, and other appearance enhancement procedures. It was also found that students planned on studying more when compared to a more successful other (Van de Ven et al., 2011). These examples illustrate how malicious and benign envy are separate and can create tangible repercussions for the envier, but also for the envied.

Regarding other moderators of envy, it is also important to note how similarity plays a big role in envy. For example, Ramachandran and Jalal (2017) point out how 10 out of 11 people would be more envious of a better-off neighbor rather than Bill Gates. One envies both of them,

but envy is stronger when compared to a more similar other, the neighbor. This finding could tie into the previously explained appraisals of deservedness and control over the situation. In that way, control is larger when the envied individual is similar since the gap between them is easier to overcome. Regarding a perceived better appraisal of deservedness, people distant from our own lifestyles such as Bill Gates are regularly used as examples of hard work and determination to the point of believing their success to be deserved (Singh, 2023). In that context, people are more likely to question the success of people who are not as glorified, such as their equals, leading to more envy towards those similar to them. Thus, similarity could simply be an interaction of deservedness and control appraisals. It can also be noted that envious reactions are dependent on underlying psychological mechanisms. Crusius and Mussweiler (2012) point out that reactions to envy occur when the ability to self-control is limited. They started out from the hypothesis that self-control capacity is a depletable resource that oversees envious reactions since they are generally socially unacceptable. To confirm this, they constructed a number of envy-inducing situations, such as being given comparatively less tasty snacks than their assigned partner in the experiment, in which the participants drank alcohol and solved cognitive load tasks to minimize the capacity to control envious reactions. The study found that if the capacity for control is depleted, spontaneous comparisons are automatic and result in a reaction (Crusius & Mussweiler, 2012). However, it is important to note that it is uncertain if alcohol affects the ability to inhibit reactions or simply changes the perception of social norms, leading to a more lenient approach when reacting. It is therefore possible that if social norms do not condemn envious reactions, the act of trying to control them could be abandoned completely. Social status plays a role in envy as well. Crusius et al. (2017), explain social-functional approaches which claim social signals, such as pride, hierarchical position, and confidence, lead to emotions. In that regard, envy might be a response to a feeling of status inequality that occurs when another asserts their higher status. When compared to someone with a higher social position, it is possible that there would be an envious emotional reaction, since it would endanger the hierarchical position of the envier. In that context, those closer to conforming to the criteria for status should elicit envious reactions in others.

All previously mentioned aspects of envy are relevant to the analysis of the relation between gender and envy and make up the framework that is going to be used further on. Primarily, that includes The Dual Envy Theory and its two aspects of benign and malicious envy, and their

motivational differences of self-improvement and aggression, respectively (Lange et al., 2018). Also important are the appraisal differences based on control and deservedness, similarity that could be connected to those appraisals, and the way those appraisals distinguish between envy and admiration or resentment (Van de Ven et al., 2012). The impact of a desire for status and its connection to the variable of similarity will also be addressed further. In the end, the psychological mechanisms of control that could inhibit envious reactions depending on social norms are going to be further discussed when commenting on the experience of gender envy.

## Gender in psychology

Gender can be defined as the social interpretation of what it means to be a man or a woman in personality or behavior (Larsen & Buss, 2005). Another definition explains it as “a psychosocial construct [that] has a wider scope incorporating the effects of social norms and expectations, roles, behaviors, expressions, and identities of women, girls, men, boys, and gender-diverse people in a given society” (Rossi & Pilote, 2016, p. 1). It is important to distinguish it from sex, which is often defined as the biological characteristics determined by genetics and hormones (Rossi & Pilote, 2016). The difference between the two is particularly significant within the LGBTQ+ community, which includes individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer, as well as those represented by the “+”, people “who are part of the community but for whom LGBTQ does not accurately capture or reflect their identity” (PFLAG, 2024, LGBTQ+ definition). In this context understanding the distinction between cisgender and transgender identities is especially relevant. Cisgender refers to individuals whose birth sex aligns with their gender identity, while transgender describes individuals whose birth sex and gender identity do not align (Detournay, 2019). Some transgender individuals show clinically significant distress arising from the mismatch between their experienced gender and their assigned gender, accompanied by a persistent, intense desire to belong to a different gender (Saleem & Rizvi, 2017). On the other hand, transsexual refers to individuals who desire to transition medically and socially to align with their experienced gender, a term that can be perceived as offensive although still used in the medical field nowadays (Saleem & Rizvi, 2017). Furthermore, some non-binary individuals identify as transgender, meaning that they identify outside the traditional male-female binary (Reisner & Hughto, 2019). In contrast, binary transgender identities abide by the traditional male-female dichotomy and

involve female-to-male and male-to-female individuals (Reisner & Hughto, 2019). Those terms are still often regarded through the lens of cisnormativity or “the assumption that everyone is cisgender and that being cisgender is superior to all other genders” (PFLAG, 2024, Cisnormativity definition). Gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation are also commonly confused through the heteronormative lens (Nagoshi et al., 2012). Gender identity encompasses the individual's sense of being of a binary or non-binary gender identity, while gender expression is the external representation of gender (Nagoshi et al., 2012). Sexual orientation specifically consists of the individual's erotic thoughts, feelings, and fantasies for members of various genders (Nagoshi et al., 2012). There is no definitive and final way to conceptualize human gender expression and sexuality, and on that note, this paper contains the general views on gender as defined within existing research. Regardless of the way it is conceptualized, gender matters particularly in the way it is conceived and experienced by individuals and their surroundings. Our sense of reality is constructed through our and others' perceptions, through which we “become” (Arendt, 1958, as cited in Dias et al., 2021). That is the background for the gender performativity theory which states that gender is always being performed and, while individuals have the choice to perform it in any way, they most often opt into the cisnormative “traditional” way of performing it (Dias et al., 2021). In that context, gender and sex are still commonly equated.

The topic of differences between the genders has been an aspect of psychological research for many years. Such studies commenced with the idea of masculinity and femininity as a bipolar scale (Shields & Diccio, 2011). Features regarded as feminine included care, empathy, and expression of emotions, while masculine features were assertiveness, domination, and self-sufficiency (Prakash et al., 2010). Primarily, it was used as a way of identifying homosexual individuals as those whose personality did not fit the one preordained by their sex (Shields & Diccio, 2011). Only later was the concept of androgyny introduced as a person that scored high on both masculinity and femininity, now seen as two separate scales (Prakash et al., 2010). With the rise of feminism, notions that either femininity or masculinity were superior began to dwindle, but researchers began more deeply exploring the differences between women and men. According to Larsen and Buss (2005), there are two worldviews when regarding those differences. Differences in the Five-Factor Model were found in emotional stability, with men scoring higher than women, and agreeableness, with women scoring higher than men (Murphy et al., 2021). Meta-

analyses of these studies resulted in maximalist and minimalist views, in which minimalists see these differences as inconsequential, while maximalists believe that even those small differences can cumulatively have big impacts (Larsen & Buss, 2005). It is generally accepted that some differences do exist, hence why there are multiple theories that explain them. Larsen and Buss (2005) name socialization and societal roles, hormones, and the evolutionary perspective as potential theoretical explanations.

Social role theory states that gender differences largely stem from the way men and women are assigned to distinct social roles within society (Eagly & Wood, 2016). Such ideas are connected to the work of social scientists and philosophers, including Simone De Beauvoir, which state that the biological destiny by which labor has been divided within society is now being reinforced by institutions, thus creating a gender identity (Bettis & Ferry, 2016). Bettis and Ferry (2016) give examples of mundane ways in which this is perpetuated such as gendered bathrooms which contain different elements such as that men's bathrooms have urinals and women's have vanity tables. The related phenomenon of correspondence bias, or the inclination to attribute dispositions to observed behavior, should also be mentioned in this context (Eagly & Wood, 2016). This could include women being seen as more nurturing and caring due to being seen performing nurturing activities they are biologically predetermined to, such as motherhood. The reason for following these roles could be two-fold (Eagly & Wood, 2016). Behavioral confirmation could be the result of the awareness of potential negative sanctions if one does not abide by their given gender role, but also the benefits of following it. Secondly, one may have personally integrated these roles within their self-concept, the idea of the self shaped by one's beliefs and other's reactions (Eagly & Wood, 2016). The theory of gender performativity could also be mentioned here as a way in which people learn to perform gender through socialization (Dias et al., 2021).

Hormones on the other hand have been shown to correlate with certain features associated with either men or women, especially testosterone (Metzger & Boettger, 2019). Interestingly, transgender individuals going through hormone therapy were found to exhibit some of the traits connected to the gender they were transitioning to. Metzger and Boettger (2019) conducted research on 23 transgender men and 27 cisgender women as a control group. The transgender men were tested with the *NEO-personality-inventory-revised* (NEO-PI-R) before and after three and six months of hormone treatment. They found that neuroticism decreased significantly after three

months and extraversion increased significantly after three and six months of testosterone therapy. These findings suggest that hormones are also a part of the reason for differences between the sexes, which is something that could impact transgender individuals.

Finally, there is the explanation of differences through the lens of evolutionary psychology. Evolutionary psychology notes how differences arise when groups are faced with different adaptive problems (Larsen & Buss, 2005). One of those important adaptive challenges arose from the male-female differences in the capability of reproduction. Chen and Chang (2015) note how the need for reproduction leads to intersexual selection where members of one sex choose members of another based on valuable traits and intrasexual selection in which members of one sex compete to be chosen. Most commonly, men are the ones competing more aggressively and focus more on the sexual aspect of relations since that is the only way they can reproduce (Chen & Chang, 2015). On the other hand, women have a greater ability to choose adequate partners and focus more on the emotional aspect, as well as the resource provision, since that way they can ensure long-term care and protection, ergo a more functional reproduction (Chen & Chang, 2015). Thus, regardless of its constructed nature, there are multiple ways psychology could explain the found gender-based differences.

## Gender and envy

DelPriore et al. (2012) state that, through the evolutionary perspective, envy differences between sexes should be predicted based on adaptive problems faced by men and women. With that in mind, they point out how men and women are likely to envy same-sex members who possess qualities important to their ability to reproduce. Specifically, men would envy those superior in resource acquisition, while women would envy those more attractive than them. It has been found that women more often cite physical attractiveness, popularity, social ease, prominent family, and better clothing as sources of envy toward other women (DelPriore et al., 2012). On the other hand, men cite greater success attracting romantic partners, access to financial resources, ownership of a status item, academic success, and superior athletic talent as a source of envy towards men (DelPriore et al., 2012). The same was found by Henniger and Harris (2015), where women were more envious and more frequently the target of envy based on looks and romantic success. On the

other hand, men were more envious and more the target of envy based on occupational success. However, it is important to note that the latter research on being the target of envy was conducted by examining participants' recollections of an event where they were the target of envy. Therefore, it is possible that these results reflect more so a perception of the participants rather than actual experienced envy by another. However, as pointed out by the authors, such findings could still reflect a higher sensitivity of individuals to aspects of each gender perceived as necessary to reproduce (Henniger & Harris, 2015). Regardless, it has been found that envy may lead to aggression between rivals in line with the concept of malicious envy. As previously mentioned, aggressive (although indirectly aggressive) behavior has been found in female groups toward those perceived the most attractive (Morgan et al., 2021). Indirect aggression, in that way, allowed for a way to lower the status of a same-sex competitor, increasing one's own status and minimizing the perceived inequality.

Regarding social explanations, Henniger and Harris (2015) also note how envy could arise due to the appraisal that another possesses something valuable and could thus depend on the culture or context. It could also relate to the previously explained idea that social roles arose from the original division of labor, one established on biological predisposition (Bettis & Ferry, 2016). Based on those grounds, the social norms for men and women developed, and with them, the ideals towards which one should strive. Since it is based on upwards comparisons, it can be inferred that when one compares oneself with people closer to the standard set upon them as well, envy arises. As posed by Eagly and Wood (2016), one of the reasons for gender differences could be the integration of the social role within their self-concept. If that is true, then the differentiation between men and women in the experience of envy could be explained by the disparity in which aspects are relevant to the self (Van de Ven et al., 2011). The second explanation is that of avoidance of social sanctions and the pursuit of the benefits from abiding by the role (Eagly & Wood, 2016). In that case, envy would come from the comparison to another benefiting from opting into the role. That would tie into the previously mentioned analysis of status being a trigger for envy insofar as gender performance is a marker of status (Crusius et al., 2017). All the previous findings can be related to evolutionary and social explanations of envy which are going to be relevant further on.

## Between-gender envy

Kimplova et al. (2024) recently found that envy could exist between genders in cisgender individuals, an area that has received relatively little attention previously. Most existing studies focus on within-gender envy and this line of research might help fill the gaps in our understanding of relationships between gender and envy. Their hypothesis was based on Freud and Horney's ideas regarding envy towards the opposite gender based on a wish for control and independence, primarily penis envy (Benjamin, 2016). The data was obtained using a structured interview with the goal of answering the question "What do you envy in the other sex?". A number of open-ended questions were posed and the answers were then statistically processed to create categories of envy between sexes. They found that women envy men on a perceived lack of responsibility, finance, prestige, and non-binding beauty standards (Kimplova et al., 2024). On the other hand, men envied women's physical beauty, the ability for seduction and manipulation, and proficiency in housework. They both envied each other's physicality, with women citing the penis and its practicality, referring to being able to urinate standing up. Men envied motherhood, the breasts, and glutes. However, these findings should be approached with caution since they are simply based on the frequency of occurrence, and should be examined through a more critical lens, such as a quantitative approach in further research. It is also notable that women envied men more than men envied women, although with a small effect size (Kimplova et al., 2024). Regardless of the potential methodological issues of this research, such results should be further explored.

These findings could have two explanations, both of which are still speculative, but could serve as a jumping-off point for further research. (Kimplova et al., 2024). Firstly, they could just be envious of the characteristics that traditionally provide status to individuals of the envied sex. That would also be in line with women being more envious of men since men generally have a higher social status within the patriarchy (Kimplova et al., 2024). In that case, it is still more likely that women would envy other women rather than men due to their similarity, and in turn, the ease with which they could attain the others' status (Ramachandran & Jalal, 2017). As such, it would be interesting to conduct research comparing the tendencies towards the same and the opposite gender. The second explanation could be evolutionary. As previously mentioned, Freud hinted at the equation of baby and penis, which implies that women experience penis envy as an allegory for the ability to reproduce without having to rely on another person (Freud, 1917, as cited in

Burke, 2014). On that note, the qualities valued in one sex are commonly the ones in which the other is inferior in a reproductive context (Wen et al., 2020). It can then be inferred that since each gender is inferior in one aspect of reproduction, they become envious of the other gender in that aspect. Kimplova et al. (2024) note the paradox of men envying women's breasts, not as a wish to possess them physically on their body, but to possess them under control and accessibility. Speculatively, that could be in line with the hypothesis that such a wish is an evolutionary allegory of a desire for independent reproduction.

There is more research to be done on the topic, especially concerning envy women experience towards men and men towards women. It should also be questioned if evolutionary or social frameworks could provide correct predictions regarding the outcome of envy. Further research on the topic could also help with the general notions of envy, as well as a better understanding of the transgender experience of gender envy.

## Gender envy

As previously stated, gender envy refers to envy arising from a wish for another's expression of gender (PFLAG, 2024, Gender envy definition). To adequately understand gender envy, the experiences of transgender individuals must be discussed. It is important to note the concept of "passing", which refers to a stranger correctly gendering the transgender person (Urquhart, 2017). Dias et al. (2021) define passing as an individual's acquisition of another group's likeness, specifically when transgender individuals present as, and resemble, cisgender people of the gender they are transitioning to. Urquhart (2017) points out, however, that the term is controversial due to its implication that there is something wrong with being transgender and not trying to conform to a certain gender expression. Nonetheless, passing has been noted to decrease transgender persons' discomfort (Dias et al., 2021). Passing is also likely to remain one of the goals of transgender people, especially for binary individuals, since it is a part of the transitioning process. Therefore, it is important to discuss it to better understand gender envy. It can be regarded as a negative concept, but in this paper, we refer to the idea of passing as a common goal without representing it as the only valid goal of a transgender individual.

Transitioning can be defined as a “process, social, legal, and/or medical, one goes through to affirm one’s gender identity” (PFLAG, 2024, Transition definition). The social aspect of transitioning involves gathering support from various contexts such as family, friends, or other social environments, and may involve a change of name, dress, and hair (Whyatt-Sames, 2016). In the legal context, it is tied primarily to the laws permitting medical procedures and non-discrimination laws which protect transgender individual's rights to transition (Trotter, 2010). Medically, transitioning involves primary care practitioners, endocrinologists, and mental health professionals (Wilczynski & Emanuele, 2014). It can practically consist of gender-affirming care, primarily including genital and non-genital surgeries, aimed at reconciling physical characteristics with gender identity, as well as hormone therapy (Li et al., 2022). It is clear, then, how passing becomes one of the main goals of those who are transitioning. The idea of passing is closely related to the gender performativity theory since transgender individuals must consistently choose to perform gender to pass during the often-long process of transitioning (Miller & Grollman, 2015). Passing is not only important to affirm one’s gender identity, but to gain status and avoid aggression (Dias et al., 2021). Transphobia, or prejudice against transgender individuals, is triggered when an individual is gender-nonconforming (Miller & Grollman, 2015). Thus, the transitioning individual is more at ease when closer to cisnormative reproductions of gender (Dias et al., 2021). Miller and Grollman (2015) also note stigma visibility or the scale at which an individual's differentiation from the norm or low status is visible, and they include gender-nonconformity as stigma visibility. In that vein, the social cost of nonconforming is high due to the levels of discrimination they are likely to face (Miller & Grollman, 2015). It is from such conditions that gender envy might be born.

The question then becomes if the wish to pass coincides with envy towards cisgender or cisgender-passing individuals. Based on the definition of envy as an upward social comparison in which one is deemed inferior in some aspect, it could easily be understood as transgender individuals comparing themselves to a more gender-conforming individual (Van de Ven, 2016). Still, that fact should not be taken at face value as proof of envy and other potential emotions should be considered.

As previously mentioned, the emotions that arise depend upon the envier’s appraisal, specifically on the appraisals of deservedness and control (Van de Ven et al., 2012). Therefore,

since empirical research on the topic is scarce, we focus on analyzing appraisals most likely to occur in transgender individuals, with the aim of describing and differentiating gender envy from other plausible emotions. The amount of control transgender individuals hold over their gender expression is arguably slim. Transitioning is not easy as it consists of the constant performance of gender, depends on the use of hormones and plastic surgery (Dias et al., 2021), as well as the ability to access gender-affirming care, crucial to the well-being of transitioning transgender individuals. Gender-affirming surgery has varied in cost from around \$13,000 to \$26,000 from 2012 to 2019 in the United States (Chu et al., 2024) which is an expensive price to pay to have one's identity affirmed. In 2024, it varied from \$3,800 for simpler surgeries to \$75,000 for complex ones in the UK, and the cost in Turkey was from \$3,500 to \$15,000 (Mytrofankina, 2024). It has also been found that 39,4% of transgender youths in the United States live in states with bans on gender-affirming care (MAP: Attacks on Gender Affirming Care by State, 2024). A survey conducted in Georgia, Poland, Serbia, Spain and Sweden found that 55,8% of transgender respondents delayed going to their doctor and 25,1% felt discriminated by their general healthcare provider (TGEU, 2023). Such a lack of control could point against the emotion felt by transgender individuals being benign envy.

Deservedness might also be linked to these factors since one's pre-transition looks, finances that could be invested into gender-affirming surgery, and the laws of the state or country one was born in are arbitrary. There might be an aspect of injustice related to passing which, since it is probably not indicative of a defect in the personality of the envied, is likely to result in malicious envy rather than resentment. On the other hand, if passing is perceived as deserved, the experienced emotion could be admiration or benign envy (Van de Ven et al., 2012). Even though the lack of control points against this emotion being benign envy, the idea that passing inherently reflects poorly on the "non-passing" individual since it is tied to their social status could still be linked to it. Admiration would occur in cases where the comparison does not reflect poorly on the subject. Thus, emotion commonly described as gender envy could actually point to admiration, benign or malicious envy. On that note, it is conceivable that admiration is, as was found by Van de Ven et al. (2011), more likely to occur when a gender-nonconforming transgender individual is comparing themselves to a gender-conforming cisgender individual. Admiration may be targeted towards cisgender individuals due to a lack of control and less similarity (Henniger & Harris,

2015), while envy would be targeted towards passing transgender individuals due to larger control and similarity.

Different emotions might also occur depending on how far-along in the process of transitioning one is. Similarity is relative and comparisons between transgender and cisgender individuals should become more frequent the closer the transgender individual is to passing (Henniger & Harris, 2015). Thus, gender envy might not “leave” the transgender individual but simply change form. It is comparable to the thought experiment by Ramachandran and Jalal (2017) mentioned previously. When comparing oneself to a better-off neighbor and Bill Gates, people are more likely to envy the neighbor. If the envier was, on the other hand, someone of Bill Gates’s financial rank, Bill Gates and the better-off neighbor would become one and the same. They would become more similar, but a possibility for an upward comparison would still exist since an individual can never be perfect in all aspects (Henniger & Harris, 2015). That could be the reason why passing transgender individuals could theoretically be envious of both cisgender and passing transgender people who are perceived closer to the cisnormative ideal of gender. Nevertheless, while envy exists for those more similar, admiration is likely to occur in tandem when comparing oneself to far-off ideals such as celebrities. On that note, “attraction”, which is sometimes tied to admiration, could also occur as it is defined as admiration without the need to emulate (Kidd, 2019). Thus, if admiration does occur as one of the emotions combined to create gender envy, it is also possible that attraction is as well. That could explain the reason for the question commonly posed within queer spaces in the last couple of years: “Do I want to be them, or be with them?” (Kheraj, 2018).

Lastly, as Crusius and Mussweiler (2012) noted, when the ability to control reactions is inhibited, envious reactions are more explicit, possibly due to a different perception of social norms. If that is the case, social norms could drive the expression of gender envy as well. Since passing is commonly seen as positive and the end goal to transition, there seem to be no social barriers prohibiting envy towards more cisnormative individuals. Regardless, concerning the previously explained conditions, gender envy would most likely manifest as malicious and be a result of low deservedness and control, as well a state where circumstances are to blame (Van de Ven et al., 2012).

## Proposed mechanisms underlying gender envy

In light of previous research, several possible explanations for gender envy will be analyzed in the further text, although none have yet been tested. Two reasons have been previously presented to explain the motivation for passing: the wish to have the identity of the gender they identify with and the need to conform to social norms for that gender (Almeida et al., 2019). Both of these motivating factors might contribute to gender envy. The first reason, the wish to embody the gender they identify with, can be tied to envy being prominent in self-relevant domains (Salovey & Rodin, 1984). Gender is relevant to the self-concept of the individual (Dias et al., 2021) and thus, if regarded as inferior compared to desired gender, could result in envious reactions. Secondly, the need to conform weighs heavily on transgender individuals, as previously explained. Passing brings about status (Miller & Grollman, 2015) and lowers the risk of violence (Dias et al., 2021). It is therefore natural that people are motivated by the wish to avoid harm and envy those able to avoid it.

It is also possible that they envy another gender's capability to reproduce, a biological aspect that cannot be as easily changed in transgender individuals. From the evolutionary perspective, it has been implied that same-sex envy is tied to the aspects necessary for reproduction (DeIPriore et al., 2012; Henniger & Harris, 2015). Arístegui et al. (2019) conducted research using a questionnaire regarding romantic jealousy on 134 male-to-female and 94 female-to-male transgender individuals. They found that transgender individuals respond to romantic rivals in line with their gender identity rather than biological sex. Female-to-male individuals were more jealous of physically dominant rivals, while male-to-female individuals were jealous of physically attractive rivals (Arístegui et al., 2019). That could mean that they feel envy based on their gender identity and the undertaken gender-affirming care rather than their born biological sex, which is in line with the idea of gender envy. Such a notion is also connected to the previously described research on the influence of hormone therapy on personality changes (Metzger & Boettger, 2019). In essence, either existing differences or transitioning could influence biology, which could in turn affect the underlying psychological mechanisms leading towards envy. Transgender individuals could thus be simultaneously biologically and socially primed to compete with members of the gender they transitioned to in order to maximize their appeal and therefore reproduction with the desired gender. Based on previous research on intersexual and intrasexual selection (Chen &

Chang, 2015), it could be said that the envy felt towards another gender is simply for the ease with which they could acquire partners of choice. Such questions could be answered with further research regarding the LGBTQ+ community and evolutionary responses related to envy. It could also be explored how envy towards each gender changes when transitioning. Without much prior research on either topic, it is hard to conjure up possible reasons for gender envy, although in light of the previous information it is likely that there are identity-related, social, and biological aspects coming into play.

## Conclusion

Although the relationship between gender and envy has proven itself complex, there is much to be said and analyzed regarding current findings. It is generally understood that envy depends on the perceived control over the situation of the envier, deservedness for the envied as well as their similarity. With cisgender individuals, it can be inferred that envy towards the same sex comes down to intrasexual selection and the wish to maximize one's odds for reproduction. It is intriguing that cross-gender envy also points towards the wish for the same attributes that make an individual a desirable partner. The explanations previously given are evolutionary, ones relating to gender identity, avoidance of aggression, and a wish for status. Further research based on these different hypotheses could help with the current understanding of the link between gender and envy. More could also be done with the research concerning between-gender envy and how it manifests as opposed to envy of one's own gender, such as focusing on which attributes elicit the most envy and under which conditions.

There is also much to be explored about the newly coined term gender envy, since empirical studies do not yet exist. As such, this article has attempted to provide a theoretically based understanding of the phenomenon. Akin to the possible social and biological explanations for envy of one's gender, the same mechanisms apply, but with added cultural factors such as "passing" being seen as desirable. Research on the romantic jealousy of transgender individuals is the closest topic to gender envy that has been examined thus far. The findings suggest that, upon transitioning, jealousy, oftentimes coinciding with envy, is targeted towards the same gender rather than biological sex. Explanations vary from biological ones, based in gender-affirming care, to social

ones, depending on similarity, status, and the self-concept as well as the wish to avoid harm. In line with that, future studies should examine exactly when gender envy manifests and what it consists of. Regarding the conditions transgender individuals face, factors such as social pressure to conform, laws prohibiting or allowing gender-affirming care and its costs, as well as which individual they are comparing themselves to could all affect the experience known as gender envy. As previously explained, it is most likely that gender envy would manifest as a malicious type of envy, since it is a state where circumstances are to blame, deservedness is low, and there is less control over the situation (Van de Ven et al., 2012). If that is true, it could have important implications, such as the possibility of aggression towards those considered to be more gender-conforming (Cohen-Charash, 2009). On the other hand, gender envy could also be considered benign envy or admiration, which could lead to a greater motivation towards gender-conformity (Van de Ven et al., 2009). Nevertheless, since appraisals in this area are unexplored while also being heavily personal, these assumptions could be incorrect, and different people could experience it differently. All of that is to say that further studies are needed in this area in order to effectively describe this newly-coined phenomenon.

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## Sažetak

Iako je proučavanje zavisti bilo obilno područje psihološkog istraživanja u posljednje vrijeme, još uvijek postoji mnoštvo pitanja koja se postavljaju svaki dan. Zavist u kontekstu roda je tema sa mnogo nijansi u odnosu na njeno nastajanje, kao i sa mnoštvom implikacija za svakodnevni život. Istovremeno, sa porastom znanstvenog interesa oko zavisti, uporaba društvenih mreža otvorila je mjesto za raspravu prije nespomenutih iskustva te im omogućila da postanu novi termini kao i tema diskursa. Jedan takav slučaj je rodna zavist, termin oko kojeg su i njegovi korisnici i prijašnja istraživanja nesigurni u pogledu njegovih svojstva. Rodna zavist se obično opisuje u kontekstu transrodnog iskustva zavisti prema rodu u koji osoba tranzicionira. Međutim, zavist je pronađena i između i unutar rodova sa zanimljivim funkcionalnim implikacijama. U tom kontekstu, cilj ovog rada je definirati od čega se zavist sastoji i kako nastaje te kako se može razlučiti od drugih emocija poput divljenja i ogorčenja. Uz to, ovaj rad analizira i odnos roda i zavisti kao i funkcionalne razloge za postojanje zavisti, primarno korištenjem evolucijske perspektive, te se dotiče ponašanja do koje zavist može dovesti. Konačno, raspravlja se o mogućim objašnjenjima rodne zavisti u kontekstu transrodnih pojedinaca i predlaže smjernice za buduća istraživanja.

Ključne riječi: rod, rodna zavist, transrodnost, zavist