Human emotions are socially constructed (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Emotions are shaped by social processes and social forces. Emotions are social as well as psychological phenomena, responses to social situations that are shaped by social learning. However useful it may be to consider emotions as physiological or as psychological events, the sociological study of emotions draws attention to often-overlooked social aspects of emotions, including the situations that provoke them, the social learning by which they are shaped, their historical and cross-cultural variability, their social usefulness, their contribution to social conflict, and the social arrangements that humans set up to manage them. To paraphrase Mills (1959), the private emotions of individuals are shaped by public issues of social structure.

Emotions are shaped by society. Private experiences of emotion are embedded in history, culture, and social structure. Not only our feelings, but also our feelings about our feelings are shaped by psychological, philosophical, and theological frameworks that are institutionalized in social life. Thus, patterns of emotional experience change in response to changes in society and culture.

Emotions cannot be fully understood without some attention to the social forces that influence them. Emotions reflect the norms, attitudes, and values of groups as well as individuals; they are useful and dangerous for groups as well as individuals. As Collins (1975:92) observed, it is through emotional behavior that humans “exercise power, create religions and works of art . . . and enact bonds of solidarity among family and friends.” Shalin (2004) argues that politics is fueled by emotions, economics feeds on moral feelings, and democracy is an embodied process that binds affectively as well as rhetorically.

Emotions are shaped by the beliefs, attitudes, and values that individuals acquire in the course of their socialization. The experience and expression of emotions depend on what one “knows,” what one believes to be true. The private experience of love depends in part on beliefs about sex and its social regulation. The private experience of jealousy depends in part on beliefs about
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Marriage (and relationships leading to marriage), threats to marriage, and appropriate ways of protecting a marriage that is threatened by a third party. The private experience of envy depends in part on beliefs about wealth, status, and power and how they should be distributed. Love is about sex; jealousy is about adultery; envy is about justice and injustice.

Emotions are important as motives for human action. Both words, emotion and motive, are derived from the same Latin root, movere, to move. The word emotion refers mostly to inner feelings, to disturbances of the conscious or unconscious mind, typically involuntary and often leading to complex bodily changes and forms of behavior. The word motive refers to that which produces motion or action. Emotions are inner states that move individuals to action in the social world. Anger can be a motive for aggression. Guilt can be a motive for making restitution or atonement. Grief can be a motive for doing something to honor the departed.

A discussion of some social aspects of jealousy and envy may be useful for illustrating a sociological approach to emotions and demonstrating the importance of the meso- and macrolevel social forces that are omitted from many discussions of emotions. Microsociology reveals that emotions are learned through interaction. Emotions reflect the life experience of the individual. Meso­sociology reveals that emotions are socially useful, indeed indispensable, to social order. Emotions reflect the institutional settings in which they are experienced. Macrosociology reveals that emotions are shaped by society and culture. Emotions reflect the history and the values of a people, and the relevant values vary from time to time and place to place.

The neglect of emotions by sociologists is partially explained by the historic reluctance of sociologists since Durkheim to look at phenomena that appear to be “psychological” in nature (Manning 2005). In fact, emotions are inescapably social, important to the understanding of social interaction, social institutions, and society and culture.

RECOGNIZING JEALOUSY AND ENVY

Jealousy and envy are separate and distinct emotions, but they are confused with each other in ordinary speech. Clarity about the distinction between jealousy and envy is a key to understanding either emotion and the necessary foundation for their scientific study. Both empirical research and therapeutic intervention are compromised by language that confuses the two emotions.

It is widely believed that jealousy and envy are the same emotion. In ordinary American English usage, the word “jealousy” is applied to both emotions (Parrott and Smith 1993). Envy is routinely referred to as “jealousy,” and both are associated with the “green-eyed monster.” In fact, although jealousy and envy are mixed together in real life, they are responses to quite different situations.

Jealousy is a protective reaction to a perceived threat to a valued relationship or to its quality (Clanton and Smith 1998). The protective reaction can involve thoughts, feelings, or actions. Although jealous behaviors sometimes damage relationships, the intention of jealousy is the protection of the relationship or the protection of the ego of the threatened partner. Jealousy typically involves an attempt to protect a valued relationship (especially marriage) from a perceived threat (especially adultery). As Goffman (1967) notes about embarrassment, jealousy is not an irrational impulse breaking through socially prescribed behavior, but part of this orderly behavior itself.

Although jealousy may be experienced in many types of relationship, including the Oedipal triangle, sibling rivalry, and jealousy of nonsexual friendships, the focus of this analysis is the adult jealousy that arises in romantic relationships and in marriage. Adult jealousy typically results when a person believes that a marriage or romantic relationship is threatened by a real or imagined third party.
An individual’s jealousy is likely to be strongest in those situations where the attributes or behaviors of others threaten the individual’s own self-definition (Ellestad and Stets 1998; Salovey and Rodin 1989; Salovey and Rothman 1991). Jealousy is felt in regard to what matters most to an individual, and marriage and marital fidelity matter very much to most people. Jealousy may reflect an erosion of one’s social position. An experience of jealousy tips one off to one’s own need to be recognized for certain attributes that one possesses. For example, a woman who is beautiful will be more likely to feel jealous of another beautiful woman, because she knows that she herself is valued for beauty. A woman who is not beautiful, who does not compete on that level because she cannot, probably will not manifest a jealous response. She has simply given up and will not act jealously, although she may become depressed.

Whereas jealousy is rooted in the desire to hold on to what one has, envy begins with the wish for something desirable that one does not have (Foster 1972). Whereas jealousy may occur when a person fears losing, or already has lost, an important relationship with another person to a third party, envy may occur when a person lacks what another has and wishes that the other did not have it (Parrott 1991).

Envy is hostility toward superiors, a negative feeling toward someone who is better off (Scheler 1961; Schoeck 1970). In other words, envy is resentment toward someone who has some desirable object or quality that one does not have and cannot get. Any quality or achievement that provokes admiration also is likely to provoke some envy. These include wealth, status, power, fame, success, talent, good health, good grades, good looks, and popularity.

Envy is not the wish for the object or advantage that provoked the envy. Rather, envy is the much darker wish that the superior would lose the object or advantage. Envy is the perverse pleasure, the malicious joy (Schadenfreude) that is felt when the superior fails or suffers. The most common outward expression of envy is gossip (Foster 1972).

Most people with whom I have discussed jealousy and envy are unclear about the distinction. I have asked hundreds of people over the course of 30 years about the difference between these emotions. Many say, “I thought they were the same.” Many others say, “Jealousy is about people, and envy is about things.” Neither of these responses captures the difference between jealousy and envy. In my experience, however, Europeans and people from the third world are much more likely than Americans to be able to articulate the difference.

My students delight in finding examples in speech and in the media of envy being called “jealousy” or otherwise mislabeled. For example, “The other players on the team were jealous of the star’s huge salary,” or “I’m jealous because you were honored and I was not,” or “Some of the other performers were jealous of her obvious talent.” In each of these cases, the emotion being reported is envy, not jealousy.

Because envy is a completely negative emotion, it usually is repressed, denied, disguised, and relabeled. For this reason, it is difficult to observe and almost impossible to assess through self-report. Having defined jealousy and envy, making clear the distinction between them, we turn now to further analysis of the two emotions in turn.

**JEALOUSY**

Here we consider the social usefulness of jealousy, its cross-cultural variations, how it changed because of the sexual revolution and the women’s movement, and some implications for psychotherapy and self-understanding. The findings are summarized so as to dispute ten dangerous misconceptions about jealousy that prevail in U.S. society in the early 21st century.
The Social Function of Jealousy

Although it often is dismissed as “the useless emotion,” jealousy is useful to individuals, couples, and society as a whole. By protecting marriage from the betrayal of adultery, jealousy helps to preserve social order (Davis 1936). Jealousy serves to maintain traditional social roles. For example, a mother’s jealousy over her husband’s attentions to their child causes her to protect her turf as nurturer by allowing the father to have only or primarily the playmate role (Ellestad and Stets 1998).

In every culture, people form valued relationships in accordance with prevailing norms. Jealousy protects whatever kinds of relationships cultures teach people to value. As Davis (1936:400) notes:

Where exclusive possession of an individual’s entire love is customary, jealousy will demand that exclusiveness. Where love is divided, it will be divided according to some scheme, and jealousy will reinforce the division.

The protective function of jealousy also is noted by Pines (1992, 1998) and Buss (2000).

Specific jealous behaviors vary enormously across cultures because of the great diversity of human beliefs about relationship boundaries, threats, and protection. The experience and the interpretation of jealousy change as beliefs about these matters change. The cross-cultural and historical variability of jealousy will be discussed below.

Jealousy, which often is described as a triangle, is, in fact, a quadrangle. The fourth party is the community. Jealousy is approved by the community when the third party is viewed as a trespasser, but disapproved when the third party is viewed as a legitimate rival (Davis 1936).

The analysis offered here is consistent with that of Davis in his 1936 article “Jealousy and Sexual Property,” but I have deliberately avoided the metaphor of property, because contemporary connotations of the term “property” distract from Davis’s point and from mine. One need not “treat one’s mate as property” (in the contemporary pejorative sense of the word) in order to feel jealous. The Davis article is about rules of sexual access (especially marriage rules) and their impact on the experience of jealousy.

Whereas conventional wisdom, borrowing from biology and psychology, sees jealousy as a universal instinct that requires the invention of marriage rules, sociological analysis reveals that, without marriage rules, individuals would not know when to be jealous. Thus, it is not jealousy that produces marriage rules. Rather, marriage rules produce jealousy. Despite variations, jealousy is universal because every society values marriage and prohibits extramarital sex.

Society shapes jealousy by defining what constitutes a marriage, what constitutes a threat to marriage, and how to protect a marriage that is threatened by a third party. The experience of jealousy in an individual is shaped by the marriage rules and the adultery taboo of the community and society. Jealousy is the declaration of one’s rights within a particular system of marriage rules.

The social usefulness of jealousy is easily overlooked in contemporary U.S. society because of the prevailing view, encouraged by the sexual revolution, that jealousy is a useless emotion that grows out of the insecurity or low self-esteem of the jealous individual. These matters are further discussed below.

A Comparative View of Jealousy

Jealousy is universal, but jealousy is different in different societies (Ford and Beach 1951; Hupka 1981; Malinowski 1929; Mead 1931). Among the Yurok Indians of Northern California, if a man
asked another man’s wife for a cup of water, this was considered an inappropriate overture and the husband would become jealous. By way of contrast, in some Eskimo societies men lend their wives to overnight guests, apparently without jealousy. The Yurok people appears to be “more jealous” than most Americans of our own time, and the Eskimo “less jealous.” Similarly, the Toda people of South India, who practiced polygamy for both genders and tolerated affairs as well, strike us as much “less jealous” than the Samoan wife who, upon discovering that a woman was having an affair with her husband, was expected to seek out the rival and bite her on the nose. Surely these differences are best explained in terms of cultural variations in the marriage rules rather than in terms of biology or psychology. Cross-cultural surveys confirm that, in general, societies with relatively restrictive sexual norms provide more occasions for jealousy and value it more highly than societies with more permissive norms.

Culture shapes the experience of jealousy through the life cycle (Mead 1931). The Dobuans, Pacific islanders east of New Guinea, had very permissive rules about premarital sex. At age 12 or 13 boys were turned out of their family hut at night in the expectation that they would wander about and, eventually, have sex with most of the girls in the locality. These liaisons generated virtually no jealousy. When Dobuans married, however, they fell under the sway of marriage rules characterized by a very strict adultery taboo. Not surprisingly, adult Dobuans appear to be highly jealous and inordinately suspicious, to the point of recruiting kinspeople to follow and spy on the spouse as a deterrent to adultery. Adult Dobuans are much “more jealous” than adolescent Dobuans because of culture, not because of biology or psychology.

American Indian cultures reflect the great human diversity in such matters. If a Zuni wife suspected that her husband were having an affair, she had a culturally prescribed way of communicating her displeasure to her husband and to the community: She refused to do his laundry and, instead, dumped it on the ground in front of her home. Among the Apache, the code of honor required that the husband of a woman who committed adultery should mutilate his wife by cutting off her nipples or the tip of her nose. In some Native American cultures, the wedding ceremony included the father of the bride giving to the groom a special arrow, with which he must kill his wife if she betrays him.

The particulars of the adultery taboo are different in different cultures. Some cultures are more tolerant of affairs than others—the Toda, the Mehinaku Indians in Brazil (Collins and Gregor 1995; Gregor 1985), and perhaps the French. Many cultures are characterized by a double standard, by which women’s infidelities are more severely punished than men’s.

Culture influences an individual’s interpretation of an event as threatening or not threatening to a valued relationship. Similarly, culture prescribes behaviors designed to protect the relationship by preventing the intrusions of the rival, punishing an aberrant mate or the rival, compensating an aggrieved mate, restoring one’s standing in the eyes of others, and so forth (Hupka 1981). For example, in the case of a man who finds that his wife has been sexually involved with a neighbor, a particular culture may prescribe one or more of several responses: killing the spouse or the rival with the approval of the community; fighting the rival until one combatant is seriously wounded or killed, mock combat supervised by friends and relatives of the rivals so that neither is likely to be seriously wounded or killed; loud, abusive arguing; a debate or formal insult match; a drum match or other musical competition, among others. Most cultures provide several possible solutions so a jealous person may choose a reaction that fits his or her disposition.

The jealousy between wives in polygynous households in Nigeria is not principally sexual jealousy. It is part of a competition to secure maximum access to scarce economic resources. Favoritism between wives produces friction because the husband is likely to follow sexual favors with economic benefits (Ware 1979).

In contrast with hunting and gathering societies, industrial societies are characterized by pluralism and rapid social change. Since the 1960s, swingers and practitioners of sexually liberal lifestyles have emerged as subcultures in which much more permissive marriage rules prevail.
Jealousy and Envy

(Berger 1981; Buunk 1981; Gilmartin 1998; Kinkade 1972; Pines and Aronson 1981; Smith and Smith 1974). Swingers, for example, do not view sexual exclusiveness as a necessary condition for a happy marriage and so appear to be without jealousy in situations that would make most people jealous. Apart from swinging, some couples agree to permit a measure of freedom or at least agree to a don’t-ask-don’t-tell policy. People in various sexually liberal lifestyles, however, constitute a very small proportion of marriages and other committed relationships. Adultery is much more common than swinging. Cheating is much more common than the negotiated “arrangement.”

Even among more conventional couples in which no one is cheating, substantial differences are observed in definitions of appropriate and inappropriate behavior, with younger, urban, secular, and better-educated individuals typically being more permissive and more tolerant of “innocent flirtation” than older, rural, religious, and less well-educated individuals. Disagreements about such boundaries within a couple often become a source of conflict. For all this diversity, however, the overwhelming majority of married Americans feel strongly that their mates should not have sex or deep emotional involvement with others, and they are apt to become very upset (jealous) if this happens. For the vast majority, the expectation of sexual exclusivity is a defining characteristic of a committed relationship. Salovey and Rodin (1985) found that survey respondents who placed great value on their current relationships and on the importance of exclusivity were more prone to feel jealous.

Many people with whom I have discussed these matters say they felt powerful jealousy for the first time when they reached the point in the development of a romantic involvement where they were ready for an exclusive relationship and did not want this other person to have sex with anyone else. Many of these relationships turned into marriages. Jealousy, in other words, was the signal that one desired a committed relationship with another. Because of the impact on American culture of the sexual revolution, popular conversation often neglects the still quite strong adultery taboo. Although the norms regarding premarital sex have become much more permissive since the 1960s, disapproval of extramarital sex remains very strong for the vast majority. The influence of the sexual revolution on the experience, expression, and interpretation of jealousy is considered in the next section.

Jealousy and Social Change

Although jealousy protects marriage from adultery in all societies, Western history reveals that jealousy has protected various kinds of valued relationships across the centuries (Clanton 1984, 1987; Coontz 2005; Goode 1959, 1963; Hunt 1959). In classical Greek culture, jealousy protected the homoerotic relationships of men with teenage boys. In the Middle Ages, jealousy protected the tender, extramarital flirtations of Roman Catholic lords and ladies whose ideal was to love “pure and chaste from afar.” But in those days romantic love had nothing to do with marriage, because marriages were arranged by the parents of the bride and groom. Following the Protestant Reformation, jealousy protected Puritan marriage, a new kind of man-woman relationship that attempted for the first time to combine sex, love, and companionship in marriage. The Protestant Reformation and the Industrial Revolution weakened the ancient custom of arranged marriage and encouraged the modern practice of choosing one’s own mate on the basis of love.

Jealousy in the United States: 1945 to 2005

The contemporary experience and understanding of jealousy have been shaped by the dramatic changes in matters of sex, love, marriage, and the family that began in the 1960s (see Clanton
As Berger and Berger (1984) later noted, Americans have been involved since the 1960s in a cultural war over the family, a vociferous and value-loaded debate over the history, present condition, prospects, and human and societal value of the family. Americans remain sharply divided over issues such as birth control, abortion, sex education, unmarried cohabitation, single parents, and homosexuality. Jealousy becomes especially salient when sexual norms and gender roles are in flux.

An analysis of articles in popular magazines reveals that the experience, expression, interpretation, and treatment of jealousy have changed substantially in the United States since World War II. Prior to the late 1960s, the prevailing view of marriage emphasized commitment and “togetherness,” so jealousy (within appropriate limits) was widely viewed as a natural emotion, as evidence of love, and as good for marriage. Women’s magazines told readers that they should be flattered if their husbands were a little jealous.

Beginning in the late 1960s, as the sexual revolution and the women’s movement introduced a new concern with personal freedom, jealousy came to be viewed by many as a learned emotion, as evidence of some personal defect such as “low self-esteem,” and as bad for marriage and other intimate relationships. By the early 1970s, women’s magazines reflected the new view of jealousy as a useless emotion that is out of place in a world of “liberated” relationships. Changes in society and culture produced changes in the private emotional life of individuals (Clanton 1989; Clanton and Smith 1998).

From the end of World War II until the late 1960s, virtually all of the articles in popular magazines said that a certain amount of jealousy was natural, proof of love, and good for marriage. The reader (typically a woman) was advised to keep her jealous feelings “under control” and to avoid the “unreasonable” jealousy that is marked by suspicion, hostility, accusations, and threats. The woman was told to avoid situations that might make her husband jealous, but to interpret his expressions of jealousy as evidence of love. Accounts of such efforts suggest the necessity of “emotion work,” active attempts to manage our emotions by evoking desirable ones and suppressing undesirable ones (Hochschild 1983; Thoits 1984). If jealousy threatened the stability of the marriage, the reader was advised to seek professional help.

By about 1970, magazine articles began to question the appropriateness of jealous feelings in love relationships. Many people no longer assumed that jealousy was evidence of love. For the first time, guilt about jealousy became an issue. According to the emerging view, jealousy was not natural; it was learned. Jealousy was no longer seen as proof of love; it was, rather, evidence of a defect such as low self-esteem or the inability to trust. Thus, jealousy was not seen as good for relationships; it was bad for them. From this it followed that one could and should seek to eradicate every trace of jealousy from one’s personality.

The change in the understanding of jealousy was accompanied by semantic shifts, changes in language that reflected new beliefs. Whereas in the 1950s the word “jealousy” was often used to describe normal and possibly beneficial feelings and behaviors, by the early 1970s the word increasingly was used primarily with reference to inappropriate, unconstructive, and even pathological reactions such as suspiciousness, paranoia, and violence. In the common speech of the 1970s, the jealous person often was characterized as unduly possessive, insecure, suspicious, and suffering from low self-esteem.

**Social Sources of the New View of Jealousy**

The new view of jealousy that arose in the late 1960s was encouraged by a larger shift in the shape of love relationships in the United States. The 1950s and early 1960s were characterized
by an emphasis on relationship commitment or "togetherness." There was almost no talk about personal freedom in marriage. The sexual revolution and the women’s movement were not yet topics of conversation. In such a time, jealousy was seen as a natural proof of love and as good for marriage.

In contrast, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, many individuals sought to enhance personal freedom in relationships, often at the cost of the forms of commitment characteristic of earlier times. Cohabitation became much more common. Women demanded fairness. The divorce rate rose. The media reported on nude beaches, communes, and gay pride. The book Open Marriage (O’Neill and O’Neill 1972) topped the best-sellers list for over a year in 1972. For discussion of these trends, see Clanton (1984), Gagnon (1977), Lawson (1988), and Swidler (1980).

As a result of these and other manifestations of concern for more personal freedom in love relationships, jealousy came to be viewed by many as a personal defect. If one emphasizes freedom in relationships, one will see jealousy as inappropriate and undesirable.

The quest for more personal freedom in love relationships and in marriage was part of a larger trend in favor of more freedom, more experimentation, and a more positive view of pleasure. These qualities often are associated with the youthful counterculture of the late 1960s, but, in fact, various manifestations of these themes diffused through the whole culture in the 1970s and 1980s. By the 1980s, even such a conventional voice as the advice columnist “Dear Abby” embraced the view that the jealous person is suspicious, insecure, and in need of counseling. The view of jealousy as a personal defect remains strong today.

To summarize: Jealousy is a consequence of social organization and will vary as forms of social organization vary. The sexual conservatism of the period before about 1965 produced a relatively positive view of jealousy, while the liberalization of the late 1960s and early 1970s produced a negative appraisal of jealousy.

Stearns (1990) demonstrates that the understanding of sibling jealousy (sibling rivalry) also changed in the twentieth century. Before the 1920s, neither experts, nor advice-givers, nor parents expressed much concern about sibling jealousy, but from about 1925 onward, child-rearing manuals routinely included dire and lengthy warnings about sibling rivalry, and parents came to note the issue as a major concern. Various strategies were recommended to reduce tension between siblings and to reassure children that they were loved. Some factors that contributed to this shift include smaller family size, which heightened actual sibling rivalry over previous levels; expert reassessment of early childhood as a time of emotional turmoil; and a growing desire to produce smooth, conflict-free personalities to fit into a more managerial, service-oriented economy.

Understanding and Managing Jealousy

Although sociology is not a clinical method, the sociological study of emotions has clinical implications. A sociological view of jealousy can facilitate better self-understanding and more effective therapy. Sociology encourages a focus on normal jealousy rather than pathological jealousy.

Sociological analysis suggests that most jealousy is best understood as a relationship problem rather than a personal problem rooted in the psychological inadequacies of one individual. The reduction of painful jealousy may depend more on negotiation between the partners than on the eradication of some weakness in one partner. If professional help is sought, marriage counseling or relationship therapy may be more helpful than individual psychotherapy. By concentrating so narrowly on the individual, psychotherapy sometimes exacerbates relationship problems. Furthermore, when an individual enters private psychotherapy because of relationship problems,
divorce is a likely outcome, especially if the therapist is also divorced and remarried. Helping professionals who work with jealous couples should give more attention to the social forces bearing upon them, especially the life cycle of the couple, their economic circumstances, and the changing cultural environment, especially recent and ongoing changes in sexual rules and gender roles.

Jealousy and Self-Esteem: A Misunderstood Relationship

Today it is fashionable to assume that low self-esteem is a major cause of jealousy and that raising one's self-esteem is a good way to reduce or “cure” jealousy. Sociological analysis calls this view into question. The sociology of knowledge (Berger and Luckmann 1966) encourages a search for the social roots of this assumption.

Explanations of jealousy as evidence of low self-esteem are part of the larger tendency since the 1970s to view a wide range of personal failures and problems as caused by low self-esteem. This view is widely taken for granted by both helping professionals and lay people. It is, nevertheless, erroneous and dangerous. In fact, one may have high self-esteem in general but still be uncertain and vulnerable in some situations. One may have high self-esteem but still experience jealousy if a valued relationship appears to be threatened.

Although it enjoys the status of a “scientific” principle of great therapeutic usefulness, the notion that emotional upsets are caused mostly by low self-esteem is, in fact, an erroneous extension of the commonsense principle that success is associated with self-confidence and with liking oneself and that failure is associated with lack of self-confidence and not liking oneself (i.e., low self-esteem).

Explanations of human behavior often assert that low self-esteem causes failure, but it is at least as true that failure causes low self-esteem (or, that the relationship is reciprocal). Thus, most statements in the popular psychological literature about the relationship between low self-esteem and various personal failures or inadequacies are at best circular and at worst backward. That is, such statements either say nothing beyond the truism that successful people feel better about themselves than do failures, or, worse, they actually invert the causal relationship and view low self-esteem as the cause of failure when, in fact, failure is more often the cause of lowered self-esteem.

Reflecting this viewpoint, a psychotherapist told me, “I have never had a jealous patient who was not also suffering from low self-esteem.” She was puzzled when I asked her which caused which. Like many others, she assumed that the low self-esteem caused the jealousy. It is at least as plausible that the jealousy caused the low self-esteem. That is, individuals’ experiences of jealousy resulted in their feeling less good about themselves, a tendency encouraged by the new view, which sees jealousy as a personal defect. As Ellis and Weinstein (1985) point out, after an intrusive episode that provokes jealousy, one can no longer take for granted the partner's commitment. This undercuts one's sense of self. The jealous person must be on guard against threats to self as well as against the possible loss of the partner. Similarly, Buunk and Bringle (1987) conclude that the experience of jealousy results in loss of self-esteem.

If an experience of jealousy routinely causes low self-esteem, how can low self-esteem be the principal cause of jealousy? If an experience of jealousy reflects a relationship problem, how can the jealousy be reduced solely through the enlargement of the self-esteem of one individual? As Durkheim (1995) noted, whenever a social fact is explained in terms of a psychological fact, we can be certain the explanation is false. For thoughtful sociological analysis of popular self-help movements, see Hochschild (2003) and Irvine (1995).
Leaving aside the methodological problems that characterize many studies of jealousy and self-esteem, several kinds of evidence suggest that low self-esteem is not the principal cause of jealousy.

1. Cross-cultural surveys reveal that low self-esteem plays little or no role in explanations of jealousy in various cultures (Hupka 1981). In all cultures, jealousy is provoked by perceived violations of marriage rules, by real events in the social world, not by personal defects in isolated individuals (Davis 1936).

2. The “low self-esteem” explanation for jealousy is not found in the popular media in the United States before the late 1960s. If it were a timeless truth, you would expect someone would have written about it earlier.

3. Empirical research has not found a consistent correlation between low self-esteem and jealousy. Kosins (1983) reviewed the literature and found five studies that reported modest correlations and five more that found no significant correlation. Hansen (1985) cited one study that finds a negative relationship between self-esteem and jealousy for both men and women, one that finds this relationship only for men, and three that find no relationship between the two variables. In his own research, Hansen (1985) found low self-esteem to be associated with jealousy for females but not for males. Furthermore, most studies do not address the question of causation at all.

4. Kosins (1983; Clanton and Kosins 1991) tested the psychoanalytic speculation that early conflicts with parents and siblings make an individual more likely to experience intense jealousy in adult relationships. The research found no statistically significant relationships between a subtle measure of jealousy and several developmental variables including childhood conflicts with siblings, separations and losses during childhood, harshness of parental discipline, quality of early parent-child relations, and emotional support from peers in childhood. Furthermore, there was no significant difference in the intensity of jealousy reported by college students (representing the “normal” or nonclinical population), psychotherapy outpatients, and a small group of psychiatric inpatients. These surprising findings suggest that jealousy is not best viewed primarily as an emotional disorder and that therapists treating clients with jealousy problems ought not assume that jealousy always is rooted in disrupted attachment history and early sibling conflicts. Although this study is a modest one and further research is needed, these findings call into question the popular view that all or most jealousy is caused by personal deficiencies such as low self-esteem.

5. Those who assume that low self-esteem causes jealousy also are likely to assume that low self-esteem causes delinquent behavior in young people. Contrary to this expectation, McCarthy and Hoge (1984) found that the effect of self-esteem on subsequent delinquent behavior is negligible. Instead, they found consistent but weak negative effects of delinquent behavior on subsequent self-esteem. In other words, low self-esteem does not cause delinquency, but delinquency tends to lower self-esteem. Furthermore, it is reasonable to assume that delinquent behavior sometimes raises self-esteem for persons who can find no other route to “success.” This study challenges the assumption that low self-esteem is the cause of delinquency, and it provides a basis for questioning the assumption that low self-esteem is the cause of jealousy.

6. In his introduction to a collection of articles on self-esteem and social problems, sponsored by the California Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility, Smelser (1989) notes that most of the social problems under consideration were assumed by the researchers to be caused by low self-esteem, not the other way around. Smelser notes, however, that in some cases this assumption is only half-plausible.
For example, because so much unemployment is involuntary and so many of the unemployed are chronically dependent on welfare, we should not conclude from a correlation of dependence and low self-esteem that the dependence is caused by low self-esteem. We know that diminished self-esteem often is the product of something outside the individual.

Smelser (1989) concludes that one of the most disappointing aspects of every chapter in the anthology is how low the associations are between self-esteem and its alleged consequences. In a few cases, consistent relationships are found. For example, high self-esteem is associated with the use of contraceptives by teenage girls, and measures of high self-esteem correlate positively with academic achievement. Children with alcoholic parents have lower self-esteem than other children. Children who have been abused by their parents show low scores on self-esteem measures. In some cases, however, the associations run in unexpected directions. For example, the use of psychoactive drugs seems to have a positive effect on self-esteem, and one study appears to suggest a positive association between high self-esteem and child abuse!

The most consistently reported finding, however, is that the hypothesized associations between self-esteem and its expected consequences are mixed, insignificant, or absent (Smelser 1989). The absence of correlation holds in important areas such as teenage pregnancy, child abuse, and most cases of alcohol and drug abuse. If the association between self-esteem and behavior is so weak, even less can be said for a causal relationship between the two.

Although jealousy may be exacerbated by the personal weaknesses and pathologies of individuals, sociological analysis suggests that most jealousy is best understood as a relationship problem that requires the attention of both members of the couple. As Margolin (1981) has noted, jealousy is an interactional problem more often than it is an individual problem. Jealousy is often a reflection of larger issues of relationship satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Questionnaire data from 66 married individuals found marital satisfaction to be negatively correlated with jealousy (Guerrero and Eloy 1992).

Jealousy and Power: A Neglected Relationship

The key to understanding jealousy is not the low self-esteem of the jealous individual (a psychological fact), but rather the imbalance of power within the couple (a social fact). I devised the Relationship Assessment Scale to measure power differences in love relationships, including dating, cohabitation, engagement, and marriage. Partners respond separately and without consultation to ten questions such as: Who makes more money? Who has more professional prestige? Who loves the other more? Who would find a new partner quicker if you broke up? Who desires sex with the other more? Who is more articulate, more persuasive? In most relationships, one partner will be more powerful in some areas and the other in others.

My hypothesis holds that the greater the imbalance of power within the couple, the greater the likelihood of problems with jealousy. Conversely, the more equal the balance of power, the less jealousy. Movement toward equality of power in a relationship may be useful for preventing and reducing painful jealousy (White and Mullen 1989).

Within a couple, the less powerful partner is more likely to become jealous. Insofar as women are usually less powerful than men, they are more likely to appear jealous. The societal trend in the direction of greater gender equality probably has the effect of reducing jealousy generally,
especially among women. This reduction in women’s jealousy is reflected in higher divorce rates (which leveled off around 1980) and higher rates of unmarried mothers (which continue to rise). Since the 1960s, women have been less likely than their mothers and grandmothers to protect their relationships with men at all costs, less likely to forgive betrayal, less likely to tolerate excessive possessiveness and the double standard, less likely to tolerate physical abuse, and less likely to sacrifice for the sake of the marriage.

Ten Dangerous Misconceptions about Jealousy

Much of what sociology reveals about jealousy contrasts sharply with American conventional wisdom and popular psychology since about 1970. It is useful, therefore, to summarize the sociological findings so as to challenge ten dangerous misconceptions about jealousy that are widespread in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century American culture. These misunderstandings threaten the happiness and well-being of those who hold them and thus have implications for education, marriage, law, psychotherapy, and self-understanding, as well as for further development of the sociology of emotions. What we feel (emotions) depends on what we know (beliefs).

The Social Usefulness of Jealousy.

1. It is widely believed that jealousy is a useless emotion. In fact, jealousy often is useful for individuals, couples, community, and society. The largely overlooked social function of jealousy is the protection of love, marriage, and other valued relationships. By protecting marriage, jealousy contributes to solidarity and social order (Davis 1936). Jealousy may be defined as a protective reaction to a perceived threat (especially adultery) to a valued relationship (especially marriage or a relationship that leads to marriage) or to its quality. The usefulness of jealousy is easily overlooked in our culture because of the readiness to assume that jealousy is always a bad thing and that the jealous person is overly sensitive and probably suffering from low self-esteem. The sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s encouraged the more negative view of jealousy that now prevails in the United States.

Jealousy and Envy.

2. It is widely believed that jealousy and envy are the same emotion. In fact, although jealousy and envy often are mixed together in real life, they are responses to quite different situations. Jealousy always involves an attempt to protect a valued relationship (especially marriage) from a perceived threat (especially adultery). Envy is resentment toward someone who has some desirable object or quality that one does not have and cannot get. Envy, in other words, is hostility toward superiors, a negative feeling toward someone who is better off. Envy is not the wish for what one does not have. It is the much darker wish that the superior should lose the advantage that provoked the envy or otherwise should suffer.

Learning to Be Jealous.

3. It is widely believed that jealousy is an instinctive biological reaction that humans share with lower animals. People often speak of the jealousy exhibited by pets, suggesting thereby that human jealousy is all or mostly “instinctive.” In fact, adult jealousy
in humans is learned as other things are learned through modeling, practice, and feedback. Jealousy is learned as individuals internalize marriage rules, the adultery taboo, and strategies for the protection of threatened relationships. Because these arrangements vary across cultures, jealousy is learned differently in different times and places. Monogamous and polygamous cultures produce different patterns of jealousy. Extramarital sexual activities that provoke intense jealousy in most Americans may provoke little or no reported jealousy among wife-lending Eskimos, the sexually permissive Toda, or contemporary swingers, assuming that the ground rules of each culture or subculture were honored.

**THE PSYCHOLOGY OF JEALOUSY.**

4. It is widely believed that jealousy is usually a personal problem, rooted in the inadequacies of the jealous individual. In fact, jealousy is usually a relationship problem. Its solution requires the involvement of both partners. The unit of analysis should be the couple, not the individual. Attention should be devoted to communication and negotiation. Most jealousy problems that require professional help call for couple therapy or marital counseling rather than individual psychotherapy.

5. It is widely believed that all or most jealousy results from low self-esteem in the jealous individual. In fact, although low self-esteem can exacerbate jealousy, most jealousy results from an imbalance of power between the partners (Clanton 1989). Thus, movement toward equality of power within a relationship may reduce the potential for jealousy.

6. It is widely believed that women are more jealous than men. In fact, there is no consistent evidence to indicate that either gender is more jealous than the other (Clanton and Smith 1998). Women, however, are more willing to acknowledge jealousy (and to blame themselves for the problem), while men are more likely to deny or relabel jealousy (and to blame the woman and others for the problem). Women’s greater willingness to admit to jealousy is consistent with women’s greater willingness to talk honestly about feelings and to take responsibility for how a relationship is going. Kosins (1983) found that women’s slightly higher scores on a measure of jealousy were roughly proportional to women’s lower scores on a measure of social desirability.

7. It is widely believed that adult jealousy is rooted in disrupted attachment history and the emotional conflicts of the early years. In fact, adult jealousy shows no strong association with early conflicts (Clanton and Kosins 1991). Experiences of romantic love and loss of love in adolescence and young adulthood probably are more important than early childhood experiences in contributing to a propensity toward adult jealousy.

8. It is widely believed that jealousy is associated with neurosis or mental illness. In fact, a comparison of patients in a mental hospital, psychotherapy outpatients, and a control group (neither hospitalized nor in therapy) found no significant differences in the amount and intensity of jealousy (Clanton and Kosins 1991). The view of jealousy as rooted simply in a psychological weakness of the jealous person is a reflection of the negative view of jealousy that emerged at the time of the sexual revolution.

**MANAGING JEALOUSY.**

9. It is widely believed that jealousy should be repressed and denied. Indeed, the repression and denial of negative emotions is characteristic of American, English, and other Northern European Protestant cultures. The repression and denial of jealousy are often
accompanies a conscious or unconscious reduction of commitment in a relationship: To avoid being hurt, one may withdraw from a relationship. In fact, jealousy should be acknowledged, expressed, and analyzed in the context of negotiations aimed at improving relationship quality. The denial of jealousy is no guarantee that it is absent.

10. It is widely believed that an individual’s goal should be the complete eradication of jealousy. In fact, one’s goal should be appropriate jealousy, constructively expressed. We should attempt to minimize inappropriate jealousy and destructive expressions of jealousy. But the complete absence of jealousy sometimes reflects indifference (Buss 2000). As Kris Kristofferson warned, sometimes “freedom’s just another word for nothing left to lose.”

**The Further Sociological Study of Jealousy**

Although observation and survey research are desirable, both are problematic, because jealousy is usually denied, repressed, and relabeled. Observational research requires a keen sense of what jealousy is, how it is likely to be expressed, and by what means it is likely to be hidden from view. Survey research and attempts to measure jealousy in individuals require unobtrusive measures, probably connected to descriptions of possible jealousy-producing vignettes (Ellestad and Stets 1998), and avoid the use of the term jealousy. It is meaningless to ask subjects how jealous they are when they probably are unclear about what jealousy is and they are very likely to deny being jealous (Clanton 1981).

Historical and cross-cultural research holds great promise for advancing our understanding of jealousy. All societies, past and present, are available to us as case studies in the production and management of jealousy. As Durkheim (1995) extracted lessons about religion from anthropological accounts of hunting and gathering cultures, we can extract lessons about jealousy from a vast trove of historical and comparative materials. Sociological accounts of jealousy must move beyond psychometrics and therapeutic concerns to reveal the overlooked larger social implications of jealousy and, by extension, the social implications of emotions in general.

**Sociology and Psychology**

Sociological analysis challenges some elements of the psychological view of jealousy that prevails in the “therapeutic culture” in which Americans live (Rieff 1966). The psychological framing of life experience is encouraged by the excessive individualism that characterizes American culture (Bellah et al. 1985). Sociological consideration of jealousy and other emotions draws attention to the influence of society and culture on the private emotions of individuals and to the hidden social usefulness of emotions. The sociological view tends to destigmatize the jealous individual and to break the cycle of blaming the victim, which is encouraged by the widespread but erroneous view that jealousy is caused primarily by the personal inadequacies (especially the low self-esteem) of the jealous person. Sociology is useful in the education of psychotherapists as an antidote to the tendency of clinicians to neglect social forces and concentrate too narrowly on the early experiences and the inner life of the individual and on the dysfunctional aspects of jealousy and other emotions.

This analysis of jealousy is intended to demonstrate the usefulness of the sociology of emotions and to provide a framework for the sociological study of other emotions. As Durkheim (1951) sought to demonstrate the power of sociology by explaining the solitary act of suicide
in terms of the influence of group membership, this chapter follows Davis (1936) in seeking to
demonstrate the power of sociology by explaining the private emotion of jealousy in terms of the
influence of social learning, social institutions, and society and culture.

ENVY

Here we distinguish envy from other emotions with which it often is confused. We note the univer-
sality of envy, its cross-cultural variability, its overlooked social usefulness, the strategies by which
societies attempt to reduce and manage it, and the political implications of envy management.

The Neglect of Envy by the Social Sciences

As both Scheler (1961) and Schoeck (1970) have noted, despite its considerable social significance,
envy largely has been neglected as a topic of social scientific inquiry. Jealousy has received more
and Envy, chronicles the emergence of jealousy research in the 1970s and 1980s and concludes
that after decades of neglect, “jealousy and envy... have certainly emerged as legitimate topics
of scientific inquiry.” However, of the 12 chapters in the Salovey book, 9 are about jealousy, only
1 is about envy, and 2 are about both emotions. Envy remains the most neglected emotion and the
least well understood.

Discovering Envy

Here we revisit and extend the definition of envy and note the difficulty of studying an emotion that
routinely is denied, repressed, and relabeled. As noted above, envy is hostility toward superiors, a
negative feeling toward someone who is better off (Scheler 1961; Schoeck 1970). In other words,
envy is resentment toward someone who has some desirable object or quality that one does not
have and cannot get.

Envy is not the wish for the object or advantage that provoked the envy. Rather, envy is
the much darker wish that the superior would lose the object or advantage. Envy is the perverse
pleasure, the malicious joy (Schadenfreude), that is felt when the superior fails or suffers.

The envious person rarely resorts to violence against the superior and rarely seeks to seize
or to win the desired object through direct competition (Schoeck 1970). Often the envious person
takes no action, but instead merely wishes that the other would lose the advantage that provoked
the envy or otherwise would suffer. And the envious person may quietly celebrate any such loss
or suffering that may befall a superior. Most often, such dark feelings are contained within the
individual. Occasionally, they may be voiced to others: “I’d like to see him get what’s coming to
him,” “Serves them right,” or “How the mighty have fallen.”

The most common outward expression of envy is gossip (Foster 1972). Recall, for example,
the deprecating labels your high school peers used to describe the student with the best grades
(“teacher’s pet” and worse), the best football or basketball player (“dumb jock”), and the beauty
queen (“stuck up”). Any quality or achievement that provokes admiration also is likely to provoke
some envy.

An individual’s envy is likely to be strongest when the advantage of the superior is in an area
of importance to the individual’s own self-definition. As James (1983:296) observed, he might
envy another person whose knowledge of psychology exceeded his own, but he would be unlikely to envy someone whose knowledge of Greek exceeded his own.

I, who for the time have staked my all on being a psychologist, am mortified if others know much more psychology than I. But I am contented to wallow in the grossest ignorance of Greek. My deficiencies there give me no sense of personal humiliation at all. Had I "pretensions" to be a linguist, it would have been just the reverse.

Following James, Salovey and his associates (Salovey and Rodin 1989; Salovey and Rothman 1991) have argued that envy is most likely to be felt when comparisons are made in domains that are especially important to how we define ourselves. We only truly care about our performance in a limited number of life domains. This “domain relevance hypothesis” holds that envy is most likely to be experienced when comparisons with another person are negative for the self, and these comparisons are in a domain that is especially important and relevant to self-definition.

Conceptually speaking, one cannot envy “down.” By definition, the envied must be better off than the envier. In real life, however, it is possible to be simultaneously better off than another in some ways but less well off in other ways. For example, younger people may envy older people for their wealth and power, but older people with wealth and power may envy younger people for their health and good looks. The unemployed youth who is going fishing may envy the bank president because of his wealth, but the bank president may envy the unemployed youth because of his freedom to go fishing.

Envy, like all emotions, is a feeling within an individual. But envy may also prevail between groups, classes, and whole societies. Poor individuals may envy the rich as a whole. Losers in competitions envy winners in general. (This may account in part for the tendency of some sports spectators, when they do not care strongly which team wins, to root for the underdog.) The New York Yankees and the Los Angeles Lakers have been described by numerous sportswriters as “the most hated team in America,” the result of long histories of success and glamour. Likewise, New Yorkers and Californians often are targets of envy from people who live in other parts of the country. Americans are targets of envy from people who live in other parts of the world. Following the attacks of September 11, 2001, even in nations friendly to the United States, some individuals voiced the idea that Americans previously had been spared such attacks on their own soil but now must come to terms with loss and vulnerability such as other nations know.

The Denial of Envy

Because envy is a completely negative emotion, it usually is repressed, denied, disguised, and relabeled. To admit straightforwardly to envy is to declare oneself to be inferior to another and hostile toward that person (or class of persons) because of the inferiority.

Because of repression, individuals are usually unaware of their own envy and so are not reliable informants about their own envy. In a review quoted on the cover of Helmut Schoeck’s 1966 book Envy, anthropologist George Murdock writes: “Schoeck has accomplished something comparable to what Freud did, namely to uncover and reveal the social implications of a deeply repressed motive.” Freud argued that many social institutions are designs for the management of unconscious sexuality and the propensity toward violence. Schoeck shows that many social institutions are designs for the management of unconscious envy. Although many sociologists have an aversion to Freud and to the notion of the unconscious mind (Manning 2005), the study of envy clearly represents an area of inquiry in which a full understanding of the phenomenon in question requires both sociological and psychological sensitivities.
Envy often is mislabeled as "jealousy," thus making it less likely that we will understand it and deal with it constructively. Conversely, jealousy is almost never mislabeled as "envy." This pattern of usage suggests that envy is more negative, more shameful, and more deeply repressed than jealousy, even if we are not sure why. Envy is one of the seven deadly sins, but jealousy is not (Lyman 1978).

As an example of the confusion surrounding jealousy and envy, the 2004 comedy film Envy was promoted by HBO thus: "Jealousy rears its ugly head in Envy." A TV guide listed the film as follows: "Envy (2004, Comedy) A man becomes jealous of his wealthy friend." Although this film is clearly about envy, these two different descriptions of the film use the word "jealousy." Thus, the popular media both reflect and contribute to the confusion of jealousy and envy.

Some academic writing also contributes to the confusion. Mead (1931), toward the end of a classic article on jealousy, begins discussing envy, without ever using the word "envy" and without realizing that she has switched topics. DeSwann (1989) titles his inquiry "Jealousy as a Class Phenomenon: The Petite Bourgeoisie and Social Security," but the article is clearly about envy, not jealousy.

Because envy is repressed, denied, and relabeled, it is difficult to observe and almost impossible to assess through self-report. To study envy by observation, we must look for it in the situations in which it is likely, and we must watch for the disguises in which it often appears.

Situations in which envy is likely include the following: Your best friend wins a coveted scholarship or award. A neighbor wins the lottery. A co-worker gets a raise or a promotion, but you do not. Another woman becomes pregnant when you cannot. The star of the team gets a huge salary and most of the press attention. In a crowded parking lot, another driver finds a parking place when you cannot. In each case, if you could be 100 percent happy for the other with no qualifications or second thoughts, you would be without envy. But to whatever degree you find yourself, even for a moment, thinking the other does not deserve the good fortune or wishing that the other would lose his or her advantage or otherwise suffer that is a measure of your envy.

The great stories of Western civilization include many examples of envy. The Egyptian god Osiris is killed and dismembered by his brother Seth, who is envious of his radiant attractiveness, power, and success. Othello is brought down by the envious lago, who, by the way, uses Othello's propensity to jealousy against him. Salieri hates Mozart because he is more talented and his work as a composer is so effortless. Sailor Billy Budd, adored by the crew for his innocence and natural charisma, becomes the victim of the envy of the ship's master-at-arms John Claggart, who falsely accuses Billy of conspiracy to mutiny.

Although no one likes to admit to envy, especially when we are clear about what it is, it is hard to imagine any human being completely without envy. Some individuals, of course, are, for whatever reasons, much more or less envious than others. But all humans who have not yet achieved moral perfection probably experience some envy.

The common disguises (indirect expressions) of envy include attempts to shift a comparison from areas in which one compares poorly with another to areas in which one looks good, attempts to provoke envy in others, to project envy and greed onto others, excessive admiration, or attempts to share the glory of another. Common verbal formulas for expressing envy include "If I can't have/do X, then no one else should either," "It's not fair that they have X and I/we don't," and, in Oscar Wilde's famous variation, "It is not enough for me to succeed; my friends must also fail."

One of my students showed that she understood what envy is when she put this note at the end of her final paper in our course:

> When I was in high school I knew this girl named Kim. I hated her to the point I avoided her in the halls. She was everything I hated in a person. She was popular, pretty (well not all that pretty), had big boobs (but they sagged), intelligent, and stuck up. It hit me in class after your envy lecture that I was envious of her.
Not only is this an example of envious resentment of the superiority of another, the envy is still active, as indicated by the tendency, years later, to gossip about the superior.

**What Envy Is Not**

To be clear about what envy is, it is useful to differentiate it from several other emotions and conditions with which envy often is confused in ordinary speech.

**JEALOUSY.** Most important here is that envy is not the same as jealousy. As noted above, jealousy is a protective reaction to a perceived threat to a valued relationship or to its quality (Clanton and Smith 1998). Envy is hostility toward superiors, negative feelings toward someone who is better off. Whereas jealousy typically involves three people, envy involves only two. Not only are the two emotions distinct in terms of the situations that give rise to them, an experimental study (Parrott and Smith 1993) revealed qualitative differences between them. Jealousy was characterized by fear of loss, distrust, anxiety, and anger. Envy was characterized by feelings of inferiority, longing, resentment, and disapproval of the emotion.

**AN INNOCENT WISH.** Envy, as noted above, is not an innocent wish for what one does not have. Envy is the darker wish that a superior should lose or suffer. Envy takes delight at the downfall of a superior. Of course, a wish for an object or advantage may be accompanied by unconscious envy.

**ADMIRATION.** Although the two often are mixed together in real life, envy is different from admiration. In ordinary speech we may say that we “envy” someone’s ability as a public speaker. This is technically a misuse of the word “envy,” because we presumably are not consciously wishing that the speaker in question will embarrass himself before an audience or get laryngitis before a big speech. Instead, we are expressing admiration for this person’s skill, and the admiration may or may not be mixed with unconscious envy.

Advertisers often play on the fact that if one is admired, one also might be envied. A recent print ad for a German luxury car trumpets: “More Horses. Bigger Engine. Increased Envy.” Another luxury car ad promises, “Once again envy will be standard equipment.” An expensive men’s fragrance is called Envy. A recent print ad for diet pills shows a photo of a newly slim celebrity model with the caption, “Don’t hate me because I’m beautiful.” Advertising, which is the consumer culture’s version of mythology, promises the pleasure that comes from being envied by others. As Aeschylus noted, “He who goes unenvied shall not be admired.”

**EMULATION.** Envy is different from emulation. In ordinary speech, we may say that “envy” is a good thing because it motivates people to work harder to get for themselves what they envy others for having. Rather than envy the owner of a fine automobile, we should emulate her. This presumably means that we should work hard, make a lot of money, and buy such a car for ourselves. Our capitalist ethos encourages us to convert our envy into emulation, thus reducing the risk that the envious have-nots will demand redistribution of wealth and privilege. Because much envy is stimulated by differences that cannot be relieved by emulation, this advice is hollow. Some envy can be converted into emulation with a resulting increase in productivity, but a great deal of envy is the result of enduring inequalities that cannot be eliminated through hard work.

Distinguishing envy from jealousy, innocent wishes, admiration, and emulation helps us to see that envy, unlike these others, is a thoroughly negative experience for both the envier (because no one enjoys contemplating his or her own inferiority and hostility toward others) and the envied...
(because no one likes being hated and gossiped about by friends, associates, and the general public). Although one may momentarily celebrate being envied as a mark of one's success, no one really wants others to, day in and day out, wish that one would fail, lose, or suffer—and celebrating when one does.

**The Universality of Envy.** Envy is rooted in comparison: To be envious, one must first compare oneself with another person or persons who are judged to be better off in some way that is important. Because comparisons with others are inescapable in social life, envy is a universal potential. In every society, envy is a possible response in a vast range of social interactions between and among persons and groups of unequal wealth, status, power, fame, success, health, talent, grades, looks, and popularity. Envy is potential in virtually all human interactions. Indeed, envy would be a likely outcome in most social situations were it not for social conventions designed to reduce envy.

**A Comparative View of Envy**

Although envy is universal, it varies across cultures and over time (Foster 1972). Sociological understanding of envy is facilitated by the comparison of envy in the simplest tribal societies and in complex industrial societies such as the United States.

In simple societies, the awareness of envy is high. Tribal people know what envy is and anticipate it in every situation in which it is potential. In industrial societies, awareness of envy is low. As noted above, most Americans are unclear about what envy is. The denial of envy is largely effective. Most Americans, most of the time, do not think of themselves as being envious, and most do not consciously anticipate being the target of envy in situations where it is potential.

In simple societies, the fear of envy is very high. Tribal people believe that they will be hated (envied) by their neighbors for any advantage they may gain, and they are likely to believe that the hostile wishes of their neighbors can harm them, bring bad health to their families, and cause their gardens to wither and their goats to die. Compliments are largely absent in tribal and peasant societies (Foster 1972:173).

In industrial societies, conscious fear of envy is low. Americans worry much less about provoking envy than tribal people. We are much less likely to turn down an opportunity to minimize the envy of others. We are much less fearful about being the target of envy and less fearful of compliments in part because we mostly do not believe, as tribal people do, that the hostile wishes of an envious neighbor have the power to harm us.

A cross-cultural comparison of jealousy and envy (Hupka et al. 1993) found that conceptual distinctions between the two emotions overlapped strongly in the United States, weakly in Germany, and not at all in Russia. In other words, Americans (living in the most advanced, most capitalist industrial society) are least clear about the difference between envy and jealousy, Russians (living in the least advanced industrial society, with a long history of forced collectivism) most clear, and Germans somewhere in between.

Because of the very high awareness and fear of envy, simple societies have low levels of economic productivity that remain unchanged for many generations (Foster 1972; Schoeck 1970). Tribal people are reluctant to invent new and more efficient technologies, and they are reluctant to accumulate any benefits that might come from improved efficiency because of the fear of being envied and because of the belief that the envious wishes of others can bring harm to oneself and one's family.

Because of the low awareness and fear of envy, industrial societies have high levels of economic productivity and enjoy dramatic economic growth across the generations. Americans
are more likely than tribal people to innovate and accumulate wealth because we are not much
inhibited by the fear of being envied and because we do not believe the envious wishes of others
can harm us.

Because of high fear of envy, people in simple societies attempt to manage envy by pro-
tecting themselves from envy as expressed in witchcraft, curses, and the “evil eye.” As Foster
(1972:174) notes:

The evil eye is the most widespread of cultural definitions of the situation in which envy is present, and
where its harmful effects must be guarded against. Although children are the prime targets of the “eye,”
other valued property such as animals and crops may be damaged.

Because of low awareness and fear of envy, people in industrial societies manage envy in
the face of great inequality of wealth and power by doing their best to ignore the differences that
might provoke envy and by rationalizing (explaining away) those differences they cannot ignore.
Awareness and fear of envy are higher in preindustrial than in industrial societies, higher in
rural than in urban communities, and higher in recently arrived immigrant groups than among
native-born Americans. The fear of envy is higher in poor communities than in the middle class
and above and higher for nonwhite minorities than for most whites.

A major cultural constraint on higher education for disadvantaged minorities is the high level
of envy in the communities from which many minority students come. If very few in the community
have gone to college, there will be more who wish others from the community should also not go
to college. In some immigrant communities, it is assumed that kids who go to college will move
away from the neighborhood, and the prevailing sentiment is, “It’s a stupid man who makes his
son better than he is.” This is similar to the Italian peasant proverb, “Never educate your children
beyond yourself.” Blacks sometimes refer to black communities as “crabs in a barrel,” suggesting
that anyone who is about to climb out of the disadvantaged neighborhood will be pulled down by
others. A black student who speaks standard correct unaccented English often will be put down
by other blacks as “talking white.” Hispanic students, especially females, often face strong family
pressure to drop out of college, being told they are “selfish” to want what their parents did not have.
American Indian students are influenced by tribal cultures in which high awareness and fear of
envy make individuals reluctant to achieve what their neighbors do not have. For all disadvantaged
minorities and for poor whites as well, educational achievement and upward mobility are inhibited
by the fear of being envied in communities from which few have gone to college.

Avoiding Envy

The important differences in envy-management between simple and complex societies can be
illustrated by comparisons of their respective strategies by which an individual may avoid the envy
of others (Foster 1972). In every society, four main strategies of envy-avoidance are employed,
always in the same order, because each strategy reduces envy while giving up less than the
strategy that follows it. The strategies are concealment, denial, symbolic sharing, and true sharing
or redistribution.

CONCEALMENT. In simple societies, a person may hide surplus food or hide from view a
healthy child (or goat) in order to avoid being envied by a neighbor, especially by one who has no
food or whose own child (or goat) is sick or has died. Concealment was difficult in tribal societies,
where everyone lived in an open camp and privacy was unknown. In industrial societies, class
segregation allows the rich to conceal their advantage from the nonrich in residential enclaves,
country clubs, private schools, and exclusive entertainments.
DENIAL. In simple societies, a person who is found to have surplus food may reduce the envy of neighbors by claiming that the food is rotten or otherwise inedible. A person may claim that his or her child (or goat) is sick and could die at any time. In industrial societies, a polite person is expected to minimize his or her own achievements, to deflect compliments, to exhibit modesty, to deny, in other words, that he or she has done anything that should result in being envied. Winners of Oscars and MVP awards reduce envy by being modest and by sharing the glory with associates.

SYMBOLIC SHARING. If neither concealment nor denial is successful, the next step is to seek to reduce the envy of the other by giving up some part of that which provoked the envy or by sharing the glory in some way. In some tribal societies, new fathers leave a phallic gift of a baton at the door of each other husband in the village, as though to say, “Don’t hate me for fathering a healthy child. You too can do this.” In industrial societies, new fathers give a phallic gift of a cigar to other men whom they meet but without a clear sense of why. The ancient tradition of bringing food to the home where someone had died is another form of symbolic sharing that originated as an envy-avoidance mechanism.

The tip or gratuity is another modern form of symbolic sharing (Foster 1972:181), an envy-avoidance mechanism that says, “Here is some money. Don’t hate me for enjoying this fine meal while you must serve me.” In most European languages, the word for the tip means “drink” or “drink money” (the French pourboire, the German Trinkgeld). The English word “tip” probably derives from the older word tipple, meaning to drink. The tip is only enough money to buy a drink. It is only a small part of the cost of the meal that the diner has enjoyed.

Much contemporary philanthropy may be understood as symbolic sharing. Through their public generosity, the very rich are able to reduce their tax burdens and, more important, head off any popular movement in the direction of progressive taxation (Slater 1980).

TRUE SHARING. If symbolic sharing is unsuccessful, one usually can reduce envy by sharing equally with the other the object that provoked the envy. Such redistribution reduces envy, but at a very high cost to the person who is the target of the envy. In simple societies, the fear of envy is so great that no one seeks to gain anything that the neighbors do not have. Among tribal people, wealth taboos to reduce envy ensure that everyone remains poor. Anyone who comes into any extra food or wealth is required by tribal custom to provide a feast for his neighbors (the potlatch) or otherwise to give away his advantage. The Lakota call such redistribution “the giveaway.”

In industrial societies, taxation is the means by which wealth is redistributed so that envy is reduced. Contending approaches to tax policy reflect the range of economic and political options within a society. The political right seeks to reduce envy by means of class segregation and, especially, by means of rationalizations of existing inequality. The political left seeks to reduce envy by reducing the inequalities of wealth and power that cause envy. The politics of envy will be further discussed below.

Envy and Social Order

Envy, paradoxically, both threatens and helps to preserve social order (Schoeck 1970). Envy is both dysfunctional and functional. Envy threatens social order by stimulating interpersonal hostility that might lead to conflict, by inhibiting the innovation and accumulation of wealth that are necessary for prosperity, and by stirring the haves-nots to revolution that overthrows the existing order. Thus, the management of envy is a universal social problem.
All societies prohibit envy; all moral systems condemn it as a violation of the highest values. In hunting-and-gathering societies, everyone remains poor because of the fear of being envied. In agricultural and industrial societies, various rationalizations of inequality are employed to reduce envy (Schoeck 1970). The Greeks explained success that otherwise might provoke envy in terms of luck; the Roman Catholics, in terms of the will of God; the Protestants, in terms of the work ethic. All three rationalizations are commonly used to reduce envy in contemporary American society.

Envy also helps to preserve social order. The social usefulness of envy lies primarily in its contribution to social control (Schoeck 1970). Fear of being envied provides one motive for conformity to necessary norms: We conform rather than be hated for our nonconformity by those who do conform. Fear of being envied protects private property: One motive for reporting a car thief is the envious feeling that “he has no more right to that car than I do.” Fear of being envied encourages fairness: We are less likely to cheat on an exam or to take a favor from a judge, because we know that we would be hated and perhaps reported to authorities by those who did not cheat or receive favors.

More generally, fear of being envied reduces injustice in society (Smith 1991). Following Rawls (1971), Smith distinguishes between resentment, which grows out of a legitimate perception of being treated unfairly, and envy, in which one is unable to show that the other’s advantage results from unfair circumstances or improper actions. For Rawls, resentment is a moral emotion and envy is not. Hostility is a typical response to perceived injustice, so perceptions of unfairness are very important to the understanding of envy.

Some envy can be turned into emulation of those who are more successful. This, presumably, would increase productivity, thus benefiting both the individual and the group. In all but a few cases, however, it is not possible for the nonrich to become rich simply by “working harder.” By exaggerating the payoff for hard work, the capitalist prescription that envy be converted into emulation helps to rationalize and preserve existing inequalities.

Envy, then, is double-edged. It is necessary to society because it inhibits dangerous deviance, but it also threatens society, especially by inhibiting innovation, depressing productivity, and discouraging accumulation of wealth. Thus, the management of envy requires that a balance be struck. From the point of view of the political right, the goal of envy management in society is that there should be enough envy to encourage the masses to conform to necessary rules, but not so much envy as to hold back the most talented individuals (Schoeck 1970). From the point of view of the political left, the goal of envy management is that there should be not only enough envy to encourage conformity to necessary norms, but enough additional envy to inspire demands for some redistribution of wealth and power (Slater 1980). The right is concerned that too much envy would prevent the rich from becoming even richer. The left is concerned that too little envy would make it impossible to narrow the gap between the rich and the nonrich. Thus, the right seeks to conceal, minimize, and rationalize existing inequality, while the left seeks to reveal, publicize, and dramatize existing inequality.

The Management of Envy in Society

Because envy threatens social order, its management is a universal social problem. As Foster (1972:175) noted:

All societies appear to have cultural forms, attitudinal norms, and cognitive outlooks that serve to reduce the fear of the consequences of envy, thereby contributing to the stability of the social group as well as to the psychological well being of the individual.
Envy is reduced by its prohibition in combination with one of two political strategies: shared poverty or rationalizations of inequality.

**Prohibitions of Envy.** Envy is prohibited in all known societies (Foster 1972; Lyman 1978; Schoeck 1970). Every religious and ethical system condemns envy. The Ten Commandments of the Jews and Christians include, “Thou shalt not covet (envy) ... anything that is thy neighbor’s.” Buddhism teaches that a virtuous person will wholeheartedly celebrate the good fortune of a neighbor. Such celebration would be the opposite of envy, in which one would begrudge the neighbor’s good fortune.

The prohibition of envy, alas, is not sufficient to eradicate it from society, just as universal prohibitions of murder and adultery do not wipe out these behaviors. The universal prohibition of any attitude or behavior, especially when the prohibition is part of the highest religious and ethical principles of a people, is good evidence that the attitude or behavior is not only bad for society but also that it is potentially widespread and, by its nature, difficult to suppress. There would be no reason for such rules unless the prohibited attitudes and behaviors are likely to occur.

Because the prohibition of envy does not result in its eradication, every society must take additional measures to reduce envy. Two strategies are available, shared poverty (typical of simple tribal societies) and rationalizations of inequality (typical of agricultural and industrial societies).

**Shared Poverty.** In simple societies, where the awareness and fear of envy are high, everyone remains poor in order to reduce envy (Foster 1972). Envy, presumably, is reduced by the forced equality of shared poverty. If everyone is poor, then no one can be hated for having more than others. Such poverty probably was functional for hunting-and-gathering peoples living marginally in the face of unyielding nature: If anyone took ten times the resources of others, some members of the group probably would die. Thus, the wealth taboos of tribal peoples require that one quickly share with others any surplus one may gain. As noted above, the tribal obligation of true sharing or radical redistribution reduces the incentive for hard work, innovation, and accumulation. In this way, high fear of envy inhibits economic productivity.

Among the aboriginal people of Australia, for example, a person is required to share what he has with appropriate relatives as prescribed by kinship rules. Thus, if by working in the white economy, an aborigine obtains extra food or money or a cassette recorder, he may be required to give it away. The kinship rules are such that each individual is related to a very large number of others; so, the demands made upon the aborigine who is successful in Western terms can be very great. Frequently, the earnings of such a person become exhausted; so, there is less motivation for working hard in a competitive environment in order to earn more. Why should an individual work for the whites to earn money to buy a cassette recorder if it must be shared equally with all of one’s many cousins, one of whom is likely to lose or break it? Kinship obligations such as these originated in ancient hunting-and-gathering societies. Resources were scarce and perishable, and in such situations, one finds security in the widest possible definition of mutual obligation.

But wealth taboos do not eliminate envy. In fact, tribal societies, despite their shared poverty, are marked by much more envy than is found in agricultural and industrial societies. Although tribal people are roughly equal in economic terms, they find other things to be envious about (Schoeck 1970). In such societies, where any small or temporary advantage makes one the target of a lot of envy (hatred, hostile wishes, gossip, witchcraft) from the neighbors, any attempt to improve one’s situation (including traveling, moving away, learning a new skill, getting an education) would be strongly discouraged.
RATIONALIZATIONS OF INEQUALITY. In complex societies, where the awareness and fear of envy are low, it is possible to achieve or obtain more than one’s neighbor without becoming the target of a lot of envy. In such societies, envy is reduced by means of rationalizations of inequality, socially constructed explanations that make it all right for some to have more and do better than others. Such explanations legitimize existing patterns of inequality, thus reducing the risk that one will be hated for doing better than others. Three rationalizations of inequality that are important in Western culture are the Greek concept of luck, the Roman Catholic belief in the will of God, and the Protestant work ethic (Schoeck 1970).

The Greek concept of luck (or chance or fate or fortune) is one of the most important cultural inventions in history because it freed humans from the inhibitions that resulted from envy and, thus, made possible all of the cultural inventions that followed (Schoeck 1970). By explaining one’s own success as the result of good luck, one reduces the likelihood that another will be made envious by that success. Similarly, by explaining one’s own failure as a result of bad luck rather than some malicious act by another, one reduces the tendency to envy those who have done better and reduces the threat that one’s envy might pose to those who have done better. The concept of luck greatly reduces the power of envy to inhibit innovation, productivity, and the accumulation of wealth, status, and power.

The Roman Catholic Church taught that differences in wealth, status, power, and achievement are the result of the will of God. One ought not hate (envy) those who are better off in any way, because everyone’s situation is an assignment from God and, thus, not to be questioned. If a poor person believes that his poverty is the will of God, he is less likely to hate (envy) the rich. Even more important, if a rich person knows that the poor believe his wealth is the will of God, he has less to fear from their envy and he is less apt to be inhibited from accumulating more. Roman Catholic belief in the will of God thus serves to reduce envy in society and to legitimize and preserve existing inequalities. Belief in the divine right of kings, for example, helped to preserve monarchies and to prevent the rise of democracy. Super-rich Protestant John D. Rockefeller claimed, “God gave me my money.”

As Weber (1996) notes, the official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church was that poverty was noble and that wealth was morally suspect. In practice, the church sanctioned the existing inequalities of wealth and poverty as “God’s will,” collaborated with the ruling classes of Europe in supporting the divine right of kings, formally opposed democratic government in principle until the 1960s, and, of course, accumulated vast wealth of its own. More recently, the Catholic Church condemned the liberation theology of those priests and theologians in Latin America who engaged in political action to reduce inequality and injustice among the people to whom they minister. Pope Benedict XVI, in his previous role as the chief enforcer of Vatican policy, was the principal agent of the Catholic Church in the suppression of liberation theology.

More important than these particulars of Roman Catholic history is the church’s role as the main carrier of Western culture from the fall of the Roman Empire until the Renaissance and the Reformation and beyond. We ought not let the foibles or failures of the Catholic Church or our modern secular sensibilities blind us to the social and cultural importance of the church. Monasteries preserved ancient writings that otherwise would have been lost during the Dark Ages (Cahill 1995). The Catholic Church contributed to the rise of feudal society, which replaced the chaotic warlordism of the Dark Ages. The Catholic Church established libraries, patronized the arts, and founded the first universities in Europe. The Catholic Church trained two priests, Martin Luther and John Calvin, who broke from the Catholic Church and launched the Protestant Reformation, which, according to Weber (1996), encouraged industrialization, the rise of capitalism, the possibility of democracy, the dominance of bureaucratic administration, and other aspects of modernization.
As the main carrier of Western civilization, the Roman Catholic Church provided the vocabulary and imagery for using “God’s will” as a rationalization of an inequality that might otherwise stimulate envy. But this socially useful concept is much broader than Catholicism or, more generally, Christianity. Not only Orthodox and Protestant Christians, but also Jews and Muslims attribute inequalities of outcome, including the deaths of loved ones, to God’s will, whether God be called Yahweh or Allah. Eastern religions, although not monotheistic, also have the notion that one’s social rank and one’s personal triumphs and losses are related to larger forces or higher powers. Even modern people with a secularist bent are likely, under the stress of setback, misfortune, or loss, to refer to God or to appeal to God as a way of coping.

Although Protestant Christians also use the will of God as a rationalization of inequality that reduces envy, the Protestants developed a further explanation for why some individuals have more wealth, status, and power than others—the work ethic. As Weber (1996) argued, the Protestants, especially the Calvinists, saw work in this world as a religious duty and, in time, came to believe that material success as a result of hard work and thrift is a probable sign that one is among the elect (that one is saved and likely to go to heaven).

The notion that prosperity is evidence of one’s salvation was not part of the official teaching of Protestantism. The belief emerged as part of the popular religion, Weber argues, as a response to the Calvinist doctrine of predestination, the belief that God knows in advance who will be saved. Whereas Catholics were assured that they would go to heaven if they were baptized and if they participated in the important rituals of the Catholic Church, the doctrine of predestination left Protestants uncertain of their salvation. To compensate, Weber argues, the Protestants developed the idea that prosperity resulting from hard work in a vocation (any legitimate occupation) was a sign that one was among the elect.

In contrast to earlier Christian teaching that wealth is an obstacle to salvation, the Protestant work ethic made it morally acceptable to become rich. As John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, later put it (Weber 1996:175): “We ought not to prevent people from being diligent and frugal; we must exhort all Christians to gain all they can, and to save all they can; that is, in effect, to grow rich.” By the time of Benjamin Franklin (1700s), who for Weber was an important exemplar and popularizer of the work ethic, the religious roots of the obligations of hard work and frugality had been largely forgotten. A secularized work ethic now prevails, sustained by the economic productivity of the capitalist system and routinized by bureaucratic administration.

To sum up: Envy is reduced by its prohibition, by the shared poverty of simple tribal societies, and by socially constructed rationalizations of inequality, especially luck, the will of God, and the Protestant work ethic. All three rationalizations, especially the work ethic, make it possible for individuals to gain wealth, status, power, and other advantages without being held back by the envy of the less fortunate. Thus, all three rationalizations, especially the work ethic, are fundamental underpinnings of industrial capitalism and its handmaiden, bureaucratic administration. The work ethic legitimizes the inequality that earlier moral systems condemned.

The Politics of Envy Management

The management of envy is inescapably political. Every political system is an arrangement for the management of envy (Yamaguchi 1997). The debate between the political left and right may be understood as a disagreement as to how envy should be managed.

Conservatives, reactionaries, and libertarians (defenders of capitalism, including most Republicans) see inequality as inevitable and prescribe class segregation, emulation, and rationalizations of inequality in order to reduce envy. From the point of view of the political right, the
chief concern is that the rich and talented should not be held back by the envy of the poor masses (Novak 1988; Schoeck 1970). The right is concerned that too much envy would prevent the rich from becoming even richer. As conservative columnist George Will puts it, “Egalitarianism is envy masquerading as philosophy.”

Progressives, reformers, and democratic socialists (critics of capitalism, including most Democrats) see much inequality as resulting from unfairness and prescribe progressive taxation in order to reduce the inequality that is at the root of envy. From the point of view of the political left, the chief concern is that the envy of the have-nots should be sufficient to fuel demand for reform (Slater 1980). The left is concerned that too little envy would make it impossible to narrow the gap between the rich and the nonrich.

The right seeks to conceal and minimize existing inequality, while the left seeks to reveal and dramatize existing inequality. With some justification, the right accuses the left of stirring up the envy of the masses (Novak 1988; Schoeck 1970). With some justification, the left accuses the right of dampening and diverting the envy of the masses as a way of protecting the rich from taxation (Slater 1980).

Defenders of capitalism advise the have-nots to convert their envy into emulation (Schoeck 1970). Rather than hating and pulling down those who have what you do not, you should do what they did: Work hard so that you can get the desired object for yourself.

Critics of capitalism argue that most of the envy provoked by gross inequality cannot be converted into emulation. Most nonrich people cannot reasonably hope to become very rich simply by “working harder.” The capitalist advice to convert envy into emulation is largely a scam, a way of cooling out the mark, a way of thwarting progressive taxation and other reforms.

Defenders of capitalism endorse the three historic rationalizations of inequality discussed above: luck, the will of God, and the work ethic. For the right, the rich have been lucky, they have been blessed by God, or they have worked hard. Wealth is seen as nature’s reward for talent and hard work. The rich are, therefore, entitled to what they have, and they ought not be hated (envied) or pulled down by those who have less (Novak 1988; Schoeck 1970). Schoeck (1970) goes further, arguing that the rich are entitled to much more than they have now—and that they have been blocked by the pervasive envy of the have-nots and the willingness of politicians of the left to inflame and manipulate that envy.

Critics of capitalism reject the idea that inequality is best explained in terms of luck, God’s will, and the work ethic. For the left, the rich have not been luckier, more richly blessed, or harder-working. Great wealth, when it is not inherited, often is gained through greed, ambition, sharp dealing, cheating, and exploitation. The rich, therefore, are not entitled to what they have, and they should be the object of resentment (envy) by the masses and of political action that leads to greater fairness in the distribution of wealth and power (Slater 1980).

The management of envy in capitalist society involves the social construction of the approval of greed, what Slater (1980) calls “wealth addiction.” Where greed is generally approved, there will not be much demand for reform. Thus, it is in the interest of the rich and powerful that the masses of the people should believe that “everyone wants to be rich.” Greed stimulates little indignation, because most Americans feel that they would do the same if they could. Ordinary people come to admire the rich rather than resent them. The rich become celebrities, TV stars, and icons. The nonrich, blinded by the unrealistic hope that they someday will be wealthy, tend to protect the prerogatives of the rich rather than use their numerical majority to demand progressive reform. “Don’t tax the rich,” they say, “I may hit the lottery someday, and I wouldn’t want the government to get any of that money.” Those who think that they can beat the system seldom try to change the system. The rich, says Slater (1980), are wealth addicts. The nonrich are “closet addicts,” whose unrealistic dreams of wealth tend to thwart reform and preserve the advantage of the rich.
A certain amount of envy is inevitable in the face of great and growing inequality. Defenders of capitalism see the envious as whining low achievers who ought not be allowed to pull down those who have achieved success and accumulated wealth (Schoeck 1970). Those who seek the progressive reform of capitalism see envy as a legitimate form of protest against the greed and unfairness of American capitalism (Slater 1980).

The Further Sociological Study of Envy

Although observation and survey research are desirable, both are problematic because envy is usually denied and repressed. Observational research requires a keen sense of what envy is, how it is likely to be expressed, and by what means it is likely to be hidden from view. Survey research and attempts to measure envy in individuals require unobtrusive measures, probably connected to descriptions of possible envy-producing situations and avoidance of the use of the terms jealousy and envy. It is meaningless to ask subjects how envious they are when they probably are unclear about what envy is and they are very likely to deny being envious.

Historical and cross-cultural research holds great promise for advancing our understanding of envy. The societies of the world, past and present, are available to us as case studies in the production and management of envy. The accounts of historians and anthropologists provide a vast database for the study of envy, even if these scholars did not set out to focus on envy. As Durkheim (1995) extracted lessons about religion from anthropological accounts of hunting-and-gathering cultures, we can extract lessons about envy from a vast trove of historical and comparative materials.

Envy must be studied in the real-life situations where it arises—in the workplace, competitive sports, politics, the worlds of theater and film, the circle of close friendships, and the family. Envy touches every area of life. Many of the institutions and social processes studied by social scientists are influenced by envy or by systems that evolved to reduce the social harm of envy. Sociological accounts of envy must move beyond psychometrics and therapeutic concerns to reveal the overlooked larger social implications of envy and, by extension, the social implications of emotions in general. By revealing these larger patterns, sociology can contribute to the management of envy in the individual and the management of envy in groups and societies.

Envy in Society: Two Examples

Envy is influenced by history and culture, economics, politics, and religion. Not only micro- but also meso- and macrolevel sociological tools must be employed for a full understanding of this dark, elusive emotion. Two examples will be considered here: the Russian culture of envy and the Rwandan genocide of 1994.

**The Russian Culture of Envy.** Compared with other industrial societies, Russia is a high-envy society. The journalist Hedrick Smith (1990:200), reporting from the Soviet Union in what proved to be its last days, writes:

> Traveling around the country, I came to see the great mass of Soviets as protagonists in what I call the culture of envy. In this culture, corrosive animosity took root under the czars in the deep-seated collectivism in Russian life and then was cultivated by Leninist ideology. Now it has turned rancid under the misery of everyday living.
The prevalence of envy in Russian society also has been noted by Hochschild (1994) and Shogren (1992). Shalin (1995) has commented on the pervasive emotional violence of Russian society, characterized by anger, self-hatred, and emotional overloading akin to posttraumatic stress syndrome.

Envy in Russian society has been exacerbated by the market reforms introduced by Gorbachev, which continue to our own time. The envy of the rank and file is aimed at anyone who rises above the crowd, anyone who gets ahead, even if the gains are honestly earned. In 1990, Gorbachev warned that the culture of envy would snuff out initiative, deter new entrepreneurs, and cripple hopes of real economic progress (Smith 1990).

One Russian TV journalist told Smith that if an American sees someone with a shiny new car, he will think, “Maybe I can get that someday for myself.” But if a Russian sees someone with a new car, he will think, “This bastard with his car. I would like to kill him for living better than I do” (Smith 1990:203f). A reformist deputy in the Supreme Soviet told Smith (1990:204), “Our people cannot endure seeing someone else earn more than they do.” An American correspondent observed, “In America, it’s a sin to be a loser, but if there’s one sin in Soviet society, it’s being a winner” (Smith 1990:203).

In Russia, envy toward the elite, the vertushka, is further encouraged by the prevailing corruption. Russians often make up for poor pay by stealing from the state. As almost everyone engages in illegal acts to enrich themselves, it is assumed that those who have done well have done so by means of massive cheating and stealing rather than through hard work, and this assumption undermines the work ethic.

Successful Russians try to hide their good fortune. Smith observed that, when Americans meet and ask each other, “How are things?” both will say, “Fine,” even if one’s mother died the day before. When Russians meet and ask each other how they are, they will say, “Normal,” or “So-so.” Even if things are good, you do not want people to think things are great, because they might be envious, and there is no telling what they might do.

The historical roots of the Russian culture of envy run deep. Russia was among the last European nations to industrialize, so many Russians lived in rural, peasant communities through much of the twentieth century. As previously noted, awareness and fear of envy are stronger in rural than urban societies. Russian villagers often repeat the aphorism, “The tallest blade of grass is the first to be cut down by the scythe,” clearly a warning about the danger of trying to stand above the crowd. This is similar to the Japanese saying discouraging flamboyance: “The nail that sticks up shall be hammered down.” Likewise, in Canada and the upper Midwestern United States, one hears variations of the saying, “Don’t stick your head above the herd. You’ll get it chopped off.”

In an old Russian tale, God comes to a lucky peasant and offers him any wish, but God adds, “Whatever you choose, I will give twice as much to your neighbor.” The peasant is stumped, because he cannot bear to think of his neighbor being better off than he. Finally, he tells God, “Strike out one of my eyes and take out both eyes of my neighbor.” In another version of this story, the peasant asks that God take one of his testicles.

Since medieval times, Russian peasants lived in a world of collective rather than private enterprise. In czarist times, most Russians lived in small clusters of homes, close to one another, not in single homesteads scattered independently across the plains. After serfdom was abolished in 1861, the peasants banded together and worked the land together. After 1917, communism forced further collectivization and taught that individual profit is immoral.

Jacoby (1973) demonstrated that, despite great shifts in the political structure of Russia, an undemocratic bureaucratic structure evolved and became stronger over hundreds of years. Prior to the Tatar invasion of 1240, most Russians lived in small villages. The central government was weak, and many decisions were made locally by assemblies of the people called Veche. The Tatar
conquest resulted in the establishment of an administration to collect taxes and supervise the
drafting of Russian recruits. In the 1400s, the Tatars deputized a Muscovite grand duke to admin­
ister the payment of tribute, an important step toward making Moscow a central and dominating
power. The Tatars were defeated in 1522, but the czars, rather than dismantling the bureaucracy
the Asian conquerors had brought, turned the system to their own purposes, while strengthening
it with the addition of a secret police apparatus. When the czars were replaced by the communists
after 1917, the new rulers again chose not to dismantle the bureaucracy but rather to adopt it and
strengthen it through the increased use of terror toward opponents of the regime. By the time of
the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, despite two historic upheavals, the Russian people had lived
under increasingly despotic bureaucratic regimes for more than 700 years. As a result, the envious
resentment of their rulers and of the newly rich has very deep roots.

**THE RWANDAN GENOCIDE.** Envy played a part in the Rwandan genocide of 1994 (Tay­
lor 1999). Rwanda was colonized by Germany beginning in 1890. The population was composed
of three ethnic groups: the more numerous Hutu, the historically dominant Tutsi, and the pygmoid
Twa, a very small, marginalized group. These ethnic groups share a common language and culture.
Before 1994, both Rwanda and neighboring Burundi were characterized by a similar ethnic mix
of approximately 80–85 percent Hutu, 15–20 percent Tutsi, and less than 1 percent Twa. Under
Belgian colonial rule, ambiguities about ethnic group membership were settled by an economic
criterion: those with ten or more cows were classified as Tutsi, those with fewer, as Hutu (de Waal
1994).

Because the Tutsi were politically dominant in the areas with which the German colonizers
had the most experience, and because the Tutsi had a strong monarchy with a somewhat centralized
administration, the Germans decided to administer the region indirectly through the Tutsi (Taylor
1999), much as the Tatars administered Russia through the grand duke of Moscow. When Germany
was defeated in World War I, the League of Nations awarded the territory to Belgium, under whose
administration the Tutsi continued to be favored. Resentment built up among the Hutu. After 1926,
the Belgians required Rwandans to carry an identity card, indicating the person’s ancestry (de
Waal 1994). Like the Germans, the Belgians helped their Tutsi allies to expand their control into
peripheral regions. Over time, power came to be concentrated in the hands of a relatively small
clique of Tutsi administrators and a handful of Belgian colonial officials.

Taylor (1999) shows how the resentment was exacerbated by the European belief that the
Tutsi were more attractive than the Hutu. Many Tutsi are taller and thinner than Hutu and have
longer and thinner arms and legs. Furthermore, the Tutsi have a face shape that is more attractive
to Europeans. Many European men married Tutsi women, further strengthening the control of
Tutsi over Hutu and adding to the Hutu envy of the Tutsi. Many upper-class Tutsi understood
that it was to their advantage to reinforce European perceptions of their natural superiority, and
they obliged with pseudohistorical fabrications extolling their intellectual, cultural, and military
achievements.

Hutu dissatisfaction with the system grew during World War II. Hutu protest became more
vocal following the war and into the 1950s. The Rwandan Catholic Church, which had evangelized
large numbers of Rwandans, began to shift its support from the Tutsi elite toward the Hutu masses,
who comprised a majority of the converts. This shift was encouraged by the fact that more and
more of the missionary priests were recruited from blue-collar, Flemish-speaking areas of Belgium
and fewer from the French-speaking elite.

Amid the anticolonial rhetoric of the time and fearing a leftward shift by their Tutsi allies,
Belgian administrators shifted to support what had become the safer group, the Hutu. Violence
between Hutu and Tutsi political groups broke out in 1959, and many Tutsi fled the country or
were expelled. The more numerous Hutu won a United Nations–sponsored election and took control of the government when Rwanda gained its independence in 1962.

Hutu presidents of Rwanda exploited lingering fear of the Tutsi for their own political purposes. Although a quota system based on population was adopted, Tutsi were never given their allotted portion (9 percent) of state jobs or places in schools and universities, and the Twa were given nothing. After decades of civil war, a multiparty government was established in 1993, but hostilities resumed following the 1994 assassination of the Hutu president of Rwanda.

A radio propaganda campaign that appealed to Hutu envy of the Tutsi encouraged the Hutu to kill their Tutsi neighbors. The Tutsi were compared to cockroaches or rats to be exterminated. The Tutsi were portrayed as foreign invaders, intent on turning the Hutu into slaves, and the Hutu were reminded that the Tutsi had ruled over them for centuries. The Hutu government passed out machetes and told their people, “It’s time to go to work,” meaning that it was time to go out and kill the Tutsi. The Hutu referred to Tutsi survivors as “those not finished off.” The Hutu government did nothing to protect the Tutsi, and the United States and the United Nations did not intervene to stop the killing.

The resulting genocide took the lives of almost one million people, about one-seventh of the population of Rwanda. About 80 percent of the Tutsi population died. Rwanda’s infrastructure was left in ruins, and most of the intelligentsia (Hutu and Tutsi) were dead or no longer living in the country.

Other factors contributed to the Rwandan genocide. Rwanda is the smallest and most densely populated nation in sub-Saharan Africa, with over 250 inhabitants per square kilometer, but its per capita GDP is one of the lowest in the world. Rwanda’s population growth rate is one of the highest in the world. Lack of available land contributed to the political tensions that led to the genocide. Virtually all the arable land in the country is under intensive cultivation.

Clearly, however, the Rwandan genocide was fueled in part by what Taylor (Personal Communication 2005) calls the passions of nationalism, including envy, especially Hutu extremist envy of alleged Tutsi intelligence and beauty. This envy was exacerbated by the resentments born of long-standing Tutsi dominance, despite their smaller numbers, in both precolonial and colonial periods.

CONCLUSION

A sociological approach focuses on neglected social aspects of emotions, including their historical and cross-cultural variability, their hidden social usefulness, their relationships to social conflict and change, and their relationships to social institutions. Emotions are responses to social situations that are shaped by social interaction and social learning.

Jealousy is a protective reaction to a perceived threat to a valued relationship or to its quality. Jealousy protects marriage from adultery, thus contributing to social order. Jealousy is learned differently in different cultures because of variations in marriage rules, adultery taboos, and gender roles. Prior to about 1965, jealousy was viewed positively in American society. The sexual revolution and the women’s movement encouraged a more negative view of jealousy, which was blamed on the low self-esteem of the jealous individual. This makes it difficult for contemporary Americans to see the social usefulness of jealousy.

Envy is hostility toward superiors. Envy is not the wish for an object, but rather the wish that the superior would lose his advantage. Because envy threatens social order, envy is prohibited in all societies. In hunting-and-gathering societies, fear of envy is high and everyone remains poor so as to avoid being the target of the envy of neighbors. In industrial societies, fear of envy is
low because of rationalizations of inequality. Envy is reduced if differences in wealth, status, and power are rationalized as the result of luck, the will of God, and hard work. Although it is negative for both the envious and the envied, envy is socially useful because fear of being envied provides an additional motive for complying with necessary norms. Envy management is inescapably political. The right seeks to reduce envy by ignoring and justifying existing inequality. The left seeks to reduce envy by reducing inequality through progressive taxation.

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Jealousy and Envy


