

The Influence of Envy Types on Helping Decisions

Authors: Shuhui Lin, Lijia Chang, Liu Xinjie, Zhongquan Li, Zhongquan Li

Date: 2026-03-26T17:23:22+00:00

Abstract

Helping behavior is one of the critical strategies individuals use to cope with the negative impacts of being envied. However, existing research shows divergence regarding the relationship between the feeling of being envied and helping behavior: the relationship maintenance perspective suggests that being envied prompts individuals to repair relationships through helping, while the status maintenance perspective argues that it inhibits helping to protect one's superior status. Integrating these dual perspectives, this study systematically examines the effects of the type of being envied (benign vs. malicious) and the presence or absence of harmful behavior on helping intentions and preferences for help types (autonomy-oriented vs. dependency-oriented), while testing the mediating role of agency and the moderating effect of interpersonal closeness. Three studies ($N = 838$) found that being maliciously envied significantly reduces helping intentions and weakens the preference for autonomy-oriented help only when the envier exhibits harmful behavior; this effect is mediated by an increase in agency. When no harmful behavior is present, the impact of being maliciously envied is weaker. The promotion of helping intentions by being benignly envied is more significant in low-competition contexts (e.g., campus) and relatively weaker in high-competition contexts (e.g., workplace); furthermore, in low-threat contexts, individuals prefer autonomy-oriented help. Additionally, interpersonal closeness can buffer the negative impact of being maliciously envied (involving harmful behavior) on helping intentions. This study reveals that the helping decisions of the envied are essentially the result of a dynamic trade-off between relationship maintenance and status maintenance goals. This provides empirical support for reconciling existing theoretical divergences and offers a new perspective for understanding the strategic choices of helping behavior in competitive contexts.

Full Text

Preamble

The Impact of Envy Type on Helping Decisions Lin Shuhui 1

Chang Lijia 1,2

Liu Xinjie 1

Li Zhongquan 1*

(1 Nanjing University, Nanjing, 210023) (2 Yili Normal University, Yining, 835000)

摘要

Helping behavior is a critical strategy for individuals to mitigate the negative consequences of being envied. However, existing research presents conflicting views on the relationship between being envied and helping behavior: the relationship maintenance perspective suggests that being envied motivates individuals to help others to repair social bonds, whereas the status maintenance perspective suggests it inhibits helping to protect one's superior position. This study integrates these dual perspectives to systematically examine how the type of envy (benign vs. malicious) and the presence or absence of harmful behavior influence helping intentions and preferences for specific types of help (autonomy-oriented vs. dependency-oriented). Furthermore, we examine the mediating role of agency and the moderating effect of interpersonal closeness.

Across three studies ($N = 838$), the results indicate that being maliciously envied significantly reduces helping intentions and weakens the preference for autonomy-oriented help only when the envier engages in harmful behavior. This effect is mediated by an increase in the envied individual's sense of agency. In the absence of harmful behavior, the impact of being maliciously envied is relatively weak. Conversely, being benignly envied promotes helping intentions more significantly in low-competition environments (e.g., campus settings) than in high-competition environments (e.g., the workplace); in low-threat contexts, individuals show a stronger preference for providing autonomy-oriented help. Additionally, interpersonal closeness buffers the negative impact of being maliciously envied (accompanied by harmful behavior) on helping intentions.

This research reveals that the helping decisions of envied individuals are essentially the result of a dynamic trade-off between relationship maintenance and status maintenance goals. These findings provide empirical support for reconciling existing theoretical discrepancies and offer a new perspective for understanding strategic choices in helping behavior within competitive contexts.

关键词

Type of Being Envied, Helping Decisions, Type of Help, Agency, Interpersonal Closeness Classification Code: B842

Abstract

Envy is a ubiquitous social emotion in interpersonal interactions. While previous research has extensively explored the psychological and behavioral responses of the “envier,” relatively little attention has been paid to the “envied” (the target of envy). In social interactions, being envied often places individuals in a complex psychological state, influencing their subsequent social decisions—particularly helping behavior. This study aims to investigate how the type of being envied (benign envy vs. malicious envy) affects an individual’s helping decisions, and to explore the moderating roles of help type, the envier’s agency, and interpersonal closeness.

Through a series of experiments, this research systematically examines the behavioral patterns of the envied. The results indicate that when individuals perceive they are being envied benignly, they are more inclined to provide autonomous help to the envier to maintain positive social relationships. Conversely, when individuals perceive they are being envied maliciously, they may choose to provide dependency-oriented help or even refuse to help as a defensive strategy to mitigate potential social risks. Furthermore, the envier’s level of agency and the degree of interpersonal closeness between the two parties significantly moderate these effects. Specifically, in high-closeness relationships, the negative impact of malicious envy on helping intentions is attenuated. These findings provide a new perspective for understanding the complexity of prosocial behavior in social hierarchies and offer theoretical support for managing interpersonal conflicts and promoting cooperation.

Introduction

In the field of social psychology, envy is defined as an unpleasant emotion arising when an individual lacks another’s superior quality, achievement, or possession. Research has traditionally categorized envy into two types: benign envy, which motivates the envier to improve themselves, and malicious envy, which leads to a desire to pull the envied down. However, social interaction is a dyadic process. For the individual who is the target of envy, perceiving these different types of envy can trigger distinct psychological mechanisms and behavioral responses.

Helping behavior, as a core component of prosocial behavior, is frequently used by the envied as a strategy to manage their social image and navigate the risks associated with being envied. However, not all help is perceived or offered equally. This study distinguishes between “autonomous help” (providing tools or knowledge for the recipient to solve problems independently) and “dependency-oriented help” (providing the direct solution,

1 引言

Being envied significantly influences an individual's helping behavior. As the source of envy, the superior performance of the envied person can easily disrupt the egalitarian relationship with the envier, triggering resentment and hostility (Parrott, 2016) and directly affecting the behavioral choices of the envied party. On one hand, out of concern for interpersonal conflict, envied individuals tend to be relationship-maintenance oriented, increasing prosocial behavior to alleviate tension (e.g., Li et al., 2017; van de Ven et al., 2010). On the other hand, the instability of a superior position can breed status anxiety and activate status-maintenance motives, prompting individuals to adopt self-protection strategies such as knowledge hiding (Liu et al., 2020) or reducing their willingness to help (Zheng et al., 2022). The trade-off between these two motives depends on how the envied person interprets the type of envy: when perceiving themselves as being benignly envied, individuals sense the other party's recognition of their superiority, which primarily activates relationship-maintenance motives (Exline & Lobel, 1999). Conversely, when perceiving themselves as being maliciously envied, they sense hostility aimed at undermining their advantage, which triggers status-maintenance motives (Lange et al., 2018; Parrott & Rodriguez Mosquera, 2008; van de Ven et al., 2009). Therefore, incorporating the type of envy perceived is essential for clarifying contradictory findings in the existing literature.

Furthermore, existing research has largely focused on the binary decision of "whether to help," with insufficient exploration into the specific modes of helping. Being envied not only affects whether an individual provides assistance but may also alter their preference for specific types of help (Chernyak-Hai et al., 2017; Halabi & Nadler, 2017). Based on this, the present study integrates the dual perspectives of relationship maintenance and status maintenance to examine how the type of perceived envy influences both the willingness to help and preferences for different helping modes, while also revealing the underlying psychological mechanisms.

1.1 被妒忌感的类型

Feeling envied is a social-cognitive evaluation in which an individual perceives that others are experiencing envy toward them (Parrott, 2016; Rodriguez Mosquera et al., 2010). Based on the behavioral tendencies of the envier, the feeling of being envied can be categorized into being benignly envied and being maliciously envied. The former stems from perceiving the envier's constructive intentions, such as self-improvement and positive imitation, while the latter originates from perceiving destructive intentions, such as aggression and disparagement (Lange et al., 2022; van de Ven et al., 2010).

Perceiving benign envy is associated with an increased sense of achievement and superiority (Lee et al., 2018; Rodriguez Mosquera et al., 2010), which enhances self-confidence and pride (Crusius et al., 2020; Yan et al., 2023). In contrast, perceiving malicious envy triggers anxiety and concerns regarding hostility, as

well as potential damage to one' s self-image or social relationships (Lee et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2020; Su & Ng, 2019). The degree of perceived threat (Lange et al., 2020) and the perceived deservingness of one' s advantage (Ferreira & Botelho, 2021; Liu et al., 2018; van de Ven et al., 2009, 2010) serve as critical cues for distinguishing between these two types of envy.

1.2 助人决策

Helping decisions encompass both the binary choice of whether to provide assistance and the specific selection of the type of help offered. Different types of help reflect whether a helper' s motivation is biased toward relationship maintenance or status preservation. This study introduces the classification framework of Autonomy-oriented Help and Dependency-oriented Help [?, ?]. The former (referred to as autonomy help) is akin to “teaching a man to fish,” aiming to enhance the recipient' s ability to solve problems independently. In contrast, the latter (referred to as dependency help) is akin to “giving a man a fish,” referring to the direct provision of a complete solution to the recipient. These two types of assistance differ fundamentally in terms of durability and status-power dynamics: autonomy help contributes to narrowing status gaps, whereas dependency help may further widen them [?, ?, ?].

1.3 整合视角：一个基于双动机权衡的理论框架

Existing literature presents conflicting findings regarding the relationship between being envied and helping behavior. Some studies have found that being envied positively predicts helping behaviors, such as providing advice and assistance (van de Ven et al., 2010). Research within organizational contexts has also confirmed that envied employees may assist colleagues in advancing work projects or cover for them during absences (Scott et al., 2015). Conversely, other studies indicate that being envied can lead to knowledge hiding and a reduced willingness to help (Liu et al., 2020; Zheng et al., 2022). This divergence suggests that a single perspective is insufficient to fully explain the underlying mechanisms, highlighting an urgent need for an integrated framework to clarify these dynamics.

Social comparison theory posits that individuals evaluate their own abilities and relative standing by comparing themselves with others (Cikara & Fiske, 2013; Festinger, 1954). In situations where they are envied, targets of envy face dual motivations: relationship maintenance and status maintenance. They simultaneously desire to maintain interpersonal harmony and strive to protect their own advantages (Koch, 2023; Puranik et al., 2019). The degree of interdependence between the parties positively predicts the motivation for relationship maintenance, while the importance of the advantage to the envied individual positively predicts the motivation for status maintenance.

Based on this, the type of envy perceived (benign vs. malicious) becomes a critical variable in determining the outcome of this trade-off. Compared to benign

envy, malicious envy is more likely to be interpreted as a status threat (Lange et al., 2020), which strengthens status maintenance motives while weakening relationship maintenance motives, thereby reducing the willingness to help (Exline et al., 2013). In contrast, benign envy conveys positive signals; the envied person's advantage is often viewed as "deserved" (van de Ven et al., 2009). However, the envied individual may worry more about relational imbalance (Crusius et al., 2020), which activates relationship maintenance motives and promotes prosocial behavior. In summary, this study integrates social comparison theory with a dual-motive perspective to construct a trade-off model of being envied.

The model predicts that perceiving malicious envy strengthens status maintenance motives. Particularly when individuals perceive harmful intent, they are prone to developing zero-sum beliefs—the notion that one party's gain must come at the expense of another's loss (Chernyak-Hai & Davidai, 2022). This leads to defensive strategies, such as a reduced willingness to help (Liu et al., 2020). Conversely, perceiving benign envy enhances relationship maintenance motives, thereby increasing the willingness to help. These motivational differences further influence preferences for types of help: in low-threat situations, individuals prefer providing autonomy-oriented help, whereas in high-threat situations, they prefer dependency-oriented help.

1.3.1 被妒忌类型对帮助意愿的影响

As previously noted, helping behavior may reinforce unequal relationships between high- and low-status individuals (Nadler, 2020). Maliciously envied individuals often face attempts by the envious party to lower their status through harmful actions (Lange et al., 2018; van de Ven et al., 2009), which in turn strengthens the envied individual's need for status maintenance. In this context, reducing helping behavior serves as a relatively moderate self-protection strategy (Heck & Krueger, 2016). Accordingly, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H1a: Being the target of malicious envy negatively predicts an individual's willingness to help. Although some research suggests that benign envy poses a lower threat and does not necessitate repairing the relationship through helping (van de Ven et al., 2010), more evidence indicates that when an advantage is perceived as justified, being the target of benign envy can enhance one's willingness to help. This effect is driven by confidence in one's own abilities (Crusius et al., 2020; Yan et al., 2023) and a desire to develop harmonious relationships (Li et al., 2017). Accordingly, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H1b: Being the target of benign envy positively predicts an individual's willingness to help.

1.3.2 被妒忌类型对帮助类型偏好的影响

According to the dual-motivation trade-off model, different types of envy not only influence the willingness to help but also shape preferences for specific types of assistance. Specifically, autonomous help can enhance the recipient's sense of self-efficacy [?, ?] and promote reciprocal relationships [?, ?]. However, it may also narrow the status gap between the two parties, thereby threatening the advantage of the envied individual. In contrast, while dependency-oriented help can highlight the helper's superiority and maintain the status hierarchy [?, ?, ?], it may signal that the recipient lacks competence [?, ?]. This can increase the recipient's dissatisfaction and sense of relative deprivation, ultimately exacerbating conflict between the two parties [?, ?, ?].

Compared to benign envy, malicious envy—especially when accompanied by harmful behavior—is more likely to trigger a sense of status threat. In such cases, to maintain the existing hierarchy, individuals are more likely to prefer providing dependency-oriented help while avoiding autonomous help [?, ?]. Accordingly, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H2a: Being the target of malicious envy negatively predicts a relative preference for providing autonomous help. Being the target of benign envy conveys signals of recognition and friendliness, resulting in a lower sense of threat and reducing the need for excessive defensiveness [?, ?]. In this context, individuals are more inclined toward mutually beneficial strategies and prefer autonomous help to communicate friendly intentions [?, ?]. Accordingly, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H2b: Being the target of benign envy positively predicts a relative preference for providing autonomous help.

1.3.3 能动性 & 社群性的中介作用

Based on the dual-perspective model of agency and communion, this study introduces “agency” and “communion” to operationalize the motivational mechanisms within this framework [?, ?].

Specifically, being the target of envy may alter an individual's social self-evaluation [?, ?], which in turn influences their levels of agency and communion [?, ?, ?, ?]. When malicious envy is perceived—particularly when accompanied by harm that escalates a threat from ambiguous to tangible [?, ?]—the resulting status threat prioritizes status-maintenance motives. This manifests as an increase in agency and a suppression of communion, subsequently driving the individual to adopt defensive strategies [?, ?]. Conversely, when benign envy is perceived, the positive social signals it conveys prioritize relationship-maintenance motives. This is characterized by a suppression of agency and an enhancement of communion, which ultimately facilitates prosocial behavior [?, ?, ?].

Agency is oriented toward self-interest, whereas communion is oriented toward

altruism [?, ?]. Analyzing these in conjunction with the characteristics of different types of help, agency is more closely associated with dependency-oriented help [?, ?, ?]. In contrast, communion is more likely to promote helping behavior because it emphasizes equality and empowerment, aligning closely with autonomy-oriented help. Accordingly, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

H3a: The negative impact of being maliciously envied on helping intentions and autonomy preference is mediated by an increase in agency (and/or a decrease in communion). H3b: The positive impact of being benignly envied on helping intentions and autonomy preference is mediated by an increase in communion (and/or a decrease in agency).

1.3.4 人际亲密度的调节作用

Interpersonal closeness is a critical situational factor that influences the dual-motivation trade-off of the envied person. Unlike general social comparisons, individuals tend to react more positively to being outperformed and more negatively to outperforming others when the comparison target is a close associate (Thai, 2022). Based on interdependence and the high value placed on the relationship, individuals are more likely to empathize with and attempt to appease close-relationship enviers, whereas they are more likely to avoid distant ones (Exline & Lobel, 2001).

Under conditions of high interpersonal closeness, the motivation for relationship maintenance is strengthened. This serves to buffer the negative impact of being maliciously envied and reinforces the positive effects of being benignly envied (Feng et al., 2021). Accordingly, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

H4a: Interpersonal closeness moderates the effect of being maliciously envied (especially when accompanied by harm) on the willingness to help (preference for autonomous help): under high (vs. low) closeness, the negative impact is weakened.

H4b: Interpersonal closeness moderates the effect of being benignly envied on the willingness to help (preference for autonomous help): under high (vs. low) closeness, the positive impact is enhanced.

The aforementioned moderating effects may further extend to the mediating paths of agency and communion. In high-closeness relationships, trust and emotional support may buffer the perception of threat brought about by being maliciously envied, thereby weakening its promotion of agency and its inhibition of communion (Fehr & Gächter, 2000; Lange et al., 2016; Smith & Kim, 2007). Simultaneously, high closeness may strengthen the promotion of communion and the inhibition of agency resulting from being benignly envied (Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006; Tesser, 1988; van de Ven et al., 2009). Conversely, under low closeness, the lack of emotional connection may amplify status threat effects, making the promotion of agency by malicious envy more significant, while weak-

ening the facilitative effect of benign envy on communion. Based on this, the study proposes the following moderated mediation hypotheses:

H5a: Interpersonal closeness moderates the effect of being maliciously envied (especially when accompanied by harm) on the willingness to help (preference for autonomous help) through agency: under high (vs. low) closeness, the mediating effect of agency is weakened.

H5b: Interpersonal closeness moderates the effect of being benignly envied on the willingness to help (preference for autonomous help) through communion: under high (vs. low) closeness, the mediating effect of communion is enhanced.

1.4 当前研究

This research consists of three sub-studies designed to systematically examine the effects of the type of being envied (benign vs. malicious) and the presence or absence of harm on helping intentions and preferences for specific types of help. Furthermore, the study tests the mediating roles of agency and communion, as well as the moderating role of interpersonal intimacy. The conceptual model for this research is presented in Figure 1 [FIGURE:1].

Study 1 utilizes a recall paradigm to preliminarily investigate the impact of the type of being envied on helping intentions and help-type preferences. Study 2 employs a situational experiment to manipulate both the type of being envied and the presence of harm, verifying their effects on helping intentions and preferences. Finally, Study 3 replicates these core effects within a workplace sample to test the mediating roles of agency and communion, the moderating role of interpersonal intimacy, and the validity of the overall moderated mediation model.

2 研究 1

Using a free recall paradigm, this study preliminarily investigates the effects of different types of being envied on an individual's willingness to help and their preferences regarding the type of assistance provided.

Introduction

Envy is a complex social emotion that arises when an individual perceives that another person possesses a superior quality, achievement, or possession that they themselves lack or desire. While extensive research has focused on the experience of the envier, recent psychological studies have begun to explore the perspective of the “envied” —the target of this social comparison. Being the object of envy can be a double-edged sword, eliciting both a sense of social superiority and a fear of potential hostility or social exclusion.

The present study aims to distinguish between different types of being envied and how these experiences influence subsequent prosocial behavior. Specifically,

we examine how the nature of the envy directed toward an individual affects their willingness to help the envier and whether it dictates a preference for specific types of help (e.g., autonomy-oriented help versus dependency-oriented help).

Methodology

Participants and Design

Participants were recruited to participate in a study involving a free recall task. The experimental design focused on categorizing the recalled experiences of being envied into distinct types to analyze their differential impacts on social decision-making.

Procedure

The study employed a free recall paradigm. Participants were asked to vividly recall and describe a specific instance in which they were the target of another person's envy. Following this recall task, participants completed measures assessing their current emotional state, their perceived relationship with the envier, and their willingness to provide assistance in a hypothetical follow-up scenario.

Measures

1. **Willingness to Help:** Measured using a Likert scale where participants indicated their likelihood of assisting the person who envied them.
2. **Help Type Preference:** Participants were presented with different assistance strategies, ranging from providing tools for the envier to solve problems independently (autonomy-oriented) to directly solving the problem for them (dependency-oriented).

Results and Discussion

Preliminary analysis suggests that the type of being envied significantly moderates prosocial intentions. When individuals perceive they are being envied for achievements deemed "earned" or "merit-based," they may exhibit different helping patterns compared to when the envy is perceived as malicious or based on unearned advantages.

[FIGURE:1]

The findings indicate that the experience of being envied does not uniformly inhibit or

2.1.1 被试

G*Power 3.1.9.2 was employed to estimate the required sample size. For the planned hierarchical linear regression analysis, we set a small effect size ($f^2 = 0.02$) based on similar prior research (van de Ven et al., 2010), with statistical power at 80% and $\alpha = 0.05$ (Liu et al., 2024; Tong et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2024). The power analysis indicated that a minimum total sample size of 395 participants was required.

A total of 457 participants were recruited online. After excluding those who failed attention checks or provided duplicate responses, the final sample consisted of 405 valid participants (62.7% female), ranging in age from 14 to 66 years ($M = 27.12$, $SD = 7.35$). Sensitivity power analysis confirmed that the current sample size is sufficient to detect a small effect size ($f^2 = 0.02$).

2.1.2 材料和程序

Participants were informed that they were participating in a survey on interpersonal interaction. First, participants were asked to recall and describe in detail a recent incident in which they felt envied by another person. To eliminate potential gender effects, the envier in the recalled incident was restricted to the same gender as the participant [?, ?]. Subsequently, participants completed an adapted version of the Helping Intentions Questionnaire [?, ?]. The questionnaire consisted of several everyday dilemmas in which the envier sought help from the participant, and the participant was informed that they possessed the necessary skills to solve the task. Participants were required to report the likelihood of three behaviors as percentages: non-helping, providing autonomy-oriented help (explaining how to solve the problem), and providing dependency-oriented help (directly completing the task for the person). The sum of the probabilities for these three behaviors was required to be 100%. Across all scenarios, the internal consistency reliabilities for non-helping, autonomy-oriented help, and dependency-oriented help were 0.93, 0.87, and 0.85, respectively. Finally, participants completed scales measuring feelings of being envied, emotions, and empathic concern, followed by demographic information.

Feelings of being envied were measured using an adapted version of the Pain-driven Dual Envy Scale [?, ?]. Following the procedure of Lange et al. [?], the first-person pronouns (“I”) in the original scale were changed to third-person pronouns (“he/she,” referring to the envier) to measure the participant’ s perception of the other person’ s pain (e.g., “He/she feels dissatisfied”), being benignly envied (e.g., “He/she strongly desires what I have”), and being maliciously envied (e.g., “He/she secretly hopes that I lose what I have”). The scale consisted of 11 items using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). In the present study, the internal consistency reliability for the total scale was 0.81, while the reliabilities for the subscales were 0.76 for perceived pain, 0.72 for being benignly envied, and 0.90 for being maliciously envied.

Emotional states were measured based on the research by Exline and Zell [?], with positive emotions (5 items) and negative emotions (6 items) each rated on a 5-point scale (1 = very slightly or not at all, 5 = extremely). In this study, the internal consistency coefficients for these two measures were 0.89 and 0.82, respectively. Empathic concern was measured using the Empathic Concern subscale of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index [?, ?]. This subscale consists of 6 items using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = does not describe me well, 5 = describes me very well).

In the present study, the internal consistency reliability of this scale was 0.77.

2.2 结果

Harman's single-factor test was employed to assess common method bias [?, ?, ?]. The results indicated that the first common factor explained 25.56% of the total variance, which is below the 40% threshold. This suggests that common method bias was not a significant concern in this study.

The mean scores for non-helping, autonomy-oriented helping, and dependency-oriented helping across various scenarios were utilized as dependent variables. Correlation analysis revealed that perceived distress, being benignly envied, and being maliciously envied were all significantly correlated with the three types of behavioral intentions. Furthermore, being benignly envied was positively correlated with positive emotions, whereas being maliciously envied was negatively correlated with positive emotions and positively correlated with negative emotions (see for details).

3. 被恶意

5.01(1.0)

4.96(1.0)

0.31**

0.47**

4.17(1.5)

4. 不帮助

38.05(27

0.19**

-0.19**

0.44**

-0.14**

0.22**
-0.36**
-0.88**
-0.18**
0.10*
-0.39**
-0.83**
0.46**
0.22**
-0.18**
-0.26**
0.24**
0.20*

5. 自主帮

36.63(17

6. 依赖帮

25.31(14

7. 积极情

2.58(1.0

8. 消极情

2.25(0.8

0.20**

0.26**

0.13*

-0.13**

9. 共情关

5.02(0.8

-0.53**

0.10*

0.19**

-0.30**

0.03**

0.22*

Note: *** denotes $p < 0.001$, ** denotes $p < 0.01$, and * denotes $p < 0.05$; the same applies hereafter.

Regression analysis revealed that being the target of benign envy significantly and negatively predicted the intention to withhold help ($b = -5.28, p < 0.001$), while positively predicting the intention to provide autonomous help ($b = 3.73, p < 0.001$) and dependent help ($b = 1.55, p = 0.036$). After controlling for gender, age, empathic concern, and emotional variables, the predictive effects on withholding help and autonomous help remained significant ($p_{withholding} = 0.037, p_{autonomous} = 0.006$), whereas the prediction for dependent help became non-significant. Overall, being the target of benign envy promotes a general willingness to help, particularly in the form of autonomous help. Conversely, being the target of malicious envy significantly and positively predicted the intention to withhold help ($b = 7.98, p < 0.001$), and negatively predicted both autonomous help ($b = -4.13, p < 0.001$) and dependent help ($b = -3.85, p < 0.001$). These effects remained significant after including control variables ($ps < 0.001$). In summary, being the target of malicious envy reduces the overall willingness to provide help.

Following the methodology recommended by Cohen et al. (1990) and Cohen et al. (2003), we compared the differences in the impact of being maliciously envied on the two types of helping intentions. The specific procedure was as follows: first, estimated values for autonomous help were generated based on the regression coefficients of being maliciously envied; second, the difference between these estimated values and the original values of dependent help was calculated; finally, this difference was regressed on being maliciously envied as the dependent variable. The same procedure was applied to analyze being the target of benign envy. The results indicated no significant difference in the negative impact of being maliciously envied on autonomous versus dependent help ($p = 0.532$). However, the positive impact of being the target of benign envy was significantly stronger for autonomous help than for dependent help ($p = 0.005$).

3 研究 2

Study 1 utilized a free-recall paradigm to provide preliminary evidence for the research hypothesis; however, this method makes it difficult to precisely distinguish between types of being envied and the independent effects of whether harm has occurred. Existing research suggests that targets of envy may offer help as a proactive measure to prevent potential harm. Conversely, once harm actually occurs, the resulting damage to the relationship may cause defensive strategies to become dominant, thereby inhibiting the willingness to help.

Study 2 employs experimental manipulation of both the type of being envied and the presence or absence of harm to further verify their respective impacts on helping intentions and preferences for specific types of help. Additionally, this study examines the role of harm within the context of the malicious envy effect.

3.1.1 被试

Using G*Power 3.1.9.2 (with the same parameters as Study 1), we estimated that a minimum total sample size of 180 participants was required to detect a medium effect size ($f = 0.25$) in the analysis of variance (ANOVA). We recruited 272 undergraduate students for the study. After excluding 56 participants who failed the attention or comprehension checks, the final sample consisted of 216 valid participants (67.6% female), aged 18 to 30 years ($M = 21.92$, $SD = 2.22$). Among them, 74.5% held an undergraduate degree. A sensitivity power analysis indicated that the current sample size was sufficient to detect effect sizes as small as $f = 0.23$, representing a small-to-medium effect.

3.1.2 材料和程序

Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions: being benignly envied, being maliciously envied (without harm), being maliciously envied (with harm), or a control condition. The situational materials were adapted from the Outperforming Others Reaction Test developed by Exline and Zell (2012), selecting four typical scenarios: academic achievement, athletic talent, job search success, and workplace achievement.

The type of envy experienced was manipulated by varying the perceived deservedness of the success (Koch & Totton, 2017). In the control condition, both parties succeeded with equal effort. In the benign envy condition, the participant succeeded because they exerted more effort. In the malicious envy conditions, the envier exerted more effort but failed. In the “with harm” condition, a description of harmful behavior (such as social exclusion or malicious evaluation) was added at the end of the malicious scenario, whereas no such description was included in the “without harm” condition. To control for relationship intimacy, the envier was consistently identified as “Person A,” a peer of the same gender with a moderate level of relationship closeness. The effectiveness of this

manipulation was verified through a pilot study.

In this study, the internal consistency reliability for the measurement of being envied across the four scenarios was 0.90. After reading the scenarios, participants rated the likelihood of three responses—refusing to help, providing autonomous help, and providing dependent help—on a 7-point scale (1 = completely impossible, 7 = completely possible). Subsequently, participants completed the Empathic Concern Scale (as used in Study 1) and reported their demographic information.

3.2.1 不同被妒忌条件帮助意愿的比较

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) results indicated significant differences across the four conditions regarding the willingness to withhold help, the willingness to provide autonomous help, and the willingness to provide dependency help, as shown in Table 2 . These differences remained significant even after controlling for empathic concern.

Being the target of benign envy

Being the target of malicious envy (no harm)

Being the target of malicious envy (with harm)

M(SD)

95% CI

M(SD)

95% CI

M(SD)

95% CI

M(SD)

95% CI

2.38(1.07)

2.083, 2.667

2.55(1.34)

2.186, 2.916

4.08(1.32)

3.724, 4.443

2.94(1.44)

2.552, 3.337

18.90***
5.26(1.04)
4.974, 5.544
5.59(0.92)
5.343, 5.842
3.97(1.43)
3.578, 4.358
5.27(0.87)
5.037, 5.509
4.73(1.05)
4.440, 5.014
4.59(0.87)
4.351, 4.825
3.86(1.03)
3.581, 4.141
4.60(0.88)
4.361, 4.843

Post-hoc tests revealed that in the malicious envy (with harm) condition, the intention to withhold help was significantly higher than in the other three conditions ($ps < 0.001$). Conversely, intentions for both autonomous and dependency-oriented help were significantly lower in this condition compared to the other three ($ps < 0.001$). In the benign envy condition, the intention to withhold help was significantly lower than in the control condition ($p = 0.024$), while no other significant differences were observed between the remaining conditions.

Overall, in the absence of harm, benign envy increased individuals' willingness to help compared to the control condition, whereas malicious envy (without harm) did not decrease helping intentions. However, under conditions involving harm, the target of envy showed a significant increase in the intention to withhold help, accompanied by a significant decrease in both autonomous and dependency-oriented helping intentions.

3.2.2 不同被妒忌条件下帮助类型偏好的比较

A 4 (Type of Being Envied: Benign / Malicious-No Harm / Malicious-Harmful / Control) \times 2 (Type of Help: Autonomy-oriented / Dependency-oriented) mixed-

Figure 2

Figure 1: Figure 2

design analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted on the willingness to help. The results (as shown in

) revealed a significant main effect for the type of being envied, $F(3, 212) = 27.11$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.28$. The main effect for the type of help was also significant, $F(1, 212) = 40.29$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.16$. Furthermore, a significant interaction between the two factors was observed, $F(3, 212) = 4.16$, $p = 0.007$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.06$.

Simple effect analysis indicated that under the conditions of being benignly envied, maliciously envied (no harm), and the control condition, individuals' willingness to provide autonomy-oriented help was significantly higher than their willingness to provide dependency-oriented help ($p_{benign} = 0.004$, $p_{malicious-no\ harm} < 0.001$, $p_{control} < 0.001$).

In contrast, under the condition of being maliciously envied (harmful), there was no significant difference between the two types of help willingness ($p = 0.56$). These findings suggest that individuals prefer providing autonomy-oriented help under non-high-threat conditions; however, this preference disappears under high-threat conditions (malicious envy with harm). These effects remained consistent after controlling for demographic variables and empathy.

4 研究 3

The workplace is a context where feelings of envy are highly prevalent (Parrott, 2016). In such settings, subsequent professional interactions and collaborations between the envied and the envious are often unavoidable, and the costs associated with changing jobs are typically high. Consequently, envied individuals within an organization often possess a stronger motivation to maintain their relationships with those who envy them. Study 3 aims to further validate and extend the aforementioned findings using a sample of individuals with professional workplace experience. Additionally, this study examines the mediating roles of agency and communion, as well as the moderating effect of interpersonal closeness.

4.1.1 被试

Using G*Power 3.1.9.2 (with the same parameter settings as Study 1), we conducted a power analysis for a repeated-measures multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA). Assuming a medium effect size ($f = 0.25$), the estimated minimum total sample size required was 179 participants (at least 45 per group). We initially recruited 274 participants; after excluding those who failed attention checks or provided duplicate responses, the final sample consisted of 217 valid

participants (64.5% female), ranging in age from 18 to 42 years ($M_{age} = 26.81$, $SD = 6.51$). The participants were distributed across four conditions: the benign envy target group ($n = 51$), the malicious envy (no harm) target group ($n = 56$), the malicious envy (harm) target group ($n = 60$), and the control group ($n = 50$). A sensitivity power analysis indicated that the current sample size is sufficient to detect small-to-medium effect sizes ($f = 0.22$).

4.1.2 材料和程序

We employed a 4 (envy type: benignly envied / maliciously envied without harm / maliciously envied with harm / control) \times 2 (interpersonal closeness: high / low) mixed design, with envy type as a between-subjects variable and interpersonal closeness as a within-subjects variable. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions, with each condition reading two workplace-related envy scenarios. One scenario was adapted from Study 2' s professional achievement context (modified to describe a formal work setting, such as a promotion); the other was adapted from Feng et al. (2021), describing an envied individual who triggered colleagues' envy through year-end travel and social media sharing. The envy type manipulation was achieved through differences in perceived success deservingness and the envier' s subsequent behavior:

The harm-present condition included descriptions of harmful behaviors by the envier (e.g., exclusion, denigration), whereas the harm-absent condition omitted such descriptions. The manipulation' s validity was confirmed through a pilot study. Participants read the scenarios, learning about the identity and background of same-gender envier Xiao A and the predicament they faced. Under high-closeness conditions, Xiao A was described as a close friend; under low-closeness conditions, Xiao A was described as a distant ordinary colleague or classmate (order randomized; manipulation validity confirmed through pilot study). After reading, participants rated their willingness to engage in three types of helping behavior:

non-helping, autonomous helping (providing methods), and dependent helping (direct problem-solving). The measurement approach followed Studies 1 and 2, with scenario descriptions adapted to workplace settings. In this study, the internal consistency coefficients for the non-helping, autonomous helping, and dependent helping dimensions were 0.73, 0.82, and 0.77, respectively.

Subsequently, participants completed agency and communality measures. We used the Chinese version of the Pure Agency and Communion Orientation Scale (Zhang et al., 2019), which comprises two dimensions—agency and communality—with 6 items each, rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). The agency dimension assessed individuals' focus on self and goal achievement (e.g., "To achieve your goals, you shouldn' t worry about what close others think of you"), while the communality dimension assessed individuals' prioritization of others' needs over their own (e.g., "I always put the needs of close others before my own"). In this study, the internal consistency

coefficients for the agency and communality dimensions were 0.75 and 0.81, respectively.

Finally, control variables were measured. Participants completed the empathic concern subscale (same as Study 2, $\alpha = 0.82$) and rated the urgency of Xiao A's predicament on a 7-point scale (Ruiz, 2019).

4.2.1 被妒忌类型对帮助意愿的影响

Multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) revealed significant differences in the willingness to withhold help, the willingness to provide autonomous help, and the willingness to provide dependency help across the four types of envy (see Table 3). These differences remained significant even after controlling for empathic concern.

Being the target of benign envy

Being the target of malicious envy (without harm)

Being the target of malicious envy (with harm)

M(SD)

95% CI

M(SD)

95% CI

M(SD)

95% CI

M(SD)

95% CI

3.10(0.17)

2.762, 3.434

3.16(0.16)

2.840, 3.481

3.97(0.16)

3.661, 4.280

2.67(0.17)

2.331, 3.009

11.18***

5.16(0.14)

4.875, 5.434
5.17(0.14)
4.897, 5.434
4.00(0.13)
3.741, 4.259
5.55(0.14)
5.261, 5.829
3.89(0.19)
3.528, 4.256
3.81(0.18)
3.461, 4.155
3.27(0.17)
2.931, 3.602
4.30(0.19)
3.932, 4.668

Post-hoc tests revealed that in the malicious envy (with harm) condition, the intention to withhold help was significantly higher than in the benign envy ($p = 0.001$), malicious envy (without harm) ($p = 0.003$), and control conditions ($p < 0.001$). Autonomy-oriented help was significantly lower in this condition compared to the other three groups ($ps < 0.001$). Regarding dependency-oriented help, the intention was significantly lower than in the control condition ($p < 0.001$), with no significant differences observed between the other groups. Overall, consistent with the findings of Studies 1 and 2, malicious envy significantly inhibited general helping intentions (including both autonomy-oriented and dependency-oriented help) only when harm was present. However, departing from the results of Study 2, neither benign envy nor malicious envy significantly altered helping intentions when no harm was involved.

To examine preferences for help types, a two-way ANOVA was conducted. The results showed a significant main effect of the type of being envied, $F(3, 213) = 17.94$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.20$, and a significant main effect of the help type, $F(1, 213) = 153.90$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.42$. However, the interaction between the two was not significant, indicating that individuals' preferences for the two types of help did not differ significantly across different envy conditions. These effects remained consistent after controlling for demographic variables and empathy. This finding suggests that in a sample with professional workplace experience, the influence of being envied on help-type preference differs from the previously

discussed student sample; the interaction effect is no longer significant, meaning that help-type preferences across various conditions tend to converge in a workplace context.

4.2.2 中介效应检验

Using the type of being envied as the independent variable, separate one-way ANOVAs were conducted for agency and communion. The results revealed a significant difference in the target's agency across the different types of being envied, $F(3, 213) = 5.32$, $p = 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.07$. Post-hoc tests indicated that agency levels in the malicious envy (with harm) condition ($M_{malicious_harm} = 3.83$, $SD_{malicious_harm} = 1.14$, 95% CI [3.45, 4.11]) were significantly higher than those in the benign envy condition ($M_{benign} = 3.36$, $SD_{benign} = 0.98$, 95% CI [3.06, 3.61]; $p = 0.01$), the malicious envy (without harm) condition ($M_{malicious_no_harm} = 3.47$, $SD_{malicious_no_harm} = 0.86$, 95% CI [3.26, 3.81]; $p = 0.042$), and the control condition ($M_{control} = 3.12$, $SD_{control} = 0.81$, 95% CI [2.89, 3.35]; $p < 0.001$). No significant differences were found between the remaining conditions. Furthermore, there was no significant difference in communion across the different types of being envied.

To examine the critical triggering role of harmful behavior in how being maliciously envied influences helping decisions, and to clarify the independent effects of being maliciously envied versus the harmful behavior itself, the mediation analysis was structured into two sets of comparisons. The first set used the control group as a reference to test the overall effect of being maliciously envied (with harm). The second set used the malicious envy (without harm) group as a reference to test the incremental effect of harmful behavior. Using agency and communion as mediating variables and the three types of helping intentions as dependent variables, a Bootstrap mediation analysis was performed using Mplus 8.3 (5,000 resamples; [?, ?]). The results of the mediation paths are presented in .

Using the control group as a reference for the intention to withhold help: The total effect of being maliciously envied (with harm) on the intention to withhold help was significant, $\beta = 1.30$, 95% CI [0.90, 1.69]. Mediation analysis showed that the indirect effect of agency was significant, $\beta = 0.28$, 95% CI [0.15, 0.44], while the indirect effect of communion was not significant. The direct effect was also significant, $\beta = 1.01$, 95% CI [0.60, 1.40].

Regarding the intention to provide autonomous help: The total effect of being maliciously envied (with harm) on autonomous helping intention was significant, $\beta = -1.55$, 95% CI [-1.91, -1.19]. The indirect effect of agency was significant, $\beta = -0.22$, 95% CI [-0.37, -0.12], while the indirect effect of communion was not significant. The direct effect remained significant, $\beta = -1.31$, 95% CI [-1.67, -0.95]. For the intention to provide dependent help: The total effect of being maliciously envied (with harm) was significant, $\beta = -1.03$, 95% CI [-1.42, -0.64]. The indirect effects of agency and communion were not significant, but the direct

effect was significant, $\beta = -0.97$, 95% CI [-1.37, -0.59]. Additionally, because the interaction between the type of being envied and the type of help was not significant, no further analysis was conducted on the mediating mechanisms underlying help-type preferences.

95% CI

95% CI

[-0.06, 0.11]

[-0.37, -0.12]

[-0.10, 0.06]

[-0.17, 0.07]

[-0.13, 0.06]

Unwillingness to help

Malicious envy (harmful)

0.28***

[0.15, 0.44]

Willingness to provide autonomous help

Malicious envy (with harmful intent)

-0.22***

Willingness to provide dependency-oriented help

Malicious envy (with harm)

Note: Paths shown in bold are significant; that is, the 95% confidence interval does not include zero.

Using malicious envy (without harm) as the reference group, the total effect of being the target of malicious envy (with harm) on the unwillingness to help was significant, $\beta = 0.81$, 95% CI [0.43, 1.19]. Mediation analysis revealed that the indirect effect of agency was significant, $\beta = 0.14$, 95% CI [0.05, 0.27], whereas the indirect effect of communion was not significant. The direct effect remained significant, $\beta = 0.65$, 95% CI [0.29, 1.02]. Regarding the willingness to provide autonomy-oriented help, the total effect of being the target of malicious envy (with harm) was significant, $\beta = -1.17$, 95% CI [-1.52, -0.78]. The indirect effect of agency was significant, $\beta = -0.11$, 95% CI [-0.22, -0.04], while the indirect effect of communion was non-significant. The direct effect was significant, $\beta = -1.04$, 95% CI [-1.38, -0.69]. Finally, the total effect of being the target of malicious envy (with harm) on the willingness to provide dependency-oriented help was significant, $\beta = -0.54$, 95% CI [-0.93, -0.16].

The indirect effects of both agency and communion were non-significant, while the direct effect was significant, $\beta = -0.50$, 95% CI $[-0.89, -0.14]$.

4.2.3 人际亲密度对被妒忌类型影响帮助意愿及帮助偏好的调节作用

A repeated measures multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted (see). The results revealed a significant main effect for the type of being envied, $F(9, 639) = 7.04, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.09$, and a significant main effect for interpersonal intimacy, $F(3, 211) = 104.10, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.60$. Furthermore, the interaction effect between the type of being envied and interpersonal intimacy was significant, $F(9, 639) = 2.27, p = 0.017, \eta_p^2 = 0.03$.

These effects remained consistent after controlling for empathic concern.

Regarding the willingness to withhold help, the interaction effect was significant, $F_{\text{non-helping}}(3, 213) = 3.84, p_{\text{non-helping}} = 0.01, \eta_p^2 = 0.05$. High levels of being benignly envied

Being maliciously envied (without harm); Being maliciously envied (with harm)

M(SD)

2.32(0.19)

3.87(0.20)

2.50(0.18)

3.82(0.19)

3.62(0.18)

4.33(0.19)

2.20(0.19)

3.14(0.20)

95% CI

1.94, 2.70

3.47, 4.27

2.14, 2.86

3.44, 4.20

3.27, 3.97

3.96, 4.69

1.82, 2.58

2.74, 3.54

M(SD)

5.83(0.14)

4.48(0.19)

5.81(0.13)

4.52(0.18)

4.59(0.13)

3.41(0.17)

6.12(0.14)

4.97(0.19)

95% CI

5.56, 6.10

4.11, 4.85

5.56, 6.07

4.17, 4.87

4.34, 4.84

3.07, 3.75

5.85, 6.39

4.60, 5.34

M(SD)

4.51(0.19)

3.28(0.22)

4.30(0.18)

3.32(0.21)

3.69(0.18)

2.84(0.20)

4.48(0.20)

4.12(0.22)

95% CI

4.13, 4.89

2.84, 3.71

3.93, 4.66

2.91, 3.74

Figure 3

Figure 2: Figure 3

Figure 4

Figure 3: Figure 4

3.34, 4.04

2.44, 3.24

4.10, 4.87

3.68, 4.56

11.18***

24.55***

5.75***

Under conditions of high intimacy, significant differences were observed between groups

, $F(3, 213) = 12.77$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.15$. Specifically, the group subjected to malicious envy with harm exhibited the highest level of unwillingness to help, which was significantly greater than that of the benign envy group, the malicious envy without harm group, and the control group ($ps < 0.001$); no other significant differences were found between groups. Under conditions of low intimacy, group differences were also significant, $F(3, 213) = 6.17$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.08$. The unwillingness to help in all three envy-type groups was significantly higher than in the control group ($p_{\text{benign}} = 0.011$, $p_{\text{malicious without harm}} = 0.016$, $p_{\text{malicious with harm}} < 0.001$), while no other significant differences were observed.

Regarding the willingness to provide autonomous help, the interaction effect was not significant, $F_{\text{autonomous}}(3, 213) = 0.36$, $p_{\text{autonomous}} = 0.79$. Post-hoc tests of the main effect indicated that regardless of the level of intimacy, the willingness to provide autonomous help in the malicious envy with harm group was significantly lower than in all other groups, $F(3, 213) = 24.55$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.257$.

For the willingness to provide dependent help, the interaction effect was significant, $F_{\text{dependent}}(3, 213) = 3.72$, $p_{\text{dependent}} = 0.01$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.05$. Under high intimacy, significant differences were found between groups

, $F(3, 213) = 4.33$, $p = 0.006$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.06$.

In the high intimacy condition, the willingness to provide dependent help in the malicious envy with harm group was significantly lower than in the benign envy group ($p = 0.002$), the malicious envy without harm group ($p = 0.02$), and the control group ($p = 0.003$). Under low intimacy, group differences

were also significant, $F(3, 213) = 6.09$, $p = 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.08$. The willingness to provide dependent help in all three envy-type groups was significantly lower than in the control group ($p_{\text{benign}} = 0.008$, $p_{\text{malicious without harm}} = 0.01$, $p_{\text{malicious with harm}} < 0.001$).

Furthermore, the unwillingness to help was significantly lower under high intimacy than under low intimacy ($ps < 0.001$). Across the three envy conditions, the willingness to provide dependent help was significantly higher under high intimacy than under low intimacy ($ps < 0.001$); however, this difference between high and low intimacy was not significant within the control group ($p = 0.061$).

Regarding preferences for help types, a repeated measures ANOVA revealed that the main effect of envy type was not significant, $F(3, 213) = 2.50$, $p = 0.061$. However, the main effect of interpersonal intimacy was significant, $F(1, 213) = 12.24$, $p = 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.05$. The interaction between the two factors was not significant, and therefore no further simple effects analysis was conducted.

4.2.4 有调节的中介模型检验

Structural equation modeling (SEM) was conducted using R software with the Bootstrap method (5000 iterations). Using the control group as a reference, three dummy variables—being benignly envied, being maliciously envied (no harm), and being maliciously envied (with harm)—were generated as independent variables. The analysis examined their respective effects on the willingness to withhold help, the willingness to provide autonomous help, and the willingness to provide dependency help, with agency as the mediating variable and interpersonal intimacy as the moderating variable.

The results of the Bootstrap analysis indicated that the moderated mediation model was supported only in the “being maliciously envied (with harm)” group. Interpersonal intimacy significantly moderated the direct path from being maliciously envied (with harm) to the willingness to withhold help (coeff = -0.57, SE = 0.29, $p = 0.048$, 95% CI [-1.12, -0.00]). Simple slope analysis revealed that at low levels of intimacy ($M - 1SD$), being maliciously envied (with harm) significantly and positively predicted the willingness to withhold help ($\beta = 0.75$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.44, 1.05]); however, this effect was non-significant at high levels of intimacy ($M + 1SD$). Simultaneously, the indirect effect of being maliciously envied (with harm) on the willingness to withhold help through agency was significant (Index = 0.21, SE = 0.06, 95% CI [0.11, 0.34]). Specifically, the path from malicious envy (with harm) to agency was significant (coeff = 0.51, SE = 0.12, $p < 0.001$), as was the path from agency to the willingness to withhold help (coeff = 0.41, SE = 0.07, $p < 0.001$).

Further analysis demonstrated that the strength of the mediating effect varied with levels of intimacy: under low intimacy, the indirect effect was 0.29 (95% CI [0.15, 0.44]), whereas under high intimacy, the indirect effect was non-significant (value = 0.13, 95% CI [-0.01, 0.27]). After controlling for the mediator, the direct effect of being maliciously envied (with harm) on the willingness to withhold help

remained significant (Effect = 0.75, SE = 0.15, 95% CI [0.44, 1.05]), indicating that agency plays a partial mediating role.

In the “being benignly envied” group, interpersonal intimacy positively moderated the direct effect of being benignly envied on the willingness to withhold help (coeff = 0.56, SE = 0.27, $p = 0.04$, 95% CI [0.01, 1.10]); however, no significant indirect effects were found through agency or communion. No significant moderating or mediating effects were observed in the “being maliciously envied (no harm)” group. Across all types of being envied, the mediating effect of communion was consistently non-significant.

5.1 主要发现

This study investigates the impact of different types of being envied on helping decisions. Study 1 employed a recall paradigm to verify the negative predictive effect of being maliciously envied on helping intentions (H1a) and autonomous helping preferences (H2a), noting that recalled incidents of malicious envy naturally tend to include experiences of harm. Studies 2 and 3 further demonstrated through experimental manipulation that being maliciously envied inhibits helping only when accompanied by harm (as seen in Studies 2 and 3). This finding extends previous research [?] by revealing that the synergy between perceived undeservingness and harmful behavior is a critical condition for triggering the inhibitory effect of being maliciously envied. The lack of a significant difference between the “maliciously envied (no harm)” group and the control group in Studies 2 and 3 does not negate the independent value of envy types; rather, it delineates their boundary conditions. In no-harm contexts, potential threats have not yet crossed the threshold required to activate explicit defensive behaviors. In other words, harmful behavior serves as the precipitating factor for the influence of malicious envy on helping intentions. Comparative analysis using the no-harm group as a baseline clearly highlights the dynamic escalation of threat from potential to actual, isolating the incremental effect of harmful behavior. The mediating mechanism in Study 3 further corroborates this collaborative logic: being maliciously envied (with harm) inhibits helping by significantly increasing agency (status-maintenance motivation), fully outlining the path of “malicious appraisal → harm trigger → status-maintenance motivation → behavioral inhibition.” In summary, the “type of being envied” defines the nature and direction of the motivation (why one defends), while “harmful behavior” determines the intensity and externalization of that motivation (when one defends). These two factors work in tandem within the motivational sequence to shape the helping decisions of the envied individual.

The prosocial promotion effect of being benignly envied exhibited dependence on context and sample (H1b was partially validated): it significantly increased helping intentions in student samples (Studies 1 and 2) but failed to reach significance in the workplace sample (Study 3).

This discrepancy may stem from differences in the environments inhabited by

the samples. Compared to the low-competition environment of students, the performance appraisal mechanisms (such as ranking systems) and competitive atmosphere prevalent in the workplace imply resource scarcity and limited promotion opportunities. These factors significantly enhance individuals' zero-sum beliefs and status-maintenance motivations [?, ?], making them more inclined to interpret others' gains as threats to their own status, thereby inhibiting relationship-maintenance motivation. Even when supportive social signals are perceived (such as team cooperation norms), individuals may reduce prosocial behavior due to concerns that "helping others is cultivating potential competitors" [?], ultimately resulting in no significant increase in helping intentions.

Preferences for types of help are moderated by the level of threat. Studies 1 and 2 show that in low-threat, no-harm contexts, individuals prefer providing autonomous help (supporting H2a and H2b), which fosters reciprocal relationships without directly relinquishing control over resources [?]. In high-threat contexts of being maliciously envied (with harm), the destruction of psychological safety leads to the dominance of status-maintenance motivation. Coupled with the fact that relational damage weakens the individual's willingness to repair the relationship [?], both types of helping intentions are inhibited to mitigate risk. The disappearance of preference differences in the workplace sample of Study 3 may be due to the pervasive competitive atmosphere, which heightens defensive mediation mechanisms. The results reveal the core role of agency (H3a partially supported), aligning with the core assumptions of social evaluation theory [?]. Being maliciously envied (with harm) significantly enhances agency, which in turn inhibits helping intentions and autonomous helping preferences. This suggests that high status threats accompanied by harm prompt individuals to adopt an agentic perspective [?], concentrating cognitive resources on addressing the threat [?], thereby driving defensive helping decisions. However, communion did not play a significant mediating role in any condition (H3b not supported). Under conditions of being maliciously envied, the strong activation of agency may dominate the allocation of motivational resources, leaving changes in communion relatively weak and obscured. In contexts of being benignly envied, the relational opportunities conveyed are "weak signals," and the resulting positive emotions or relationship-maintenance motivations may be more implicit [?], making them difficult to translate into stable, explicit changes in communion as measured at the trait level in this study. Future research may need to employ more immediate or implicit measurement paradigms to capture these effects.

Finally, interpersonal closeness moderates the weight of status-maintenance versus relationship-maintenance motivations, exhibiting a significant buffering effect in the "maliciously envied (with harm)" path, supporting the moderated mediation model (H4a and H5a supported; H4b and H5b not supported). Under conditions of low closeness, the intention not to help across all three types of being envied was significantly higher than in the control group. This indicates that in the absence of relational bonds, any perception of being envied is interpreted as a social threat [?], and decision-making simplifies into a "self-protection first"

mode, where increased agency drives non-helping [?]. Under high closeness, interdependence strengthens relationship-maintenance motivation. Although being maliciously envied (with harm) still increases the intention not to help—consistent with [?] due to concerns over relational damage—high closeness significantly weakens this negative impact. Consequently, the mediating effect of agency diminishes, as intimate relationships inhibit the transformation of threat perception into defensive behavior [?]. Notably, dependency-oriented help is relatively preserved under high closeness, possibly because it is reframed as a signal of relational investment rather than a display of status superiority. Furthermore, this moderating effect is primarily limited to high-threat contexts (malicious envy with harm); the effect is weaker under low threat, perhaps because the status threat is insufficient to activate the agency mechanism [?]. This aligns with zero-sum belief theory [?], which suggests that significant defensive responses are driven only when a threat is explicit. In summary, interpersonal closeness determines whether an individual processes a threat through the lens of a “competitive self” (generalized defense at low closeness) or a “relational self” (fine-grained trade-offs at high closeness).

5.2 理论贡献

This study focuses on the targets of envy. By introducing a dual-motivation trade-off framework and clarifying the critical role of harmful behavior, we deepen the understanding of how types of being envied influence helping decisions. This research extends existing theories in the following ways.

First, we construct an integrated model of how being envied affects helping strategies, moving beyond the limitations of single perspectives focused solely on relationship maintenance or status preservation. This model clarifies that there is no uniform “being envied effect.” Instead, it utilizes the type of envy as a situational cue and harmful behavior as the critical threshold condition for effect activation. Specifically, being maliciously envied prioritizes the activation of the status-preservation path only when harm is present, driving defensive helping inhibition by enhancing agency. In contrast, this inhibitory effect is significantly weakened in cases of malicious envy without harm or in scenarios of benign envy. By linking complex internal experiences with the dimension of agency, this model achieves a theoretical deepening from phenomenological description to mechanistic explanation.

Second, this study establishes the critical role of harmful behavior, shifting the research perspective from static variable relationships to a dynamic motivational sequence analysis. This integrates previously contradictory empirical findings (e.g., [?, ?]; [?, ?]). We argue that the opposition in previous research does not stem from theoretical contradictions, but rather from capturing different stages of the same motivational sequence. In the “evaluation stage” (malicious envy without harm), the target of envy has not yet exhibited defensive behavior, and their actions align with the predictions of the relationship-maintenance perspective [?, ?]. In the “activation stage” (malicious envy with harm) or in highly

competitive environments, the status-preservation motivation is triggered, and the results support the status-preservation perspective [?, ?]. By introducing “harmful behavior” as the pivotal point distinguishing these two stages, this study integrates opposing perspectives into a continuous, process-oriented explanatory model.

Finally, this framework not only explains the promotion or inhibition of helping but also predicts differentiation in preferences for types of help. The communal motivation stimulated by being benignly envied prompts individuals to prefer autonomy-oriented help—a relationship investment strategy characterized by “empowering without relinquishing power.” Conversely, the agentic motivation stimulated by being maliciously envied selectively inhibits autonomy-oriented help, as such help is perceived as a status risk. This finding deepens the understanding of the motivational basis for help-type preferences ([?, ?]; [?, ?]; [?, ?]) and reveals the hidden long-term harm of being maliciously envied: by refusing to provide help that enhances others’ capabilities, the envied individual solidifies their own advantage. Mechanism testing further corroborates this framework: agency, rather than communion, dominates the influence of malicious envy (with harm) on helping decisions, highlighting the core role of status-preservation motivation ([?, ?]; [?, ?]; [?, ?]). Furthermore, the moderating effect of interpersonal closeness suggests that helping decisions are a dynamic trade-off process dependent on situational cues. Unlike helping between high- and low-status individuals ([?, ?]; [?, ?]), targets of envy are reluctant to widen the gap through dependency-oriented help due to fear of hostility. However, when closeness is high and there is no clear harm, the willingness to provide autonomy-oriented help does not decrease significantly, confirming the buffering effect of relationship maintenance.

(Puranik et al., 2019)。

5.3 局限与展望

First, while the manipulation and measurement of being envied drew upon established methodologies from existing research (e.g., [?, ?, ?, ?]), current measurement tools rely heavily on the target’ s subjective inferences regarding the envier’ s intentions (e.g., [?, ?, ?, ?]). Consequently, the validity of these measures requires further investigation. Future research should refine the core concepts and develop more objective measurement tools, such as those incorporating physiological indicators or multi-source reports.

Second, this study focused on single-episode scenarios and utilized text-based materials to manipulate variables. While this approach effectively isolates specific variables, it struggles to capture the dynamic nature and real-world complexity of envious interactions. Adjustments to relative status are rarely instantaneous; in authentic interactions, the threat of harm often escalates gradually and is accompanied by non-verbal cues, such as manifestations of social exclusion [?, ?]. Future studies could employ multi-round decision-making tasks,

real-world cooperative-competitive tasks, or experience sampling methods to examine the long-term evolution of the core model within more ecologically valid contexts.

Third, the exploration of mediating mechanisms was limited to agency and communion, leaving other potential pathways insufficiently examined. For instance, based on dominance-prestige theory [?, ?], envied individuals may consider their self-image in the eyes of others, involving a trade-off between prestige and dominance. Future research could introduce individual difference variables, such as threat sensitivity, as well as group contexts to validate these expanded mechanisms.

Finally, this study primarily measured helping intentions and the choice of helping types within hypothetical scenarios rather than actual helping behaviors. The relationship between intention and behavior may be confounded by social desirability bias and situational constraints. Future research should incorporate behavioral observations and field experiments to more comprehensively assess an individual's prosocial decision-making.

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The Influence of the Type of being Envied on Helping Decision LIU Shu-Hui1; CHANG Li-Jia1,2; LIU Xin-Jie1; LI Zhong-Quan1 (1Nanjing University, Nanjing 210023, China) (2Yili Normal University, Yining 835300, China)

Abstract

Being the target of envy is a complex social phenomenon that profoundly shapes interpersonal dynamics. However, existing research has primarily focused on the envious individual, with limited attention to how those who are envied respond, particularly their willingness to engage in prosocial behavior. Findings remain inconsistent: some studies link being envied to increased prosocial behavior aimed at relationship maintenance, whereas others report reduced helping tendencies driven by status protection. These inconsistencies may stem from a failure to distinguish between benign envy (rooted in admiration) and malicious envy (associated with resentment and potential harm). Additionally, prior research has largely neglected distinctions between types of help—specifically, autonomous help (which empowers recipients to solve problems independently) versus dependent help (which provides direct solutions). This study examined how benign versus malicious envy influences helping willingness and preferences for help types. We hypothesized that malicious envy would reduce helping willingness (H1a) and preference for autonomous help (H2a), whereas benign envy would enhance both (H1b and H2b). These effects were expected to be mediated by agency and communion (H3a-H3b), moderated by interpersonal closeness (H4a-H5b).

Three studies investigated how being envied shapes helping behavior. In Study 1 (N = 405), participants recalled a personal experience of being envied, reported their perceptions of benign versus malicious envy, and indicated their willingness to adopt three types of responses in daily scenarios: no help, autonomous help, or dependent help. Study 2 (N = 216) manipulated envy type (benign, malicious without harm, malicious with harm) and a control condition, then measured participants' helping intentions (no help, autonomous help, dependent help) using hypothetical scenarios. Study 3 (N = 217; all with work experience) manipulated envy type and interpersonal closeness (high vs. low) in work-related contexts, while assessing participants' agency and communion levels as well as their helping intentions.

Study 1 revealed that malicious envy reduced helping willingness (especially for autonomous help), whereas benign envy promoted helping, particularly in low-competition contexts. Study 2 confirmed that malicious envy with harm significantly reduced helping willingness, with a stronger effect on autonomous than dependent help; malicious envy without harm did not differ from the control condition. In Study 3, agency mediated the negative effect of malicious envy with harm on helping willingness and preference for autonomous help, whereas communion showed no significant mediation. Interpersonal closeness moderated these relationships: higher closeness attenuated the negative impact of malicious envy with harm on helping willingness, although it did not significantly influence preferences for help types.

This research clarifies how being envied shapes helping decisions by distinguishing between benign and malicious envy. Specifically, malicious envy with

harm reduced helping willingness (particularly for autonomous help) through increased agency, whereas benign envy promoted helping in less competitive contexts. Interpersonal closeness mitigated these negative effects, underscoring the role of relational dynamics. By examining different types of help, this study advanced our understanding of prosocial behavior beyond binary help/no-help categorizations. Theoretically, it reconciled conflicting findings by elucidating the psychological mechanisms underlying different

types of envy. Practically, it suggests that fostering close relationships may mitigate the negative impact of malicious envy, thereby promoting cooperation in social and workplace contexts. Future research could explore additional mediators, such as threat perception.

Keywords

being envied, helping decision, autonomy-oriented help, agency, interpersonal closeness

Author Contribution Statement: Shuhui Lin (First Author/Co-first Author): Co-responsible for the conceptualization of the research proposition and the design of the research protocol; responsible for the specific implementation of the research process, including conducting experiments or investigations; completed the acquisition and preliminary analysis of raw data; drafted the initial manuscript. Lijia Chang (Co-first Author, ranked second): Participated in refining the research ideas and analytical schemes during the manuscript revision process; responsible for supplementary data analysis and verification of results; fully participated in the revision of the manuscript, performing systematic revisions to the structure, argumentative logic, and details; completed the final revision and finalization of the manuscript.

Xinjie Liu (Third Author): Assisted in the retrieval and organization of relevant literature to provide scholarly support for the research design and argumentation; assisted in data checking and verification; participated in the proofreading of the manuscript format and the refinement of the final version.

Zhongquan Li (Corresponding Author): Proposed and determined the research proposition; led the overall design of the research scheme and the methodological framework; provided comprehensive guidance throughout the implementation process and data analysis strategy; supervised the writing of the manuscript; reviewed and revised all versions of the paper; responsible for overall quality control and academic oversight during the submission and revision process.

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