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# Do We Always Hope to Become “Better” When We Experience Envy? Effects of Incidental Envy and Social Context on Self-Improvement Behavior\*

Y. Jin Youn\*\*

Kiwan Park\*\*\*

Incidental envy is known to motivate self-improvement behavior. This phenomenon occurs in part because feelings of inferiority guide subsequent behavior in a way to self-improve, after experiencing envy. However, no research has yet examined whether this tendency may be affected by social context: private versus public. Although extant literature suggests that envy generally leads to self-improvement, we demonstrate that this effect may be mitigated under public social contexts. Across two studies, we find that although incidental envy generally increases self-improvement behavior (e.g., effort exertion and charitable giving) in private social contexts, this tendency is attenuated under public social contexts. We conclude with a discussion of theoretical and practical implications of this finding.

Key words: envy, social context, self-improvement, emotion

## I. Introduction

Imagine a woman experiencing envy while having a lunch with her colleagues. She learns that one of her friends has become engaged to be married, while the other has received a

huge raise at work. After lunch, she returns to her office and learns that her company is soliciting donations for a certain cause. How will the lingering feelings of envy influence her decision to donate? Specifically, would the social context of whether the donation takes place either in public (e.g., having her name

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printed on the company newspaper) or in private (e.g., donating anonymously) influence her final decision? Envy is an emotion that is common to consumers (Belk 2011), which arises from upward comparisons to better-off others (Festinger 1954; Mussweiler, Ruter, and Epstude 2004). Thus, understanding the implications of incidental envy (i.e., envy that is experienced due to a prior, unrelated cause) on self-improvement behavior either in public or private social contexts can offer both theoretical advances and practical implications for marketers.

Prior research on envy predicts that this woman will be more likely to donate due to the motivational properties of envy (Van de Ven, Zeelenberg, and Pieters 2011a; Van de Ven, Zeelenberg, and Pieters 2011b), thereby overcoming her feelings of inferiority and improving self-evaluation (i.e., self-improvement). More broadly, self-improvement behavior of various forms increases after experiencing envy (Polman and Ruttan 2012; Van de Ven et al. 2011a; Van de Ven et al. 2011b). In other words, those who experience envy are more likely to engage in a wide array of behaviors to improve or enhance the self (Belk 2011). For example, incidental envy leads people to hold a high moral standard, and thus motivates them to become a more ethical person (Polman and Ruttan 2012). Similarly, incidental envy tends to boost individuals' performance on certain tasks, such as anagram tasks and remote associates tasks (Van de Ven et al.

2011b).

However, no research has yet demonstrated the role of social context in determining the influence of incidental envy on self-improvement behavior. As such, this research allows for the advancement of theory, given that extant research does not address whether or how incidental envy may influence consumers' propensity to engage in self-improvement behaviors across private and public social contexts. We propose that, while self-improvement behavior following envy generally increases when the behavior is performed in private circumstances (Polman and Ruttan 2012; Van de Ven et al. 2011b), the proposed self-improvement tendency is attenuated in the presence or recognition of others.

Then, why is self-improvement behavior mitigated when other people are watching or aware of one's behavior? Public social contexts have been shown to shift consumers' attention toward self-presentational concerns and away from maximizing their own self-interest, due to the potential for reputational consequences (Buss 1980; Froming, Walker, and Lopyan 1982). Here, public social contexts refer to contexts in which one's behavior or attitude is viewed, directly or indirectly, by others. For example, prior research has shown that when consumers' choices are publicly observable (versus private), they are more likely to switch from their original preferences (Ariely and Levav 2000) and incorporate more variety into their

choices (Ratner and Kahn 2002) to make a favorable impression on others. In public social contexts, envious people may also shift their interest from self-improvement to other concerns related to self-presentation.

However, if the self-presentation motive is imperative, one may contend that self-improvement behaviors should be pursued more rather than avoided, in an attempt to make a good impression on others. In contrast, it is worth noting that public social contexts often decrease the confidence and performance of those who feel inferior, ironically due to impression management reasons (i.e., self-handicapping; Berglas and Jones 1978; Kolditz and Arkin 1982). This phenomenon often occurs when the situation is more diagnostic or demanding (e.g., a test that is important for the individual, a test that is observed or evaluated by others). Even experts exhibit decreased performance when there is an evaluative audience (Baumeister and Showers 1986). Because those who experience incidental envy undergo heightened feelings of inferiority, they may become more sensitive to the possibility that, in public contexts, self-improvement behavior may turn out to be unsuccessful. Furthermore, public situations in which people are generally aware of the relationship with and the presence of others make salient interdependent goals of fitting in with others, fulfilling social roles, and maintaining social connections. These interdependent goals may lead people to engage in a prevention

focus rather than a promotion focus (Aaker and Lee 2001; Lee, Aaker, and Gardner 2000), thereby dampening self-improvement tendency further.

Based on the aforementioned research, we hypothesize that consumers who experience incidental envy will engage in self-improvement behavior only when social context is private. In contrast, we predict that such a tendency will attenuate in public social contexts. We test and confirm this prediction in two experiments that employ different conceptualizations of self-improvement behaviors drawn from prior research. To represent self-improvement behaviors, we use two tasks—time spent in unsolvable anagram tasks (experiment 1) and donation amount (experiment 2).

## II. Experiment 1: Envy, Social Context, and Effort Exertion

The objective of experiment 1 was to provide a test for the proposed effect of social context on self-improvement behavior following the experience of envy. As self-improvement behavior, we employed a standard method of effort exertion on a performance task. Specifically, we used time spent on the unsolvable anagram as our dependent measure (e.g., Shah, Higgins, and Friedman 1998).

## 2.1 Method

Three hundred and eleven participants from Amazon's Mechanical Turk ( $M_{age} = 24.96$ ,  $SD = 9.19$ ; 64% male) were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (social context: public vs. private)  $\times$  2 (emotion: envy vs. neutral) between-participants design. All participants were informed that they would be completing a series of unrelated tasks. The first task was entitled "Past Experience Recall," and participants were instructed to visualize and recall either a prior experience when they envied another person (envy condition) or their activities of yesterday (neutral condition), depending on their experimental assignment (adapted from Malatesta and Izard 1984; Appendix A for stimuli).

In the second task, all participants were provided with a series of anagrams, described as "word jumbles" (Goldsmith and Dhar 2013). They were instructed that this task required them to rearrange letter strings (e.g., etkbas) into English language words (e.g., basket). Four of the five anagrams that participants received were solvable, whereas the final anagram had no solution. This final anagram was included since persistence on impossible tasks has been commonly employed as a measure of effort in prior work (Shah et al. 1998).

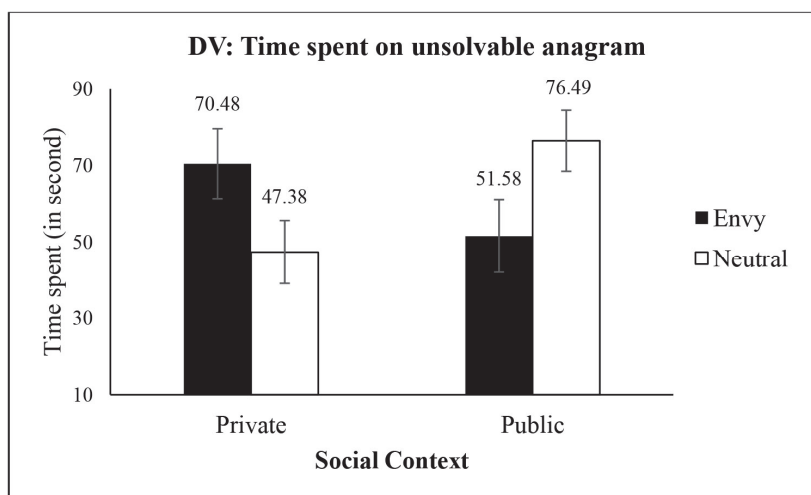
For those in the public condition, participants were told that their performance would be

shared amongst other researchers (i.e., "your data will be analyzed by a team of researchers at a large Midwestern University and ultimately reviewed by researchers at several different universities"). In contrast, in the private condition, no information was provided about whether anyone would review the participants' performance. Time spent on the unsolvable anagram served as the dependent measure.

## 2.2 Results and Discussion

We predicted that self-improvement behavior (here, effort exertion) following incidental envy would be mitigated in public, as compared to private, social contexts. This was tested using a 2 (social context)  $\times$  2 (emotion) ANOVA on time spent on the unsolvable anagram (in seconds). Results revealed a significant interaction between social context and emotion ( $F(1, 307) = 7.51$ ,  $p = .006$ ; Figure 1). Replicating the effects observed in prior research, when the social context was private, those experiencing incidental envy ( $M = 70.48$ ,  $SD = 80.85$ ) exerted (marginally) more effort than those in the neutral-emotion condition ( $M = 47.38$ ,  $SD = 54.65$ ;  $F(1, 307) = 3.51$ ,  $p = .062$ ). More importantly, however, the public context attenuated this effect: participants experiencing incidental envy ( $M = 51.58$ ,  $SD = 50.46$ ) exerted less effort than those in the neutral-emotion condition ( $M = 76.49$ ,  $SD = 101.15$ ;  $F(1, 307) = 4.01$ ,  $p =$

〈Figure 1〉 Time spent on unsolvable anagram as a function of social context and envy (experiment 1).



.046). No significant main effects emerged in this analysis ( $F_s \leq .34$ ,  $p_s \geq .56$ ).

Thus, experiment 1 provided evidence for the moderating role of social context on the influence of envy on self-improvement behavior. One limitation of this experiment was that those in the private condition did not receive any substantial information regarding who would be viewing their performance data. Therefore, participants in the private condition might have had varying assumptions regarding whether or not their performance would be evaluated by others. The next experiment addressed this limitation by introducing a less ambiguous manipulation of social context, in addition to replicating the observed interaction in a different self-improvement behavior—donation.

### III. Experiment 2: Envy, Social Context, and Charitable Giving

The goal of experiment 2 was two-fold. First, experiment 2 tested for convergence with the prior results by utilizing a different manipulation of incidental envy. Second, experiment 2 employed charitable giving as a self-improvement behavior. Prior research suggests that prosocial behavior can serve a self-improvement function and positively improves one's well-being (Houle, Sagarin, and Kaplan 2005; Weinstein and Ryan 2010).

#### 3.1 Method

One hundred and thirty-three students ( $M_{\text{age}} = 23.15$ ,  $SD = 2.75$ ; 37% male) from a large

Midwestern University in the US were randomly assigned to one of the eight conditions in a 2 (social context: public vs. private)  $\times$  2 (emotion: envy vs. neutral)  $\times$  2 (gender: male vs. female) between-participants design. All participants were informed that they would be completing a series of unrelated tasks. Next, participants indicated their gender and were then randomly assigned to one of the two emotion-induction conditions.

For emotion induction, participants were told that they would be evaluating a recent online interview given by another student at their university. Because prior research has shown that envy is most frequently experienced as a result of comparisons to same-sex others (Hill and Buss 2008; Tesser, Millar, and Moore 1988), males (females) were assigned to read an article about a fictional male (female) student. The contents of the interview were adapted from Hill and colleagues (2011) and modified only to reflect the students' own university. Except for the name, picture, and all gendered pronouns, the interview contents remained consistent across genders. In the envy condition, participants read about a fictional student who possessed a great deal of wealth and material possessions, whereas in the neutral-emotion condition, participants read about a fictional student of relatively average financial means (Appendix B for stimuli).

To validate the effectiveness of the manipulation, a pre-test ( $n = 51$ ) was conducted in which

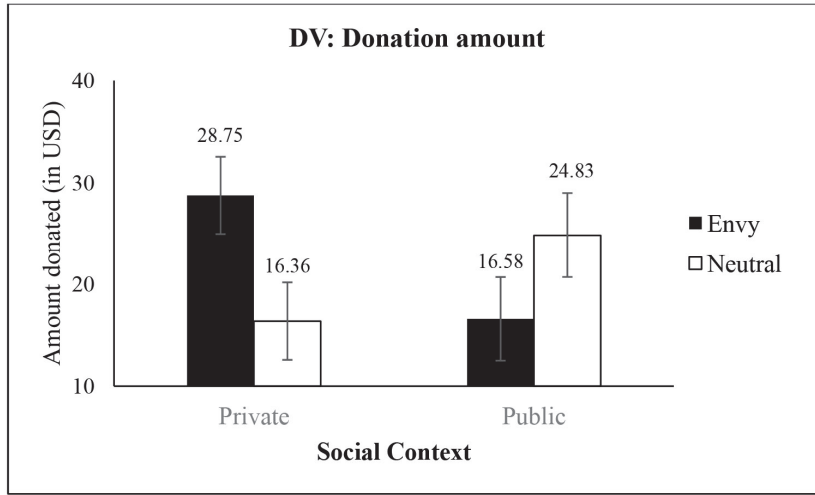
participants from the same population (i.e., university students attending the same school) as the main study were randomly assigned to read the interview from either of the two emotion conditions. The gender of the interviewee was matched with that of the participant. A 2 (emotion)  $\times$  2 (gender) ANOVA revealed that those in the envy condition felt significantly more envy ( $M = 3.92$ ,  $SD = 2.32$ ) toward the interviewed student than those in the neutral-emotion condition ( $M = 2.21$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ;  $F(1, 47) = 14.17$ ,  $p < .001$ ). No other effects were significant.

After reading the interview scenarios, all participants moved on to what was presented ostensibly as unrelated charitable giving. In this task, they were asked to imagine that they had recently started a new job at a firm where charitable donations were encouraged. In the public condition, participants were told that each donor's name and donation amount would be published in the "Donation Page" section of the company's newspaper. In the private condition, they were told that all donations were entirely anonymous. All participants were asked how much money they would commit to donating to a charity of their choice, on a scale of \$0–\$100. The donation amount served as the dependent variable.

### 3.2 Results and Discussion

A 2 (social context)  $\times$  2 (emotion)  $\times$  2

〈Figure 2〉 Donation amount as a function of social context and envy (experiment 2).



(gender) ANOVA on donation amount revealed a significant interaction between social context and emotion ( $F(1, 125) = 6.55, p = .012$ ; Figure 2). As in experiment 1, when the social context was private, participants experiencing incidental envy ( $M = 28.75, SD = 29.16$ ) donated significantly more than those in the neutral-emotion condition ( $M = 16.36, SD = 19.83$ ;  $F(1, 125) = 4.58, p = .034$ ). More importantly, however, when the social context was public, this effect was mitigated. In the public context, participants who experienced incidental envy ( $M = 16.58, SD = 16.03$ ) directionally donated less money than those in the neutral-emotion condition ( $M = 24.83, SD = 23.14$ ), but the difference was not significant ( $F(1, 125) = 2.28, p = .134$ ). No other significant effects emerged in this analysis ( $F_s \leq 2.08, p_s \geq .152$ ).

## IV. General Discussion

In this research, we hypothesize that consumers who experience incidental envy are motivated to engage in self-improvement behaviors in private social contexts, but instead suppress such behaviors in public social contexts. We test this prediction in two experiments by manipulating both social context (public versus private) and emotion (envy versus neutral). We find robust support for the predicted interaction between these factors, which was validated on two different dependent measures of self-improvement behaviors suggested by prior research. By doing so, to the best of our knowledge, this work is the first to demonstrate that social context works as an important moderator to the previously-acknowledged positive



effect of incidental envy on self-improvement.

The present research offers important theoretical contributions to the literature on incidental envy and social context. First, although envy is a common emotion that significantly affects various consumer behaviors (Belk 2011), the influence of envy on behaviors unrelated to the envy-inducing target has been largely underexplored. Prior research on envy has primarily focused on how this emotion influences people's perception and behavior toward the target who evoked the emotion (Hill, DelPriore, and Vaughan 2011; Van de Ven et al. 2011a). Our findings suggest that incidental envy influences subsequent unrelated self-improvement behaviors by demonstrating that incidental envy affects one's tendency to exert effort and to engage in charitable giving. As such, the present research adds to the scant literature of incidental envy by providing evidence on how and when incidental envy leads to self-improvement behaviors.

Second, although social context is a critical factor that influences a variety of consumer behaviors (Froming et al. 1982; Ratner and Kahn 2002), the relationship between social context and incidental envy has, to the best of our knowledge, never been investigated. Prior research suggests that public social contexts may increase self-improvement behaviors due to the heightened self-presentational concerns. This is why people are more likely to engage in self-improvement behavior in public contexts

to increase the reputation of self to others (Gneezy et al. 2012). The current research offers substantial evidence that when people experience incidental envy, this is not the case. We demonstrate that consumers' self-improvement behavior following the experience of incidental envy may be hampered in a public social context. This finding not only adds to the literature of envy by suggesting a meaningful moderator in examining the influence of incidental envy on self-improvement behaviors, but also to that of social context by demonstrating how the presence of others alters consumers' behavior under the influence of envy.

Finally, the current paper investigates prosocial behavior as a proxy to measure self-improvement. Specifically, we test whether envy and social context influences consumers' tendency for charitable giving. In doing so, we add to the vast literature of why and when people engage in prosocial behavior (Bartlett and DeSteno 2006; Bénabou and Tirole 2006; Clary and Snyder 1991; Weinstein and Ryan 2010). Envy proves to be one of the factors that are critical to determining engagement in prosocial behavior.

Although our results demonstrate that the influence of incidental envy on self-improvement behavior is moderated by social context, there are several limitations. First, given that the focal interest in the current research was on investigating whether social context could influence self-improvement behavior after the experience of incidental envy, we did not

distinguish between different types of envy. Future research may broaden this inquiry by examining whether the type of envy consumers experience may change how the interplay between envy and social context affects decision-making. For example, prior research has demonstrated that envy can be either malicious or benign (Van de Ven, Zeelenberg, and Pieters 2009; Van de Ven et al. 2011a; Van de Ven et al. 2011b). By activating either of the two types of envy, future research could test whether these different types have distinct carry-over effects on unrelated behaviors, potentially moderated as a function of social context. Then, researchers may be able to form a more nuanced framework for understanding how envy interacts with social context to determine subsequent self-improvement behavior.

Second, other behaviors that may be influenced by incidental envy need to be explored. Envy can evoke multiple motivations and desires that are related to the self and others. As such, incidental envy might influence our behavior in competition, cooperation, or relationships. Hence, it will be fruitful to explore whether incidental envy and social context affect behaviors in unrelated domains besides self-improvement.

Finally, although we provided substantial evidence on the relationship between incidental envy and social context on self-improvement behavior, a direct test on the underlying mechanism was not conducted. We argue that the demonstrated phenomenon emerged due to

several factors related to public social context (e.g., self-presentational concerns, impression management, and prevention focus). Thus, empirical evidence on the specific process that drives the proposed effect is an area that calls for further investigation. Future studies should be conducted to test specific aspects of public social contexts that motivate people to engage less in self-improvement behavior when experiencing incidental envy.

The current findings suggest several important practical implications for marketers. For example, many charitable organizations collect donations in public (e.g., collection boxes) and private (e.g., online) contexts. Because envy is prevalent in everyday life, understanding how envy influences consumers' tendency toward donations depending on social context may be important for their marketing strategy. Our findings suggest that incidental cues that may activate envy (e.g., the presence of indulgent products; Savary, Goldsmith, and Dhar 2015) may not be beneficial in public collection locations; however, such cues should increase private donations.

These findings also offer suggestions for managers seeking to promote self-improvement behaviors in a public workplace. They should be cautious in employing any practices that might activate incidental envy (e.g., performance rankings), as doing so may have unintended negative consequences on exerting efforts. Eliciting feelings of inferiority through social comparison may boost one's motivation to

self-improve internally. However, the same practice of generating envy could attenuate self-improvement behavior, particularly in public social contexts. Our results offer a useful maxim for managers and marketers: envy is good internally, but may be bad externally.

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## 〈Appendix A〉

### Experiment 1: Emotion induction manipulation.

#### a. Envy condition:

Please visualize and recall a prior experience when you envied another person (e.g., a popular girl/guy at school, a person who has something you want, someone who achieved your desirable goal etc.). Write about this specific time when you felt envious toward others. Please describe the situation in which you felt envious - what the specific situation was, why you were envious, what made you feel envious, how you felt, whether it was a negative or positive experience, etc.

#### b. Neutral-emotion condition:

Please visualize and recall your activities of yesterday. Write in detail about what you did throughout the course of the day.

## <Appendix B>

### Experiment 2: Emotion-Induction Manipulation

a. Neutral-emotion condition (male version).

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## NEWS

### CAMPUS INTERVIEW

by Julie Reed, staff writer



photo provided by interviewee

Dude Wildcat Central is starting a series of Campus Interviews, today's being the very first of the series. Every week we will features one fellow student in hopes of making this large campus seem a little smaller. Let's take a look at this week's victims, ahem, interviewees.

**What is your full name?** David Alan Johnson

**What year are you and what is your major?** I am a sophomore and my major is still undeclared. I have really liked a lot of classes that I have taken at NU, but I can't imagine doing anything related to any of them for the rest of my life. I am giving myself until the end of this year to decide.

**What are your career goals for the future?** Well, since I am an undeclared major, I really don't know. My parents are starting to give me a hard time about the fact that I can't figure out what I want to do yet, so I think I'll pick a major later this year. I think that I might want to be a counselor or a teacher or something like that since I like dealing with people.

**Why did you decide to come to NU?** Finally, a question that I can answer! I came to NU because it's a good school and I love the Chicago area. I came here to visit a friend of mine from back home when I was in high school and I knew that I had to live here. I was so happy that I got in since some of my friends who'd applied, didn't. After my friends had gotten their rejections, I freaked out for about two weeks until I finally got my acceptance letter in the mail.

**If you could live anywhere in the world, where would you live?** I live there right now! Evanston! The city is nice and clean, Chicago is so close (only a train ride away), and weather in the summer is to die for. If I had to choose another place, it would probably be Boston or San Francisco. I like to be in places that are cities, but not huge like New York. I want to be somewhere where there is a lot of stuff to do and a lot of other college-aged people.

**What is something about you that most people don't know?** Well, for one thing, I hate spiders. Also, one of my front teeth is fake. I lost it when I was 10 from falling off my bike. It's bonded to my other teeth, so it's not like it can fall out or anything, but it's not real.

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b. Neutral-emotion condition (female version).

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THE INDEPENDENT WEEKLY WOMEN'S NEWSPAPER OF THE NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

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## NEWS

### CAMPUS INTERVIEW

by Julie Reed, staff writer



photo provided by interviewee

Lady Wildcat Central is starting a series of Campus Interviews, today's being the very first of the series. Every week we will features one fellow student in hopes of making this large campus seem a little smaller. Let's take a look at this week's victims, ahem, interviewees.

**What is your full name?** Lauren Ann Johnson

**What year are you and what is your major?** I am a sophomore and my major is still undeclared. I have really liked a lot of classes that I have taken at NU, but I can't imagine doing anything related to any of them for the rest of my life. I am giving myself until the end of this year to decide.

**What are your career goals for the future?** Well, since I am an undeclared major, I really don't know. My parents are starting to give me a hard time about the fact that I can't figure out what I want to do yet, so I think I'll pick a major later this year. I think that I might want to be a counselor or a teacher or something like that since I like dealing with people.

**Why did you decide to come to NU?** Finally, a question that I can answer! I came to NU because it's a good school and I love the Chicago area. I came here to visit a friend of mine from back home when I was in high school and I knew that I had to live here. I was so happy that I got in since some of my friends who'd applied, didn't. After my friends had gotten their rejections, I freaked out for about two weeks until I finally got my acceptance letter in the mail.

**If you could live anywhere in the world, where would you live?** I live there right now! Evanston! The city is nice and clean, Chicago is so close (only a train ride away), and weather in the summer is to die for. If I had to choose another place, it would probably be Boston or San Francisco. I like to be in places that are cities, but not huge like New York. I want to be somewhere where there is a lot of stuff to do and a lot of other college-aged people.

**What is something about you that most people don't know?** Well, for one thing, I hate spiders. Also, one of my front teeth is fake. I lost it when I was 10 from falling off my bike. It's bonded to my other teeth, so it's not like it can fall out or anything, but it's not real.

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c. Envy condition (male version).

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**What is your full name?** Avery Nathan Adams, but everyone calls me Nathan

**What year are you and what is your major?** I am a sophomore and a psychology major.

**What are your career goals for the future?** I'm going to be a lawyer, just like my dad. He always said that he would let me join his law firm when I finish law school. It would be Adams, Adams, and Smith. I'm really lucky to have my career already planned out for me. A lot of my friends are having a hard time figuring out what to do when they're done with school and I feel bad for them. I'm not sure what branch of law I am going to go into, but I can figure that out later. I do know that I don't want be one of those lawyers on TV that chases ambulances or a divorce lawyer because that would just be too depressing.

**Why did you choose to attend NU?** Well, it was a no brainer. My grandfather attended NU and so did my Dad. Both of them bleed NU purple and donate a lot of money, especially to athletics. We've got great seats at the football games. I go to almost every game and although they're a lot of fun, it makes studying kind of hard during football season. Also, it didn't hurt that I got a full scholarship. Besides, who wouldn't want to live in Evanston? It's an awesome college town, and Chicago is right around the corner. Also, a lot of my friends go to NU, so that makes being here even more fun.

**What is your dream car?** I'm driving it right now! I have a silver BMW 318i. The weather is so good recently and I love driving it with the roof down! I have wanted one since my best friend got it as a graduation gift a couple of years ago. I was so jealous of her and then on my 19th birthday, my parents surprised me with one of my own. Before that, I was just driving a used Jeep Grand Cherokee. It was bright red (which I hate) and I just didn't like to drive it.

**What is something about you that most people don't know?** I suck at math. I have had to take intro to algebra twice and I might have to take it again if I don't get my act together this semester. I'm glad that law doesn't require any math, because if it did, I'd be in a lot of trouble. I'd probably have to start buying exams off of the internet or something.

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