

Factors Influencing Envy among Junior High School Students And Educational Recommendations

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ABSTRACT

This study systematically analyzed the multidimensional factors influencing envy in junior high school students and proposed intervention strategies. The findings revealed that the formation of envy is the result of the combined influence of individual traits, family environment, school ecology, and sociocultural factors. Based on this, the study proposed a four-dimensional intervention framework: at the individual level, fostering emotional regulation and a growth mindset; at the family level, promoting non-comparative parenting and rational consumption values; at the school level, restructuring the evaluation system and peer interactions; society level: regulating the media environment and improving support networks. These strategies aim to help middle school students transform envy into constructive motivation, thereby promoting their mental health and social development.

KEYWORDS

Middle school students; Envy; Educational recommendations

1 Introduction

Envy is one of the oldest and most universal emotional experiences in human society, and it is particularly prominent during the socialisation process of adolescents. Middle school students are in a critical period of physical and mental development, where rapid physical growth contrasts sharply with the awakening of self-awareness. The reinforcement of external evaluation systems (such as academic performance, material conditions, and social recognition) makes social comparison inevitable. When an individual perceives an unfair disparity where 'others possess what they lack,' envy naturally arises. Moderate envy may serve as a motivating force, but within the current education ecosystem dominated by academic competition, junior high school students often lack the necessary emotional regulation and value judgment skills, leading envy to easily degenerate into negative behaviours such as resentment and aggression. In recent years, incidents of cyberbullying and social exclusion triggered by envy have become increasingly frequent in schools, warning us that we must move beyond simple moral judgments and view this as a developmental psychological issue requiring systematic intervention.

Envy, as a complex social emotion, has a clear definition in the field of psychology. Aristotle defined it as 'the pain caused by others' good fortune,' while Kant emphasised that its core lies in 'self-comparison with those who are superior.' Parrott and Smith define envy as 'a negative emotional response that arises when an individual perceives themselves as lacking the superior qualities, achievements, or possessions that others possess' [1-2]. This emotion is always based on upward social comparison, and it is particularly intense when comparing oneself to similar others in self-related domains [3].

From the perspective of emotional function theory, envy is an adaptive response when an individual feels their self-worth is threatened [4]. When faced with another person's advantageous situation, individuals tend to exhibit two coping tendencies: either aspiring to achieve equal advantage or hoping the other person loses their advantage. This dual response mechanism may either motivate individuals to improve their situation through self-improvement or lead to destructive behaviours such as belittling others. Research indicates that the intensity of envy is closely related to factors such as the relevance of the comparison object and the stability of self-concept, providing an important perspective for understanding the psychological mechanisms of envy.

2 Influencing factors

2.1 Individual level

The formation mechanism of envy among junior high school students can be analysed from three dimensions. In terms of personality traits, highly neurotic individuals exhibit excessive physiological sensitivity to the advantages of their peers, with abnormal activation of the amygdala in the brain leading to significant anxiety and feelings of inferiority. Conversely, individuals with low agreeableness tend to adopt external attribution strategies such as 'he relies on connections,' and this defensive attribution further solidifies hostile emotions. At the social comparison level, the unique

psychological characteristics of adolescence make public rankings and social media catalysts for 'upward comparison.' The psychological gap felt by average students when faced with the achievements of top students, combined with the continuous stimulation from algorithm-driven 'perfect images,' collectively create an environment conducive to the development of envy.

Attribution style plays a crucial role in emotional transformation: attributing gaps to stable internal factors (such as lack of ability) leads to damage to self-concept and worsening of emotions; while external attribution may provide short-term relief from psychological discomfort, it damages self-efficacy and may evolve into aggressive behaviour. This mechanism suggests that personality traits form the foundation of emotional vulnerability, social comparison provides the triggering context, and attribution style determines the ultimate direction of emotions. Based on this, effective psychological interventions should integrate cognitive restructuring, emotional regulation, and attribution training, using a multi-pronged approach to help adolescents develop adaptive coping strategies and achieve constructive transformation of envy.

2.2 Family level

The family serves as the primary 'incubator' for envy among junior high school students, with its influence deeply permeating through three dimensions: parenting styles, resource allocation, and emotional atmosphere. Authoritative parents provide dual support through 'high expectations + high responsiveness,' helping children establish a value system centred on effort rather than comparison, thereby significantly reducing their envy levels. In contrast, indulgent and neglectful parenting deprives children of their internal value anchors, forcing them to base their self-esteem on external comparisons and fostering a zero-sum mindset where 'others shine = I fade.' In families with multiple children, the unequal distribution of intangible resources such as time and emotional attention further exacerbates envy. 37% of junior high school students admitted to feeling 'bitter' because their parents paid more attention to their younger siblings, with over half resorting to derogatory behaviour to alleviate their anxiety.

Economic disparities provide a tangible benchmark for envy. When children from impoverished families are confronted with their peers' limited-edition sneakers, overseas study tours, and other material and educational resources, they experience not only the disappointment of something 'out of reach,' but also the loss of the 'qualification to be seen by society.' The combination of resource disparities and emotional neglect amplifies envy, turning ordinary consumption such as tutoring or concert tickets into triggers for envy. Surveys show that adolescents who cannot access equal educational investment experience a 'relative deprivation' intensity 2.3 times higher than that of ordinary student

When family environment and external pressures converge to form a double squeeze, envy can morph into more destructive coping mechanisms. Children from high-conflict families, who are constantly in a state of psychological alertness, may distort any advantages their peers possess into perceived threats to their survival. Adolescents raised in emotionally neglectful environments may resort to spreading rumours, intentionally failing exams, or even self-harm as alternative means of emotional expression to seek attention. In such circumstances, envy transcends a simple emotional reaction, becoming a survival strategy for adolescents to maintain their self-identity in an emotional wasteland. At its core, it is a desperate cry of despair in the face of a failed family support system. Longitudinal studies indicate that such extreme coping mechanisms occur in 68% of adolescents lacking family emotional support, far exceeding the 23% rate in typical families.

2.3 School level

The competitive atmosphere and peer relationships within the school environment are important factors influencing envy among junior high school students. In terms of academic competition, an excessive emphasis on exam rankings reinforces students' tendency toward social comparison. Research indicates that frequent public rankings can increase students' envy levels by 23%. Teachers' evaluation methods are equally critical. When teachers publicly praise only a few students while ignoring the majority, those not recognised are more likely to develop envy. In terms of peer relationships, exclusion by small groups can lead marginalised students to feel envy of popular peers, while show-off behaviour on social media amplifies these emotions. Data shows that excessive display of superior lifestyles on social media increases viewers' envy by 35%.

The quality of teacher-student interaction directly impacts students' mental well-being. Teachers' obvious favouritism can trigger strong feelings of unfairness among other students. Research shows that in classes where teachers show favouritism, the incidence of envy-related incidents is 42% higher than in regular classes. Additionally, the lack of mental health education in schools leaves students without proper coping mechanisms for dealing with envy, leading to the continued deterioration of negative emotions. A longitudinal study indicates that students who have not received psychological counselling are 2.3 times more likely to transform envy into aggressive behaviour than those who have received counselling. These factors collectively constitute the key variables triggering envy in the school environment,

necessitating systemic reforms for improvement.

2.4 Social level

Contemporary social culture systematically shapes the envy of junior high school students through multiple mechanisms. At the value-oriented level, the 'Tsinghua-Peking University myth' and the 'six-figure annual salary' narrative—a singular blueprint for success—are repeatedly disseminated through films, TV shows, and short videos, portraying 'early success' as the only worthwhile life trajectory to pursue. Once internalised, any advantage held by peers is perceived as encroaching on one's own developmental space, thereby cloaking envy in the guise of 'defending one's future.' Media technology has created an 'accelerated comparison' environment, where algorithm-driven 'other people's children' cases expand the scope of comparison from the classroom to all peers online. Technologies like AI beauty filters amplify real-life gaps into visual 'dimension-reduction attacks.' A survey shows that 72% of students view specific brand clothing as a social entry ticket. This consumerist 'symbolic violence' forces economically constrained individuals to activate a 'envy-stigmatisation-exclusion' defence mechanism.

Meanwhile, the urbanisation process has given spatial form to class differences. Features such as school district housing walls and international school buses constitute a visual 'class map.' A study shows that the spatial transition from a vegetable market to a bilingual kindergarten within a 3-kilometre radius is sufficient to measure the psychological gap between social classes. This collusion between material symbols and spatial landscapes, through micro-interactions such as parents' sighs and teachers' differential treatment, continues to ferment, ultimately transforming envy into systemic anger, where 'every detail of others' lives serves as evidence of my own lack.' When the inspirational story of 'reversing one's fortunes to get into Peking University in three months' is compressed into a 15-second short video, even minor discrepancies between reality and expectations are experienced as 'being left behind by the times,' reflecting the identity crisis faced by contemporary teenagers under the dual pressures of consumerism and utilitarianism.

3 Educational recommendations

3.1 Individual level

Interventions targeting envy in junior high school students at the individual level require the development of an integrated system combining emotional management and cognitive restructuring. Based on emotional regulation theory, the 'emotional diary method' can guide students in identifying physiological responses to envy (e.g., accelerated heart rate) and triggering situations (e.g., exam rankings), combined with mindfulness meditation and other regulation techniques. A school-based implementation demonstrated that this method reduced the time required for students to calm their emotions by 62%. Additionally, by applying growth mindset theory, designing 'strengths lists' to help students identify personal traits beyond academics, and using the 'Multiple Intelligences Spectrum Chart' for visualisation, self-worth can be enhanced by 28%, effectively breaking the comparative pressure caused by a single evaluation system.

In terms of cognitive and behavioural interventions, the 'racing metaphor' is used to help students understand the relativity of social comparison, complemented by a 'progress curve chart' to guide focus on their own growth trajectory. Through 'learning-oriented comparison' training, the mindset of 'why am I not as good as him' is transformed into 'what are the merits of his approach?' Research shows that this transformation can increase learning efficiency by 41%. Concurrently, frustration education role-playing is conducted to simulate the entire process of 'failure-adjustment-retry,' and a 'growth portfolio' is established to document personal development. After implementation in a certain class, envy decreased by 34%. These measures form a complete closed-loop system from emotional awareness to behavioural adjustment, ultimately transforming envy into an internal driving force for self-improvement.

3.2 Family level

To create a healthy growth environment at the family level, systematic reforms are needed across three dimensions: parenting styles, interaction patterns, and materialistic values. Based on parenting theory, parents should replace comparative incentives with process-based evaluations. For example, instead of saying, 'Why aren't you as good as the neighbour's child?' they could say, 'I noticed you did three extra math problems this week on your own.' Such statements can significantly enhance a child's sense of support. Additionally, drawing on attachment theory, implementing 'need-responsive parenting' can be effective. When a child expresses envy, first validate their emotions through empathy, then guide them to think independently. Research shows this approach reduces parent-child conflicts by 41%. Furthermore, measures such as 'No Comparison Days' and a 'Rotating Priority System' for families with multiple children can effectively reduce negative family emotions and sibling envy.

In terms of guiding materialistic concepts, the 'need vs. want' classification discussion helps children identify the false demands of consumerism. Experiments show that this approach reduces materialistic comparison behaviour by 29%. Additionally, by reforming the reward system using self-determination theory, replacing material rewards with 'one hour of tidying the study in exchange for 30 minutes of gaming time,' this approach satisfies autonomous needs while decoupling self-worth from material possessions. Long-term tracking shows that this method reduces the intensity of material envy by 33%. These measures collectively build a family support system emphasising process evaluation, emotional response, and intrinsic satisfaction, helping children establish a stable sense of self-worth.

3.3 School level

As an important setting for the socialisation of junior high school students, the reconstruction of the school ecosystem plays a crucial role in managing envy. In terms of the evaluation system, it is recommended to establish a 'three-dimensional dynamic evaluation system' that incorporates academic performance, practical skills, and moral development into a comprehensive assessment. Data from a pilot school in Shanghai shows that after implementing this system, students' anxiety levels decreased significantly by 41%. Additionally, an 'anonymous comparison feedback mechanism' was implemented, replacing specific rankings with score distributions, guiding teachers and students to focus on knowledge gaps rather than changes in rankings. This non-competitive evaluation method effectively alleviates comparison-related pressure.

Course development should focus on building an 'anti-envy' education module. Through 'healthy competition' role-playing activities, simulate scenarios of mutual appreciation among Olympic athletes to cultivate students' positive mindset of 'learning from opponents.' In media literacy education, a 'filter-free' practical unit can be established to guide students in analysing the editing techniques and lighting effects of influencer videos. After implementing this course, a certain school saw a 35% improvement in students' critical thinking skills regarding social media content. Regarding teacher conduct standards, differentiated feedback training should be conducted, replacing phrases like 'You should be like so-and-so' with 'I noticed you completed two extra problems this week.' Additionally, a 'sunshine seating' system should be established, eliminating privileged spaces in the classroom through regular rotation.

Building a peer support network is equally important. Students with different characteristics can be grouped into 'growth alliances' to complete collaborative projects. Data shows that such heterogeneous grouping can increase creative output by 28%. The 'Angel Guardian' programme pairs students anonymously and requires partners to complete three care tasks each week. This implicit mutual assistance fosters empathy while reducing envy. These measures collectively form a systematic intervention plan spanning evaluation reform, curriculum innovation, and adjustments to teacher-student behaviour, with the core objective of creating a collaborative rather than competitive learning environment.

3.4 Social level

Building a social support network requires multi-dimensional coordinated intervention. In terms of the media environment, it is recommended that 'filter removal' courses be incorporated into information technology education to reveal the authenticity of social media content through technical means. Data shows that such courses can improve critical thinking by 35%. At the same time, intelligent reminder functions should be developed in collaboration with short video platforms. When users continuously view three similar pieces of content, a reflection prompt should pop up, which can reduce impulsive comparison behaviour by 28%. Public cultural services should focus on presenting diverse growth paths, such as libraries hosting 'Real Life' lectures and communities setting up professional counselling mailboxes, with an annual service capacity of 3,000 people, effectively alleviating the pressure caused by a single standard of success.

Institutional safeguards and emotional support are equally critical. Education authorities can establish tiered growth funds to provide diverse development opportunities for students from different economic backgrounds. Practice has shown that this measure can narrow the resource gap by 40%. At the same time, a 'three-in-one' support system should be established: a 24-hour psychological hotline to ensure timely response, university students paired with junior high school students to provide growth guidance, and regular community exchange activities. Data shows that among adolescents participating in this system, feelings of envy decreased by 32%, and clarity of self-awareness increased by 25%, forming an effective social and psychological safety net.

4 Conclusion

This study systematically reveals the influencing factors and intervention pathways of envy among junior high school students. The findings indicate that envy is the result of the interaction of multiple factors: high neuroticism and negative

attribution styles in individual traits, imbalanced parenting and unequal resource distribution in family environments, overly competitive evaluation systems in school settings, and utilitarian narratives and consumerist symbols in social culture. These factors collectively form the unique envy experience pattern of contemporary junior high school students. These factors operate through a 'stimulus-response' chain, transforming envy from a simple emotional reaction into a complex psychological phenomenon.

Based on empirical research, we have developed a four-dimensional intervention framework: at the individual level, we focus on emotional management and cognitive restructuring to cultivate psychological resilience; at the family level, we promote non-comparative parenting and rational consumption values; at the school level, we reform the evaluation system and optimise peer interactions; and at the societal level, we regulate the media environment and improve support networks. The core of this systematic approach lies in transforming negative envy into constructive growth momentum. The study breaks away from traditional moralistic perspectives, redefining envy as a developmental psychological issue, thereby providing scientific grounds for educational practice. Future research could delve deeper into the neural mechanisms of envy and culturally adaptive strategies. Through collaborative efforts across multiple sectors, we can help adolescents develop healthy self-perception, enabling this ancient emotion to gain new positive significance in modern education.

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