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Generous envy

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The willingness to share depends on different motifs – even envy. Examples from Pakistan, Latin America and the USA.

What part does envy have in sharing? Often a very large part. Consider the fiesta complex that flourishes in rural Latin America and other peasant societies worldwide. The fiesta is a community celebration, funded by individuals who voluntarily contribute food, music, liquor, and so on for the occasion. Anthropologists have long known that the fiesta complex is characteristic of small, closely-knit, egalitarian peasant farming villages comprising isolated nuclear households. In peasant villages, agricultural land – a non-renewable and bounded resource – is the basis for survival. Loss of land means starvation. Life is made even more precarious because peasants are located at the outer margins of centralized states. Government, being distant, is weak, as is the rule of law. Thus, despite their meagre
resources, peasants are all too easily exploited by bandits, corrupt officials, and other predators. Life in these harsh conditions requires withdrawal and concealment of scarce resources from both outsiders and neighbours.

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As anthropologist George Foster put it, the fundamental assumption of the peasant, based on hard experience, is that there are “insufficient quantities of the good things in life.” The pervasive ideology of “limited good” means that any person’s gain is always balanced by someone else’s loss. The postulate of limited good extends beyond material items such as food, housing, or clothes to include anything desirable: looks, intelligence, even happiness. Standing out and having more than one’s neighbours generates extreme envy, which is especially dangerous in closed peasant society, since it can result in the destruction of the person envied, even if the cost is injury to the envier. This pattern is clear in a popular folktale, in which a magician offers a man anything he wishes for, with the proviso that his envied neighbor will get double. The man replies: “Blind me in one eye.”

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To fend off the dangers of envy, peasants characteristically hide any wealth they have accumulated behind high mud walls, and build their houses without windows, so no envious eyes can peer in. The wise peasant wears old clothes, avoids appearing proud or ambitious, and affirms his weakness and poverty. Ostentation is dangerous, and compliments are anathema, since they can be interpreted as covert expressions of envy. Similarly, gratitude indicates inferiority, and so is avoided. In fact, all emotions must be hidden. It is safest to be stoic.

In peasant society, the prototypical symbolic expression of envy is manifested in a universal belief in the malevolent power of the evil eye – a magical capacity (often involuntary) to harm
envied others by merely glancing their way. This can work purely automatically. Looking at a pretty baby may inadvertently put the evil eye on it. To avoid this, babies are hidden away, have soot smeared on their foreheads, are given denigrating names, or otherwise made ugly.

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Aside from strategies of concealment or magical protection, among peasants the best way to placate malicious envy is to sponsor a fiesta. By the celebratory redistribution of hard-won goods, the donor shows selflessness, demonstrates solidarity with his fellow villagers, denies any ambition, and returns, impoverished, to his own household. Having met the cultural ideal of self-abnegation and sharing, he can transform dangerous envy into admiration. The moral of this story is that the strong fear of envy found in a limited good peasant society can impel and even increase sharing.

Now let me turn to a short description of another society famous for its combination of envy and generosity: the Pukhtun of the Swat Valley in the Northwestern frontier area of Pakistan – the people among whom I did my anthropological fieldwork. Like peasants, they are farmers, and like them, their land-based village economy is tightly restricted. However, unlike peasants, the Pukhtun have no encompassing ideology of limited good and do not follow the concomitant practices of withdrawal and protective self-abnegation. Instead, the Pukhtun are highly competitive warriors, well known for defending their own possessions and despoiling the possessions of others. They are far from being subservient and fearful like the peasants they despise. Hidden in their mountain fastness, they have been able to avoid domination by the state and fend off all invaders. At the same time, they have long been adventurous entrepreneurs who travel far afield seeking work and profit. The money these migrants bring home is expended on building guesthouses and other prestige items. It is not the Pukhtun way to hide either one’s ambitions or one’s possessions.

Like peasants, the Swatis have no ascribed ranks. Hewing to an egalitarian ideal, all the Swat Pukhtun dress and act more or less the same and all are greeted similarly – with a handshake and straightforward gaze. This is true even for those who are outside the magic circle of the
Pukhtun tribe, that is, the members of the carpenter or barber or fieldworker castes who do not own land, and act as servants to the Pukhtun landowners.

“I against my brothers; my brothers and I against our cousins; my cousins, my brothers, and I against the world.”

(Arab saying)

The Pukhtun social structure is based on relationships between lineages that are believed to share a common male ancestor. In principle, all the millions of Pukhtun (or Pashtun as they are known in Afghanistan and more southern parts of Pakistan) are members of the same great lineage, traced through forefathers to an ancestor who lived during the time of the Prophet. In this fundamental sense, they are “rain-sown wheat” – all alike. In terms of actual social organization, members of closely related patrilineages (khels) live contiguously, hold adjoining plots of land, share responsibility to revenge any slights against other members, and are themselves collectively responsible for injuries caused by any of their clan. At the same time, members of the khel are also adversaries. An Arab saying sums up the prevailing attitude: “I against my brothers; my brothers and I against our cousins; my cousins, my brothers, and I against the world.”

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In this competitive yet fiercely egalitarian setting, a secular leader in Swat is merely “first among equals.” He rules by strength and character, rallying allies to him and subduing rivals. He is obeyed as long as he has the ability to crush usurpers. But it is understood that his authority is strictly personal and conditional; he will eventually age and weaken, and another powerful man will rise to take his place. Since, in principle, all men are equal, and all are potentially capable of leading, the new leader could be anyone (women are a different story – one I do not have the space to tell here). Even non-Pukhtun servants – if they are brave, industrious, and lucky – can hope to gain land and live up to the Pukhtun code, thereby eventually blending into the dominant kin groups. As a poor laborer once told me, "the landlord sits upon the necks of the poor. God grant that I may become a landlord!"
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All Pukhtun men seek to gain the respect and obedience of their fellows by an exemplary performance of Pukhtunwali, the code of honor. This requires quick and disproportionate revenge for any slight to himself or his lineage, defending the chastity of female relatives, and offering lavish hospitality and protection to any guest, whether a relative, a beggar, a stranger, or even a sworn enemy. To fulfil this aspect of the honor code, every village has several imposing hujeras, or men’s houses, each associated with a particular powerful khel. These multipurpose buildings feature ornate carved columns, a courtyard where the clan elders and their dependents gather to talk, drink tea, pass judgments, and plan strategy, and rooms where any guests can be housed and feasted. They are where any stranger is likely to spend the night, safe and well fed.

Hospitality is not the prerogative of the elite. Even the poorest people will slaughter their only chicken to feed a chance visitor – especially an unknown wayfarer – and will give him any object he praises, with no refusals possible. These gestures of largesse are heartfelt, but also aim to excite envy, not from the passive guest, but from one’s rivalrous neighbors, who covet the honor that comes from fulfilling the role of the open-handed host. The much valued host-guest relationship of unstinting giving – which stands in radical contrast to the daily Pukhtun experience of rivalry and possessiveness – is the Pukhtun equivalent of the fiesta.

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As might be expected, the competitive nature of Pukhtun society, combined with the firm belief that all men are equal and so all men can lead, lends a distinct tinge of envy to any relationship between leaders and followers. This is because followers must either blame themselves for their shortcomings (an unacceptable alternative in an egalitarian society), or somehow release their feelings of envy. One common way to accomplish this is through betrayal, even at the cost of crippling one’s own khel, since one’s greatest and most detested rivals are also often one’s closest kinsmen and allies. In fact the term of reference for one’s
father’s brother’s son is tarbur, which is also a term for enemy. Balance can also be maintained by inflicting the evil eye (which flourishes in Swat just as it does among peasants) on the envied one. The existence of the evil eye is not the only similarity to the management of envy in peasant societies. Swatis also build high walls to hide behind, believe that love, honor, friendship, and other intangible goods are strictly limited, avoid compliments or expressions of gratitude, and cultivate an impassive affect.

But where the peasant’s hope is to hide and avoid standing out, the Pukhtun contend assiduously among themselves – especially with near relatives – for tenuous positions of authority. Instead of providing collective fiestas for the entire village, men in Swat spend whatever surplus they accumulate on ostentatious hospitality for allies and guests. The difference in motivation is great – fiestas aim to ward off envy, while hosting guests and allies aims to stimulate envy. But the consequences are similar – the sharing of wealth.

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Do societies where there is intense envy always have customary performances of redistributive sharing? The two patterns I’ve outlined above indicate that this may well be the case. But is sharing always stimulated (or at least tinged) by envy? Probably not. For example, in highly egalitarian and very small scale hunting and gathering societies, sharing food with others in the group is de rigueur, differences among people are minimal, and strong manifestations of envy are not found. Nor is envy elaborated in complex collectivist social formations such as existed in traditional Japan or China, where hierarchy was sacralized, rank ascribed, and selfless participation in the group was expected. The caste system of pre-modern India is the extreme of this type of social formation. There, one’s caste was preordained by karma earned in previous lives, and rose or fell in future incarnations. There is no one to blame but oneself – in a past life – for a low position in this one. It is significant that belief in the evil eye – a sure indicator of envy – does not exist either among the sharing cultures of aboriginal hunters and gatherers, or within the rigidly hierarchical collectivist societies of pre-modern Japan, China, and India.
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Perhaps more startling, strong expressions of malicious envy (and the evil eye) are also not characteristic of modern capitalist nation states. It may be that pervasive envy fades away when the social formation becomes more complex, bureaucracy becomes more efficient, the legal system becomes more rationalized, redistribution becomes impersonal, and the economy expands. As stabilization and growth occur, fear of envy recedes, as do compensatory behaviors like self-effacement or compulsory sharing. Instead, people feel that they can rely on the impersonal and rational mechanisms of the state, the legal system, and the benefits of an expansive economy to shield them from being envied or envying others. The same systemic transformations provide for the needy as well, so that sharing is no longer necessary. The multiple avenues for gaining status in a modern society also help to minimize envious impulses. The handyman who knows how to fix his car can look down on the clumsy hedge fund manager; the aspiring artist in a loft can feel superior to the accountant with a house in the suburbs.

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A prime example of a low-envy society is the United States, where there are very few envy reducing, institutional levelling, or redistributive mechanisms, such as progressive taxes, restraints on earnings, or laws regulating the inheritance of wealth. Such limits are regarded as anathema by the vast majority, including the poor, since the American credo is that goods have no limit. One person’s gain does not mean another’s loss; it is simply an expansion of the pie. The American motto is “be all you can be,” and Americans in general optimistically assume that, despite setbacks, the economy will expand, progress will continue, problems will be solved, justice will be done. In this worldview of “unlimited good”, success is to be praised. So rather than hiding possessions behind windowless walls, picture windows expose Americans’ living quarters for all to see.
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The question remains as to whether envy is a universal emotion, varying only in the degree and manner it is emphasized or denied in different social formations. Or is it a social construct, absent in complex societies where hierarchy is sacralized and in simple societies where collective unity and redistribution of goods are the highest values? In any case, contrary to popular assumptions, it does seem that envy, and especially the fear of envy, is not particularly characteristic of stable, wealthy, and self-confident capitalist nation-states. However, it is important to remember that envy is not limited to individuals, but occurs between groups as well. When wealthy, stable, and powerful collectives confidently trumpet their wisdom and superiority in the international arena, they may well expect to be admired and emulated, forgetting that such assertions are likely to arouse malicious envy in places where good is limited. In these circumstances, humility and generosity are not simply moral duties. They are also placating strategies in an unjust world.

Photo: “Evil Eye protectors and branches” by Curious Expeditions 2008 - licenced under Creative Commons Attribution (2.0)

Credits Photo-Gallery

The pictures were taken by Cherry Lindholm, who accompanied Charles Lindholm on his field trip to Swat Valley in 1977.

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