

Feeling of 'lacking' as the core of envy: a conceptual analysis of envy

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Feeling of 'lacking' as the core of envy: a conceptual analysis of envy

The aim of this paper is to explore the subjective experience of envy through concept analysis. Further, the study on which it is based aimed to answer questions about the composition and manifestations of envy. From the viewpoint of nursing science, the analysis of envy is based on a desire to understand human beings from the perspective of subjective health and illness and thus from a health promotion perspective. Envy is conceived of as a dimension of a person's health and illness. The concept is therefore meaningful from the viewpoint of nursing; it describes a phenomenon which enables us to deepen our understanding in a way relevant to nursing science. In the study the hybrid model developed by Schwartz-Barcott *et al.* was used for conceptual elaboration. In the theoretical phase of the study the subjective experience of envy was explored from the viewpoints of philosophy, religion, Finnish folklore and psychoanalysis, as well as nursing science. As a synthesis of these, a conceptual analysis of envy adapted from Wilson was conducted and a working definition of envy was proposed. In the fieldwork phase, envy was examined by means of an empirical analysis using a phenomenological approach. As a result, a classification describing the experience of envy was presented. The core experience of envy has been defined as a 'lacking', and the object of envy as something good possessed by someone else. Envy manifests itself in both destructiveness and creativity. The trends of development of envy are inflexibility and emancipation, and the essence of envy is multidimensional. Finally, the working definition of the concept was elaborated on the basis of the empirical phase and a new definition reflecting the composition and manifestations of envy was proposed.

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INTRODUCTION

Envy is a multidimensional phenomenon difficult to identify. Envy implicitly is present in collaborative relationships as a force with both creative and destructive dimensions (Schalin 1986, Alberoni 1993, Klein 1994). On the one hand, it can open up new developmental challenges for a person, while on the other hand, it can have indirect manifestations that may lead to a narrowing of existence. Caregivers' ability to establish health promoting collaboration with the patient may be impaired by indirect manifestations of envy (Alberoni 1993, Munnukka 1993, Klein 1994). Since the caregivers' awareness of their own thoughts, feelings, values and actions as well as their ability to communicate unambiguously constitute the basic components of collaboration, increased awareness in areas that are difficult to identify is especially important. This can also be regarded as an ethical question. (Wilson & Kneisel 1992, Johnson 1993, Taylor 1994, Barker & Baldwin 1995).

Background and purpose of the study

The aim of the study on which this paper is based was to explore the subjective experience of envy through concept analysis. Further, the study aimed to answer questions about the composition and manifestations of envy. The analysis of envy is based on a desire to understand human beings from the perspective of subjective health and illness. Health was defined as a manifestation of a person's favourable existence, including such aspects as hope, confidence and joy, which may manifest themselves as an ability to pursue a rich and fulfilling life. (Rauhala 1989) The envious experience was understood as a dimension of a person's health and illness. On the one hand, the understanding of the envious experience can help the caregivers to become aware of the possible limitations and challenges in relation to themselves, their patients and colleagues brought about by their own envy. On the other hand, understanding may increase the possibilities for understanding others and to promote their health through this awareness. The concept of envy is an important and useful concept from the viewpoint of nursing, since it describes a human and common phenomenon familiar to all on the basis of personal experience.

A HYBRID MODEL FOR STUDYING ENVY

The study utilized the hybrid model presented by Schwartz-Barcott *et al.* (1986, 1993), which combines

theoretical and empirical analysis and is especially useful when studying a concept in a new context or when trying to discover new features in a known concept. Figure 1 presents the use of the hybrid model in this study.

Morse *et al.* (1996a) argue that the hybrid model lacks cohesion in terms of a theoretical basis and partially in terms of substantiation, and regard these as weak points. In this study, theoretical consistency was provided by the fact that envy was not approached from the viewpoint of operationalization, as the model requires, since this would have contradicted the underlying commitments of the study. Instead, the aim was to devise a definition of the components and manifestations of envy, which will make it possible to understand the subjective experience of envy.

THEORETICAL PHASE

The theoretical phase of the hybrid model began with the selection of the concept, the rationale for which was provided in the introduction. The literature review began with dictionary definitions, after which the literature was reviewed using an interdisciplinary approach. The concept of envy was examined from the viewpoints of philosophy, religion, Finnish folklore, psychoanalysis, and nursing science, in order to identify definitions that describe the essential nature of envy.

Views on envy

A philosophical view of envy

According to Alberoni (1993), the definitions given by philosophers for the concept of envy at different times are quite uniform in nature. Universal to all is the pain that is contained in envy in the forms of anger and grief and the

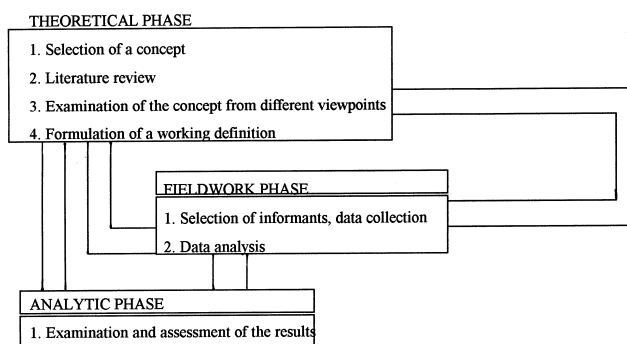


Figure 1 A hybrid model for studying envy (adapted from Schwartz-Barcott & Kim 1993).

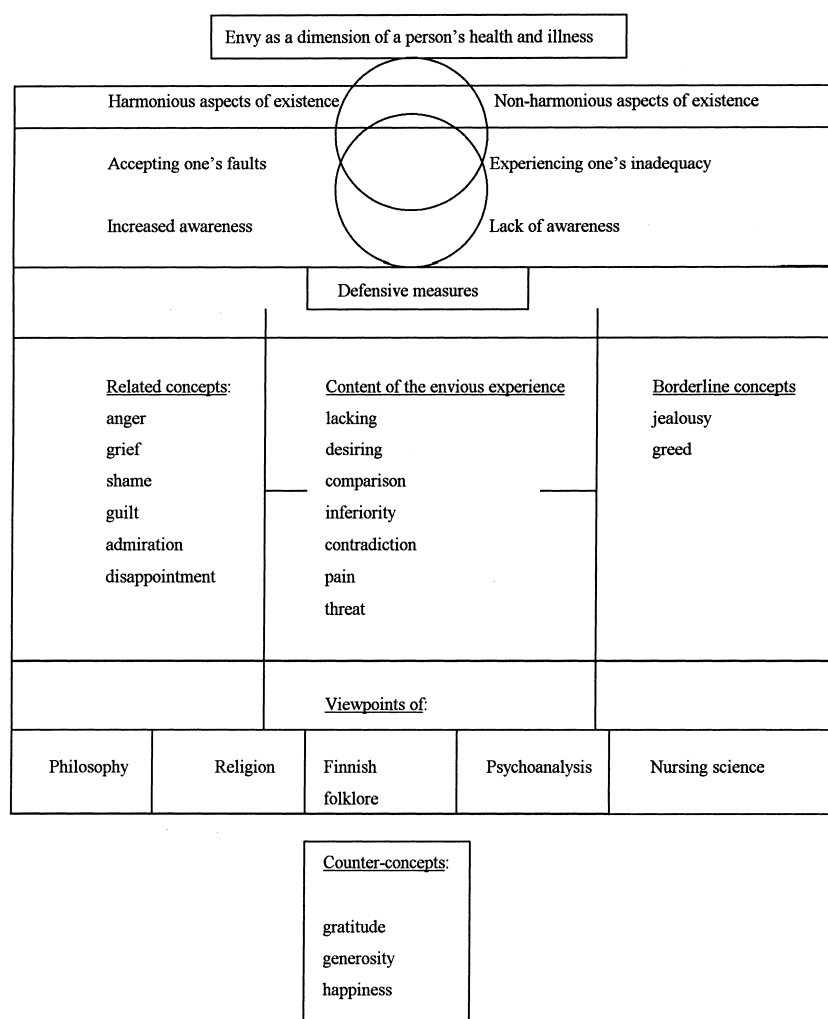


Figure 2 Theory-based analysis of subjective envy. The related terms, borderline concepts and counter-concepts have been adapted from Wilson's conceptual analysis (Walker & Avant 1992, Rodgers & Knaf 1993).

focusing of envy on the good things the other possesses. Aristoteles (1997) defined envy as pain arising from the good luck of people who are equal to us. For De Spinoza (1949), envy is identical to anger, since an envious person takes pleasure in others' misfortune and grieves over their good fortune. Descartes (1956) relates envy to grief and suffering that the person experiences while seeing others enjoy the good things in life. He distinguishes just envy from unjust envy. Kant (1990) sees envy as an inclination to feel pain about others' happiness, even though it does not harm the envious person (see Alberoni 1993).

From the philosophical point of view, modifying the typology of Wilson (1969), anger and grief were chosen as concepts related to envy (Walker & Avant 1992) (Figure 2).

A religious view of envy

Primitive people make sacrifices to gods in order to maintain a favourable connection with them and not to become an object of envy (Schalin 1987). In Catholicism, envy is considered one of the seven deadly sins (Achté &

Vauhkonen 1980). The biblical roots of envy are to be found in Satan's fall. Satan was not satisfied with his position in heaven, but started to covet God's place, wanting to displace him. As a consequence, God threw Satan out of heaven onto earth and he became God's enemy. Envy can also be found in the first fall of man. It was the main sin in the tragedy of Adam and Eve's sons, Cain and Abel, which persists in sibling rivalry. Envy is also a central dimension in the New Testament. Jesus was envied by the chief priests because of the miracles he performed and his reputation. Pontius Pilate did not dare to disclaim the priests, though he was well aware of their motives: '... he knew that the chief priests had delivered him for envy' (the Gospel according to Mark 15: 10). From a biblical point of view, envy can be defined as a sin based on the selfishness of a person acting in his/her own interest, from which people should strive to be free. From the religious viewpoint, shame and guilt were chosen as concepts related to envy (Figure 2).

Finnish folklore's view of envy

From the viewpoint of Finnish folklore, envy is defined as something that has to be avoided and disapproved as a frightening and destructive part of a person's life. According to Foster (1972), every culture employs different symbolic means to neutralize and control the hazards involved in envy and the fears brought about by it. An example is an old Finnish poem which gives a description of an envious person's gaze and provides a magic verse to defend oneself against it (*Suomen Kansan Vanhat Runot* 1934). There are four different operational models which are commonly used to fend off others' envy: concealment, denial, symbolic sharing and genuine sharing. Regardless of the culture, the person usually tries to conceal a thing that might become an object of envy for others. If the person fails in this, he/she often tends to deny the value of the thing he/she possesses. If the person is unsuccessful in this concealment, it is possible to share the object of envy symbolically, for instance, by sharing the honour and merit for an achievement with the envying person. If this does not calm the envious person and, consequently, his/her fear for the other's envy, one can be forced to share the object of envy genuinely. (Foster 1972, Whitman & Bloch 1990) From the viewpoint of Finnish folklore, shame and guilt were chosen as concepts related to envy (Figure 2).

A psychoanalytical view of envy

From the psychoanalytical viewpoint envy can be defined as a painful emotion caused by the experienced weakness of the ego, which leads to a lowering of self-esteem and a loss of self-respect (Schalin 1986). On the other hand envy is a part of the human being's natural narcissistic development and, if conscious, a central feature of a well-balanced ego (Smith & Whitfield 1983, Schalin 1986). The distinctive feature of envy is that the person does not acknowledge his/her boundaries. He or she does not recognize his or her own real limitations. This is also a feature characteristic of jealousy. These two emotions share the wish to be omnipotent. The key difference between the two phenomena is that an envious person experiences the other as having something he/she is lacking and would want to possess, whereas jealousy relates to a situation where the other gives the thing the jealous person would want to have for him/herself to someone else. Envy is also suggestive of greed. The essential difference between envy and greed is the fact that envy implies a hostile attitude towards the other, while greed implies an insatiable desire to own and exploit something. (Whitman & Bloch 1990, Hansen 1991, Parrot & Smith 1993, Klein 1994, Shengold 1994). In Figure 2, jealousy and greed are presented as borderline concepts of envy.

Parrot (1991) suggests that subjective envy includes admiration, a desire to have for oneself something possessed by another, a feeling of inferiority in relation to the envied person and an experience of injustice. Disapproval, and anger at, the other's superiority on the one hand, and the guilt caused by one's ill will on the other, are related. Thus, in addition to the related concepts mentioned earlier, admiration and disappointment were chosen as related concepts from the psychoanalytical viewpoint (Figure 2).

Nursing science's view of envy

The nursing science view of envy is to be found in the goal of nursing, that is health. Subjective envy and its understanding can facilitate the identification of one's own wishes and honest appraisal of one's limitations and increase the capacity to respond to developmental challenges. The essential qualities include awareness, ability and courage to reflect on oneself and one's relationship with the environment. This makes it bearable to accept one's feelings and to grieve over one's faults. This also enables one to accept a lack of awareness and destructiveness as dimensions of existence, and to accept oneself as one is. Genuine responsiveness gives rise to gratitude, which can be understood as a counter-concept of envy along with generosity and happiness (Schalin 1987) (Figure 2). This state can be considered to manifest as health, i.e. as a person's ability to live a rich and satisfying life (Rauhala 1989).

Figure 2 shows a theory-based analysis of subjective envy. The figure is based on the typology presented by Wilson (1969), which includes close, borderline and counter-concepts. Of the concepts mentioned above, anger, grief, shame, guilt, admiration and disappointment are presented as related concepts, since these feelings are closely related to the experienced content of envy. The borderline concepts are jealousy and greed, since they share features with the concept of envy. Gratitude, generosity and happiness are defined as counter concepts. What is central from the viewpoint of nursing science is the person's possibility to move forward towards harmonious existence (Rauhala 1989). As far as the experience of envy is concerned, this can be seen to occur through awareness, acceptance of one's faults and new developmental challenges in a collaborative relationship respectful of the other's good (Smith & Whitfield 1983, Schalin 1986) (Figure 2).

A working definition of the concept of envy

As a result of the theoretical phase, the following working definition of envy was formulated:

Envy is a painful and contradictory emotion based on an experience of lacking and comparison, which typically involves

a wish to have something good the other possesses and the envious person is lacking. Envy may include feelings of disappointment, shame, guilt, grief as well as admiration and hopes for identification. It is modified greed, suggestive of the emotional state of jealousy. The counter-concepts of envy are gratitude, generosity and happiness. Envy can be experienced as a threat and one can protect oneself from it. Especially when unconscious, envy may lead to destructive behaviour or non-harmonious existence. On the other hand, recognition of envy may open up new developmental possibilities towards harmonious existence. Envy can be perceived as a dimension of a person's health and illness.

THE FIELDWORK PHASE

At the fieldwork phase, the concept of envy was elaborated by supplementing the results of the theoretical phase with empirical data (Schwartz-Barcott *et al.* 1986, 1993). The approach chosen was phenomenological, since the aim was to deepen our understanding of the experience of envy (Giorgi 1985, Perttula 1995).

Selection of the informants and data collection

Five psychiatric nurses were chosen as informants, since they were assumed to be accustomed to dealing with experiential features on the basis of their working experience and education. The selection of informants was expedient. The selection criteria were given to the chief nurse of the study setting, who then selected the members of the study group on the basis of these criteria (see Nieminen 1997). The central criteria for selection were an interest in, and a desire to analyse, personal experiences of envy as well as a desire to commit oneself to group work on this theme. An oral agreement on co-operation was made with the informants at the beginning of the first meeting. The purpose and goals of the research and the informants' role in it were reviewed, and the informants' consent to participate in the research process was elicited. It was agreed that the data would be kept confidential.

Data collection was carried out during March–May 1997 as a sequence of seven videotaped small group sessions, each of which lasted for 1½ hours. In addition, a fieldwork diary was kept in order to record questions related to the course of the study process (Hirsjärvi *et al.* 1997). The small group was chosen as an analytical unit, since this was believed to provide versatile material in a short period of time. A group may offer a more natural setting for the examination of envy than does an individual conversation, since the group enables people to follow the course of conversation and participate at their own discretion. A series of small group sessions gave an opportunity to establish intense contacts with the informants and to elaborate the material (Morgan 1988, Boyle *et al.* 1989, Alasuutari 1993, Schwartz-Barcott & Kim 1993, Välimaa &

Pötsönen 1996). Videotaping was chosen, because it provides rich material and allows the researcher to observe events directly and repeatedly from different perspectives. (Bottorff 1994, Denzin & Lincoln 1994, Viitanen 1996, Routasalo 1997).

Data analysis

The analysis phase began with the transcription of the videotaped material. The videotapes were then reviewed in order to obtain an overall view. The transcribed material was then examined in conjunction with the videotapes. The statements describing subjective envy were then sorted from the text. The statements were translated into standard language, which expressed the central content of the statement in question. When the translations were considered appropriate, they were organized into a list, the order of which corresponded to the original course of discussion. The aim was to preserve the connection of the translations with the whole of the conversation. As the final phase of the analysis, a classification of subjective envy was formulated (Giorgi 1985, Leino-Kilpi 1990, Åstedt-Kurki 1992, Munnukka 1993, Perttula 1995) (Figure 3).

Experienced content of envy

The main classes of subjective envy identified were as follows: the core experience of 'lacking' as a strength and a burden, the good the other possesses as the object of envy, destruction and creation as manifestations of envy, inflexibility and emancipation as developmental trends, and finally, multidimensionality as a basic assumption. The central features of the experience of 'lacking' are the experience of oneself as imperfect and that of being disadvantaged in relation to others. The things important to a person are the ones that determine the object of envy, and the other person seems to represent the object of envy. Envy is manifested both openly and as concealed, and working out and denial are ways to deal with it. The multidimensional basic nature of envy involves both positive and negative dimensions, different manifestations in different phases of a person's life course as well as great variety.

A comparison of the empirical and theoretical findings shows that the former confirm the latter. Moreover, the empirical findings reveal more clearly than the theoretical discussion the multidimensional quality of envy, which is inherent in its basic essence, manifestation and development.

FINAL ANALYSIS

In the final analysis, the working definition that was presented as a result of the theoretical phase was re-evaluated and developed on the basis of the fieldwork

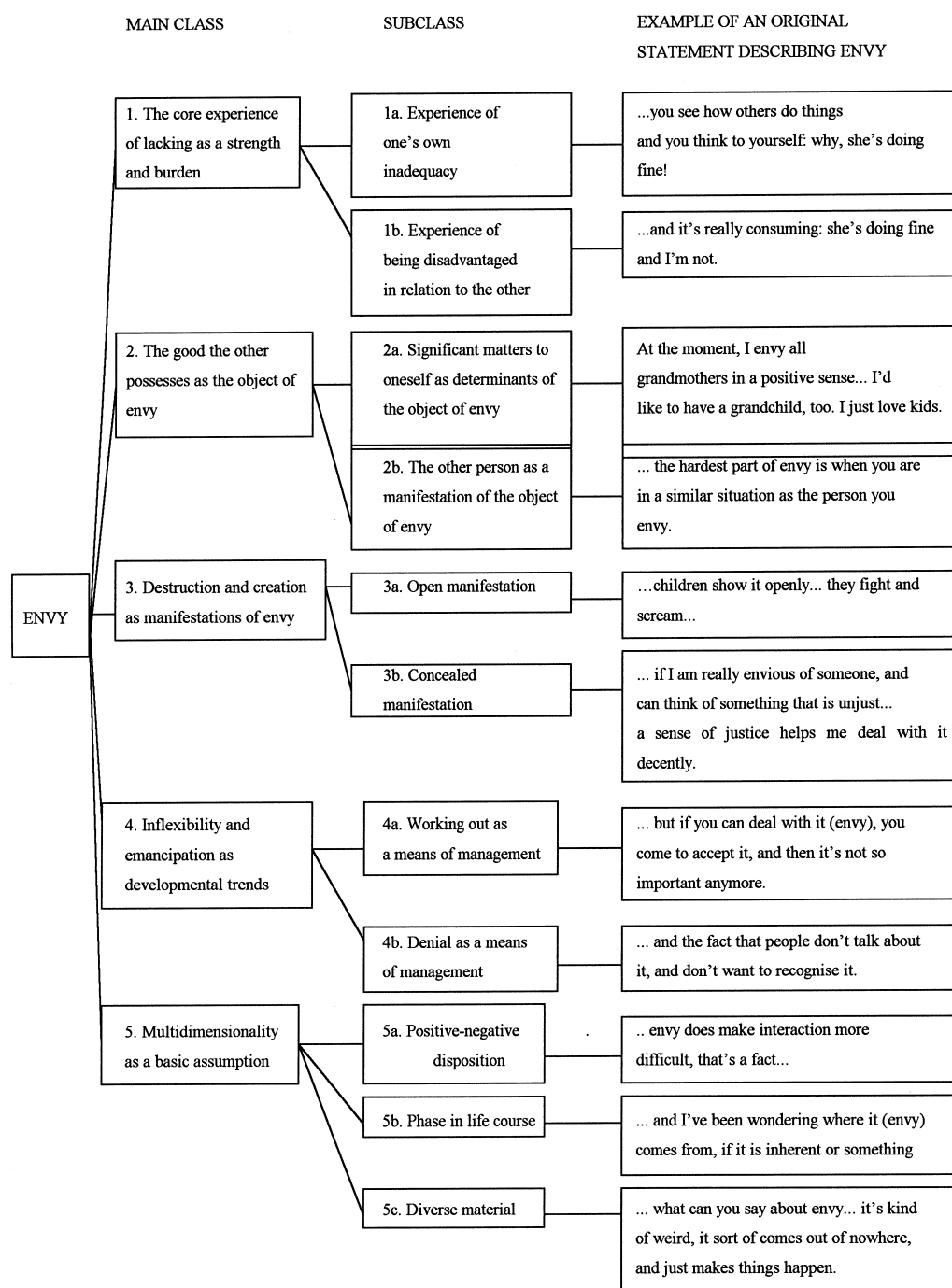


Figure 3 Classification describing the composition and manifestations of subjective envy.

phase (Schwartz-Barcott *et al.* 1986, 1993, Häggman-Laitila & Pietilä 1993). When comparing the results of the phases mentioned above, it was pointed out that they are parallel. The experience of 'lacking' is essential to both. The desire to have for oneself something good the other possesses and the contradictory and multidimensional nature of envy are also demonstrated in the results of both phases. Further shared features include destructiveness and developmental possibilities contained in

envy as well as working out/becoming aware of and denial/lack of awareness as means to deal with it.

A new definition of envy on the basis of the results

The working definition was elaborated by applying the results of the fieldwork phase to the determinants and manifestation of the object of envy. The manifestation and

developmental trend of envy were redefined, as was the core quality of envy. In the final analysis, the research task was answered by redefining the concept of envy as follows:

Envy is a painful and contradictory emotion based on an experience of lacking and comparison, which includes a distinctive desire to obtain something good the other possesses and the envious person is lacking. The things important to oneself determine the object of envy, which the other represents. Envy may include feelings of injustice, shame, guilt, grief as well as admiration and hopes for identification. It is modified greed, suggestive of the emotional state of jealousy. The counter-concepts of envy are gratitude, generosity and happiness. Envy can manifest itself in both destructiveness and creativity, both openly and as concealed. It can be experienced as a threat and one can protect oneself from it. The envious person may direct his/her development toward inflexibility and emancipation. Denial as a way to deal with envy supports the former, while increasing awareness and working out support the latter. Envy is basically a multidimensional phenomenon with different contents at the different phases of life as well as positive and negative aspects. Envy can be perceived as a dimension of a person's health and illness.

Evaluation of the new definition

The definition of the composition and manifestation of subjective envy will now be assessed briefly on the basis of the evaluation criteria presented by Morse *et al.* (1996a). The authors pointed out that, until now, there have been no evaluative criteria for concepts, and that it would be necessary to integrate concept evaluation into research on concept development (Morse *et al.* 1996b). Since concept analysis implemented by using a hybrid model is understood as a cycle, assessment can yield information as to whether one should return to the theoretical or the empirical phase (Schwartz-Barcott *et al.* 1986, 1993, Häggman-Laitila & Pietilä 1993). In this study, the concept of envy has been given a detailed and comprehensive definition, which is hence also quite extensive. The qualities of the concept have been expressed with precision on such a level of abstraction that the definition could be applied to different contexts. It contains the preconditions and outcomes of the manifestation of the concept, and the boundaries have been demarcated as well. The next challenge in developing this concept might be a review of the preconditions and outcomes of the characteristics and manifestations of envy in nursing practice.

DISCUSSION

Results

The aim of the study was to understand subjective envy through conceptual analysis of envy, and to answer

questions about the components and manifestations of envy. The selection of the study subject was based on the idea that envy is a highly active phenomenon in human relations and involves both creative and destructive qualities (Schalin 1986, Alberoni 1993, Klein 1994). The topic was justified, from the viewpoint of nursing science, by the fact that research into envy would provide understanding of subjective health and illness and thus, health promotion. It can be concluded that the result of the study, i.e. the definition describing the composition and manifestation of subjective envy, is in keeping with the study task and, consequently, understanding of the human experience of being healthy and ill and the idea of health promotion.

This study suggests that the hybrid model is a versatile method for concept development. It provides guidelines for research because of its stepwise nature. When the researcher is aware that the theoretical basis of the model is partially unsubstantiated, it can be modified in order to preserve the internal consistency of the study.

The results of this study are consistent with those of earlier studies. Feelings of discomfort, dissatisfaction with oneself and comparison to others as related to envy, which were presented by Heikkinen (1998), were also recognizable in this study. Heikkinen (1998) indicates that envy is also related to mental health. Vähäsaari (1992) holds that envy might have positive effects by bringing about dreams of the future. Kokko (1994) found that the majority of teenagers interviewed experienced envy rarely or occasionally, thus supporting the findings of Foster (1972), who argued that such findings are indicative of a denial of subjective envy. The explanation is in keeping with the present findings, according to which envy is a painful emotion, and denial is one way to deal with it.

Feldman & Paola (1994) suggest that envy is directed towards an idealized object on the basis of feelings of omnipotence and involves comparison. This conclusion seems to agree with the results of this study, according to which envy is based on comparison and the other person is the object of envy. The study findings are also consistent with the results of Salovey & Rotman (1991), according to whom envy is experienced especially when a person feels threatened by something in an area which is meaningful to him/her. This study indicates that things that are important to a person determine the object of envy. Parrot & Smith (1993) suggest that envy typically involves a feeling of inferiority, longing, disapproval and a difficulty of accepting the feeling of envy. This result can be seen as consistent with our findings which present envy as an experience of lacking.

A comparison of the previous studies and the present study shows that especially the multidimensional nature of subjective envy is more clearly highlighted by the present results, which demonstrated the multidimensionality of its core nature, manifestation and developmental trend.

Reliability of the results

The correspondence between the phenomenon and reality in this study was evaluated in the course of data collection by using feedback from a collage composed of every session's central content and from a feedback session after the completion of the study (see Lincoln & Cuba 1985, Tynjälä 1991, Rauhala 1993, Perttula 1995). This feedback warranted the conclusion that the correspondence between the experience of the researcher and that of the informants was adequate. The researcher's self-awareness has been under evaluation during the whole study process. Reflection on the naturalistic attitude was first carried out through the theoretical phase, and elimination of it was aimed at during the fieldwork phase. In the data collection phase, collages and feedback were used for a critical analysis of awareness. The researcher repeated the phases of the analytical process several times, attempting to identify new alternatives each time. A serious attempt was made to report the study procedures accurately by justifying methodical solutions and by documenting all phases of data collection and analysis in detail. As a whole, the study process represents an attempt at consistent reflection as well as a description of this reflection (Perttula 1995). This is important from the viewpoint of reliability, but also crucially important ethically, because the informants shared their personal experiences with the researcher (see Munhall 1993).

Significance of the study and future challenges

At the beginning of the paper, conceptualization of envy was justified with the desire to understand the phenomenon under study as a dimension of a person's health and illness. If the correspondence between the concept and reality is sufficient, it provides the person with an opportunity to clarify his/her conception of the world and enhance his/her harmonious existence. Further, it can be thought that a conceptual reduction facilitates the description of subjective envy to others, thus enabling communication. (Rauhala 1993.) In this case, conceptual analysis can assist in discovering new developmental areas for nursing and in developing nursing practice. Clarification of the concept of envy may facilitate nursing practitioners' conscious work in collaborative relationships and increase their possibilities to enhance a person's harmonious existence.

A future challenge is to apply the present definition of envy to nursing practice, e.g. to study the manifestations of envy in the collaborative relationships between caregivers and patients or in a care community and the preconditions and outcomes of its manifestation. This could help us to identify new dimensions in a concept that requires further specification through concept analysis (Häggman-Laitila & Pietilä 1993). The results of

such a study could serve as a justification for recommendations aimed at developing nursing, nursing education and nursing administration.

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