



## Envy in Othello can effort explain such a tragic issue

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### Introduction

The destructive power of envy is perfectly highlighted in Shakespeare's *Othello*. Despite fighting loyally for many years under Othello's commands, Iago learns that Othello prefers to select another soldier (Cassio) rather than him as his personal lieutenant. Iago is piqued since he aspired for a long time in that promotion and secretly expected to be chosen by Othello. Envy arises intensively in Iago and pushes the latter to plan a Machiavellian vengeance aiming at ruining the life of both Othello and Cassio. The play ends dramatically. Consumed by his envy, Iago kills Emilia (his own wife) and Roderigo (his friend and ally), he wounds Cassio (his rival) and succeeds in exerting Othello to kill his wife (Desdemona) and to commit suicide. Finally Iago is led away in chains while Cassio becomes governor of Cyprus, the position so desired by Iago. In *Othello*, Shakespeare chooses to picture the extreme and ugly side of envy. Indeed not every envious episode ends in bloodshed. Envy is a protean emotion, i.e. the hostility inherent in envy can take many forms (e.g. nasty looks, sarcastic comments, aggression...).<sup>16</sup> How Iago's envy led to such a dramatic end? We argue that effort might explain such a tragic issue. Indeed, Iago put a lot of efforts during many years so as to improve his position. When Iago realised that all his efforts were invested in vain, this might have amplified his envy exerting Iago to behave extremely and showing him the path to crime. Would the play ended identically if Iago invested no effort in obtaining a promotion?

How effort impacts envy: does it amplify or reduce envy? Would Iago be more envious if he was less invested in getting that promotion? Would Iago's envy deter the latter from committing crimes if he put fewer efforts in improving his position? We aim at exploring the direct connection between effort and the emotion of envy. Through this paper, we address the following question: are people more prone to experience envy and to alter others' situations when their inferior situation results from their own efforts or from factors out of their control (e.g. luck)? This issue is a particularly interesting one in Labour Economics (to design new incentive schemes) or in Management (in team management or in Human Resources). Indeed the workplace gathers all conditions required in order to generate intense envy among colleagues (Bedeian, 1995; Vecchio, 2005; Vidaillet, 2007, 2008). By assigning limited organizational resources, it generates inequalities among co-workers (e.g. wages, job promotions, windowed offices, secretarial support...). Employees' performance is not observable in all firms. When employees' performance is observable it is very easy for managers to propose wages that depend on individual performance but when performance is not observable, managers propose wages relying on factors that are beyond employees' control (e.g. manager's beliefs about employee's performance, employee's physical attractiveness...). Employees' reactions are ought to be very different in these two settings. Since envy is acknowledged to be a powerful micro-motivation leading to action (Ben Ze'ev, 2000; Smith and Kim, 2007). Which configuration minimises the probability for an employee to experience envy and to engage in counterproductive behaviour (e.g. deter job atmosphere, sabotage...) toward co-workers? We propose to investigate this issue through referring to experimental methods.

Albeit standard economic theory states that emotions do not affect individuals' satisfaction and behaviour, evidence suggests the opposite (Bault et al., 2008; Bosman and van Winden, 2002; Bosman et al., 2005; Sanfey et al., 2003; van Winden et al., 2008). Emotions draw growing attention from scholars. In Emotion theory, effort is acknowledged to play a key role on emotions by modulating their intensity (Ben Ze'ev, 2000; Lazarus, 1991; Ortony et al., 1988; Wyer and Srull, 1989). Indeed emotions are ought to be experienced more intensively when the emotional situation involves efforts from the subject. Ben Ze'ev (2000) emphasizes this connection through the following lines: "(...) the more effort we invest in something, the more significant it becomes and the more

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<sup>16</sup> See Parrott and Rodriguez Mosquera (2008).