

# Envy and egalitarianism in Aboriginal Australia: An integrative approach

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The word ‘envy’ directs attention to feelings and cognitions that are especially important sources of information in our complicated sociality. As it is delimited by philosophers, economists, psychologists and others, envy is conceptually nested within a family that includes evil eye beliefs, inequity aversion, strong reciprocity and social comparison. Although the accumulation of work in these areas is substantial, anthropological treatments of envy are rare. Given repeated assertions of envy’s universality and its potential importance for understanding widespread aspects of the human condition, a comparative eye seems essential. I present an account of ‘jealous’ in Aboriginal Australia via a framework that casts emotions as emerging from the interaction of psychobiological and sociocultural processes. According to this perspective, ‘envy’ should not be regarded as an invariant human condition but rather as a Western version of what, in a more generic human form, may both defend the individual and the larger sociality.

**Keywords:** Emotions, cooperation, Aboriginal Australia

## INTRODUCTION

Between 2003 and 2005, I made a series of trips to a remote Arnhem Land community called Numbulwar to conduct a study of the context and consequences of the premature morbidity and mortality that have become so dramatically apparent across Indigenous Australia in recent years (Burbank 2011). The first few days of the last of these trips were, as had become routine, filled with settling in activities such as cleaning out a flat that I was able to rent, stocking up on basic food supplies at the local shop and being visited by my ‘close family’ and other fictive ‘kin’. Sherry, a woman who helped me throughout the study was among the first of the people I had seen, but several days passed before I first encountered her close kinswoman, Mercy, who has never formally assisted me in any of my research though I have known her for more than thirty years. Seeing each other at the shop, we engaged in what I thought of as a friendly exchange of catch up news. The conversation included a promise that she would visit me later that day to tell me what to buy for her once I was back in Darwin or Perth, ‘because you never sent me anything, like Christmas lights’<sup>1</sup> —something I had mailed to Sherry the previous holiday season. Later that day, Mercy did come by, in Sherry’s company. Then, appearing somewhat agitated, even angry, Mercy told me, referring

to the various packages that I had been sending to Sherry and her children over the past few years that, 'We are jealous when you send everything to Sherry. We are jealous of [her] kids. Our turn now'. This brief comment from Mercy, to whom I did send Christmas lights that year, provides, I think, a clear-cut example of 'inequity aversion' as it is lived at Numbulwar and an example of the way that its cultural manifestation, labelled by the words 'jealous', or 'jealousing', was used in the local Aboriginal English. This usage might, at least roughly, be translated as 'envy' or 'feeling envious', but to stop at this would be to miss much of the experience.

## AN INTEGRATIVE APPROACH

Envy is best regarded as a Western version of what may be a generic human potential; a position anticipated by Garrison and Arensberg some years ago when they said that:

*Invidia* ... is a highly culturally elaborated definition of an emotional state. The emotional state and the rivalries to which it is attributed are probably universal. But the complex conceptualization of that state and its circumstances, as in the emic concept *invidia*, is probably not universal. (Garrison and Arensberg 1976: 323)

In emphasising both cultural particularity and a degree of psychic unity, I am following an approach that understands emotions as forms of experience that emerge from the interaction of psychobiological and sociocultural factors, not to mention those arising from individual differences and the immediate context in which an emotion may be felt (e.g. Reddy 1997, 2001; B. Shore, unpubl. data). Hinton (1999), an early advocate of this perspective, has pointed out several of its advantages in contrast to universalist approaches on the one hand, and constructionist approaches on the other. First among these, perhaps, is the avoidance of both biological and cultural determinism in our understanding of this domain of human experience. At the same time, however, such treatments take the possibility of constraints into consideration. In contrast to radical constructionism, we may here consider the limits of human plasticity and the possibility that at least some emotions are either more or less constrained than others and hence more or less variable across the range of human experience. Nevertheless, we are also encouraged to seek the differences in similar experiences across cultures. Further, what Hinton calls 'processual', and I, along with others (e.g. Worthman 2009: 2) call 'integrative', approaches reinforce a call emphasised, if not originating, in the constructionist literature (e.g. Lutz 1988), to realise that as anthropologists we too often operate with our own folk categories, and hence implicit cultural baggage, and need to analyse emotion terms encountered in other cultural settings.

Hinton (1999) also suggests that the delineation of an emotion begins with the delineation of the processes that generate emotions. In exemplification, he reminds us of Kagan's (1978, 1984) weather analogy. What we experience as a 'nice' or 'rainy' day may be seen as a confluence, or 'coherence' of 'wind velocity, humidity, temperature, barometric pressure and type of precipitation' (304). Weather is a constant in our

experience and so we tend to ignore it, but our attention is drawn to specific weather events, usually the more dramatic ones. These we may then acknowledge with words like 'hail' or 'cyclone'. So too are we more likely to attend to, and label, the more dramatic episodes of psychic and somatic feelings that are always with us (see also Russell 2003).

What are the specifics that cohere and give rise to envy? Let me begin by positing an inherited human potential or disposition that I call 'inequity aversion', a term I have borrowed from Fehr and Schmidt (1999), as it escapes not only the complex of Western cultural associations with the word 'envy', but also the evaluative shadow that so encumbers many academic discussions of it. As readers of this literature will discover, this term, like so many in the human sciences, is used with somewhat variable meanings. I develop mine here. Briefly, what I mean by 'inequity aversion' is a disposition for humans to compare their social and material circumstances with others and experience feelings about their circumstances relative to others which may motivate an attempt to change their position. It is, according to Bloch and Sperber (2002), such 'inherited dispositions' as the one posited here, that once provided our evolving species with a distinct reproductive advantage. Now, as a universal psychic presence, they direct our attention and interest to certain kinds of cultural material, that which provides the kind of information we somehow feel it is important to have. But, one should ask, what evidence do we have that suggests 'inequity aversion' is such a disposition?

First comes the possibility that 'social and physical pain might rely on overlapping neural processes in the form of a common neural alarm system' (Eisenberger and Lieberman 2004: 298), which suggests that our social wellbeing is as vital as our physical integrity. Pain, whatever its source, 'captures attention, disrupts ongoing behavior, and motivates action aimed at regaining safety and mitigating painful experiences' (294). That humans cooperate with each other to a far greater extent than any other animal has, in recent years, been noticed by scholars working within evolutionary frameworks (e.g. Dunbar 2003; Hammerstein 2003). Of particular interest here are the dilemmas posed to us by the costs and benefits of our cooperation; we might imagine the development of human sociality arising from a series of sequential, if not simultaneous, moves in which individuals ensure that their cooperation with others does not entail their own exploitation. Worthman (2009: 2–3) has emphasised the complex and changing nature of this scenario, not to mention the contemporary 'social landscape', where emotions enhance our capacities for noticing what needs be noticed in a timely fashion as we interact with conspecifics who may be either, or both, our rivals and our allies. Given that differential reproductive success is the name of the game, and that this is dependent upon differential access to resources, a critical first step is the act of social comparison, that is, of noticing how self compares to socially relevant others. Noticing the extent to which one is treated like others, especially with regard to resource distribution, must be an essential human potential, a term I actually prefer to 'disposition', for it highlights environment's role in the development of human capacities and normal variation. Being motivated to do something about one's

disadvantage must be equally important. In our complicated social landscapes scattered with the pitfalls of too much or too little cooperation, the impetus that only pain might provide may be the critical step from immobility to action and if envy, or similar emotions, motivate 'strong reciprocity', that is, the act of punishing others when they defect from group endeavours, it may also be the guarantor of some of our most important forms of cooperation.

The sociologist Festinger (1954) proposed many years ago that there is a human 'drive to evaluate his opinions and his abilities' (117) on the grounds that:

A person's cognition (his opinions and beliefs) about the situation in which he exists and his appraisals of what he is capable of doing (his evaluation of his abilities) will together have bearing on his behavior. The holding of incorrect opinions and /or inaccurate appraisals of one's abilities can be punishing or even fatal in many situations. (Festinger 1954: 117)

Although people may have a need for such information, it may not be available from the physical world, hence:

To the extent that objective, non-social means are not available, people evaluate their opinions and abilities by comparison respectively with the opinions and abilities of others. (Festinger 1954: 118)

A great many studies have since been undertaken in this area (e.g. Suls and Wheeler 2000), and while not extending to non-Western populations, as least as far as I can find, it does seem more than 'plausible' that social comparison is a pan human potential. Evidence of the widespread occurrence of this process is provided by Fiske's (1992) abstraction of 'equality matching' from the cross-cultural record. This is one of four intrinsic, that is, unlearned, cognitive models that are, he believes, employed in all societies to structure relationships (717).<sup>2</sup> On the basis of his fieldwork with the Moose of West Africa and his substantial familiarity with other ethnographic works, Fiske has proposed that these models are used 'to generate, understand, coordinate, and evaluate social relationships' (693). The human psyche's 'equality matching' model enables attention 'to the magnitude of imbalances, using addition and subtraction to calculate the net result of a series of interchanges' (704). Fiske connects envy with equality matching, observing that 'any kind of major inequality in fortune often leads to accusations of witchcraft or sorcery', and that misfortune, in turn, is explained with reference to the practice of witchcraft or sorcery by an envious individual. 'This', he says, 'encourages people to be scrupulously fair and to hide their resources, in order to avoid inciting envy' (705). While social comparison is not limited to calculations of 'relative amount' of material goods, but may be expanded to include attention to any dimension of value such as 'good fortune', evidence of a 'capacity to assess relative amounts' is provided by:

many findings in behavioural, developmental, neuropsychological and neuroimaging studies [that] converge to suggest a variety of representation of numbers and a variety of processes engaged in numerical inference. (Boyer and Barrett 2005: 111)

Inequity aversion arises in negative social comparison followed by pain, or distress, which in turn prompts us to change a position where we find our self at a disadvantage. Pain, say Lieberman and Eisenberger (2009: 891), 'motivates us to seek out the salve that will take the pain away'. It is here in our response that we find the origins of 'envy' and similar, but different, emotions across cultures. To help us imagine how the pain of negative social comparison may come to be associated with specific ideas and forms of action, I turn to Obeyesekere (1981) and Reddy (1997, 2001). In Obeyesekere's psychoanalytically inspired discussion, both symptoms and symbols represent 'deep motivations'—the conflicts, terrors and unacceptable desires that arise in early life. A symptom is a manifestation of that conflict and a means of self-communication, a self-representation that is both meaningful and soothing. In order to communicate with others, however, sufferers must draw on their cultural worlds and in doing so their symptoms are transformed into symbols that, at the best of times, help them transcend the original trauma. Some symbols, because of their origins in psychic conflict, may have a widespread, if not universal, appeal, though we should consider that even these symbols may not hold the same meaning for all as they come to exist apart from the deep motivations that gave rise to them. They do, however, contain a potential to represent the circumstances of their genesis, an ease of association with cognitions and feelings linked to the personal, though unconscious, experiences of those who choose them.

Reddy's (1997, 2001) ideas about emotion words have much in common with Obeyesekere's ideas about symbols. Locating 'emotional events' or 'feelings' in 'any functioning central nervous system' (1997: 335), Reddy assigns emotion words a greater role in our emotional lives than simply one of reference. Instead they may be seen as 'emotives', a term he has devised in a play on Austin's (1962) 'constatives' and 'performatives', words that may be an attempt to communicate an interior reality but which also affect, and thus to some extent form, that reality. Addressing the thorny issue of human universals, Reddy suggests that it is not so much specific emotions but rather the requirement for some form of emotional control that is found across human cultures. This requirement leads to 'emotion regimes', a 'set of normative emotions and the official ritual, practices and emotives that express and inculcate them' (2001: 129). We may imagine that 'envy' is a symbol that originates in a 'deep motivation' arising from the pain of negative social comparison and which has the potential to represent and form that experience, at least to some degree.

Emotion talk is a communicative event, an attempt to translate an interior state into an exterior one. In the act of translation, however, as is always the case, slippage occurs (Reddy 2001: 78–88), though the degree to which the original state is distorted may vary and variation occurs in culturally specific ways. 'Envy', then, cannot be understood as a direct translation of specific responses to negative social comparison in other cultural contexts. Take, for example, the Robarchek and Robarchek (2005) Robarchek and Robarchek (1998) comparison of the Waorani grief-rage-homicide complex with that of the Ilongot grief-rage-headhunting complex (e.g. Rosaldo 1980,

1989). Although they focus primarily on similarities apparent in the two sets of interpretation, particularly on the connections of 'envy' and 'rage' with violations of an egalitarian ethic, an effort highly relevant to my discussion of 'jealous' below, the differences are nevertheless apparent, illustrating the ways in which culture may transform our genetically inherited potentials to feel certain emotions. Ilongot *liget* is 'typically born of "envy" ... [and] grows through the heart's reflections on the success of an "equal" ... as it notes that "I have less"' and motivates Ilongot youth to kill when they see others wearing the hornbill earrings indicating that they have taken their first head (Rosaldo 1980: 47 in Robarchek and Robarchek 2005: 221–22). Headhunting springs from Ilongot 'envy'. In contrast, while Waorani 'envy' is also aroused by the perception of inequality and leads to homicide, the route is more circuitous. It is as an act of vengeance for a death assumed to have been caused by sorcery which, in turn, is assumed to have been caused by envy: 'I don't have a child like that', she said. So saying, being enraged, Omëngkidi's child she bewitched, and she died' (219). It is the subsequent feelings of grief and rage that motivate the act of killing.

More significantly, envy appears to occupy different moral spaces in Waorani and Ilongot psyches. *Liget* originates in envy ('*apet*, '*apa'apa*) (Rosaldo 1980: 46) and, while a source of ambivalent feelings, is nevertheless valued as a force that moves people to act:

'Without *liget* to move our hearts ... there would be no human life'. It is envy, they explain, that stimulates industry and spurs people on to labor, and it is *liget* that is revealed when, in work, we pant and sweat. (Rosaldo 1980: 47)

*Liget* is also intimately connected to headhunting. Once, Michele Rosaldo played a recording of a headhunting celebration made on a previous fieldtrip. Her account of this event illustrates the value this activity had for those who once practiced it. The Ilongot listeners could, in short, not bear to listen to the tape. When she had the opportunity to ask one guest the reason for this:

He told us that it hurt to listen to a headhunting celebration when people knew that there would never be another ... 'I still am an Ilongot at heart: and when I hear the song, my heart aches as it does when I must look upon unfinished bachelors whom I know that I will never lead to take a head'. (Rosaldo 1980: 33)

The Waorani have, in similar fashion, relinquished homicide. Although some do continue to murder from time to time they, in contrast, express no regret about the loss of this activity, at least as far as I can ascertain from Robarchek and Robarchek's ethnography (1998, 2005). To the contrary:

The old cultural and psychological schemata of envy, grief and rage persist but, in this new reality, they are only infrequently manifested in homicidal raiding. The speed with which the transformation from violence to relative peacefulness occurred can only be explained as a consequence of the Waorani's conscious striving to achieve what they themselves had long wanted: an end to the killing. When the opportunity presented itself, they seized and implemented it. (Robarchek and Robarchek 2005: 223–24)

It is the response to the pain of negative social comparison that transforms ‘inequity aversion’ to ‘envy’ or ‘*apet*’, ‘*apa’apa*’, or to ‘jealous’, as I shall argue below. And perhaps the most critical part of the response derives from the context in which it is considered and enacted, a context which necessarily includes feelings and values (Lutz 1988: 82).

The complex experience of inequity aversion, composed of the proposed invariants—negative social comparison, pain and action to ameliorate the pain—may be perceived and performed in a variety of different ways. In addition, when these acts are placed in circumstances that vary not only by sociocultural factors but also circumstantial ones, the variations of human experience, though patterned and hence recognisably part of the same category of event are, nevertheless, seemingly infinite.

## NUMBULWAR

Numbulwar is located in the southeast Arnhem Land reserve of the Northern Territory of Australia. The ‘town’, as it is now regarded, was first established as the Rose River Mission by the Anglican Church Missionary Society in 1952 with the specific intent of providing the Nunggubuyu people with a mission of their own (Cole 1982). Today Numbulwar is a community of about eight hundred people, enlarged most of the time by about two hundred visitors, usually people from ‘Groote’ and Ngukurr. All these settlements have always been plagued by material poverty (e.g. Cole 1985). The missionaries who established them, though supported to some extent by the larger Australian society, struggled to provide themselves and their Aboriginal flocks with adequate infrastructure, at least in terms of Western standards (Biernoff 1979). For example, the original housing for Aboriginal people, provided several years after the building of mission accommodation (Young 1981), consisted of small wooden structures, many of only one small room, without plumbing and kitchens. Over the years various government programs have replaced these with houses that more closely resemble those that might be seen in many Darwin suburbs—about 550 air kilometres away—but due to overcrowding, hard use and an imbalance between trained tradespeople and demand for repairs, the issue of adequate, safe and healthy housing continues to be a topic of concern both for local people and the larger Australian polity.

I have been engaged in anthropological fieldwork at Numbulwar, off and on, since 1977 and, until recently, have always possessed more than any local while I am living there. Even the minimal changes of clothing that I bring likely exceed what most Aboriginal people have in their possession at any given time. Though living far more simply than is even possible in my usual setting, I have always been housed in relative luxury, if only because my shelter is inhabited by far fewer people than the norm, even when I have provided a bed to locals. The various caravans, houses and flats that I have been able to use, though minimally furnished to my eye, have always contained more furniture, appliances, bedding, linen and kitchenware than I have seen in any Aboriginal household. On some of these trips, I have not only had a vehicle but also enough money to buy petrol whereas the majority of residents do not own cars and those who do may often not have money to fill the tank.

Recently, however, the people whom I know best, and many others to judge from casual observation, have been acquiring more material goods than they have previously possessed. Such items as baby strollers, mobile phones, CD and DVD players appear to be the possessions of many and at least one person had acquired a laptop computer by 2007. Some people now have washing machines and refrigerators along with the stoves that come with any newer style house. More and more people appear to own vehicles and boats, the latter usually dinghies with outboard motors, forms of ownership that may entangle them in substantial debt. Until they were cut off for non-payment, people have had telephones and pay TV services in their homes. Girls and young women, dressed now in today's youth fashions, display more jewellery and hair decorations than before and young men have traded their bare feet and inexpensive thongs for 'boots', that is, sports shoes. Nevertheless, I suspect that most of the people at Numbulwar would agree with a local woman who told me that 'Aboriginal people are poor'—although I have heard one Aboriginal man who received 'royalty money' from a mining concern on Groote Eylandt described as 'rich'—and indeed, in Western terms, they are. Jobs in the town are few and most paying more than a CDEP<sup>3</sup> wage are occupied by visiting 'whitefellas'. Levels of educational achievement and English competency make employment outside the community a rare possibility, assuming that people are willing to leave, which is rarely apparent. The primary source of subsistence is various forms of welfare, supplemented by a little cash for paintings, pandanus baskets and other 'handcraft'. Although some people may fish almost every day and frequently engage in other forms of hunting and gathering, these activities cannot begin to sustain the nutritional needs of such a large and settled population; they certainly cannot support a consumerist lifestyle. A rare few, like the 'rich' man just mentioned, those with claims to 'country' on Groote Eylandt, receive 'royalty' money from a subsidiary company of BHP Billiton that mines manganese on the island, and perhaps even fewer have jobs that may include salaries more in keeping with the rest of Australia. But both of these cash sources are stretched by the demands of extended family members.

### 'JEALOUS'

Although sometimes used to mean 'envy', more often I have heard the word 'jealous' used in a way that Westerners would translate as 'jealousy'. For example:

She might be jealous. He might have been looking at another woman, that's why she's angry. She might be jealous of her sister. (Burbank 1994: 58)

Although scholars (e.g. Schoeck 1969; Parrott and Smith 1993; Purshouse 2004) have taken pains to point out the distinguishing features of these emotions, Westerners often substitute the word 'jealous' for the word 'envy' in casual conversation. So, it may simply be the result of historical accident that the Aboriginal people of Numbulwar, who have long been exposed to English speakers, have adopted this convention in their Aboriginal version of English. Still, it seems to suit their purpose and so a

further look at how ‘jealous’ is used to talk about what Westerners see as two varieties of experience may help us better understand the thoughts and feelings that Aboriginal people are attempting to convey when they use this word.

‘Jealous’ is clearly a word sometimes used to speak about sexual jealousy:

Because a young man is jealous he will do this and that and give his wife a hard time. A young girl is jealous of her husband just because she sees somebody look at him when he walks around. He says, ‘I’m not going to those girls, I’m going with those boys’. They are going to fight, jealous [of] each other. It’s the same with that young man, ‘Oh, you are going to those men’, just because they are sitting watching her as she goes by. He might hit or punch her. (Burbank 1994: 59)

It may also be used to indicate the desire to withhold an object and not share with others, in this case food:

Maybe that girl is gonna be pregnant and that baby [the fetus] is gonna tempt her mother, that girl is gonna make fights all the time because she is starting to have that baby ... Old people can tell that way when they fight, that means they gonna have a baby ... She is gonna be jealous all the time. Maybe [her husband] kills fish or goes hunting, gets bullock meat and comes back. Only he can let mother, sister—close up sister—[have some], but not long way one, [his wife is] gonna let them ask him for beef or fish. But nobody else. And after when she has three or four kids, that’s the time temper is gonna fade away and she is gonna love anybody after that ... [Before] she is jealous for girl and for beef. (Burbank 1994: 60)

Mercy, however, is not alone in using ‘jealous’ to indicate an experience we might, initially, describe as envy. Another woman, for example, told me that her husband had been stranded up the coast when his new motorboat wouldn’t start. Someone had put water in its petrol tank because ‘jealous’ (Burbank 1994: 60). As ‘jealous’ is used in this same way elsewhere in Aboriginal Australia—for example, in northeast Arnhem Land, someone might be ‘jealous for that mutika’, that is, ‘jealous’ of a vehicle (Gerrard 1989: 106)—I suggest that this polysemous usage reflects a domain of experience characteristic of Indigenous Australia more broadly. And contra scholars who have supposed that ‘envy is negligible’ in hunting and gathering societies (see Lindholm 2008: 239), I suggest that the roots of this experience are to be found, as is the case with the Waorani, in the ‘cultural emphasis on egalitarianism’. It is precisely the violation of egalitarian expectation that sets ‘jealousing’ in motion. When people see:

that ‘someone has something desirable that I do not have.’ This violates both the existential assumption that equality is ‘normal’ and the normative assumption that it is morally ‘right’. (Robarchek and Robarchek 2005: 217)

## COUNTERING ‘JEALOUS’

In line with much of the anthropological thinking on hunting and gathering societies in general (e.g. Woodburn 2005; Kelly 2007), the precolonial, and to a great extent continuing, condition of Aboriginal Australia has long been thought of as one in

which an egalitarian ethos is disturbed, and then only to a limited extent, by little more than age and gender differences and the degree to which some men may have more religious knowledge and wives than others (e.g. Hiatt 1996). Pervasive sharing and the absence of wealth distinctions are thought to be emblematic of the Aboriginal way of being. Nevertheless, with regard to remote Aboriginal communities, there is substantial ethnographic recognition of an undertone of 'grumbling' and sometimes more than a murmur over 'stinginess, neglect and ingratitude' accompanied by 'various counterstrategies' devised to avoid sharing with others (Peterson 1993: 860). Indeed, we may look at many Aboriginal social arrangements as a means of avoiding the disruption that 'jealousing' may introduce into social life, although their deployment might not be so intended.

What Peterson (1993) has so aptly named 'demand sharing' is one of these, an example of which is provided by Mercy's request for Christmas lights and my capitulation to it. Demand sharing, he suggests, makes sense in certain socioeconomic circumstances, particularly those of hunting and gathering societies characterised as they are by kin-based forms of social relations accompanied by generalised reciprocity. In such a setting resources, as always, are limited, and potential recipients with more or less equal claims on a giver are many, at least relative to the resources one might have to give. By responding to demands rather than initiating an act of sharing, the onus and cost of distribution is placed on the person who is to benefit from it. To rephrase Peterson's (1993) argument in terms of mine, it makes sense in such circumstances to respond to the person who directs attention to their need. Not only does this assuage, if not prevent, bad feelings, it also leads to distributions that create greater equality among group members, at least usually. According to Peterson, some individuals will make demands though they may already have more of some object than the targeted giver. Whatever the actual condition of the recipient, however, having given to one, the giver may then refuse another for the often very real reason that he or she no longer has anything to give.

The person who only pretends to be in need is not the only 'defector', to use game theory language, in this scenario. Records of Aboriginal social life have noted various strategies that people employ to avoid sharing. Among these is the practice of eating one's hunting and gathering catch before returning to camp and demanding kin. Another is that of hiding items, a strategy that anthropologists quickly learn (Peterson 1993: 864). A related tactic that Peterson (1993: 862) observed in northeast Arnhem Land is to give an item to someone while continuing to use it. In this case, spears were given to elderly women, thus enabling the hunters to refuse requests for them on the grounds that the spears were not theirs to give. At Numbulwar I was given objects such as tape recorders and tobacco and told to refuse them to anyone who asked. Presumably, I was thought to have a 'strong binji' (guts/abdomen) and so be more able to resist demands than their owners might be, suggesting, as Peterson does (1993: 863), that a disposition to share is inculcated early in the life of an Aboriginal child.

A striking example of such early childhood socialisation is provided by an instance of sharing that took place as a group of related women and children sat together at a funeral held at Numbulwar in 2005. Because they were sitting outside rather than in the church itself they were more able to converse, eat and drink during the service. As we sat together, I watched a girl of about ten remove a peanut from her mouth—it was the last from the packet—and give it to a little boy, just a toddler who, watching her eat, had said, ‘peanut’. Shortly afterwards, one of his adult female kin asked him for some of his soft drink: ‘Give me some uncle’. His mother said, ‘Give your *marig* [kin reciprocal of uncle] some’, and he offered the bottle to her, an example of the kind of childrearing and child response that I have seen at Numbulwar over the years. Consequently, Peterson concludes:

For demand sharing to be a pervasive social practice, it has to be a part of the habitus and of moral education in the management of interpersonal relations, as the nature of socialization suggests it is. (1993: 865)

Thus, demand sharing becomes not only a means of achieving greater equity but also a mechanism for the production and maintenance of sociality (Peterson 1993: 870). Asking someone for something may be an attempt to obtain something, but of at least equal importance, it may also be an attempt to produce, maintain or test a relationship, as when a teenage girl once said to me, ‘If you love me, give me those apricots’.

It is clear from ethnographies across the continent that acts of demand sharing and responses to them have the potential to evoke strong feelings. People do defect and recognise the possibility of others defecting. Demands may be refused and desires frustrated, whether they are of those who demand or of those who give. Anger can be expected to follow from many of these interactions in consequence, and anger in turn is generally expected to lead to some kind of aggressive act (Burbank 1994). As just one of many possible examples, we might look at a series of fights that took place at Numbulwar in 2004. These events, occurring over two days, were said to be over ‘money’. They centred on encounters between two ‘clan’ sisters and involved at least a half dozen other people, including men from three clans.<sup>4</sup> This is not to count the many observers and commentators of all ages who witnessed much, if not all, of what transpired. Although the participants were regarded by one of these observers as ‘family’, who noted that, ‘they feel sad when they fight with family’, both of the main contenders received what appeared to be substantial blows. One of these women had asked a clan ‘mother’ for money and, I was told, ‘They didn’t like her to ask. They are jealous for that money. They want only them to ask’, meaning only the attacker and her supporters should be able to ask the clan mother for money.

While the connection between demand sharing and ‘jealousing’ seems fairly straightforward, I suggest that other actions that we might not think of in this connection also serve to diminish bad feelings, though again they may not be enacted with that explicit purpose in mind. Principal among these is the practice of destroying objects, usually, but not always, those of contention, though they may represent a

substantial material investment. The most dramatic example of this that I have come across is found in Sutton's (2008: 79–80) discussion of the part he sees some 'cultural attitudes' playing in current 'community dysfunction':

The role of demand pressures from relatives was often central to the theft of store goods or cash. At Aurukun [on the Cape York Peninsula in Queensland] in the early 1970s, Gideon Chevathun was the first local person placed in charge of the general store. Under pressures which he described, he felt obliged to supply goods at no cost to certain people, especially in-laws. The climax of this distressing experience came when Gideon went home and burned his house down. (Sutton 2009: 81)

In the Western Desert, says Myers (1988: 61), Pintupi car owners discover 'how many relatives one has'. Requests for transport are many and 'those who refuse are said to be ... 'jealous' for the car'. There are so many conflicts over their maintenance and use that 'proprietors ... set fire to and destroy their own cars as one desperate and angry resolution'. At least one car has been destroyed at Numbulwar, that is to say, damaged to the extent that it required \$10,000 worth of repairs to get back in running order. More commonly, the objects destroyed are things like windows and walls of houses, tape recorders, electric kettles and bags of flour.

In past analyses of indirect physical aggression (Burbank 1985, 1994: 151–55), I have suggested that the destruction of objects might be understood as displacement behaviours. Rather than 'kill', that is strike, a person, people at Numbulwar may 'kill' things. The value of specific relationships would seem to redirect people's violence towards less valued targets, usually material objects. Take, for example, the following case that I was told of in 1978:

A man returned home one day to find that his younger brother and younger brother's wife had removed all the screws from his tape recorder. In anger ... he took up a hatchet and 'killed' ... the tape recorder. (Burbank 1985: 58)

In this instance a man was clearly able to express his feelings without harming his brother and sister-in-law and further jeopardising family harmony. He was also able to remove the cause of dissension, ensuring no repeat of this kind of interaction, at least until another costly, hence scarce, and highly valued object was obtained. Among Western understandings of 'envy' is an acknowledged motive on the part of the envious person to deny the possession or quality to the envied other. Iago's envy of Othello, for example, sets in train the events that lead to the destruction of a happy marriage and the death of Desdemona (Smith 2004: 56). A second example from a Western society parallels the Waorani case mentioned above and suggests that they are not completely off track when they attribute the death of a child to an envious sorcerer:

In 1953 a middle-aged spinster in Munich took her friend's baby out for a walk in its pram. Suddenly she pushed baby and pram into the Isar River. The investigation, in which the psychiatrist Ernst Kretschmer took part as an expert witness, disclosed that the culprit was suddenly overcome with envy of her friend's happiness which the child symbolized. (Schoeck 1969: 107)

In contrast to Iago, the Waorani, and this German spinster, Aboriginal people seem more likely to destroy something of their own that another wants rather than something possessed by another. The tape recorder was destroyed not by the brother and his wife, but by the man who bought it, who, we might presume, interpreted his brother's and sister-in-law's act of vandalism as something like a 'jealous' one. Destroying an object of dissension is not, however, restricted to material things; people here may be treated in similar fashion. *Mirriri* is the word used at Numbulwar to refer to the emotional and behavioural accompaniments of brother/sister etiquette, much of it now more of the past than the present. A man's attention is not to be called to the sexuality and reproductive or eliminatory functions of any of his 'sisters', actual or classificatory, even in the most indirect way. When this occurs, however inadvertently, as it does from time to time, the appropriate and expected response is for the offended 'brother' to pick up spears and chase any 'sister' in his vicinity:

Olden times, somebody eloped. I came here [to Numbulwar] from a long way. I came by canoe and was staying here. When they eloped, the woman's brother looked around. 'My sister has eloped'. He picked up his spears and chased all his sisters into the bush. I saw that. I was a little girl. Their brother hunted those women away. (Burbank 1994: 152)

As women are chased into the bush, the objects of a man's 'shame' and offense are removed from the scene, preventing injury and reducing the possibility of further aggression. Unless one wishes to attribute incestuous jealousy to Aboriginal men, which I do not, these acts should not be taken as examples of attempts to minimise the effects of 'jealous' feelings. They do, however, suggest the pervasiveness of strategies that are used to this effect.

Homicides, however, specifically those of women over whom men have been fighting, may be seen in this light. Writing of the Gidjingali of northeast Arnhem Land, Hiatt (1965) mentions two cases in which a woman was killed to avenge the death of a man who fought over her. The details of one of these cases are as follows. Charlotte refused to marry her promised husband, and instead eloped with a childhood lover. The pair was chased by Adolf, her step father, who was thought to have fathered her child. Adolf was killed by her lover, who was not killed in retribution but rather punished by what people at Numbulwar might describe as the *magaranganyji*, a highly structured form of violence (Burbank 1994: 90). Later:

When the elopers returned, two 'brothers' of the victim .... attacked Charlotte. Slim's spear went through both her thighs. She had barely recovered when Tod ... speared her in the buttock. Finally, a few months later, Boris ... speared her through the back, and she died. (Hiatt 1965: 125)

The Gidjingali attributed Charlotte's death to sorcery, and Hiatt attributes it to revenge, which may well have been the case. Nevertheless, Charlotte's death removed a woman who had caused what might be seen as 'jealousing' in the community. This latter possibility is suggested by another example from Hiatt's ethnography: although

promised to Douglas, Nora was married to his elder brother Cassius after the two men had fought each other for her:

Some time later Nora eloped with Cecil ... a younger classificatory brother of Cassius and of the same land-owning unit. Cassius and his son Maurice pursued the elopers, who had joined the Nagara. They seized Nora and took her back to the Blyth River. Cecil did not try to stop them but later fought Cassius with spears and clubs. Neither injured the other seriously, but afterwards Nora said she wanted to be Cecil's wife and moved into his camp. Maurice announced that if his two 'fathers' continued to fight, he would kill Nora. (Hiatt 1965: 96)

This latter case suggests the very specific and conscious motive of removing a source of contention, something, or someone, to be 'jealous' of.

Practices that work against 'jealousing' may also extend to the realm of religious property and practice. While I do not explore this domain to any great extent, there is one aspect to be mentioned here. Gerontocratic polygyny, the monopoly of marriageable women by older men, appears to be characteristic of the traditional Australia social formation, although to varying degrees (Hiatt 1985; Keen 2005). Observers of the practice have noted the potential for conflict that it contains as 'the younger men at the peak of their physical strength and sexual activity' are left with 'virtually no women available to them' (Rose 1968: 208). Hiatt (1985), seeing this pattern 'from a sociobiological viewpoint' arising from 'a favoured male reproductive strategy', reiterates Howitt's original supposition that older men were able to 'maintain their monopoly' on women 'by virtue of their religious authority and powers of sorcery' (35). While Hiatt disputes Rose's (1968: 207–208) ideas about the causes of gerontocratic polygyny, he attends, as we might, to his idea that prolonged male initiation into the religious life of Groote Eylandt was a means of preventing young men from competing with older ones for wives, and from resenting the fact that they had none. Hiatt seems also to recognise this possibility in Aboriginal Australia more broadly when he says:

The balance of power between the upper and lower age-groups is weighted so heavily in favour of the former, that this opposition of interests seldom breaks out in open conflict between specific individuals ... To be successful in furthering sectional interests, the ideology of a privileged class (or, in this case, male age-grouping) must to some extent be accepted by the under-privileged class or classes, and this does in fact happen in the communities under consideration. (1985: 37)

Targets of envious feelings are, according to the literature, others most like the self (e.g. Ben-Ze'ev 1992; Smith and Kim 2007). We are most likely to compare our self with others whom we regard as equals and envy those who, but for their good fortune, or our bad luck, seem just like us. The creation of social distinction, such as that between initiated and uninitiated men, or to use Lindholm's (2008: 240) words 'the sacralization of difference' may, as Foster (1972: 170) suggests, be interpreted as the creation of 'conceptual nonequals', culturally sanctioned divisions between which individuals are not allowed to compete, and hence envy. Thus, the uninitiated or incompletely initiated young men, though at the peak of their physical and sexual

powers, are not eligible to marry, nor legitimately compete or, reasonably, be 'jealous' of the older initiated married men.

## DISCUSSION

We may now compare what we have learned of 'jealous' with what we know about 'envy', which is not to say that all Aboriginal people and Westerners have identical group specific emotions, only that an Aboriginal person is more likely to experience 'inequity aversion' as something along the lines of 'jealousing', and a Western person along the lines of 'envying' given their respective emersion in remote Aboriginal or Western settings.

Distinctions between 'jealousy' and 'envy' not infrequently rest on whether or not someone feels bad because of something they do or do not have, be it an object, quality or person (Foster 1972; Smith and Sung 2007). In the second instance, a man does not have a wife, and so envies another who does; in the first, a man has a wife and is jealous of the attention she pays to another man. But given the use of 'jealous' to signify both of these cases at Numbulwar, what similarity can we find that might justify this form of expression? Why is there only one 'emotive' for what Westerners think of as distinct experiences? Quite simply, I suggest that the similarity is to be found in the act of social comparison. We need to think of this process as an ongoing and essential exercise that may, from time to time, rise into consciousness to either acknowledge a current state of affairs or project a future state of affairs. Negative social comparison may be either the perception or anticipation of a disadvantage vis a vis others.<sup>5</sup> A woman threatened by a rival may imagine herself without a husband, or in situations where polygyny is possible, as is still the case at Numbulwar, with less attention from a husband and with less of the 'beef' he may provide. While we might anticipate that current and future perceptions of disadvantage would be met by different acts, in this Arnhem Land setting both often seem to be met by attack. Anger is understood as the motive for aggression and sometimes 'jealous' is understood to provoke anger. Sometimes 'jealous', in and of itself, is said to motivate fighting: 'They are fighting because she is jealous, that girl. She was chucking flour everywhere'. That is, rather than attack her rival, a woman threw bags of flour (Burbank 1994: 58). The philosopher Ben-Ze'ev (1992: 566) has said that emotions accompanying change are felt with more intensity when an imagined change approximates reality. If this is true, then we may not be surprised that both the denial and threat of denial of a desired object or person may precipitate aggression.

The Aboriginal conflation of 'envy' and 'jealousy' should also prompt us to ask why so much effort in Western thought has been expended on distinguishing 'envy' from 'jealousy' or, to extend this questioning, why so much effort has been devoted to distinguishing envy not only from jealousy but from 'indignation' and 'resentment', 'discontent' and 'covetousness' and so on (e.g. Ben-Ze'ev 1992). The Western compulsion to carve up and distinguish various responses to negative social comparison is intriguing but not something I can pursue here. Instead, I will observe that while the

Western moral position on 'envy' is preponderantly a negative one, the people of Numbulwar appear more accepting of 'jealous' in themselves and others and see the assertion and aggression that stems from it as a routine part of social life.

Along with Martha Nussbaum (1995), I am inclined to believe that whatever their cultural circumstances, the vast majority of human beings are likely to value life over death, health over illness and satisfaction or pleasure over pain. Still, violence at Numbulwar is not condemned out of hand. While acts of aggression may be seen to precipitate 'trouble', they may also be seen as a means of resolving trouble as when, in 1988, several young men received public beatings for petrol sniffing and these beatings, arranged by the local Aboriginal council, were clearly regarded as moral acts. According to Dumont (1970: 20) 'to adopt a value is to introduce hierarchy', that is to say, value requires hierarchy as something or someone is inevitably valued more or less than something or someone else. Whether aggressive action is condoned or condemned is likely to depend on where it sits in the hierarchy of value that we may read in the actions of Numbulwar's Aboriginal population. If my argument that objects are destroyed in place of relationships and people is correct, we may say that, in general, relationships and people are valued more highly than objects by this group. There appears, however, to be a hierarchy of relationships as well. Years ago, Warner (1937: 101) suggested in relation to the *mirriri* that by throwing spears at a 'sister', a man who has heard her husband swear at her 'saves any trouble between the clans', meaning, I infer, the men of his clan and those of his brother-in-law's clan. Hiatt (1965) clearly indicates that at least one Gidjingali man placed higher value on relations between brothers than on a woman's life. However, insofar as sharing creates, maintains or tests relationships, we may expect the acts that encourage it to be valued and, if only by association, so must the feelings that provoke these acts.

We also need to attend to the pervasiveness of the practices detailed in the preceding section, that I have interpreted as creating and maintaining circumstances of equality and as minimising negative social comparison. Demand sharing, the destruction of objects and people that are the source of dissension and the creation of what in other circumstances could be regarded as unnecessary social distinctions, may all be seen as efforts to maintain relationships that anthropologists would characterise as egalitarian. Unlike those of us who are unwilling to incur the cost of strong reciprocity, Aboriginal people's actions maintain a cooperative social environment. That their actions are often 'selfish' ones, intended to preserve their own equality with others, should not disqualify them as moral acts, though Ben-Ze'ev (1992: 575) would probably disagree. Although motivated by the perception of individual disadvantage, insofar as they encourage sharing and other forms of cooperative behaviour, their consequences may be described as beneficial for the group. There are, however, instances when acceptance of 'jealous' appears not to hold. As is the case across Aboriginal Australia, the people of Numbulwar face a steady stream of unexpected premature deaths. Commonly, they respond to these with suspicions of sorcery, and sometimes the motive offered for this secretive act is simply 'jealous' (Burbank 2011). A man was a good hunter or a good fighter or just 'big and fat' and so he died. We may suppose

that here, in conjunction with sorcery, 'jealous' bears greater similarity to Waorani 'envy' than Ilongot *'apet'* and is thought to be an immoral emotion just as sorcery is thought to be an immoral act.

Ben-Ze'ev (1992) has argued that the intensity and pain of envy is greater the closer people think they resemble those with whom they compare themselves. Drawing upon his experience of kibbutz society, he outlines the circumstances in which he would expect an 'increase in the level of envy' (577). Among these he includes substantial social homogeneity—a high degree of perceived similarity in terms of accomplishments and opportunities. To this he adds repeated social interaction where 'personal encounters are frequent, making it difficult to forget prevailing envy'. Joining many others, he emphasises an 'egalitarian moral concern' which, within the kibbutz, legitimates envy as it 'justifies condemnation of inequality and thus may be perceived as implying some justification' of the feeling (577). These circumstances might also be said to characterise Numbulwar, and particularly 'family' where most demand sharing and, I assume, 'jealousing' takes place. When Aboriginal people at Numbulwar use the word 'family', they are speaking of what anthropologists call a kindred, that is, 'an egocentrically defined field of close kin' (Shapiro 1981: 41). While the various forms of welfare that the people of Numbulwar receive go some distance in sustaining their bodies, there is little besides 'family' to sustain them socially and emotionally. Disputes within community-wide bodies often break down along 'family' lines and the only people besides family who are generally appealed to when supplies run low are the transient outsider 'whitefellas'.

Sometimes people speak of 'close family', indicating the perception of a more direct genealogical link and greater intimacy with only some people in the community, though all are regarded as kin. 'Close family' are not simply 'close', however. In some ways they are interchangeable. Those who practice sorcery, for example, may find satisfaction in murdering one family member in place of another. At the same time, people acknowledge the possibility that they may be killed by 'close family' (Burbank 2011). It is in this context that we find Aboriginal people not only facing a steady stream of premature mortality, but also a steady stream of new things to consume and as they do so they increasingly appear to have 'wants' as opposed to 'needs' (Fox 1989: 46). It is not just a matter of sharing 'beef'; everyone, at least in a 'family', should have 'Christmas lights'; they must compete 'to remain equal' (Naish 1978: 244) and are challenged to do so by an ever expanding material standard. Competition with 'family' is likely to be a familiar childhood experience arising from a highly responsive child-care ideal compromised by relatively large numbers of children and short birth intervals. People grow up nurtured by family but also in constant competition with family and as even casual conversations reveal, this is frequently precipitated by the perception of inadequate resources. The connections between 'jealous' and sorcery and the possibility that family may be implicated in a sorcery death suggest the degree of intensity that such feelings may reach. The connections between 'jealous' and sorcery also suggest that some people can at least imagine feelings of such painful intensity that the legitimate self-assertion that is manifest in 'demand sharing' is transformed

into deadly and morally reprehensible aggression. No one that I know at Numbulwar admits to practicing sorcery, but I can think of only one person there who may not believe in its possibility. We might suppose that these ideas arise in the 'deep' ambivalence about 'family' generated by early experiences of hostility and succour and are then attracted and stabilised by the pain of negative social comparison (cf. Obeyesekere 1981; Bloch and Sperber 2002).<sup>6</sup>

The vision of a complex social landscape of equality and inequality, sharing and defecting, cooperation and competition, justifiable assertion and reprehensible aggression is contained in the emotive 'jealous' and the practices and beliefs that express this pain. These expressions enable the Aboriginal people of Numbulwar to create and maintain the relationships that are so vital to them in their restricted social universe. At the same time, they enable us to see that while 'jealous' and 'envy' cannot be understood as direct translations of each other, those of us enculturated to feel envy have substantial empathetic means of understanding 'jealous', and those of us taught to feel 'jealous' have similar means of understanding 'envy' (cf. B. Shore, unpubl. data). In so doing, we might acknowledge not only our shared human potential for such feelings, but also both the moral unacceptability and benefits of feeling such emotions. Feelings that become 'jealous' and 'envy' provide us with a signal that we are, or are soon to be, at a disadvantage, usually in some significant way. Christmas lights may not seem very important to us, but if to Mercy they represented the power to move the larger Australian sociality into providing for its Aboriginal kin, then her failure to receive them could be interpreted with alarm.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

An Australian Research Council Discovery Grant (#DP0210203) received with Professor Robert Tonkinson and Dr. Myrna Tonkinson supported this research. Hearty thanks to Rita Armstrong, Katie Glaskin and Myrna Tonkinson for reading earlier versions of this paper and to Martha Macintyre and Erin Fitz-Henry for their helpful suggestions.

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## NOTES

- 1 Such conversations were recorded as soon as possible after the encounter but should nonetheless be regarded only as 'best' approximations.
- 2 With the possible exception of 'market pricing' in some foraging societies, Fisk anticipates finding that all these models are universal.
- 3 The federal government's Community Development Employment Projects supplemented unemployment benefits prior to the 'Intervention'.
- 4 'Clan' is a word used by the Aboriginal people of Numbulwar. People are identified with a certain clan because they come from a country associated with that clan, usually, their father's country.

- 5 Even some of those stressing the differences between 'envy' and 'jealousy' find similarities. Purs-house (2004), for example, says, 'there is a group of emotions which can be labelled both as jealousy and as envy' (20); Parrott and Smith (1993: 907, 911) have observed a frequent co-occurrence of what they regard as 'envy' and 'jealousy'.
- 6 This argument bears similarity to Schoeck's (1969: 62–64) discussion of sibling rivalry in the genesis of envy. While he claims sibling rivalry as a universal experience, he believes that the intensity of envious feelings is modified by individual differences in 'aggressive drives'. Others have also observed the association of envy and sorcery or the association of envy and evil eye beliefs which resemble sorcery beliefs insofar as they implicate 'envy' as the motive for harm (e.g. Foster 1972; Lindholm 2008).

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