

AGF RESEARCH · FACT-CHECKED · 2026

The Envy economy.

Every African abroad is measured in two mirrors at once: rich in the one facing home, behind in the one facing the host country — on the same salary, on the same day. This report is about the machinery inside that double reflection: the brain that prices everything relatively, the half of humanity that would take half the salary to come first, the neighbour's win that sends you to the moneylender — and what the science says about living between mirrors without being broken by either.

~50%

would take HALF the salary to out-earn everyone around them

+2.4%

rise in neighbours' bankruptcies per \$1,000 a nearby lottery winner takes

1 in 3

feel worse — envious, resentful — after browsing social media

84%

of surveyed migrants overestimated the wages waiting abroad

MIRROR ONE — HOME

- In this mirror you are rich.
- Your salary, converted, is a fortune.
- Your photos are someone's evidence that abroad works.
- The audience responds with requests, expectations — and quiet envy.

MIRROR TWO — HOST COUNTRY

- In this mirror you are behind.
- Locals your age own homes; you rent and remit.
- Their compound interest started at birth; yours started at arrival.
- The audience does not respond at all. You are not in their mirror.

Every African abroad lives between these two mirrors — measured as wealthy in one and behind in the other, on the same salary, on the same day. Neither mirror shows the actual life.

Fig 1 — The double reference group. Psychology mostly studies people with one comparison audience; the migrant carries two, permanently, facing opposite directions.

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01 · The Short Version

A member of this network told us a story that fits in one sentence: on the same Sunday, her aunt in Kisumu asked when she would “remember those of us you left behind”, and her Canadian colleague asked, sympathetically, whether she was “still renting”. Two mirrors, one woman, one salary. This report is about the machinery behind that Sunday.

- **Comparison is not a character flaw; it is the brain's pricing system.** fMRI studies show the reward circuitry responds to *relative* outcomes — identical money literally feels worse when a peer got more. In the classic Harvard survey, about half of respondents preferred \$50,000 where others earn \$25,000 over \$100,000 where others earn \$200,000 — **half the real income, for the relative win.**
- **The pain is engineered to be strongest exactly where the diaspora lives.** Tesser's research shows comparison burns in proportion to closeness × relevance: the age-mate with your same start hurts more than any billionaire. The diaspora WhatsApp group is a machine for delivering close, relevant comparisons across nine time zones, daily.
- **Migration doubles the reference groups.** The migrant has two audiences: the home mirror, where your converted salary makes you rich and envied, and the host mirror, where locals your age started compounding at birth. You are simultaneously ahead and behind — and both mirrors are calibrated against fictions: 84% of surveyed migrants overestimated the wages waiting abroad before they left.
- **Envy has an invoice.** For every \$1,000 a lottery winner takes home, their neighbours' bankruptcy filings rise 2.4% — comparison spends borrowed money. The diaspora edition: the December performance, the shipped car, the wedding that outruns income, the “rich relative” myth that inflates the black tax.
- **The fix is not to stop comparing — the instinct is older than language.** It is to compare wisely: against yourself at arrival, against process rather than outcomes, with curated mirrors — and with the occasional honest post, because visible struggle keeps your success attainable, and attainable success keeps your community's envy benign.

The envy economy has no currency of its own. It is denominated entirely in other people's highlight reels — and everyone in it is both customer and vendor.

02 · The Two Mirrors

Reference-group research has shown since the 1940s that wellbeing tracks the group you compare against far more than your absolute condition. Migration performs a strange surgery on that machinery: it does not replace your reference group — **it adds a second one and keeps both switched on**. Face the home mirror and you are wealthy: your salary converts into school fees for half a compound, your winter coat photographs like success. Face the host mirror and the same life reads as behind: renting at an age your colleagues bought, starting a pension in your thirties, explaining your credentials to people younger than your discounted CV. Neither mirror is lying, exactly — each measures a different economy — but your nervous system does not apply purchasing-power adjustments to feelings. It receives both verdicts at once, forever: *you are envied*, and *you are behind*.

And there is a third pane most people miss: the **diaspora mirror** — other Africans abroad, the truest comparison group of all, same start, same visa queues, same remittance load. Which is exactly why it is the one that burns hottest.

03 · The Oldest Instrument

The measuring instinct did not arrive with smartphones. Festinger's 1954 social comparison theory formalised it: humans have a basic drive to evaluate themselves, and where objective standards are missing we measure against other people. The equipment is far older than the theory — status-tracking is primate infrastructure, and Gilbert's social-rank research argues much of our emotional palette is status machinery: **pride signals a rise, shame signals a fall, and envy is the alarm that someone has something your survival systems have decided matters**. The system was tuned for villages of roughly 150 people, where every comparison target was a real, whole, visible life.

Africa's cultures have always known this machinery intimately. A continent that developed the evil eye, the praise singer, the age-grade system that compares only peers initiated together, and a thousand proverbs about the neighbour's harvest did not need Festinger. What tradition understood is that comparison is a communal force requiring communal management.

04 · The Relative Brain

The relative brain — your reward circuitry does not price your life in absolute terms. It prices it against the room.

Same reward, others got more

The ventral striatum — the brain's reward centre — responds LESS to identical money when peers received more (Fliessbach et al., Science, 2007).

Another's advantage

Envy activates the anterior cingulate cortex — the same region that processes physical pain (Takahashi et al., Science, 2009).

Another's misfortune

Schadenfreude lights the striatum — the reward system. The stronger the envy felt earlier, the stronger the reward when the envied person stumbles.

Chronic one-down position

Sustained low relative standing tracks with elevated cortisol, inflammation and stress illness in primates and humans alike (Sapolsky, 2005).

Fig 2 — The neuroscience: reward is relative, envy is processed like pain, and the envied person's stumble is processed like winning.

In Fliessbach's fMRI experiment, participants received identical money for identical work — and the ventral striatum, the reward centre, **responded more when others got less and less when others got more**. Takahashi's team completed the picture: envy activates the anterior cingulate cortex, a region that processes physical pain, while news of the envied person's misfortune lights up the reward system. Schadenfreude is, neurally, a payday. When your first reaction to an age-mate's setback shames you, it helps to know the reaction is circuitry, not character — and that what you do *next* is character.

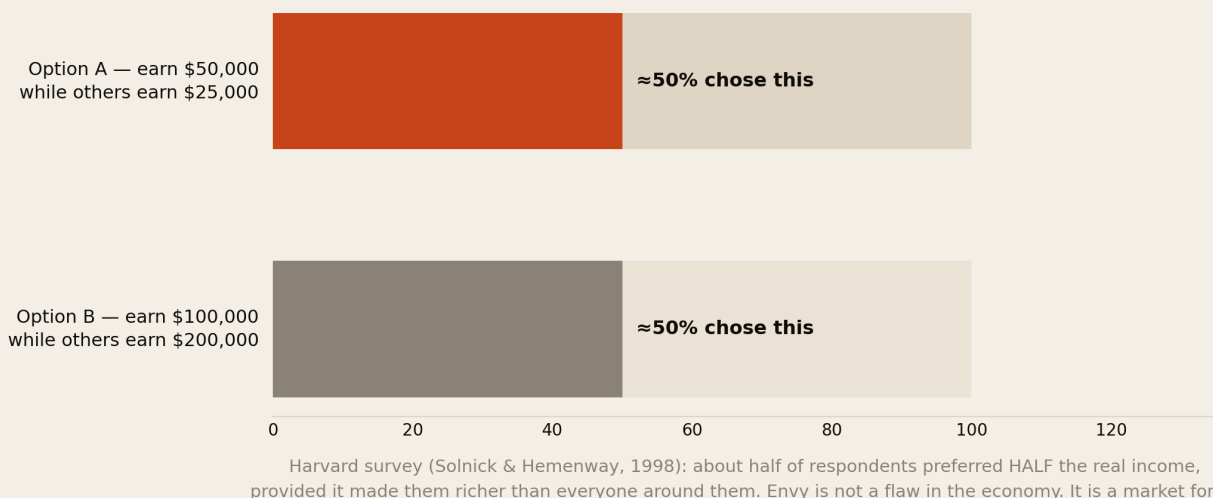


Fig 3 — Solnick & Hemenway (1998): half the real income, for the relative win.

How much does relative position weigh against real money? In the Harvard survey, **about half of respondents chose \$50,000 where others earn \$25,000 over \$100,000 where others earn \$200,000** — surrendering half their purchasing power to stand above the crowd. Anyone who has watched a diaspora wedding budget triple to impress a WhatsApp group has seen the finding replicate in the field. The stakes are not only financial: Sapolsky's primate work shows chronic one-down status tracks with cortisol, inflammation and illness. Feeling permanently behind is physiologically expensive — a tax the host mirror levies daily.

05 · The Cousin Principle

The cousin principle — comparison pain = closeness × relevance (Tesser's self-evaluation maintenance model). Why the age-mate's news burns hotter than any billionaire's, and why the diaspora WhatsApp group is a furnace.

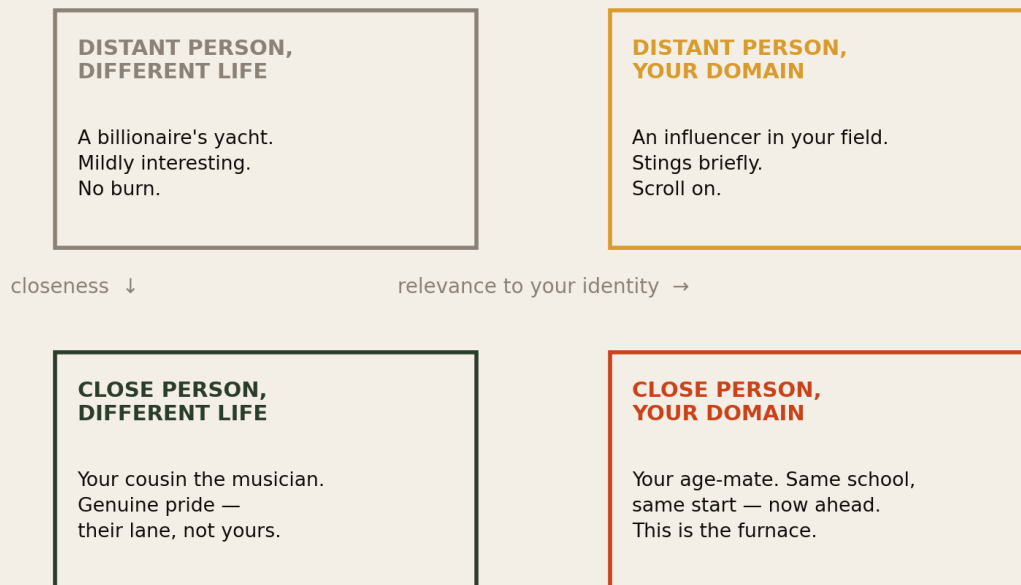


Fig 4 — Tesser's self-evaluation maintenance model, drawn as a map of who can hurt you.

Why does a stranger's Lamborghini amuse you while your age-mate's modest house keeps you up at night? Tesser's answer is an equation: **comparison pain scales with closeness × relevance**. A distant person in a different life is entertainment. A close person in a different lane is pride — the cousin who sings gets your genuine applause. But a close person succeeding in *your* domain — same school, same start, same definition of success — is a direct audit of your self-concept. That is the furnace.

African social life runs unusually hot on this equation. The **age-mate** is an institution: initiated with you, graduated with you, bride price and job title known to your mother to the shilling. The extended family is a permanently close comparison pool; the “what will people say” audit keeps every domain relevant. And migration feeds the equation: the diaspora WhatsApp group curates your closest, most relevant comparisons and delivers their promotions, keys and gender reveals to your pocket at breakfast. Nobody lies awake over a billionaire. They lie awake over the age-mate from secondary school who arrived the same year — and just posted the house.

06 · The Two Envies

MALICIOUS ENVY

- “They don’t deserve it.”
- Triggered when success feels undeserved or unreachable
- Wants to pull the other down — gossip, sabotage, silence
- The village suspicion, the “who does she think she is”

BENIGN ENVY

- “If they can, so can I.”
- Triggered when success feels earned and attainable
- Wants to pull yourself up — effort, questions, mentorship
- The hustle fuel — the reason you got on the plane at all

Same trigger, two roads (Van de Ven et al., 2009). The fork is perceived attainability — which is why hiding your process and posting only outcomes turns your community’s benign envy malicious.

Fig 5 — Van de Ven et al. (2009): same trigger, two roads, and the fork is perceived attainability.

Envy is not one emotion. **Malicious envy** is hostile and wants to pull the other down; **benign envy** is the admiring ache that makes you work harder. The fork is **perceived attainability**: success that looks earned and reachable becomes fuel — “if they can, so can I” is the sentence that filled every visa queue on the continent — while success that looks undeserved or impossible turns to poison: gossip, “must be nice”, and the quiet hope of a stumble.

African culture carries a rich folk theory of the malicious kind — the evil eye, the “village people” jokes that are only half jokes, the real fear that visible success invites attack. Strip the metaphysics and the sociology underneath is sound: **communities correctly understood that unexplained, unshared success destabilises them**, and built rituals — redistribution, feasts, deliberate modesty — to manage it. The attainability fork also hands you a practical lever: post only outcomes — the car, the keys — and your success looks like magic: unattainable, malicious-envy bait. Show the process — the night shifts, the failed applications, the years — and the same success becomes a roadmap.

07 · The Feed That Never Sleeps

The feed that never sleeps — what the research says the scroll does to the comparing brain

1 in 3

Facebook users report feeling worse — envious, resentful, lonely — after browsing; passive scrolling is the trigger (Krasnova et al., 2013)

No. 1

envy trigger on the feed: other people's travel and vacation photos — the diaspora's signature genre

Lurking

does the damage: passive following predicts envy and lower life satisfaction; active posting and messaging largely does not

~150

people your status-tracking brain evolved to compare against. Your feeds now serve you thousands, pre-filtered for success

Fig 6 — The scroll, quantified. Krasnova et al. (2013) on Facebook envy; Dunbar on what the hardware was built for.

Connect the ancient machinery to a global feed. In Krasnova's studies of Facebook users, **one in three reported feeling worse — envious, resentful, lonelier — after browsing**, with passive scrolling the trigger and **travel photos the number-one envy stimulus**. Lurking does the damage, not posting. A brain built to compare against ~150 known, whole lives now scans thousands of strangers' curated peaks — and concludes, as Chou and Edge showed, that everyone else is happier.

The diaspora scroll is this problem squared, because each mirror has a feed. One thumb-flick serves a home-friend's new build ("they're leveling up while I pay rent abroad"), the next a local colleague's lake house ("I will never catch up here"), the next a fellow diasporan's citizenship post ("same year as me — what have I been doing?"). Three upward comparisons, three reference groups, ninety seconds — before breakfast. And each is a fiction: the build has a loan on it, the lake house an inheritance behind it, the passport five years of paperwork cropped out. The feed is not a window. It is a market stall where every vendor displays only the ripest fruit — including yours.

08 · The Price of Keeping Up

The envy ledger — comparison is not a feeling with no invoice. It borrows, spends, and bills you later.

+2.4%

rise in neighbours' bankruptcy filings for every \$1,000 a nearby lottery winner takes home — envy spends borrowed money (Agarwal, Mikhed & Scholnick, Review of Financial Studies)

~50%

of people would take HALF the salary to out-earn everyone around them (Solnick & Hemenway)

84%

of surveyed migrants overestimated the wages waiting abroad before they left — the myth both mirrors are calibrated against

2x

the double bill the diaspora pays: envied in one mirror, envious in the other — on the same salary, the same day

Fig 7 — The envy ledger. Comparison borrows, spends, and bills you later.

If envy were only a feeling, this would be a wellness essay. It is a balance-sheet item. Using lottery wins as random shocks to neighbourhood status, Agarwal, Mikhed and Scholnick found that **every \$1,000 a winner took home raised bankruptcy filings among close neighbours by 2.4%** — strongest in low-income, high-inequality areas, with the mechanism visible in the bankrupts' asset lists: conspicuous goods, bought on debt, to keep up. One person's visible rise, other people's borrowed spending.

The diaspora runs its own editions yearly, and this library has priced several: the wedding arms race, where celebrations outrun annual incomes because the real audience is the comparison pool; the December homecoming performance — the shipped car, the rounds for the whole bar, two weeks of display costing three months of margin; the plot bought because an age-mate bought one, unseen and gone. None of this is stupidity. When half of humanity will pay half its income for relative position, a visible-status purchase is not irrational — it is just expensive. The colder question: **who exactly is the audience for this purchase, and what do they contribute to your actual life?**

09 · The Myth of Abroad

Now turn the mirror around, because the diaspora is not only envy's victim. To the home audience, **you are the lottery winner next door** — the visible rise against which cousins measure their own stalled queues. That mirror too is calibrated against a fiction: in one study of migrants to Italy, **84% had overestimated the wages waiting for them**; migration-expectations research finds systematic over-optimism about life abroad, maintained by a century of one-directional evidence — successful migrants photographed, failed migrations unphotographed.

And every African abroad is now a maintenance worker for that myth. You cannot post the warehouse shift, the racist landlord, the fourth rejection — partly pride, partly kindness, partly the shame audit waiting for any admission of struggle. So you post the graduation, the snow, the skyline. The home audience takes the photos as data and adjusts two behaviours: the remittance expectations (a rich relative can obviously afford more), and the migration queue itself, restocked by your highlight reel. The performance is not free for you either. The researchers' term is information asymmetry; the lived version is loneliness — being envied for a life you cannot admit is hard, by the only people who truly know you. The envy economy's cruellest trade: **both mirrors polishing their fictions at each other, both sides paying interest on images.**

10 · The Double Bill

- **The upward bill (host mirror): chronic behindness.** Not episodic envy but a baseline — daily structural comparison against people whose compounding started at birth, in a country that also discounts your name and credentials. Sapolsky's one-down physiology is the health footnote; relative-deprivation research shows the feeling operates independently of your actual standard of living.
- **The downward bill (home mirror): being envied.** It sounds like a compliment and functions like a tax: inflated remittance expectations, requests priced off your imagined salary, the impossibility of saying “I can't afford it” without being disbelieved — plus friendships that curdle into transactions, the fear of the eye that hides wins even from family, and the guilt of having “made it” into a life that does not feel made.
- **The lateral bill (diaspora mirror): the furnace.** The comparison pool that best understands your life is best equipped to wound you with theirs — and diaspora communities can develop a real malicious-envy culture: success policed with “who does she think she is”, the business undermined from inside, the crab bucket that greets every climber.
- **The compound interest: every bill feeds the others.** Feeling behind abroad makes the home performance more necessary; the performance inflates the envy and the expectations; the expectations deepen the squeeze that keeps you feeling behind. The mirrors are not two problems. They are one loop.

11 · What the Traditions Knew

- **Buddhism trained the counter-emotion.** *Mudita* — sympathetic joy in another's success — is the direct antidote to envy, and it is trainable: compassion-training studies show a few weeks of practice increases positive affect and reduces hostility. “I’m glad it’s you” is a skill, not a temperament.
- **Aristotle drew the fork first.** His Rhetoric separates *phthonos* — envy that wants to strip the other — from *zelos*, emulation: the moral discomfort that spurs you to rise. Twenty-four centuries before the psychologists, the two envies were on the page.
- **The Stoics changed the measuring stick.** Epictetus called envy “a disease of the soul”; the Stoic move survives intact — measure yourself against your values, not the room. “Am I living according to what I control?” converts comparison from a status game into an integrity audit.
- **And African traditions engineered the environment.** Ubuntu makes the neighbour's success partly yours by definition; the harambee converts one family's rise into communal stakeholding — hard to maliciously envy a graduation you helped fund; age-grade systems restricted comparison to true peers; and the deliberate modesty norms around wealth were envy management, not superstition. The village knew what the feed forgot: **comparison is safe only inside relationships thick enough to hold it.**

12 · Comparing Wisely

Comparing wisely — the evidence-backed moves, translated for a life between two mirrors

01 Compare to yourself at arrival

The only fair benchmark a migrant has. Not the locals born on third base, not the home timeline — you, the day you landed with two bags.

02 Curate the mirrors

Unfollow what reliably wounds; follow people who show process and struggle, not just outcomes. A feed is a room — choose who is in it.

03 Ask the process question

When the pang hits: not “why not me?” but “what did they do that I can try?” Envy pointed at a method becomes mentorship.

04 Practise mudita — and post honestly

Rejoicing in another's win is trainable and measurable. And showing your own struggle sometimes is community service: it keeps your success attainable, and your community's envy benign.

05 Read your envy as a compass

You do not envy at random. The sting marks what you actually want — or what you have been ignoring. Data, not verdict.

Fig 8 — The rebuild. The goal is not to stop comparing — it is to choose the mirrors and the questions.

Suppressing comparison fails; the instinct is older than language. What works is redirecting it. **Compare to yourself at arrival** — the only benchmark that prices your actual handicaps; against arrival-you, the language learned, the system decoded, the people carried, the growth is undeniable. **Curate the mirrors** — passive scrolling is the documented damage-dealer, so unfollow what reliably wounds, keep the accounts that show process, and convert lurking into contact: the age-mate's house feels different once you have heard about the loan. **Ask the process question** — not “why not me?” but “what did they do that I can try?”; if the answer is a method, copy it; if the answer is an inheritance, the comparison was never valid. **Practise mudita — and post honestly sometimes**: congratulate fully, first, out loud; and show your own struggle occasionally, because it keeps your success attainable and someone in your mirror is waiting for exactly that permission. **And read your envy as a compass** — the sting marks what you actually value; sometimes it is a goal to chase, sometimes a value you have been outsourcing to other people's scoreboards.

13 · The Uncomfortable Part

First: you are not only the customer in the envy economy — you are also a vendor. The same person wounded by the feed curates one. Your December photos, your graduation post, your careful silence about the warehouse years — someone in Kitale measures their life against that highlight reel the way you measure yours against a colleague's lake house. This is not an accusation; it is bookkeeping. The fastest way to soften the economy is for its vendors to start labelling their goods honestly.

Second: some of what the diaspora calls envy is actually grief, and some of what it calls hustle is actually envy. The pang at the friend who stayed home and thrived is often not wanting their life — it is mourning the version of yours that stayed. Naming it grief changes what heals it. And an ambition that only activates when an age-mate posts — the degree started after their graduation, the business launched after their launch — is not a vision, it is a reaction. A life steered by other people's milestones arrives at other people's destinations.

Third: the community's malicious envy is real, and pretending otherwise protects it. The crab bucket is not a stereotype — it is what the attainability fork predicts when success looks unattainable and unshared inside a tight group under scarcity. The diaspora business quietly boycotted from within, the achiever cut down with “she has forgotten herself”, the return home downplayed to avoid the eye — these are our own line items, and they answer to our own tools: make success legible (show process), make it communal (stakeholders do not sabotage), and call the behaviour what it is. A community that can celebrate its winners without auditing them — and whose winners can be honest without performing — has exited the worst of the envy economy, whatever the feeds are doing.

14 · Method & Limits

This report combines social-comparison research, neuroscience, behavioural economics and migration studies, as at 31 August 2026.

- **The core psychology is the replicated canon** — Festinger (1954), Tesser's self-evaluation maintenance model, Van de Ven's benign/malicious distinction, and the fMRI findings on relative reward and envy/schadenfreude. Neuroimaging samples are small and reverse inference has limits; we use them as converging evidence, not proof by brain scan.
- **The Solnick & Hemenway survey** polled 257 Harvard-affiliated respondents in 1995 — stated preferences, not behaviour. It sits, however, on a large literature on positional concerns pointing the same way.
- **The lottery-bankruptcy result** is a quasi-experiment from one Canadian province; the 2.4%-per-\$1,000 figure is an estimate, not a universal constant. We cite it for the mechanism — visible peer income causing debt-financed status spending — which the authors document directly in balance-sheet data.
- **The Facebook findings (2012–13) predate today's platforms**; TikTok and Instagram are structurally more comparison-dense, which likely makes those estimates conservative, but we cannot show that directly.
- **The 84% wage-overestimate figure** is from one 2015 study of migrants to Italy; the direction is well replicated across migration-expectations research, the exact percentage is not.
- **No study has measured the double-reference-group effect in African diaspora populations directly.** The two-mirrors framework is our synthesis of established mechanisms applied to diaspora life — labelled as argument, not measurement. The same holds for the reading of African institutions as envy management: plausible, ethnographically grounded, not experimentally tested.
- **The framework reached us partly through a secondary source** — Mark Manson's *Social Comparison Guide*, shared by a member of this network. We went to the primary papers — Festinger, Tesser, Van de Ven, Fliessbach, Takahashi, Krasnova — and cite those; the guide is credited as the pointer, not as evidence.
- **Nothing here is clinical advice.** Comparison that has curdled into persistent depression, anxiety or rumination deserves a professional conversation, not a better feed.

Principal sources

Festinger (1954), A Theory of Social Comparison Processes; Tesser (1988) on self-evaluation maintenance; Van de Ven, Zeelenberg & Pieters (2009) on benign and malicious envy; Fliessbach et al. (2007) and Takahashi et al. (2009) in *Science*; Solnick & Hemenway (1998) on positional concerns; Agarwal, Mihed & Scholnick (2020), *Review of Financial Studies*, on lottery wins and neighbouring bankruptcies; Krasnova et al. (2013) on Facebook envy; Chou & Edge (2012); Migration Policy Centre research on migrants' wage expectations; Klimecki et al. (2013) on compassion training; Sapolsky (2005) on hierarchy and health; Lockwood & Kunda (1997) on role models. Located partly via Mark Manson's *Social Comparison Guide*. Full inline links in the web edition.

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