



The view over one's shoulder: The causes and consequences of leader's envy of followers

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ABSTRACT

We propose a social comparison-based framework in which leaders' meta-perceptions of power relative to their followers can be a source of envy, which can then lead to varied behaviors. We provide a model summarizing the main points of this framework, and develop propositions discussing how and when these effects operate. We start by discussing why perceived power differentials between leader and follower are expected to cause envy in the leader-follower relationship, and the contingencies that might affect such relationships. We then discuss how the aversive character of envy can provoke different types of action on the part of leaders aimed at reducing or eliminating this emotion. Furthermore, we propose different conditions that can increase the likelihood that the leader would choose one of these courses of action over another. Finally, we end with a discussion of the implications of leader-follower social comparisons and envy for research in the leadership field and for practice.

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Introduction

Decades of research have established the importance of leadership for individuals, groups, and organizations in general (e.g. Jung & Sosik, 2002; Peterson, Smith, Martorana, & Owens, 2003). Leader attributes, attitudes and behaviors have been linked to a variety of important outcomes, such as followers' job performance, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment (Judge & Piccolo, 2004).

While approaches focusing on the follower and the follower's perspective of leadership have provided important contributions to our knowledge of leadership, they have also tended to portray leaders as more-or-less passive enactors of appointed roles in mostly static contexts. For example, it is largely assumed that the main objective of the people occupying formal managerial and leadership positions in organizations is the achievement of group task-oriented goals. Therefore, the assumption held in these literatures (with a few exceptions; see Grant, Gino, & Hoffmann, 2011) is that follower characteristics (such as initiative, expertise and likability) that enable the achievement of organizational goals are desired, developed and supported by the leader. Overall, these characteristics are thought to have positive effects on the leader's emotions, attitudes and behaviors toward the follower, and ultimately to result in a positive leader-follower relationship (e.g. Li, Liang, & Crant, 2010; Newcombe & Ashkanasy, 2002). It is also assumed that leaders feel secure in their hierarchical positions; that is, leaders are seen as unthreatened by competition from followers, with their power and influence over others being perceived as largely both high and stable.

However, these assumptions can be unwarranted; people, including leaders, can be motivated by self-interest (e.g. Maner & Mead, 2010) and a need for competence (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In addition, the dynamic business context (see Guest, 1998) in

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which leaders find themselves is one of constant change driven by competition's ever-increasing requirements for competence. This dynamism has diminished job security and the belief in lifetime work in a single organization (Rousseau, 1995), a fact that can hold true for all organizational levels – including higher ones. Leaders, therefore, might perceive their followers as competitors instead of just subordinates. Furthermore, there is evidence that not all followers construct their followership role in such a way as to conform with the prototypical view of being “subordinate” to the leader. Some followers think of themselves more as co-leaders or partners (see Carsten, Uhl-Bien, West, Patera, & McGregor, 2010), driving them to desires and behaviors that can make them seem like a perceived threat to the leader.

Finally, the leadership literature has put too much emphasis on both the “heroic” and “dark” sides of leadership, in which leaders are driven by external (e.g. see Tepper, Duffy, Henle, & Lambert, 2006) or internal factors (e.g. Judge, Piccolo, & Kosalka, 2009) to commendable or undesirable actions. While these views are valuable and have enriched the leadership literature, they have failed to consider leaders in general as complete and complicated individuals with insecurities, weaknesses and conflicting sets of motives and emotions. Additionally, these approaches have focused overmuch on valence-symmetric follower-leader effects, where positive (negative) follower behaviors result in positive (negative) leader responses (such as empathy and optimism on the positive side, and anger and frustration on the negative side; see Kellett, Humphrey, & Sleeth, 2002; Wolff, Pescosolido, & Druskat, 2002).

To address these gaps in the literature, we explore how social comparison processes can influence how leaders feel about their followers and themselves, with the primary driver of such processes being power. Power comes from many sources including expertise and referent power; importantly, perceptions of power are often just as important as power itself. Power is the major differentiator between the roles of leader and follower, and the key resource needed to influence others (Stogdill, 1950). As such, the acquisition and retention of power is a core motivator for those who seek leadership positions (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991). If the social comparison process between leaders and their followers yield favorable comparisons in terms of power, then leaders would react positively to their followers; this state of affairs is expected and typical, constituting no threat to the leader's self-perception as a leader. However, if a leader finds that a follower is superior in one or more aspects of power, leaders can react negatively to the follower. The most common affective reaction to upward or unfavorable social comparisons in such situations is envy (e.g. see Smith & Kim, 2007).

Envy is the pain that results from perceiving that one is lacking desired qualities in comparison to another person (Smith & Kim, 2007). Social comparisons and envy have previously only been studied in the context of peer-to-peer relationships (see Duffy, Scott, Shaw, Tepper, & Aquino, 2012). Our paper uses social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) and the literature on the emotion of envy (e.g. Smith, 2008) to first argue that power is an important role-related domain in leader-follower comparisons in which envy can occur.¹ We then discuss how and when social comparisons might result in envy, and finally outline how envy relates to leader behaviors aimed at rectifying or avoiding such unpleasant comparisons.

We argue that this phenomenon is important because exploring social comparisons and envy from the perspective of the leader in the context of the leader-follower relationship provides counterintuitive insights on the effects of organizationally desirable positive follower characteristics. Most extant work generally results in valence-symmetric predictions; positive follower characteristics and behaviors are associated with positive responses on the part of the leader, and vice versa. We demonstrate that a more comprehensive view of leaders as complex individuals can result in contrary predictions, with positive follower characteristics drawing undesirable responses from envious leaders. Below, we summarize the relevant literature on leader perceptions of follower power, followed by a general discussion on social processes and envy. We then present our overall model, and a number of propositions around its function.

Leader perceptions of follower power

Power in the leader-follower relationship

Leadership relates to the exercise of influence toward the achievement of goals (see Stogdill, 1950; Subasic, Reynolds, Turner, Veenstra, & Haslam, 2011). This centrality of influence in the leadership process makes power one of the foundations of leadership (Turner, 2005), because it represents the major means for exercising such influence on others (Bass, 1990; Day & Antonakis, 2011). As Kirkpatrick and Locke (1991, p.52) argue, “power is a leader's currency”. Power is important to leaders outside their leadership role as well; powerful people have less dependence on others when it comes to obtaining resources, and fewer threats to face (Weber, 1947; Emerson, 1962; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003). Power allows for freedom from constraints and from others (Galinsky, Magee, Gruenfeld, Whitson, & Liljenquist, 2008; Fast, Gruenfeld, Sivanathan, & Galinsky, 2009), and can help individuals triumph in conflicts over goals and resources (Cyert & March, 1992; March & Simon, 1993). Additionally, power is a source of status (Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Individuals who have power are therefore motivated to retain and increase it.

Previous work has discussed how power can come from different sources (for example, see French & Raven, 1959), as well as power being a relative, not an absolute concept (Emerson, 1962). In our discussion, the primary issue of importance is not the

¹ This is not to suggest that envy cannot result from comparisons between leaders and their followers in other domains such as, for instance, physical characteristics; however, these other resources and characteristics lead to envy in any context such as peer-to-peer comparisons and are not uniquely relevant to the leader-follower context.

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