



Effect of leader-member exchange on employee envy and work behavior moderated by self-esteem and neuroticism

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the impact of leader-member exchange (LMX) on envy in the workplace and the subsequent effects of envy on work engagement and socially undermining behavior. In addition, the moderating roles of personality traits, such as self-esteem and neuroticism, are examined in this relationship. Paired questionnaires were personally collected from 245 subordinates and 82 of their immediate supervisors. Empirical analysis of the responses revealed: (a) the quality of LMX is negatively related to employee envy in the workplace, (b) employee envy mediates the relationship between LMX and work engagement, (c) self-esteem boosts the relationship between envy and work engagement, but decreases the relationship between envy and social undermining, and (d) neuroticism exacerbates the relationship between envy and social undermining.

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El efecto del intercambio líder-subordinado en la envidia del empleado y el comportamiento en el trabajo: la autoestima y el neuroticismo como moderadores

RESUMEN

En este estudio se investigó el impacto del LMX en la envidia de los empleados en el lugar de trabajo y su efecto en el comportamiento laboral de los empleados, tales como el compromiso con el trabajo y el comportamiento de debilitamiento social. Además, se analizó el rol moderador de rasgos de personalidad tales como la autoestima o el neuroticismo en relación a la envidia y el comportamiento en el trabajo de los empleados. Se recogieron personalmente cuestionarios emparejados de 245 empleados y de 82 de sus supervisores directos (la media era de 3 empleados por supervisor). Los hallazgos de la investigación pueden generalizarse de la siguiente manera: (a) la calidad del LMX está negativamente relacionada con la envidia del empleado en su lugar de trabajo, (b) la envidia del empleado media en la relación entre LMX y el compromiso laboral, (c) la autoestima fomenta las relaciones entre envidia y compromiso laboral pero disminuye la relación entre envidia y debilitamiento social y (d) el neuroticismo sólo potencia la relación entre envidia y debilitamiento social.

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Envy is triggered when someone lacks or desires others' superior qualities, achievements, or possessions (Parrott & Smith, 1993). Accordingly, envy is prevalent in the workplace (Lange

& Crusius, 2015a; Smith & Kim, 2007), especially when employees perceive an imbalance in the distribution of job promotions, the time and attention of organizational authorities, and other resources that they must compete for (Tai, Narayanan, & McAllister, 2012). This may result in positive or negative consequences for employees seeking to overcome the comparative advantages of those they envy (Duffy, Shaw, & Schaubroeck, 2008; Smith & Kim, 2007). Managing envy is imperative for employees and

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employers, because it influences behavior and attitudes in the workplace.

Traditionally, envy has been regarded as a hostile feeling. Envious people are less willing to share information with, and are more inclined to harm, those they envy (Cohen-Charash & Mueller, 2007; Kim & Glomb, 2014); furthermore, they refrain from helping the envied target (Gino & Pierce, 2010) and engage in socially undermining behaviors (Duffy & Shaw, 2000). However, research by Van de Ven, Zeelenberg, and Pieters, 2009, Zeelenberg, and Pieters (2009) demonstrates that envy can also yield positive consequences, such as motivating increased performance or attempts at self-improvement (Hill, Del Priore, & Vaughan, 2011; Schaubroeck, Shaw, Duffy, & Mitra, 2008), which can trigger innovative action to achieve desires. These contradictory understandings illustrate that the study of envy and its work-related consequences have been surprisingly sparse, and given that work environments have a surfeit of potential envy-inducing situations (Duffy et al., 2008) research has not clearly established the relationship between envy and harmful or favorable behaviors (Cohen-Charash, 2009; Hill et al., 2011; Schaubroeck et al., 2008).

Johnson (2012) notes that social comparisons, especially unfavorable ones, provide a diagnostic perspective on the self, which are the building blocks of envy (Lange & Crusius, 2015b). In organizations, leaders differentiate among their subordinates by creating close and high-quality relationships with some and maintaining formal and distant relationships with others (Li & Liao, 2014), which is reflected in the leaders' control and distribution of tangible and intangible resources. Employees may be driven to socially compare themselves with their coworkers on the basis of accumulated resources, such as promotions, salary, opportunities, and "insider" information; the employee who has greater resources than everyone else often becomes the subject of envy by others (Hill & Buss, 2008; Wobker, 2015).

Building on this body of research, this study contributes to the literature by advancing our understanding of the cause-effect relations regarding envy. First, we examine leader-member exchange (LMX) as a cause of envy. Given that managerial practices (e.g., performance appraisals and compensation systems) substantially influence employees' lives in an organization (Li & Liao, 2014), leaders' differential treatment of employees may induce unfavorable social comparisons that promote feelings of envy (Duffy et al., 2008). Second, this research seeks to understand the varying consequences of envy. Tai et al. (2012) argue that the manifestation of envy can vary according to an individual's in-group personality and how the envious parties view themselves relative to those they envy, which is determined by their core self-evaluation.

Core self-evaluation is a higher order construct (Judge, Van Vianen, & De Pater, 2004) that incorporates primary traits such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, neuroticism, and locus of control. Here we focus on two dimensions of core self-evaluation, self-esteem and neuroticism, both relating to an individual's emotional state. Overall, employees with favorable core self-evaluations are more likely to behave constructively (Tracy & Robins, 2003). Individuals with high self-esteem treat envy as a stimulus to engage in constructive behavior, such as work engagement, which aligns with their favorable self-evaluation and suppresses behavior inconsistent with it (e.g., undermining envied targets) (Rosenberg, 1965). By contrast, individuals with high neuroticism are likely to treat envy as a source of stress and anxiety (Muris, Roelofs, Rassin, Franken, & Mayer, 2005), which drives reactive behaviors, such as social undermining, to relieve their negative self-view and feelings of inferiority (Tracy & Robins, 2003). In short, this research seeks to determine whether a favorable core self-evaluation (high self-esteem) elicits positive behavior and whether an unfavorable core self-evaluation (high neuroticism) elicits negative behavior in response to envy.

Theoretical Framework and Hypothesis

Envy in the Workplace

Envious individuals vary in how they narrow the gap between themselves and those they envy. They strive either to attain the level of the other or pull the other down to theirs; thus, envy can be either benign or malicious (Smith & Kim, 2007).

The traditional view of envy considers inferiority and animosity to be its core components, focusing on malicious envy, which is aligned with negative outcomes (Van de Ven et al., 2009). People experiencing malicious envy are more likely to be emotionally sensitive to frustration and to interpret social comparison as exposing inferiority. This relates to a number of damaging behaviors (Crusius & Mussweiler, 2012) that harm the person feeling envious and others in the workplace (Duffy & Shaw, 2000; Kim & Glomb, 2014). However, empirical studies on benign envy suggest that envy without hostility resembles admiration and can be a positive feeling (Van de Ven et al., 2009). Here, envy serves as a motivational force driving people to work harder to achieve their goal of obtaining what others have (Van de Ven et al., 2009). Therefore, envy can be a predictor of an increased admiration for and a willingness to learn from envied targets and enhance work motivation.

Two action tendencies thus appear to initiate the behavioral consequences of envy, which are threat- and challenge-oriented; both of these play a prominent role in alleviating the pain of envy. From this understanding, we suggest that when people experience envy, they use strategies to alleviate its unpleasantness that are either positive or negative (Tai et al., 2012; Wobker, 2015). We believe that both types of envy are crucial in shaping employee attitudes and behavior toward organizations and their leaders.

The Mediating Effect of Envy

LMX theory assumes that leaders vary in how they treat their subordinates in ways that can be classified on a continuum from high-quality (in-group) to low-quality (out-group) (Liden, Erdogan, Wayne, & Sparrowe, 2006). Within an organization, leaders may develop close relationships with only a few employees because of limited time and resources (Erdogan & Bauer, 2010; Liao, Liu, & Loi, 2010; Nie & Låmsä, 2015). High-quality-LMX employees receive extra tangible and intangible resources from their leaders, such as information, opportunities, trust, respect, and obligation (Li & Liao, 2014; Liden, Wayne, & Sparrowe, 2000), from which their low-quality-LMX employees (who have failed to develop close relationships with their leaders) cannot benefit. Therefore, differential treatment by a supervisor can result in conflicts between in-group and out-group members (Li & Liao, 2014), and may induce feelings of envy (Yukl, 2009) in employees who share a lower LMX relationship with a supervisor than a peer, especially if that peer is perceived to be similar to themselves.

The comparison process occurs more often with people to whom an individual is closer (friends or coworkers), and it often originates from leaders' attitudes toward their subordinates, because the immediate manager is a central agent in the employee-organization exchange who is the primary representation of the organization for employees (Erdogan & Bauer, 2010; Liden, Bauer, & Erdogan, 2004). Thus, subordinates working together under the supervision of a common leader are susceptible to a comparison-based relationship. For instance, in the context of a job promotion, Cohen-Charash (2009) describes how envy arose when a similar coworker had something (the promotion) that the target employee desired but lacked. This situation has been conceptualized into the LMX domain by Kim, Ok, and Lee (2009), who argue that when a low-quality-LMX employee notices the superior rapport between a high-quality-LMX employee and the leader and realizes that the

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