Costly comparisons:
Managing envy in the workplace

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"She doesn't even have an advanced degree, and when she talks to customers she sounds like a high school girl. All I know is that she spends so much time traveling with the boss, I think that there is something else going on there. I just don't understand how she was placed in charge of this team and I wasn't!" — Employee in a consulting organization

"I don't understand if envy really even exists in the workplace. Only employees with very poor abilities would worry about their coworkers' success. Take me for example — one of my colleagues was just given his own lab with a lot of funding. I'm not feeling envy — I'm going to have the exact same thing soon." — Research scientist at a plant science lab

INTRODUCTION

The two anecdotes above highlight the complex and sometimes contradictory nature of envy in the workplace. Both instances involve a social comparison, comparing one's own level of success or accomplishment with that of a coworker. The individual's relative inferiority is highlighted through this "upward" comparison — in both cases, the employee doesn't quite measure up. Yet one is struck by the vastly different emotional and behavioral reactions each employee had. The first employee reacted in a destructive manner, experiencing feelings of resentment and hostility that resulted in damaging negative gossip aimed at harming the envied employee. When we typically think about envy, this is what is usually called to mind — a negative, destructive emotion that costs the organization dearly, leading to high turnover rates, workplace incivility, and outright sabotage. Recent research, however, suggests that there may be another side to this much-maligned emotion, a motivational side that can result in positive outcomes. The second employee exemplifies this view; he expresses admiration for the successful coworker, which reinforces a strong motivation to succeed in a similar fashion. Understanding workplace envy in order to promote a motivational response and minimize a destructive response is important if managers want to encourage a collaborative and engaging work environment. Ironically, most of us rarely acknowledge actively comparing ourselves to others; nor do we often admit, even to ourselves, that our behavior may be motivated by feelings of envy or inferiority. Yet the very nature of organizational life, which includes competing for both limited spots in the formal hierarchy as well as informal status among groups of friends and colleagues, makes these comparisons and the related experience of envy a relatively common occurrence.

Envy is a more complex emotion than we have previously understood, and several organizational characteristics can influence how envy is experienced, creating the context that transforms the experience of envy from being malicious and destructive to being a benign force that motivates people to strive to improve.

This article will focus on providing a brief synthesis of contemporary research on envy in the workplace. By integrating research from the fields of social psychology and organizational behavior, our aim is to provide managers a better understanding of both the productive and counterproductive consequences of envy. We argue for an approach that recognizes envy subtypes, which include two distinct experiences of envy, namely malicious and benign. These envy sub-types entail different sets of motivations, feelings, and behaviors. We also argue that characteristics of the individual, relationships, and the organizational environment fundamentally shape the experience of envy, largely determining the subtypes of envy. Because comparisons and envy are often an unavoidable aspect of organizational life, it is

unlikely that workplace envy can be wholly eliminated. We will, however, offer suggestions based on a recent research on workplace envy that will provide managers with actions that can shape the organizational environment to be one that favors a benign experience of envy over a malicious one.

DEFINING ENVY

Envy at its most basic level is the pain felt at another's good fortune. This pain is experienced when individuals desire what another has achieved or accomplished. The superior accomplishment of another serves to highlight one's own relative deficiency or shortcoming. Envy is often experienced when a coworker is rewarded, recognized or promoted, as illustrated by the following statement. ''*I can't believe that Julio was just promoted to senior account executive. I have been vying for that promotion for several months. Why couldn't that have been me?*'' Envy begins as a feeling of pain that one social psychologist has compared with feeling a punch to the gut. Implicit in this is the process of social comparison, which helps people understand how well they ''measure up'' compared to their peers. These comparisons help employees understand their own place within the social environment of the organization, influencing their feelings of self-worth, and helping them to construct social identities within the workplace. Social identities form how employees see themselves and their roles in the organization, for example do they believe they are viewed as competent up and comers, part of the inner circle — or not. Although employees may make these comparisons on the basis of several different domains, including relative popularity among peers and the quality of their relationships with supervisors, the domain of performance achievement and reward is a particularly important aspect of comparison in organizations. This makes sense, as many people strive to be considered competent, high-performing employees worthy of being promoted higher in the formal hierarchy, as well as being granted greater access to resources, promising career opportunities, and more desirable rewards and recognition. Whether employees are willing to admit it or not, these are all strong motivations for them to compare their own performance achievement to that of their peers.

The initial focus of organizational researchers was on understanding the malicious and destructive consequences envy wreaked on organizations. Employees experiencing high levels of envy were more likely to turnover and more likely to engage in counterproductive behavior, including undermining coworkers, spreading negative gossip, acting with aggression, and withdrawing from the workplace. These researchers viewed envy mainly as a negative emotion that would diminish self-esteem and cause stress. People would then act in ways to alleviate this stress through avoiding the person they compare themselves against or retaliating against them. One organizational researcher relayed the following story, which highlights the potentially destructive outcomes associated with envy, based on his experiences working with a consumer goods company that had undergone a corporate merger with a former competitor in the industry.

Each separate organization had its own vice president (VP) of marketing. After the merger, these two executives began to intensely engage in comparison with one another — how

much autonomy did they possess, how many assignments were being thrown their way, how many resources were flowing their way, how many new projects were they given access to. This intense focus on the other fueled competition between the two executives. One of the executives who perceived himself to be at a disadvantage began to spread gossip about the other VP and encourage his employees not to talk to employees on the other side. This accelerated conflict on both sides, which spread down to their employees. When the organization suggested marketing should be consolidated, having a single chief marketing officer (CMO), both executives increased their counterproductive behaviors aimed at one another. Senior managers kept asking the two to collaborate more closely, but they did the exact opposite. Within a year and a half of the merger, both VPs were removed and a new outside CMO was brought in to heal the rift within the organizations.

As a result of this primarily negative view of the consequences of workplace envy, the best advice available to managers was to focus on minimizing any type of within-organization comparisons in a bid to eliminate envy. One often-suggested method was to separate the envious employees from the target of their envy. However, this advice may be easier to prescribe than to follow, given that the need for comparison is a fundamental drive in organizational life and given the fact that those employees that most frequently interact with one another are also most likely the ones engaging in comparison and experiencing envy. There may be another reason to rethink our approach to handling workplace envy, as more recent research has revealed a potentially softer side to this emotion. More recent studies have demonstrated that in certain contexts experiencing envy can lead to productive consequences. One study demonstrated that employees who experienced envy after being passed over for a desired promotion actually increased their subsequent performance, and this performance increase was still evident months after being denied promotion. Other studies have shown that experiencing envy causes some individuals to cultivate a relationship with the envied other in order to learn from them and emulate their success. Could it be that envy can also be inspirational and motivate achievement? If so, how does this research on the benign side of envy integrate with the traditional findings on the destructive antisocial consequences associated with envy in the workplace?

Two Faces of Envy

Researchers in the fields of organizational behavior and social psychology have recently been trying to explain how envy can result in both productive and destructive behaviors in organizations. One perspective suggests that the organizational context, characteristics that shape the culture and environment of the organization, determines whether or not experiencing envy results in positive or negative outcomes. While we can all agree that envy is a strong negative emotion that elicits feelings of inferiority, people make sense of this painful feeling in one of two ways: either attributing that painful feeling to a threat or to a challenge. When people evaluate envy as a threat, they shift their focus from desired outcomes, such as a promotion, to the envied person. The focus is then not on achievement but on threat elimination,

and the envied person is more likely to engage in hostile acts to undermine her target or "referent". This perspective helps to explain why organizations that are perceived as unjust or unfair and organizations with ultra-competitive internal environments are often viewed as threatening by employees, resulting in counterproductive behavior in the workplace. For example, a study by Yochi Cohen-Charash demonstrated that envious employees who also perceived the organizational environment to be unjust were more likely to engage in counterproductive behavior. On the other hand when people perceive situations of envy as a challenge to overcome, they maintain their focus on the desired achievement and legitimate means for reaching their desired goal. Organizations, such as Zappos, Whole Foods and Sewell Automotive, that are perceived to possess a fair and just climate, those that promote collaboration and joint goals, and those that foster positive relationships are organizations in which the situations of envy are not viewed as a personal threat, but rather as a challenge to be overcome — a goal that can be reached through determined effort.

A second perspective, based on the research of social psychologists, suggests that the divergent consequences of envy can be explained by the existence of two fundamentally different types of envy. These psychologists argue that envy is a complex emotion that can be further broken down into subtypes, one a malicious form of envy and the other a benign form of envy, and that both can be experienced independently, or even at the same time. Although we do not make the distinction in English-speaking countries between these two different types of envy, many other countries actually have separate words for these envy sub-types, including Russia, Brazil, Germany and the Netherlands. Both malicious envy and benign envy are the result of an initially painful upward comparison. For example, let's imagine a situation in an IT (information technology) consulting firm's sales function. We have Julie, the top performing salesperson, and Tonya, who is lagging behind. Tonya, who desires to be seen as a competent high performer, realizes that she does not quite measure up to Julie. "Julie was the top performing sales person this quarter. I really thought I had a shot, but I ended up somewhere in the middle." From this perspective, envy unfolds over time; a person might have an initially painful comparison event, but then she reflects more upon the situation and makes appraisals to understand why he didn't quite measure up. These appraisals then determine the qualitative experience of envy with different feelings, motivations, and resultant behaviors. Benign envy is experienced without feelings of hostility toward the other; it motivates self-improvement, and can result in increased determination or effort. For example Tonya may respond in the following way: "I was not too far from being the top salesperson this quarter. Julie's network of clients is not much more developed than my own and I know I can work even harder. With a renewed effort, I believe I can do much better this coming quarter." Malicious envy on the other hand is experienced with hostility toward referent others, a motivation to pull others down or diminish their own accomplishments, and encourages destructive behaviors of sabotage and undermining. As an example, Tonya could reflect on this situation in a completely different way — "This is just not fair. Of course, Julie wins again! Our boss puts her in contact with the most lucrative new clients, and I know she

probably stole a few of my contacts. I'm going to make sure the new sales associates watch out for her."

What determines these two qualitatively different experiences of envy, both of which can stem from the same comparison event? Why does Tonya seem motivated in one instance but hostile in the next? Social psychology suggests that the way in which employees appraise and make sense of the social comparison information plays an important role in determining which type of envy a person will experience. If a person appraises the desired outcomes as being both: (1) attainable for themselves; and (2) deserved by the other, they are likely to experience benign envy; otherwise, they are more likely to experience malicious envy. There is growing research evidence that when employees experience malicious envy, they are more likely to engage in acts of workplace deviance, and when employees experience benign envy, they are more likely to increase their performance-related effort. Why then have traditional studies of envy in the workplace primarily found that envy leads to negative behavior? One reason suggested by social psychologist Richard Smith in his book *Envy: Theory and Research*, is that traditionally employed measures of envy focus on the hostile component only, largely ignoring benign characteristics. More recent studies of envy in the workplace, in contrast, have developed scales to measure both malicious and benign envy.

FACTORS INFLUENCING THE EXPERIENCE OF ENVY

If envy is a complex emotion that is shaped by appraisal patterns, what influences people to experience benign or malicious envy in the workplace? How people make sense of their experiences of envy are often shaped by social relationships and organizational factors, and there is some evidence that personality may also play a role in shaping the experience of envy. In the following section we will review the evidence of 3 major factors determining how envy is experienced at the workplace.

Networks of Social Comparison

Consider the following example: Juan and Christina were both hired at the same time, members of the same incoming cohort. Juan has just received a promotion. Should we expect Christina to experience benign envy and be motivated to work harder, or should we expect her to experience malicious envy and attempt to undermine Juan to somehow even the score? The answer may depend on the broader social context. Imagine, for example, that Juan and Christina were members of the same cohort—six young professionals all hired at the same time. This cohort, while not contentious, keeps close tabs on one another; their achievements tend to be a common topic of discussion and gossip amongst the group members. It's difficult to avoid hearing news concerning the accomplishments of other cohort members in this setting. Now imagine that Juan was the fifth member of this six-person cohort to receive his first major account to manage on his own, making Christina the last cohort member waiting for the additional responsibility. Considering the broader social context suggests that Christina will likely experience malicious envy. She might believe the workplace is unfairly stacked against her or she might begin to
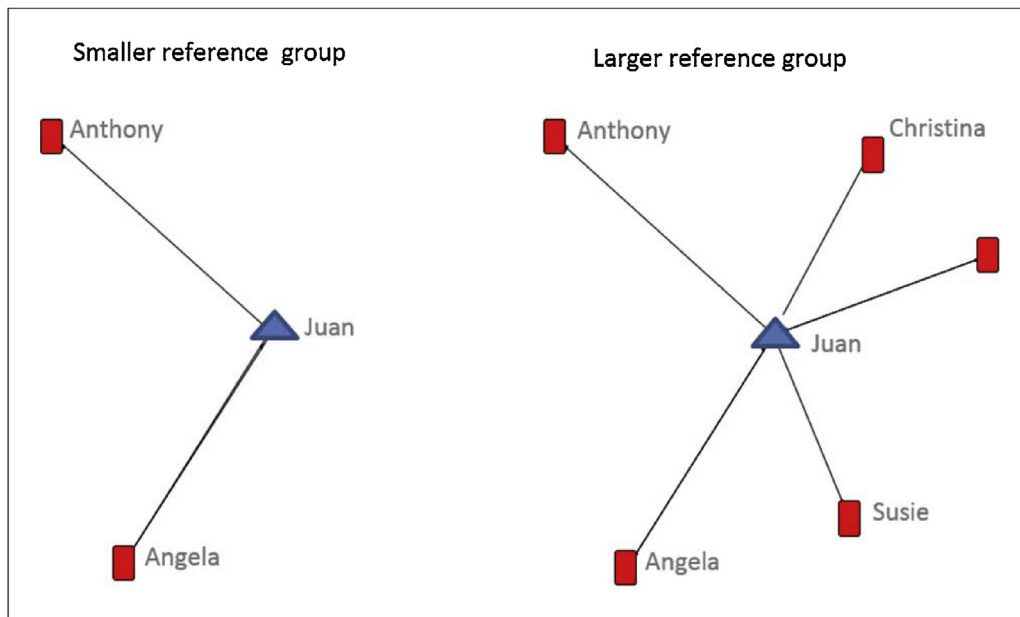
Figure 1 Reference group size

doubt that she has the necessary skills or abilities to compete, making a promotion a seemingly impossible challenge. Understanding the social context—the pattern of relationships that exist within the organization—can provide deeper insights into how envy is experienced by each employee.

We know that not all social comparisons affect people equally. Although we often assume that everyone within a team or department compares herself against everyone else, this tends not to be the case. Studies have suggested that employees typically compare their performance levels on average against three or four others, although this number can vary widely among employees. This set of comparison others forms a "reference group," which tends to be relatively stable over time; employees typically maintain this set of comparison others until a major change occurs, such as turnover or promotion. The longevity of these comparisons persist because employees often choose to compare to similar others and to others with whom they are easily able to gather information about how well they are performing. Although envy is often thought of as a dyadic experience involving an envious comparer and an envied target, research suggests that it is better to think of envy occurring within a network of comparisons. Not only are employees comparing themselves against multiple targets in these referent groups, but also these targets have their own referent groups and are also potentially comparing themselves against one another. Social comparison information flows through these comparison networks as employees monitor others' behavior and communicate with others about individuals' achievements. Depending on where an employee is located in this comparison network, he or she might have more or less exposure to the social comparison information that is flowing in a particular network.

Our own research has indicated that the structure of an individual's comparison network—the number of referents against whom he or she compares and the comparison relationships that exist between these referent others—impacts the experience of envy. For example, Fig. 1 shows comparison networks of varying size; in each, Juan is the focal person, and each person represented in this network is one of Juan's referents. These individual networks also vary in terms of density, as shown in Fig. 2. The first example illustrates a sparse network where the referents to whom Juan compares himself do not compare themselves to one another. Conversely, the second example shows a dense network where all referents of Juan also compare themselves to one another.

Comparison network size determines how much attention an individual is likely to focus on each of his or her referents. Employees with smaller comparison networks tend to focus too much attention on the performance of one or two others, and the outcomes of these comparisons tend to play a more central role in that an employee's identity. This intense scrutiny placed on relatively few referents tends to promote rivalry. This is essentially the same approach that sports leagues such as the NBA, NFL, MLB and NCAA use to promote rivalries—they encourage each team to play against another team more often than others in their division or league. Over time, this constant interaction and fight for higher status promotes long-lived rivalry. This rivalry can change the way employees perceive social comparison information, making them more competitive and less likely to be inspired by the success of their peers. This competitive perspective brings with it zero-sum thinking, where they perceive that the success of others is a threat to the self. All of this type of thinking is enhanced in small comparison networks and reaches its zenith when the employee is obsessed with only one other comparison person. In contrast, when employees have larger comparison networks, they have multiple referents to whom they can switch their attention. For example, in Fig. 2, Anthony and Angela could both be outshining Juan, but as long as Juan is still outperforming the others in his comparison network, these relatively unfavorable comparisons will be perceived as less threatening. Psychological research shows that when individuals compare against many others unfavorably, having just <u>one</u> person to whom they can compare favorably will help protect them from feeling intense negative emotions. They can at least point to that
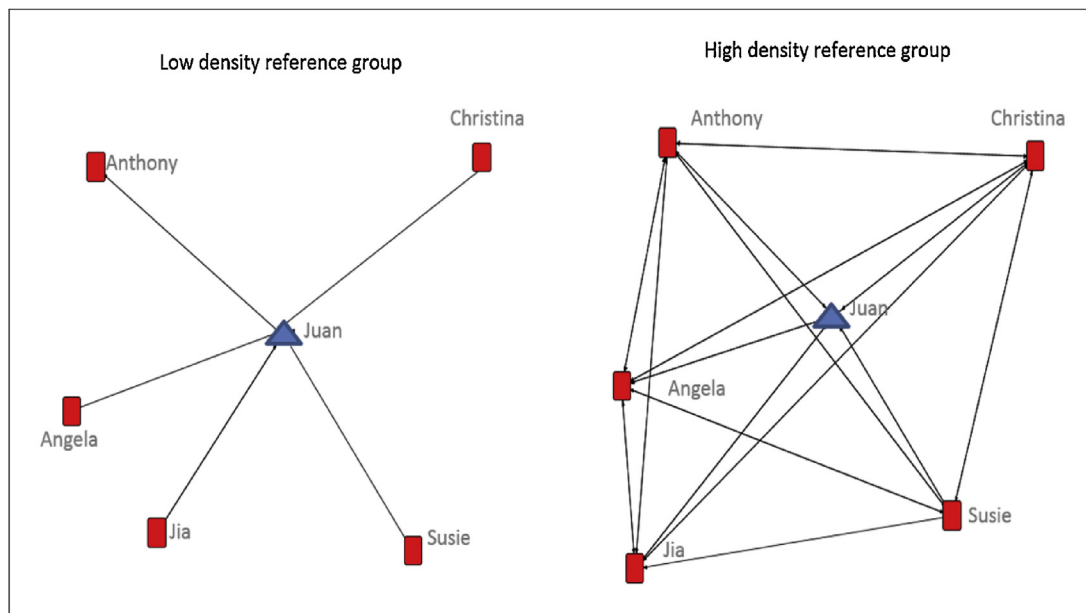
Figure 2   Reference group density

one person and think to themselves that things could be worse. Larger comparison networks afford employees an increased chance of finding someone to whom they compare favorably. Our own research shows that employees with larger comparison networks are more likely to experience benign envy, which increases their motivation and performance-related effort; employees with smaller comparison networks, however, are more likely to experience malicious envy, increasing their likelihood of engaging in deviant behavior such as negative gossip and incivility in the workplace.

Although there does seem to be a benefit derived from comparing against many others, there is also a drawback when everyone within a group is comparing their achievements to everyone else. In these dense comparison networks, information flows rapidly from employee to employee, as they share a common interest in comparison and exchange gossip based on the performance outcomes of others within that network. In this sense, hearing about others' performance and achievements is almost inescapable. As one anonymous research participant mentioned to me at the conclusion of one study, "No matter where I turn, I can't help but hear about the achievements of my coworkers." These dense networks also increase the importance of personal reputation because individuals' actions are monitored and discussed more frequently by others. Taken together, these dense comparison networks create a more competitive, pressure-filled environment where it is difficult to escape from unflattering comparisons. This inescapability might begin to erode feelings of self-worth and the feeling that one can achieve one's goals over time. Indeed, our own research has shown that employees embedded in dense comparison networks are more likely to experience malicious envy and engage in destructive deviance when comparing unfavorably to others. On the other hand, employees who are embedded in sparse, loosely connected networks of comparison do not seem to be subject to the same kinds of intense pressure that is generated by dense comparison networks. These employees have more control over their access to social comparison information because their referents are largely

unconcerned with monitoring each other's performance. Thus, employees are more likely to access comparison information through direct monitoring or communication, as opposed to third-party gossip. As a result, they are likely to find desired goals more attainable and can be inspired by their peers' success, rather than feeling threatened by them. Our research also shows that individuals embedded in loosely connected comparison networks are more likely to experience benign envy and as a result are motivated to increase their performance-related effort.

In sum, our research suggests that the number of people to whom we compare and the structure of this comparison network can influence the environment in which employees come to understand their experience of envy. Comparing against too few others can give rise workplace rivalries, making relationships more competitive and contentious, and increasing the felt threat that employees have when engaging in comparisons. Having more people with whom to compare allows employees greater flexibility to divert attention and a broader frame of reference that can help put things in perspective; while some referents may be successful at any given time, others might be struggling. Larger comparison groups encourage this type of multiple perspective-taking, which should allow employees to maintain a sense of attainability in achieving their goals.

Employees embedded in dense networks of comparison are constantly inundated with social comparison information, even when they are not actively seeking it out. This inability to escape from potentially threatening comparison information can make employees feel more threatened, less likely to achieve their goals and more likely to experience malicious envy. These findings suggest that managers should pay attention both to whom employees are comparing and competing against, and the structure of social networks within their workplace. Introducing internal competition in a loosely connected group may in fact be motivating, while doing the same thing in a well-connected group where everyone already communicates might undermine the unit's cohesiveness.

The optimal comparison network to encourage benign envy and discourage malicious envy is a relatively large set of comparison others that are very diverse and do not compare themselves against others.

Organizational Factors

"The environment here was very competitive. We jealously guarded our own research; we were in constant fear of getting "scooped" — having our research ideas taken and then published by a colleague before we were able to do so. It got so bad that people in this department would switch off their computer screens to avoid having colleagues see which research articles they were reading." — Junior researcher in a highly competitive European University

This story was related to me by a colleague during his doctoral studies. Needless to say the people in this department did not celebrate one another's successes, creating an atmosphere ripe for malicious envy to flourish. When employees make sense of social comparison information and envy-evoking situations, they do so within an organizational context — the organizational systems and structures that shape employee experience and influence employee perceptions. Organizational factors that influence employee perceptions of envy are related to levels of internal competition and organizational justice. For example, some of the earliest studies of workplace envy focused on the effects of internal competition, driven by differences in compensation systems. Compensation systems, such as tournament-based pay and merit-based pay—where employee salary distributions are determined by individual performance levels or supervisor evaluations—were shown to be related to intense feelings of envy in the organization. A more recent study demonstrated that envy could result in harmful behavior directed at team members, but only when employees perceived a highly competitive environment within the team. When individuals perceived high levels of collaboration within their team, they did not engage in harmful behaviors, even when experiencing envy. Whole Foods, for example, has implemented a self-directed team based management system in order to harness the power of competition between teams. Whole Foods organizes its people into several interlocking teams. Within teams, emphasis is placed on building trust and fostering collaboration. These teams are then incentivized to compete against other teams in terms of sales, productivity and growth. This system is designed to discourage competition between peers, interdependent employees who work closely together, while fostering competition at the team level. This approach appears to be in line with research on interpersonal competition in the workplace. Studies have shown that interpersonal competition has a tendency to change the way employees perceive their peers. It is extremely divisive; under competitive conditions, people are more likely to notice differences between themselves and their coworkers, and to perceive others as a threat. Perceiving others as a threat makes it more difficult to consider others' success as deserved, and when engaging in upward comparisons the experience of malicious envy is more likely to occur. In contrast, when employees perceive their coworkers as collaborators, they are more likely to notice similarities between themselves and others even when the others are more successful. This promotes the belief that one's own

success is similarly attainable, making benign envy a more likely outcome.

Employee perceptions of organizational justice—how fair they perceive the organization to be—have also been shown to play a major role in the experience of envy. Yochi Cohen Charash conducted a study examining the link between envy and counterproductive behaviors in the workplace. This link was much stronger if employees perceived their workplace as being unfair. In addition to overall perceptions of fairness, organizational researchers have identified specific areas of organizational justice. Distributive justice concerns perceptions of fairness about the allocation of organizational outcomes such as rewards or desired job opportunities, while procedural justice concerns perceptions of fairness about the policies and rules used by the organization to make decisions on the allocation of desired organizational outcomes. Our own research demonstrates a link between procedural justice and envy. When employees experienced upward comparisons and perceived the organization as unjust, they were more likely to experience malicious envy; however, when the organization was perceived to promote high levels of justice the experience of benign envy was a more likely outcome. Both perceived injustice and internally competitive organizations have the potential to increase the level of perceived threat that employees may feel, making achievement and success seem less likely.

Just as organizational scholar Michelle Duffy questions whether "the social comparison costs triggered by envy may ultimately outweigh the economic advantages associated with market-based compensation systems," we question whether it is possible that the motivational gains that are enjoyed when employees compete against one another could be overshadowed by the cost of social undermining and counterproductive behavior. However, our research also suggests that under the right circumstances, encouraging competition can be beneficial. If employees believe that the procedures by which their peers are rewarded are both transparent and fair they are likely to experience benign envy when observing the success of others.

Personality Factors

Thus far our discussion has been focused on situational and organizational factors that influence the experience and consequences of envy. There is also some evidence that personality may play a role as well. People vary in the extent to which they engage in comparisons and the relative weight they place on those comparisons: social psychologists refer to this characteristic as social comparison orientation. Individuals high in social comparison orientation tend to possess more uncertainty about themselves and engage more often in these comparisons. Studies show that individuals who measure higher in social comparison orientation tend to perceive the workplace as less cooperative and more competitive than those measuring lower on this trait. There is also evidence that some individuals have a natural predisposition to experiencing envy. Social psychologists have created scales that measure dispositional envy as well as dispositional benign and malicious envy. Many of these scales are freely available in scientific journals and could be used as part of a broader set of tools for selection and employee development. For example, placing an employee with high levels of dispositional

envy in an intense competitive environment may not be the best possible fit for that individual.

As previously discussed, when employees are able to view upward comparisons as challenges that can be overcome and believe that reaching similar levels of achievement are attainable, they are more likely to experience benign envy resulting in an increased motivation to succeed. But as we all know, individuals differ in terms of self-confidence. There are a few studies that show that individuals with lower self-esteem are more prone to experiencing envy. These results make sense, given the importance that attainability beliefs have on the experience of envy. However a study by Yochi Cohen-Charash indicates a more complex pattern: she looked at both self-esteem and perceptions of justice, and when high self-esteem individuals perceived injustice, they were actually more likely to engage in counterproductive workplace behavior when experiencing envy. These results suggest that justice concerns and the belief that envied others are not deserving of their success may be even more influential than beliefs about attainability. This line of research also reinforces the importance of promoting justice within the organization, as high achievement-oriented employees with high levels of self-esteem are the most likely to behave counterproductively in the face of organizational injustice.

MANAGING ENVY

Is it possible for managers to exercise control over the experience of envy in the workplace? Avoiding comparisons and suppressing this emotion altogether is likely impossible, but as the research we reviewed suggests, managers may be able to exercise some control over the comparison process. Employees engage in comparisons more often and rely more heavily on this type of information when the organizational environment is uncertain and rife with politically motivated behavior. By managing organizational policies and systems that improve employee perceptions of fairness and justice, fostering collaborative internal environments, and promoting employee belief in the attainability of desired organizational rewards and personal goals, employees may come to view the success of their peers as motivational rather than threatening. In essence if managers are able to exercise some control over organizational factors that influence the ways in which employees understand and interpret situations of envy, it might be possible to transform the experience of malicious envy into benign envy. The following section will discuss some practices that may help encourage benign envy in organizations while discouraging malicious envy.

Provide Feedback and Encourage Self-comparisons

Employees can become overly reliant on comparisons with their peers in the face of performance uncertainty. In the absence of clear feedback from managers, these comparisons help alleviate uncertainty by providing diagnostic information on performance attainment through a relative comparison with peer accomplishments and rewards. One easy way to limit this overreliance is to provide clear and timely performance feedback to employees. Research also suggests that specific types of feedback may be even better suited to

solving this problem. Several organizational researchers have suggested that managers should encourage comparisons to past selves. This involves a process of comparing current goal-attainment and performance with the past performance of the employee. Of course in order for this to be considered seriously by the employee, clear and easily comparable metrics should be used. Compiling both objective performance data such as the amount of revenue brought in by sales, or the number of new product innovations with subjective ratings of performance from both managers and peers should provide a good basis for comparison.

Additionally, managers should make use of both *performance goals* and *learning goals*. *Performance goals* focus on attainment and production, while *learning goals* focus on the acquisition of knowledge and skills. In the performance review process, managers should provide feedback on the fulfillment of both performance goals and the acquisition of new skills or knowledge. Additionally, mangers should include many performance-related domains including individual achievements, knowledge sharing, and team achievements that could possibly demonstrate areas of improvement for the employee. It is important that managers help employees maintain beliefs of the possibility of self-improvement and attainability of future rewards in order to encourage the experience of benign envy. People are generally resilient and can regulate extreme negative emotions in the face of unflattering upward comparisons as long as there is at least someone who is worse off. It is even possible that the comparison others could be a past version of themselves. This is not to say that performance feedback should be falsified to create an illusion of potential future attainability for all employees. It may very well be the case that a particular employee lacks the knowledge, skills, or abilities that are requisite for satisfactory job performance; but if managers see potential within employees and want to minimize counterproductive behaviors such as malicious gossip, undermining or sabotage, a more well-rounded and informed approach to performance management that focuses on several different performance domains and encourages employee self-improvement should be stressed.

Ensure that Recognition Programs Reward Many, Frequently

Employee recognition programs are often used within organizations to recognize and reward outstanding performers and motivate their peers. Often these programs fall short of their goals and end up undermining the very achievement-oriented behaviors they are designed to promote. It is difficult to pick up an article written for business leaders or human resource (HR) professionals these days and find anything positive concerning the once hyped "Employee of the Month" (EOM) programs, and rightly so. The downsides to these programs are that they encourage everything from favoritism and brown-nosing to subsequent poor performance, as some employees seek to avoid being seen as "rate-busters" by fellow employees. Envy is a likely culprit in this process. The inherent problem with many EOM programs is that they recognize and reward too few people and do so too infrequently. Recognition programs are closely tied to the process by which employees select referents in the organization. Recognized individuals are spotlighted by the

organization as high-achievers and possible targets of emulation. If the organization only rewards and recognizes a few "superstars," it makes it less likely that fellow employees recognize the similarity between themselves and these elite few, which in turn discourages employee beliefs in self-attainability. Instead recognition programs that reward and recognize many employees on a more frequent basis create larger potential referent pools of employees that are perceived as similar to the comparing coworker. This allows employees to pick many potential comparison targets they perceive as similar to themselves, encouraging beliefs in attainability. As our research has demonstrated, having larger comparison networks can help impede the formation of rivalries and dilute competitive pressures, making it easier for employees to celebrate and attempt to emulate the success of their coworkers.

Mix Things Up: Change Office Space and Team Assignments Occasionally

Managing recognition programs is not the only way managers can exercise some control over the referent selection process within organizations. Employees are likely to choose as referents others with whom they frequently interact. These are the individuals with whom their own goals may be interdependent and with whom they have easier access to social comparison information. Because proximity and accessibility are important factors in referent selection, managers might find it helpful to enact policies to change interaction patterns occasionally. Although familiarity can help build trust and cohesion within the workplace, it can also breed competition and rivalry. Research on the psychology of rivalry demonstrates that repeated interaction is a necessary precursor to developing rivalries; this is especially true in workplaces with high levels of conflict and internal competition. Rivalries can distract employees' attention, shifting focus from completing individual goals to overcoming rivals at all cost. This mindset makes the experience of envy more malicious, leading to acts of deviance and sabotage. Sometimes it is better to broaden the exposure that employees have to one another. As proximity often determines interaction patterns in organizations, occasionally changing office or seating arrangements may help relieve some of the competitive tensions between individuals. Managers can also creatively use temporary group and team assignments, giving employees the chance to interact with and compare themselves with a larger pool of individuals in the workplace. Additionally, exposing employees to a broader range of coworkers will encourage the formation of larger comparison networks, which are likely to be less densely connected.

Promote Fairness in the Organization

Employees expect fair treatment in the workplace. Scholars have studied issues of fairness and organizational justice in the workplace for decades and have recognized its importance in retaining and motivating employees. Issues of fairness are closely linked to how envy is experienced in the workplace. If employees believe that they lack access to important resources or relationships within the organization, they are less likely to believe they can obtain high levels of success themselves and concurrently they are more likely to believe that high achievers enjoy unfair and undeserved advantages. These employees will believe they lack the legitimate means to get ahead in the organization. When faced with the success of their "undeserving" peers, they are more likely to experience malicious envy and react with hostility. Managers might also want to promote organizational justice because envy research suggests the highest achievement-oriented employees may be differentially affected by perceived organizational injustice. Research has shown that employees with the highest self-esteem are the most affected by organizational injustice. Typically, employees with the highest self-esteem are the most resilient and committed employees, and they are better able to overcome obstacles in the workplace. However when faced with organizational injustice, studies have shown that individuals high in self-esteem are the most likely to react by engaging in counterproductive workplace behaviors.

Managers can act to promote organizational justice. Research on procedural justice looks at issues of fairness as they pertain to the systems and procedures used by the organization to distribute awards and opportunities. Studies show that employees are able to tolerate unequal distribution of rewards if they believe that the procedures in place for their dissemination are unbiased and fair. How companies communicate the reason behind these decisions will greatly impact employee perceptions of organizational justice. LeanCor a third-party logistics company has created a formal career progression plan for employees that details the required skill acquisition, professional licensing, and performance rating attainment necessary to be considered for promotion into various positions. When employees are promoted within the company, the news is broadcast through the company website and the company newsletter with a description of the employee's qualifications in addition to the promotion announcement. These steps are taken in order to provide transparency into the promotion process and ensure that employees perceive promotion decisions as fair and just. There are several other steps that can be taken to promote organizational justice such as the use of participative decision-making, management by objectives, and formal dispute resolution. All of these HR practices encourage employee voice, allowing them to have some say in the organizational decision making process. Ceding some control to employees to help solve significant organizational problems, allowing goals to collectively set, and providing formal mechanisms for employees to voice their concerns will positively contribute to perceptions of justice within the organization. Fostering an organizational environment that values and promotes fairness and justice impacts employee appraisal, making it more likely that social comparison will result in benign experiences of envy.

CONCLUSION

Comparisons and envy are a naturally occurring aspect of organizational life and although none of the recommendations listed above promise perfect outcomes, there is some evidence that managers can exercise several forms of unobtrusive control over the social comparison process in organizations. While managers cannot prevent comparisons and eradicate envy, they can take several steps to foster an

environment of collaboration and justice which will diminish the likelihood of malicious envy in organizations. Much of our discussion has also centered on issues of internal competition in the workplace. Competition is strongly linked with social comparison. Based on research findings should managers attempt to institutionalize internal competition as a motivational technique inside organizations? It seems the best advice is one akin to finishing a recipe with a potentially overpowering spice—use sparingly and only in the presence of other required ingredients.

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