

GREEN AND MEAN: ENVY AND SOCIAL UNDERMINING IN ORGANIZATIONS

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, we develop a model of envy and unethical decision making. We postulate that unfavorable comparisons will induce envy in outperformed coworkers, who are subsequently motivated to engage in unethical acts to harm the envied target. In particular, we consider the differential effects of unfavorable individual-level and unfavorable group-level social comparisons on attitudes and norms for engaging in social undermining behaviors. Envy is a self-sanctioned emotion and often difficult to detect. Even so, envy is likely to be both prevalent in and harmful to organizations. Organizational culture may play an important role in moderating the prevalence and consequences of envy within organizations. For example, managerial actions designed to boost organizational identity may significantly curtail envy within their organization.

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INTRODUCTION

The tension between competition and cooperation pervades organizations. Managers often exhort their employees to collaborate with each other, but at the same time use competitive reward systems. In many cases, managers explicitly compare employees with each other (e.g., for "Employee of the Month" awards), while in other cases, employees may spontaneously compare their relative standing with each other. In this chapter, we explore the tension between competition and cooperation in organizations by considering how individual- and group-level comparisons harm cooperation. We review prior research to describe how competition and comparisons induce envy and promote unethical behavior. In particular, we focus on employees' insidious behaviors that are directed toward a fellow employee, i.e., social undermining (Duffy, Ganster, & Pagon, 2002). While past envy research has focused on individual-level comparisons, competition in organizations occurs at both individual and group levels. In the second half of this chapter, we develop a model that describes how different types of comparison (individual-level versus group-level comparisons) alter the envy experience and the decision to engage in social undermining. Finally, we discuss actions managers can take to mitigate envy, and we identify areas for future research.

THE ENVY CONSTRUCT

Defining Envy

Individuals have preferences for psychological balance (Heider, 1958) and equity (Adams, 1965). When individuals experience disadvantageous inequity, they are likely to feel envy. Parrott and Smith (1993, p. 906) define envy as a state that occurs "when a person lacks another's superior quality, achievement, or possession and either desires it or wishes the other lacked it." Parrott and Smith suggest that envy has several inherent features: inferiority, longing, and a sense of subjective injustice. And although envy is typically conceived as a negative state, Silver and Sabini (1978) suggest that envy can be both a positive and negative emotion.

Envy can be both episodic and dispositional. Episodic envy occurs in response to a particular event. Dispositional envy refers to an individual's predisposition to feeling envy toward others in general (Smith, Parrott, Diener, Hoyle, & Kim, 1999). People with high dispositional envy tend to feel episodic envy more frequently and more intensely (Smith et al., 1996).

People who feel envy can be envious of individuals or groups. For example, a marketing manager may envy the budget and power given to the manufacturing department. This envy may transcend individual group members, because the object is held at the department level. This may lead to stable levels of envy between groups, even as group members change departments or firms.

Group Envy

Although prior envy research has focused on individual experiences, envy can be experienced at both the individual and the group levels. Consistent with prior work (Kelly & Barsade, 2001), we conceptualize group-level emotions as the emotional tone of the group. Group emotions are influenced by individual members' dispositions and emotions, the sharing and contagion processes that occur within the group, and affective events that happen to the group. In this chapter, we consider the role of unfavorable group comparisons as affective events that can influence group emotion. For example, a group that loses a competition may experience high levels of envy toward the winning group.

Envy is experienced by individuals, and group-level envy is an aggregation of individual members' emotions. In measuring group-level envy, both the aggregate strength of envy in the group and the variance in strength of envy among members need to be considered (Kelly & Barsade, 2001). Two groups with the same *average* levels of envy may be conceptually very different if the variance of emotional intensity across the group members is different. For example, a group in which all of the members experience moderate levels of envy may develop stronger subjective norms for social undermining than does a group in which some members experience intense levels of envy and others experience no envy.

Antecedents of Envy

Envy is produced by unfavorable comparisons. In these comparisons, an individual may recognize that she/he lacks something that another has. Managerial action can certainly trigger envy (e.g., via an award ceremony), though in many cases, individuals identify relative shortcomings on their own. In fact, people automatically compare themselves with others to determine whether they are in a favorable or unfavorable position. These social comparisons are very common, and Festinger (1954) argues that individuals make social comparisons when more objective criteria are

lacking. Other research has shown that even in the presence of objective criteria, people use social comparisons to evaluate a situation (e.g., Loevenstein, Bazerman, & Thompson, 1989; Novemsky & Schweitzer, 2004).

In prior work, researchers have manipulated envy through a number of comparison processes: comparisons on aptitude tests (Salovey & Rodin, 1984), promotion decisions (Dunn & Schweitzer, 2004b; Schaubroeck & Lam, 2004), and descriptions of individuals' accomplishments and lifestyle (Dunn & Schweitzer, 2004b; Smith et al., 1999). In experiments, researchers often invoke comparisons with fictional others who are represented as either outperformers or average performers.

Some unfavorable comparisons are more influential than others. For example, unfavorable comparisons along self-relevant dimensions with peers are more likely to induce envy than are unfavorable comparisons along self-irrelevant dimensions with dissimilar others. Tesser's (1988) self-evaluation maintenance (SEM) model suggests that social comparisons are most critical when the compared dimension is personally important to one's identity. For example, comparing favorably in quantitative ability may be more important to an engineer than a musician. Comparisons to similar others are perceived as more informative (Festinger, 1954) and researchers have found that individuals feel envy more intensely when they compare themselves with similar others than when they compare themselves with dissimilar others (Cohen-Charash, 2004; Schaubroeck & Lam, 2004).

Expectations about performance also influence envy. In a study of bank tellers' reactions to promotion decisions, Schaubroeck and Lam (2004) found that envy was higher in nonpromoted tellers who had high promotion expectations than it was for nonpromoted tellers with low expectations. The authors found that envy and supervisor-rated performance were positively correlated ($r = 0.44$ when measured simultaneously, $r = 0.38$ when performance was rated a month before; Schaubroeck & Lam, 2004). These results suggest that, while the best performers are targets of envy, better performers are also the most susceptible to feeling envy.

Envy may also be more intense when individuals perform poorly in an *absolute* sense. Salovey and Rodin (1984) only found significant levels of envy (termed social comparison jealousy in their article) when the individuals in their study were outperformed and performed poorly relative to an average benchmark. Dunn and Schweitzer (2004a), however, found that individuals experienced envy when they were outperformed even when they performed at above average levels. These findings suggest that poor performance is not a necessary condition for envy, but that it may exacerbate envy.

Consequences of Envy

Although feelings of envy can sometimes lead to constructive organizational behavior (e.g., as an underperforming employee strives to perform at a higher level), in this chapter we focus on the harmful organizational consequences of envy. People who feel envy often strive to restore a sense of balance and to elevate their own perceived standing. Envy is often associated with feelings of injustice (e.g., Dunn & Schweitzer, 2004a; Parrot & Smith, 1993; Smith et al., 1999), and envy can motivate individuals to derogate and harm not only the envied targets, but unrelated others as well.

Prior research has linked feelings of envy with other emotions. Smith et al. (1994) found that envy was correlated with hostility and depression. Feather and Sherman (2002) also found envy to be positively related to resentment and negatively related to liking. Salovey and Rodin (1984) found a link between envy and anxiety. In their studies, they found that participants felt more anxiety in anticipation of meeting a person who outperformed them than they did in anticipation of meeting a person who did not outperform them. In other work, Smith and colleagues found that envy mediates the relationship between unfavorable comparisons and *schadenfreude* (taking pleasure in the suffering of others, in this case, taking pleasure in the suffering of an envied target; Smith et al., 1996).

Vecchio (1997) characterized behavior triggered by envy along two dimensions. The first dimension classifies behaviors as either constructive or destructive (i.e., whether the behavior has positive or negative implications for the organization). The second dimension classifies behaviors according to whether or not the person feeling envy involves the envied target in the behavior. For example, a constructive-engaged behavior is complimenting the envied person. A destructive-engaged behavior would be sabotaging the envied person's work. A constructive-disengaged behavior is increasing one's own efforts, and a destructive-disengaged behavior would be leaving the organization.

Several studies have found that envy leads people to devalue those they envy (Heider, 1958; Salovey & Rodin, 1984, 1986; Smith et al., 1999). In one study, participants rated students whom they envied as lower than other students on traits that were unrelated to the comparison (caring, niceness, and attractiveness; Salovey & Rodin, 1984). In a bank setting, Schaubroeck and Lam (2004) found that envy was negatively related to liking of a promoted teller, and in another study, Cohen-Charash (2004) found that envy led individuals to avoid the envied person.

Related work has also investigated the relationship between envy and trust. In a recent study, Dunn and Schweitzer (2004a) found that envy decreased affective trust in outperforming another person. Affective trust is based largely on the relationship quality of the individuals and includes dimensions such as feeling comfortable sharing ideas and expecting social support from the trustee (McAllister, 1995). In a study investigating outperformance, Tesser and Campbell (1982) found that participants' perceptions of closeness to another person and willingness to help another were lower when that person outperformed them. Envy, however, was not specifically measured in this study.

Envy and Unethical Behavior

Although prior work has not explicitly linked envy with unethical behavior, negative workplace deviance is a likely consequence of envy (see Warren, 2003 for a review of deviance in organizations). Prior research has found that workplace deviance is often triggered by perceptions of injustice and negative emotions (e.g., anger). For example, Greenberg and Barling (1999) found that employees behave aggressively toward both supervisors and co-workers following procedural injustice. In a study linking emotion and workplace deviance, Fox, Spector, and Miles (2001) found that employees were more likely to engage in counterproductive work behaviors when they had strong negative feelings than when they did not have these feelings. In addition, Lee and Allen (2002) found a positive relationship between anger and workplace aggression, and Glomb and Liao (2003) found a link between anger expressions and interpersonal aggression at work.

In this chapter, we focus on the relationship between envy and social undermining, a construct closely related to deviance. Duffy et al. (2002, p. 332) define social undermining as behavior directed at another person that is "intended to hinder, over time, the ability [of that person] to establish and maintain positive interpersonal relationships, work-related success, and [a] favorable reputation." Social undermining differs from deviant behavior in that social undermining behaviors are subtle behaviors that are always directed at another person. In many cases, social undermining is so subtle that targets of social undermining are unaware of these behaviors. Despite the target's lack of awareness, prior work has demonstrated that social undermining can harm organizations by lowering productivity and adversely affecting the emotional states of others (Duffy et al., 2002; Ruehlman & Wolchik, 1988; Vinokur, Price, & Caplan, 1996; Vinokur & van Ryn, 1993; Westman & Vinokur, 1998). In fact, Duffy et al. (2002) found a link between social undermining and psychosomatic complaints, such as headaches.

Dunn and Schweitzer (2004b) examined the link between envy and social undermining explicitly. In their work, they found that the relationship between envy and social undermining was consistent across different types of upward comparisons ranging from unfavorable promotion decisions to unfavorable comparisons of qualifications (e.g., education and work experience). Importantly, Dunn and Schweitzer (2004b) also found that envied targets did not appropriately diminish their trust in those who envied them. That is, people who received coveted awards or favorable outcomes *failed* to recognize that their counterparts would envy and possibly harm them.

Most prior work has focused on the harmful consequences of envy for individuals who are envied. In some cases, envy may harm organizations by impacting the larger group. For example, Duffy and Shaw (2000) found that envy toward one's group members at early points in a project was positively related to social loafing and negatively related to group cohesion at later points in the project. In this chapter, we present a model that considers how different types of comparisons influence envy and social undermining in organizations. Our framework suggests that group-level comparisons may mitigate some of the harmful effects on envy but will exacerbate other harmful effects of envy.

COMPARISON LEVEL, ENVY, AND UNDERMINING

In organizations, envy can be induced through comparisons between individuals and comparisons between groups. The vast majority of envy research has focused on individual-level comparisons and individual-level envy (e.g., Salovey & Rodin, 1984, 1986; Smith et al., 1999). Envy, however, can be experienced at the group level. For example, a manufacturing group (or an Organizational Behavior department) may envy the attention and funding that are given to the marketing department. In many organizations, groups are explicitly placed in competition with each other for rewards and recognition. In the 1990s, for example, manufacturing firms often rewarded specific groups of assembly line workers for productivity and efficiency accomplishments (Young, Fisher, & Lindquist, 1993). Little research has explored the effects on envy in the workplace; in particular, we know very little about the effects of envy between groups.

In this chapter, we describe the influence of personal and group envy on social undermining. We develop propositions by drawing upon prior envy research and Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1985). We develop our framework with respect to Ajzen's theory, because this theory has been

empirically validated for several types of behavior, including unethical behaviors (e.g., Chang, 1998; Kurland, 1995; Randall & Gibson, 1991).

Theory of Planned Behavior

According to the Theory of Planned Behavior, an individual's behavior is informed by three factors: an individual's attitude toward the behavior, the group's norms regarding the behavior, and an individual's control over the behavior (Ajzen, 1985). An individual's intention to perform a specific behavior is likely to be greater when the individual's attitude toward the behavior is favorable, when the individual perceives that the group norms judge the behavior to be acceptable, and when the individual perceives that he or she has the ability to perform the behavior. An individual's *actual* ability to perform the behavior will influence whether or not the individual's intention translates into action.

Organizations can influence their employees' ethical behaviors in a number of ways. For example, an organization that communicates and emphasizes high ethical standards can create an ethical group norm. This norm will decrease the likelihood that individual employees will engage in unethical behavior. Similarly, organizations can curtail the unethical behavior of their employees by decreasing their ability to perform unethical acts (e.g., by adopting procedures that limit opportunities for employees to engage in theft).

Using Ajzen's (1985) framework, we develop a model of how individual- and group-level envy influence an individual's decision to engage in a specific unethical behavior: social undermining toward an envied target. Although envy is likely to promote a number of unethical behaviors, we focus our attention on social undermining. Envy is particularly likely to promote social undermining behaviors for two reasons. First, social undermining behaviors directly harm the envied target and may help underperforming individuals restore their sense of balance. Second, the self-sanctioned nature of envy makes covert destructive behaviors, like many social undermining behaviors, more attractive than overt destructive behaviors (Dunn & Schweitzer, 2004b).

In our model, we consider the mediating influence of envy on attitudes and norms, and we focus our attention on two levels of comparisons: comparisons between individuals and comparisons between groups. Unfavorable comparisons at both levels can produce personal envy (envy the individual member feels toward the target) and group envy (an aggregate

level of envy the group feels toward the target). Across both types of comparisons, we model the decision to engage in social undermining as an individual decision.

We depict our model in Fig. 1. Consistent with Ajzen's (1985) work, we also include the influence of both perceived and actual control. The model suggests a number of propositions regarding the relationship between comparison level, envy, and undermining. We will start by describing how comparison level affects attitudes toward undermining. Second, we will discuss how comparison level affects norms about undermining. Finally, we will draw from these propositions to consider how comparison level, through attitudes and norms about undermining, affects various characteristics of undermining behavior, such as its likelihood, destructiveness, and overtness.

Comparison Level, Personal Envy, and Undermining Attitudes

In our first proposition, we consider the link between envy and social undermining. Prior research has found that underperforming individuals judge social undermining of envied colleagues to be more acceptable than do outperforming individuals (Dunn & Schweitzer, 2004b). Prior work has also found that individuals who feel envy experience greater *schadenfreude* toward an envied target (Smith et al., 1996), and that individuals who feel envy develop less favorable attitudes toward an envied individual (Schaubroeck & Lam, 2004). As a result, we expect feelings of envy to promote favorable attitudes for social undermining.

Proposition 1. Individuals who experience envy will develop more favorable attitudes toward social undermining than will individuals who do not experience envy.

In our model, we consider two types of unfavorable comparisons: individual- and group-level comparisons. Individual-level comparisons reflect interpersonal comparisons (e.g., an employee who compares her salary with the salary of the person in the cubicle next to hers). Group-level comparisons reflect intergroup comparisons (e.g., status comparisons between groups of coworkers).

We expect the level of comparison to influence attitudes toward social undermining in several ways. Most importantly, we expect the level of comparison to influence the absolute level of personal envy. We expect individual-level comparisons to induce greater personal envy than will

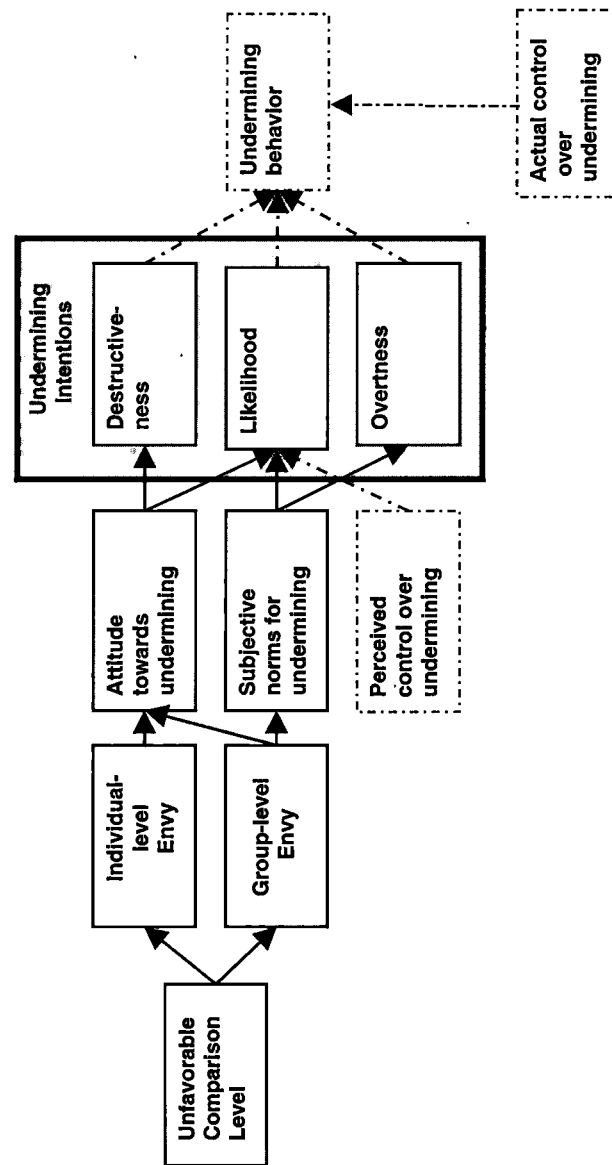


Fig. 1. Comparison Level, Envy, and Social Undermining.

group-level comparisons. Prior research has shown that people react most negatively to unfavorable comparisons that are relevant to their self-identity (Salovey & Rodin, 1984; Tesser, 1988). For example, authors are likely to be more envious of a colleague's superior writing skills than of a colleague's superior cooking skills. In a given domain (e.g., writing skills), comparisons made at the individual level are likely to be more self-relevant than comparisons at the group level. For individual comparisons, an individual's outcome is often largely determined by his or her own actions. For group comparisons, in contrast, a group's outcome is largely determined by the actions of other members of the group. As a result, underperforming as a group is likely to have a weaker effect on one's self-identity because other factors (e.g., the actions of other group members) can account for the underperformance. Compared to group-level comparisons, individual-level comparisons are also likely to evoke more intense personal envy because individual comparisons can trigger envy that is directed toward a single individual target. In individual-level comparisons, another individual's actions may trigger personal envy. In group-level comparisons, by contrast, the focus of envy is likely to be dissipated across many competing group members. As a result, an individual who experiences an unfavorable group-level comparison may not feel sufficiently intense envy toward any particular member of the competing group to justify engaging in social undermining toward that individual.

Proposition 2. Unfavorable individual-level comparisons will induce more intense personal envy than will unfavorable group-level comparisons.

The level of comparison is also likely to influence social undermining by altering an individual's attitude toward social undermining behavior. Compared with unfavorable group-level comparisons, we expect unfavorable individual-level comparisons to induce greater envy and as a result, exert greater influence on attitudes toward social undermining. These arguments lead to the following proposition.

Proposition 3. Attitudes toward social undermining will be more favorable following unfavorable individual-level comparisons than they will be following unfavorable group-level comparisons; this relationship will be mediated by personal envy intensity.

COMPARISON LEVEL, GROUP ENVY, AND GROUP NORMS FOR UNDERMINING

We conceptualize group-level envy along two dimensions: the average intensity of experienced envy within a group and the variance of envy experienced by group members. We expect the intensity of group envy to influence norms for social undermining in the same way that the intensity of personal envy influences individual attitudes toward social undermining. Group norms are influenced by the attitudes of individual group members (Kelly, 1969). As more members of the group feel stronger envy toward the target, more members will support social undermining of the target, leading to a stronger group norm for undermining. That is, we expect favorable norms for social undermining to increase as the average intensity of group envy increases.

Proposition 4. Higher group envy intensity leads to stronger norms for social undermining.

The variance in group envy will also affect group undermining norms. When the variance in group envy is low, the group will have a stronger consensus in their feelings toward the target, and based on the individual-level propositions, consensus in feelings of envy will create more similar attitudes toward social undermining. In contrast, high variance in envy indicates disparity among group members in their envious feelings towards the target, which would lead to less agreement in attitudes towards social undermining of the target.

The effect of variance on norms for undermining is contingent on the intensity of group envy, as shown in Table 1. By our prior propositions, we expect that when group envy intensity is low, the majority of the group will oppose undermining. In contrast, when group envy intensity is high, the

Table 1. The Influence of Group Envy Intensity and Variance on Group Norms for Social Undermining (SU).

| Group Envy Intensity | Group Envy Variance | |
|----------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|
| | High | Low |
| High | Weak norms supporting SU | Strong norms supporting SU |
| Low | Weak norms opposing SU | Strong norms opposing SU |

majority of the group will support undermining. Generally, we expect low variance (i.e., group members feel similar levels of envy toward the target) to lead to stronger norms about undermining than high variance (i.e., some members feel envy toward the target while others do not). That is, groups will have strong norms *supporting undermining* when group envy intensity is *high* and strong norms *opposing undermining* when group envy intensity is *low*. Thus, when group envy intensity is low (the group generally opposes undermining), we expect the group norms *opposing* undermining will be less favorable when variance is low than when variance is high. When the level of group envy is low and group variance is high, a minority subset of members (who feel high envy) may weaken the antiundermining norms. Conversely, when group envy intensity is high (the group generally supports undermining), group norms *supporting* undermining will be higher when variance is low than when variance is high. When group envy intensity is high and group variance is high, a subset of members (who feel low envy) who disapprove of undermining may restrain the development of favorable norms for social undermining. In fact, some envious group members may refrain from engaging in social undermining out of fear of being reprimanded or reported by these members.

Proposition 5a. When group envy intensity is low, variance in group envy leads to more favorable norms toward undermining.

Proposition 5b. When group envy intensity is high, variance in group envy leads to less favorable norms toward social undermining.

From Propositions 5a and 5b, we expect norms toward social undermining behavior to be most favorable when the average envy levels within a group are high and the variance in envy is low. While individual comparisons lead to more intense personal envy than group comparisons, the average envy intensity of the group will be higher following unfavorable group comparisons, because in group comparisons all of the members will be exposed to the envy-inducing context. For example, in individual-level comparisons, the envy experienced by one group member may be independent of the envy experienced by another (who was compared herself against a different coworker). Members who have compared unfavorably with a target will feel envy towards that target, but other members may not. In unfavorable group comparisons, all members received the same unfavorable comparison, and thus are likely to experience more similar levels of envy. Additionally, the target of comparison in individual comparisons may be a different person for different members, while group members direct

their envy toward the same set of other competing group members. As a result, we expect the average intensity of group envy to be higher when unfavorable comparisons are made at the group, rather than the individual, level. We also expect the variance in group envy to be lower when unfavorable comparisons are made at the group, rather than the individual, level.

Proposition 6. Unfavorable group-level comparisons will induce more intense group envy than will unfavorable individual-level comparisons.

Proposition 7. Unfavorable group-level comparisons will lead to lower variance in group envy than will unfavorable individual-level comparisons.

Tying Propositions 4–7 together, we expect that unfavorable group-level comparisons will lead to stronger group norms supporting social undermining, because unfavorable group-level comparisons will lead to more intense and less varied feelings of group envy than unfavorable individual-level comparisons.

Proposition 8. Group norms supporting social undermining will be stronger following unfavorable group-level comparisons than they will be following unfavorable individual-level comparisons; this relationship will be mediated by the strength and variance of group envy.

COMPARISON LEVEL AND INTENTIONS TO UNDERMINE

Our model suggests that intentions to engage in social undermining will be greater when attitudes toward social undermining and norms for social undermining are more favorable. Unfavorable individual- and group-level comparisons, however, have different effects on individual attitudes and group norms. While individual-level comparisons are likely to create more favorable *attitudes* toward social undermining, group-level comparisons are likely to create more favorable *norms* toward undermining. Our model suggests that attitudes and norms will mediate the relationship between the comparison level (individual- or group level) and the magnitude of undermining intentions.

Although we cannot develop propositions relating the level of comparison with the *magnitude* of undermining intentions, different levels of comparisons are likely to influence the *nature* of the undermining behavior differently. First, we consider the extent to which undermining behaviors are

overt. Undermining behaviors can range from highly overt behaviors to highly covert behaviors. Highly overt behaviors include publicly insulting or physically harming a coworker. Highly covert behaviors include leaving a colleague's mistake in his work or deliberately giving the colleague bad advice under the guise of trying to help him or her in a task. Envy is a sanctioned emotion (Parrott & Smith, 1993), and as a result, people who feel envy may try to disguise their feelings and the undermining behaviors that result from them. This is especially true when the individual experiencing envy believes that others in their work group are not experiencing envy and the subjective norms do not favor behaviors such as social undermining. When group norms favor social undermining, however, the social sanctions for engaging in social undermining are reduced. Individuals are likely to feel more comfortable publicly engaging in undermining behaviors toward a target when they believe that group norms favor such behavior. Group-level comparisons are more likely to create favorable subjective norms for social undermining. As group envy increases, groups may even encourage undermining behavior to help the group members restore their perceived relative standing with respect to members of the competing group. This will be especially true when the variance in group envy is low, i.e., when there are few to no individuals in the group lacking envy toward the target and discouraging undermining behavior. In this case, individuals who engage in overt undermining may even be recognized for their efforts on behalf of their group.

Proposition 9. Unfavorable group-level comparisons will lead to more overt types of social undermining behaviors than will unfavorable individual-level comparisons, mediated by social norms supporting undermining.

Another important dimension of undermining behaviors is the destructiveness of the behavior. Both overt and covert behaviors can vary in terms of destructiveness. For example, overt undermining behaviors can range from a mildly rude comment to a serious character attack made in front of the envied target's supervisor. Covert behaviors can range from ignoring a request for information from the target to secretly hacking into the target's computer to delete files. We expect attitudes toward highly destructive behaviors to be most favorable following unfavorable individual-level comparisons for two reasons. First, unfavorable individual-level comparisons are more likely to trigger intense envy than unfavorable group-level comparisons, because individual-level comparisons are likely to be perceived as more self-relevant than the potentially diffuse experience of envy in a group.

Second, a destructive act against an envied individual may be perceived more favorably by the actor, because an act against an envied individual may have a better chance of restoring balance between the two individuals than a destructive act against a member of a competing group. As a result, we expect social undermining acts following unfavorable individual-level comparisons to be more destructive in nature than social undermining acts following unfavorable group-level comparisons.

Proposition 10. Unfavorable individual-level comparisons will result in more destructive undermining behaviors than will unfavorable group-level comparisons, mediated by attitudes toward social undermining.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Our model provides a framework for comparing the effects of individual- and group-level comparisons on envy and social undermining. In designing reward systems, managers can measure performance and assign awards at either the individual- or the group level. In addition to creating positive incentives, these reward systems lead employees to compare themselves with others. In this chapter, we consider the harmful consequences of unfavorable comparisons (e.g., losing a competition to another employee or work group) and subsequent feelings of envy. We argue that the consequences of experiencing envy from an individual-level versus a group-level comparison are fundamentally different. In particular, we argue that different levels of comparisons will influence attitudes and group norms toward social undermining very differently. Different levels of comparisons will also influence the nature of social undermining behavior. Compared to unfavorable group-level comparisons, unfavorable individual-level comparisons are more likely to lead to covert behaviors, and when envy is intense, these unfavorable comparisons may lead to very destructive behaviors directed toward an envied colleague. Following unfavorable group-level comparisons, individual employees are likely to engage in more overt social undermining behaviors, but these behaviors may be less destructive than those following unfavorable individual-level comparisons because of the public nature of group emotion and norms sharing.

In many cases, managers unintentionally induce envy through their use of competitive reward systems. Despite the important role managers play in promoting (or curtailing) envy, many managers are likely to underestimate the prevalence of envy within their work groups. Envy is easy to overlook

because it is a self-sanctioned emotion (Parrott & Smith, 1993); people who feel envy often attempt to conceal their true feelings. As a result, managers may underestimate the harm envy causes within their organization, because employees are reticent to discuss their feelings and because envy is likely to provoke covert behaviors.

Managing Envy in Organizations

Although envy is difficult to recognize, managers should be very concerned with envy in their workplace. First, envy can lead to a number of disruptive organizational behaviors including unethical behaviors, such as social undermining and subversive actions that harm the organization. Second, managers can directly influence the amount of envy in their organization.

Prescriptively, managers should take actions both to minimize envy in their organization, and to curtail the destructive effects of envy. Specifically, managers should consider the reward systems they use carefully and select an incentive system that balances the benefits of a competitive system (e.g., in motivating employees) and the costs (e.g., in inducing envy). Managers can also influence the types of comparisons employees make through the selection of performance criteria and by controlling the flow of information. For example, prior work suggests that individuals seek downward comparisons (Wills, 1981). Managers might facilitate the selection of downward comparisons by providing employees with information about other underperforming employees.

Managers may also reduce the salience of comparisons by reducing the visibility of awards. For example, managers can give some rewards in private, stress the importance of confidentiality when awarding high performers, or limit the amount of attention drawn to the award winner (e.g., stop posting photos of award winners in the company newsletter). Further, managers can influence their corporate culture and take actions to increase solidarity and employee affiliation with the organization. These actions may increase the extent to which employees feel proud of, rather than envious of, high performing employees.

In addition to reducing the experience of envy, managers may be able to reduce the negative consequences and increase the positive consequences of envy. First, managers should ensure that employees view the performance criteria as valid and diagnostic. This may facilitate positive attitudes toward the high performer (Alicke, LoSchiavo, Zerbst, & Zhang, 1997; Dunn & Schweitzer, 2004b) and may reduce feelings of perceived injustice that might cause negative reactions directed toward the organization. Second, managers

may be able to lessen the effects of envy if those who feel envy have future opportunities in which to restore the balance in a positive manner. For example, a company could give monthly awards to 12 different employees instead of a large annual award to one. Providing specific, constructive feedback about how an employee can improve his or her performance may also increase motivation instead of derogation. Specific feedback and encouragement can increase the perceived feasibility of "leveling up" to correct the imbalance.

Future Research

Despite the prevalence and importance of envy to organizational behavior, envy represents a surprisingly understudied emotion in organizations (Brief & Weiss, 2002). Aside from Vecchio's (1995) important work on this topic, very little theoretical work has developed our understanding of envy in the workplace. Similarly, relatively little empirical research has investigated envy (see work by Cohen-Charash, 2004; Dunn & Schweitzer, 2004a,b; Schaubroeck and Lam, 2004 for exceptions). Results from this emerging literature suggest that envy plays an important role in organizations, but many outstanding questions about envy remain.

Envy is likely to be influenced by the presence of objective information. Salovey and Rodin (1984) found that envy toward an outperformer was reduced when the underperformer was informed that his or her absolute level of performance was above average. These findings suggest that the opportunity to make downward comparisons might mitigate envy. Quite possibly, by providing an average benchmark managers could reduce envy in the upper half of performers. Novemsky and Schweitzer (2004), however, have found that social comparisons influence judgment even when objective information is available. Future research is needed to better understand the role of objective information in managing envy.

While prior research has largely conceptualized envy as an unfortunate byproduct of social comparisons, surprisingly little prior work has investigated the deliberate choices individuals make to induce envy in others. In many instances, people make conscious choices to flaunt their successes in a way that induces envy in others. In fact, many advertising campaigns for luxury products suggest that inducing envy in others is a desirable goal. Future research should examine the conditions under which individuals and groups desire to be envied, and consider whether or not they misperceive the implications of being envied. Prior work suggests that people do fail to recognize how harmful envy is (Dunn & Schweitzer, 2004b), but future work should explore this issue in more detail.

Future work should also explore the role of envy in organizations more broadly. In this chapter, we consider individual- and group-level envy. In many cases, envy is likely to be experienced by a number of employees at once toward a specific individual (e.g., following a promotion decision or an employee-ranking process). Future work should consider other characteristics of groups, such as size, composition, and cohesiveness. In addition, future work should explore how several people feeling envy toward an individual interact with each other and how they might behave in concert to harm an envied target (e.g., Joseph's brothers responding to his new multicolored coat). Quite possibly, this type of setting could trigger particularly unethical behavior by cueing both the harmful individual-level effects on attitudes and the harmful group-level effects on subjective norms. Alternatively, unfavorable group-level comparisons may lead to a number of other harmful behaviors that we did not consider in this chapter, such as within-group conflict. In some cases, unfavorable group-level comparisons may lead group members to scapegoat or otherwise harm members of their own group.

Finally, we call for future research to explore the relationship between organizational culture and envy. Although our framework suggests that organizational culture is likely to be very important, future research should investigate this issue. Ultimately, results from this work will articulate practical prescriptions regarding the creation and maintenance of organizational culture for managers seeking to curtail the harmful effects of unfavorable comparisons in their workplace.

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