

CONCEPTUALIZING ENVY FOR BUSINESS RESEARCH

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Abstract

Envy is a pervasive emotion that has found attention in various disciplines from philosophy, anthropology, evolutionary and social psychology to political thought. Surprisingly, it has not been extensively treated in business research even though it can affect a large variety of business-relevant phenomena ranging from individual workplace behavior to the theory of the firm. In the comparably rare cases where envy is treated in business research, the term is often defined loosely and used rather inconsistently. This limits the comparability of existing research and hinders the aggregation of findings. This conceptual paper attempts to clarify the concept of envy for business research from a situational perspective. Thereto, it integrates research on envy from various scientific disciplines and introduces a novel graphical notation to conceptually distinguish the four distinct notions of envy proper, benign envy, spite, and jealousy. Thereby, it lays the groundwork for further analysis of the phenomenon of envy in business research.

Key Words: Envy, Jealousy, Conceptualization

Topic Groups: Managerial and organizational cognition and psychology, Organizational behavior

INTRODUCTION

The “resentment emotion” (Ortony, Clore, & Collins, 1988, p. 99) of envy is one of the most pervasive (Lindholm, 2008) and has been concerning humans for a long time. A classical depiction of this motive can for example be found in the biblical narrative of Cain’s slaying of Abel, whom he envied for God’s favoritism (also see Schoeck, 1966, pp. 123–131 for a brief account of actual crimes committed from the motive of envy). Other objects of envy, that is the “features we envy in others” (Elster, 1991, p. 50) and which are normally not intrinsically good or bad and valued only inside a certain milieu (Harris & Salovey, 2008), can be everything from food, children, and health in peasant societies to fine homes and clothing in modern society (Foster, 1972).

Not surprisingly, envy has long been a subject of debate in various disciplines from philosophy (see for example D’Arms & Kerr, 2008; Gillmann, 1996 or Schoeck, 1966 for an overview), anthropology (see for example Lindholm, 2008), and evolutionary (Hill & Buss, 2008) and social psychology (Smith & Kim, 2007) to political thought (Russell, 1930; Schoeck, 1966) and economics (Zizzo, 2008; Kolm, 1995). However, it has not received significant attention in the management literature (Mishra, 2009), as have emotions in general (see Delgado-García & De La Fuente-Sabaté, 2010 for a review of the extant empirical work).

This is despite the fact that envy can have important influences on many topics relevant to management research. These topics range from individual workplace behavior (Vecchio, 2000; Duffy, Shaw, & Schaubroeck, 2008; Mishra, 2009) to managerial decision making (Lister, 2001; Goel & Thakor, 2005; Moran & Schweitzer, 2008), consumer behavior (Young & Rubicam EMEA; Belk, 2008) and even the theory of the firm (Nickerson & Zenger, 2008).

It seems that one of the problems of management research on envy is that different research projects use different terms and conceptualizations of envy, be they explicit or only implicit. This limits the comparability of existing research and hinders the aggregation of findings. Some researchers are generally skeptical whether an unanimously accepted definition of what envy constitutes exactly will ever emerge (Harris & Salovey, 2008). However, the problem is not so much whether everyone will agree to the same meaning of the term "envy", but rather everyone making explicit their understanding of the term. To facilitate this, this paper attempts to conceptualize envy and related phenomena for management research.

SITUATIONAL CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF ENVY AND RELATED PHENOMENA

Three different ways of interpreting envy are conceivable. One can either take a dispositional, a phenomenological, or a situational approach (Salovey, 1991). The dispositional approach understands envy as a person's sensitivity to envy-provoking situations and their tendency to harbor envious feelings. The phenomenological approach focuses on the specific feelings that people encounter when experiencing envy. The situational approach, in contrast, centers on the question which kinds of situations can arouse envy in individuals and what their desires in such situations are.

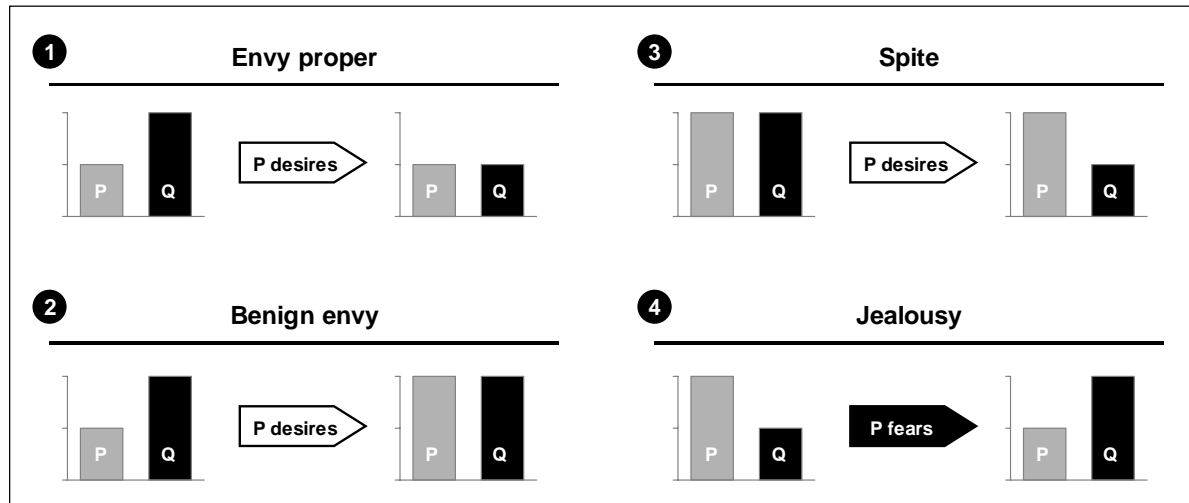
For most practical applications in a managerial context, the questions of individual envy propensity and the precise emotions felt by someone experiencing envy are subordinate to the question of which situations actually constitute envious situations. This is because until it is clarified which situation actually qualifies as involving envy, individual differences and the emotions felt are not relevant to management research. Consequentially, the situational approach to envy seems useful for management research and will hence be used in this paper.

When one disentangles the different ideas of envy that can be found in the literature, principally four different situations and corresponding terms describing them emerge. These are envy proper, benign envy, spite, and jealousy. Figure 1 introduces a novel graphical notation to display the four different concepts in terms of an interaction between two individuals P and Q with a current and a desired respectively feared potential future situation each. The size of the bars indicates the outcome of a social comparison performed by P using Q as a comparison standard. The following details these conceptions integrating research from various disciplines, including psychology, philosophy, and economics.

First, there is what is being referred to as "envy proper" (Smith & Kim, 2007, p. 47), "malicious envy" (Smith & Kim, 2008, p. 4; Parrott, 1991, pp. 9–12), or "destructive" or "black envy" (Grolleau, Mzoughi, & Sutan, 2006, p. 5). It describes the phenomenon that a person who made a disadvantageous comparison to another person has a desire to remove his or her relative disadvantage by making the comparison person worse off to overcome his or her feeling of inferiority (see illustration 1 in Figure 1). Elster maintains that such envy comes in two forms, namely weak and strong envy. Weak envy, on one hand, implies that the disadvantaged person enjoys seeing the other person's welfare diminished but is not willing to incur a cost for this to happen. Strong envy, on the other hand, implies that a

person is willing to incur a personal cost in order to have the other's welfare reduced (Elster, 1991). The latter constitutes the more common case and represents a trade-off between absolute and relative standing. This is clearly what scholars have in mind when they argue that "Envious agents

Figure 1: Situational conception of envy and its cognates



want to be better more than they want to be better off" (Goel & Thakor, 2005, p. 2262). An example for strong envy proper would be a company owner who exits a joint venture even though it was profitable for him only because the joint venture partner made even greater gains.

Second, there is what is called "benign envy" (Smith & Kim, 2008, p. 3, Smith & Kim, 2007, p. 47), "nonmalicious envy" (Parrott, 1991, pp. 9–12), "competitive" or "white envy" (Grolleau et al., 2006, p. 5), or "emulation" (Elster, 1991, p. 49; Miceli & Castelfranchi, 2007, p. 473). This concept refers to the reaction of a person that realizes his or her inferiority as compared to another person and develops the desire to eliminate this discrepancy by improving his or her own position with regard to the dimension of comparison (see illustration 2 in Figure 1). An example would be a manager that finds another person to be a better public speaker and then starts practicing to improve his or her public speaking skills. Some scholars, however, argue that this phenomenon does not really represent envy, as true envy does require some form of ill will directed towards the envied person (Smith & Kim, 2007; Miceli & Castelfranchi, 2007), rather than only a "longing" for the object of envy (Smith & Kim, 2007, p. 47; D'Arms & Kerr, 2008, pp. 45–48).

Third, there is the phenomenon of "spite" (Elster, 1991, p. 54), sometimes also referred to as "nastiness" (Abbink & Sadrieh, 2009, p. 306). Spite is the desire of one person to make another person worse off not to regain parity, but to gain superiority. While envy wants to eliminate the other's superiority, spite wishes for his or her inferiority (see illustration 3 in Figure 1). Normally, envy tends to bring spite with it (Elster, 1991). Similar to envy, spite can also be weak and strong, depending on whether the one person is willing to incur a cost to see the other person be made inferior (Elster, 1991). An example for weak spite would be a situation in which a manager is happy to see another colleague being demoted, while at the same time not being willing to incur a personal cost to make it happen.

Until now, it has always been assumed that the superiority or inferiority of one of the comparing individuals can be changed without explicitly transferring a good or property from the envied individual to the envying individual (this is possible because envy is not normally considered to presuppose a zero-sum view of the world; Elster, 1991). Some authors, however, have included the requirement in their definitions of envy that envy has to strive for the transfer of something between the persons (probably because they were thinking in terms of envy in romantic relationships, where the object of envy is singular, than in economic terms, where object of envy normally can be obtained without removing it from the other party; Salovey, 1991). A similar distinction is made when the terms "general envy" and "particular envy" are used (Rawls, 1999, p. 466). Whenever the object of envy that causes the discrepancy in standing between the two persons comparing is unique, envy and spite naturally coincide. Such an object can for example be a position in a ranking. If the person ranked second envies the person ranked first, the desire to gain first place naturally requires the other person to lose first place.

Fourth, there is the concept of jealousy. Although the word is oftentimes used synonymously with envy in colloquial language, it refers to a genuinely distinct concept (Foster, 1972). While envy relates to the desire to remove someone's superiority, jealousy refers to the fear of losing one's superiority to somebody else (Miceli & Castelfranchi, 2007; Smith & Kim, 2007); see illustration 4 in Figure 1. The two phenomena are interlinked in that when one person realizes that he or she is being envied, he or she might become jealous for that very reason. It is apparent that, even while envy and jealousy may be very similar in the feelings experienced (albeit in different intensities), they differ in that they occur in different situations (Salovey, 1991). It should be noted that jealousy is always the fear that the object of jealousy is being transferred from the jealous person to another, not merely being lost by one person. For example, one does not get jealous when the promised promotion gets cancelled, but only when the threat arises that somebody else might get it instead.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This paper was motivated by the fact that while envy has been treated extensively in various scientific disciplines, it has been comparably neglected in management research. Since this is likely to be partially due to a confusion regarding the specific concepts associated with the term "envy", this paper set out to develop situational conceptualizations of envy-related phenomena for management research.

Thereby, the four distinct concepts of envy proper, benign envy, spite, and jealousy were identified through integration of literature from various scientific disciplines. Additionally, the four different concepts were illustrated and contrasted using a novel graphical notation. Thereby, this paper lays the groundwork for further analysis of the phenomenon of envy in business settings.

Several opportunities for future research exist. The framework which was proposed in this article could for example be used to categorize current business-related research on envy. This might allow the identification of research gaps with regard to envy in business. Another avenue for further research could be to further explore the exact psychological mechanisms driving the phenomena addressed in this contribution. Social comparison theory could, for example, provide such a theoretical basis (Festinger, 1954).

This paper's contribution to science and practice lies in the provision of a structured vocabulary which is hoped to further educated practical discussions and productive academic scholarship on the topic of envy in management. Specifically, managers may use this

vocabulary to address issues related to envy in the workplace, e.g. when discussing compensation schemes or information systems which may trigger envy and related phenomena. Theorists can benefit from the clear delineations set forth in this paper insofar as it provides them with a framework to distinguish emotions and patterns of behavior that were previously lumped together or only ill-defined. Therefore, this research offers insights that are meaningful from both a practical and a theoretical perspective.

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Advances in Business-Related Scientific Research Journal (ABSRJ)
Volume 1 (2010), Number 2

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