

Relationship of Leadership and Envy

Subjects: **Others**

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envy

leadership

bibliometric review

binary relationship

dual-track theoretical model

1. Introduction

With the increases in social mobility and proximity ([Lu et al. 2013](#)), the legitimacy of interests and the fairness of institutions have gradually become important psychological demands of people. The social comparisons brought about by the gaps in benefits and systems trigger people's emotional evaluations and produce complex emotional states of negative cognition. The rapid development of psychology and interpersonal relationships has resulted in this kind of psychological experience—i.e., envy—attracting widespread attention in academic circles. The research on envy is based on psychology and is enriched by the diversity of the audience, the diversification of subject areas, and the complexity of psychological activities, and it has characteristics that are atypical for psychological research: envy can be managed autonomously, and even can be determined by others and the external environment. Through reasonable guidance and intervention, envy can be used as an “office tool” to shift the dual extremes of continuous emotional variables—the theory of envy is harmful to the theory of beneficial envy. Envy can be destructive or can lead to promotions, and it also has the functional role of guiding the development of people's hearts and organizations.

At present, many documents have explored all aspects of envy-driven activities, which deeply reflect the occurrence, reaction mechanism, and external behavior of envy ([Fu 2010](#)). However, in general, such research still follows the research paradigm of psychology, without considering the combination of envy and the environment and new functions of envy given by the times. In fact, envy appears more in the workplace these days and has a turbulent influence on interpersonal relationships and the atmospheres of offices, e.g., it can promote hatred for power and wealth. This puts higher demands on organizational leadership and mechanisms for the redirection of envy. Analyzed at the macro level, such as national and regional governance, envy is a subjective emotional behavior of the led or controlled subject, triggered by the unbalanced nature of their rights and interests, under the control of coercive power. Even in the game of central and local governments, envy can be significant and lead to regional differences in governance, not to mention the narrow space of psychological confrontation that is the

workplace, where the relationship between leadership and envy will be even stronger ([Liu et al. 2021](#)). This article integrates the views of the predominant literature and sorts out the research content and developmental stages of envy-linked activities based on a leadership perspective. Herein, we analyzed the lack of existing research, the emotional connotations of envy in the organizational environment, and the internal mechanism that affects interpersonal behavior; additionally, we revealed the key path for effective leadership that uses the positive aspects of envy. We also constructed an overall theoretical framework and put forward the dual-track theoretical hypothesis of envy-linked activities from the perspective of leadership.

This paper's literature review and inherent analysis of envy, leadership, and the workplace (particular environments) allow for the following research objectives:

- From the conceptual level: (1) To further clarify the difference between envy and jealousy, the work environment and workplace climate are clarified to shape the particular concept of envy ([Salovey and Rodin 1984](#)). (2) A clear conceptualization of leading and leadership, extending the noun attribute of the concept to the verb state, i.e., an analysis of leadership activities in dynamic behavior and their impact on the work environment ([Hupka 1984](#)). (3) To pay particular attention to the workplace, identify its specific properties and heterogeneity with other social environments ([Silver and Sabini 1978](#)).
- At the theoretical level, the essential theoretical foundations and empirical thinking on envy, leadership, and the workplace are sorted out and summarized by previous authors, from which the potential relationships between the three are summarized, and the intersection areas or interweaving points of findings are clarified. Ultimately, this paper lays the foundation for the literature synthesis and the organization of ideas utilizing measurement.
- At the relational level, the literature on the relationship between leadership and envy is summarized using bibliometric methods to form a lineage and evolutionary history of literature research. The relationship between leadership and envy in the workplace environment was analyzed in real-life and historical frameworks and different years. It is concluded that the relationship between leadership and envy has evolved from isolation to a potential single influence (envy stemming from the non-benign distribution or role of leadership), to a potential two-way influence (too much workplace envy putting demands on leadership), to a direct control mechanism (through the role of leadership, the transformation of benign envy can be achieved, and the formation of a large amount of positive envy can contribute to rapid corporate development ([Leach and Spears 2008](#))).
- This paper proposes a two-track theoretical hypothesis model for the adjustment of envy-leadership relationships through the preceding work and the path developed in the literature. On the one hand, this theoretical model can pave the way for empirical work in subsequent studies, and other scholars can test the stimulus–organism–response path in turn based on this paper's model of ideas ([Klein 2011](#)). It clarifies the trajectory of leadership interventions and guiding ideas for envy adjustment (pursuing decision performance or fairness, guiding organizational practice or effectuation), analyses the trajectory of the role of envy in the workplace (single element role of perceptions, attitudes on envy; or mediating, moderating model of perceptions-attitudes-envy), and finally obtains specific adjustment measures. On the other hand, the model

creatively points out the role of leadership in the workplace on employee or organizational envy, i.e., it integrates the two sides of envy and leadership while forming a new direction of research under a unified research framework.

Overall, this paper breaks away from the traditional psychological research paradigm of envy and leadership concept analysis. On the one hand, it constructs a two-track model of both, aided by management and econometrics (and even by big data and computer disciplines), and proposes practical ideas and hypothesis paths for subsequent cross-sectional research. On the other hand, the response to leadership adjustment, control, or transformation envy is foreseen in the context of binary relationships and the workplace.

2. The Theoretical Basis of the Relationship between Envy and Leadership

In the process of analyzing the literature, it is not difficult to find that the English definition of “envy” can describe either of the technical terms “envy” and “jealousy”. Before 2000, scholars analyzed the concept of envy and put forward the concept that when a person both lacks and desires to possess the excellent qualities, achievements, or possessions of others, “envy” is produced, which is accompanied by guilt, self-denial, and inappropriate malice ([Salovey and Rodin 1984](#)). “Jealousy” occurs when people fear losing important interpersonal relationships due to competition, accompanied by fear of loss, anxiety, and doubts and anger about betrayal ([Smith and Kim 2007](#)). Silver believed that the reason for the mixed use of the two terms is related to the ambiguity of the language ([Bedeian 1995](#)), but he pointed out that the most essential difference between the two is that “envy” is a binary relationship, but “jealousy” is a ternary relationship. In addition, the author used an empirical comparison to study the causes and consequences of “envy” and “jealousy” in the article, and concluded that self-esteem, authoritarianism, the attributes of the work environment (competitive rewards, employee autonomy, and leadership considerations), and individual response variables (based on organizational self-esteem, sense of control, and turnover intention) are more relevant to envy than jealousy. That is, the scope of envy is wider than that of jealousy, and it feels more intense for individuals. However, when combing through the literature, the authors found that in recent years, most foreign scholars have not strictly distinguished the two. In addition, since this article discusses the relationship between leadership and jealousy in social workplaces, the definition of jealousy by Salovey and Rodin is that envy is jealousy in the context of social comparison.

In organizational behavior, the personal traits (character) and decision-making behaviors of leaders are usually the hotspots that scholars pay attention to. In the retrieved literature, it is not difficult to find that a leader’s personality characteristics (e.g., narcissism), leadership behavior style (e.g., disruptive and transformational), leadership–member relationship (LMX), leadership work environment (e.g., corporate culture), etc., are all research perspectives developed by scholars. This is also closely related to the development of leadership theory ([Schneider et al. 2005](#)). The traditional leadership theory develops with leadership, injecting values into an organization to arouse resonance in the followers. Group leadership theory involves differences in cultural backgrounds that have significant impacts on employees’ psychology and behavior. In the vertical pairing theory, the “in-circle” and “out-of-circle” relationships formed between leaders and followers have important impacts on

organizational behavior. In the transformational leadership theories in recent years, charismatic leaders display their own values and beliefs in non-traditional ways in order to arouse the passion of employees and to influence their behavior. At the same time, the research on destructive leadership has gradually entered the public's field of vision, and its negative effects on the work attitude and behavior of subordinates and on organizational behavior and performance have attracted widespread attention from scholars and entrepreneurs. Therefore, it is not difficult to find that "innate" leadership has the function of influencing organizational behavior and can resolve jealous activities in the interpersonal field through decision-making behavior ([Liang et al. 2019](#)). Based on the above analysis, we find that leadership identity theory, leadership behavior theory, and leadership change theory exist in the workplace and other workplaces. Leaders can influence employees' behavior and change their minds through some manifestation of these theories. Leadership as a managerial activity is essential for effective management of work and the resolution of psychologically undesirable factors of employee envy at work ([Gotsis and Grimani 2016](#)). Therefore, in the following analysis, we focus on broad leadership behaviors rather than specific leadership behaviors.

Specifically, the field of research on the relationship between leadership and envy mainly involves the following aspects. First of all, leadership traits include the personality characteristics and personal abilities of a leader, such as whether the leader is considerate ([Kim et al. 2013](#)). The level of a leader's interpersonal processing and business abilities has a significant impact on employees' organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) and psychological activities (such as jealousy and hatred) ([Cropanzano and Mitchell 2005](#)). LMX refers to the quality of the relationship between employees and their direct supervisors. The existing literature proves, through normative and empirical research, that supervisors can adjust employee jealousy by improving the quality of the LMX perceived by employees ([Kim et al. 2010](#)). Ethical leadership refers to the leadership behavior that promotes this behavior to followers through two-way communication, strengthening decision making through personal behavior and interpersonal relationships ([Veiga et al. 2014](#)). The core meaning is that a leader's behavior is fair, and this motivates employees through the LMX ([Dunn and Schweitzer 2006](#)). On the contrary, unfair and unjust leadership behavior will stimulate jealousy among employees. As a result of this differential treatment, the psychology among employees will gradually change from envy to jealousy, with the final result of bad behavior among employees due to jealousy. Therefore, scholars have concluded that through ethical leadership behavior, employees' organizational citizenship behavior can be adjusted, and employees' jealousy or destructive behavior can be alleviated.

According to the literature analysis, envy and leadership has been a hot research topic in the past ten years, mainly focusing on the antecedents and consequences of envy and the influence of leadership on organizational behavior. Often combined with OCB and counterproductive behavior (CWB). The main theoretical basis involves role theory, social exchange theory, leader–member exchange theory, affective event theory, the theory of planned behavior, and attribution theory.

3. The Main Content of the Research on the Relationship between Leadership and Envy

The study of the binary relationship between envy and leadership in the context of the workplace contains a large number of research directions, concepts and connotations (as seen in the previous section), and therefore the grasp of the knowledge structure and literature level of this hot topic is more dependent on the “quantity” and “quality” of the literature. This paper uses the CiteSpace-assisted Histcite citation analysis tool as the main method to extend the bibliometric analysis in the formation of envy and leadership theme studies ([Garfield 2009](#)).

Based on all of the documents since research on the relationship between leadership and envy came into being, as well as on visualized analysis according to the time dimension, the research on the relationship between leadership and envy can be divided into three main stages, as outlined below.

With attention being paid to the negative effects of envy, academic circles have gradually started paying attention to the driving factors of envy and the effects of jealous activities. The main contents include the production and action mechanism of envy in the body and mind, the vagueness of envy judgment, and the prior elements of envy.

As envy is caused by interpersonal activities, envy frequently occurs in the workplace. Based on this, the research on envy began to shift from focusing on envy in the work environment to focusing on this field, and scholars believe that the production and influence of envy at work is the core part of envy research. The influence of leaders on envy and the mechanism of envy in this field are more general and universal. Explaining the dual relationship between leadership and envy in the interpersonal field is helpful for portraying the overall connotations of envy and provides an effective research path and model for organizations and individuals to reasonably recognize envy.

4. Conclusions, Shortcomings and Outlook

At the conceptual level: (1) We elucidated the difference between envy and jealousy. We found that envy is more associated with the environment and more likely to be found in social and workplace settings through specific theoretical analysis and literature exploration. Moreover, the concept of envy has both positive and negative characteristics in its attributes, which means that envy can be regulated and controlled. In the social context, leadership is used more as an emotional tool. (2) In the concept of leadership, we sorted out the patterns of leadership activities and their work intellectualization in various stages, such as “deliberately causing competition among employees to expand corporate effectiveness”. (3) In the interaction between the concepts of leadership and envy, we also discovered the antecedents, factors, subjects, and nature of leadership influence on envy. We emphasize that intelligent leadership, emotional leadership (fully considered from the staff’s point of view), can drive the joyous work of employees. This kind of leadership can circumvent employee conflicts in the workplace, rather than expanding or disregard them.

At the theoretical level, we combed through the history of changes and theoretical innovations in envy and leadership at the theoretical level. In the earliest studies, envy was considered undesirable behavior, and it had no exploitable value in the workplace. Therefore, leadership had to kill envy as soon as it was detected in the team. This is the “envy elimination concept” based on value theory. In the wake of stories such as “Othello”, scholars have developed the doctrine of interpersonal relationships, emphasizing that some envy is justified and positive. It

can motivate employees to improve, regulate their behavior and work hard to find jobs. Employees' envy makes them afraid of falling behind. Therefore, the intelligence of leadership at this time is that it can lead to envy to push employees to improve. Modern society has been enriched by the research on leadership member exchange theory and emotional event theory, which emphasizes that leadership and envy should be flexible. Flexibility implies emotional intelligence and social intelligence: not interfering too much but allowing the workplace environment to develop freely.

The greatest goal and value of our research is to propose a new hypothetical model of the dual-track theory. This model contains most of the previous theoretical paths and forms an analytical path for the general relationship between envy and leadership one by one. It can be used as a basis for subsequent theoretical analysis and to support later hypotheses on the relationship between the two. Most importantly, it is proposed to provide a paradigm for studying changeable wisdom in the workplace (how to use leadership well and how to control or play envy).

As a result, this paper constructs a paradigm for exploring the envied leadership relationship under bibliometric analysis using the CiteSpace-assisted Histcite method to address the above scientific questions. In the study, the research variations of envy and leadership are sorted out. The two-track model of the envy-leadership relationship in the workplace context is developed by combining the theoretical foundations of management and librarianship and clarifying the path of leadership regulation of envy based on the changes in their relationship. This model is derived from analyzing the envy thoroughly- leadership relationship considering the triggering mechanism of competition in workplace activities and clarifying the competition path on the generation of envy in the workplace. Secondly, the feedback of the external environment and internal, interpersonal elements in the competitive relationship is explored to uncover the decision making and performance appraisal generated by the leader after receiving messages from the external environment and internal interpersonal. Through the leader's intervention trajectory, perceived attitudes and envy continue to adjust in the employee's psychological trajectory, eventually transforming into benign envy with the role of positive elements. Thus, in terms of response representations, reasonable leaders can transform malicious jealousy into benign envy and maintain the presence of benign envy. Inappropriate leadership, on the other hand, inhibits good envy and expands the presence of malicious jealousy.

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