

## Upward Comparison at the Workplace: A Review

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**ABSTRACT:** The study of workplace envy has gained popularity in recent years. The goal of this paper is to examine and systematize the knowledge regarding envy and envy at work that has been offered by empirical research in the last five years, based on a prior review. 32 papers were chosen after searching scientific databases, defining exclusion and inclusion criteria, and classifying the material. The findings reveal an increasing interest among researchers in examining benign envy and its implications, as well as investigating novel variables to explain envy in the workplace. The two main theoretical frameworks employed in the studies reviewed are social comparison theory and cognitive appraisal theory. Researchers can use the findings of this study to develop future studies and devise intervention measures to reduce workplace envy.

**Keywords:** envy, upward comparison, review, workplace.

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## INTRODUCTION

Interaction with colleagues, managers, and subordinates is accompanied by an emotional charge, and the emotions of employees can have a significant impact on the life of the organization. As a result, it is very important for managers to understand the functioning of negative emotions at work when it comes to preventing and intervening in the harmful effects of these emotions on the quality of work life. Envy has become apparent as an emotion that often occurs in work situations over the past few decades, and has piqued the interest of many experts (see for example. Buunk et al., 2020; Dogan & Vecchio, 2001; Smith, Merlone, and Duffy, 2017).

Envy at work is defined as a sequence of negative thoughts, emotions and behaviors arising from the loss of self-esteem when a person who is significant towards the person achieves the results he yearns for (Vecchio, 1995; 2000). Envy can also be defined as the tendency to react negatively to the benefits of others (Smith & Kim, 2007). Both definitions agree that envy is an unpleasant and painful emotion characterized by feelings of inadequacy, hostility, and hatred caused by the enjoyment of others towards something one wants (Smith & Kim, 2007; Shu & Lazatkhan) (2017). As Sterling and Labianca (2015) say, "envy is a sadness felt at the good fortune of others at the most basic level" (p.297; see also et al., 2012).

According to recent studies on envy at work, there are two different types of envy: benign and malignant envy (see Braun et al., 2018; Celse et al., 2016; Khan et al., 2017; Li et al., 2017; Lange & Crusius, 2015; Lange et al., 2018; Navarro-Carrillo et al., 2018). Both types of envy seek to reduce the gap between oneself and the other. Dangerous envy leads to withdrawal incentives aimed at harming the position of others' superiors, while benign envy leads to a motivation to move that focuses on strengthening one's own status.

In recent years, there has been a surge in interest in the study of the envy of organizations, which has resulted in a significant increase in the number of publications on this issue (see for example. Smith et al., 2017). Socioeconomic and sociopolitical developments (for example, fewer resources, and increased competitiveness) that have significant implications for the organization could be one of the explanations for this growing interest.

Between 1993 and 2014, Girbés-Llácer and Martn-Julián conducted a literature evaluation to determine the state of the art of research on envy and envy in the workplace. Their findings reveal that envy at work may be benign or malignant. Harmful envy is associated with hostility, counterproductive work behavior, and low performance, while benign envy is related to performance, job satisfaction, and group cohesion. At the methodological level, Girbés-Llácer and Martn-Julián (2015) point out that most of the studies evaluated are correlational, and that experimental studies and qualitative methods such as interviews or

focus groups, in addition to quantitative approaches, will be required. They underscored the importance of studying coping techniques when experiencing envy, as well as the moderate variable between envy and its impact, in future studies. The purpose of the study was to conduct a comprehensive assessment of the literature on workplace envy from 2014 to 2020.

## METHODOLOGY

This systematic literature review was carried out in accordance with the quality standards of PRISMA statements for conducting and reporting on meta-analyses and systematic reviews (Moher et al., 2009; Urrtia, & Bonfill, 2010), as well as best practice guidelines for conducting and reporting narrative reviews (Moher et al., 2009; Urrtia, and Bonfill, 2010). (Siddaway et al., 2019). The literature search methodology, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and the literature classification used are detailed below.

## LITERATURE SEARCH AND INCLUSION CRITERIA AND EXCLUSIONS

The first and most important technique for finding relevant material is to perform a search in a scientific database using a specific set of keywords. ProQuest, Web of Science, Pubmed, and Scopus are databases that we focus on because they are often used in psychology. The search phrase "envy" is combined with the words "workplace" and "work" using the operator "AND". The following are the search criteria in this database: Envy should occur in document titles and/or abstracts. The document must be reviewed by a panel of specialists. Publication at the end of 2014 or later. The type of publication taken is Journal.

## CODING

After preliminary identification of the 116 potentially relevant studies, we established inclusion criteria and exceptions for including articles in the database (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Criteria for inclusion and exclusion.

Inclusion	Exclusion
Publications 2014 to 2021	Publications under 2014
Journal	Books, proceedings, theses, dissertations
Open access	Not open access
Focus on envy at work	Not focus on envy in the workplace
Evaluation by experts	Publication outside of English
English-language publication	

According to the specified inclusion and exclusion criteria, a preliminary assessment is made of the relevance of the article based on the opinion of the judge. At this point, 16 articles were eliminated because they were not empirical. Five of them are books or book chapters, two of which are written in languages other than English or Spanish, and one of them does not have the entire content.

The two panelists individually studied the full text of the remaining 47 papers to ensure that they were qualified. When there is disagreement regarding the relevance of the document, the authors of this systematic review reach an agreement. After reading the papers, 15 were eliminated for various reasons, including the study did not focus on the workplace (1 paper); it was a case study (2 papers); the purpose of this study was not envy but other variables (9 papers); the sample consists of students (1 paper), or research using economic models (1 paper). The reading of the entire text confirms the first assessment in the filtering step for most entries. This systematic review includes the remaining 32 publications

## **RESULTS**

These findings are governed by the objectives of the study: theoretical approaches, conceptualization, and measurement tools, key objectives and results, practical consequences, and future research ideas.

### **THE THEORETICAL BACKGROUND OF ENVY**

Both hypotheses are included in the studied study. Workers use social comparisons to establish self-evaluation, and they take advantage of this knowledge to regulate their attitudes and behaviors, according to the theory of social comparison (Festinger, 1954). (for reviews, see Buunk & Gibbons, 2007). Envy, according to this point of view, comes from social comparisons, usually social comparisons upwards with others, in different elements of the workplace (Braun et al., 2018; Brooks et al., 2019; Celse et al., 2016; Dineen et al., 2017; Eissa & Wyland, 2016; Gan, 2019; Ghadi, 2018; Khan et al., 2017; Khan et al., 2014; Kim & Glomb, 2014; Lange et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2018; Li et al., 2017; Mao et al., 2020; Nandedkar, 2016; Navarro-Carrillo et al., 2018; Ng, 2017; Ogunfowora et al., 2019; Reh et al., 2018; Scot et al., 2015; Shkoler et al., 2019; Shu & Lazatkhan, 2017; Tariq et al., 2019; Thiel et al., 2020; Thompson et al., 2016; Treadway, 2019 and Wang, 2018).

As a result, the theory of social comparison offers a theoretical foundation for understanding why certain employees become envy in the workplace. The process of comparison, however, contains cognitive judgments, as Cohen-Charash (2009) implies; that is, it is the process by which individuals assess significant events with respect to their goals and aspirations. As a result, based on the theory of cognitive appraisal of emotions (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), some

authors claim that the negative assessment of workers towards the work environment is the basis of envy in the workplace (Braun et al., 2018; Brooks et al., 2019; Celse et al., 2016; Demirtas et al., 2017; Dineen et al., 2017; Eissa & Wyland, 2016; Lange et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2018; Li et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2019; Mao et al., 2020; Ng, 2017; Ogunfowora et al., 2019; Reh et al., 2018; Scot et al., 2015; Shkoler et al., 2019; Shu & Lazatkhan, 2017; Thiel et al., 2020; Thompson et al., 2016; Treadway, 2019 and Wilkin & Connelly (2015).

We found a number of studies that highlighted the relationship between envy and leadership or supervision in addition to these two theoretical approaches (Braun et al., 2018; Celse et al., 2016; Demirtas et al., 2017; Eissa & Wyland, 2016; Khan et al., 2014; Li et al., 2017; Navarro-Carrillo et al., 2018; Ng, 2017; Ogunfowora et al., 2019; Tariq et al., 2019 and Wilkin & Connelly, 2015). LMX (Leader-Member Exchange) is one of the most frequently researched hypotheses about envy at work (Gonzalez-Navarro et al., 2018; Shkoler et al., 2019; Shu & Lazatkhan, 2017; Treadway, 2019). Some findings suggest that the dynamics of the superior-subordinate relationship have implications for envy, such as low LMX which leads to feelings of envy among subordinates (Nandedkar, 2016). Employees with better LMX relationships tend to be more admired by their co-workers (Wang & Li, 2018).

Other studies use justice or equality as a theoretical framework for studying envy (Celse et al., 2016; Eissa & Wyland, 2016; Khan et al., 2014; Li et al., 2017; Ng, 2017, Wilkin & Connelly, 2015; Sijinjak, 2016). The perception of injustice, for example, moderates the effect of malicious envy on the tendency to engage in counterproductive work behavior (Navarro-Carrillo et al., 2018).

People often compare their input-output ratio with their peers to determine the fairness or injustice of the situation, according to equity theory (Adams, 1963, 1965). The authors of this study used the function of justice or equivalent beliefs to gain a better understanding of envy. As a result, this study shows that envy is linked to leadership, perceptions of justice, and perceptions of equality in a variety of ways.

## **CONCEPTUALIZATION AND EVALUATION OF ENVY**

We find four different ways to envy conceptualization: situational, episodic, typological, and dispositional. The Situational Approach to Envy. A group of the first group of authors (14 studies) adhered to Vecchio's definition of envy (1995; 2000), which states that it is a pattern of thoughts, emotions, and behaviors that arise from the loss of self-esteem when a person is important to the person. achieve the desired result. As a result, emotions come from the desire to acquire the property of others, whether it is an actual good or a human characteristic (Demirtas et al., 2017; Eissa, & Wyland, 2016; Erdil, & Muceldili,

2014; Ghadi, 2018; Gonzalez-Navarro et al., 2018; Thompson et al., 2016; Ogunfowora et al.2019 and Reh et al.2000). Vecchio (2005), on the other hand, distinguishes between two types of envy at work: feeling envious by others and experiencing envy towards others. We identify other authors who are also interested in studying these aspects of envy (Lee et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2019; Mao et al., 2020; Ng, 2017; Scott et al., 2015, Treadway et al., 2019).In this research group, the Vecchio scale (1995; 2000) was used as an instrument to measure envy.

Episodic Approaches to Envy. Secondly, 10 papers from the evaluated literature belong to the group of conceptualizations of envy that follow the investigation of Cohen-Charash (2009). This author concentrates on " episodic envy," or envy based on certain events. According to this scholar, episodic envy includes bad emotions and components of social comparison that may aggravate them. Envy is a negative feeling produced by social comparisons upwards in response to certain incidents. Because envious people do not have what envious people have, envious people, feel inferior to envious people. An in-depth study of the conceptualization of envy was conducted by Brooks et al (2019), Dineen et al.(2017), Gan (2019), Khan et al.(2014), Nandedkar (2016), Navarro-Carrillo et al.(2018), Shu & Lazatkhan (2017), Tariq et al.(2019), Thiel et al.(2020), and Wilkin & Connelly (2015). In the entire study, they used the Cohen-Charash scale (2009) to measure Envy.

A typological approach to envy. The third group of eight studies based on Van de Ven, et al.(2009) on the concept of envy as a painful emotion caused by the good fortune of others. This conceptualization is more recent and gives a deep distinction between the two types of envy; envy good and evil. These two types of envy aim to equalize the differences between oneself and others who are superior. Good envy leads to motivation which is shown by an increase in one's performance, while evil envy leads to a decrease in motivation. So it can be said that the difference between good and evil envy is different in the thoughts, feelings, and tendencies of the actions it causes. Some studies that use this concept of envy are Braun et al.(2018), Celse et al.(2016), Khan et al.(2017), Li et al.(2017), Lange et al.(2018), Navarro-Carrillo et a.(2018), and Wang, & Li (2018).In this study group, the van de Ven, et al (2009) or Kim and Glomb (2014) scales were used for this envy.

## **RESEARCH OBJECTIVES REVIEWED**

Determining the objectives of the research examined is one of the topics of study in this systematic review. On the one hand, as is customary when investigating envy, twelve studies examine it by attributing it to dysfunctional outcomes for both individuals and organizations. The following dysfunctional results were investigated: socially destructive behavior (Eissa & Wyland, 2016; Reh et al., 2018; Shu & Lazatkhan, 2017); counterproductive work behavior (Khan

et al., 2014); exclusion from the workplace and health problems (Scott et al., 2015); lying behavior (Celse et al., 2016); communication problems (Gan, 2019); turnover (Erdil & Muceldili (Kim & Glomb, 2014).

Envy, on the other hand, has been associated with good results such as work involvement and prosocial behavior in some studies (Li et al., 2017). Erdil and Muceldili (2014) investigated the negative and positive effects of envy, while Lee et al. (2018) investigated the impact of envy on motivation and work performance.

The effects of good versus evil envy were explored in several studies (Braun et al., 2018; Celse et al., 2016; Khan et al., 2017; Li et al., 2017; Lange et al., 2018; Navarro- Carrillo et al., 2018 and Wang & Li, 2018). The impact of leadership or supervisory styles on employee envy has also been investigated (Braun et al., 2018; Celse et al., 2016; Demirtas et al., 2017; Eissa & Wyland, 2016; Gonzalez-Navarro et al., 2018 ; Khan et al., 2014; Li et al., 2017; Nandedkar, 2016; Navarro-Carrillo et al., 2018; Ng, 2017; Ogunfowora et al., 2019; Shkoler et al., 2019; Shu & Lazatkhan, 2017; Tariq et al., 2019; Treadway, 2019; Wang, 2018 and Wilkin & Connelly, 2015).

envy has also been linked to a number of personality traits, including neuroticism, awareness, and competitiveness (Ghadi, 2018). Similarly, the function of envy has been investigated by associating it with the Dark Triad of personality traits (Lange et al., 2018).

Overall, most studies have seen Envy in the workplace as related to individual and organizational dysfunction. Some studies, however, have linked envy to useful results. Researchers have looked at the relationship between envy and leadership and envy and personality traits, but benign envy has recently received their attention.

## **KEY OUTCOMES RELATED TO ENVY IN REVIEWED RESEARCH**

Another question in this systematic review concerns key findings from the study of envy in the workplace. envy is clearly related to actions aimed at harming others, according to studies that look at the dysfunctional impact of envy on both individuals and organizations (e.g. CWB, Ghadi, 2018; social laziness, Thompson et al., 2016). Envy, on the other hand, fosters a sense of a more competitive work environment (Ng, 2017). In addition, most studies look at moderator or mediation variables in the relationship between envy and these harmful behaviors (for example, relationship conflict, Eissa & Wyland, 2016; neuroticism, Shu and Lazatkhan, 2017; high perceptions of procedural justice, Khan et al., 2014; LMX, González-Navarro et al., 2018; mood and anxiety, Lee et al., 2018). envy, on the other hand, can operate as a psychological barrier that reduces the tendency to lie (Celse et al., 2016).

Envy was also discovered to act as a mediator between several variables. According to Thiel et al. (2020), envy is a mediator variable in the relationship between witnessed unethical behavior and moral disengagement, and both cognitive reassessment orientations and cognitive reassessment attenuate this mediated impact. According to Wilkin and Connelly, envy mediates the relationship between distributive justice and theft behavior (2015). The effect of creative process involvement and helpful behavior on co-worker exclusion and disrespectful employee focus is moderated by co-worker envy (Mao et al., 2020). Envy also moderates the relationship between co-worker exclusion and psychological health or intention to leave the company (Scott et al., 2015). Other researchers have discovered a link between envy and the desire to leave (Erdil & Muceldili, 2014; Ng, 2017), as well as a link between group envy and victimisation of high-performing employees (Erdil & Muceldili, 2014; Ng, 2017). Kim and Glomb (2014) Furthermore, anticipating potential threats to one's status causes envy, which influences behavior toward coworkers (Reh et al., 2018). Envy is also involved in the interaction of LMX or TMX and CWB (Shkoler, et al., 2029).

Several studies have been conducted to determine the difference between benign and evil envy. According to Khan et al. (2017), both types of envy seek to close the gap between themselves and the envious individual. Their goals, however, differ: good envy is motivated by a desire to be better, whereas vicious envy is motivated by a desire to bring the envious individual down. According to Li et al., different types of envy have different implications for prosocial behavior (2017). Lange et al., (2018), on the other hand, suggest that both types of envy can be harmful. Perceptions of injustice and unpleasant emotions, according to Navarro-Carrillo et al. (2018), modulate the effect of envy (vs. benign) on unproductive work actions.

Poor relationships with superiors or superiors (Ogunfowora et al., 2019; Thompson et al., 2016; Tariq et al., 2019) and leader narcissism (Braun et al., 2018) can lead to feelings of envy among employees, according to research. The study's main focus is the quality of the relationship with the leader (low LMX). Low LMX, in turn, leads to CWB (González-Navarro et al., 2018; Shkoler et al., 2019), workplace incivility (Nandedkar, 2016), low job involvement (Shu & Lazatkhan, 2017), poor job performance (Treadway et al., 2019), and workplace exclusion (González-Navarro et al., 2018). (Wang et al., 2018). Furthermore, ethical leadership has a direct negative impact on workplace feelings of envy (Demirtas et al., 2017).

Furthermore, several personality traits have been included in workplace envy research. Neuroticism, conscientiousness, and perceived competitiveness, according to Ghadi (2018), all play a role in predicting workplace envy. Furthermore, Liu et al. (2019) discovered that envy reduced workplace exclusion,

with a stronger association when neuroticism was higher. Finally, Lange et al. (2018) discovered a link between evil envy and Machiavellian and psychopathic behavior.

Finally, most studies examine the relationship between workplace envy and individual and organizational dysfunction. Furthermore, other research has found that many variables (for example, perceptions of justice, and interpersonal conflict) play a moderating or mediating role in the relationship between envy and its dysfunctional outcomes. Envy has also been demonstrated to function as a moderating or mediating factor. Furthermore, research has shown that having a strained relationship with a boss or bosses can lead to feelings of envy among employees and that certain personality traits (such as neuroticism and anxiety) can predict work envy.

### **SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

We will focus on future research ideas that will help us better understand envy in the workplace. The most frequently suggested approach is to conduct cross-cultural studies to investigate the role of context and culture. Eissa and Wyland (2016); González-Navarro et al., (2018); Li et al., (2017); Liu et al., (2019)); Shkoler et al., (2019); Tariq et al., (2019); Thiel et al., (2020); Thompson et al., (2020); and Thompson et al., (2020). (2016). Nine of the studies examined stress the importance of conducting longitudinal studies to investigate envy (Braun et al., 2018; Eissa & Wyland, 2016). Furthermore, three studies suggest that future research should include a larger sample of more diverse individuals (Braun et al., 2018).

Using more than one source to collect data, such as managers' assessments of the level of employee envy at work (Ghadi, 2018); collecting data from envious and envious perspectives (Liu et al., 2019); collecting data on objective performance metrics in an organizational context (Khan et al., 2017); and surveying employees about envy separately from the rest of the workforce (Khan et al., 2017). (ESM). Furthermore, three studies emphasize the significance of researching reverse causality (Kim & Glomb, 2014; Lee et al., 2018; Scott et al., 2015).

Suggestions for measuring variables include using a multi-item scale (Khan et al., 2017; Wilkin & Connelly, 2015) or other ratter scores, rather than just self-report data (Shkoler et al., 2019); or assessing independent and specific manifestations of dark personality (Lange et al., 2018). Furthermore, Tariq et al., (2019) and Wang & Li, (2018) suggest that using experimental designs in future research would be interesting.

Other variables that can be investigated in future work-related envy research include contract type (González-Navarro et al., 2018); organizational

support and narcissism (Liu et al., 2019); transformational leadership and personality traits (Mao et al., 2020); perceived organizational support (Nandedkar, 2016); comparison to downward supervisor (Eissa & Wyland, 2016).

Furthermore, when investigating the causes and consequences of envy, competitive reward structures or personality traits may be relevant variables to consider (Thompson et al., 2016). Treadway et al., (2019) advocate focusing on the leader's personal characteristics, whereas Lee et al., (2018) advocate focusing on specific envy triggers, such as superior job performance.

In conclusion, the studies reviewed emphasize the importance of conducting cross-cultural and longitudinal studies, as well as gathering a larger sample from a more diverse population, to investigate the negative and positive effects of Envy in the workplace and take into account various moderating or mediating variables in research.

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of this paper is to examine how empirical research on workplace envy has evolved in recent years and organize knowledge on the topic. We conducted a systematic review of studies on workplace envy published between 2014 and 2021 for this purpose. We organize data by identifying the main conceptualizations of envy, theoretical approaches to studying envy, instruments used to measure envy at work, key objectives and findings from various empirical studies, and the research under review's practical implications and future research proposals.

The main findings show that over the last five years, social comparison theory and cognitive appraisal theory have been the two most popular theoretical frameworks in envy research. Envy is preceded by negative evaluations and upward social comparisons with others. Envy is also present in theoretical approaches to leadership, justice, and equality. In the last five years, there has been an improvement in the theoretical framework on which the study of workplace envy is based (see Girbés-Llácer and Martn-Julián, 2015). As a result, we might assume that envy is a common workplace emotion. As various authors (for example, Wilkin and Connelly, 2015) have pointed out, its management can ensure equity and fairness while reducing potential negative effects and increasing positive effects.

Regarding the conceptualization of envy, we have extended the previous review (see Girbés-Llácer and Martn-Julián, 2015) by systematizing envy's conceptualization in four distinct ways. The first conceptualization represents a situational approach to envy, namely broad envy directed at the workplace, whereas the second conceptualization views envy as episodic, namely directed at a single reference. The third approach, according to a review by Girbés-Llácer

and Martn-Julián (2015), is more contemporary and extends the conceptualization of envy by distinguishing between two qualitatively distinct types of envy, good envy, and vicious envy. In the latter approach, envy is viewed as a dispositional variable with individual differences in envy propensity. We believe that future research should focus on distinguishing between good and evil envy as a means of advancing the study of envy. Different authors (such as Braun et al., 2018) have noted that positive envy can serve as a motivating force to increase the effort required to attain what others already possess.

The practical implications of the reviewed studies emphasize the significance of fostering a collaborative, communicative, and just organizational environment. In addition to having clear and equitable organizational policies, businesses must cultivate a culture in which social comparisons are minimized and equality is pursued. Another suggested practical implication is providing employees with personal guidance and co-counseling coaching, and feedback for dealing with negative emotions in the workplace and giving them a sense of control. Finally, team-building activities are proposed to increase employees' positive influence. We believe that recognizing that emotions are elements of the work environment and that envy is a common feeling in the workplace is essential to the success of all of these intervention suggestions. To develop a prevention strategy, any proposed intervention should begin with an explicit acknowledgment of envy.

In terms of recommendations for future research, the reviewed literature emphasizes the need for cross-cultural and longitudinal studies to learn more about the dynamics of the examined relationships. Other suggestions include collecting data from multiple sources and obtaining a larger sample of a more diverse population. Other important suggestions include examining reverse causality and employing a multi-item scale in lieu of self-report data alone. In addition, according to a number of evaluated studies, additional research is required to determine the negative and positive effects of envy in the workplace. According to the findings, additional moderating or mediating variables that could be investigated in future research include organizational, supervisory, and personality traits.

This study has several limitations that should be mentioned. Despite a rigorous screening process, only English and Spanish-language publications were included in the search. In contrast, the majority of scientific literature is written in English. In addition, we only include empirical studies because we want to provide academics working on this topic with an overview of the most recent research so they can use it to plan future studies.

In conclusion, we have confirmed the existence of studies with comparable research objectives and theoretical frameworks, as well as studies with ambiguous theoretical frameworks. We believe that this circumstance makes it more difficult to improve our understanding of this topic. According to our findings, researchers are also interested in introducing new variables that could explain workplace envy and its impact on individuals and organizations. Overall, the evaluated studies were of high methodological rigor and quality, allowing their recommendations and suggestions to be considered in workplace envy research. Finally, this study's findings highlight the need for a systematic review to enhance our understanding of envy in the workplace.

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