

## Malicious Envy in the Workplace And Intangible Capital: An Interpretation from the Perspective of Management<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

*In the last few years the topic of envy has been addressed in an increasing number of studies from different theoretical perspectives. However this subject has received a relatively scant attention in management studies, notwithstanding the fact that envy is quite widespread within organizational contexts. In an attempt to bridge this gap, this paper aims to address the theme of envy in the workplace from a management perspective. The hypothesis at the heart of this contribution is the following: under some circumstances workplace envy represents a critical issue to business organizations, in that it may affect the development and the value-creation potential of a company's human capital and relational capital. This hypothesis will be dealt with through a qualitative research approach: firstly, a review of the literature on envy, from an interdisciplinary perspective, is presented; then the topic of envy in the workplace will be analyzed and its organizational effects outlined; finally some useful tools for the management of envy in the workplace will be proposed.*

**Keywords:** *envy, stress, workplace, human capital, relational capital.*

### 1. Introduction

Although several disciplines have analyzed envy, it is still difficult to give an unambiguous definition and detail accurately its peculiar characteristics. In general, definitions of envy underline that it is an unpleasant, often painful emotion characterized by feelings of inferiority, hostility and resentment produced by the awareness of another person or group of persons who enjoy a desired possession (object, social position, attribute or quality of being) (e.g., Parrott, 1991; Parrott & Smith, 1993; Pines, 1998; Anderson, 2002; Kim & Hupka, 2002; Klein, 1975).

As Epstein (2003) points out, there is a word for envy in all known languages, which suggests it is one of the most universal human emotions. Several scholars agree that envy is a common experience for most people regardless of culture (Foster, 1972; Schoeck, 1969; Teitelbaum, 1976; Walcot, 1978). Similarly, the anthropological perspective suggests that envy is a universal emotion (Hill & Buss, 2008) and its antagonistic nature is exemplified by the many publicized crimes (Schoeck, 1969; Thernstrom, 1998).

It is also noteworthy that the doctrinal debate on envy dates back to ancient times. Even the Holy Bible refers to facts caused by envy; in fact, due to the Devil's envy, death came into the world (for a review see: Schimmel, 2008; Stein,

2000) other examples are Cain's envy against Abel which led him to kill (Laverde-Rubio, 2004); Esau's envy against Jacob, and according to Hagedorn and Neyrey (1998) and Aquaro (2004), the envy of Jewish people who took Jesus to Pontius Pilate. Envy is the painful perception of differences; in fact Saint Thomas of Aquinas defined envy as «sadness over some good or excellence another person possesses, inasmuch as one perceives this good or excellence as taking away from one's own good»; envy is the only one of the seven capital sins which does not give any pleasure (Epstein, 2003). Although the philosophical approach shows divergent positions, most works share the common awareness that envy is widespread across mankind. According to Russell (1930), envy is «one of the most potent causes of unhappiness and it is the most deplorable of the human features, because instead of feeling pleasure for what he does, he suffers for what the others have». In a recent work, Celse (2010) asserts that envy arises from any unflattering social comparison that threatens individual self-evaluation and includes a depressive and a hostile dimension.

Several studies show that in most cases envy is hidden (Heikkinen, Latvala, & Isola, 2003), because it is difficult to admit even to oneself (Epstein, 2003). Some claim that envy is the very last emotion that people will admit to feel (Schoeck, 1969; Silver & Sabini, 1978). The tendency to hide envy and its different shapes partly explains the lack of studies on this topic, (Farber, 1961), as especially management studies are concerned.

In addition, envy is considered as one of the group of related emotions (e.g. shame, indignation) (Smith & Kim, 2007) characterized by negative affective reactions to the superior fortune of others (Heider, 1958; Ortony, Clore, & Collins, 1988).

People often use the terms envy and jealousy interchangeably (Salovey & Rodin, 1986; Parrott & Smith, 1993), but the philosophical consensus is that they are distinct emotions (Ben-Zeev, 1990; Foster, 1972; Neu, 1980; Russell, 1930; Salovey, 1991; Silver & Sabini, 1978). Specifically, whereas envy is concerned with something the person does not have but wants to have, jealousy is concerned with protecting something one already has from others aiming to take it (or believed to want to take it). Therefore, envy is a form of resentment for something the person has, whereas jealousy is the fear of the person of losing something he has (Scheler, 1912).

Generally, envy is characterized by dangerous tendencies, such as the will to sacrifice one's results so as to reduce the envied person's benefit (e.g., Berke, 1986; Parks, Rumble, & Posey, 2002; Thernstrom, 1998; Zizzo & Oswald, 2001); the satisfaction that one feels when the envied person suffers (Smith et al. 1999) or when an envied group fails (Leach, Spears, Branscombe, & Doosje, 2003), even when the suffering is undeserved (Brigham, Kelso, Jackson, & Smith, 1997).

Some recent studies have stressed the positive consequences of envy, such as the desire to improve and emulate (Cohen-Charash, 2009; Schaubroeck & Lam, 2004; van de Ven, Zeelenberg, & Pieters, 2009). For instance, van de Ven et al.

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(2009) have empirically supported the distinction between two types of envy, namely benign and malicious envy. In particular, they have shown that the experience of malicious envy leads to a “moving-up” motivation aimed at improving one’s own position, whereas malicious envy leads to a “pulling-down” motivation aimed at damaging the envied person. Some scholars have articulated more positive views of envy, describing it as benign, admiring and emulative (Neu, 1980; Rawls, 1971; van de Ven, Zeelenberg, & Pieters, 2011).

If one considers the psychoanalytic research tradition, it emerges that envy is present in the literature from its very beginnings. In fact, in Freud’s works envy is related both to sexual difference and familiar context, with particular reference to the relationships among brothers (1900), generations and in social organizations (1913; 1927).

The study of envy was also carried out by Abraham (1923), who highlighted that not only the envious desires to possess what the envied has, but he or she also has impulses of hate against the envied person. According to him, envy emerges when external conditions stimulate it, usually in the presence of resentment, jealousy, hostility, avidity and desire of possess. Melanie Klein (1957) – envy has a primary role in her theory – defines envy as «the angry feeling that another person possesses and enjoys something desirable – the envious impulse being to take it away or to spoil it». According to her, envy arises both from external conditions (for example, from the frustration caused by inappropriate familiar cares) and from a primary attachment rooted in the avidity of the nursing. The main criticism to Klein’s theory on primary envy is that envy should not be considered only as an impulse, but also as a feature of one’s personality (Parrot, 1991). For instance, Rosenfeld (1965) supposes a relation between envy and narcissist personalities «which, by nature, tend to destroy the relationships with the environment for stubbornness, envy and self-overestimation». Similarly, Joeffe (1969) refuses the idea of envy as a primary impulse, and tries to recover a concept of envy which is not only negative and which can lead to the possibility of a therapeutic intervention.

Besides the destroying reaction of envy individuated by Klein, Lacan (1973) acknowledges the possibility that the envious may imitate the envied and that, by doing so, he may improve his own position. By contrast, Segal (1968) claims that the envious emphasizes so much the object of envy that the possibility to own it becomes more and more distant.

Some authors (e.g., Etchegoyen, Lopez, & Rabih, 1987) agree with Racker (1957), asserting that envy often derives from a frustration; he distinguishes primary envy from the frustration caused by the environment, although in clinical cases these often appear together.

Some researchers affirm that envy emerges from a basic desire for equal treatment present from a very early age (Russell, 1930). Forrester (1997) suggests that the «call for justice and equality is founded on the transformation of envy». In a sense, envy creates the desire for justice; without envy there would be no desire for justice. Nevertheless the relation between envy and inequality is refused by another

theoretical current according to which – paradoxically – a society without any social difference would be totally devastated by envy. Girard (1991) is aware that in contemporary society, total equality is a mere utopia; he refers to primitive and ancient societies to observe that both of them not only did not look for equality, but were also terrified by it. He states that where there are no social differences, the desires of individuals are flattened out thus causing continuous conflicts and a universal envy with an uncontrollable impulse.

Furthermore, it should be noted that envy concerns both material things somebody else possesses and what the envied represents in his own being, as part of a social context. In other words, there is a distinction between envy of possessing and envy of being; the former arises from the desire of possessing an object that somebody else has; in this case, the longing for possession concerns mainly material goods, and it can be divisible from the person who possesses it.

On the contrary, envy of being implies a deeper emotional involvement, because the object of desire is not represented by a mere material good, but rather by a specific person, that is an individual included in a context, where he benefits from relationships, exchanges, accomplishments and experiences. Hegel (1991) argues that property is an extension of personality since it allows the person to use his will on something: «to have something in my power, even though it be externally, is possession (...) But, when I as a free will am in possession of something, I get a tangible existence, and in this way first become an actual will. This is the true and legal nature of property, and constitutes its distinctive character». As Scheler (1912) points out, envy of being exceeds envy of possessing, although the latter often originates the former (but it is less important).

However, envy is often related to the individuals’ closeness: Aristotle in *Rhetorica* wrote that «we envy those who are close to us in space, time and reputation» (see also Elster, 1991; Choi, 1993). This theory is proved by empirical studies showing that people we envy are similar to ourselves, save for their advantage on the desired domain (Parrott, 1991; Salovey & Rodin, 1984; Salovey & Rothman, 1991; Schaubroeck & Lam, 2004; Tesser, 1991).

## **2. Review of relevant interdisciplinary literature**

The issue of envy has also been addressed from an economic point of view. However, the behavioural implications of envy have not received much attention in the economic literature (Mui, 1995). In general, economists have studied envy with a neutral approach: a review of this literature suggests that envy would not be inherently negative, but rather it is a condition which can lead to both positive or negative results in terms of usefulness for the person and the environment (Palaver, 2005; Zizzo, 2008). Therefore, envy can stimulate or slow down economic growth.

The main insight to be gained is that traditional assumptions of rationality – in envy-dominated contexts – may be subject to changes. For example, several empirical studies have shown that where there is envy, sometimes people are

willing to sacrifice even their money in order to reduce the earnings of others (e.g., Beckmann, Formby, Smith, & Zheng, 2002; Celse, 2009; Charness & Grosskopf, 2001; Wobker, 2014; Zizzo & Oswald, 2001; Zizzo, 2003; 2004).

From the economic perspective, envy has also been studied as an incentive or disincentive for consumers to purchase products. For example, van de Ven, Zeelenberg and Pieters (2011) demonstrate that when there is benign envy consumers tend to choose the same envied good; on the contrary, when there is malicious envy, consumers select different products.

Still another strand of economic literature had addressed the issue of envy in the workplace, with an aim to understand its impact on organizational performances; here the prevailing contention is that envy in the workplace leads to negative attitudes and behaviours (e.g., Duffy, Shaw, & Schaubroeck, 2008).

However, the debate on the dual nature of envy (malicious and benign) also concerns envy in the workplace. In fact, some recent studies have focused on the positive consequences associated with envy in the workplace, such as emulation, desire to learn and increased motivation to succeed (Cohen-Charash, 2009; Schaubroeck & Lam, 2004; van de Ven, Zeelenberg, & Pieters, 2011).

This paper adopts the distinction between malicious and benign envy to address the issue of envy in the workplace, with particular reference to organizations operating in the knowledge economy. The starting point of the work is that, in the knowledge society, competition becomes a model of evaluation: individuals tend to measure happiness and well-being in relative rather than absolute terms, thus providing envy a fertile ground (Rifkin, 2009). In this regard, Vidaillet (2008) asserts that in general «working life is full of emotions», and in particular that «envy is almost inevitable in society and work». Similarly, Vecchio (2005) highlights that “the workplace is a competitive, often hierarchical domain in which envious hostility may often play an important role. By way of example, Schaubroeck and Lam (2004) have found evidence that promotion expectations affect – through envy – social evaluations and job performance among candidates who were rejected for promotion.

In industrialized countries the physiological needs (Maslow, 1943) are mainly satisfied, therefore other needs arise, mainly related to the desire of self-realization. On this point, some empirical studies (e.g., Kasser, 2002) have demonstrated that if people are very poor and unable to satisfy their primary needs for physical survival, surely they are unhappy. The interesting fact is that once they reach a minimum level of economic wellbeing which allows them a fair lifestyle, their happiness does not grows together with their richness; on the contrary, richness makes them less happy and more exposed to dissatisfaction and depression. In the knowledge economy the workplace appears to be a particularly fertile context for envy, since work is increasingly considered an end in itself rather than a mean to an end. On this topic, Meister and Willyerd (2010) observe that modern organization is composed of experts of knowledge (Drucker, 2006), who consider work as an

integral part of their lives, not as something totally split, which only needs to be balanced with the rest of real life. This implies a deeper emotional attachment to the profession, which generally has positive results; an enthusiast worker probably works with passion and method. Nevertheless, there is a down side: if envy is the emotion of comparison it is evident that the worker emotionally involved will be more sensitive toward the judgment of comparison with his colleagues. On this point, Drucker (2006) underlines that individuals are often led to search for satisfaction through professional success particularly if they have lived negative events: in these circumstances competitiveness could increase, and with it – indirectly – even the risk of being overwhelmed by envy.

Another issue which is especially relevant in highly-cognitive organizations lies in the fact that they often promote and hire best people or high achievers, which is referred to as ‘star culture’. Such organizations may incur higher risks that employees will engage in interpersonal counterproductive work behaviors, because the star achievers may elicit envy toward themselves (Exline & Lobel, 1999; Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). In addition, organizations promoting a star culture might also inadvertently hire high self-esteem individuals who are more likely to engage in socially undermining behaviours in response to experiencing envy, as research has shown (Cohen-Charash & Muller, 2007).

### **3. Behavioural responses to envy**

The envious uses behavioural strategies to bring the envied person down to his level. Some studies on the expressions of envy have demonstrated that it can be expressed externally by gossip, criticism, calumny, backbiting and defamations, potent weapons for dissuading people who seek to rise above their level (Blum & Blum, 1965).

In general, when workers feel frustrated, they can have two kinds of reaction: rational and irrational. In the former case, people tend to break down the obstacle; in the latter, they develop self-deceptive mechanisms to preserve – at least in part and for an initial period of time – their self-esteem. One reaction could be an episode of aggressiveness: the relation between frustration and aggressiveness has been analyzed in the past (e.g., Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer, & Sears, 1939) and has been recently confirmed (Berkowitz, 1989; Dill & Anderson, 1995).

Elster (1991), who has focused on the reactions of envy, has reported the possibility that the person could try to forget the experience or concentrate on what makes the situation less enviable. Nevertheless, the envious person could also have a more aggressive cognitive strategy, that is: reprocess the data to be convinced that the envied person got what he has in an unlawful manner, and perhaps at his expense. Generally, if the benefit is perceived as objectively unfair, it should provoke indignation and resentment rather than envy as others also argued (D’Arms, 2002; Neu, 1980; Smith, 1991; Walker & Smith, 2002), or have tried to demonstrate empirically (Smith, Parrot, Ozer, & Moniz, 1994).

In other cases the envious uses the technique we should term of “values review”; he will try to call into question with

himself the standards of the positive opinion of others about him. The following step implies the projection of disvalues: the envious will try to attribute – also publicly – his colleague's deficiencies which usually do not concern the scientific-technical skills, but rather marginal and personal elements, such as affability, inclination to sharing and morality.

Apart from the forms of envy, the envious can choose two alternative paths for its management: elaborate a strategy of envy 'metabolization' or staying anchored to it. In the former case, the envious tries to use comparison to improve his position. In this sense, we claim that when the envious decides to 'metabolize', envy is benign, consistent with those scholars who recognize the painful and frustrating nature of envy, but also its usefulness inasmuch as the envious tries to improve his position (Crusius & Lange, 2014; Tai, Narayanan, & McAllister, 2012; van de Ven et al., 2009). With regards to this point, D'Arms and Kerr (2008) observe that the aim of the envious is to fill the gap with the envied; therefore, to the extent that benign envy motivates the person to improve his position, it becomes in a sense desirable. In this connection, Crusius and Lange (2014) observe that while the maliciously envious mainly focuses on the envied person, the benignly envious mainly focuses on the object that makes the other better off.

We believe that only if the envious is able to elaborate envy concentrating on himself and trying to improve, it might prove – at least to some extent – beneficial in the workplace. But what happens when the envious is not able to elaborate envy?

We consider this form of not elaborated envy as negative: in particular, it is dangerous in professional contexts due to its negative power. In fact, the aim of the envious here is to lower the level of superiority of the envied (Taylor, 1988). Therefore, the envious will try to isolate the envied because he can cause him two kinds of problems: an organizational one and a psychological one. The most obvious consequence of the isolation of the envied is information asymmetry (Dunn & Schweitzer, 2004) which manifests in the lack or delay of the information he receives. It means that the information will be spread among the organizational levels so that the envied does not receive it at all or partly and with delay. In response to the envy suffered, the envied could try to slow down his professional success through a behaviour of moderation, or even self-devaluation, so as to prevent or placate the other's venom; however he does not consider that to the envious this could appear as an act of arrogance. In addition, hiding one's own superiority with false devaluations is a sin of ingenuity: the envious could feel mocked inasmuch as the envied tries to attribute his own success to fortune, or to a good destiny, thus belittling his own merits.

Furthermore, it could happen that the feeling of envy degenerates in a sense of guilt, which brings the envied to deprive himself of his material or immaterial richness; Elster highlights that envied tend to assume two kinds of attitude: destroy their own richness or conceal it. The first attitude, being more onerous, is less frequent. The second one is documented in some societies, such as Haiti's farmers

(Simpson, 1941), who are used to buy many small fields rather than a single very large field, in order to conceal their richness. Similarly, rich people of Ghana (Schoeck, 1969) are used to leave the outside part of their houses unfinished so as to show their lack of richness.

Malicious envy is often accompanied by feelings of hostility and ill will toward the advantaged person (Smith, 1991; Smith, Parrott, Ozer, & Moniz, 1994). Some authors demonstrate that among the cognitive consequences of negative envy there would be the ability to remember more accurately the information about the envied person than that of another person (Hill, DelPriore, & Vaughan, 2011).

The tendency towards envy may cause socially undesired behaviours, such as criminal behaviour (Schoeck, 1969) and in-group biases (Glick, 2002; White, Langer, Yariv, & Welch, 2006). When hostile behaviours become usual, the envied could have a psychological breakdown. Several empirical studies have reported the psychophysical consequences of stress (Cooper, 1998; Lazarus, 1966; Lazarus, Deese, & Osler, 1952; Seyle, 1956), even with specific reference to the workplace (Cartwright & Cooper, 1997; Lazarus, 1995; Locke & Taylor, 1991; Watson, Pennebaker, & Folger, 1987). Compared with the traditional researches on stress, researches on this topic tend to underline the integration of individual and organizational variables (Miller, Griffin, & Hart, 1999). With particular reference to the stress of the envied, some studies have reported a depressive tendency and poor mental health (Smith, Parrott, Diener, Hoyle, & Kim, 1999), a lower level of job and group satisfaction, an increased absenteeism, turnover intentions and reduced commitment (Duffy & Shaw, 2000). A recent empirical study, based on a sample of accommodation enterprises in Turkey, has found that envy among employees negatively affects the perception of organizational climate (Özoç & Çalişkan, 2015).

In general, in the last few years the economic literature has attached an increasing importance to non economic variables such as the degree of social cohesion, the role of trust and cooperative behaviours within organizational contexts. In this connection, several empirical studies have found a relationship between cooperation-related variables and economic development (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Knack & Keefer, 1997; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; Porters, 2000; Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998; Temple & Johnson, 1998). This research strand may prove useful to the study of envy in the workplace because – as it has been observed (Vecchio, 2005) – an envy-dominated context tends to erode the quality of relationships and cause a tendency to antisocial behaviours. Vecchio (2000) has highlighted that people who are victims of envy in the workplace have a greater inclination to leave their work. Envy in the workplace causes stress and uneasiness, which may hamper the creativity and motivation of workers. As especially organizational cooperation is concerned, envy may hamper the development of trust relationships among workers. Scholars such as Smith et al. (1994) have found evidence that where envy is associated with perceived injustice – that is, a subjective belief that the envied person's advantage is unfair – it leads to hostile and depressive behaviours and

ultimately to reduced performance as a means to restore equity. The interaction effect between perceived unfairness and envy has been examined by Cohen-Charash and Muller (2007) too. They have found envy and perceived unfairness to be positively associated with counterproductive work behaviours (e.g., withholding work-related information, sabotaging reputation, creating coalitions) against the envied person. Additionally, they have reported that high self-esteem further exacerbates the negative interaction between high levels of unfairness and envy, that is: high self-esteem individuals would be more likely to harm envied others in (perceived) unfair situations. These findings suggest that envy, especially in its harmful form, might be understood as resulting (at least to some extent) from a subjective perception of injustice. From a managerial perspective, it should be considered that envy in the workplace can affect negatively the potential of human capital (meant as the bundle of knowledge, attributes and capacities that can be learned by workers) and of relational capital (meant as the bundle of relationships among individuals inside and outside the organizations).

#### **4. Envy and self-esteem saving strategies**

The strategies described in this section clearly represent only some of the possible ways to protect ones' sense of self from the harmful affective consequences of envy. These strategies could be divided in two groups: dysfunctional strategies and efficient strategies. Dysfunctional strategies include idealization, retire and self-commiseration, whereas efficient strategies include the instinct of standing out and the return to the concentration on oneself.

Idealization (Kets de Vries, 2004) is the process through which an individual, by means of an exaggerate admiration, tends to raise a third party, a group of people, an organisation or a subject above human means. Exaggerated admiration allows to convey the corrosive instinct of envy outside, trying not to contaminate a positive image; therefore, in the workplace the person aware of the higher skills of his colleague or manager will exaggerate the qualities of the subject so as to justify to himself the higher performances and preserve the admired person from envy. As Kets de Vries (2004) points out, the strategy of idealization does not last long, because those who choose this solution need to create supermen. Nevertheless, as the experts of organisations know, being the subject of an idealized admiration is very difficult: inevitably, very soon the hero reveals his feet of clay; the pendulum could easily oscillate toward the opposite direction and knock the leader off his pedestal. Typically, idealization only contributes to create excessively obedient collaborators, who generate imbalances in the organisation, both because they eliminate their critical potentialities, and because they inhibit those of the others, thus driving the other members of the group to a constantly accommodating behaviour; nevertheless, should envy awaken from the torpidity caused by idealization, it would risk to implode, causing significant inconveniences to the envious, the envied and the whole organisation.

Alicke, LoSchiavo, Zebst and Zhang (1997) have explored the circumstances under which people exaggerate the ability of those who outperforms them, what these authors call the

“genius effect”. They have found that exalting the outperformers is a strategy that is applied when people are directly and unambiguously outperformed, which makes it difficult for them to deny, explain away or ignore the comparison target's superiority. In such circumstances, exaggerating the outperformers' ability is conceived to be a construal mechanism that negates the potentially negative implications of unfavourable social comparisons (e.g., envy) by allowing the inferior performers to salvage a positive self-image.

Another strategy to limit envy could be renounce. In fact, retirement could represent a compromise between the desire to excel and the fear of failing, yet it could be the possibility to see somebody who succeeds in the intent desired. If the envious wants to avoid envy, he could choose to retire from comparison. Nevertheless, this decision could have extreme consequences, since it generates feelings of inability and reactions of dependence. In the workplace this choice could cause some problems: it inhibits the workers' self esteem and turns them into disinterested and slow executors of procedures that will hardly improve their career.

Survival in companies is not simple because of the extreme complexity of the environment, therefore companies cannot accept defeatist and unmotivated workers.

It is no accident that in these last few years the studies on management have focused on the concept of human capital, based on the assumption that there is a direct correlation between the accumulation of human resources within an organisation and the increase of synergies, productivity and performance (e.g., Becker & Gerhart, 1996; Coleman, 1998; Fitz-Enz, 2000; Hitt, Biermant, Shimizu, & Kochhar, 2001; Huselid, 1995; Nafukho, Hairston, & Brooks, 2004).

Renunciation potentially undermines the value of human capital, because it drives workers to retire from constructive comparison and from integration, which in the professional context are at the basis of the production of new knowledge.

An alternative form of renunciation is self-pity, which consists of grief and suffering for not having benefited from advantageous situations during somebody's experience. Individuals self-commiserate to hide the differences between them and the others, since they believe they were treated unfairly from society, which on the contrary was compliant with others. Sometimes envy is associated with self-pity, indicating the subject's inability to alter the present (Ben-Ze'ev, 1990). In professional contexts such subjects can cause problems of balance in the team (Bion, 1992). It should be also noted that an excessively pessimist predisposition facilitates the mechanism of self-realizing prophecies, especially in those sectors in which a constant intellectual and psychophysical effort is required.

On the other hand, among the strategies to manage envy – or to transform it in benign envy – there is the impulse to excel and the return to the concentration on oneself. To sum up the reflections carried out so far, it is evident that envy – in particular envy of being – is the pain which arises from the awareness of the others' success; furthermore, it becomes clear that the person can get free from this pain if – rather than feeling self-pity – he tries to examine the others'

behaviour so as to overcome them by improving his own attitudes and skills. In this way, malicious envy could turn into benign envy. Generally, the desire of taking revenge with a victory can be the decisive factor to reach success, esteem or sexual achievement; in particular, in professional contexts the search for excellence provides workers with a motivation to improve themselves and, in the presence of positive results, they will enjoy an emotional state of self-fulfilment.

Finally, a potentially constructive strategy for the management of envy – implying a great emotional intelligence – is the exercise of what can be defined as the “return to the concentration on oneself”. In theory it is very simple, but the procedure is very complex: it consists of encouraging individuals to abandon the comparison with other people’s success and concentrate more on themselves, carrying out a project aimed to improve their points of strength and bridge the gap with the envied targets.

### **5. Research summary, limitations and future directions**

This contribution was mainly motivated by the circumstance that management theories have devoted a relatively scant attention to the issue of envy in the workplace. This paper was aimed to help fill this gap, by specifically addressing the issue of workplace envy from the managerial perspective and particularly the potential for envy to affect the development and value of corporate intangible capital. In doing so, this paper adopts the distinction between malicious and benign envy found in the envy-related literature.

This paper is an attempt to analyse how “malicious envy works at work” to the purposes of managerial action. In particular, we have highlighted that envy can be ‘metabolized’ or interiorized by the envious subject. If the envious is able to metabolize envy, he brings into focus the advantage of the envied person and through emulation he tries to improve himself. This kind of behaviour corresponds to benign envy. On the other hand, if the envious is not able to metabolize envy, he tries to bring down the envied to his level. In this case envy can be dangerous in professional contexts because – as we have seen – the actions of the envious are specifically focused (Lam, Van der Vegt, Walter, & Huang, 2011) and socially undesirable.

Similarly, several empirical studies describe episodes of social isolation and direct or indirect aggressiveness in the presence of envy. These consequences associated with malicious envy, and the theoretical background which shows the envy’s negative effects, have lead us to observe that malicious envy can be considered a cause of stress. Furthermore, considering the current management theories on the strategic importance of intellectual capital (Alavi & Leidner, 2001; Edvinsson & Malone, 2000; Hall, 1992; Stewart, 2007; Stewart & Ruckdeschel, 1998; Wiig, 1997), we believe that over time negative envy could reduce the value-creation potential of intellectual capital, as especially human capital and relational capital are concerned.

With respect to human capital, we have reported some studies that explain how envy can contribute to waste resources and reduce creative energies because it reduces the ability of judgment (Epstein, 2006; Stein, 1997; 2000).

Our contention that the value of human capital could be negatively affected by envy is based on prior empirical studies that demonstrate that – under certain circumstances – envy increases both the worker’s desire to abandon the workplace and his absenteeism, as well as reduces his concentration (Vecchio, 2005). Moreover, our contention is sustained by the notion that the envious person tends even to renounce his own well-being when this endangers the well-being of the envied person (Beckmann, Formby, Smith, & Zheng, 2002; Celse, 2009; Kebede & Zizzo, 2011; Nozick, 1981; Rawls, 1972; Zizzo & Oswald, 2001; Zizzo, 2002; 2003).

To the extent that envy gives rise to antisocial behaviours (Vecchio, 2005), it may hamper the development of healthy relationships between workers. It has been shown that envy tends to ruin the communication and the relationships between employees (Dogan & Vecchio, 2001), as well as to diminish the group potency and cohesion (Duffy & Shaw, 2000), inasmuch as it is based on hostility (Smith & Kim, 2007). Other studies have highlighted that malicious envy affects negatively interpersonal relations (Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005). In addition, envy makes the transfer of tacit knowledge (Polany, 1967) – which is in and by itself a delicate process (Nonaka, 1991) – even more problematic.

Based on all such insights and considerations, some tentative reflections can be made. Firstly, it is necessary to consider the usefulness of the study of envy to an understanding of work-related stress and its organizational consequences. In this connection, management studies appear to have relatively overlooked the importance of envy in the workplace; in fact, as a research topic, it still appears to be some kind of ‘taboo’, particularly in the Italian business-economics literature. In particular, we suggest that the studies on knowledge management should consider the phenomenon of envy in the workplace, because envy could reduce the value-creation potential of intellectual capital, with specific reference to human and relational capital.

Even though the dialogue between psychoanalytic studies and the business world has never been easy, the psychoanalytic studies could prove particularly useful for managers to understand envy in the workplace, with specific reference to its causes and dynamics (Gould, 1991). As Fineman (2003) points out, it is a managers’ responsibility to understand emotional states and take into account the individuality of workers.

A possible way to manage envy in the workplace could be based on the theoretical framework which considers emotional intelligence as one of the leader’s features (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2006). In this sense, the psychodynamic approach can help to study the role of envy in the workplace, since emotional intelligence could favour its metabolization, through communicative and social expertise which facilitate the management of interpersonal relationships (Argyle, 1994), with the aim to keep envy under a minimum level which is necessary to grant the dynamism and competition of a society (Stoeck, 1969).

In terms of more practical implications for managers, the main insight to be gained from the envy-related literature is that managers should take actions both to minimize the

potentially negative consequences and to foster the potential positive outcomes of envy.

It is to be highlighted that managers themselves can unintentionally induce envy in their organizations, typically through implementing competitive rewards systems, which on the one hand are effective at motivating employees, but on the other lead employees to compare with each other and experience envy when they fare badly relative to others. In normative terms it follows that, in designing reward systems, managers should pursue a balance between the benefit of a competitive system (e.g., motivation) and the costs (e.g., inducing envy in inferior performers).

Managers can also reduce the negative outcomes of unfavourable comparisons and the subsequent feelings of envy through the selection of evaluation criteria that employees view as valid and diagnostic. Indeed, research has shown that people may even exalt those who outperform them when they are unambiguously outperformed (Alicke et al., 1997). Furthermore, managers should promote a corporate culture aimed at increasing solidarity and employees' sense of affiliation with the organization, which may increase the extent to which inferior performers feel proud, rather than envious, of higher achievers (Dunn & Schweitzer, 2006).

In general, making employees perceive evaluation criteria as valid and fair might help prevent the negative behavioural outcomes of envy, in particular counterproductive work behaviours which can be both directed at the envied targets and the organization. Research has explicitly documented that higher perceived unfairness and envy result in higher levels of interpersonal counterproductive behaviours (Cohen-Charash, & Muller, 2007). Also, Tai, Narayanan and McAllister (2012) have forwarded the notion that envy's effects on behaviour are affected by employee perceived organizational support, that is the employees' general perception of the extent to which the organization values their contributions and attends their well-being. According to Tai et al. (2012), employees who appraise organizational support as high are likely to view the superior standing of the envied co-workers as the result of a fair system, and even to increase their job performance based on the belief that the organization would similarly reward them.

Eventually managers may be able to reduce the negative consequences of envy by providing inferior achievers future opportunities to restore the balance with their outperformers (Dunn & Schweitzer, 2006). Even more fundamentally, providing specific and valuable suggestions about how inferior performers can improve their position may also increase motivation to pursue a 'moving up' rather than a renunciation strategy.

In sum, one might argue that envy's effects in the workplace can be affected either in a positive or negative way by the organizational environments and the leaders who shape them. An implication of this argument is that managerial attention should be especially directed at creating the conditions that elicit the potential benefits of envy, in particular through fostering an environment where the employees perceive a fair and equitable treatment from organizational authorities and even more fundamentally

perceive the organization as being supportive when they experience an unfavourable social comparison.

This paper suffers from being qualitative in nature. Without detracting from this limitation, the interdisciplinary literature review that has been carried out might be useful to future research aimed at empirically exploring the level and the impact of envy within companies.

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