THEY WANT WHAT I'VE GOT (I THINK): THE CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF ATTRIBUTING COWORKER BEHAVIOR TO ENVY

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The focus in research on envy has recently shifted to include not only the envious person but also the person who is a target of that envy. We join the conversation in this nascent but developing literature by addressing a critical question: Given that envy is a covert emotion, how do employees come to perceive that they are envied? The answer, we propose, is that when employees are faced with ambiguous coworker behavior, they will, under certain circumstances, make an envy attribution for that behavior. We position envy attributions as a type of a relational attribution and elaborate a model grounded in theory on self-regulation that explains both how and when employees come to attribute the behaviors of their coworkers to envy. Going further, we then draw from research on approach-avoidance to explain the subsequent behavior of an employee who has attributed coworker behaviors to envy. In so doing, we not only provide an explanation for conflicting findings in the extant "being envied" literature but also call for an increased focus on attributions as intervening mechanisms that explain people's response to others' emotions.

Have you ever thought your coworkers envied you? Imagine that your dean recognizes you with a research excellence award at a faculty meeting. One of your colleagues later drops by and says, "Great job! I really admire your work! In fact, I've also done some research in that area; do you have any ongoing work we could collaborate on?" The next day, as you walk down the hallway, you overhear some other colleagues talking about you in an office, but they are less kind. One of them says, "Did you know her adviser was an editor at the journal where she has all her publications?" Then another adds, "I'd win that award too if my teaching load was so low."

You might not give your colleagues' behavior much thought if it was expected. If it was unexpected, however, you might question it (Ditto & Lopez, 1992). One explanation you may consider is that they envy you. It is plausible: envy has been defined as "pain at another person's good fortune" (Tai, Narayanan, & McAllister, 2012: 107), and one feels envy when one lacks and covets something that another has (Parrott & Smith, 1993). You have just won a prestigious award, along with a $10,000 research stipend. Yet envy is not associated with specific facial expressions or body language (e.g., Rodriguez Mosquera, Parrott, & Hurtado de Mendoza, 2010), and people often hide their envy because of its socially unacceptable nature (Clanton, 2006). It may therefore be unclear whether envy was the cause of your coworkers' behavior.

Despite this equivocality, an inference about others' envy has critical implications since it often leads to undesirable personal outcomes, such as job and relationship related tension, underperformance, and turnover intentions (e.g., Rodriguez Mosquera et al., 2010; Scott, Tams, Schippers, & Lee, 2015; Yu & Duffy, 2017). Further, although less frequently considered, perceptions of being envied may also impact the relationship between an employee and coworker. Indeed, even the potential for envy "places the enviable person in a complex and delicate social situation" (Parrott, 2017: 455), and it is these consequences that we focus on here.

One of the functions of emotions is to facilitate and coordinate social interactions (Keltner & Haidt, 1999); indeed, several theoretical perspectives note that people recognize emotions such as happiness, anger, and fear in others and respond accordingly (e.g., Adolphs, 2002; van Kleef, Homan, & Cheshin, 2012). Yet envy is different—it is a covert emotion, so a coworker's envy may not always be obvious or apparent to an employee, given the tendency of coworkers to hide it (Parrott, 2017). For this reason, researchers may be taking too big of a leap by studying the consequences of being envied without sufficiently explicating the process through which these perceptions form. We focus on this process and build theory about *envy attribution*: a belief that a coworker's behavior is caused by a feeling of pain resulting from a perceived inequality in their relationship with the employee with regard to a desirable attribute/object.[1]

Theory on attributions focuses on three overarching types of attribution: internal, external, and relational (e.g., Eberly, Holley, Johnson, & Mitchell, 2011). Given that envy is a dyadic, interpersonal phenomenon (Smith, 2000), we conceptualize envy attribution as a specific relational attribution that arises from a relationship imbalance between two employees. Grounding our model in self-regulatory theory, we describe an episodic, unfolding process in which an envy attribution links two distinct yet interconnected self-regulatory cycles (Austin & Vancouver, 1996; Carver & Scheier, 2001). The first self-regulatory cycle occurs as employees are driven to make sense of coworker behavior that is unexpected. We draw on the concept of relational value (the degree to which the behavior conveys that the employee is valued and seen as important; Leary, 2012) to explain when coworker behavior may seem unexpected. We then theorize about the conditions under which employees will attribute the coworker's behavior to envy, which concludes the first self-regulatory cycle. As we theorize further, the attribution of envy itself triggers a second self-regulatory cycle in which employees seek to address two competing goals made salient by this attribution (Elliot, 2006): workplace relationship promotion (an approach-oriented goal) and protection of perceived advantage (an avoidance-oriented goal). We explain the factors that influence the goal toward which employees will regulate behavior and how this impacts their exchange relationship with the coworker (Sherony & Green, 2002).

By unpacking the underlying cognitive process surrounding envy attributions, we make several contributions to ongoing research. First, emotion scholars tend to assume that emotions are clearly expressed and easily understood by the observer/ target, so the predominant focus is on how people respond after observing others' emotions (van Kleef et al., 2012). Even envy scholars themselves—despite recognition that envy is not easily observed and must be inferred from others' behaviors (Rodriguez Mosquera et al., 2010; Yu & Duffy, 2017)—tend to focus on employee responses following this inference (e.g., Lee, Duffy, Scott, & Schippers, 2018; Vecchio, 2005). We depart from this perspective in our focus on how people come to believe that others envy them. In this regard, we incorporate theory on attributions and explain the process by which an envy attribution is made for coworker behavior that may or may not be envy driven. In so doing, we underscore more broadly the crucial role played by attributions in how individuals respond to others' covert emotions. Further, in studies of envied persons, researchers have tended to adopt a "situational" (i.e., nonspecific or diffuse) approach to both the coworker who is envious and the advantage that

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[1] Although people often use the terms *jealousy* and *envy* interchangeably, these two are distinct emotions (e.g., Parrott & Smith, 1993). In their review, Smith and Kim (2007) noted that while envy involves two people and occurs when envious people lack a desired thing that the envied possesses, jealousy involves three people and necessarily occurs in the context of relationships when the jealous person fears losing an important relationship with another person to a rival. Broadly speaking, you feel envious when you *lack* the thing you desire, whereas you feel jealous when you already *possess* the relationship you desire but are afraid of losing it (Hoogland, Thielke, & Smith, 2017).

is envied (e.g., Lee et al., 2018; Scott et al., 2015; Vecchio, 2005). Instead, by taking an episodic approach, our theory incorporates characteristics of both the employee-coworker relationship and the nature of the employee's perceived advantage over that coworker.

Our model also helps reconcile conflicting findings in the being envied literature. Scott et al. (2015) argued that being envied leads employees to be ingratiatory and helpful (see also van de Ven, Zeelenberg, & Pieters, 2010). Parrott (2017) noted similar findings; however, he also reported that some envied people tend to distance themselves from envious others (see also Henagan & Bedeian, 2009; Parrott & Rodriguez Mosquera, 2008). An envied person cannot be both helpful and withdrawn simultaneously, yet this apparent contradiction is not well explained in the literature. By explaining when envy attributions will lead employees to be helpful or withdrawn, we provide a resolution to these conflicting findings. Finally, we explain how both negative (e.g., social undermining) and positive (e.g., prosocial behavior) coworker behavior can be attributed to envy under specific conditions. We thus extend research that has, to date, focused only on perceptions of being envied stemming from negative behavior of others (e.g., Scott et al., 2015; Vecchio, 2005). Overall, we respond to a call from Duffy, Shaw, and Schaubroeck (2008: 181) to "disentangle the various dynamics" associated with perceptions of being envied.

ENVY AND "BEING ENVIED" IN THE WORKPLACE

Workplace Envy

Interest in envy pervades society. From luxury goods meant to provoke others' envy (e.g., Belk, 2011) to the tale of Cinderella in popular culture, to extensive discussions in religion (e.g., the Bible) and philosophy (e.g., Aristotle's *Rhetoric*), to the workplace (Parrott, 2017)—envy is everywhere. The traditional conceptualization of envy is as a hostile emotion with negative undertones (e.g., Smith & Kim, 2007), yet envy is also associated with outcomes such as motivation to improve and admiration of the envied (e.g., Crusius & Lange, 2014). Hence, some scholars have advanced a two-construct view of envy: malicious envy—similar to the traditional view of envy as a hostile emotion—and benign envy—the more

positive form of envy (van de Ven, Zeelenberg, & Pieters, 2009). This approach captures envy's leveling-down (harming the envied) and leveling-up (improving oneself) processes (Crusius & Lange, 2017).

Tai and colleagues, however, argued that this view conflates envy with its outcomes (e.g., benign envy is associated with actions to improve oneself, whereas malicious envy is associated with hostile acts) and instead defined envy as "pain at another person's good fortune" (2012: 107). They suggested that this separates the painful experience of envy from its behavioral outcomes (see also Cohen-Charash & Larson, 2017). Similarly, Hoogland et al. (2017) also noted that envy begins with a sense of pain and inferiority that drives subsequent behaviors. We follow Yu and Duffy (2017) and adopt Tai and colleagues' (2012) more neutral definition of envy since it succinctly highlights the two fundamental conditions associated with envy: a sense of disadvantage and the experience of pain.

Perceiving Coworker Envy

Until recently, researchers largely focused on the *envious* person (for a review see Smith & Kim, 2007); this was in line with research on emotions more broadly, which tends to study a focal employee's emotional experience. But scholars are increasingly recognizing that people's emotions can influence targets of those emotions as well (van Kleef, 2016). Envy, in particular, is bound to affect its target, given its explicitly dyadic nature (Vecchio, 2007). This is increasingly likely in today's workplaces, where employees often collaborate within teams and simultaneously compete for valuable and scarce resources (e.g., Menon & Thompson, 2010). Stressing the widespread prevalence of workplace envy, Parrott (2017) noted that employees may be envied for almost limitless reasons, including promotions, salaries/bonuses, furnishings and office size, prestigious projects, lower workloads, and supervisor rapport. Because social comparisons causing envy can be rooted in so many types of advantages, a "majority of people in any organization are susceptible to being the targets of envy," and not just high performers (Parrott, 2017: 456). For this reason, scholarly attention on the envied employee is necessary, since being envied influences interactions, relationships, and even the organization (Duffy et al., 2008). Initial findings show that being envied

is an ambivalent experience with performance implications (Lee et al., 2018; Parrott & Rodriguez Mosquera, 2008) that can lead to job and relationship tension and turnover intentions (Scott et al., 2015; Yu & Duffy, 2017). The common refrain across this research, however, is that people believed they were envied. What is less clear is how this belief forms.

Envy is a covert emotion, with coworkers often loath to display envy openly since societal norms cast it as a repugnant and undesirable emotion (Clanton, 2006). How do employees then come to believe that they are envied? For the most part, scholars have assumed that employees are simply aware of this (e.g., Lee et al., 2018; Vecchio, 2005). For instance, Rodriguez Mosquera et al. (2010) took this awareness as a given in asking students about a time they felt envied, while others have focused on outperformance as an explanation for perceiving envy (Kim & Glomb, 2014; van de Ven et al., 2010). There is, however, other work that has hinted at the inferential nature of envy (e.g., Exline & Lobel, 1999). Scott et al. (2015), for one, noted the importance of the inferential nature of being envied. Their work, however, focused only on workplace exclusion and did not consider the possibility of envy attributions for positive behavior. Van de Ven et al. (2010) also hinted at a mechanism for detecting envy, although they did not elaborate on it. Thus, the psychological process for attributing coworker behavior to envy remains largely unexplored.

Absent an understanding of this process, we lack insight into how an envy attribution forms, who is likely to attribute envy to a coworker's behavior, and when. Our purpose is to unpack the envy attribution formation process and its outcomes in an employee-coworker dyad. Our theory reflects the fact that organizational life largely consists of mundane, routine behaviors within dyadic relationships (e.g., Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008; Liden, Anand, & Vidyarthi, 2016)—most of which are unlikely to be seen as envy driven. Thus, for behavior to be attributed to envy, it must stand out in some way against this backdrop. Indeed, envy scholars have noted that students who feel envied often reported that a close other has acted unexpectedly (Parrott, 2017; Rodriguez Mosquera et al., 2010). Building on this, we conceptualize behavior that is discrepant from expectations as the trigger for an envy attribution episode. We frame this episodic process within a self-regulatory framework (Austin & Vancouver, 1996), since this lens explains responses to discrepancies between actual (i.e., coworker behavior) and desired (i.e., expectations for that behavior) states, and focus on how attributions of envy subsequently play out in organizations.

## A SELF-REGULATORY MODEL OF ENVY ATTRIBUTION FORMATION

Figure 1 shows our theoretical model for an envy attribution episode. It begins with a self-regulatory cycle triggered by a mismatch between coworker behavior and employee expectations, which, under the right conditions, culminates in an envy attribution. The envy attribution then initiates a second self-regulatory cycle wherein the employee chooses how best to respond to the coworker, with further consequences for their exchange relationship. A point of consensus among attribution scholars is that attribution formation necessitates effortful and systematic information processing (e.g., Harvey, Madison, Martinko, Crook, & Crook, 2014; Martinko, Harvey, & Dasborough, 2011; Weiner, 1985). To that end, we first explain the self-regulatory process that triggers systematic information processing about the coworker's behavior and the subsequent envy attribution formation depicted in the first self-regulatory cycle. We then move to the second cycle and explain the employee's subsequent response.

Coworker Behavior

We first propose that of the two most commonly studied types of workplace behaviors—in-role and extra-role behaviors (e.g., Motowidlo, 2003)—coworker behaviors of the latter sort are more likely to result in an envy attribution. Role responsibilities generally dictate day-to-day in-role behaviors, which are predominantly task focused and, hence, accounted for. Extra-role behaviors, in contrast, are volitional, often other focused (even if indirectly, as with gossip; Erdogan, Bauer, & Walter, 2015), and can be enacted for a variety of reasons, including envy.

To build theory about envy attributions for different types of coworker behaviors, we chose two oppositely valenced extra-role behaviors—social undermining and prosocial behavior—as exemplars and ends of a behavioral continuum (for a similar example see Jehn & Shah, 1997), although

FIGURE 1
An Episodic Model of the Causes and Consequences of Attributing Coworker Behavior to Envy
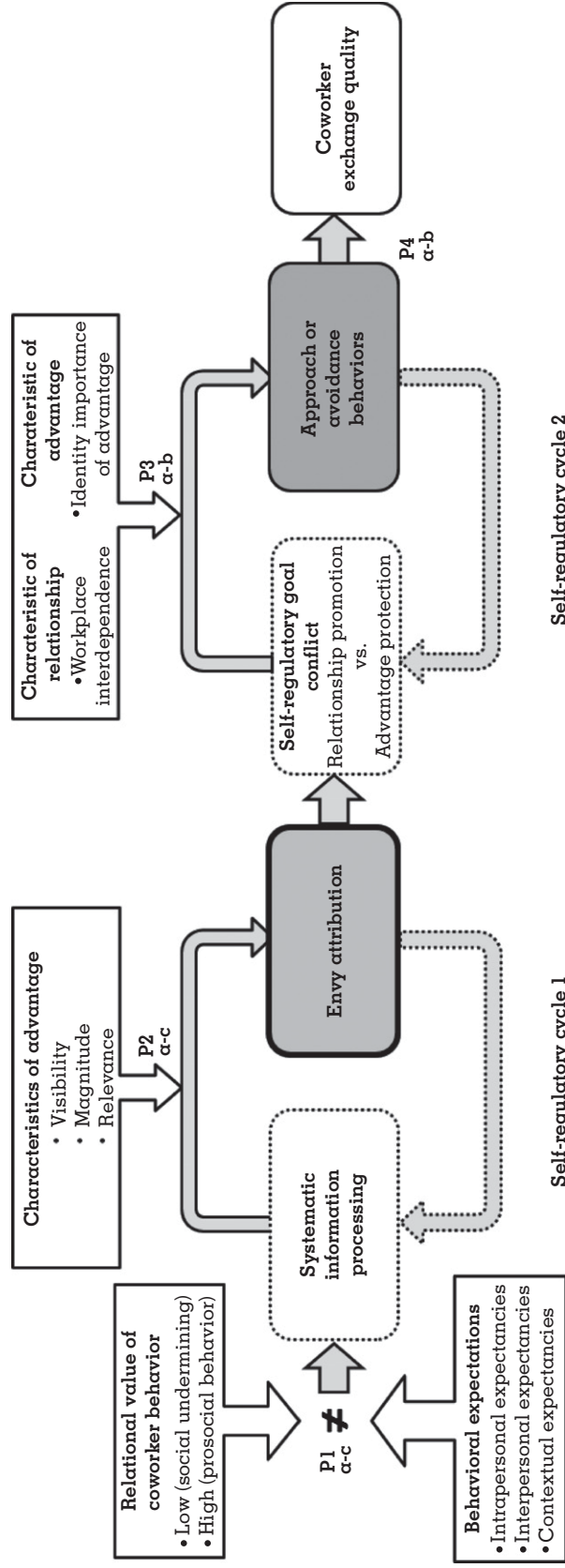
our theory applies to other behaviors on this continuum as well. The two behaviors we have chosen are common in organizations (e.g., Duffy, Ganster, & Pagon, 2002; Penner, Dovidio, Piliavin, & Schroeder, 2005) and allow us to not only represent coworker behaviors parsimoniously but also explain when both positive and negative behaviors can be attributed to envy. We do not assume that these behaviors are always caused by envy, but prior work does position these behaviors as potential outcomes of envy (e.g., Tai et al., 2012).

Specifically, social undermining involves "intentional actions that diminish a target's ability to establish and maintain positive relationships, work-related success, and a favorable reputation in the workplace" (Duffy et al., 2002: 333) and includes behaviors such as criticizing, being unfriendly, gossiping, spreading rumors, and withholding help and information. Prosocial behavior, in contrast, involves acts that are "generally beneficial to other people" (Penner et al., 2005: 366) and includes helping, doing favors, complimenting, and being nice to others. While coworkers may enact both these types of behaviors for a variety of reasons (e.g., De Dreu & Nauta, 2009; Duffy et al., 2002; Greenbaum, Mawritz, & Eissa, 2012), when caused by envy, social undermining is aimed at bringing the envied employee down, whereas prosocial behavior is aimed at bringing the envious coworker up (Crusius & Lange, 2014; Tai et al., 2012).

The likelihood that envy will cause behavior such as social undermining is uncontroversial (e.g., Duffy, Scott, Shaw, Tepper, & Aquino, 2012). Indeed, negative behavior as an outcome of envy features prominently in religious, philosophical, and empirical writings. Prosocial behavior, however, may initially seem counterintuitive. Yet research supports this as well, since scholars have found envy to be positively related to helping, complimenting, or hoping to become or remain friends with the envied (Hareli & Weiner, 2002; van de Ven et al., 2009). Though ostensibly prosocial, this behavior may have instrumental undertones, in that it is aimed at getting closer to envied employees and "learning their secrets and new tricks" (Yu & Duffy, 2017: 45). Similarly, Cuddy, Fiske, and Glick noted that envied individuals receive "begrudging admiration" and unwilling cooperation enacted "in the service of other goals" (2007: 633–634). The envious individual may thus seek to benefit by obtaining the advantage they covet or otherwise deriving reputational benefits through association (Tai et al., 2012). Our position is that these behaviors are sufficient, under the conditions described below, to initiate a sensemaking process that may result in an envy attribution, whether truly caused by envy or not.

Self-Regulation: Relational Value, Behavioral Expectations, and Systematic Information Processing

When will employees attribute different types of coworker behaviors to envy? We suggest that the answer lies partially in how elaborately they process this behavior (Martinko et al., 2011; van Kleef et al., 2012). Unlike other emotions, envy may not be very obvious, owing to its covert nature (Parrott & Smith, 1993). To attribute envy as the cause of coworker behavior, there should therefore be something unexpected, novel, or otherwise disruptive or out of place about the behavior that commands the attention of the employees and prompts elaborative thinking about its possible causes (Morgeson, Mitchell, & Liu, 2015; Weiner, 1985). Systematic or effortful information processing of coworker behavior by the employees is therefore an important prerequisite for an envy attribution to occur (Martinko et al., 2011).

Given the immense stream of experiences people encounter daily, employees are not likely to exert much effort processing a majority of their coworkers' behaviors, nor will they make causal attributions for every common and routine coworker action (e.g., Bargh & Chartrand, 1999; Martinko & Thomson, 1998; Weiner, 1985). Indeed, daily interactions between employees and coworkers typically conform to expectations (Morgeson, 2005). In these instances, cognitive resources are preserved through automatic information processing (relying on heuristics and prior decision rules; Chaiken & Ledgerwood, 2011; Smith & DeCoster, 2000). Yet coworker behaviors may at times be discrepant from expectations and appear nonroutine and unusual, creating a discontinuity that requires systematic information processing (Ditto, Scepansky, Munro, Apanovitch, & Lockhart, 1998). Below we explain when this may happen by drawing from theory on self-regulation (Carver & Scheier, 2001; Stinson et al., 2010).

Self-regulatory theory views cognitive and behavioral processes as the result of feedback loops that help people attain and maintain a desired

state (Johnson, Chang, & Lord, 2006). Self-regulatory processes compare inputs against this desired state, and if a discrepancy is detected, individuals seek to reduce it (Austin & Vancouver, 1996). In an interpersonal context, a crucial input into the self-regulatory cycle is the self-relevant information that people detect from others' behavior (Leary, Terdal, Tambor, & Downs, 1995). Individuals constantly and preattentively monitor others' behavior for verbal and nonverbal cues about their own relational value—the extent to which they are valued in their social relationships by others (Leary, 2012). Cues conveying rejection and disapproval indicate low relational value, and cues related to acceptance and approval indicate high relational value (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). Applied to our model, social undermining by a coworker should convey a low level of relational value to the employee, and prosocial behavior should convey a high level of relational value (Stinson et al., 2010).

Self-regulation, however, is not initiated simply by ascertaining one's relational value from others' behaviors. Instead, it must first be established whether a discrepancy exists in the way the coworker is treating the employee (detected relational value) and the way the employee expects to be treated (expected relational value) for self-regulation to be initiated. In other words, employees do not approach interpersonal interactions as "blank slates" but, instead, have expectations about the level of relational value they anticipate from such interactions. Hereafter we refer to this expected relational value broadly as "behavioral expectations." Drawing from work on interpersonal interactions and norms (e.g., Burgoon, 1993; Feldman, 1984; Stinson et al., 2010), below we describe three potential sources of information across levels of analysis that employees may use to form behavioral expectations: intrapersonal, interpersonal, and contextual. In each case we illustrate how a mismatch between these behavioral expectations and the relational value of coworker behavior can trigger systematic information processing.

Intrapersonal. Theory holds that people have a stable, intrapersonal standard that indexes the relational value they expect from typical interactions with others (Stinson et al., 2010; Swann, 1997). A long stream of research points to trait self-esteem—an individual's chronic self-view that develops over a history of interpersonal experiences (Leary, 2003)—as a primary indicator of this

expectancy (e.g., James, 1890). Those with high trait self-esteem have a positive self-view and believe they possess many desirable attributes. They therefore expect high relational value from others' behaviors. Employees with low trait self-esteem, in contrast, have a negative self-view, believe they do not possess many desirable attributes, and tend to expect interpersonal treatment conveying low relational value (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). Employees may not always be consciously aware of this expectancy (e.g., Austin & Vancouver, 1996); however, it is critical in guiding social interactions, since people desire interactions that align with their self-view and "make the world seem coherent and predictable" (Swann, 2012: 23).

When the relational value of a coworker's behavior and the employee's trait self-esteem–based expectancies align (i.e., when a high trait self-esteem employee receives prosocial behavior or a low trait self-esteem employee experiences social undermining), the employee should experience a sense of authenticity and control (Swann & Schroeder, 1995). Since there is no discrepancy requiring redress, the employee can conserve resources by processing this behavior automatically and accepting its relational value uncritically (Smith & DeCoster, 2000; Stinson et al., 2010). A counterintuitive implication of this is that receiving social undermining could be acceptable for some employees. Research supports this, however, since even negative behavior can at times be seen as valid, in that low trait self-esteem employees typically expect a low relational value from interaction partners (Jussim, Yen, & Aiello, 1995; Swann, 1997).

In contrast with the above, detection of a discrepancy in relational value stemming from a coworker's behavior and the focal employee's trait self-esteem–based expectancies (i.e., when a high trait self-esteem employee is undermined or a low trait self-esteem employee receives prosocial behavior) should have self-regulatory implications. Theory predicts that, in this case, coworker behavior may appear unexpected, sudden, and even threatening to the employee's self-view (Ditto & Lopez, 1992; Swann, Stein-Seroussi, & Giesler, 1992), causing discomfort and uncertainty (Stinson et al., 2010; Swann & Schroeder, 1995). Thus, employees will be motivated to engage in thorough, systematic information processing to make sense of this behavior (Ditto et al., 1998). There are counterintuitive implications

here, too, in that prosocial behavior, although typically viewed as positive, can be viewed as off-putting, surprising, or even threatening by employees with low trait self-esteem. Indeed, research has shown that low self-esteem employees tend to react negatively to compliments, praise, and flattery (Colman & Olver, 1978; Kille, Eibach, Wood, & Holmes, 2016), prompting systematic information processing. Overall, for employees with high (low) trait self-esteem, behavior conveying high (low) relational value would align with their behavioral expectations, while behavior conveying low (high) relational value would be discrepant and prompt systematic information processing. We therefore propose the following.

> Proposition 1a: Discrepancies between the relational value of coworker behavior and employee intrapersonal expectancies will lead to systematic information processing.

Interpersonal. Just as employees have intrapersonal expectancies for treatment by others in general, they also have expectations for the behavior of *specific* coworkers—what we term *interpersonal expectancies*. An interpersonal expectancy, or "an enduring pattern of anticipated behavior," represents an implicit understanding about interaction norms between two specific individuals (Burgoon, 1993: 31). Employees often work closely with coworkers, and repeated interactions with specific coworkers may lead to the formation of cognitive schemas about the typical behavior from those individuals (Baldwin, 1992). When the relational value of a coworker's behavior aligns with what an employee has come to expect *from that coworker*, the behavior meets interpersonal expectancies. In this case, regardless of the relational value conveyed by it, coworker behavior should not seem out of ordinary, novel, or unexpected, and, hence, the employee will tend to process it in an automatic fashion (Burgoon, 1993; Morgeson et al., 2015).

In contrast, interpersonal expectancy violations occur when coworker behavior does not align with the employee's mental schema for that coworker's actions, making the behavior seem novel, disruptive, and unexpected (Burgoon, 1993; Morgeson et al., 2015). Consider a coworker who is typically polite but unexpectedly insults or belittles you. Alternatively, perhaps a coworker who has often been distant or dismissive of you is suddenly helpful or complimentary. This sudden change may seem surprising and somewhat suspicious. Thus, interpersonal expectancy violations can be distracting and arousing and can focus an employee's attention on the sudden change (Burgoon & Le Poire, 1993; Hilton, Klein, & von Hippel, 1991). Indeed, people mention feeling envied when, within an ongoing relationship, there is "a deviation from the behavior that would be expected" (Parrott, 2017: 457). The relational value conveyed by this behavior is crucial, since it signals a discrepancy in relationship quality compared to expectations (Leary & Guadagno, 2004). Given this novelty and its potential implications for the relationship, violations of interpersonal expectancies will lead to systematic information processing. Thus, we propose the following.

> Proposition 1b: Discrepancies between the relational value of coworker behavior and employee interpersonal expectancies will lead to systematic information processing.

Contextual. Finally, ongoing employee interactions are embedded within contexts that typically have norms dictating expected and appropriate behavior (Birenbaum & Sagarin, 1976; Cialdini & Trost, 1998)—what we term *contextual expectancies*. These norms can also serve as standards against which employees tend to evaluate the relational value conveyed by a coworker's behavior, in that they provide a reference for checking the "perceived prevalence or typicality of a given behavior" (Bettenhausen & Murnighan, 1991; Jacobson, Mortensen, & Cialdini, 2011: 434). Importantly, workplaces vary in terms of the type of behavior considered appropriate. For instance, Duffy et al. argued that norms for social undermining can develop "when the social environment of a team is rife with individuals undermining their colleagues" (2012: 652; see also Duffy, Ganster, Shaw, Johnson, & Pagon, 2006). In such workplaces, negative behaviors, such as being rude and critical, gossiping and spreading rumors, and withholding help and information, may be seen as normal and possibly even expected. In contrast, others have documented the prevalence of norms for more positive behaviors, such as cooperation and citizenship behaviors (e.g., Chatman & Flynn, 2001; Ehrhart & Naumann, 2004). In such workplaces, prosocial behaviors, such as helping, doing favors, being nice to others, and sharing

information and resources, will be seen as normal and appropriate.

Thus, an employee's contextual expectancies may guide their response to the relational value of a coworker's behavior, depending on whether the typical or expected behaviors of the work context in which they are embedded tend to be negative, undermining behaviors or positive, prosocial behaviors. To this end, the same coworker behavior could be seen as normative and expected or counternormative and unexpected, depending on the particular contextual expectancy in which it is enacted (Feldman, 1984). When the relational value of coworker behavior aligns with the employee's contextual expectancies, this behavior may appear routine and expected and, thus, not warrant extensive cognitive processing (Morgeson et al., 2015). In contrast, behaviors that violate contextual expectancies may stand out as counternormative, unexpected, and discrepant (Lee & Mitchell, 1994; Morgeson, 2005). These behaviors will catch the attention of the employee and trigger systematic information processing to comprehend the reason behind them (Smith & DeCoster, 2000). Thus, we propose the following.

> *Proposition 1c: Discrepancies between the relational value of coworker behavior and employee contextual expectancies will lead to systematic information processing.*

What Is an Envy Attribution?

When discrepancies of the sort described above occur, self-regulatory theory posits that employees will tend to take action to restore homeostasis (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 2001). One option available to employees is to alter the behavioral expectations against which they have compared the relational value of their coworker's behavior (e.g., Stinson et al., 2010). However, although behavioral expectations can change in the long run, they tend to be relatively stable in the short term. For example, Leary and Baumeister noted that "trait self-esteem does not change every time a social bond is made or broken" (2000: 13). The same is likely true of both interpersonal and contextual expectancies (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Thus, the more viable, short-term option is to instead seek a causal explanation for coworker behavior that allows an employee to reject the

relational value conveyed by that behavior and regain homeostasis (e.g., Stinson et al., 2010).

We propose that an envy attribution achieves this end by invalidating the relational value of coworker behavior. An envy attribution is a belief that a coworker's behavior is caused by pain resulting from an employee's relative advantage over that coworker. As such, it suggests that the coworker's behavior is not an accurate indicator of either the employee's relational value or their supposed suitability for relationships (Leary & Guadagno, 2004; Stinson, Cameron, & Huang, 2015). Instead, this behavior is perceived to have an ulterior motive—either to bring the focal employee down through social undermining or to bring the coworker up through prosocial behavior that, although positive, is ultimately self-serving (Tai et al., 2012). In this way, by providing an alternate explanation for coworker behavior that is discrepant from the employee's behavioral expectations, envy attribution helps address this aversive discrepancy and aids effective self-regulation (Stinson et al., 2015).

Importantly, an envy attribution constitutes a type of a relational attribution, or "explanations made by a focal individual that locate the cause of an event within the relationship that the individual has with another person" (Eberly et al., 2011: 736). Relational attributions have two key features that differentiate them from other attributions (Eberly, Holley, Johnson, & Mitchell, 2017). First, they are grounded within a dyadic relationship, and, second, responsibility for an event (in our case coworker behavior) is predicated on some feature of that relationship and not on some factor that can be ascribed to either the individual or a situation outside the individual's control. Put differently, within a dyad, "relational attributions are not reducible to the actions of either partner alone" (Eberly et al., 2011: 732). Envy in particular occurs, by definition, because of a relational discrepancy between members of a dyad with regard to something that is coveted by the envious but possessed by the envied (Cohen-Charash, 2009). Indeed, this dual focus (i.e., a simultaneous focus on the self and the other) is a defining feature of envy that separates it from other emotions (Smith, 2000; van de Ven et al., 2009). Hence, through an envy attribution, the employee holds neither themselves nor the coworker individually responsible for the coworker behavior. Instead, the causal impetus for the behavior is inextricably linked to a feature of the relationship itself

(Smith, 2000), making envy attribution a relational attribution.

Factors Influencing an Envy Attribution

Although we stipulate that systematic information processing is necessary to initiate the envy attribution process (Ditto & Lopez, 1992; Martinko et al., 2011), it is not sufficient. Attribution theory makes clear that any attribution must constitute a *plausible* explanation for behavior. Thus, even if an envy attribution were convenient, it would be unlikely to occur without corresponding evidence making it plausible (Klein & Kunda, 1992; Kunda, 1990). How, then, does an employee uncover this evidence? We theorize that the employee must simultaneously appraise the presence of the following two conditions that represent the dual focus of envy: (1) possession of a relative advantage over the coworker with regard to some object/attribute and (2) perceived painful implications of this advantage for that coworker. These conditions are intrinsic to the experience of envy[2] (Hoogland et al., 2017; Smith, 2000; Smith & Kim, 2007), and, absent either, envy is unlikely to be seen as a sufficiently plausible explanation of coworker behavior. Yet even if an employee is engaged in intensive cognitive processing, there is no guarantee that they will recognize the simultaneous presence of these two conditions. We propose that characteristics of the supposed advantage that an employee has over the coworker make envy a more plausible explanation. Drawing from extant theory on envy (e.g., Exline & Lobel, 1999; Salovey & Rodin, 1984; Smith & Kim, 2007), we posit *that the visibility, magnitude, and relevance of the employee's* perceived *advantage over the coworker* will make its existence more salient and increase awareness of its potential painful implications for the coworker,

thus increasing the possibility of an envy attribution.

Visibility. High visibility of status differences is a hallmark of today's workplaces (Duffy et al., 2008). In fact, some scholars advocate public conferral of rewards, where coworkers can witness the success of the focal employee (Mickel & Barron, 2008). For example, consider that an award winner such as the one in our opening vignette receives an award during a faculty meeting attended by all members of the college. Consider further that the dean also announces the award in an email to the entire college. Thus, the award is conferred in full view of the employee's colleagues. While award ceremonies are perhaps the most visible display of advantages, newsletters, company-wide emails, notice board displays, or meeting announcements are other ways of making advantages visible in the workplace (Exline, Single, Lobel, & Geyer, 2004; Henagan, 2010; Henagan & Bedeian, 2009). The public nature of these events highlights not only the superior status of the employee who has the advantage (Mickel & Barron, 2008) but also that others do not possess it (Duffy et al., 2008). This accentuates a relative disadvantage and can also magnify the associated pain (Fenigstein, 1987). Indeed, scholars suggest that people feel ashamed and humiliated if they think their failures have been exposed publicly (Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007). Yet not all relative advantages are public or highly visible; raises and bonuses are often privately discussed and kept discreet (Colella, Paetzold, Zardkoohi, & Wesson, 2007; Timm, 2014). Similarly, idiosyncratic deals used to differentiate between employees may not always be known to others (Rousseau, Ho, & Greenberg, 2006). Thus, a relative advantage will differ in the degree to which it is known by others.

Research indicates that people are attentive to the visibility of their perceived advantage and the possible accentuation of others' painful sense of inferiority due to it. For instance, Exline et al. (2004) found that students preferred not having their name announced to the class when given a reward. Similarly, van de Ven et al. (2010) found that lab participants anticipated envy more when they thought a confederate knew of a relative advantage than when they thought the confederate was unaware of it. Taken together, when engaged in systematic information processing about a coworker's behavior, employees should be increasingly likely to perceive that they

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[2]The simultaneous presence of these two conditions differentiates an envy attribution from attributions of related but distinct emotions, such as resentment (in the case of social undermining) or admiration (in the case of prosocial behavior). While these emotions can be associated with upward social comparisons, they represent an "other focus" and not a "dual focus" like envy (Smith, 2000). Further, unlike envy, they can also occur in the absence of social comparisons (van de Ven et al., 2009; van de Ven, Zeelenberg, & Pieters, 2012). Thus, attributions involving these emotions would likely occur under different conditions. We return to this point again in the discussion.

possess a relative and painful advantage over the coworker when that advantage is highly visible. Hence, we propose the following.

> *Proposition 2a: For employees engaged in systematic information processing about a coworker's behavior, the greater the perceived visibility of their advantage over the coworker, the more likely they are to attribute that behavior to envy.*

Magnitude. The magnitude of an advantage represents the perceived degree of difference between what the employee has and what the coworker has (Kanten & Teigen, 2015). The magnitude of the employee's perceived advantage over the coworker thus highlights the relative discrepancy between them since it signifies "the extent to which the individual is outperformed" (Argo, White, & Dahl, 2006: 100). So while an employee may write off advantages of lesser magnitude and downplay the difference between what they have and what their coworker possesses as not significant, advantages of larger magnitude may make their higher status more salient in their mind, sensitizing them to the potential for upward comparisons by the coworker (Exline & Lobel, 1999; Strohmer, Biggs, & McIntyre, 1984). Moreover, since "relative outcomes matter more than absolute levels when envy is involved," larger discrepancies in the employee's and the coworker's relative standing with regard to a desired attribute/object may be seen to reflect more poorly on the coworker than smaller discrepancies (Argo et al., 2006; Exline & Lobel, 1999; Smith & Kim, 2007: 53). Thus, the same cues that indicate a larger magnitude of an advantage can also make that advantage's painful impact for the coworker more noticeable to the employee.

For instance, consider our opening example: the research award may be perceived as either low or high magnitude. If there are several such awards given out every year and they do not come with any additional rewards or perks, an employee receiving such an award may see this as neither indicating a large disparity with their coworker nor adversely impacting the coworker. In this case, envy may seem to be a less plausible explanation. In contrast, if the award is scarce and accompanied by a substantial sum of money, it is more likely that the employee will perceive a larger gap between what they have and

what others have, making the existence of the advantage, as well as its potentially painful implications, more salient. Employees engaged in systematic information processing about a coworker's behavior should then be increasingly likely to perceive that they possess a relative and painful advantage over the coworker when that advantage is of higher magnitude. Hence, we propose the following.

> *Proposition 2b: For employees who engage in systematic information processing about a coworker's behavior, the greater the perceived magnitude of their advantage over the coworker, the more likely they are to attribute that behavior to envy.*

Relevance. Relevance refers to how important the employee believes the advantage is for the coworker. Prior research indicates that social comparisons in self-relevant domains tend to be more painful and distressing, thus triggering envy in people (e.g., Lockwood & Kunda, 1997; Salovey & Rodin, 1984, 1991; Smith, 2004). Exline and Lobel (1999) noted, however, that the suffering of these individuals does not go unnoticed; instead, employees are likely aware of the domain relevance of their advantages for their coworkers. This awareness should sensitize them to the potential pain their relative advantage could cause, since advantages that are perceived to have higher degrees of relevance imply greater desirability (Salovey & Rodin, 1984). As a result, the significance and the adverse impact of their superior position over the coworker are likely to be accentuated in the mind of the employees when the advantage is seen to be relevant to the coworker (Schaubroeck & Lam, 2004).

For instance, consider again our opening example. Because the award is for research productivity, an employee winning the award may feel that other research-active faculty members are at a greater relative disadvantage and may experience greater pain about not winning the award than colleagues who are more focused on teaching. Empirical evidence supports this as well, with research showing that outperformers are sensitive about the relevance of the domain of their superior performance for the outperformed person and tend to conceal and downplay achievements in domains seen as highly relevant to the outperformed person (Beach et al., 1998; Tal-Or, 2008). Employees engaged in systematic

information processing about a coworker's behavior should then be increasingly likely to perceive that they possess a relative and painful advantage over the coworker when that advantage is of higher perceived relevance to the coworker. Hence, we propose the following.

> *Proposition 2c: For employees who engage in systematic information processing about a coworker's behavior, the greater the perceived relevance of their relative advantage for the coworker, the more likely they are to attribute that behavior to envy.*

INTERPERSONAL OUTCOMES OF AN ENVY ATTRIBUTION

An envy attribution locates the cause of the coworker behavior in the employee-coworker relationship, instead of an internal or external source (Eberly et al., 2011), and it also highlights the coworker's ulterior motives, thereby helping the employee reject the relational value of that behavior. This mitigates the discrepancy that triggered the first self-regulatory cycle, thus ending it. But we propose that the envy attribution will play a more complex role in this episode (e.g., Foster, 1972). As we explain below, making an envy attribution creates a self-regulatory dilemma that initiates a second cycle with implications for the long-term exchange relationship with the coworker.

Self-Regulatory Goal Conflict Due to an Envy Attribution

By attributing a coworker's behavior to envy, the employee inherently acknowledges the existence of a status difference with respect to some object/attribute that the employee possesses and believes the coworker covets. Thus, while an envy attribution ends the first self-regulatory cycle, we propose that it immediately triggers a second cycle by signaling the existence of a discrepancy with respect to two goals: workplace relationship promotion and self-protection (e.g., Duffy et al., 2008; Parrott & Rodriguez Mosquera, 2008; Scott et al., 2015).

Regarding the former, employees fundamentally seek to promote positive relationships with others (Leary et al., 1995). An envy attribution indicates a discrepancy with this goal, since it

points to a potential problem in a relationship. That is, the coworker is seen as either actively trying to harm the employee (when social undermining is attributed to envy) or trying to use the employee for their own benefit (when prosocial behavior is attributed to envy; Tai et al., 2012).

Regarding the latter, employees also have self-protection goals (e.g., Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006), which, in this case, refer to the protection of an employee's perceived advantage over a coworker. An envy attribution will indicate a discrepancy here as well, since, regardless of the coworker's behavior, employees may perceive a threat to their advantage after making an envy attribution (e.g., as the coworker tries to close the gap; Lange & Crusius, 2015). In sum, while relational attributions in general create anxiety about one's relationships (Eberly et al., 2011), the envy attribution in particular highlights two areas of concern: promotion of the employee-coworker relationship and protection of the advantage that the coworker appears to be after.

Given the above, employees attributing a coworker's behavior to envy may find themselves in a dilemma. Not only do discrepancies between actual and desired states with regard to these two goals become salient, but self-regulation toward these goals is itself likely to be in conflict. Workplace relationship promotion is an approach-oriented goal (i.e., a focus on relationships reflects movement toward a desired end-state; Elliot, 2006), whereas advantage protection is an avoidance-oriented goal (i.e., a focus on protection reflects movement away from an undesired end-state; Elliot, 2006). Self-regulatory goal conflict, particularly when those goals involve relationships, is quite common (e.g., Cavallo, Fitzsimons, & Holmes, 2009; Cavallo, Holmes, Fitzsimons, Murray, & Wood, 2012). This may be even more true in the workplace because the nature of modern work often involves intense competition for asymmetrically distributed valuable resources among employees who also have to simultaneously collaborate toward a common goal (e.g., Menon & Thompson, 2010; Vecchio, 2005).

Self-Regulatory Goal Prioritization and Approach/Avoidance Responses

Self-regulatory theorists largely concur that, in cases of goal conflict, one can usually regulate

toward only one type of a goal at a time—especially when those goals are approach and avoidance oriented (e.g., Cavallo et al., 2012; DeShon & Gillespie, 2005; Elliot, 2006; Murray et al., 2006). When goal conflict arises because of an envy attribution, one option is for the employee to self-regulate toward a relationship promotion goal. Indeed, relational attributions often prompt actions to repair weakened social bonds (e.g., Eberly et al., 2011). Perhaps the employee does this for empathic reasons to reduce the pain of the supposedly envious coworker (Exline & Lobel, 2001). Alternately, this effort could be rooted in appeasement so as to stem any future negative behaviors (van de Ven et al., 2010). In either case, research suggests that employees who attribute envy to others may engage in a number of relationship-enhancing behaviors, such as complimenting, being nice and helpful, being ingratiating (Parrott & Rodriguez Mosquera, 2008; Scott et al., 2015; van de Ven et al., 2010), being self-deprecating about the advantage and offering to share it (Zell & Exline, 2010), or even reducing future performance (White, Sanbonmatsu, Croyle, & Smittipatana, 2002).

Consider again our opening example. An award winner could offer to do a friendly review of a supposedly envious colleague's manuscript as a way of promoting the relationship. There is some risk to this decision, however. Reducing effort or downplaying an advantage may be detrimental to sustaining or utilizing it, and helping others is time consuming (Rapp, Bachrach, & Rapp, 2013) and depleting (Gabriel, Koopman, Rosen, & Johnson, 2018; Lanaj, Johnson, & Wang, 2016) and can detract from the employee's own performance (Bergeron, 2007; Koopman, Lanaj, & Scott, 2016). Also, by sharing knowledge, information, and resources related to the advantage, the employee may potentially equip the coworker with the ability to eliminate the relative advantage in the future (Yu & Duffy, 2017). Hence, regulating toward relationship promotion could, over time, threaten the perceived advantage itself or the employee's ability to utilize the advantage in the workplace.

Similarly, self-regulating toward the self-protective goal of preserving one's perceived advantage also has benefits and trade-offs. Avoiding negative situations is a powerful driver of human behavior (Higgins, 1997), and one way to do it may be to socially withdraw and limit interactions with the supposedly envious coworker (e.g., leave the room, avoid conversation, opt for different work shifts or work locations). Believing one is envied by others can be distressing (Rodriguez Mosquera et al., 2010), and avoiding contact can help prevent exposure to unpleasant upward comparisons from coworkers (Exline & Lobel, 2001). For instance, Exline, Zell, and Lobel (2013) found that outperformers were often reluctant to meet people they perceived as being envious and preferred different interaction partners in the future (see also Henagan & Bedeian, 2009, and Parrott & Rodriguez Mosquera, 2008). Similarly, Parrott (2017) also noted distancing as one response to being envied.

However, this strategy is also risky, since withdrawal works against the development of social relationships (Rusbult, Zembrodt, & Gunn, 1982). For example, while an award winner could choose not to collaborate with a colleague seen to be envious and avoid them in meetings and social events, the award winner may miss opportunities to develop social capital (e.g., Coleman, 1988; Koopman, Matta, Scott, & Conlon, 2015; Labianca & Brass, 2006) that could be useful when applying for promotion and tenure. This could also make the award winner look arrogant, thereby escalating negative reactions from coworkers (Lange & Crusius, 2015).

Given this, toward which goal (relationship promotion via approach behaviors or advantage protection via avoidance behaviors) will the employee self-regulate following an envy attribution? There is no de facto right answer, since both strategies have pros and cons. Moreover, extant research provides evidence of both types of behaviors in response to being envied (e.g., Parrott & Rodriguez Mosquera, 2008; Scott et al., 2015). Although people may have a tendency to adopt approach or avoidance goals (e.g., Heimpel, Elliot, & Wood, 2006), we propose that an envy attribution episode represents a "strong" situation because of its relational focus and status implications (Mischel, 1977). Thus, situational features are likely to influence the employee's decision. Drawing further on self-regulation and attribution theories, we consider two conditions that may shape the employee's response, and, in the process, we reconcile contrary findings in the extant being envied research about whether people approach or avoid others after an envy attribution. Specifically, we posit that employee-coworker interdependence (a relationship characteristic) will increase the likelihood of self-regulation

toward the relationship promotion goal, whereas the importance of the advantage for the employee's work identity (an advantage characteristic) will increase the likelihood of self-regulation toward the goal of advantage protection.

Workplace interdependence. Research on attributions has noted the importance of interdependence as it relates to relational attributions (e.g., Eberly et al., 2011). We thus posit that interdependence plays a vital role in determining employee behavior following a specific type of relational attribution—envy. Modern workplaces are increasingly designed such that employees need to frequently interact and work together (Ferris et al., 2009). As such, interdependence—the extent to which individuals rely on each other to complete their tasks, earn valued rewards, and reach their work goals (Brown & Abrams, 1986; Wageman, 1995)—is an important attribute of work relationships. Indeed, a coworker whom an employee depends on for information, resources, and cooperation is an important part of that employee's working life (e.g., Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). Thus, a higher level of interdependence "makes salient a collective sense of responsibility and increases the need for collaboration and mutual adjustments among group members" (Bartel & Saavedra, 2000: 205).

Accordingly, maintaining good relationships with coworkers with whom employees are interdependent may enable the employees to achieve more of their own work goals. Further, because interdependence may lead to closer and friendlier ties in the workplace, the perception of a painful advantage over a coworker may elicit an empathic concern and a desire to help protect the coworker from distress (Exline & Lobel, 1999). Higher levels of interdependence should therefore make discrepancies involving relationship promotion goals increasingly salient, thus prompting an employee to regulate behavior accordingly.

In cases of lower levels of interdependence, in contrast, there is likely to be less of a focus on the relationship (Eberly et al., 2011). With lower levels of interdependence, employees will have little incentive to promote the relationship, since it is unlikely to have a meaningful impact on their everyday work experience. In this case, relationship-promoting behaviors may do more harm than good by diminishing the employees' advantage (e.g., Bergeron, 2007). Hence, in cases of low interdependence, employees are less likely to self-regulate toward promoting the relationship. Thus, we propose the following.

> *Proposition 3a: The level of employee-coworker interdependence will moderate the relationship between goal conflict arising from an envy attribution and approach-avoidance behaviors toward the coworker such that in the case of higher interdependence, employees are more likely to enact approach-oriented behaviors and less likely to enact avoidance-oriented behaviors.*

Identity importance of the advantage. Identity plays a crucial role in self-regulation, with researchers showing that people use identities as benchmarks to assess the relevance of particular events in their environment and to regulate their behavior (e.g., Caza, Vough, & Puranik, 2018; Higgins, Roney, Crowe, & Hymes, 1994; Stets & Burke, 2005). Establishing and expressing one's identity is a key concern for employees (Bartel, Blader, & Wrzesniewski, 2012), and they often construct identities that are "tied to participation in the activities of work" (Dutton, Roberts, & Bednar, 2010: 266). On this point, there are multiple avenues for forming a work identity, including developing unique sources of expertise (Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006), being a part of exclusive collectives (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Vough, 2012), having strong relationships with superiors (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007), or possessing desirable objects (Mehta & Belk, 1991; Rafaeli & Pratt, 2013). Importantly, all are potential sources of workplace envy (Parrott, 2017). Building on this, we explain how perceived advantages relevant to an employee's identity can influence subsequent behaviors.

Given the tendency to protect one's identity (Petriglieri, 2011), events that threaten particular identities are likely to motivate self-protective behavior (Higgins, 1996; Stets & Burke, 2005). Thus, we expect that the importance of an advantage for an employee's identity will influence regulation toward an advantage protection goal, following an envy attribution. If a particular advantage possessed by an employee is central to that employee's identity, threats to that advantage may be especially distressing since they may make the employee fearful of losing that identity (Petriglieri, 2011). Indeed, employees can go to substantial lengths to protect a particular identity (Caza et al., 2018; Leavitt & Sluss, 2015). Following

an envy attribution, if the advantage in question is more central to employees' identity, this should make discrepancies involving the advantage protection goal increasingly salient, since losing the advantage may result in the employees losing themselves (Petriglieri, 2011). Consider again our opening example. If an award winner defines themselves as a researcher, attempts by others to achieve the employee's level of status or undermine their research credentials may threaten that identity. Even perceived envy over a cozy office chair could be threatening if the employee views that chair as symbolic of their elevated status in the department.

Not all perceived workplace advantages, however, infuse meaning and status into an employee's identity (e.g., Crusius & Lange, 2017; Stets & Burke, 2005). For example, coworkers may be seen as envying advantages such as the ability to telecommute, enhanced travel accommodations, or a high-end laptop provided by the company. However, although convenient or luxurious, such advantages may not be of great importance to the employee's work identity. In this case, threats to these advantages are less likely to prompt self-regulation toward the advantage protection goal, since the advantage may be more of a convenience than an integral part of the employee's identity. Thus, to the extent that an employee's identity is rooted in an advantage, threats to that advantage can be distressing and may exacerbate the perceived risks related to the loss of the advantage—making the advantage protection goal more salient. Hence, we propose the following.

> *Proposition 3b: The centrality of the perceived advantage to an employee's identity will moderate the relationship between goal conflict arising from an envy attribution and approach-avoidance behaviors toward the coworker such that the more central the advantage is to the employee's identity, the more likely the employee will enact avoidance-oriented behaviors and the less likely the employee will enact approach-oriented behaviors.*

Implications for Coworker Exchange Quality

Whether an employee enacts approach or avoidance behavior, that choice constitutes the end of the second self-regulatory cycle, since the employee has chosen which goal to self-regulate toward and has taken action to do so. However, the approach or avoidance behavior that the employee engages in, beyond facilitating self-regulation, likely has broader implications as well. To date, research on being envied has mainly focused on shorter-term attitudinal (e.g., job satisfaction, work engagement, job tension, and turnover intentions; Lee et al., 2018; Scott et al., 2015; Vecchio, 2005) or behavioral (e.g., performance, helping, and avoidance; Exline et al., 2013; Lee et al., 2018; van de Ven et al., 2010) outcomes. But an envy attribution episode is embedded in an ongoing relationship between the employee and the coworker (Lange & Crusius, 2015). Hence, we propose that an envy attribution will affect both these individuals through its broader effect on the quality of their social exchange relationship (e.g., Seers, 1989).

Coworker exchange relationships reflect the extent to which the relationship between two coworkers is characterized by support (e.g., Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), trust (e.g., McAllister, 1995), and perspective taking (e.g., Davis, 1994), fostering feelings of mutual concern and sensitivity to others' needs. High-quality coworker exchanges occur when coworkers take care of each other by "exchanging and reciprocating favors" (Sluss, Klimchak, & Holmes, 2008: 458). These relationships are important for organizations because they foster open communication and mutual learning (Liao, Liu, & Loi, 2010), create a shared knowledge structure (Settoon & Mossholder, 2002), reduce role ambiguity (Chen, Takeuchi, & Shum, 2013), and increase performance, commitment, and creativity (Kamdar & Van Dyne, 2007; Liao et al., 2010; Liden, Wayne, & Sparrowe, 2000; Vinarski-Peretz, Binyamin, & Carmeli, 2011).

In interpersonal relationships, approach behaviors are directed toward positive relational outcomes that are rooted in affiliation (Elliot, Gable, & Mapes, 2006; Gable, 2006; Lin & Johnson, 2015) and include sharing information, knowledge, feedback, and help and providing socioemotional support. These actions reflect resource exchanges (e.g., Foa & Foa, 1974), and by signaling goodwill from the employee in the hopes that the coworker will then reciprocate in kind, they should contribute to the maintenance and enhancement of the relationship (e.g., Adler & Kwon, 2002; Kamdar & Van Dyne, 2007; Settoon & Mossholder, 2002). Thus, when employees engage

in approach behaviors after an envy attribution, the quality of their exchange relationship with the coworker should be strengthened. Hence, we propose the following.

> *Proposition 4a: Approach behaviors on the part of the employee will be positively related to high-quality coworker exchange.*

Avoidance behaviors, in contrast, are generally oriented toward weakening (or severing altogether) some social tie (e.g., Elliot et al., 2006; Gable, 2006; Gable & Impett, 2012). That is, avoidance is functionally an "exit strategy" that prevents the discussion of problems or subsequent relationship building (Exline et al., 2013). It is primarily a fear response and, as such, generally provokes negative thoughts and feelings in others (Elliot, 2006; Gable, Reis, & Elliot, 2003). By avoiding interactions with the coworker or by failing to provide needed information or help, the employee undermines the norms associated with social exchange relationships (Blau, 1964), which may also make the employee look arrogant (Lange & Crusius, 2015). Accordingly, trust, respect, and feelings of obligation from the coworker are expected to decrease. Thus, we propose the following.

> *Proposition 4b: Avoidance behaviors on the part of the employee will be negatively related to high-quality coworker exchange.*

DISCUSSION

For millennia, envy has captured the attention of laypeople, scholars, and philosophers. However, only recently has that collective attention turned toward the plight of those who feel they are envied in the workplace (e.g., Lee et al., 2018; Scott et al., 2015). This lack of focus is puzzling, given the dyadic nature of envy, the recognition that envy at work is widespread, and the well-documented behaviors of the envious (Parrott, 2017; Yu & Duffy, 2017). Using self-regulation as an overarching framework and integrating research on relational attributions and approach-avoidance, we build theory on the critical, multifaceted, and heretofore largely unexplored role of attribution when it comes to being envied. In so doing, our model contributes to the extant research on envy specifically and the literature

on emotions and the literature on attributions more broadly.

Theoretical Implications

Our thesis is that envy is a covert emotion, so employees cannot simply observe it and respond to it as they would to other emotions, such as happiness, sadness, anger, regret, or fear (Keltner & Haidt, 1999; van Kleef, 2016). Yet an examination of emotion research more broadly reveals little consideration of how people respond to others' covert emotions. Scholars hold that emotions serve a coordination function between individuals (e.g., Keltner & Haidt, 1999); for example, emotions as social information theory (EASI; van Kleef et al., 2012) suggests that the observer/target of others' emotions gains information about the intentions and relational orientation of these people and then responds appropriately. An inspection of this work, however, reveals two assumptions: (1) that emotional displays are unambiguous and distinct and (2) that observers/targets clearly understand and interpret emotions. Our theory reveals that these assumptions may not always hold. Regarding envy specifically, we illustrate that unless coworker behavior is unexpected, and unless employees intensively search for and find evidence to support an envy attribution, they may actually not detect their coworker's envy.

The implications of our model extend beyond envy, since other emotions also lack clear and unambiguous signals. In fact, a number of more social emotions (e.g., jealousy, shame, and schadenfreude; Smith, 2000; Smith & Kim, 2007) arguably have aspects that, to varying degrees, could render their presence ambiguous. Thus, models similar to ours (albeit with different conditions) could be developed for other covert emotions. We therefore echo van Kleef et al. (2012) in calling for additional theory on covert and ambiguous emotions. In particular, we recommend that scholars broaden their scope from the current focus on studying people's response after detecting others' emotions to studying the process of emotion detection itself.

The framework we develop here, wherein ambiguous and unexpected behavior triggers intensive cognitive processing, sets the stage for such theorizing. Abstracting from our model, scholars seeking other emotion attributions should consider the type of attribution (internal

versus external versus relational) suggested by theory on that emotion, as well as which core features of that emotion are likely to be salient to the employee. Consider two emotions in the nomological net of envy—resentment and admiration (Smith, 2000)—that individuals may experience based on others' relative advantages. Unlike with envy attributions, the valence of the behavior itself could be an initial source of information for the employee; negative behaviors are more likely to be associated with resentment, whereas positive behaviors are more likely to be associated with admiration (van de Ven et al., 2009). Moreover, unlike the "dual" focus of envy that indicates relational imbalance, these emotions are primarily "other oriented" (Smith, 2000). An implication here is that resentful or admiring coworkers do not focus on the self-referential implications of a disadvantage; they focus instead only on the employee and the specific advantage (van de Ven et al., 2009). This may occur if the advantage is in a domain with less self-relevance (Hoogland et al., 2017) or if the situation itself is believed to be immoral or wrong (van de Ven et al., 2012). Because a relational imbalance is not perceived to be responsible for the behavior, a relational attribution is unlikely. Instead, an external attribution may be more likely here, since the coworker behavior will be seen to be triggered by an advantage or a distasteful condition based on factors external to their relationship with the employee (Smith, 2000; van de Ven et al., 2009, 2012). An alternative emotion is jealousy, which, like envy, also reflects a relational imbalance (Smith & Kim, 2007), albeit one stemming from completely different initial conditions. Overall, theorizing on the causes and consequences of the attributions of these emotions is beyond the scope of our article, but we hope our theory can provide a point of departure for such inquiries.

Our research also contributes to theory on attribution by showing how emotions such as envy can themselves be the subject of attributional processes with both positive and negative responses. In particular, we extend the work on relational attributions by providing a more balanced account of the triggers and consequences of such attributions. Regarding the former, research to date has focused on negative, achievement-related behaviors as precursors to relational attribution (e.g., abusive supervision or negative performance information; Burton,

Taylor, & Barber, 2014; Eberly et al., 2017). Yet, as we discuss, negative behaviors may not always be sufficiently novel to necessitate attributional processes, since there are times when these behaviors are quite common and expected (e.g., Matta, Scott, Colquitt, Koopman, & Passantino, 2017). By broadening the scope of inquiry to the relational value of behavior and the extent to which it aligns with expectancies, we shift the focus away from relational attributions for only negative events to relational attributions for unexpected events. This helps us explain how even positive but unexpected behaviors can trigger relational attributions.

Regarding the latter, we also increase the precision of theory on the consequences of relational attributions. Here again, while research has primarily suggested that people will seek to repair relationships following relational attributions (Eberly et al., 2011), we show that at times relational attributions may lead to more negative avoidance behaviors as well. Overall, our theory augments attribution research significantly, and we call for models that more explicitly recognize discrepancy as a precursor to attribution and more holistically consider the potential triggers and outcomes of attributions.

We also make several contributions to the envy literature. Our episodic approach to being envied is a departure from the "situational" approach typically adopted. A situational approach focuses on envy that potentially stems from an aggregate of multiple, nonspecific coworkers. As a result, it obscures the fact that workplace relationships are layered, nuanced, and multiplex. This approach, we feel, has prevented prior consideration of two factors that are intrinsic to the experience of being envied: the relationship between the two individuals and the characteristics of the perceived advantage (Cohen-Charash, 2009). Hence, to this point we have lacked theory about how the existing relationship between the employee and the coworker, as well as characteristics of the envied advantage, impact the experience of perceiving coworker envy. Our episodic, unfolding model remedies this, since we articulate that not all relative advantages are created equal. Indeed, an employee may not even realize that a relative advantage might be envied. As we theorize, employees are more likely to recognize advantages as causes of envy when these advantages are more visible or have higher magnitude and relevance. We thus place boundaries around when

envy attributions are likely to occur. We also show that once an envy attribution occurs, characteristics of the specific relationship and advantage remain relevant. That is, whereas higher interdependence may prompt approach-oriented behaviors, advantages that are important to one's workplace identity may instead prompt more avoidance-oriented behaviors. As a result, we call for future research to pay more attention to episodes of being envied.

We also further extend the being envied research that has, to this point, focused only on negative behaviors as cues that lead employees to believe they are envied. By explaining how even positive behavior can, under the right conditions, be attributed to envy, we present a more comprehensive view of when perceptions of being envied can occur. An implication of this is the need to more fully incorporate both types of behaviors in theory and scales meant to study the envied (e.g., Vecchio, 2005). Additionally, our theory also helps reconcile conflicting findings about whether employees will tend to act in more approach- or avoidance-oriented ways upon perceiving others' envy. We explain this dilemma and highlight contingencies that predict when employees are likely to adopt an approach response or an avoidance response. In so doing, we contribute to work on symmetries/asymmetries in the interpersonal outcomes of emotions (van Kleef, 2014). For example, while theory on social exchange (Blau, 1964) and spirals (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Rosen, Koopman, Gabriel, & Johnson, 2016) predicts that employees may respond to undermining (prosocial) behavior with undermining (prosocial) behavior of their own, we show that this response may not always be as straightforward. By detailing the self-regulatory dilemma caused by an envy attribution, as well as the factors that influence goal prioritization after an envy attribution, we explain when a coworker's undermining behavior can lead to positive, approach-oriented responses and when a coworker's prosocial behaviors can lead to negative, avoidance-oriented responses.

Future Research

Because attributions are necessarily inferential, an important question arises: Are attributions for covert emotions correct? This question is important because if emotions coordinate social interaction, and if the emotion attribution is in error,

then subsequent behavior is based on a misreading of the situation. Consider an employee incorrectly attributing prosocial behavior to envy. The possibility exists that this employee would withdraw from interactions with that coworker, thus harming their exchange relationship, with potential adverse implications for both individuals (Dimotakis, Scott, & Koopman, 2011; Liden et al., 2016; Sherony & Green, 2002). Yet social undermining behaviors erroneously attributed to envy could lead to approach behaviors that might ultimately strengthen their relationship. An employee could also fail to attribute a coworker's behavior to envy and, thus, miss an opportunity to enhance their relationship or unwittingly give up a valuable relative advantage. As is clear, the question of attributional accuracy has complex implications for our model that we hope will be addressed in future research. One option is an integrative model that combines our perspective of envied employees with the perspective of envious employees (e.g., Tai et al., 2012) and dynamically illustrates the unfolding and interweaving of an envy episode between both parties.

Another opportunity is to expand our model beyond a single episode. Once an individual makes an envy attribution and acts accordingly, does this prior history change the way they see that coworker's behaviors in the future, thus increasing the likelihood that future behaviors will be attributed to envy? This seems possible; indeed, relationships are ongoing and mutually interlocked (March & Simon, 1958; Weick, 1979), so a prior interaction along these lines could reasonably shape expectancies regarding subsequent interactions. This is, unfortunately, beyond the scope of our episodic model. However, it is an important question for this literature going forward, since an envy attribution could serve as an anchoring event that shifts a relationship from primarily altruistic to competitive, or vice versa (Ballinger & Rockmann, 2010).

Relaxing our assumption that the employee and coworker have comparable status in the organization could also provide opportunities to extend our theory. Organizations are rife with status differentials among employees (Magee & Galinsky, 2008), and such differentials could certainly have implications for our model. For example, employees could see their status as an advantage that causes pain in others. In this case, a status differential may increase the likelihood

of making an envy attribution. Status differentials could also influence behavior following an envy attribution. Status is indicated by respect, prominence, and prestige in the eyes of others in the organization (Djurdjevic et al., 2017), and, as a result, high-status coworkers are desirable relationship partners. In this case, an employee might be less inclined to engage in avoidance-oriented behaviors, regardless of the importance of an advantage to their identity.

Moreover, our focus on the dyadic relationship and the nature of the advantage omits constructs at the individual and organizational level that may be relevant. For example, just as Lange, Crusius, and Hagemeyer (2016) linked narcissism to envy, future researchers can explore whether narcissism influences the experience of the envied individual as well. Because of their grandiose sense of self (e.g., Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001), narcissistic employees may be sensitive to negative behaviors from others and prone to make envy attributions when they perceive such behaviors. It could also be that all advantages have strong identity importance to narcissistic employees, leading them to self-regulate primarily toward a self-protection goal after an envy attribution. In terms of organizational variables, competitive climates may breed envy (Dogan & Vecchio, 2001), which could increase the sensitization of employees to ambiguous behavior from coworkers. Alternatively, perhaps in these environments workplace relationships may have less priority, leading to a tendency to self-regulate toward self-protection goals. We hope that our model opens the door to such investigations in the future and that future researchers will consider a wider array of individual, relational, and organizational factors than those we addressed.

Our theory also has implications for research at the macro level, where scholars have recently begun incorporating self-regulatory and attribution principles into their theory (e.g., Crilly, Ni, & Jiang, 2016; Gamache, McNamara, Mannor, & Johnson, 2015). Executives need to make attributions for the competitive actions of other firms, for example, and those attributions can influence their competitive responses (e.g., Gnyawali & Madhavan, 2001; Smith, Ferrier, & Ndofor, 2001). It may be that the alignment of competitive actions and the behavioral expectations of a given competitor serves as an important indicator of how the competitive action is perceived. More directly related to envy, our work may inform future research on executive compensation—specifically, the strategic implications of internal and external CEO relative pay disparity (Fredrickson, Davis-Blake, & Sanders, 2010; Seo, Gamache, Devers, & Carpenter, 2015). Since pay gaps tend to be visible, of large magnitude, and highly relevant, overpaid CEOs might be more likely to attribute envy to the actions of others both within and external to the firm, and such attributions could influence subsequent strategic decisions as well.

There are two final points we wish to make. One option for the future is to consider alternative expectancies. Our focus was on three that are relatively stable and cross levels of analysis. There may also be situational expectancies, which may arise due to idiosyncratic, circumstantial conditions. Consider an employee who receives a promotion, and the employee's supervisor promises that everyone in the workgroup was supportive. When this employee later experiences social undermining, this behavior may be unexpected when considered in light of that promise. Another option is to examine the interplay between various expectancies, or between the characteristics of an advantage that may lead to an envy attribution. For example, is behavior that aligns with contextual expectancies but violates interpersonal expectancies more or less likely to trigger systematic information processing? Similarly, would an employee be more or less likely to attribute envy if a perceived advantage was highly visible but seemingly not relevant to that coworker? Unfortunately, developing the intricate theory necessary to unpack this interplay was beyond the scope of our article. However, we think that such theory would be an interesting and fruitful opportunity for future research.

CONCLUSION

To what would you attribute your coworker's behavior if the scenario in our opening example happened to you? How would you respond? How might that response affect your relationship with that coworker? If your coworker's behavior was due to envy—indeed, this is possible—the extant literature is ill-suited to answer these questions. Scholarly interest in workplace envy is increasing, yet attention to the plight of those who are envied has lagged. By elucidating the attributional nature of being envied, as well as the causes and consequences of this attribution, we provide a platform to answer these questions. Our

hope is that by shining a spotlight on envied employees, our work will catalyze further theory building and testing in this area.

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