

Competition, rivalry and envy at the workplace : a Lacanian perspective

Bénédicte Vidaillet
Professor in Organizational Behavior
University of Lille 2
6 rue de l'hôtel de ville – BP 59
59051 ROUBAIX cx 1
France

b.vidaillet@free.fr

Our goal in this article is twofold. Firstly, we wish to show that the management systems that are used in many organizations, by stimulating the performance of their employees and by trying to increase the competition between them, also lead to develop workplace envy. Secondly, we suggest that using a psychoanalytical framework based on the Lacanian theory can help us better understand workplace envy, in relation to both competition, rivalry, performance enhancement, as well as violence and destructiveness in the organizations.

Despite the fact that envy is a prevalent emotion in the workplace, it has generally received little scholarly attention. Only a few studies, most of them derived from the works of Melanie Klein, have been developed during the last ten years. This theoretical framework leads those that use it to emphasize the highly destructive consequences of envy on the envied person as well as on the organization and its functioning (Halton, 1994; Kets de Vries & Miller, 1989; Mouly & Sankaran, 2002; Schlapobersky, 1994; Stein, 2000a, 2000b). In those studies, envy is supposed to reveal the sadistic and aggressive aspect of groups and organizations (Stein, 2000a). However, a recent study whose theoretical framework is based on social psychology has suggested that envy could enhance the performance of the envious person (Schaubroeck & Lam, 2004).

In this article, we suggest that using Lacan's theories as an alternative to the Klein-Bion movement that has, up to now, dominated the research about organizational envy inspired by psychoanalysis, seems essential to understand why envy could both lead a person to work harder as well as to attack their rivals. This theoretical framework enables us to better integrate the existing studies on organizational envy and to understand how envy can develop in a highly competitive work environment. In his theory, Lacan has strongly emphasized the fact that the construction of a subject's identity is a complex process in which the other plays an essential part, which, however, causes self-alienation. The theory of the Mirror phase as well as Lacan's reinterpretation of the Oedipus complex are particularly relevant in this respect. The Lacanian perspective makes it possible to focus on what, in the experience of envy, is related to narcissism, and to the identification with the other that may be first a model and then a rival. The organizations that encourage competition and rivalry also develop envy and finally violence and destruction. .

Our analysis is based on a case study. It is the case of a High Street retail outlet specializing in household appliances. The data were collected by way of interviews and participant observation three days a week during a whole year. This case study enables us to put forward the organisational features likely to favour the feeling of envy among the employees. The permanent resorting to models, the comparisons between individuals, the enactment of these comparisons and the role of the managerial staff are especially studied. The consequences of this envy are obvious : violence between co-workers is frequent, there is no team spirit in the shop, disputes between salespeople happen daily in front of customers, which in the long term is detrimental to the running of the organisation. However, the activity of the shop and its performance, i.e. turnover and mark-up, are concurrently rising. This example is symbolic of what happens in numerous companies in which the quantitative quest for results is based on competition and rivalry and breeds envy with its potential for destruction in the long term.

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