



The roles of informational unfairness and political climate in the relationship between dispositional envy and job performance in Pakistani organizations



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ABSTRACT

Drawing from conservation of resources and trait activation theory, this study unpacks the relationship between employees' dispositional envy and job performance, considering the mediating effect of informational unfairness and the moderating effect of political climate. Multisource, time-lagged data from employees and their supervisors in Pakistani organizations show that an important reason that dispositional envy may diminish job performance is that employees develop beliefs that their organization is unfair in its information provision. This mediating role of informational unfairness is particularly salient to the extent that employees perceive that the organizational decision-making climate is marked by dysfunctional politics. The study informs organizations how they can mitigate the risk that persistent feelings of envy lead to negative performance outcomes—that is, by avoiding work climates that are highly political in nature.

1. Introduction

Organizational life offers plenty of opportunities for employees to compare themselves with others and potentially feel envious if they perceive that those others possess more intelligence, knowledge, or capabilities (Smith & Kim, 2007). As a result of such envy, employees might worry about their ability to fulfill their job obligations or their career situation in general (Duffy & Shaw, 2000; Parrott, 1991), which can generate negative outcomes such as depression, lower job satisfaction, or enhanced turnover intentions (Duffy & Shaw, 2000; Smith, Parrott, Diener, Hoyle, & Kim, 1999). Although envy sometimes emerges in response to specific events, it also can be *dispositional*—that is, a relatively stable, individual feature that captures persistent feelings of inferiority and resentment (Kemp & Bolle, 2013; Smith et al., 1999).¹ In the presence of dispositional envy, which is the focus of this study, employees suffer lower self-esteem or feelings of reduced self-worth due to the repeated, negative comparisons they make with organizational peers (Salovey & Rothman, 1991; Smith et al., 1999).

Despite acknowledging that dispositional envy can generate self-depreciating thoughts through negative social comparisons (Tesser, 1991), previous research has not considered how efforts by

dispositionally envious employees to *conserve* their feelings of self-worth might reduce their propensity to engage in performance-enhancing activities, nor does it address the circumstances in which such effects might be more likely (Smith & Kim, 2007). Therefore, the current study draws from conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989) to propose that employees' dispositional envy might be associated with lower job performance, because of their belief that they receive insufficient information about how to fulfill their job duties (Bies & Moag, 1986; Greenberg, 1990). That is, developing a belief in “informational unfairness” may help dispositionally envious employees protect their personal resource of self-esteem (Dudenhöffer & Dormann, 2015; Hobfoll, 1989), yet this belief in turn may also provoke a reduced propensity to undertake performance-enhancing efforts (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001). In accordance with trait activation theory (Tett & Burnett, 2003; Tett & Guterman, 2000), we further propose that perceived political climate—or the extent to which employees perceive that the organizational climate is marked by self-serving behaviors and behind-the-scenes decision making (Abbas, Raja, Darr, & Bouckennooghe, 2014; Kacmar & Ferris, 1991)—functions as a trait-relevant cue that triggers this mediating role of informational unfairness. Thus, the primary aim of this study is to create a deeper understanding of *how* and *when*

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¹ Previous research also indicates that dispositional envy is a unique personal trait, distinct from individual differences such as dispositional jealousy or neuroticism (Smith et al., 1999), that shapes work outcomes.

dispositional envy may exert negative performance effects.

In so doing, this study makes several contributions. In particular, dispositional envy has received little empirical attention in relation to explaining reduced job performance (Smith et al., 1999; Smith & Kim, 2007). Although prior research considers how persistent feelings of inferiority and resentment, relative to other group members, might undermine effective group functioning (Duffy & Shaw, 2000), empirical studies of the individual performance consequences of dispositional envy are scarce, without any specific investigations of *why* this personal trait might undermine employees' propensity to undertake performance-enhancing efforts. By investigating unfairness beliefs as critical causal mechanisms that connect dispositional envy to reduced job performance, we extend previous research that has theorized about the link between dispositional envy and unfairness but not examined it empirically (Heider, 1958; Smith, 1991; Smith & Kim, 2007). More generally, our focus on *informational* unfairness complements organizational research that tends to devote more attention to the roles of distributive, procedural, or interpersonal fairness in predicting employee outcomes (e.g., Chebat & Slusarczyk, 2005; De Coninck, 2010; Gumusluoglu, Karakitapoglu-Aygün, & Hirst, 2013). In this sense, we respond to explicit calls for more studies of this underexplored aspect of organizational justice as a means to explain performance outcomes (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001; De Clercq & Saridakis, 2015; Skarlicki, Barclay, & Douglas, 2008).

In addition, we explicate how perceived political climate might activate the mediating role of informational unfairness in connecting dispositional envy with lower job performance. Accordingly, we extend previous research that has considered how perceptions of dysfunctional politics may invigorate the harmful effects of adverse work conditions, such as perceived contract breaches (Kiewitz, Restubog, Zagenczyk, & Hochwarter, 2009) or leader–member exchange differentiation (Yuan, Xiao, Li, Chen, & Ning, 2016). Consistent with trait activation theory (Tett & Guterman, 2000), we propose that perceived political climate may *activate* or trigger the belief among dispositionally envious employees that their organization fails to provide them with sufficient information to do their job adequately, which then reinforces their reluctance to undertake performance-enhancing activities (Bies & Moag, 1986; Shin, Seo, Shapiro, & Taylor, 2015). In so doing, we offer critical insights into how organizations can immunize employees against the threats of persistent feelings of inferiority and resentment—namely, by discouraging a political climate marked by self-serving behaviors. Finally, the moderated mediation effect in our model—which combines a mediating role of informational unfairness with a moderating role of perceived political climate—extends previous applications of trait activation theory that tend to focus on how situational variables moderate the *direct* link between personal traits and job performance (Bouckennooghe, Raja, & Butt, 2013; Kacmar, Collins, Harris, & Judge, 2009).

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

2.1. Proposed conceptual model

Dispositionally envious employees experience a chronic sense of inferiority, marked by repeated feelings of frustration whenever they compare themselves with organizational peers (Smith et al., 1999). Because of these negative feelings, employees may experience significant resource losses, in the form of tarnished self-esteem during their daily interactions with others (Salovey & Rothman, 1991; Smith et al., 1999; Tesser, 1991). Previous research identifies self-esteem as a critical personal resource that enables people to deal with stressful life situations (Nyamathi, Stein, & Swanson, 2000), and according to conservation of resources (COR) theory, employees have a greater tendency to protect themselves against the loss of this personal resource to the extent that they experience frustration during the execution of their

daily job tasks (Dudenhöffer & Dormann, 2015; Hobfoll, 1989). On the basis of this COR logic, it follows then that employees marked by strong dispositional envy may seek to protect themselves against feelings of reduced self-worth by looking for external causes for their sense of inferiority (Hobfoll, 1989; Mayo & Mallin, 2010). In particular, a belief that the organization treats them unfairly can function as an important rationale for diverting the blame for their perceived inadequacies to an external source, thus enabling them to conserve positive feelings of self-worth and protect their personal resource of self-esteem (Van den Bos, Bruins, Wilke, & Dronkert, 1999). That is, unfairness beliefs help employees with a natural tendency to feel inferior avoid self-deprecating thoughts (Dudenhöffer & Dormann, 2015; Hobfoll, 2001; Turner & Roszell, 1994).

We focus in particular on how a belief in *informational* unfairness—suggesting that the organization is not honest or forthcoming in its information provision (Bies & Moag, 1986; Shin et al., 2015)—may constitute an important response to persistent feelings of inferiority. Extant research indicates that organizational unfairness beliefs can explain why certain adverse work conditions, such as abusive supervision (Burton & Hoobler, 2011) or job insecurity (Piccoli & De Witte, 2015), generate negative work outcomes. However, no previous studies address their potential role in relation to the effect of dispositional envy. Several elements might explain how dispositional envy undermines job performance—such as the enhanced stress and associated energy depletion that come from continuous self-deprecating comparisons with others (Smith & Kim, 2007) or a proclivity to engage in deviant behaviors that hurt organizational peers even if these efforts come at the expense of one's own success (Duffy & Shaw, 2000)—but we focus specifically on informational unfairness beliefs as critical mechanisms that connect dispositional envy to reduced job performance. In so doing, we explicitly acknowledge that the negative impact of this personal trait on job performance may stem, in important ways, from employees' desire to protect their personal resource bases by searching for an external cause for their own perceived inadequacies (Hobfoll, 2001; Mayo & Mallin, 2010).

We further suggest that employees' perceptions of a political climate might function as catalysts of this indirect effect of dispositional envy on job performance, through informational unfairness beliefs. Prior research has called for further consideration of the situational moderators of the relationships between personal traits and job performance (Kacmar et al., 2009; Tett & Burnett, 2003). Accordingly, we investigate the role of perceived political climate, or perceptions that the organizational climate embraces self-serving behaviors and that organizational decision making is predicated on self-interest instead of the collective good (Kacmar & Ferris, 1991). Consistent with trait activation theory (Tett & Guterman, 2000) and COR theory (Hobfoll, 2001), we argue that the extent to which dispositionally envious employees perceive their work environment as strongly political may function as a trait-relevant cue that *reinforces* both (1) their reliance on informational unfairness beliefs to explain their personal shortcomings and (2) their subsequent reluctance to engage in performance-enhancing activities. That is, when employees have a chronic tendency to feel inferior and resentful, their observation of political maneuvering in the organizational environment may trigger stronger convictions about informational unfairness, because dysfunctional politics invigorate the threat of personal resource loss in the form of reduced self-esteem as a result of perceived inadequacies (Abbas et al., 2014; Tett & Guterman, 2000). Moreover, the perception of a political climate may create a negative resource spiral (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001) that reinforces negative feelings due to unfair information provision, such that employees give up on meeting their performance requirements. The proposed theoretical framework and its constitutive hypotheses are summarized in Fig. 1 and explained in more detail next.

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