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Abstract

In this article, we explore the social construction of workplace envy through an analysis of its portrayal in a fictional narrative. Based on our examination of three excerpts from Richard Russo’s novel *Straight Man*, we argue that envy is socially constructed in prominent and revealing episodes within broader organizational narratives. We further show that envy both serves as a catalytic emotion that engenders action and sensemaking, and at the same time, acts as a mechanism that reproduces the moral and cultural order within which it occurs.

Keywords: emotion, envy, fiction, narrative, social construction

It should come as no surprise that the experience of work is saturated with emotion (Ashforth and Humphrey 1995). We are, after all, intensely emotional beings. So it would seem quite unlikely that we could suppress our emotions for eight hours a day, five days a week, even if we wanted to. Despite the growing body of research that acknowledges the important role of emotion at work (for example, Ashkanazy et al. 2000; Payne and Cooper 2001), good organizations are still often regarded as places where feelings have been managed, designed out, or removed (Fineman 2000). The traditional view of organizations creates an impression of organizational life in which decisions can be based on rational processes and impersonal criteria (Martin et al. 2000), with a limited role for emotions, and even less significance accorded to negative, strong, or disruptive emotions.

In this article, we explore an emotion that is important and prevalent in everyday workplaces, and yet largely overlooked in organizational research — envy. Traditionally, envy has enjoyed an important place in accounts of human misbehaviour (Sabini and Silver 1986). Much has been written about the sources of envy (Cohen-Charash 2000; Lieblich 1971; Smith et al. 1999) and about its effects (Cohen-Charash 2000; Salovey and Rodin 1984; Tesser et al. 1988); few attempts have been made, however, to provide significant linguistic or phenomenological analyses of envy itself (Sabini and Silver 1986). The experience of envy at work has received even less scholarly attention (Lazarus and Cohen-Charash 2001). We address these gaps with an investigation of workplace envy as a form of cultural performance. Rather than treating emotion as an intra-psychic state, we conceptualize envy and
other emotions as socially constructed in organizational discourse, and particularly through the narratives constructed by organizational members. In order to investigate the social construction of envy in organizations, we draw on its portrayal in a fictional novel that vividly captures the dynamics of this important and powerful emotion.

This article contributes in several ways to the study of envy and of workplace emotions in general. First, our analysis explores the social construction of envy and suggests that it plays a paradoxical role in organizations, triggering individual action while at the same time reproducing the dominant organizational culture. Second, we contribute to the emerging discussion of emotions as performative in nature (Gergen 1999; Sandelands and Boudens 2000; Sarbin 1989). We argue that emotions, whether displayed or merely ‘felt’, can usefully be conceptualized as elements of narrative and thus opened up to the conceptual and methodological tools associated with narrative analysis (Czarniawska 1998; Riessman 1993). Third, we demonstrate the value of utilizing fictional narratives as a source of data for emotions research. While others have made persuasive arguments for the value of fictional narratives in organizational research (Czarniawska 1999; Knights and Willmott 1999; Phillips 1995), we offer an illustration of how fiction can be used to illuminate a specific emotion that is relatively difficult to access through other means.

We present the remainder of the article in five major sections. In the first section, we discuss the challenges of studying workplace emotion and argue for a narrative approach. The second section describes our research methods, including the data we examined and the analytical approach we have taken. Third, we present an analysis of workplace envy in three excerpts from narrative fiction. In the fourth section, we discuss the social construction of envy and the role that envy plays in organizational life. Here, we draw on our own analyses and more broadly on theory and research that focuses on the social construction of emotions. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of our article for research on emotions in organizations.

A Narrative Approach to the Study of Workplace Envy

There are several reasons why the workplace is an ideal arena in which to study emotions. Most people spend a very large part of their lives at work, and invest substantially in it their energies and ambitions. Many workplaces are characterized by close, frequent interaction between individuals and high levels of interdependence, which together often lead to relationships that extend beyond work or task boundaries (Frost et al. 2000; Horn and Horn 1982). Contemporary workplaces are also increasingly recognized as stressful environments, characterized for many participants by strong emotions, such as anger, envy, and fear (Frost and Robinson 1999). The nature of many work environments places challenges and demands on workers which often increase the range and intensity of emotions, both positive and negative, invested in work relationships.
The methodological challenges of researching emotion are considerable, however, often leading researchers to simplify how emotions are conceptualized, and to examine them in narrow, unrepresentative ways. One methodological problem is that emotional displays may not always correspond to feelings, or may not reflect the complexity of feelings that underpin those displays (Ashforth and Tomiuk 2000; Sandelands and Boudens 2000; Sarbin 1989). Further, in order to make emotions more amenable to quantitative analysis, the range of emotions considered in organizational research has been constricted: researchers have tended to group emotions into broad categories, such as positive, neutral, and negative (Morris and Feldman 1996), and address them only indirectly through global attitudes such as satisfaction, stress, morale, and commitment. Moreover, the difficulty of gaining research access to situations in which strong or negative emotions may arise has resulted in an undue focus on easily observable emotional displays, often of frontline service workers (for example, Sutton and Rafaeli 1988). In addition, there has been a tendency to focus on extraordinary organizational events, such as role transitions and intergroup conflict, which has left the emotions of mundane organizational life relatively unexamined (Ashforth and Humphrey 1995).

**Emotions as Cultural Performances**

We argue that a broader and more multifaceted analysis of emotion becomes possible when emotion is understood as socially constructed. Mead (1934) was among the earliest to suggest that there is no feeling (or only rudimentary feeling) independent of social processes: he argued that emotions come into recognizable existence through an internal expression which is directed toward an internalized ‘other’ that represents society and social norms. Similarly, Bruner (1990) proposes that we experience the world and interpret our feelings through internal narratives of past events. We thereby make our experiences sensible, even to ourselves, by expressing them in ways that would be understandable to another. Even emotions that appear less obviously social, such as sadness or contentment, are components of cultural life (Gergen 1999) and so are something we do, as much as something we have (Averill 1980). Armon-Jones (1986: 33) describes emotions as ‘socioculturally determined patterns of experience and expression which are acquired, and subsequently feature, in specifically social situations’. The concept of emotions as cultural elements is supported by cross-cultural research that has documented the cultural specificity of many emotions, their meanings in social life, and their public display (Heelas 1996). The capacity to experience specific emotions, therefore, is contingent upon having learned to interpret experiences according to the values, norms, and expectations of the culture in which one is participating.

Although a social constructionist approach to emotions has gained considerable support in recent years (see Averill 1980; Fineman 1996; Harré 1986), it has also been criticized as portraying an overly socialized conception of emotions and ignoring their fundamental experience (Craib 1998). In his critique of the sociology of emotions, Craib (1998: 109) argues that rather
than understanding emotions as cultural performances, ‘we should at least entertain the idea that there is a range of emotions common to all humans, perhaps rooted in our biological make-up, but that the available register of emotions, forms of emotional experiencing and expression, as well as the wider meanings of emotions, vary culturally and historically’. This argument, however, points to what we see as a clear benefit of adopting a social constructionist position with respect to emotions in organizations. While there may be universality in the most basic human feelings, our interest is precisely in, as Craib describes, the available register, forms of experiencing, and wider meanings of emotions that together largely constitute what we mean when we refer to the phenomenon of emotions in organizations.

One form of cultural expression that has long been associated with the expression of emotions is the narrative. Narratives, which generally involve consequential events and chronological organization, reflect the human desire to have events display coherence, organization, and closure (Golden-Biddle and Locke 1993). Narratives present feelings embedded in the social and historical contexts that profoundly influence them (Riessman 1993). An appreciation of these contexts is critical. Gergen (1994), for example, argues that to understand emotion, we must examine the ways in which emotional performances are circumscribed by and embedded in broader patterns of relationships. As he observes, if we cut an emotional performance away from ongoing relationships, it either would not occur or would be nonsensical. Narratives capture social context and relationships, and allow us to understand the complex patterns of interaction in which emotional performances take place. Moreover, the personal and specific nature of narratives makes them particularly important for the expression of highly emotional issues (Riessman 1993). This may be especially true for extreme or negative emotions, for which narratives may provide a milieu that connects them to a broader context and so makes them reasonable and understandable. Although narratives may often evoke emotional reactions on the part of those who listen to or read them, our interest here is in the way that emotions are socially constructed within the narratives themselves.

Narratives in organizations provide a potentially powerful focus for empirical analysis. The narrative turn in the social sciences (Riessman 1993) has already entered organization theory in several ways. Organizational stories have been collected, categorized, and analysed for insights into organizational life (Boje 1991). Oral histories have also been used to document and understand organizational members’ professional and personal lives (Gergen 1992). In addition, researchers have recently applied literary and discourse analysis techniques to the close examination of organizational texts (Martin 1990; O’Connor 1995). More generally, there has emerged a significant body of research that has examined organizational discourse, including narratives (Czarniawska-Joerges 1996; Hardy and Phillips 1999; Mumby and Clair 1997). The appeal of narratives for organizational research comes from their ability to capture more of the richness and complexity of organizational life than can be accessed through more traditional sources of data, such as surveys or structured interviews (Boje 1991; Lincoln and Guba 1985).
Narrative Fiction in Organizational Research

A potentially rich and powerful source of narratives for analysis only recently considered by organizational researchers comes from fiction, such as novels, plays and movies. This work challenges the traditional demarcation between novels and other organizational texts, which Phillips (1995) argues has been drawn too severely. The separation of fictional novels from the empirical examination of work and organizational life is also a relatively recent phenomenon: in the 19th century, for instance, it was largely historians and writers of realist novels who described the emergence of capitalist structures. Among them, authors such as Strindberg (in *The Red Room* of 1879) considered issues of workplace specialization, the social effects of new technologies, and the division of labour (Jacobsson 1994). Similarly, Dickens was able through his popular fiction to focus public attention in Britain on working conditions, resulting in policy and legislative changes. Zola, a strong proponent of the realist novel, which was then a new and innovative genre, conducted extensive ethnographic research on the work and lives of miners in 19th-century France before writing *Germinal* in 1883. More recently, highly detailed representations of life within contemporary organizations have included Tom Wolfe’s 1987 *Bonfire of the Vanities*, David Lodge’s 1990 *Nice Work*, and *Armadillo* written by William Boyd in 1998.

As a source of data for organizational research, narrative fiction has several important advantages over other data sources. It can provide a powerful basis for both the generation and testing of theory (Phillips 1995). Novels can also serve as models and a source of inspiration for organization studies (Czarniawska 1999). A unique advantage of fiction is that novels are available from a wide variety of times and places, providing a wider reflection on business culture than is usually the case in management contexts (Czarniawska-Joerges and Guillet de Monthoux 1994). Novels are also particularly effective at capturing the processual, psychological, and lived quality of organizational work (Boland 1994; Knights and Willmott 1999), and excel at revealing the many facets of complex human relationships.

Recently, organizational researchers have used fictional works to examine a variety of organizational issues, often exploring relatively broad connections between narrative fiction and organizational realities. Knights and Willmott (1999), for instance, explore issues of power, identity, inequality, and insecurity in four contemporary novels. In an edited collection of essays, Czarniawska-Joerges and Guillet de Monthoux (1994) bring together analyses of novels from different times and places that touch on issues of interest to organizational theory, including power, disgrace, betrayal, and paranoia in organizations. In addition, the traditional boundaries of organization studies are challenged in a recent special issue of *Organization*, in which science fiction novels are used to examine such issues as meta-theory (Phillips and Zyglidopolous 1999), and the limits of positivist scientific inquiry and knowledge (Case 1999). Although this work has added substantially to our understanding of organizations and has highlighted the potential of fiction as data, relatively little of it has used
narrative fiction to investigate specific organizational phenomena, such as discrete emotions.

**Using Narrative Fiction to Study Workplace Envy**

Narrative fiction is a particularly appropriate source of data for the study of workplace emotions. This is partly because emotion is an aspect of fiction that it is especially important be constructed realistically and in rich detail. Whereas the context of a story or the abilities of the characters might be fabricated in an incredible way, it is critical to engaging reader interest and empathy that the emotional responses of characters be plausible. The dramatist’s interest in the experience, meaning, and consequences of emotions can offer insights to organization studies that are complementary to the concern of scientists for the causes and categorization of emotions. Novels and short stories also overcome many of the difficulties associated with studying emotion in the workplace, including access to research sites, the effect of the investigator, and separating inner feelings from emotional displays. Through the use of first-person and omniscient narrators, fictional narratives can provide direct access to characters’ real-time emotional experiences, with detail, nuance, and subtlety. The use of such narrative techniques does not, of course, diminish the degree to which we are dealing with emotion as a social construction; first-person monologues and omniscient presentations of characters’ emotions constitute inter-subjective accounts of emotion constructed by the author for the readers. A final strength of narrative fiction is that the full range of emotions, their dynamics, and their varying intensities are represented, including less socially acceptable (and often covert) emotions such as fear, anger, and envy. Complex, ambivalent, and changing emotions that are difficult to access through traditional research methods are particularly well suited to vivid representation through fiction. Although relying on narrative fiction to examine workplace emotions has fundamental limitations that stem from the degree to which fictional representations can ever represent ‘truthful’ accounts, we believe that this limitation is balanced by the potential for narrative fiction to provide useful insights into often veiled workplace emotions.

We draw on narrative fiction to study envy in the workplace. For our purposes, envy can be defined as occurring when a perception exists that ‘a person lacks another’s superior quality, achievement, or possession and either desires it or wishes that the other lacked it’ (Parrott and Smith 1993: 906). Sabini and Silver (1986: 168) argue that the concept of envy is used in a variety of different ways in everyday discourse:

‘Depending on the context, “envy” may refer to an emotion (“He was overcome by envy”), a reason for action (“He acted out of envy”) or a characterization of an action as a transgression of a moral order, i.e., a sin.’

Within the social sciences, envy has predominantly been viewed as an emotion. A key scholarly literature to explore envy has been psychoanalytic writing, where it has been positioned as a central facet of human experience (Klein 1957; Segal 1964). In this tradition, envy is seen as a complex emotion
involving rage, destructive hostility, greed and shame, and which develops in early childhood as a defensive reaction against anxiety (Barth 1988). Envy is typically regarded as an unconscious phenomenon, taking place in the minds of individuals (Stein 2000). This approach to envy has largely followed the traditional psychological view of emotions as involuntary and uncontrollable reactions to external stimuli (Averill 1996; Sabini and Silver 1986).

Psychological research on envy has highlighted its relationship to jealousy, with which it is often confused. Bedeian (1995) argues that while envy is primarily dyadic (restricted to the envier and a target person, who possesses something the envier covets), jealousy stems from the fear of losing, to a rival, a valued relationship with another person or thing. Although envy and jealousy are often contrasted, they are just as often confused, both in analytical writing and in everyday speech (Segal 1964). A notable aspect of this confusion is that the much more common direction of confusion is for envy to be referred to as jealousy (Segal 1964). Kets de Vries (1992) argues that this may be because jealousy is considered a more socially acceptable emotion, and less equated with a sense of inferiority. In discussing envy as a sin, Sabini and Silver (1986: 168) argue that ‘It is felt to be a nastier, more demeaning, less natural sin than the others.’ From our perspective, envy is an interesting emotion precisely because of its negative connotations and its strong association with sin and inferiority. Although we do not follow a psychological or psychoanalytical tradition, we appreciate the centrality that this approach has allocated envy in social life: as Kets de Vries (1992: 57) argues, ‘One may not like being possessed by envy, but one cannot avoid having to live with it.’

In spite of the ubiquity of envy in social systems, it has until recently been virtually ignored in the social sciences outside of psychology (Kets de Vries 1992; Stein 2000). Workplace envy, in particular, has generally received little scholarly attention (Ashforth and Humphrey 1995). This is despite the fact that envy is present in the workplace, and a natural result of the assignment of limited organizational resources (Bedeian 1995; Cohen-Charash 2000) and the frequent opportunities individuals have of comparing themselves unfavourably to their peers. One reason that workplace envy may have been overlooked is that it is often less visible than other strong emotions, perhaps because envy, and the feelings of inferiority and resentment associated with it, are seen as socially disgraceful. Because of its typically covert nature, envy may go unaddressed in organizations. This is in spite of the fact that it can significantly undermine individual and group performance, potentially leading to job dissatisfaction, supervisor dissatisfaction, and a tendency to quit (Duffy and Shaw 2000).

Our conceptualization of emotions as socially constructed and our interest in narrative fiction as a source of research data leads us to the research questions that guide our study. In taking a social constructionist approach to investigating workplace envy, we are concerned with envy as a cultural performance. This leads to our first research question: How is envy socially constructed in organizations? As part of an organizational narrative, work-
place envy has the potential to affect both the individuals who experience it and the organizations within which it occurs. This leads to our second research question: What role(s) does envy play in organizations?

**Methods**

In this study, we adopt an interpretative methodology (Lincoln and Guba 1985) in which emotions are treated as socially constructed and culturally embedded (Edwards and Potter 1992). In brief, we develop a narrative analysis (Riessman 1993) of the role of envy in a set of passages from the 1997 novel *Straight Man* by American author Richard Russo.

**Methodological Approach**

A wide variety of approaches to the analysis of texts exists in the social sciences (Ballmer and Brennenstuhl 1981; Johansen 1993). These range from content analyses that systematically, and usually quantitatively, examine thematic patterns across passages of text (Krippendorff 1980) to formal linguistic analyses which focus on the formal aspects of text (Ballmer and Brennenstuhl 1981; Stubbs 1983) and interpretative approaches which focus on developing an interpretation of the text that emphasizes both the context of interpretation and the text itself (Gergen 1999; Phillips and Brown 1993). We believe that an interpretative approach is particularly appropriate to our use of a fictional narrative to examine emotions in the workplace. In drawing on fictional narratives as research data, it is important to keep in mind their ontological status and the effects that status must have on any analysis. The ‘truth’ of fictional narratives comes not from the veracity of their plots, but from the degree to which some aspects of them resonate with readers. Thus, we can treat a fictional narrative as ‘data’ in the sense that it provides a ‘real’ account of the way in which an emotion (envy) is socially constructed through a textual portrayal of its experience. Adopting an interpretative approach is consistent with this notion of truth, since the product of an interpretative analysis is some kind of account (results, theory, propositions, and so on) that is explicitly rooted in the interaction of the analyst and the text.

Emotions, as we have conceptualized them, are performative; whether expressed verbally, displayed physically or simply experienced subjectively, they are constituted out of socially and culturally meaningful elements of discourse (Gergen 1999). Consequently, emotions must be inherently connected to the social and cultural context of the narrative in which they are embedded. In adopting an interpretative approach to address the above questions, we are not concerned with delivering the one and only answer to these questions. Rather, we have attempted to develop a set of answers that is consistent with both the text and our analytic approach (Czarniawska 1998; O’Connor 1995). Riessman (1993) notes that the features of a narrative account on which a researcher will focus depends upon a range of idiosyncratic factors, including the investigator’s research question, theoretical and
epistemological position, and personal background. Our backgrounds as interpretative scholars, emotion researchers, and academics familiar with university organizational challenges lead us to highlight the organization- and occupation-related aspects of envy in our study.

The Data

The fictional passages that are the focus of our analysis are drawn from the novel *Straight Man* (Russo 1997). This novel was selected for several reasons. First, *Straight Man* presents a rich consideration of issues and experiences that are both widespread and significant in organizational life. The events of the novel take place at a fictional, small US university facing severe budget cuts, the allocation of which pits department against department, and long-time colleagues against each other. Such downsizing, layoffs and budget cuts are commonplace events in contemporary organizations, with important consequences for organizations and their employees. The second reason for choosing this novel was the presence of strong, complex, and well-articulated emotions throughout the text, as the characters face challenging personal and professional issues. Their workplace and status are threatened by political change, the local economic climate, and the short-term manoeuvring and agendas of politicians. The third important aspect of the novel is the narrator’s reflexive and performative style: throughout the novel, the main character and narrator, Devereaux, muses considerably on his work, marriage, physical failings, and diminished appreciation of life. This aspect of the book is consistent with our interest in the performative, socially constructed nature of emotions and provides accessible, transparent data on which our analysis can focus.

We have purposely chosen a contemporary academic setting because we believe it provides an especially appropriate context in which to examine workplace envy. This environment is frequently characterized by a number of factors which can threaten self-esteem, increase comparisons, and breed resentment between peers — any of which might provoke or heighten envious experiences. First, academic life is becoming increasingly stressful at the same time that its status in the community is declining (Fisher 1994). Second, in many countries, universities are offering fewer opportunities for advancement, which intensifies both competition for promotion, and for resources and status among those who remain stuck at a lower, less prestigious level. Third, academia is typical of the professional work arena in that reputation among peers (based on affiliation, rank, and publication record in universities) is a key resource, made all the more significant by the frequent absence of external, material rewards for scholarly achievement. Fourth, we can also expect comparisons with peers to be intensified by the very close, long-term relationships characterizing many university faculties and divisions. In combination, these factors can provide an organizational context in which envy is particularly potent and prevalent. In addition, examining envy in a contemporary academic environment will allow many readers of this article to bring their own interpretations and experience to bear, as we have done, on familiar aspects of the academic context.
In examining envy in *Straight Man*, we consider three specific passages in which Devereaux experiences and reflects on feelings of envy in his workplace. We chose these passages because they offered clear and succinct portrayals of envy, which lent themselves to detailed analysis. In addition to being times that Devereaux acknowledges envying others, the events in the passages we have examined are ones which prompt him to consider seriously significant changes in his actions and personal outlook, changes that he imagines might allow him to get beyond his current professional and personal stalemate. Although our analysis relies on three relatively short passages from the novel, this approach is consistent with more traditional qualitative approaches wherein the researcher concentrates on short extracts from an extended field study in order to analyse them closely and systematically (for example, Kärreman and Alvesson 2001; Watson 1995). In studies of this kind, and particularly ones that focus on language use, it is impossible for researchers to present anything more than a small fraction of their data if they are to be published in journal articles rather than books. Similarly, in order to deal with the social construction of envy using this novel as a source of data, it was essential that we attempt to find exemplary passages on which we could focus. In so doing, we adopt a similar approach to researchers seeking ‘transparent’ or ‘extreme’ cases (Eisenhardt 1989; Pettigrew 1990) in order to better examine a little understood phenomenon. Moreover, just as these ethnographic studies rely on the researcher’s deep knowledge of the organizational context to enhance the validity of the analysis and argument (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Van Maanen 1998), our analysis of these extracts relies considerably on our close reading of the entire text. One advantage that utilizing a novel as data offers relative to traditional ethnographic approaches, however, is the easy availability of the entire text to anyone who might be interested in scrutinizing our findings.

**Data Analysis**

In studying emotion, Harré (1986) argues for a methodology that is able to elucidate the social functions that emotional talk and emotional displays perform within a given culture. In our study, we are interested in examining the social construction of workplace envy, the roles it plays in the lives of organizational members, and its function as an element of organizational discourse. Because we approach these issues through the analysis of narrative fiction, we began by developing a set of analytical questions that could be applied to fictional passages in which envy was a key element. The questions are intended to allow a systematic examination of the passages and are tied closely to the two research questions that guide the study. Our interest here is in the way that envy is constructed as an element in narrative fiction as an emotion associated with one of the characters, rather than with the emotions experienced by readers of narrative fiction (including our emotions as readers and commentators on the text).

Our first analytical question focuses on the way in which envy is socially constructed. We argue that for an emotion to be socially constructed in
narrative fiction, it needs to be presented in a way that is consistent with readers’ understandings and experiences of the emotion. We have argued that the social construction of emotion is a cultural accomplishment that requires knowledge and understanding of the appropriate cultural rules regarding that emotion, including how it is to be displayed, where and when it is considered appropriate, and with whom it can be legitimately associated. Thus, regardless of the narrative device (for example, first-person monologue, dialogue, or omniscient presentation) employed by an author to present an emotion, the author must draw on certain narrative resources to construct envy as a plausible emotion for the character to experience.

It is our interest in exactly these resources that leads to our first analytical question.

(1) What Narrative Resources Does the Author Use to Construct the Character's Experience of Envy as Plausible for the Reader?

In order to understand a specific emotion, we need to position it in relation to other similar and different emotions. More generally, from a social constructionist perspective, all concepts (including emotions) are made meaningful by their relationship to other concepts and the implicit rules which prescribe and proscribe particular usages (Hardy and Phillips 1999). Thus, a key way in which emotions are made meaningful is through their relationship to other emotions. For a particular emotion to be socially constructed in narrative fiction, the author must also convey the feelings that accompany, enrich, and complicate that emotion. This is particularly true in the case of envy, a very complex emotion which, in addition to merely coveting an advantage enjoyed by another, necessarily involves strong feelings about the self and the envied party (Kets de Vries 1992).

Our second analytical question is thus as follows.

(2) What Emotions Accompany the Character's Experience of Envy?

A central concern in this paper is the role that envy plays in organizations, and, in particular, its impact on the lives of organizational members. Gergen (1999) argues that emotional expressions make sense by virtue of their position in a relational scenario, and that once an emotion is performed, the relational scenario also prescribes what follows. We agree that emotions in organizations have consequences that extend well beyond their immediate experience, in that they play a crucial role in determining people’s actions and decisions (Gergen 1994; Harré 1986).

This leads to our third analytical question.

(3) In the Novel, What Flows from the Character's Experience of Envy?

In conducting an interpretative analysis of a fictional narrative, a key issue concerns the criteria on which the analysis should be judged. Riessman (1993: 64) argues that traditional concepts of verification, such as validity and reliability, which rely on realist assumptions, are ‘largely irrelevant to narrative studies’. In this study, we have attempted to follow three criteria proposed by
Riessman (1993) for judging the adequacy of narrative analysis: persuasiveness, coherence, and pragmatic utility. Persuasiveness refers to the extent to which an interpretation of a narrative is reasonable and convincing, and is adequately supported with evidence from the narrator’s accounts (Riessman 1993). Czarniawska (1999: 58) suggests that ‘a good novel makes the readers believe in its worlds by the force of external persuasion (just like good science), not by the force of external authority’. Coherence refers to whether a narrative analysis reflects the narrator’s stated or implicit beliefs and goals, the narrative’s internal structure, and the unifying themes of the narrative. A narrative analysis can be considered stronger to the extent the above are achieved (Riessman 1993). The third criterion is pragmatic use: how useful an analysis is to its audience, which in our case is concerned with insights into organizational life and emotions, and to the possibility of extending our work in further investigations.

Thus, we present an analysis of three excerpts from Straight Man, knowing full well that alternative interpretations of the same passages are not only possible, but inevitable. Nevertheless, we propose that, in light of the above criteria, our interpretation is reasonable, and can provide additional insight into the experience of workplace envy, and the use of fictional narratives.

In common with researchers such as Czarniawska (1999: 15) we view novels not only as a source of information, but of meaning, and as ‘texts to be taken into account while other texts are produced; models — not for imitation, but for inspiration’.

An Analysis of Envy in Straight Man

Context

William Henry Devereaux, Jr., the first-person narrator of Richard Russo’s Straight Man, is the chair of a deeply divided English department at a small, US university. He describes himself as a procedural incompetent, elected to the position because ‘no one for an instant considered the possibility I would do anything’. He sets the organizational context for the novel in its first few pages:

‘I know what’s coming. For the last few months rumors have been running rampant about an impending purge at the university, one that would reach into the tenured ranks. If such a thing were to happen, everyone in the English department would be vulnerable to dismissal. ... According to which rumors you listen to, the chairs are being either asked or required to draw up lists of faculty members in their departments who might be considered expendable. Seniority is reportedly not a criterion.’ (Russo 1997: 8)

As a result of numerous grievances against him, Devereaux has become ‘the most embattled program chair on campus’. Devereaux oversees a department whose longstanding members are deeply dissatisfied, but ‘too weighed down by tenure, rank, and salary’ to market themselves to better colleges.
The events of the novel take place in April, ‘the month of heightened paranoia for academics’, at a time when the state legislature is again threatening deep cuts to higher education. The department atmosphere is one of distrust, suspicion, and retribution, in which the department members routinely insult, threaten, belittle, and even, in one case, assault each other. The English department faculty are unable to agree on much, with the notable exception of the need to recall Devereaux from his post as chair. The department’s hiring process is log-jammed, though there is tacit agreement not to hire someone whose accomplishments would reflect unfavourably on the present faculty. As a group, department members are waiting for pension and full benefits, and in the interim have ‘chosen, perhaps wisely, to be angry with each other, rather than with ourselves’.

Devereaux is a month shy of his 50th birthday, and finds himself yearning for the days when his own career was more exciting, and promising. Devereaux admits that he would like to be the man he once was. It is almost exactly 20 years since his single book was published, ‘and forgotten the year after’, and he no longer even thinks of himself as a writer. Devereaux claims to accept his situation (‘Had I been more, I’d be more. Simple.’), but privately dwells on ageing, the impracticality of starting over, reasons for not producing fictional work, and the lack of significance or consequence in his personal or professional life. Devereaux’s health is failing, and he suspects he has a kidney stone, like those that plagued his father. His daughter voices concern that Devereaux’s marriage is in trouble, and he admits to a friend that he is perhaps only half in love with his wife. Fantasies of her with other men occur to him frequently. Clearly, Devereaux is ‘hungry for something to happen’ and dissatisfied with his life and the diminished way in which he now responds to personal and professional events.

Analysis of Excerpt 1: Jacob’s Announcement

In the following excerpt, the narrator, Devereaux, pays a visit to the Dean of the Arts Faculty, Jacob Rose, who has told him about an exciting job offer he, Jacob, has received.


“How come you were on the market to begin with?” I ask, since this has been puzzling me. Most of us who came to the university twenty years ago continued to make applications for years after we arrived, but then tenure and promotion locked us up and we gave up.

“Because Dickie shit-canned me back in October,” he says smiling at the effect that this intelligence has on me, and I can understand why. He’s taken a fall and landed on his feet. My unflattering view of his marketability was probably a view he himself shared. He’s as surprised as I am. Also, he’s kept his firing a secret, something nobody who knew him would have suspected he was capable of doing. His reward is that he can announce his firing and triumph over adversity in the same breath.

“How come you didn’t tell your friends?” I ask, realizing too late that this is a straight line.
“I did,” he reassures me. I can see that his spirits are absolutely irrepressible. This must be one hell of an offer he’s just received, from the kind of institution that will make all of us jealous when we hear. I can’t imagine how such a thing has transpired, but apparently it has....

“You must be relieved to be shut of the whole mess.”

Again Jacob appears to consider his response carefully. “I’m not shut of it quite yet,” he says. “What I’m hearing is that you will be shut of it before I will. This afternoon, is what I’m hearing.”

“My troops are in mutiny,” I concede. “I should maybe rally them. I’m told it’s still possible. The question is, should I?”

Jacob meets my eye and shrugs. “Honest Injun? I don’t see how it matters.”

I nod. “Once again you’ve failed to cheer me up.”

What’s really depressing is the idea of Jacob leaving. He’s been a reasonably well-intentioned, lazy, honorable, mildly incompetent dean, and that’s about the best you can hope for. And he’s been a friend I’ll miss. Worse, I have to admit to feeling the jealousy of one crab for another that has managed to climb out of the barrel.

(1) What Narrative Resources Does the Author Use to Construct the Character’s Experience of Envy as Plausible for the Reader?

This passage provides a clear and believable instance of envy: Devereaux not only envies Jacob’s opportunity to leave the university, but, more broadly, the fact that he ‘has managed to climb out of the barrel’ in which Devereaux thought they were both stuck. The author uses several narrative resources to make Devereaux’s envious reaction plausible to the reader. In particular, Russo draws on salient aspects of Devereaux’s professional situation, as well as his personal characteristics and relationship to Jacob. First, given the negative way in which Devereaux’s professional context is portrayed in the novel, envy seems an apt emotional response for him to experience. The West Central Pennsylvania University, of which both Devereaux and Jacob are members, is portrayed as an unremarkable institution, situated in the ‘sooty and sprawling’ town of Railton. This is not a place in which either Devereaux or Jacob intended to stay when they began their careers more than 20 years before. Now the university is threatened with budget cuts likely to result in faculty job losses — even the job security that came with tenure and discouraged them from leaving is in jeopardy. It is clear why Devereaux might experience envy when he hears his colleague’s news — who would not want the opportunity to leave this scene?

Second, several elements specific to the two characters and their relationship also serve as important narrative resources in making Devereaux’s experience of envy plausible. Devereaux and Jacob share a number of personal characteristics: readers of the novel will recognize that the qualities Devereaux applies to Jacob of being ‘lazy, honorable, mildly incompetent’ are ones he also attributes to himself. This makes Jacob an even more likely referent for Devereaux than other long-time colleagues might be. Jacob is not simply one
of Devereaux’s colleagues, but one who joined the university at the same time as him — indeed, in the same department. This common starting point makes the differences in their current situations more noticeable: Jacob now has an offer that Devereaux believes ‘will make us all jealous’, while Devereaux describes himself as having ‘given up’ attempting to leave. This is particularly striking given Devereaux’s perception of them both as ‘crabs in a barrel’. Devereaux’s feelings of envy make even more sense when we consider his friendship with Jacob. Although in the passage Jacob jokes that they are not friends, in fact, they have a close relationship with a considerable history.

(2) What Emotions Accompany the Character’s Experience of Envy?

The passage contains a number of emotions that appear to accompany Devereaux’s experience of envy, including surprise, irritation, despondency, and inferiority. Surprise, in particular, seems to intensify the feelings of envy. Devereaux is surprised by a number of things: that Jacob has been fired, that Jacob has managed to keep this news a secret, and also that Jacob has apparently received a job offer ‘from the kind of institution that will make all of us jealous’. As Devereaux comments, ‘I can’t imagine how such a thing has transpired, but apparently it has.’ Thrown by the unexpected turn the conversation has taken, Devereaux loses his usual nonchalance to ask Jacob a question (‘How come you didn’t tell your friends?’) that he immediately regrets. As well as feeling surprise, the description of Jacob’s spirits as ‘absolutely irrepressible’ suggests irritation on Devereaux’s part, especially as he has become the object of play. However, the end of the excerpt clearly captures Devereaux’s despondency at Jacob’s departure — both sadness at the loss of a ‘well-intentioned’ and ‘honorable’ dean, but also sorrow at losing a good friend. Worst of all, though, are his feelings of being left behind ‘in the barrel’ of West Central Pennsylvania University. This metaphor not only captures the sense of his being ‘stuck’ somewhere, but also clearly suggests the lack of dignity that Devereaux attributes to his work situation. Related to this, Devereaux also experiences feelings of inferiority, as he compares his own work situation (and his value as an academic, and even a person) to that of his old friend and colleague, Jacob.

(3) In the Novel, What Flows from the Character’s Experience of Envy?

Devereaux appears to have clear reactions to his experience of envy. Following from his initial feelings of being left behind, Devereaux begins to contemplate the opportunities that could open for himself as a result of Jacob’s move. Describing it as a ‘base thought’, Devereaux muses, ‘I could be dean.’ Interestingly, he then goes on to observe, ‘I do not, I think, covet Jacob Rose’s job or his office,’ but he clearly does savour the idea that he would ‘come out a winner’, and the reaction that his appointment would have on his colleagues, who are on the verge of impeaching him as department chair. One consequence of Devereaux’s envy, then, concerns his thoughts on how to further his own position — not by leaving, as Jacob is doing, but by otherwise improving his situation. It is notable that Devereaux does not seek to diminish Jacob’s success in his own head, in a way that would reduce his own feelings...
of relative failure. Instead, he finds himself contemplating a way in which he can gain (by getting a promotion) from what at first appeared a depressing situation. Jacob remains an important referent, for him, however: later in the book, when concealing valuable information from a fellow faculty member, Devereaux compares himself favourably to Jacob, commenting, ‘I think I play the innocent every bit as convincingly as my dean.’

Analysis of Excerpts 2 and 3: Rachel’s Good News

The following two excerpts take place after Devereaux has just answered his secretary’s phone, only to find the call is from his former agent, Wendy. Wendy confides that she has sold to a publisher some stories written by Devereaux’s secretary, Rachel. Although Devereaux has actively encouraged and assisted Rachel in her writing, he is surprised by the news.


“‘I'm glad you decided to take her on,’” I say, fishing a little, maybe. “She said you liked the stories.”

She pauses before responding. “I not only liked them, I sold them.”

“When?”

“About twenty minutes ago.” When I don’t say anything right away, she says, “That’s a very unprofessional thing I just did. Telling you before the author. Except I know you helped her. I thought you’d be thrilled.”

“I am, Wendy,” I assure her.

“You sound funny about it, is why I mention it.”

If I sound a little funny, the explanation isn’t one I’m sure I can share with her. In fact, her news has taken me back more than twenty years, to the afternoon this same woman called with the news that Off the Road had been bought by a trade publisher, news that ultimately resulted in Julie’s conception, our buying the land in Allegheny Wells that started the faculty stampede, my refusal to sell to Paul Rourke, my promotion to full professor, which deepened our roots in a place we never planned to live for very long. All from one phone call. What her call is going to mean to Rachel I don’t know, but I do know her life is about to change.’


‘The limitations of intuition, of imagination, are what make one-book authors of men like William Henry Devereaux, Jr., I fear, and perhaps this is why I am envious of Rachel tonight. For though I told my agent that I was not jealous, the truth is that I am. Not of her success. The envy I feel has less to do with accomplishment or validation than with the necessary artistic arrogance that these breed. Usually all questions, Rachel, tonight, will feel like she got some of the answers right, saw some of the patterns clearly enough to detail them convincingly. She will consider the possibility that the leaky vessel of her talent may be seaworthy after all. Instead of being dictated to by the waves of doubt that threaten to swamp all navigators, she'll turn bravely into the wind. The moment she does is the moment I envy.’
(1) What Narrative Resources Does the Author Use to Construct the Character’s Experience of Envy as Plausible for the Reader?

In these two episodes of envy, Devereaux covets what he imagines Rachel will have and experience, as a result of the publication of her stories. Again, we see several aspects of Devereaux’s professional situation that are used in the narrative to make the envy plausible and appropriate in the circumstances. We know that Devereaux feels dissatisfied professionally: while the first years of his career were characterized by literary success and rapid promotion, he has achieved little since then of which he feels proud. Devereaux’s work-life comprises teaching the same classes to the same types of students and experiencing the same petty workplace antagonisms, crises, and interactions as he has for 20 years. Rachel’s news highlights these professional dissatisfaction, and Devereaux’s experience of envy is sharpened by the similarities not only between her news and his own news regarding publication 20 years earlier, but also by the parallels in the way in which the two pieces of information were conveyed. The comparison between Rachel’s professional situation and Devereaux’s own is almost unavoidable as a result of the same person (Wendy) communicating very similar news (pending sale and publication of fiction) in the same way (by phone). Devereaux’s feelings are further heightened by the difference in their professional status at the university: Rachel is, after all, Devereaux’s secretary.

What makes Devereaux’s feelings of envy especially plausible, however, are aspects of his personal situation on which the passages draw. Devereaux recounts the changes that publication of his novel 20 years previously had brought to his life, including having his first child and moving to the outskirts of Railton. While he does not know what specific changes Rachel will experience, their anticipated magnitude and significance contrast very favourably with the lack of change, significance, and consequence that characterizes his own personal life. Devereaux’s envy is also made more believable by the growing uncertainty he feels about his creative insights and powers, no longer even considering himself a novelist. Devereaux acknowledges his own inability to accept the costs and effort that effecting significant change in his life would require, but nonetheless envies Rachel the confidence and impetus for change that he believes she will now experience. The relationship that exists between Devereaux and Rachel helps us further understand his feelings of envy. In encouraging Rachel’s efforts, Devereaux has played the role of advisor and mentor; Rachel’s sudden publishing success now makes her at least his equal, and potentially his superior, in this regard. Later in the novel, Devereaux observes that the relationships Rachel enjoys with their mutual colleagues will also be disrupted, as a result of the fact that, as he puts it, Rachel will now have a better publication record than many of the faculty she serves as a secretary.

(2) What Emotions Accompany the Character’s Experience of Envy?

A number of strong feelings accompany Devereaux’s experience and expression of envy, including abandonment, longing, inferiority, and guilt. He feels abandoned by Wendy, his agent, and is reminded that this is the first year in
20 that he did not receive an annual card from her. Devereaux longs for the feelings of courage, artistic confidence, and power he expects Rachel to experience, as he once did. He contrasts Rachel’s moment of triumph and courage as she ‘turns bravely into the wind’, with the ‘waves of doubt that threaten to swamp’ him. Devereaux focuses his envy in the second passage on this triumphant and confident moment he expects Rachel to enjoy, and the courage to forge forward that will accompany it. His envy is heightened by deep feelings of inadequacy as a writer, and as a perceptive observer and chronicler of human behaviour — two roles on which Devereaux has prided himself. Devereaux refers to his own ‘limitations of intuition, of imagination’ and to himself disparagingly as a ‘one-book author’. That he denies his envy in the initial episode also suggests feelings of guilt over his own ambivalent reactions, as well as envy and surprise at Rachel’s good news.

(3) In the Novel, What Flows from the Character’s Experience of Envy?

An important consequence appears to flow from Devereaux’s experience of envy: he considers writing another book, a possibility that he has previously almost completely discounted. Several pages later, he even constructs a fictional narrative, which he refers to as ‘merely an exercise’, justifying it as a means of ‘being able to explain to myself life’s mysteries, which I’m not even close to grasping in the first person’. The most significant consequence, then, is that Devereaux begins to reconstruct himself as someone who could write another book. His fictional narrative, however, reveals the tension that exists between this new identity and his present situation. In it, Devereaux paints a bleak portrait of a character who is able to function and go among other people so long as she accepts ‘the dreaded calm’ of an unnamed medication. The medication diminishes her experience of life, and causes her both to lose perspective of what is important, and be satisfied with mediocrity and conformity. Clearly, the similarities with Devereaux’s perception of his own compromised situation are significant. Devereaux feels as though he exists in a dulled state of medication, aware that for his fictional character, ‘skipping her medication caused the sails of her own craft to billow’, just as he sees Rachel ‘turn bravely into the wind’ — a frightening, but exhilarating sensation. Devereaux’s envy leads him to fantasize that he, too, could have a second wind, but only if he is prepared to take a risk.

Discussion

Our analysis of envy in the novel Straight Man has important implications for our understanding of envy as a socially constructed emotion. The way in which Devereaux describes his feelings about Jacob’s announcement and Rachel’s good news, and especially the way in which these descriptions are positioned in the broader narrative, reveal important insights about envy in work organizations. In this section, we draw both on our own analysis and on other research and theory on the social construction of emotion to discuss how envy is socially constructed and the role that envy can play in organizational life.
How is Envy Socially Constructed in Organizations?

In attempting to understand how envy is constructed as an emotion in the passages from *Straight Man*, we investigated the narrative resources that were used to make the instance of envy plausible, and the constellation of emotions that the author associated with envy in each case. We found that the key narrative resources that prompted the experience of envy in both cases were Devereaux’s professional and personal history, and his relationship to the people and events. The plausibility of Devereaux’s envy in each case is rooted in the contrast between his current stagnated professional circumstances and the positive prospects facing Jacob and Rachel. Also critical to the portrayal of envy is the potential for Devereaux to compare his personal situation to theirs — the broad similarities between his and Jacob’s initial career paths, and between his early career break and Rachel’s first publishing success, provide an understandable basis for envy.

The emotions that surround Devereaux’s envy are, in both cases, surprise, dejection and inferiority. We argue that Devereaux’s surprise with respect to his colleagues’ good fortunes is an important element. If their successes had been expected, we might expect Devereaux to have already dealt with them in some way — perhaps by reframing his identification with his colleagues or by downplaying the significance of the success. Dejection and inferiority are also key complementary emotions. Devereaux’s dejection in the first passage is tied to his feeling of being stuck at West Central Pennsylvania University, while in the second it is associated with his longing for the feelings of excitement and confidence that he associates with Rachel’s news. The feelings of inferiority stem from Devereaux’s assessment of his own limited potential to change, in terms of moving to a new university or beginning to write again, or even to attempt to change.

Together, the narrative resources used by the author and the accompanying emotions he presents suggest that envy is socially constructed in organizations as a concentrated piece of a broader narrative. Devereaux’s incidents of envy are clearly only meaningful and understandable as elements of his professional life, with all its challenges and disappointments. This contextualized image of envy is consistent with research that highlights the way in which the social construction of emotions depends upon the relationship of emotion to other, broader narratives and structures (Gergen 1994, 1999; Harré 1986). Gergen (1994), for example, argues that we need to understand emotions as parts of more extended sequences of interaction. More broadly, the social construction of emotions is tied closely to the cultural systems of rights and obligations (the moral order) in which it occurs (Gergen 1999; Harré 1986; Sabini and Silver 1982). From this perspective, emotions are not simply constructed socially, but are cultural statements regarding the morality of a situation (Sabini and Silver 1986). To express or experience an emotion is thus to ‘feel’ something about the relationship between a situation and a relevant set of moral codes. Envy, in particular, involves a sense of ‘ought’ (Sabini and Silver 1986), as when Devereaux feels that he ought to have the same level of success as Jacob. This sense of ‘ought’ is reasonable to the reader because
it appeals to our understanding of the conventional moral code relating the concept of success to that of career. Thus, the social construction of Devereaux’s envious ruminations extends beyond his immediate situation and even beyond the novel’s story-line: these episodes of envy are socially constructed out of the moral order that is available to the reader concerning the rights and obligations of Devereaux as a professional, an academic, and an author.

Devereaux’s instances of envy also highlight the particular status of envy in the broader moral order. Devereaux’s attempts to conceal his envy, albeit not completely successful, draw attention to the shameful nature of this particular emotion, especially when it is related to the success of close friends. In the case of his secretary’s news of publication, for instance, Devereaux initially denies to himself feeling envious. When he does finally acknowledge his own envy, he claims (not entirely convincingly) that what he envies, in fact, is not Rachel’s achievement, but instead, the confidence that she will experience. The image of workplace envy presented here is of an emotion which, even if acknowledged, will often be reframed and interpreted in internal narratives in ways that would make it more socially acceptable. In this case, for example, the focus of Devereaux’s envy has shifted from Rachel’s achievement to the more acceptable object of her confidence.

Although Devereaux’s episodes of envy are clearly linked to both the larger narrative and the broader moral context, they are not simply representative of either of these. Each instance of envy brings together important threads in the larger narrative: Devereaux’s identity as a once-successful author; his feelings of superiority with respect to most of his colleagues; his relationship to his much more successful academic father; and his expressed cynicism regarding his own academic and writing careers. The episodes of envy in which Devereaux feels surprise, dejection and inferiority punctuate the storyline, revealing a side of him that is miserable and pitiable. Thus, we argue that a second major aspect of the social construction of an episode of envy is that it involves a cultural performance which stands out from the ongoing narrative in terms of its tone and content. Devereaux’s expressions of envy stand out prominently against the humorous, smug, and disparaging tone that typifies his interactions with the other characters in the novel, and against his more low-key, negative ruminations about his own life.

What Role Does Envy Play in Organizations?

Based on our analysis of the envy episodes in Straight Man, we argue that envy plays two key roles in organizations. First, it acts as a catalytic emotion with respect to the envier: envy creates a tension that demands resolution. Unlike some emotions that might plausibly remain associated with a stable state of affairs, envy is often connected to action intended to reduce the feeling (Sabini and Silver 1982, 1986) and consequently has been described as a ‘motivational’ emotion (Armon-Jones 1986). Envy can also provide what Weick (1995) refers to as an ‘occasion for sensemaking’: the surprise and negative feelings that are associated with envy can result in a collapse of
previously accepted accounts of the world, which then need to be replaced with new accounts or repaired. An interesting parallel exists between what we refer to as catalytic emotions and classical narrative structures that involve contrast, tension and resolution (Martin 1986). This makes envy particularly suited to representation through narrative fiction, and as a plot device for motivating and explaining action (our thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out). However, regardless of the form in which envy is expressed, its basis will always be an unfavourable contrast with the envied party.

In *Straight Man*, Devereaux’s episodes of envy act as a catalyst, although not for what most people would consider positive action. Indeed, the clearest consequences of Devereaux’s envy are a set of fantasies that work to repair partially the negative feelings and collapse of sensemaking associated with his envy. In the first case, Devereaux imagines (not unrealistically) that Jacob’s departure might provide positive opportunities for himself, such as becoming dean. In the second incident, Devereaux considers writing a second book, and spins out a self-referential narrative on which it might be based. Thus, the primary action prompted by Devereaux’s envy is his own sense-making. If workplace envy involves a collapse of understood roles and relationships such that the envier is unable to make sense of his or her world, then reconstructing a positive world through self-enhancing fantasy narratives is a highly plausible option. In this case, Devereaux uses his fecund imagination to alleviate feelings of inferiority, dejection, and role confusion.

The role of envy as a catalytic emotion suggests that envy in organizations might more generally lead to sensemaking that reframes the situation, to positive action which elevates the envier, or to negative action which brings down the envied person. The latter two possibilities highlight the difference between two forms of envy that have been identified both in social constructionist research (Armon-Jones 1986) and in more traditional psychology (Bedeian 1995). First, action taken to achieve or obtain that which is envied would be associated with what has been referred to as ‘nonmalicious envy’ (Parrott 1991). The focus of non-malicious envy is on rectifying the envier’s deficiency in some way (Neu 1980). In contrast, action taken to diminish what the envied person enjoys, by depriving them rather than by improving the position of the envier, is rooted in ‘malicious envy’ (Parrott 1991).

From our perspective, neither form of envy should be understood as ‘causing’ the actions with which they are associated. Rather, we argue that envy as a catalytic emotion is better understood as strategic; as an element of a broader narrative, envy allows and makes sensible future actions (including the expression of other emotions) which otherwise would not be comprehensible (Harré 1986). This is not to suggest that people who experience or express envy are being intentionally duplicitous or that the phenomenology of envy does not include ‘real’ feelings of dejection or inferiority. Rather, in focusing on the role of envy as a socially constructed emotion, we are highlighting the role that envy can play in social dramas (Goffman 1959), whether those dramas are authored by the individuals in order to achieve specific ends, or are simply invocations of standard cultural repertoires. Consequently,
workplace envy can play an important role in facilitating action by the envier that might otherwise be problematic, action which may be positive or negative with respect to the organization and its members.

The second key role of emotion is connected to the moral order in which the emotion takes place: envy plays a confirming role with respect to cultural systems of rights and obligations. The feelings of dejection and inferiority that accompany envy are rooted in the envier’s acceptance of a culturally prescribed hierarchy of what is desirable and worthy (Sabini and Silver 1982). In doing envy, the envier is reproducing that hierarchy and reaffirming the moral order. Devereaux’s envy was based on a set of moral assumptions regarding his professional context: ideas about what he and his colleagues ought to have achieved as writers and as academics were key elements in Devereaux’s episodes of envy. This is shown clearly in the way that status and status differentials were central to the situations that provoked Devereaux’s envy. Both Jacob and Rachel experienced significant elevations in their status, which left Devereaux feeling dejected and inferior. Significantly, the sources of Devereaux’s envy (Jacob’s and Rachel’s good fortunes) were highly legitimate as ‘good things’ within their shared cultural system. Promotions, moving institutions, and publishing contracts are all indicative of a successful career in Devereaux’s, Jacob’s, and Rachel’s world of academe and writing. Thus, Devereaux’s envy of Jacob and Rachel plays a reproductive, conservative role in Straight Man. Despite the potential for action that envy engenders, it does so within narrow boundaries: the moral order in the text is reflected in and reproduced by Devereaux’s episodes of envy.

We propose that when envy occurs in real-life workplaces, it works in a similar fashion to reaffirm a moral order — the organizational culture or professional norms of the envier(s). Gergen (1994) argues that communities generate conventional modes of relating and that within those modes of relating, some patterns of action are understood as emotions. Workplace envy constitutes one set of actions within normal modes of relating in organizations. It is not only made sensible by its placement in ritualized patterns of exchange and relationship, but also makes sense of those ritualized patterns (Gergen 1999; Sabini and Silver 1986; Sarbin 1986). Organizational life offers a host of opportunities to experience envy, as colleagues gain promotions, raises, accolades, expertise, contacts, and enhanced reputations. When employees experience envy, their micro-level actions and feelings work to reproduce the macro-level moral structures that guide the organization. Organizations include a variety of hierarchies (roles, positions, departments, activities, and rewards) which provide members with a sense of what is better and what is worse, what ought to be and what ought not to be. Workplace envy transforms abstract moral rules into visceral, emotional experiences that carry organizational members into recursive patterns of action that symbolize the organization and reproduce it at the same time.

The role of envy in reproducing the moral order is tightly tied to the broader institutional foundations of emotion. One of the key insights offered by scholars concerned with the social dimensions of emotion is that emotions are not only culturally and historically specific, but that they often play
important roles in establishing and maintaining social order within specific institutional structures (Demos 1996; Goffman 1959; Hochschild 1983). In general, however, social control has tended to be associated with emotions that are more obviously constraining, such as guilt, shame or embarrassment (Demos 1996; Parrott and Harré 1996). Moreover, these controlling emotions are often considered socially appropriate, if unpleasant, under certain circumstances. In contrast, our analysis of envy highlights the institutional bases of emotions which at face value may be seen as less legitimate or desirable. It also highlights the institutional specificity of the role of emotions — we are not arguing that envy will always be catalytic at the individual level or conservative at the organizational or institutional levels, but rather that envy as it is experienced and expressed in contemporary, competitive workplaces may often take on these roles. To understand emotions as socially and discursively constructed is necessarily to afford organizational actors significant agency in their enactment of emotion, but it is also critical to recognize the institutional constraints associated with emotion as a resource for discourse and action.

Conclusion

In this article, we have investigated the social construction of workplace envy through a close examination of its portrayal in a work of narrative fiction. Based on our analysis, we have argued that envy is socially constructed in organizations through reference to a moral order that provides potential objects of envy by delineating hierarchies of entities as status, power and money. We have further argued that envy is likely to appear in organizational narratives as a distinctive element in which the enviers experience and express (perhaps only to themselves) feelings of dejection and inferiority. Our analysis suggests that envy plays a paradoxical role in organizations. On the one hand, it is catalytic — prompting action, reframing, or both. On the other hand, instances of envy enact and reproduce the moral order in which they are located. So, while envy prompts movement, it does so within the bounds of the dominant cultural systems that define what is enviable.

We believe that our study highlights the important potential for the use of narrative fiction in organization studies, but that it also points to several limitations associated with this form of data. One limitation in our study stems from the very brief selections used in our analysis of workplace envy. This is a fundamental tension in qualitative research: although a greater number of longer excerpts would provide a more deeply contextualized portrayal of the emotion, practical limits to manuscript length severely limit this possibility. An additional limitation we face in drawing on fictional representation is the presupposition in this article that all emotions are conscious, and can thus be represented in writing. Depending on the form of social constructionism one adopts, there may be emotions felt by individuals that are not articulated through an internal dialogue, perhaps because they are too mild, too intense, too painful, or otherwise resist complete and accurate verbal
description. Though, clearly, in these cases an experience might lose some richness through an internal dialogue, this is an inherent challenge in attempting to present and analyse the motives and emotions of others.

A further limitation might result from our use of a small-town, university setting in which to examine envy. We are not the first to examine emotion narratives and experiences in a university setting (see Frost et al. 2000; Brown 1997), but it is reasonable to question the generalizability of a unique work context, chosen specifically because it is often suffused with envy, competition, and rancour. Academic work is often isolated and self-absorbed (Frost and Taylor 1996), and characterized by a doubting, self-critical frame of mind (Quinn et al. 1996). There is the additional threat to self-esteem of being evaluated on creative work within stressful and often uncreative environments. In a professional environment where status among peers is paramount, membership in a low-performing group or institution, such as the Railton University English Department in Straight Man, can provide a further, external attack on academics’ self-esteem. However, we would argue that several of the above factors are present in many professional work environments, and still prominent, albeit to a lesser extent, in other workplaces.

Although this study has it limitations, we believe that our analysis has important implications both for the study of workplace envy and for the use of narrative fiction as data. The study of envy in organizations has thus far been dominated by approaches that assume its status as a psychological phenomenon. We think that significant advances in understanding workplace envy will be made only if this perspective is broadened considerably to include an appreciation for the manner in which envy is a social construction. This does not mean that we should abandon careful and systematic ways of investigating envy, or emotions more generally. What it does suggest, however, is that traditional experimental and survey approaches, in which subjects respond to relatively artificial stimuli, may provide a limited understanding of the dynamics of emotions in organizations. Gergen’s (1994) examination of anger suggests an alternative approach in which we explicitly recognize the scripted nature of many emotional performances, and consequently attempt to work out the nature of those scripts. Our study of envy here suggests that a systematic investigation can also occur outside of a controlled environment, if both the context of the emotion and its experience and expression are examined closely.

A second implication for research on envy in organizations stems from our argument that envy has a dual nature as both catalytic and conservative. At the individual level, the role of envy is potentially that of a change agent: enviers may be motivated to overcome the negative feelings associated with envy by transforming some aspects of their lives. This suggests that research on envy, and other emotions, may benefit substantially from adopting a longitudinal approach that is able to capture their role in individual narratives that unfold over time. At the same time, we have argued that episodes of workplace envy serve largely to reproduce the moral hierarchies that underpin them. Thus, another important angle for organizational emotions research is to examine the ways in which emotions might be used, intentionally or not,
to reinforce organizational cultures and to buttress organizational systems of power and domination. Examining these dynamics would be facilitated by researchers drawing more extensively on emotional labour research (Hochschild 1983; Mann 1999) and on symbolic perspectives on organizations (Alvesson 1991; Jones 1996). Although we do not suggest that all emotions in organizations constitute emotional labour, there are important parallels between emotions that are explicitly commodified (Fineman 2000; Sutton and Rafaeli 1988) and those that implicitly and inconspicuously serve organizational needs, such as motivating employees through envy and jealousy. Similarly, we believe research on organizational symbolism (Gagliardi 1990; Turner 1990) that has highlighted the ways in which organizational rites and rituals involve intense emotions may shed light on the ways in which ‘normal’ emotions in organizations may be, in fact, highly ritualized experiences (Gergen 1994).

In conclusion, we believe that although there may be aspects of emotion lost in its written portrayal, there also remains a great deal that can be expressed in language, especially by skilled writers and reporters of human nature and experience. Thus, if we choose our books carefully, our understanding of the emotional world of organizations may benefit tremendously from their detailed examination.

Note
All authors contributed equally to this article.

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