



## Catching up or putting them down? An investigation of employee divergent reactions to coworker conscientiousness

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### ABSTRACT

Research on conscientiousness has primarily focused on the consequences of employees possessing higher conscientiousness. However, it is equally important to understand how employees react to others' higher conscientiousness (e.g., coworkers). Drawing from the social comparison theory, we attempt to reveal employees' emotional and behavioral reactions to their coworkers' higher conscientiousness. Using 210 employee-coworker dyadic data collected from China, we found that coworkers' higher conscientiousness leads focal employees to experience either relative deprivation or inspiration, which is shaped by the extent of the focal employees' zero-sum mindset. Furthermore, we found that these relative deprivation and inspiration emotions motivate focal employees to engage in social undermining and help-seeking behavior toward their conscientious coworkers. These findings enhance the understanding of the specific reactions of employees to others' higher conscientiousness.

### 1. Introduction

Given that employees with higher conscientiousness are described as reliable and hardworking (Venkatesh et al., 2021), existing research has extensively examined the outcomes of employees possessing conscientiousness, including increased proactivity (Tu et al., 2020) and ethicality (Luksyte et al., 2024). However, how employees interpret and react to the higher conscientiousness exhibited by others, especially their coworkers, remains overlooked. Greenbaum et al. (2024) suggested that coworkers' personalities, as manifested through attributes and behaviors in interpersonal interactions, have far-reaching influences on employees' responses. Accordingly, coworkers' higher conscientiousness may affect employees' responses. Furthermore, the research evidence indicated that higher conscientiousness poses both risks and benefits in certain situations (Venkatesh et al., 2021). Overlooking such complex impacts of conscientiousness may lead to a mistaken belief that high conscientiousness is always better. Hence, to provide a comprehensive picture concerning the influence of conscientiousness, we seek to uncover the employees' negative and positive responses to their coworkers' higher conscientiousness.

The social comparison theory offers a distinctive theoretical lens for our study, as it explicates how and why individuals destructively and

constructively react to salient others. This theory suggests that individuals tend to assess their situations through comparison with superior others (Festinger, 1954), which subsequently prompts them to engage in either the contrast or assimilation process (Smith, 2000). In the contrast process, individuals focus more on the discrepancies between themselves and others (Smith, 2000), resulting in resentment emotions and destructive responses (Campbell et al., 2017). Alternatively, in the assimilation process, individuals are more inclined to focus on their similarities with others (Smith, 2000), leading to the emotions of inspiration and constructive responses (Watkins, 2021). The experience of contrast or assimilation process is influenced by individual differences (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007), especially in how individuals recognize the tensions between self-interests and other interests (Downes et al., 2020). The existing studies posited that such cognitions could be captured by the zero-sum mindset (Dong et al., 2023), where some individuals could only be achieved at the expense of others (Sirola & Pitesa, 2017).

Drawing upon the social comparison theory, we assumed that coworkers' higher conscientiousness may elicit employees' divergent emotional and behavioral reactions that depend on the extent of their zero-sum mindset. Specifically, in the context of observing coworkers' higher conscientiousness at work, the outstanding dedication demonstrated by these coworkers may prompt focal employees to assess

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whether their own work effort is insufficient in comparison to coworkers. According to the social comparison theory, these comparisons may render employees with varying levels of a zero-sum mindset to undergo the contrast or assimilation process.

For employees with a higher zero-sum mindset, the contrast process is more likely to be activated, as they perceive conscientious coworkers' advantages as conflicting with their own and thus consistently focus on the disparities between themselves and coworkers. Hence, they may believe that their desired advantages would be taken by conscientious coworkers (Sirola & Pitesa, 2017), and experience resentment emotions of relative deprivation (Callan et al., 2011). In this case, these employees may thwart their coworkers' advantages by resorting to a destructive response, such as social undermining behavior (Dong et al., 2023). Conversely, the assimilation process is more likely to be activated when employees with a lower zero-sum mindset, as these employees believe that conscientious coworkers' advantages have positive implications for themselves and prefer to seek similarity with coworkers and self-enhancement (Sirola & Pitesa, 2017). As a result, they may experience the emotions of inspiration from coworkers' higher conscientiousness (Watkins, 2021) and be motivated to build similar advantages by proactively seeking help from coworkers (Mueller & Kamdar, 2011). Fig. 1 depicts our theoretical framework.

## 2. Theory and hypotheses

### 2.1. Coworkers' higher conscientiousness, employees' zero-sum mindset, and social comparison-based emotions

Drawing from comparison theory, we argue that when employees possess a higher zero-sum mindset, coworkers' higher conscientiousness is more likely to render them to undergo the contrast process and perceive resentment emotions of relative deprivation. For employees with a lower zero-sum mindset, coworkers' higher conscientiousness is more likely to prompt them to experience the assimilation process and facilitate inspiration.

Specifically, employees with a higher zero-sum mindset tend to view situations as win-lose and believe that their own advantages are fundamentally at odds with those of others (Sirola & Pitesa, 2017). According to the social comparison theory, these employees may pay more attention to their differences with others (Smith, 2000), which may result in a lack of interpersonal trust (Dong et al., 2023). Hence,

when witnessing conscientious coworkers work harder and perform better (Venkatesh et al., 2021), employees with a lower zero-sum mindset may regard coworkers' higher conscientiousness as a way of gaining greater advantages over them, which could highlight their own lack of work dedication and makes it more difficult for them to acquire desired advantages (Sun et al., 2021). Such a resentment sense of desired outcomes is being deprived referred to as relative deprivation (Callan et al., 2011). Dong et al. (2023) have supported the argument that feelings of relative deprivation most likely arise when individuals perceive others as performing better or being in more advantaged situations.

Conversely, employees with a lower zero-sum mindset tend to regard situations as win-win and embrace the interplay between self-interests and other interests (Sirola & Pitesa, 2017). In accordance with the social comparison theory, these employees can perceive the advantages of others as self-attainable and focus more on their shared similarities (Smith, 2000). As a result, they can make prosocial attribution for the outstanding attributes and behaviors of others (Dong et al., 2023). In this case, when observing the dedication of conscientious coworkers engaged in work, employees with a lower zero-sum mindset are apt to view their coworkers' higher conscientiousness as admirable attributes and valuable resources (Dong et al., 2023). This, in turn, encourages their expectations to develop similarities with these coworkers and a newfound self-enhancement (Watkins, 2021). Such a heightened expectation for future achievements is described as feelings of inspiration (Smith, 2000). Watkins (2021) found that inspiration can be induced by observing another person's superior abilities and virtues. Therefore, we propose:

**Hypothesis 1.** The coworkers' higher conscientiousness will be positively related to employees' relative deprivation when their zero-sum mindset is high (vs. low).

**Hypothesis 2.** The coworkers' higher conscientiousness will be positively related to employees' inspiration when their zero-sum mindset is low (vs. high).

### 2.2. Employees' behavioral reactions to coworkers' higher conscientiousness through social comparison-based emotions

Moreover, the social comparison theory indicates that the resentment emotions derived from the contrast process can provoke

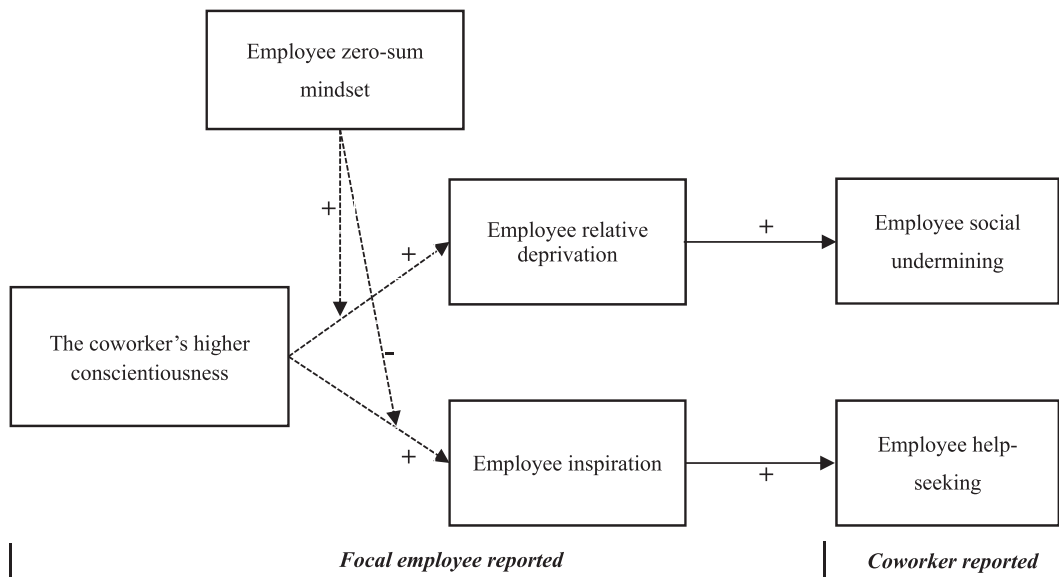


Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

Note. Dashed lines from the independent variable represent interactive effects as predicted.

individuals' destructive responses to obstruct others' advantages (Campbell et al., 2017; Smith, 2000). Conversely, the emotions of inspiration stemming from the assimilation process can elicit individuals' constructive responses to proactively pursue similarities with others and build self-advancement (Smith, 2000; Watkins, 2021). Accordingly, we anticipate that for employees with a higher zero-sum mindset, the relative deprivation elicited by coworkers' higher conscientiousness may lead them to destructively respond to such coworkers by engaging in social undermining behavior. For employees with a lower zero-sum mindset, the inspiration induced by coworkers' higher conscientiousness may spur them to constructively respond to their coworkers by resorting to help-seeking behavior.

Social undermining entails behaviors that intend to obstruct one's advantages at work, such as disseminating rumors about others, deliberately delaying work to impede their progress, or providing misleading information (Duffy et al., 2002). The relative deprivation feelings resulting from the social comparison with coworkers who have higher conscientiousness may lead employees with a higher zero-sum mindset to perceive themselves as occupying inferior positions (Callan et al., 2011). As a result, the dissatisfaction of these employees toward conscientious coworkers may be fostered, and thus pay more attention to undermining coworkers' advantages to improve their own situations (Gheorghiu et al., 2021). In this respect, social undermining behavior is regarded as an instrumental strategy for employees (Dong et al., 2023). Current studies (Dong et al., 2023; Gheorghiu et al., 2021) have suggested that the relative deprivation induced by salient coworkers can elicit focal employees' social undermining.

Help-seeking behavior is a kind of constructive interpersonal behavior that involves seeking task-related information from others (Mueller & Kamdar, 2011), which can enhance individuals' problem-solving ability and work performance (Hong et al., 2024). As stated, when the feelings of inspiration are inspired by coworkers' higher conscientiousness, employees with a lower zero-sum mindset are more likely to be motivated to build similar advantages to their coworkers. As such, these employees prefer to transcend their limitations and pursue higher-order goals (Watkins, 2021). In this respect, seeking help from highly conscientious coworkers provides such an opportunity (Mueller & Kamdar, 2011). Specifically, proactively seeking help from conscientious coworkers could help employees acquire valuable knowledge and skill sets (Hong et al., 2024), thus facilitating shared development and advantages with coworkers. Previous studies (Downes et al., 2020; Watkins, 2021) have supported the argument that feelings of inspiration can evoke individuals' proactive learning and advice-seeking. Thus, we propose:

**Hypothesis 3.** The positive indirect effect of coworkers' higher conscientiousness on employees' social undermining behavior as mediated by relative deprivation is stronger when their zero-sum mindset is high (vs. low).

**Hypothesis 4.** The positive indirect effect of coworkers' higher conscientiousness on employees' help-seeking behavior as mediated by inspiration is stronger when their zero-sum mindset is low (vs. high).

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Sample and procedures

We conducted a two-wave survey with a one-week time gap to test our hypotheses. The participants were recruited from four companies in northwest China, which involved education, energy, and real estate industries. Moreover, because our study focuses on how employees react to their coworkers' higher conscientiousness, the participants serve as focal employees and their identified colleagues serve as coworkers. There were no instances in which focal employees evaluated multiple coworkers or cases where a coworker assessed multiple focal employees.

Referring to the practice of the existing study (Downes et al., 2020;

Greenbaum et al., 2024), at time 1 (T1), 398 participants were invited to report coworker higher conscientiousness through a two-step assessment process. First, each participant was instructed to list coworkers they perceived as exhibiting higher conscientiousness at work. Second, they were required to nominate one coworker from their previous list—specifically, a coworker with whom they often looked when they considered their own conscientiousness at work. Subsequently, participants were asked to assess their perceptions of that nominated coworker's conscientiousness relative to their own. As our study concentrated on the higher conscientiousness of coworkers, we excluded cases where the focal participants rated their coworkers' conscientiousness as three or lower ( $N = 11$ ). Participants were also required to report their own zero-sum mindset and control variables. 368 participants provided valid responses at T1 with a response rate of 92.46%. At T2, a week later, we invited these 368 participants to list the name of the coworker they nominated last week, and then rate their feelings of relative deprivation and inspiration derived from that coworker. 329 participants provided valid responses with a response rate of 89.40%. Meanwhile, according to the coworkers' names nominated by 329 focal participants, the HR department helped us send emails inviting these coworkers to assess the social undermining and help-seeking behavior that focal participants exhibited toward them. 231 coworkers finished the second-wave survey. Finally, 210 employee-coworker dyads were obtained by combining the data from T1 and T2 and removing invalid responses.

Of the 210 focal employees, 51.40% were female, averaged 30.68 years of age ( $SD = 5.83$ ), and 77.60% held a bachelor's degree. The average tenure employees work with coworkers is 3.56 years ( $SD = 1.75$ ). Among coworkers, 49.00% were female, averaged 30.75 years old ( $SD = 5.57$ ), and 77.10% held a bachelor's degree.

#### 3.2. Measures

Unless otherwise specified, the measures used a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

##### 3.2.1. Coworker higher conscientiousness (T1)

The coworker's higher conscientiousness was measured by a ten-item scale from the HEXACO model of personality (Ashton & Lee, 2009). Referring to the practice of Downes et al. (2020), we slightly adapted the scale to assess the degree to which focal employees perceived coworkers' higher conscientiousness at work relative to their own. A sample item is "This colleague often pushes themselves much harder than me when trying to achieve a goal".

##### 3.2.2. Zero-sum mindset (T1)

Focal employees rated their zero-sum mindset with a six-item scale adopted by Sirola and Pitesa (2017). A sample item is "More good jobs for some employees means fewer good jobs for other employees".

##### 3.2.3. Relative deprivation (T2)

Focal employees reported their relative deprivation emotions with a five-item scale developed by Callan et al. (2011). A sample item is "I feel deprived when I think about what I have compared to what this colleague has" (1 = *not at all* to 7 = *very much*).

##### 3.2.4. Inspiration (T2)

Focal employees reported their inspiration emotions using a five-item scale adopted by Watkins (2021). A sample item is "I am inspired by this colleague" (1 = *not at all* to 7 = *very much*).

##### 3.2.5. Social undermining behavior (T2)

Coworkers reported the social undermining behavior exhibited by focal employees with a thirteen-item scale developed by Duffy et al. (2002). A sample item is "Gave me incorrect or misleading information about the job" (1 = *never* to 7 = *always*).

3.2.6. Help-seeking behavior (T2)

Coworkers reported help-seeking behavior exhibited by focal employees with a seven-item scale developed by Anderson and Williams (1996). A sample item is “This colleague frequently asks me for the needed information to complete a task”.

3.2.7. Control variables (T1)

The existing literature suggested that demographic variables and social comparison orientation can influence individuals' reactions toward social comparison referents (Dong et al., 2023; Watkins, 2021). Therefore, we controlled focal employees' gender, age, education, dyadic tenure with coworkers, and social comparison orientation. Focal employees' social comparison orientation using the scale developed by Gibbons and Buunk (1999). A sample item is “I always pay a lot of attention to how I do things compared with how this colleague does things”. Additionally, Greenbaum et al.'s (2024) study suggested that the focal employee's own personality could affect their reactions to a coworker's personality and incorporated it as a control variable. Hence, we controlled for the focal employee's self-ratings of conscientiousness, which was measured using the same item from Ashton and Lee (2009).

3.3. Analysis strategy

We applied AMOS 23.0 to conduct a series of confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) to evaluate the validity of the study measures. Then, we adopted MPLUS 8.30 to conduct path analysis to test our hypotheses. The variables involved in the moderation were mean-centered. The bootstrapping technique with 20,000 samples was adopted to estimate bias-corrected 95 % confidence intervals for moderated mediation effects. We followed Hayes's (2015) guidelines to estimate the index of moderated mediation.

4. Results

4.1. Preliminary analysis

The CFA results indicated that our hypothesized six-factor model fit the data well ( $\chi^2/df = 1.43$ , RMSEA = 0.05, IFI = 0.90, TLI = 0.90, CFI = 0.90), and was superior to theoretically plausible alternatives. For instance, (a) a five-factor model combining employee relative deprivation and inspiration ( $\chi^2/df = 1.79$ , RMSEA = 0.06, IFI = 0.83, TLI = 0.82, CFI = 0.83); (b) a four-factor model combining employee relative deprivation, inspiration, and zero-sum mindset ( $\chi^2/df = 2.18$ , RMSEA = 0.08, IFI = 0.73, TLI = 0.71, CFI = 0.73); and (c) a two-factor model, which is a combination of employee relative deprivation, inspiration, zero-sum mindset, and coworker higher conscientiousness versus a combination of help-seeking, and social undermining ( $\chi^2/df = 3.02$ , RMSEA = 0.10, IFI = 0.53, TLI = 0.51, CFI = 0.53). These results provide empirical support for the discriminant validity of our study variables. Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1.

4.2. Hypothesis testing

As shown in Table 2, the interaction terms of coworker higher conscientiousness and employee zero-sum mindset positively affect their relative deprivation ( $B = 0.12$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ ,  $p = 0.022$ ). As depicted in Fig. 2, simple slope tests revealed a significantly positive relationship between coworker higher conscientiousness and employee relative deprivation when their zero-sum mindset was high ( $B = 0.36$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). However, this relationship was notably weaker when the employee zero-sum mindset was low ( $B = 0.20$ ,  $SE = 0.08$ ,  $p = 0.011$ ). Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

Similarly, the interaction terms of coworker higher conscientiousness and employee zero-sum mindset negatively affect their inspiration ( $B = -0.21$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ). As Fig. 3 presented, simple slope tests revealed a significantly positive relationship between coworker higher

Table 1 Means, standard deviations, and correlations of variables.

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Employee gender	0.08											
2. Employee age	-0.04	-0.12*										
3. Employee education	0.15**	0.48***										
4. Employee tenure with coworker	-0.23	-0.18***	0.02									
5. Employee social comparison orientation	0.09	0.29***	-0.01	-0.09								
6. Employee conscientiousness	0.14**	0.16**	0.05	0.19***	(0.88)							
7. Coworker higher conscientiousness	-0.18***	-0.10	0.08	0.24***	-0.36***	(0.83)						
8. Employee zero-sum mindset	-0.15**	-0.07	0.08	0.14**	0.34***	-0.31***	(0.91)					
9. Employee relative deprivation	0.09	0.08	-0.09	-0.11	0.41***	-0.09	0.18**	(0.84)				
10. Employee inspiration	0.09	0.14**	-0.06	0.07	-0.08	0.28***	0.48***	-0.21***	(0.79)			
11. Employee help-seeking	-0.09	-0.10	0.06	0.07	-0.14**	0.18**	0.32***	-0.25***	0.11	(0.88)		
12. Employee social undermining	1.49	30.68	3.11	3.56	2.71	5.59	5.52	2.95	3.66	5.09	5.47	(0.87)
Mean	0.50	5.83	0.49	1.75	0.98	0.64	0.86	0.70	0.75	0.94	0.70	3.07
SD												0.61

N = 210. Alpha coefficients are presented along the diagonal. Employee tenure with coworker was reported in years. Gender was coded as 1 = female and 2 = male. Education was coded as 1 = high school or lower, 2 = junior college degree, 3 = bachelor degree, and 4 = master degree or higher.

\*  $p < 0.05$ .

\*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

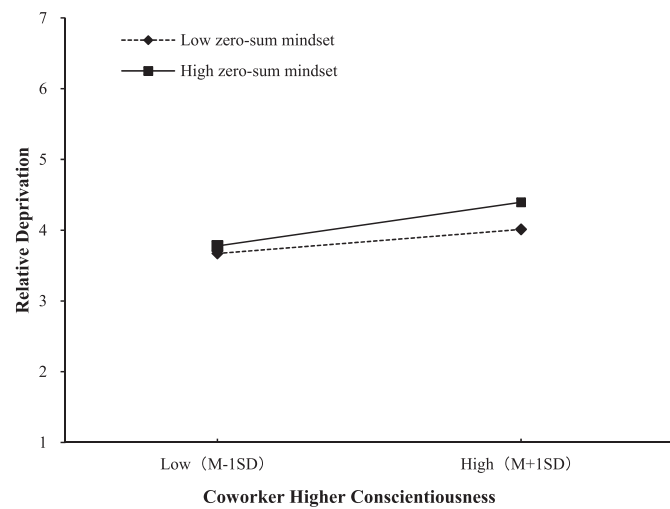
\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

**Table 2**  
Results of interactive effects.

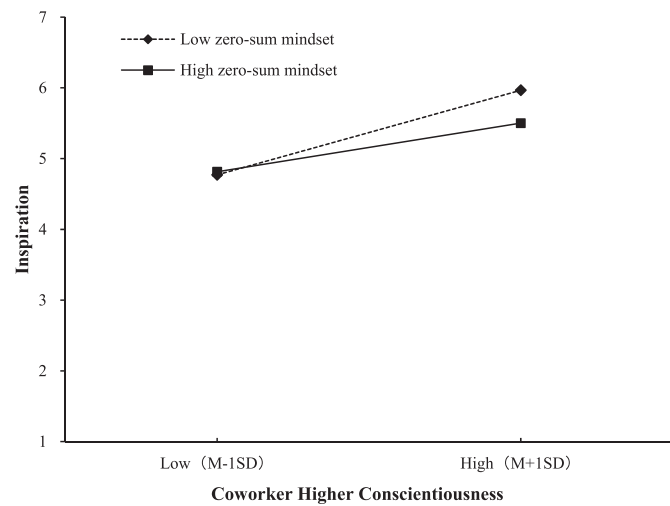
Variables	Employee relative deprivation	Employee inspiration
	B(SE)	B(SE)
<i>Intercepts</i>	3.96*** (0.66)	5.26*** (0.83)
Employee gender	-0.13 (0.09)	0.06 (0.11)
Employee age	0.00 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)
Employee education	-0.21* (0.09)	-0.11 (0.11)
Employee tenure with coworker	-0.06 (0.03)	-0.02 (0.04)
Employee social comparison orientation	0.29*** (0.05)	0.03 (0.06)
Employee conscientiousness	-0.02 (0.09)	0.00 (0.11)
Coworker higher conscientiousness	0.28*** (0.06)	0.55*** (0.08)
Employee zero-sum mindset	0.18* (0.08)	-0.15 (0.10)
Coworker higher conscientiousness × Employee zero-sum mindset	0.12* (0.05)	-0.21** (0.06)
<i>Residual variances</i>	0.40*** (0.04)	0.63 (0.06)

N = 210, unstandardized coefficients are reported. SE = standard error.

\* p < 0.05.  
\*\* p < 0.01.  
\*\*\* p < 0.001.



**Fig. 2.** Interaction of coworker higher conscientiousness and employee zero-sum mindset onto relative deprivation.



**Fig. 3.** Interaction of coworker higher conscientiousness and employee zero-sum mindset onto inspiration.

conscientiousness and employee inspiration when their zero-sum mindset was low ( $B = 0.70, SE = 0.10, p < 0.001$ ). However, this relationship was weaker when the employee zero-sum mindset was high ( $B = 0.40, SE = 0.08, p < 0.001$ ). Therefore, **Hypothesis 2** was supported.

Moreover, the results of moderated mediation effects indicated that the influence of coworker higher conscientiousness on employee social undermining behavior via relative deprivation was significant when their zero-sum mindset was high ( $estimate = 0.07, 95\% \text{ CI} = [0.026, 0.136]$ ), but was significantly weaker when employee zero-sum mindset was low ( $estimate = 0.04, 95\% \text{ CI} = [0.007, 0.091]$ ). The difference between these indirect effects ( $differences = 0.03, 95\% \text{ CI} = [0.005, 0.082]$ ) and the index of moderated mediation ( $index = 0.02, 95\% \text{ CI} = [0.003, 0.058]$ ) were significant, supporting **Hypothesis 3**.

Additionally, the indirect effect of coworker higher conscientiousness on employee help-seeking behavior via inspiration was significant when their zero-sum mindset was low ( $estimate = 0.21, 95\% \text{ CI} = [0.015, 0.339]$ ), but was weaker when employee zero-sum mindset was high ( $estimate = 0.12, 95\% \text{ CI} = [0.049, 0.222]$ ). The difference between these indirect effects ( $differences = -0.09, 95\% \text{ CI} = [-0.183, -0.020]$ ) and the index of moderated mediation were significant ( $index = -0.06, 95\% \text{ CI} = [-0.130, -0.014]$ ), supporting **Hypothesis 4**.

In particular, we also conducted the above analyses to eliminate control variables. The results continue to provide support for our hypotheses, underscoring the robustness and reliability of our findings. The specific results can be attached from the corresponding author.

**5. Discussion**

Drawing on the social comparison theory, we developed and tested the dual-path model to reveal employees' responses to their coworkers' higher conscientiousness. We found that when employees' zero-sum mindset was high, coworkers' higher conscientiousness could elicit their relative deprivation emotions and prompt destructive responses (i.e., social undermining behavior). Conversely, when employees' zero-sum mindset was low, coworkers' higher conscientiousness could elicit their emotions of inspiration and foster constructive responses (i.e., help-seeking behavior).

**5.1. Theoretical implications**

Our study offers several notable theoretical contributions to existing literature. First, our study contributes to the conscientiousness literature by uncovering the influence of conscientiousness in the broader interpersonal context. The existing study (Luksyte et al., 2024; Tu et al., 2020) has generally focused on the consequences of employees possessing conscientiousness. However, little attention has been devoted to employees' reactions toward their coworkers displaying higher conscientiousness. Addressing this limitation is crucial because the work tasks undertaken by an individual are embedded in an interpersonal structure (Campbell et al., 2017). Such a relational context increases the likelihood that the attributes and behaviors comprising an individual's personality shape the observer's reactions (Greenbaum et al., 2024). In this respect, we found that observing coworkers' higher conscientiousness could evoke employees' divergent emotional and behavioral reactions. By doing so, we expand the understanding of the impact of conscientiousness in the broader interpersonal context.

Second, our study also adds to the conscientiousness literature by presenting a more integral picture of both the negative and positive consequences of conscientiousness. Venkatesh et al. (2021) have posited the potential risks and benefits of conscientiousness in specific situations. Yet, it is generally regarded as a desirable personality trait that engenders favorable employee outcomes (Luksyte et al., 2024; Tu et al., 2020). This focus may cultivate an inappropriate consensus that conscientiousness is universally beneficial and overshadows the potential negative manifestations of conscientiousness in specific contexts. Our study found that although coworkers' higher conscientiousness

could be linked to employees' constructive responses, it could also be costly and trigger destructive ones. As such, we provide a more holistic understanding of the consequences of conscientiousness than previously assumed.

Third, our study clarifies *how* and *why* conscientiousness can evoke both negative and positive consequences. Drawing upon the social comparison theory, we found that coworkers' higher conscientiousness can evoke distinct social comparison-based emotions in focal employees (*i.e.*, relative deprivation and inspiration), which, in turn, spurs their destructive and constructive reactions (*i.e.*, social undermining and help-seeking behavior) to coworkers. Moreover, we specified that these contrasting emotions and behavioral reactions are contingent on employees' zero-sum mindset. In this regard, our study illuminates the underlying mechanism and boundary condition that conscientiousness can elicit both positive and negative outcomes. Meanwhile, our investigation of employee zero-sum mindset also addresses Dong et al.'s (2023) calls to explore how individuals' characteristics affect their evaluation of salient coworkers at work.

### 5.2. Practical implications

Our findings also have important implications for management practice. To mitigate the downsides and enhance the benefits of conscientiousness in interpersonal contexts, managers should meticulously assess the extent of employees' zero-sum mindset during the process of selection. Additionally, managers should engage in effective communication with employees to raise awareness regarding the detrimental impact of the zero-sum mindset, thereby weakening their belief in the inherent conflict between self-interests and other interests. Finally, managers should strive to foster positive interactions at work, thus effectively diminishing focal employees' inclination to engage in undermining behaviors toward conscientious coworkers.

### 5.3. Limitations and future directions

Our study still has some limitations that need to be addressed in future research. First, we found that employees' zero-sum mindset is a key boundary factor that affects their reactions to coworkers' higher conscientiousness. However, Downes et al. (2020) suggested that employees' goal orientation can also shape their perception of coworkers. For instance, employees with high performance-prove goal orientation tend to view coworkers' advantages as threats, which may lead them to engage in destructive responses to salient coworkers. Therefore, future research can further explore other moderators to better understand the consequences of desirable personal traits in interpersonal contexts.

Second, while our study examines how focal employees make upward social comparisons with highly conscientious coworkers and subsequently exhibit divergent responses, it does not address whether they might engage in downward social comparisons with less conscientious coworkers. Smith (2000) suggests that downward social comparison can also elicit varied sets of emotions in individuals, such as pride and schadenfreude. These emotions may render different reactions of focal individuals. Thus, future research could further examine when employees make downward social comparisons with less conscientious coworkers and the specific responses they may adopt.

Finally, we investigated focal employees' help-seeking as a constructive response to coworkers' higher conscientiousness. However, when focal employees perceive their coworkers as conscientious, social loafing may also arise. This may lead them to take advantage of the desirable outcomes brought by conscientious coworkers and refrain from taking action (Gheorghiu et al., 2021). Hence, future research could investigate how and when coworkers' higher conscientiousness may provoke the employees' social loafing.

### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Qingxiang Weng:** Supervision, Methodology, Funding acquisition. **Yanfen Wang:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Software, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Xiujuan Wang:** Investigation, Formal analysis. **Huanyu Qin:** Formal analysis.

### Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper. All participants consented to take part in the survey of this study. It didn't pose any risk to participants' health.

There is no actual or potential data overlap with previous studies. No conflict of interest exists in the submission of this manuscript, and all authors approve the manuscript for publication. On behalf of my co-authors, I would like to declare that the work described was original research that has not been published previously, in whole or in part.

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### Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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