Job Satisfaction

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Abstract

Research on job satisfaction, or the positive or negative evaluation one makes about one's job, began in the early 1930s and has been a productive area of research for decades. In this article, the concept is defined, the history of the research on job satisfaction is described, and major theoretical positions and empirical findings are presented.

Definition

Among the various concepts that can describe how people think about and relate to their work, psychologists have found it useful to include an overall evaluative judgment about one's job. This evaluation is labeled job satisfaction and, thus, job satisfaction can be defined as *a positive or negative evaluation one makes about one's job or job situation.* Conceived this way, job satisfaction is an attitude. Therefore thinking about the measurement of satisfaction or developing theories of its causes and consequences are best approached by recognizing that the concept of job satisfaction falls under the broad umbrella of general attitude theory. This has not always been understood and as a consequence, unnecessary confusion about the nature of satisfaction and its relation to related but different concepts like affect has existed. However, more conceptual clarity has developed in the last 20 years, and the definition of satisfaction an attitude or an evaluative judgment has been broadly accepted.

Traditionally, psychologists have made a distinction between *overall satisfaction*, satisfaction with one's job as a whole, and *facet satisfactions*, expressed satisfactions with the aspects of one's job (e.g., pay, supervision, the work one does, etc.). These differences simply relate to the differences in the object of evaluation. In the past, the language surrounding these concepts has created confusion by implying some part–whole relationship among the various attitudes, as if the overall attitude was composed of the facet attitudes. Although beliefs and attitudes about various work features may influence overall evaluations about jobs, they are only one such influence. Attitudes are always evaluations of something, be they concrete objects like coworkers or abstract concepts like jobs or career opportunities, and any element of work experience that is at all discriminable can be an object of evaluation. Understood this way, when psychologists focus on the evaluation of the totality of a job, they are referring to overall job satisfaction. When they focus on the evaluation of a specific aspect of job experience, they are referring to some facet satisfaction.

Psychologists have also developed a number of other related concepts to describe the aspects of work experience, such concepts are commitment, engagement, work subjective well-being, and so on. In some cases, the differences from satisfaction are subtle but important. In other cases, the differences are more apparent than real, as evaluation turns out to be the disguised but essential defining feature. Only one distinction is important to raise in this article and that is the difference between affect (moods and emotions) and satisfaction, as satisfaction has sometimes been erroneously defined as an affective or emotional reaction to one's job. Satisfaction, as an attitude, is an evaluative judgment. Moods and emotions are affective states with discernible beginnings and endings and the subjective experience of particular feelings. Such affective experiences can influence attitudes but they are not equivalent to the attitudes.

Measuring Job Satisfaction

As is typical with attitudes generally, job satisfaction is most frequently measured using self-reports in questionnaire format. Satisfaction is assessed both in research and organizational practice contexts (e.g., organization-specific morale surveys, climate surveys, etc.), and while researchers tend to use a few well-developed, widely available measures, organizations tend to use proprietary measures either developed in-house or by consulting firms.

Measures used in the research community tend to be of two types: overall satisfaction measures or facet-based measures. Overall satisfaction measures ask for overall evaluations of one's job directly. That is, they specifically reference the totality of one's job as the object of evaluation. One popular example is the 'faces' scale (Kunin, 1955), which asks respondents to use a series of scaled, smiling faces to indicate their overall evaluation. The faces response format can be used to measure evaluations of particular facets too, but it is frequently used as a measure of overall satisfaction. Another popular measure is the Job in General Scale (Ironson et al., 1989) patterned after the facet-focused Job Descriptive Index (see below).

Facet measures assess evaluations of specific aspects of job experience (e.g., pay, supervision, coworkers, etc.). Generally, overall satisfaction is derived as a sum of the individual facet evaluations. The two most popular facet satisfaction measures are the Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire (MSQ; Lofquist and Dawis, 1969), which assesses 20 job satisfaction facets and is available in both long and short forms, and the Job Descriptive Index (Smith et al., 1969), which measures five facets. These measures are convenient because they assess both facet evaluations and overall job evaluations and have long histories of use. However, the assessment of overall satisfaction through facet summation is problematic because it assumes that people's overall satisfaction is derived from some mental calculation involving the facet evaluations. There is good reason to suppose this not to be true. Indeed, the Job in General Scale for measuring overall satisfaction directly was developed as a response to this concern. In addition to these rigorously developed overall and

facet measures, there are a number of single- and multiple-item assessments of facet and overall job satisfaction that have been developed in an ad hoc manner and appear in the literature.

History of Research on Job Satisfaction

Research on job satisfaction began in earnest in the early 1930s and was heavily influenced both by the economic and employment crises of the depression and by the new developments in attitude measurement (e.g., work by Thurstone and Likert, in particular.) The economic situation provided an important reason for studying employee 'morale,' while the advances in attitude scaling provided an approach to the task, even if that approach was not often followed rigorously.

Interestingly, research published in the 1930s showed an interest in more varied aspects of work experience than what is captured by the construct of job satisfaction. For example, Fisher and Hannah examined the relationship between 'emotional maladjustment' and job satisfaction in their clinical studies reported in their book *The Dissatisfied Worker* (1931). Rexford Hersey (1932), using what would today be called mood checklists, studied the daily rhythms of worker affect and related those rhythms to daily changes in productivity, physiological states, and off-work life events. Hoppock (1935), interested in the far-reaching consequences of the depression, focused his attention on the social implications as opposed to the organizational implications of job dissatisfaction.

Later, interest in worker experience narrowed to emphasize evaluative judgments of the aspects of work, i.e., job satisfaction and the causes and consequences of those attitudes. Perhaps the research most influential for the development of the dominant paradigm was conducted by Kornhauser and Sharp (1932). In their research, conducted at Kimberley Clark, Kornhauser and Sharp laid the foundation for what was to come by using questionnaires to ask about facets of job satisfaction and relating those facets to aspects of performance of interest to management. The examination of work attitudes became the primary vehicle for studying work experience, questionnaires became the primary method, facet measurement became the primary content, and organizational effectiveness became the primary reason for the research. By the end of the decade, an eclectic stew of thinking about worker experience had boiled down to a puree composed of worker attitudes or job satisfaction. Satisfaction became the predominant way of capturing worker experiences and the research after that mostly concentrated on the predictors and performance correlates of satisfaction, how best to measure satisfaction, and the development of theories of satisfaction formation.

The 1940s and 1950s saw mostly empirical efforts to catalog the various work environment features and personal characteristics that predict differing levels of work satisfaction. There were also continued empirical efforts to demonstrate the ability of satisfaction to predict job performance in its various forms. Although even Kornhauser and Sharp (1932) in their landmark study reported an inability of satisfaction to predict performance, there existed a generally accepted belief that workers would perform better and be more motivated in their work, if they found satisfaction in their jobs. The reasons for this assumption were based more on intuition than sound conceptual analysis. Then in 1955, Brayfield and Crockett published an influential review of studies correlating satisfaction and performance and found the relationship to be negligible. Subsequent reviews by Vroom (1964) and Iaffaldano and Muchinsky (1985) came to the same conclusion. Although later reviews (for example, Judge et al., 2001) may be more optimistic about the relationship between satisfaction and performance, by the late 1950s it became clear that more theoretical development of the concept was needed, including better understanding of the development of work attitudes and a clearer picture of the many ways in which employees contribute to organizational effectiveness might be predicted by levels of satisfaction.

In this regard, the 1960s might be considered the 'golden age' of satisfaction research as psychologists mostly abandoned the empirical efforts to catalog the correlates of satisfaction and began to develop influential theoretical positions. In 1959, Herzberg, Mausner, and Snyderman introduced the 'two-factor' theory, which dominated research and practice for over a decade. Important theoretical positions were offered by Porter (1961), Adams (1963, 1965), Katzell (1964), and Locke (1969) in a tradition that Lawler (1973) labeled 'discrepancy theories' to illustrate that they all involved workers comparing assessments of working conditions to some personal standard. Vroom (1964) developed a theory of satisfaction out of his broader expectancy theory of motivation. The 1960s also saw the development of the two most important theoretically driven measurement systems, the Job Descriptive Index (Smith et al., 1969) and the MSQ (Lofquist and Dawis, 1969). Important theoretical developments continued in the 1970s, particularly with the introduction of social information processing theory by Salancik and Pfeffer (1977, 1978), which emphasized the importance of the social context of satisfaction judgments, and the job characteristics model of Hackman and Oldham (1975), which emphasized the importance of features of the tasks that people work on.

Finally, after a period of theoretical and empirical quiescence, the 1990s saw psychology's renewed interest in affective states thereby making its way to the study of work experience. In some ways this helped work psychology come full circle to the initial interests of Hersey (1932) or Fisher and Hanna (1931), broadening discussions of work experience beyond the confines of satisfaction. More importantly for satisfaction research, the interest in affect helped bring clarity to the construct of satisfaction, positioning it as an attitude or evaluative judgment, influenced by but not equivalent to affective states. Important overarching discussions of this were presented by Weiss and Cropanzano (1996) with the presentation of Affective Events Theory (AET) and then in more detail by Weiss (2002). Now, as indicated earlier, job satisfaction is one of a number of psychological constructs used to understand the subjective experiences of workers. A thorough history of the research on job satisfaction can be found in Weiss and Brief (2001).

Consequences of Differing Levels of Job Satisfaction

An overriding impetus for the study of job satisfaction has been a belief that it is an important influence on job performance.

Consequently, the nature of that relationship continues to be an important direction for the application of empirical and conceptual efforts. As employees can contribute to organizational effectiveness in many ways, through their task performance, commitment to the organization, reliability of attendance, provision of support and mentoring, and so on, no single statement can be made about satisfaction and performance. Instead, the importance of work attitudes to performance appears to be a function of what aspect of performance one is referring to.

Initial interest focused on what might be called immediate task performance and by 1955 enough empirical studies of that relationship had been done to justify a review by Brayfield and Crockett. Their conclusion was rather surprising for the time. "It appears that there is little evidence in the available literature that employee attitudes of the type usually measured in morale surveys bear any simple – or for that matter, appreciable – relationship to performance on the job." (1955: p. 408). Later Vroom (1964) reviewing essentially the same literature came to the same conclusion as did an early *meta*-analysis by Iaffaldano and Muchinsky (1985). More recently, a *meta*-analysis by Judge et al. (2001) reported a more moderate satisfaction–performance relationship ($r = 0.30$, corrected). They suggest that the difference is due primarily to methodological differences (Judge et al., 2001). A *meta*-analysis by Harter et al. (2002) found a moderate relationship between employee satisfaction and unit-level performance ($r = 0.22$). Regardless, it is important to note that even the most optimistic results find satisfaction explaining less than 10% of the variance in task performance. Further, most of the data points in these *meta*-analyses are from correlational studies, leaving causal direction ambiguous. Finally, Bowling (2007) suggests that the satisfaction–performance relationship is largely spurious. He found that the relationship between satisfaction and performance dropped to 0.09 after controlling for domain-specific personality traits (i.e., organization-based self-esteem), suggesting that satisfaction may not be causally related to performance. Overall, and contrary to intuition, these results suggest modest to negligible relationships between job satisfaction and task performance.

Employee contributions to organizational effectiveness go beyond the contributions made by immediate task performance and therefore research has also looked at the ability of satisfaction to predict other criteria like job withdrawal (turnover, absenteeism, etc.) and extra-role behaviors (organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) and counterproductive work behavior (CWB)). *Meta*-analyses of studies examining satisfaction–turnover relationships generally produce findings similar to those for task performance, moderate but not substantial. For example, Carsten and Spector (1987) found that turnover was related to satisfaction ($r = -0.26$, corrected) and Tett and Meyer (1993) found that turnover intentions and withdrawal intentions were highly correlated with job satisfaction ($r = -0.58$, corrected), but observed turnover less so ($r = -0.24$). A number of other *meta*-analytic studies found relationships of a similar magnitude (Cotton and Tuttle, 1986; Fried et al., 2008; Griffeth et al., 2000; Hom et al., 1992; Podsakoff et al., 2009). Overall, satisfaction is most strongly related to turnover intention, not actual turnover. The attenuated relationship between intentions and behavior may be due to a myriad of other factors that are outside of the individual's control (i.e., ability to get another job).

Similar to the satisfaction–turnover relationship, satisfaction has been weakly related to absence duration ($r = 0.09$) and absence frequency ($r = -0.18$; Scott and Taylor, 1985). The restricted relationship between absenteeism and satisfaction may be due to the employee's ability to express such behaviors (i.e., strict absence policies).

In the 1980s, interest shifted to behaviors that were outside of the formal job requirements, such as OCB (see Bateman and Organ, 1983; Smith et al., 1983). OCBs, broadly defined as organizationally useful behaviors that are not formally prescribed by formal job requirements, appear to be moderately correlated with satisfaction ($r > 0.16$; Dalal, 2005; LePine et al., 2002; Organ and Ryan, 1995). CWBs, or behaviors intended to harm coworkers or the organization as a whole, can be considered the opposite of OCBs. Mount et al. (2006) found significant path coefficients between satisfaction and organizational CWBs ($r = 0.41$) and interpersonal CWBs ($r = 0.40$), and Dalal (2005) found a moderate relationship between satisfaction and overall CWBs ($r = -0.37$, corrected). In comparison to in-role behaviors, more substantive effect sizes for OCBs and CWBs may be due to the greater level of control that the employees have over these behaviors. OCBs and CWBs are not strongly regulated behaviors, and thus allow employees more latitude in expression.

Harrison et al. (2006) have argued that this behavior-by-behavior approach to satisfaction consequences is inconsistent with basic attitude theory. Working from the compatibility principle of attitude theory, they argue that overall job satisfaction, as a general attitude, should be a better predictor of an aggregated index of employee contributions than of any single behavior. In a very creative *meta*-analysis, where they combine results for both withdrawal and extra-role behaviors, they conclude that the expected relationship of overall satisfaction with an integrated index of contribution approached 0.60. Their work is important because it shows a utility for job satisfaction that has been heretofore hard to find and because it demonstrates the usefulness of incorporating attitude theory into the study of job satisfaction.

Finally, interest in satisfaction is not driven entirely by organizational considerations as there is reason to believe that job dissatisfaction has negative effects on mental health. For example, a *meta*-analysis by Lee and Ashforth (1996) found significant relationship with satisfaction and Maslach's (1982) three dimensions of burnout: emotional exhaustion ($r = -0.31$, corrected), depersonalization ($r = -0.44$, corrected), and personal accomplishment ($r = 0.29$, corrected). Further, a *meta*-analysis by Faragher et al. (2005) found that satisfaction is related to anxiety ($r = 0.42$), depression ($r = 0.42$), and self-esteem ($r = 0.43$), suggesting that satisfaction at work can be meaningfully related to employee's mental health.

Predictors of Job Satisfaction

Organizational research has had a long tradition of examining the predictive correlates of job satisfaction, with interest in predictors across populations and for specific populations (e.g., nurses, firefighters, teachers, etc.). The result is a literature

of thousands of studies demonstrating that this work feature or that personal characteristic correlates with job satisfaction.

Judge and Kammeyer-Mueller (2012) found it useful to organize the most studied work environment predictors of job satisfaction into four broad categories: the nature of the work itself, the support from coworkers, leader quality, and organizational practices. Evidence exists for the importance of experiences in each of these categories.

Of primary importance among work-related factors is the nature of the work itself. Since the introduction of the Job Characteristics Model (Hackman and Oldham, 1976) of satisfaction and motivation, empirical studies consistently show that when people work on jobs, they report as being more complex, requiring more skills, providing more intrinsic feedback, and so on, they also report higher levels of job satisfaction. In addition, interventions that change jobs to enhance these characteristics generally enhance reports of satisfaction as well. Related to the structure of work, but not the specific task per se, is research on role conflict and role ambiguity. Both role conflict, the extent of incompatible job demands, and role ambiguity, uncertainty concerning job responsibilities, are consistently correlated with reports of job dissatisfaction. Importantly, conflict between work and nonwork roles is also a consistent predictor of dissatisfaction. Kossek and Ozeki (1998) found a negative relationship between all types of work–family conflict and satisfaction ($r = -0.31$), suggesting that problematic work and nonwork relationships are detrimental to satisfaction.

Social interactions in the workplace, both with coworkers and with supervisors, are well-known predictors of job satisfaction. Not surprisingly workers report that the degree of support they get from their coworkers is an important influence on the extent to which they like their jobs as is the degree to which their supervisors show concern, consideration, and respect for them (Judge and Kammeyer-Mueller, 2012).

Organizational practices and policies also influence satisfaction. For example, Baltes and colleagues investigated the differential effect of nontraditional work schedules on satisfaction (Baltes et al., 1999). Flextime schedules allow individuals to decide when to arrive and leave from work. Compressed workweeks condense the workweek to less than 5 days by increasing the number of hours per day. A compressed schedule was more strongly related to satisfaction ($r = 0.28$) than a flextime schedule ($r = 0.07$). Much research has shown that being treated in a just and fair manner correlates with reported job satisfaction. Interestingly enough, while most people would think that pay levels are the single most important influence on satisfaction, *meta*-analytic results suggest that pay may only be weakly related to job satisfaction (Judge et al., 2010).

Personal antecedents, such as personality, also predict satisfaction. Bruk-Lee et al. (2009) found that job satisfaction was positively but weakly related to the Big Five personality traits (Goldberg, 1990) of conscientiousness, extraversion, and agreeableness ($r \geq 0.12$), negatively related to neuroticism ($r = -0.25$), and not related to openness to experience. Satisfaction was also related to trait positive affectivity ($r = 0.41$) and negative affectivity ($r = -0.25$) (Bruk-Lee et al., 2009). Another *meta*-analysis (Connolly and Viswesvaran, 2000) found similar relationships between positive and negative affectivity and satisfaction.

The ability to review the thousands of studies on the predictors of job satisfaction is clearly beyond the scope of this article, but there is no compelling necessity to do so. The purely empirical database, the observation that this factor or that variable predicts satisfaction, might have some practical value in a particular context but it provides little organizing explanatory insight into the nature of work attitudes or their consequences. This conclusion has not gone unnoticed by job satisfaction researchers, and as a result a rich history of theoretical activity has developed side by side with the purely empirical database.

Theories of Job Satisfaction

Two general points can be made about the broad array of theoretical positions developed regarding job satisfaction. First, although job satisfaction is an attitude held about one's job (or the aspects of one's job when referring to facet satisfactions), very few of the major theoretical positions are informed by basic attitude theory (but see work by Schleicher et al., 2011; Harrison et al., 2006; as a notable exceptions). Second, most theoretical positions focus on developing a causal structure for satisfaction, instead of trying to place satisfaction within a broad nomological network of causes, consequences, moderators, and so on. Interestingly, all of the theoretical approaches have received some empirical support, partly because they are mostly complementary rather than antagonistic, partly because they each touch on some element of the truth, and partly because they are infrequently stated or tested in ways conducive to disconfirmation.

Theories of job satisfaction can be placed within four broad categories: cognitive judgment theories, social influence theories, dispositional theories, and affect theories. Historically, cognitive judgment theories are the oldest positions and affect theories are found more recently. These theoretical positions are best understood as presenting differences of emphases, not incompatibility. For example, affect theories like AET generally include a role for personality.

Cognitive judgment approaches dominated the theoretical landscape in the 1960s; and although they are more rarely researched today, they still form an implicit framework for many discussions of satisfaction. Locke's (1976) value-based theory is perhaps the most influential, but theories with a similar structure were offered by Porter (1961) and Katzell (1964), among others. Although each of the theories has unique elements, a general framework can be described. In this framework, the work environment is perceptually organized as a set of discrete concrete or abstract features (e.g., coworkers, pay, supervisors, career opportunities, etc.). Workers have a corresponding set of standards that they use to evaluate the features directly or the outcomes derived from the features (i.e., the pay I receive compared to the pay I desire or expect). Finally, perceptions are matched to standards to yield facet satisfactions. Overall satisfaction is derived from the combination of facet satisfactions.

More recently, a variant of the discrepancy approach can be found in fit theories of satisfaction. Fit can be defined as "the compatibility between an individual and a work environment that occurs when their characteristics are well matched"

(Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). In a *meta*-analysis of research on fit, Kristof-Brown et al. (2005) found support for the contention that the degree to which job and organizational demands match personal skills, need, and values predicts job satisfaction. Fit theories have a 'matching' structure similar to those found in cognitive judgment theories, although judgment theories postulate specific cognitive processes while fit generally does not.

Social influence theories, most notably represented by social information processing theory (Salancik and Pfeffer, 1977, 1978), give emphases to the role that the social environment has in influencing judgments about work. That is, they postulate that attitudes of coworkers can influence perceptions and evaluations of particular features of one's job as well as overall evaluations of the job as a whole. In this sense, social influence theories are not alternatives to cognitive judgment theories but rather help understand how the perceptions that are critical to these judgments are influenced by the social environment. Not surprisingly, research has consistently supported these social influences on work perceptions and evaluations.

Dispositional approaches focus on personality characteristics as influences on satisfaction. As described by Weiss and Cropanzano (1996), the basic idea is that "to some degree, a person's job satisfaction reflects his or her general tendency to feel good or bad about all aspects of life and this general tendency is independent of the specific nature of the job" (p. 7). Evidence for the position is found in tendencies for satisfaction to show some stability across time and jobs and for satisfaction to correlate with established personality constructs. The most notable theoretical position in this area is core self-evaluations (CSE) theory (Judge et al., 1997). CSE represent fundamental evaluations of the self and include personality characteristics of self-esteem, self-efficacy, locus of control, and neuroticism. Research supports the relationship between the CSE composite and job satisfaction.

In the 1990s, the popularity of research on job satisfaction gave way to a new interest in affective states like moods and emotions. However, the new-found interest in true affect did not lead to the disappearance of thinking about job satisfaction. Instead, it helped make that thinking more precise. An important theoretical position in this domain is AET (Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996) that attempts to clarify key concepts in satisfaction and affect research. In particular, it explicates differences between satisfaction, as a relatively stable attitudinal evaluation of one's job, and moods and emotions as transient affective experiences (see also Weiss, 2002), and it discusses how discrete affective experiences influence overall judgments like satisfaction. It also draws a distinction between affect-driven behaviors (criteria driven by immediate affective states like moods and emotions) and judgment-driven behaviors (criteria driven by evaluative judgments like satisfaction). Now, these distinctions between affect and attitude are well accepted and their interrelationships represent a productive area of research.

Summary

Jobs satisfaction, the overall evaluative judgment one has about one's job, has a long and rich history in organizational research and practice. In some ways it is seen as the enduring 'person side' of such research, in contrast to performance interest of much organizational research. Even this characteristic is flawed because, historically, much satisfaction research was driven by supposed performance implications. Nevertheless, over the long history of work psychology, satisfaction has generally carried the load for research on work experience. Today work experienced is captured by a plethora of related constructs like emotions, moods, engagement, commitment, and so on. Still, as part of this umbrella of work experience concepts, satisfaction remains an important way to describe worker–employer relationships of interest to researchers and management.

See also: Happiness and Work; Industrial–Organizational Psychology: Science and Practice; Job Analysis and Work Roles, Psychology of; Organizational Citizenship Behavior; Work Motivation; Workplace Stress.

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