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# Deconstructing job satisfaction Separating evaluations, beliefs and affective experiences

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## Abstract

In this paper I argue that standard treatments of job satisfaction have inappropriately defined satisfaction as affect and in so doing have obscured the differences among three separate, if related, constructs. These key constructs are overall evaluative judgments about jobs, affective experiences at work, and beliefs about jobs. I show that clearly separating these constructs is consistent with current, basic research and theory on attitudes as well as with current research and theory on “subjective well-being” (SWB). I also argue that the separation of the constructs can produce better criterion predictions than job satisfaction has by itself, suggests new areas of research that cannot be envisioned when satisfaction and affect are treated as equivalent constructs, and requires the development of new measurement systems. © 2002 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

*Keywords:* Affect; Emotions; Attitude; Job satisfaction

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## 1. Introduction

Let me begin by clearly stating the objectives of this paper, as well as its underlying logic. My basic position is that current definitions of job satisfaction, along with the research guided by these definitions, have obscured the differences among three related but distinct constructs: evaluations of jobs, beliefs about jobs, and affective experiences on jobs. I intend to show why it makes conceptual sense to separate these constructs, what the separation of these constructs can do for us theoretically and practically, and what we have to do methodologically to take advantage of this delineation. I want to make my objectives clear from the outset because I have received enough resistance to

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this position from reviewers and colleagues to indicate that while these distinctions appear obvious to me, consideration of these ideas causes severe pain in others. Foretold is forewarned.

## 2. Defining job satisfaction

Cranny, Smith, and Stone (1992) have suggested that there is a clear consensus in the definition of job satisfaction. Their “consensus” definition is that job satisfaction is “an affective (that is, emotional) reaction to one’s job, resulting from the incumbent’s comparison of actual outcomes with those that are desired (expected, deserved, and so on.)” (p. 1). This definition is essentially equivalent to the definition offered by Locke in his two classic and influential papers on job satisfaction. In his 1969 paper, “What is job satisfaction,” Locke says that job satisfaction is the “pleasurable emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one’s job as achieving or facilitating one’s job values. Job dissatisfaction is the unpleasurable emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one’s job as frustrating or blocking the attainment of one’s values” (Locke, 1969, p. 317). In his 1976 chapter in the *Handbook of Industrial Psychology*, Locke said that job satisfaction is a “pleasurable or positive emotional state resulting from an appraisal of one’s job or job experiences” (Locke, 1976, p. 1300).

While Cranny et al. (1992) conclude that their definition of job satisfaction as affective or emotional response represents the consensus definition of job satisfaction, a definition of job satisfaction as the attitude one holds about one’s jobs is also prevalent. So, for example, Miner (1992) states that “it seems desirable . . . to treat job satisfaction as generally equivalent to job attitudes” (p. 116) and, more recently, Brief (1998) says that job satisfaction “is an attitude toward one’s job” (p. 10).

It seems clear from the literature that most organizational researchers do not see these two definitions of “satisfaction as affect” and “satisfaction as attitude” as inconsistent. For example, in the classic book by Smith, Kendall, and Hulin (1969) in which the development of the job description index (JDI) is described, they define job satisfactions as “feelings or affective responses to facets of the situation” (p. 7), while earlier stating that the “problems associated with the measurement of satisfaction are but specific examples of those encountered in the measurement of any attitude” (p. 1). Other examples of important pieces treating attitude and affective response as synonymous include Hulin (1991), Locke (1976), and Vroom (1964). In keeping with the classic tripartite model of attitude structure, attitudes themselves are thought to be complex entities that, as part of the attitude construct, include affective responses, beliefs about the object, and behaviors in relation to the object. Thus, to say that job satisfaction is an attitude about our jobs and to say that it is an affective response to our jobs is, for many among us, to say the same thing.

However, it is my contention that the treatment of attitude and affect as the same thing has obscured real and important differences between the constructs. It is also my contention that organizational researchers who fall back on the tripartite model as justification for this confusion are falling back on a structural model of attitudes that has been substantially modified by basic attitudinal researchers. Furthermore, by treating attitude and affect as

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