



# Job emotions and job cognitions as determinants of job satisfaction: The moderating role of individual differences in need for affect



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 22 August 2013

Available online 5 December 2013

### Keywords:

Job satisfaction

Job emotions

Job cognitions

Need for affect

Attitude bases

## ABSTRACT

Research has shown that job satisfaction is determined by both cognitions about the job and affect at work. However, findings from basic and applied attitude research suggest that the extent to which attitudes are based on affective and cognitive information is contingent on stable individual differences, in particular need for affect. Based on current conceptualizations of job satisfaction as an attitude toward the job, we hypothesized that job satisfaction depends more on affect and less on cognitions, the higher a person's need for affect is. To test these hypotheses, we conducted two correlational studies ( $N = 194$  university employees;  $N = 134$  employees from various organizations) as well as an experimental study ( $N = 191$  university employees) in which the salience of positive versus negative job cognitions was varied. Results supported our hypotheses. We discuss theoretical and practical implications of these differences in affective and cognitive underpinnings of job satisfaction.

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## 1. Introduction

What determines the job satisfaction of an employee? Answering this question has long been a major concern of scholars and practitioners (Spector, 1997). Current conceptualizations that define job satisfaction as an attitude toward one's job assume that it has cognitive and affective determinants (Brief, 1998; Weiss, 2002). In fact, several studies have shown that job satisfaction is influenced by beliefs about the job (cognitions) as well as mood and emotions (affect; Brief & Roberson, 1989; Fisher, 2000; Ilies & Judge, 2004; Weiss, Nicholas, & Daus, 1999). However, aside from being distinct determinants of job satisfaction, little is known about factors influencing the extent to which attitudes toward the job are determined by cognitions and affect.

In this regard, findings in attitude research suggest that individuals differ in regard to the cognitive and affective underpinnings of attitudes (e.g., Crites, Fabrigar, & Petty, 1994; Haddock & Zanna, 1998; Huskinson & Haddock, 2004). Specifically, a number of studies have revealed that differences in affective and cognitive underpinnings of attitudes are related to individual differences in the motivational disposition of need for affect (e.g., Haddock, Maio, Arnold, & Huskinson, 2008; Huskinson & Haddock, 2004; Maio & Esses, 2001). With respect to the attitude toward the job, these findings suggest that individual differences in need for affect may also moderate the extent to which job satisfaction is determined by affect at work and job cognitions. Hence, the central goal of the present studies is to investigate whether need for affect indeed influences the importance of affect versus cognitions for individuals' job satisfaction.

By pursuing this goal, the present studies illuminate the processes that link dispositions to affective and cognitive factors underlying individuals' job satisfaction judgments (Judge & Larsen, 2001). Moreover, individual differences in the cognitive and affective underpinnings of job satisfaction may have implications for the stability of job satisfaction (Dormann & Zapf, 2001), the predictive validity of job satisfaction for different work-related behaviors (e.g., in-role and extra-role behavior, affect-driven and

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judgment-driven behavior; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996; Williams & Anderson, 1991), and the measurement of job satisfaction (Kaplan, Warren, Barsky, & Thoresen, 2009). In the following, we will review existing studies on the influence of job cognitions and affect at work on job satisfaction and then describe research regarding the role of need for affect as a disposition moderating the cognitive and affective bases of attitudes.

### 1.1. Cognitive and affective bases of job satisfaction

The notion that job satisfaction has cognitive as well as affective underpinnings is rooted in basic attitude research holding that an attitude (i.e., an overall evaluation toward an attitude object) is based on cognitive and affective processes (Petty, Wegener, & Fabrigar, 1997). Similarly, we consider job satisfaction as an attitude toward the job, that is, “a positive (or negative) evaluative judgment one makes about one’s job” (Weiss, 2002, p. 175) that is based on cognitions about the job and affect experienced at work. Cognitions about the job represent rather descriptive (or “cold”) beliefs that a person holds about his or her job (Brief & Roberson, 1989; Weiss, 2002). They may refer, for example, to characteristics of the job (e.g., job content, working hours, payment) or to what one receives from the job (e.g., prestige, promotion opportunities, steady employment). Affective experiences, in comparison, refer to feelings at work, which include positive and negative emotions as well as moods.<sup>1</sup> Hence, the present research considers affect (as well as cognition) as a situational factor, that is, we refer to affective states rather than to affective traits.<sup>2</sup>

Job cognitions and affect at work have been shown to be related to each other (Brief & Roberson, 1989; Ilies & Judge, 2004), reflecting the “synergistic relation” between cognitive and affective determinants of attitudes (Eagly, Mladinic, & Otto, 1994). With respect to job attitudes, in particular affective experiences at work arouse and are accompanied by cognitions about the job and vice versa (Judge & Larsen, 2001; see also Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Nonetheless, “affect and cognition can and should be studied as separate and separable influences on job satisfaction” (Judge & Larsen, 2001, pp. 74–75; Weiss, 2002). Indeed, a number of studies have shown that job satisfaction is predicted simultaneously by both cognitive and affective determinants (Brief & Roberson, 1989; Fisher, 2000; Ilies & Judge, 2004; Weiss et al., 1999). More generally, these studies investigated two important questions: first, whether job satisfaction measures differ in the extent to which they capture cognition and affect and, second, whether job satisfaction is indeed influenced by both job cognitions and affect at work.

With regard to the first question, which was raised almost 30 years ago (Organ & Near, 1985), research has shown that job satisfaction scales differ greatly in the extent to which they capture both cognition and affect (e.g., Brief & Roberson, 1989; Fisher, 2000; Niklas & Dormann, 2005). Recent meta-analytic findings by Kaplan et al. (2009) showed that scales that were considered to be primarily cognitive (e.g., the Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire; Weiss, Dawis, England, & Lofquist, 1967) were significantly less related to state affect than job satisfaction scales that were considered to be more balanced in terms of capturing the role of both job cognitions and affect at work (e.g., the Faces Scale; Kunin, 1955). Clearly, studies interested in the underpinnings of job satisfaction should employ balanced satisfaction scales reflecting both affective and cognitive processes.

The first investigation on the second question regarding the cognitive and affective basis of job satisfaction was conducted by Brief and Roberson (1989). In their study, employees were asked about affect at work (i.e., frequency of positive and negative mood during the last week) and job cognitions (i.e., extent to which various job characteristics apply to their job). Regression analytic results showed that global job satisfaction, assessed with a Kunin Faces Scale, was predicted by both affect at work and job cognitions. These initial findings, based on retrospective reports of affect at work, were replicated in studies employing experience sampling methodology to measure real-time affect at work. A study by Weiss et al. (1999), for example, showed that pleasantness of affect and job cognitions uniquely predicted global job satisfaction (see also Fisher, 2000; Ilies & Judge, 2004). Overall, existing research provides solid empirical evidence that job satisfaction is influenced by both job cognitions and affect at work. In line with suggestions of a number of authors (Weiss, 2002; Weiss et al., 1999; see also Brief & Roberson, 1989; Kaplan et al., 2009; Schleicher, Watt, & Greguras, 2004), however, we hold that people may differ in the extent to which their job satisfaction is influenced by cognitions about the job and affect at work. In fact, whereas the role of individual differences for the cognitive and affective underpinnings of attitudes has been investigated extensively in social psychological research, job satisfaction research on this issue is as yet scarce.

### 1.2. Individual differences in the cognitive and affective bases of job satisfaction

Brief, Butcher, and Roberson (1995) showed that employees low in negative affectivity (Watson & Clark, 1984) who were offered cookies, drinks, and a small gift reported higher job satisfaction than employees of a control group who had not experienced such a positive mood inducing event. In contrast, job satisfaction of individuals high in negative affectivity was not affected by the positive mood inducing event. Although participants’ mood was not assessed in their study, the results may be interpreted as showing that positive mood is more influential for job satisfaction of people low (vs. high) in negative affectivity. However, it is unclear whether people low (vs. high) in negative affectivity also react more to negative mood inducing events or whether negative mood is more influential for their job satisfaction (Judge & Larsen, 2001). Thus, it is unclear whether the

<sup>1</sup> We use the terms feelings at work, affect at work, emotions at work, and job emotions synonymously throughout the paper.

<sup>2</sup> As research has shown, affective traits such as positive and negative affectivity (Watson et al., 1988) and other dispositional factors such as core self-evaluations (Judge, Locke, & Durham, 1997) are important determinants of job satisfaction (Judge & Larsen, 2001; Kaplan et al., 2009). Both theoretically (e.g., Brief, 1998; Judge & Larsen, 2001; Judge et al., 1997; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) and empirically (e.g., Ilies & Judge, 2004; Judge, Locke, Durham, & Kluger, 1998), their influence on job satisfaction is at least partly mediated by employees’ job perceptions and appraisals (i.e., job cognitions) and/or their feelings at work. The present research, in comparison, focuses on the role of dispositions as a moderator of the importance of job cognitions and affect at work for job satisfaction.

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