



Situational job characteristics and job satisfaction: The moderating role of national culture



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 27 February 2014

Received in revised form 11 November 2014

Accepted 7 January 2015

Available online 30 January 2015

Keywords:

Culture
Job characteristics
Job satisfaction

ABSTRACT

International research on job satisfaction suggests that the relationship between job characteristics and job satisfaction differs across countries. These differences might be due to an effect of cultural differences. However, to date, there has been little systematic research on the question if and how national culture moderates different job characteristics' influences on job satisfaction. We address this research gap by referring to the four key dimensions of culture defined by Hofstede and seven top drivers of job satisfaction. Empirical analyses are based on a sample from 24 nations. Findings indicate that some job characteristics' impacts vary significantly between countries, while others prove to be independent of national context. These differences are indeed partially, significantly moderated by individual dimensions of culture.

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1. Introduction

Job satisfaction is a central concept in organizational psychology, and research on its determinants and outcomes has strong practical relevance for human resources management. In recent years, job satisfaction has attracted the attention of cross-national and intercultural researchers. Thereby, most studies focus on cross-national differences in job satisfaction levels, and show remarkable differences (e.g. Jones & Sloane, 2009; Llorente & Macias, 2005; Pichler & Wallace, 2009; Sousa-Poza & Sousa-Poza, 2000).

However, it is not only the average job satisfaction levels that differ, but the antecedents of job satisfaction might also be valued differently across nations. This notion finds support in several cross-national studies (e.g. Masuda et al., 2012; Robert, Probst, Martocchio, Drasgow, & Lawler, 2000; Sousa-Poza & Sousa-Poza, 2000; Tangian, 2009). For instance, in their analysis of 21 countries, Sousa-Poza and Sousa-Poza (2000) compare job satisfaction drivers by looking at their statistical significances in country-specific regression analyses, finding that some determinants of job

satisfaction apply to all countries (e.g. having an interesting job), while others are country-specific (e.g. pay and job security). Similarly, Timming (2010: 537) performed regressions for individual countries and concludes that “although there is some evidence that several of the predictors are more robust than others, the findings [...] are marked by considerable variation”. Hence, certain job characteristics seem to remain constant in their impacts on job satisfaction across countries, while others appear to vary.

A central explanation for these results might be cultural differences. For instance, Warr (2007) highlights that living in a certain culture involves exposure to valued behaviors and role relationships that might affect the importance attached to different job characteristics. Likewise, Huang and van de Vliert (2003, 2004) posit that the cultural values prevalent in a nation predispose how this cultural group's members value different job characteristics. It is therefore reasonable to assume that different job characteristics' relevances or impacts on job satisfaction are moderated by national cultural values. Yet, there is little systematic research into the specific effects that different cultural facets might have on individual-level relationships between situational job characteristics and job satisfaction (as also noted by Warr, 2007). Most of the empirical research stops at country comparisons (e.g. Sousa-Poza & Sousa-Poza, 2000; Tangian, 2009; Timming, 2010) and few studies directly incorporate cultural values (e.g. Huang & van de Vliert, 2003, 2004). There are also few

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theoretical frameworks that theorize cultural facets' specific effects on job satisfaction models. This is surprising, because – from a practical perspective – the value that employees attribute to different job characteristics has strong relevance to HR managers in multinational organizations. This is the information needed to customize instruments and incentives to satisfy and therewith motivate international workforces. From a theoretical perspective, a comprehensive approach evaluating culture's impact would be fruitful in order to estimate the extent to which theories on the antecedents of job satisfaction are dependent on different cultural contexts.

This paper addresses this matter by asking whether national culture and its dimensions moderate certain job characteristics' impacts on job satisfaction. To answer this question, we first provide a brief review of studies on the relationship between job characteristics and job satisfaction from a cross-national and/or an intercultural perspective. We will then theoretically specify how culture may moderate the relationships between different situational job characteristics and job satisfaction. We thereby focus on the cultural dimensions introduced by Hofstede (1980) (power distance, individualism vs. collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity) and seven top drivers of job satisfaction (interesting job, independent work, job security, high income, advancement opportunities, good relationships with management, and good relationships with colleagues) (Sousa-Poza & Sousa-Poza, 2000). Our basic propositions are empirically tested by applying a multilevel analysis on a large-scale dataset ($n = 14,446$) of 24 nations.

Findings show that while some job characteristics have an equal influence on job satisfaction (independent work, high income, and good relationships with co-workers) and thus qualify as nation-independent, others' influences (interesting job, security, advancement opportunities, good relationships with management) do vary across countries. These differences are partially moderated by culture.

This study contributes to the literature by offering a systematic and comprehensive conceptual framework into the specific effects that different cultural facets might have in the relationship between job characteristics and job satisfaction. It thus offers an explanation for if, how, and why the importances of situational job characteristics to job satisfaction might vary between different cultural environments. Furthermore, by focusing on central cultural dimensions and antecedents of job satisfaction, we advance the findings of previous empirical research by following a systematic multilevel approach.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Antecedents of job satisfaction

Job satisfaction can be influenced by various situational job characteristics. Well-known situational approaches to job satisfaction are the motivation-hygiene theory of Herzberg, Mausner, and Snyderman (1959), the job characteristics model of Hackman and Oldham (1976), and the work of Peter Warr (1999, 2007). According to Herzberg et al. (1959), job satisfaction's antecedents can be clustered in real motivational factors – such as achievement, recognition, work, responsibility, promotion, and growth – which increase job satisfaction but do not diminish dissatisfaction, and hygiene factors – such as pay, company policy, good relationships with co-workers, and supervision – which decrease job dissatisfaction but do not increase satisfaction. Similarly, the job characteristics model defines five core job characteristics as conditions that lead to higher job satisfaction: task identity, task significance, skills variety, autonomy, and feedback (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). Based on a comprehensive

review of these and further approaches, Warr (2007) provides – to our best knowledge – the most comprehensive collection of job features that are significantly and positively associated with job satisfaction: (1) opportunity for personal control (employee discretion, autonomy, self-determination), (2) opportunity for skill use (skills utilization, opportunities for learning), (3) externally generated goals (job demands, workload, work-family conflict), (4) variety (in job content and location), (5) environmental clarity (information about the future, required behavior), (6) contact with others (quantity and quality of interactions), (7) availability of money (income level), (8) physical security (absence of danger, good working conditions), (9) valued social position (status in society, task significance), (10) supportive supervision (leader consideration, supportive management), (11) career outlook (job security, opportunities for promotion, advancement), and (12) equity (fairness in one's employment relationship, morality in an employer's relationship with society).

Job satisfaction's various antecedents are often categorized into different groups or dimensions. The most popular categorization distinguishes between extrinsic and intrinsic job characteristics, and can be traced back to Herzberg's differentiation between motivators (intrinsic aspects) and hygiene factors (extrinsic aspects) (Kaasa, 2011). It is argued that intrinsic rewards (e.g. interesting work, self-responsibility) stem directly from the task properties involved in doing a certain job, while extrinsic rewards (e.g. pay, security, advancement opportunities) are provided by the organization in order to motivate employees (see also Mottaz, 1985). Some authors (e.g. Katz & Van Maanen, 1977; Mottaz, 1985) hypothesize on a further cluster of rewards derived from interpersonal relationships at work, such as good relationships with co-workers.

In current research, these three groups of situational job characteristics are often assumed to all positively affect job satisfaction, and are also common in analyzing job satisfaction's antecedents in a cross-national surrounding (e.g. Huang & van de Vliert, 2003). While some authors bundle individual job satisfaction antecedents with intrinsic and extrinsic factors in performing their job satisfaction analyses (see e.g. Kooij, De Lange, Jansen, Kanfer, & Dijkers, 2011), authors in a cross-national context are advised to analyze and interpret each antecedent individually. According to Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov (2010), the classification into intrinsic and extrinsic elements is not suitable for comparing countries owing to potential countervailing effects of single elements making up the dimensions. For instance, in a cross-national analysis, a stronger importance of self-responsibility and a lower importance of interesting work would not become visible when researching a factor called intrinsic motivators. In the following, we will therefore focus on individual job characteristics.

2.2. National differences in job satisfaction levels and the impact of culture

In recent years, many authors have addressed the topic of job satisfaction from a cross-national and/or intercultural perspective. Especially the question whether job satisfaction levels differ across nations or cultures has seen some research. Authors such as Sousa-Poza and Sousa-Poza (2000), Llorente and Macias (2005), Jones and Sloane (2009), and Pichler and Wallace (2009) have identify differing job satisfaction levels between nations and refer to situational or economic location factors as explanatory terms. For instance, Sousa-Poza and Sousa-Poza (2000) analyzed country differences in work role inputs (e.g. work time, effort) and work role outputs (e.g. income, job security) and their effects on job satisfaction. Pichler and Wallace (2009) analyzed individual-level factors (e.g. occupation, intrinsic and extrinsic job characteristics) and country-level factors (e.g. wage levels, extent of unionization,

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