



Unraveling the importance of the quantity and the quality of workers' motivation for well-being: A person-centered perspective

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ABSTRACT

The current study compares the quantitative and the qualitative viewpoints on work motivation by relying on Self-Determination Theory's differentiation between autonomous and controlled motivation. Specifically, we employed a person-centered approach to identify workers' naturally occurring motivational profiles and compared them in terms of positive and negative aspects of worker well-being. Across a representative population sample (Sample 1) as well as two divergent samples of different organizations (Samples 2 and 3), four profiles were found: (1) a HA-HC profile characterized by high autonomous and high controlled motivation, (2) a HA-LC profile characterized by high autonomous and low controlled motivation, (3) a LA-HC profile typified by low autonomous and high controlled motivation and (4) a LA-LC profile characterized by low autonomous and low controlled motivation. In general, workers in the former two profiles (both scoring high on autonomous motivation) reported most job satisfaction, work enthusiasm/engagement and the lowest levels of strain/burnout. The latter two profiles (both scoring low on autonomous motivation) displayed the least optimal outcomes. Results seem to point at the importance of autonomous motivation.

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1. Unraveling the quantity and the quality of workers' motivation: a person-centered perspective

Motivation is important for workers' optimal functioning and organizations' productivity. It is therefore a critical issue for organizational science and practice (Pinder, 2008). Workers vary considerably in their motivation to put effort in their job: Whereas some drag themselves to work, others are highly motivated. High levels of work motivation may furthermore stem from different sources, ranging from a passionate intrinsic interest in one's job to feeling extrinsically pressured by stringent deadlines or contingent rewards such as a bonuses.

Most motivational theories, such as Goal-setting Theory (Locke & Latham, 1990) and Expectancy-Value Theory (Vroom, 1964) favor a *quantitative* approach in studying work motivation, emphasizing the amount or intensity of motivation. Others, such as the Achievement Goal Theory (Elliot & McGregor, 2001) and Regulatory Focus Theory (Higgins, 2000) primarily adopt a *qualitative* point of view. They differentiate qualitatively different types of motivation (i.e., mastery versus performance goal orientation, promotion versus prevention orientation) because some types of motivation correlate positively with adaptive outcomes (e.g., well-being, positive affect, persistence, deep level learning) while other types associate positively with less adaptive or even maladaptive outcomes (e.g., stress, ill-being, negative affect, depressive symptoms) (e.g., de Lange, Van Yperen, Van der Heijden, & Bal, 2010).

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The literature provides support for both the qualitative and quantitative views (Pinder, 2008). To date, to the best of our knowledge, research comparing the conflicting assumptions of both perspectives is lacking. The current contribution aims to tap into this issue by relying on Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000) which emphasizes that both the quantity and the quality of motivation matter. As such, this study aims to expand the current knowledge on work motivation in three ways. First, by comparing the qualitative and quantitative point of view, we add to the theoretical understanding of work motivation. Second, we shed light on how work motivation would best be approached methodologically. Within a quantitative perspective, all types of motivation are added because they are all equivalent in value or importance. This assumption runs against the qualitative perspective, in which the differences between various types of motivation are critical. Rather than adding them, lower quality types of motivation are therefore subtracted from more optimal types of motivation to obtain a general score of the quality of motivation (e.g., Pennington & Roese, 2003) or jointly included in the analysis to examine their relative importance and interaction (e.g., Payne, Youngcourt, & Beaubien, 2007). In both cases, the shared variance is controlled for, which, according to the quantitative approach, may lead to a loss of substantive information.

To avoid such drawbacks, we rely on a person-centered approach (Magnusson, 1998), i.e., cluster analysis (Gore, 2000), to study the quality and quantity of motivation. A person-centered approach can be contrasted with commonly employed variable-centered approaches such as regression analysis or structural equation modeling. Variable-centered approaches typically break down the complex reality into separate variables. They aim at identifying relationships between independent and dependent variables and assessing the strengths of these relations at the group level. Person-centered approaches may complement this variable-centered approach as they focus upon the experience of individuals (Clatworthy, Buick, Hankins, Weinman, & Horne, 2005). Specifically, cluster analysis allows for the detection and the comparison of naturally occurring groups defined by particular profiles, in our case in terms of the quantity and quality of their work motivation. As such, cluster analysis allows for drawing conclusions on the level of groups of individuals and may assist in identifying which individuals are most at risk for experiencing ill-being such as burnout, or, conversely, are most likely to thrive at work. For practitioners it is easier to recognize and understand groups of people with different profiles as obtained from cluster analysis, than to understand the implications of interaction effects of the dimensions in regression analysis. The current study thus also adds to the practical understanding of work motivation. This is the third contribution of this study.

To ascertain the validity of our results, we employ a multi-study approach, testing the hypotheses in a heterogeneous representative sample (Sample 1) as well as two divergent homogeneous samples (Samples 2 and 3). While the representative sample allows identifying the typical worker of each emerging profile and the relative occurrence of the different profiles, the divergent samples also shed light on the universality of the clusters, both across particular organizations and countries, increasing the generalizability of the findings. Before detailing the hypotheses, we discuss the quantitative and qualitative view on motivation based on SDT, as well as the added value of a person centered approach.

2. Quality and quantity of work motivation: a self-determination theory perspective

SDT taps into the quality of motivation by distinguishing two different types of motivation according to the degree to which workers experience the reasons for putting effort in their work as autonomous or controlled (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Workers particularly believe that the reasons for their behavior stem from themselves when they find their job inherently interesting, enjoyable and challenging, i.e., when they are intrinsically motivated. SDT considers this the most autonomous type of motivation. However, jobs might also include tasks which are not intrinsically motivating, but are executed out of extrinsic motivation, i.e., to obtain an outcome that is separable from the activity itself. Based on empirical findings, SDT distinguishes three different types of extrinsic motivation depending upon the degree to which employees endorse the reasons for engaging in the behavior, that is the degree in which the extrinsic reasons are internalized (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In case of intrinsic motivation the perceived locus of causality is internal; when the motivation is extrinsic, the locus of causality can be internal or external.

First, employees may experience the reasons for their behavior as totally external to themselves and act upon contingencies administered by others. They may for example only invest efforts in their job to obtain a bonus or to meet their supervisor's expectations. This is labeled as external regulation. Second, employees may buttress their behavior with self-worth contingencies, such as ego-involvement, pride, guilt, shame and anxiety. Then, the reasons for conducting the behavior are partially taken in, but not fully endorsed, resulting in an internal pressure to act or an introjected regulation. External and introjected regulation are typified by a perceived external locus of causality and feelings of external or internal control. Therefore they compose controlled motivation. Third, employees may identify with or integrate the extrinsic reasons to put effort in their job and consider their tasks valuable or personally important. Although extrinsically motivated, such the behavior is accompanied by a perceived internal locus of causality and feelings of psychological freedom and volition, as in the case of intrinsic motivation. Therefore, these types of motivation are grouped together with intrinsic motivation as autonomous motivation. Within SDT, the original distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation has thus been replaced by the differentiation between autonomous and controlled motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Workers may display both types of motivation or behavioral regulation (Sheldon, Turban, Brown, Barrick, & Judge, 2003), but autonomous and controlled motivation are found to relate to qualitative different outcomes. According to SDT, autonomous motivation contributes to individuals' optimal functioning as it allows for the satisfaction of the basic human psychological needs for autonomy (i.e., experience choice and authorship in one's behavior), competence (i.e., feeling effective in carrying out activities) and relatedness (i.e., feeling a sense of connection and intimacy with others; Van den Broeck, Vansteenkiste, De Witte, Soenens, & Lens, 2010). Therefore autonomous motivation is considered to lead to beneficial outcomes, and is said to be of high quality. Controlled motivation, in contrast, does not contribute to or even detracts from the satisfaction of the three basic psychological needs. It therefore leads to lower levels of optimal functioning, and is said to be of lower quality (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

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