



An examination of blue- versus white-collar workers' conceptualizations of job satisfaction facets

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the degree to which blue- versus white-collar workers differentially conceptualize various job facets, namely the work itself, co-workers, supervisors, and pay. To examine these potential differences, we conducted a series of analyses on job satisfaction ratings from two samples of university workers. Consistent with the study hypothesis, results revealed that blue- and white-collar workers held different conceptualizations regarding the nature of co-workers, pay, and the work itself, but not of supervisors. In general, more dimensions for each facet emerged for the white-collar workers, suggesting that these individuals possess more differentiated and multidimensional evaluations of these job facets than do blue-collar workers. Discussion focuses on the meaning and implications of the findings.

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1. Introduction

Among the most robust findings in organizational psychology is that workers' satisfaction with various facets (i.e., aspects or features) of their jobs has significant individual and organizational consequences (for reviews, see Brief, 1998; Hulin & Judge, 2003; Spector, 1997; Warr, 2007). While workers' satisfaction with myriad aspects of their jobs may be consequential, scholarly research has largely converged on particular job features that are of greatest import. Some of those features, the ones under investigation here, are the degree to which individuals are satisfied with their supervisor, co-workers, pay and benefits, and the nature of their work (Smith, Kendall, & Hulin, 1969).

Almost universally, both satisfaction with regard to these job facets is assessed using self-report measures (see Brief, 1998). An often unstated assumption underlying this approach is that workers view these aspects in the same manner. By implication, being (dis)satisfied with these various job features "means the same thing" for different groups of employees. While some workers are more satisfied with their co-workers than are others, for instance, the assumption is that all respondents evaluate their co-workers using a similar frame or along the same dimensions; the difference is thought to be one of degree, not kind.

However, some evidence, discussed below, suggests that different groups of workers may evaluate these job aspects using dissimilar conceptualizations. Such dissimilarities are significant for at least two reasons. First, they are meaningful because researchers often infer that mean differences in satisfaction ratings among various groups provide evidence regarding the nature of those characteristics that predict more or less satisfaction. For instance, a finding that white-collar workers are more satisfied with their work duties than are their blue-collar counterparts is usually interpreted to mean that the objective characteristics of the two job types (e.g., level of control, autonomy) result in greater satisfaction with the work itself (e.g.,

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Hackman & Oldham, 1980; Humphrey, Nahrgang, & Morgeson, 2007). However, to the degree that qualitative differences exist with respect to how these different groups think about such facets, interpreting findings across groups or comparing groups' mean satisfaction levels on these facets becomes a questionable practice (Steenkamp & Baumgartner, 1998).

Second, and perhaps more significant, is that these dissimilar conceptualizations would be indicative of qualitatively different experiences of work. A finding that white- versus blue-collar employees rate their satisfaction with co-workers using more or fewer dimensions, for instance, suggests that these two groups actually experience and form judgments about their co-workers in different ways. As noted by Logan, O'Reilly, and Roberts (1973), job satisfaction researchers should not simply assume that different groups of workers have identical perceptions of the satisfactions they derive from their job. Rather, scholars should examine different satisfaction patterns for various employee groups as an important strategy for understanding the nature of job satisfaction and, even more broadly, the nature of subjective work experience.

The purpose of the current paper is to explore the notion that blue- versus white-collar workers evaluate these facets in qualitatively different manners. We chose these particular groups because they report mean difference in facet job satisfaction (e.g., Herzberg, Mausner, Peterson, & Capwell, 1957; Pearson, 1998; Wan & Leightley, 2006) and because their distinct work experiences (Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006) have the potential to lead them to think differentially about what contributes to or represents satisfaction with these job facets.

To these ends, the remainder of the paper unfolds as follows. First, using existing research and our own theoretical intuition, we broadly suggest that these two groups of workers possess somewhat dissimilar conceptualizations of these facets. Next, we conduct a series of configural equivalence (i.e., invariance) analyses to examine the fit of the same, generally accepted single, unidimensional factor model for each facet across the groups. Results indicating less than excellent fit would provide preliminary evidence that the factor structures differ across groups and, by implication, that the two groups evaluate the facets in somewhat discrepant ways. To explore these potential differences, we then conduct exploratory factor analyses (EFA) for each facet to generate alternative configurations. Finally, based on these preliminary findings, we develop theoretically-based alternative configurations which we evaluate on a separate subsample using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). The paper closes with a discussion of the meaning and implication of the results.

1.1. Differences in job satisfaction between blue- and white-collar workers

For this paper, we follow others in defining blue-collar workers as those who perform primarily physical work and whose career paths are relatively restricted (Gibson & Papa, 2000; Lederer, 1987) and white-collar workers as professional and semi-professional employees (Hammer & Ferrari, 2002). A particularly robust finding from studies comparing job satisfaction across these groups is that blue-collar workers tend to be less satisfied than their white-collar counterparts with various aspects of their jobs, such as pay (e.g., Lee, Mueller, & Miller, 1981; Weaver, 1975), their supervisors (e.g., O'farrell and Harlan, 1982), and the work itself (e.g., Lee et al., 1981; O'farrell and Harlan, 1982).

While such differences almost certainly do largely reflect objective qualities of the jobs, such comparisons may also be somewhat erroneous to the degree that the two groups evaluate these facets in discrepant manners. Indirect support for this differential conceptualization derives from findings indicating that these groups think about their jobs and job experiences in somewhat discrepant ways. Hennequin (2007), for example, discusses how blue- and white-collar workers may hold distinct ideas about the meaning of career success, given the dissimilar indicators of success and differing paths to such success that characterize the two groups. Related research documents that these two groups often attach unequal importance to the role of work in their lives and identity (see Dubin, Champoux, & Porter, 1977), develop different meanings of work (Harpaz, 1986; Yuchtman-Yaar & Gottlieb, 1985), and have different levels of job involvement (Kaufman, 1982). The two groups also perceive and react to some aspects of the job differently, such as role strain (Mathieu & Hamel, 1989) and upward mobility (Prince, 2003). In addition, different job characteristics may be of more or less significance in determining overall job satisfaction across these two groups (Berger, 1986; Ronen & Sadan, 1984).

Here, we attempt to extend these findings by examining whether these differences manifest in dissimilar ratings of satisfaction with job facets. Specifically, we assess the degree to which these employees differentially conceptualize four particularly meaningful and significant features of work, namely the work itself, the supervisor, co-workers, and pay (Warr, 2007). As discussed below, we do so by comparing the two groups' patterns of responses to the corresponding four facet scales of the Job Descriptive Index (JDI; Smith et al., 1969), which is the most widely used and validated facet measure of job satisfaction (Kinicki, McKee-Ryan, Schriesheim, & Carson, 2002; Smith & Stanton, 1998).

Our general prediction is that white-collar workers will have more differentiated views of at least some of these facets than will blue-collar workers. We base this proposition on the notion that white-collar workers' jobs generally are more complex than are those of their blue-collar counterparts (Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006). Owing to this great complexity, white-collar employees potentially have more information and/or dimensions upon which to evaluate the facets of their jobs. For instance, the greater variety in their tasks (Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006) may lead white-collar workers to evaluate their work in a more differentiated or nuanced way. Similarly, their greater potential for multiple types of interactions with co-workers (e.g., interactions with co-workers of differing job status and positions) could also lead to more differentiated or refined judgments about satisfaction with co-workers. Conversely, for blue-collar workers, whose jobs tend to be more routinized and monotonous (Dubin & Champoux, 1977), the factor structures should be simpler and less differentiated, as these employees should have more consistent information upon which to rely in evaluating each facet. Based on this rationale, we offer the following broad hypothesis:

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