



Changes in situational and dispositional factors as predictors of job satisfaction [☆]



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ABSTRACT

Arguably, job satisfaction is one of the most important variables with regard to work. When explaining job satisfaction, research usually focuses on predictor variables in terms of levels but neglects growth rates. Therefore it remains unclear how potential predictors evolve over time and how their development affects job satisfaction. Using multivariate latent growth modeling in a study with 1145 young workers over five years, we analyzed how well job satisfaction is predicted a) by levels of situational (i.e., job control) and dispositional (i.e., Core Self-Evaluations (CSE)) factors and b) by growth per year of these predictors. Results showed both intercepts and slopes to be related to each other, suggesting a joint growth of job control and CSE during early careers. Job satisfaction after five years was best predicted by the slopes of job control ($\beta = .31, p < .001$) and CSE ($\beta = .34, p < .01$). These findings provide further longitudinal evidence for the role of situational as well as dispositional factors for predicting job satisfaction. In addition, growth rates per year were better predictors than initial levels. Furthermore, a lack of change in job control or CSE went along with a drop in job satisfaction, implying that young workers need to perceive things to be improving in order to increase, or at least maintain, their level of job satisfaction. In terms of theory, the relative importance of levels versus changes deserves more attention. In terms of practical implications, our results suggest a double emphasis on job design (i.e., granting sufficient, and increasing, control) and on personal development (e.g., through training) so that people experience a match between both. Finally, negative associations between initial levels and growth rates suggest that people are quite successful in achieving a reasonable fit between their job characteristics and their needs and goals.

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1. Introduction

Job satisfaction refers to “a positive (or negative) evaluative judgment one makes about one's job or job situation” (Weiss, 2002, p. 175). It is associated with numerous organizational variables like absenteeism, turnover, organizational commitment, and job performance (Judge, Thoresen, Bono, & Patton, 2001; Kammeyer-Mueller, Wanberg, Glomb, & Ahlburg, 2005). Being satisfied can be regarded as an element of personal well-being (Warr, 2007) and is associated with physical health (Faragher, Cass, & Cooper, 2005).

There are a number of longitudinal studies predicting job satisfaction over time (e.g., Elfering, Semmer, & Kälin, 2000; Staw, Bell, & Clausen, 1986; Zapf, Dormann, & Frese, 1996). These predictions are, however, static in the sense that job satisfaction is predicted by the levels of the predictors at an earlier time; however, changes in the predictors over time are not accounted for. Some studies that used job satisfaction as a predictor rather than an outcome showed changes in job satisfaction to predict certain

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outcomes, such as turnover. For example, [Boswell, Boudreau, and Tichy \(2005\)](#) and [Semmer and Schallberger \(1996\)](#) showed that job satisfaction declines before a job change and increases immediately afterwards (see also [Boswell, Shipp, Payne, and Culbertson \(2009\)](#)). However, there is a dearth of studies investigating job satisfaction as an *outcome* depending on *changes* in predictor variables; the only studies that come close to this type of investigation focus on the effect of discrete changes, such as turnover, as predictors of changes in job satisfaction ([Boswell et al., 2005, 2009](#); [Semmer, Baillod, Stadler, & Gail, 1996](#)), or as predictors of the stability of job satisfaction ([Dormann & Zapf, 2001](#); [Elfering et al., 2000](#)).

This article contributes to the literature by investigating how the level of job satisfaction at a later time can be predicted by levels as well as slopes of predictor variables in a latent growth model. As it is well known that both situational and dispositional factors influence satisfaction ([Cohrs, Abele, & Dette, 2006](#); [Judge, 2003](#); [Judge, Locke, & Durham, 1997](#); [Steel & Rentsch, 1997](#)), our investigation focuses on an important situational variable (i.e., control), and on an important dispositional variable (i.e., core self-evaluations), trying to predict job satisfaction by the levels and the change over time in both variables simultaneously.

1.1. Situational influences: The importance of control

Of the many aspects of the work situation that are associated with job satisfaction, job control (which we use interchangeably with autonomy) is especially important. Job control, that is, being able to exert influence on one's way of working in terms of tasks, times, or means, and therefore to influence situations in accordance with one's needs, is arguably one of the most important aspects of job design ([Hackman & Oldham, 1980](#); [Humphrey, Nahrgang, & Morgeson, 2007](#); [Karasek & Theorell, 1990](#); [Parker & Wall, 1998](#)). Job control is important for a variety of outcomes such as employee health, attitudes toward work, and performance ([Bosma et al., 1997](#); [Warr, 2007](#)); it predicts job satisfaction quite consistently ([Fried & Ferris, 1987](#); [Humphrey et al., 2007](#)).

Perceived working conditions, including control, often show substantial stability over time ([Dormann & Zapf, 2001](#); [Kälin et al., 2000](#)). Regarding job control, previous research showed that the perception of job control increased after entering the labor market; after their first year of work, people started to perceive more freedom to organize their work ([Elfering, Semmer, Tschan, Kälin, & Bucher, 2007](#); [Kälin et al., 2000](#)). Even though mean values of job satisfaction tend to decline after entering the labor market and reach the lowest level around the age of 26, on an individual level, advancements in terms of status, tenure, etc. may lead to increases in job control and other indicators of good job conditions. Such improvements seem to be one of the factors underlying the subsequent increase in job satisfaction with age ([Birdi, Warr, & Oswald, 1995](#)). Altogether, changes in (perceived) job control seem likely, and if they occur, it also seems likely that they are associated with concomitant changes in job satisfaction.

1.2. Dispositional influences: The role of CSE

The dispositional approach rests on findings that there is some stability in attitudes over time and across situations ([Dormann & Zapf, 2001](#); [Judge, Heller, & Mount, 2002](#); [Staw et al., 1986](#)). Stable individual differences are likely to affect job satisfaction and the perception of working conditions ([Judge, Locke, Durham, & Kluger, 1998](#)). The concept of Core Self-Evaluations (CSE) is a prominent candidate for a construct that exerts such an influence. CSE was introduced by [Judge et al. \(1997\)](#) as a higher-order construct representing the combination of well-established first order constructs that tend to have similar associations with job satisfaction. A high level in CSE is characterized by high self-esteem, high self-efficacy, internal locus of control, and low neuroticism ([Bono & Judge, 2003](#); [Judge et al., 1998](#)); of these, locus of control is the weakest indicator, and the value of including it in the CSE concept is doubtful ([Judge, Erez, Bono, & Thoresen, 2002](#)). CSE is quite stable over time (e.g., two year interval, [Dormann, Fay, Zapf, & Frese, 2006](#)), and has been shown to be associated with job satisfaction ([Judge & Bono, 2001](#); [Judge et al., 2002](#); [Wu & Griffin, 2012](#)).

Associations between CSE and job satisfaction may be direct as well as indirect ([Judge, Bono, & Locke, 2000](#)). The direct way is straightforward, in that CSE represent the dispositional aspect of job satisfaction ([Judge et al., 1998](#)). Findings that job satisfaction is rather stable over time and can be predicted by personality variables over considerable intervals (e.g. [Scollon & Diener, 2006](#); [Staw et al., 1986](#)) have often been interpreted as indicating a strong dispositional character of job satisfaction, and thus of the direct association between personality and job satisfaction as described above. However, [Dormann and Zapf \(2001\)](#) challenged this conclusion: When they included job content and job stressors as control variables, the stability of job satisfaction dropped dramatically. Similarly, findings that the stability of job satisfaction is considerably lower for people who change jobs ([Dormann & Zapf, 2001](#); [Elfering et al., 2000](#)) implies that the stability of job satisfaction is partly due to stable conditions at work. Indirectly, CSE may influence job satisfaction through two processes: First, CSE influence what type of environment people are in, leading to specific experiences at work, which in turn are a source of job satisfaction ([Dormann & Zapf, 2001](#); [Judge & Hurst, 2007](#)). Such a process may involve self-selection (seeking and seizing opportunities) as well as selection by others (employers). Also, employees may craft their job in such a way that job characteristics become more consistent with their personality ([Tims & Bakker, 2010](#); [Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001](#)). Second, CSE may determine how individuals perceive and process information about their work environment. This process results in more positive conclusions about work among people reporting high levels of CSE, whereas people with more negative self-evaluations should come to more negative conclusions about their work environment ([Dormann & Zapf, 2001](#); [Judge & Hurst, 2007](#)).

1.3. The role of time

As described above, research typically tries to predict job satisfaction through *levels* of predictor variables and does not account for changes in these predictors. Articles covering job satisfaction that do discuss and model time-related aspects usually

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