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The use of the concept “entitlement” in
management literature:
A historical review, synthesis, and discussion of
compensation policy implications

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Abstract

Individuals’ perceptions of what they are entitled to have long been regarded as an important area of debate. We examine the various uses of entitlement perceptions across fields to develop a typology that identifies two dimensions: employee entitlement perceptions and reciprocity in the employee–employer relationship. We discuss how our typology informs management practice. In particular, we describe the implications of our typology on employee reactions to different pay plans. Directions for future research are suggested. © 2001 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Over time, changes in technology, globalization, competition, and demographics have altered the nature of employment relationships (Feldman & Gainey, 1997; Friedman, Christensen, & DeGroot, 1998; Lepak & Snell, 1998; Parker, Wall, & Jackson, 1997;

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Potterfield, 1999; Rousseau & Wade-Benzoni, 1995; Tsui, Pearce, Porter, & Tripoli, 1997). Some of these employment relationship changes are unintended results of organizational change (e.g., Mohrman & Cohen, 1995; Whitener, 1997), whereas in other cases organizations have taken steps to alter employees' expectations of what they should expect from their employers (e.g., Kossek, Roberts, Fisher, & Demarr, 1998; Sturman, Boudreau, & Corcoran, 1996). Consequently, management researchers have recognized the need to address employee expectations when examining employee–organization relationships (e.g., Heath, Knez, & Camerer, 1993).

Much of the research regarding employee expectations in their employment relationships uses the term “entitlement” or “entitlement philosophy.” Despite the term entitlement having a notable history and specific definitions in many classic social science fields—including philosophy, political science, and law—there have been no scientific treatments of the concept in organizational sciences. In other words, the concept of “entitlement” has often been employed in management literature, but it has not received treatment as a specific construct (i.e., Kerlinger, 1986). Although the multidisciplinary roots of management are often seen as a distinctive competence for the field (Bartunek, Bobko, & Venkatraman, 1993; Blackburn, 1990; Porter, 1996), the varied assumptions behind the use of the term entitlement in other fields create different uses of the term within the organizational sciences. The inconsistent use of the term has made the formation of a nomological net around the construct impossible.

Failure to treat entitlement as a scientific construct is a notable gap for organizational science because understanding individuals' perceptions of entitlement is fundamental to understanding employee expectations and, in particular, the nature of exchange between individuals and their employing organizations. For example, employee entitlement perceptions are thought to affect the development of psychological contracts (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994), which subsequently affect work attitudes and behaviors. Use of the term entitlement in organizational science, however, often does not reflect its historical meanings in intellectual prose. Management texts, theory, and research incorporating the term fail to consider many of the precise components of its domain that have led to key distinctions in other fields. Although there are merits to avoiding overprecision and unnecessary scientific treatments, the importance of the term entitlement across disciplines and within organizational science for understanding employee expectations necessitates a more in-depth and precise treatment of the construct. We argue that a cross-disciplinary examination of entitlement will (a) improve our understanding of the role of entitlement perceptions in the workplace, (b) help more fully specify entitlement's role in current management theory, and (c) foster research employing a scientific treatment of the construct.

Furthermore, this article will show how our treatment of the construct generates specific propositions regarding (a) the construct's relationship with conceptually similar constructs, (b) its association with behaviors and attitudes of importance to researchers and practitioners, and (c) how the construct can explain individual preferences for various compensation systems. Ultimately, we develop a typology of entitlement that synthesizes previous uses and reveals the array of assumptions for the construct. Whereas some have argued that employee preferences for various reward systems and the effectiveness of such systems are affected by the fit between compensation plans and employee characteristics (e.g., Cable & Judge,

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