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“I want it all and I want it now!” An examination of the etiology, expression, and escalation of excessive employee entitlement

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ABSTRACT

Excessive entitlement is a pervasive and pernicious social issue, one that has considerable significance for human resource management. Despite its implications for work settings, relatively little research has examined this construct through a management lens. In this paper, a definition of excessive entitlement is offered and a model describing how it is expressed and encouraged in organizational settings is proposed. Key human resource functions drawn from the practitioner literature on employee entitlement (recruitment and socialization tactics, performance appraisal and reward structure; Wellner, 2004) are situated as interacting with employee trait levels of excessive entitlement to trigger counterproductive work behaviors. To the extent counterproductive behaviors are rewarded, the psychological correlates of excessive entitlement will spiral in an upward fashion, ultimately reinforcing trait expression. In contrast, ignoring or punishing the behavioral outcomes of excessive entitlement will prompt “regulation,” whereby individuals disavow their entitled attitudes or “retribution,” which may include retaliation, disengagement, and turnover. The implications of this work, along with strategies for advancing the study of excessive entitlement in work settings, are discussed.

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It has been suggested that we are living in the “Age of Entitlement” or the “New Gilded Era” (e.g., Samuelson, 1995). Indeed, it seems as though individuals are increasingly subscribing to the belief that they should get exactly what they want, when they want it – oftentimes without regard for the well-being of others. While the antecedents of this rise in feelings of personal deservingness are difficult to pinpoint, several factors have been proposed, including a general increase in the standard of living, proliferation of technology and the “instant gratification” such advancements often bring, and expansion of the welfare safety net (Samuelson, 1995). Whatever the catalysts, it would appear that entitlement-related attitudes are now influencing life in many of our social institutions. For instance, much has been made of entitlement in education (Côté & Allahar, 2007; Greenberger, Lessard, Chen, & Farruggia, 2008; Jayson, 2005; Roosevelt, 2009), government (Gomery, 2005), and the family (Allers, 2005; Tyre, Scelfo & Kantrowitz, 2004), and recent press reports suggest entitlement is a significant problem in the workplace (Irvine, 2005; Rushowsky, 2007).

Despite growing interest in entitlement, a lack of consensus regarding construct definition and dearth of theoretically-grounded work on this topic in the organizational sciences has limited understanding of entitlement as it pertains to work life. The absence of a clear research framework related to entitlement at work is disconcerting, as entitlement attitudes have been implicated in the new psychological contract and noted among individuals with diverse backgrounds working in a variety of industries (e.g., Campbell, Bonacci, Shelton, Exline, & Bushman 2004; Rousseau, 2005). Indeed, the significance of entitlement for contemporary Human Resource Management (HRM) is particularly salient, as many practitioners have reported frustration with what they perceive to be a workforce with “shockingly high expectations for salary, job flexibility, and duties but little willingness to take on grunt work or remain loyal to a company” – entitled views that seem especially rampant among the newest generation of workers (i.e., “GenY” or the “MeGeneration”; Irvine, 2005, p. E2; also Twenge, 2006).

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To date, much of the literature has been inconsistent in acknowledging that entitlement can have both positive and negative connotations – an issue that has detracted from the clarity of this construct's definition and one compounded by the subjective nature of the criteria upon which entitlement is evaluated (Naumann, Minsky & Sturman, 2002). Thus, a primary purpose of this article is to introduce the construct of *excessive entitlement* (Levin, 1970) to the human resource management literature. A second purpose is to present a model outlining the psychological and behavioral consequences associated with reinforcing excessive entitlement in work settings. According to the model, features of the organizational environment can 'activate' excessive entitlement, increasing the likelihood of trait expression. The model describes how rewarding the behavioral correlates of excessive entitlement triggers an escalation effect wherein employees describe wanting and deserving more than others for contributing less. In contrast, ignoring or punishing excessive entitlement is posited to result in a) regulation, whereby individuals abandon their entitled views and engage in productive task-related behaviors or b) retribution, which may include retaliation, disengagement, and organizational exit. Further understanding of excessive entitlement and its implications for work life is important in that it will allow organizations to design interventions that prevent the escalation of entitlement-related attitudes and behaviors as well as manage their consequences when they emerge.

1. Construct definition of excessive entitlement

The term entitlement has become part of our collective lexicon, and yet popular conceptualizations of the word are predominantly negative, a feature that can fundamentally misrepresent the nature of this construct (Naumann et al., 2002). Broadly speaking, entitlement reflects "an entire family of human events associated with social justice: issues of equity, deserving, rights, fairness, and the justice of procedures, distribution and retributive acts" (Lerner, 1987, p. 108). Importantly, there is nothing inherently negative about entitlement, as beliefs about what an individual feels he or she has a right to receive can be "normal" (e.g., the right to claim benefits as granted by law or contract), "restricted" (e.g., women have been noted to self-allocate less compensation than men for comparable work; Hogue & Yoder, 2003) or "excessive" (e.g., Levin, 1970). Whether entitlement is categorized as normal, restricted, or excessive ultimately hinges on observer evaluations of a focal individual's level of deservingness, a subjective judgment closely linked to the correspondence between behavior and its consequences (e.g., Campbell et al., 2004; Feather, 1999a, Feather, 2003; Naumann et al., 2002). When the consequences of one's actions are deemed consistent with the intentions behind it (i.e., "good things happen to good people" or an "eye for an eye") they are considered deserved; when inconsistent (e.g., those who contribute little get ahead), they are said to be undeserved (Feather, 2003). Individuals are therefore said to be deserving of, or legitimately entitled to, outcomes for which they have contributed an appropriate amount or type of input (e.g., those who have contributed payroll taxes are said to be entitled to claim social security benefits, with such claims reflecting a normal sense of entitlement; Campbell et al., 2004; Naumann et al., 2002). Of course, beliefs about one's personal control over behavior and its consequences must also be taken into account, as people are generally considered undeserving of outcomes – positive or negative – they are not responsible for (Feather, 1999b, p. 5).

Considering an individual's level of deservingness provides insight into the legitimacy of his or her entitlement and yet this criterion is conceptually problematic in that it resides entirely in the eye of the beholder. Perceptual and self-serving biases such as tendencies toward positive self-presentation and commitment of the fundamental attribution error make it unlikely that individuals will acknowledge their perceived entitlement as undeserved or excessive (Feather, 1999b). Judgments concerning the nature of entitlement therefore rest – at least in part – on how observers evaluate a focal individual's preferred equity ratio *vis-à-vis* societal norms for resource allocation (e.g., Deutsch, 1985; Heath, 1976; Naumann et al., 2002; Skitka & Tetlock, 1992). In capitalist societies where rewards are typically distributed according to principles of equity (i.e., individual outcomes are commensurate with, or equal to inputs; Heneman, 1992), entitlement will be deemed excessive when an individual's desire for outcomes exceeds what is considered socially normative based on the nature of his or her inputs. Importantly however, evaluations of deservingness may also be influenced by characteristics of the actor and the nature of the relationship that person shares with the evaluator (Feather, 1999b). Perceptions of strong moral character – along with interpersonal liking – are just two factors that minimize the likelihood a rater will judge an actor's entitlement as being undeserved (Feather, 1999b). To avoid such biases, agreement among multiple neutral (e.g., third party) assessors may be needed to classify the nature of an individual's entitlement.

Wanting more, coupled with beliefs that one is more deserving than others, is one way excessive entitlement has been defined and measured (e.g., Campbell et al., 2004). This conceptualization is limited however, in that it necessarily – yet erroneously – classifies both the greedy and ambitious person as illegitimately or negatively entitled (i.e., the greedy and ambitious person's desire for outcomes will exceed his or her current levels). Thus, the ability to categorize entitlement as excessive requires assessing not just beliefs regarding the type and amount of outcomes an individual wants or believes are owed to him or herself, but also necessitates assessing that person's attitudes toward the type and amount of inputs that should be contributed (e.g., the Equity Sensitivity Instrument; Huseman, Hatfield & Miles, 1985; also Naumann et al., 2002). The excessively entitled individual's preference for a small input: outcome ratio does not negate the fact that he or she may contribute inputs though to observers, those inputs would be viewed as either irrelevant to the calculation of the equity ratio or as reflecting low levels of investment (e.g., time, effort, skill) relative to their expected pay-off (Naumann et al., 2002). For instance, excessively entitled individuals are likely to view subjective characteristics and experiences as comprising valid inputs, believing they are deserving simply because of "who they are or what they have done" in the past (e.g., Lerner, 1987, p. 108). Individuals high in excessive entitlement could therefore be expected to endorse the idea that they deserve to receive a disproportionately greater amount or kind of outcome than what would be predicted on the basis of their objective performance-related contributions.

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