

The Importance of Affect in Understanding Job Satisfaction

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Abstract

Affect is a variable of job satisfaction which is either poorly studied or hardly studied at all. This has caused job satisfaction to be seen as a cognition based purely on attitude, mood, and emotion. However, recently numerous studies have been conducted in the affectivity field of job satisfaction with numerous theories being posited to explain the impact of affect on job satisfaction, which accounts for within-person variance and rules out the fluctuation and subjectivity of emotion. Studies into affectivity have also impacted the consensus on within-person variation, which was once considered a confounding variable, and can now be used to further our understanding on job satisfaction altogether.

Job Satisfaction is the age-old mundane topic for old and young people alike to complain about. While this is a common topic that bolsters small talk, it is an integral aspect of the professional workplace and the interactions that take place in it. These interactions, in turn, reinforce and supplement or hinder productivity, which makes it imperative for more research to be done into the matter so that employees and resources are being maximized without putting a strain on their mental health. One neglected and unstudied factor of job satisfaction is affectivity as opposed to cognition, and those will be the very factors that we discuss in this paper. Though briefly studied in the past, job satisfaction has been diminished to a simplified and under-studied subtopic in the Industrial Organizational (IO) Psychology field, as though it is one of the imminent topics that impact every organization and every employee. In order to have a more holistic and nuanced understanding of job satisfaction, we need to look at job satisfaction not as a mere cognition but as affectivity impacting the experience in the workplace

The most commonly accepted definition of job satisfaction is the one cited by Locke, as mentioned in Judge, T. A., & Ilies, R. (2004), “which incorporates both cognitive and affective elements” (p.1). This definition emphasizes the importance of the individual’s cognition and affectivity, which, in and of itself, is not an issue. However, while a “considerable amount of research has linked job satisfaction to various behaviors” (p. 2), not as much nuanced research has been done into the “affective dimension” (p. 2). Affectivity is mentioned in job satisfaction studies in the past but remains heavily neglected, which often results in the emphasis of satisfaction being placed on cognitive and behavioral factors. More often than not, placing a high emphasis on the behaviors of the employee as though their low job satisfaction is a consequence of *their* behavior essentially places the blame on the employee.

On the other hand, it intuitively makes sense that affectivity is heavily linked to job satisfaction, because, as mentioned in Barrett, L. F., & Bliss-Moreau, E. (2009), “affective reaction to the external sensory array helps the brain to make external sensations meaningful, aiding perception in a very basic way” (p. 8). This means that affectivity is inherently linked to the process of forming perceptions, with perceptions being the very process through which people evaluate the world around them and build their beliefs. The fact that affectivity influences perception naturally indicates that affectivity is a foundational part of our cognitive abilities and faculties. There have also been concerns about the study of emotions (to understand impacts of job satisfaction), as emotions are not stable and are constantly subject to change. Affectivity, however, eliminates this concern, as “affective variation has important psychological consequences that reach beyond the boundaries of emotion” (p. 3). Affectivity also covers certain components of behavior, which is why many can believe that behavior can replace affectivity, even though affectivity is more holistically rounded while also encompassing behavioral trends; “the word ‘affect’ [can be used] to refer to ‘feelings’ ... which she described in more behaviorally mechanistic terms (i.e., a tendency to move towards or away from an object during basic emotions)” (p. 6).

Furthermore, several theories have been postulated regarding the connection between affectivity and job satisfaction. One such example has been put forth by the study done by Hulin and Judge (2009) who have stated that affectivity is essentially undervalued through older methods of research, but has been realized through novel and more recent forms of study. Hulin and Judge (2009) “devote[d] considerable space in this review to the affective nature of job satisfaction, and how consideration of job affect necessitates revision” (p. 4) to better understand the role that affectivity plays in job satisfaction as a whole. The authors then go on to mention that IO

Psychology has undergone a “cognitive revolution” (p. 6), but recently numerous psychologists have been combating this revolution with an aptly named “affective revolution” (p. 6).

A prime example of the studies conducted by the agents of “affective revolution” (p. 6) is Weiss and Cropanzano (1996), which postulates the Affective Event Theory (AET), which states that people’s affectivity is impacted and determined by work events, which, in layman terms, refers to how someone feels while they are working or are at their workplace. This theory has been bolstered by statistics found in Miner et al. (2005) and Miner (2001), who reported that affectivity between similar days (in terms of workload, stress, positive/ negative events, etc), correlated to around 0.50 to 0.65. Whether the negative events be as mundane as not being able to get your morning coffee to as catastrophic as having a tree fall through your roof, they have a lasting impact on your affectivity, which, in turn, impacts the rest of your day.

Another positive feature of affect is the fact that, as Hulin and Judge (2009) put it, “job dynamic is inherently dynamic” (p. 39). This is important because job events are also equally as “inherently dynamic” (p. 39). This relationship was studied through Miner et al. (2005), who speaks on the effectivity of affect assessment as well as Dalal et al. By applying the AET, both studies found that studying the base affect of the employee at the beginning of the work day, they were able to see the impact of negative and positive occurrences on mood and affectivity, while accounting for within-person variance, which is often avoided in psychology studies. This finding reinforces the fact that “AET offers a new approach to the study of job attitudes. It emphasizes a source of variance in job attitudes—within-person variance—that has been largely ignored in the past. It represents more than adding a variable, affect, to the study of job attitudes” (p. 41).

As mentioned previously, within-person variance has not only been left unstudied in the past, but is also cast into the margins of ‘error’ or considered a confounding variable. However, with the ongoing studies into affectivity opening a channel through which within-person variance can contribute to a more holistic perspective on job satisfaction. As explained by Rudolph, C. W., Clark, M. A., Jundt, D. K., & Baltes, B. B. (2016), within-person variance studies “explain variation across distinctive intraindividual patterns of behaviour” (p. 2).

Some other theories integrate the aforementioned “cognitive revolution” (p. 6) into the new rivaling “affective revolution” (p. 6), as “cognitive frameworks need to be researched to explain the correlation between affectivity and job satisfaction” Connolly, J. J. (1998). We can now see that there’s a difference between merely seeing job satisfaction as an outcome of cognition and from seeing a dynamic relationship between cognition and affectivity, with cognition being the foundation of understanding affect. This is a realistic and viable theory, as both cognition and affectivity are used hand in hand as opposed to one being neglected over the other.

By paying more heed and attention to affectivity, we are creating a more dynamic understanding of job satisfaction in terms of cognition, affectivity, and within-person variance. Personal differences and personalities are taken into consideration, as mentioned previously, affectivity studies take within-person variety into account while also using it to diversify our perception of job satisfaction.

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