AN EXAMINATION OF REFERENT SELECTION PROCESSES UNDERLYING JOB SATISFACTION

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ABSTRACT. Using two different methods of assessment, the goal of the present research was twofold: (1) to examine the relative influence that different standards of comparison have in determining satisfaction with various job facets; and (2) to examine the relative consistency of each standard's influence across job facets. According to both direct reports and the strength of empirical relationships, the results indicated that some standards of comparison were stronger predictors of facet satisfaction than others. The consistency of a standard's influence or predictive power depended on the particular standard of comparison under consideration. Some standards were consistently strong or consistently weak predictors of facet satisfaction, regardless of the particular job facet. However, for other standards of comparison, the amount of predictive influence depended on the particular job facet. Within the context of discrepancy-based theories of job satisfaction, results are discussed in terms of their comparability across the two different methods of assessment, and the directions they suggest for future research.

The question of how to enhance workers' feelings of job satisfaction has long plagued both managers and researchers alike. Within the field of industrial and organizational psychology, job satisfaction is one of the most intensely studied topics. Indeed, the quantity of job satisfaction research is somewhat overwhelming. As of 1976, Locke (1976) estimated that there were 3000 books, articles, and dissertations devoted to this topic. Today, the total number of publications must easily exceed 5000. In view of the shrinking labor market, and the concomitant interest in employee recruitment and retention, we can only expect continued, if not enhanced, interest in job satisfaction research.

Despite the voluminous research literature, many gaps still remain in our understanding of the causes of job satisfaction. For example, one of the most provocative findings from job satisfaction research has been the typically weak and inconsistent correlations (i.e., $r = 0.20$ to $r = 0.30$) between objective job conditions and workers' reported degree of satisfaction (e.g., see reviews by Gruneberg, 1977; Vroom, 1964; Locke, 1976, 1984). From a practical standpoint, these consistently
weak correlations imply that: (1) a substantial number of workers are relatively dissatisfied despite objectively favorable job conditions; and (2) conversely, a substantial number of workers are relatively satisfied despite objectively unfavorable job conditions. From a research perspective, results such as these point to the inadequacy of objective conditions as predictors of job satisfaction. More research is clearly needed to gain a better understanding of the processes underlying job satisfaction.

To explain this general weakness in the relationship between objective conditions of work and job satisfaction, several theorists have proposed discrepancy models of job satisfaction (e.g., Porter, 1961; Locke, 1969; Lawler, 1973; Smith, Kendall, and Hulin, 1969). Within such models, job satisfaction is thought to be the result of a comparison between: (1) the individual's perception of present job experiences; and (2) some personal standard of comparison (e.g., what the person wants, feels entitled to, sees others getting, has had in the past, etc.). When perceptions of current job experiences match one's standard(s) of comparison (i.e., when there is no discrepancy), job satisfaction is predicted to be high. When this comparison process reveals a mismatch between current job experiences and one's standard(s) of comparison, job satisfaction is expected to be low. Such a mismatch between current job experiences and standard of comparison may occur in two ways: (1) the job experiences exceed one's standard(s) of comparison (for example, the individual has more interaction with clients/customers than s/he would like); or (2) the job experiences fall short of one's standard(s) of comparison (for example, the individual is getting paid less than he or she needs, wants, deserves, etc.).

Theoretically based in work from the areas of social comparison, cognitive dissonance, equity, relative deprivation, person-environment fit, adaptation level, and level of aspiration (e.g., Festinger, 1954; Adams, 1963; Crosby, 1982; Helson, 1964; Lewin, 1951), all of the various discrepancy theories agree that the discrepancy between different facets of one's job experience and some standard of comparison is a key determinant of job satisfaction. There is less consensus among discrepancy theorists about the particular standards of comparison relevant to the evaluation of job experiences. A review of the discrepancy literature suggests that different standards are highlighted, depend-