The relevance of identified and intrinsic goal motivation for work engagement

Abstract

Background/Research aim

This study analyses the relevance of intrinsic and identified goal motivation within self-concordance indices for work engagement. Classical self-concordance indices assume equal importance for intrinsic and identified motivation whereas self-determination theory and research on implicit-explicit motives suggest that intrinsic motivation is more relevant when predicting engagement. Thus, this study aims to empirically test the individual predictive power of intrinsic and identified goal motivation for work engagement.

Methodology

Participants completed a self-administered, online questionnaire whereby self-concordance was based on their two most important work-related goals. The sample consisted of $N = 388$ non-profit sector employees in paid employment. The study employed multiple regression analyses as well as t-test for independent samples.

Results

Findings, based on multiple regression analyses show that intrinsic goal motivation is a significant predictor of work engagement whereas identified motivation is not. Furthermore, t-tests for independent samples indicate that high intrinsic/low identified individuals report higher levels of engagement than high identified/low intrinsic motivated individuals. Based on

these findings, a more parsimonious self-concordance index without identified motivation is proposed.

Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that intrinsic goal motivation is the only relevant predictor of work engagement which suggest that the way self-concordance is typically measured, whereby intrinsic and identified goal motivation are seen as equally important, seems incorrect.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, a more parsimonious measure of self-concordance, without identified goal motivation, is proposed when used to predict work engagement.

Keywords: self-concordance, intrinsic goal motivation, identified goal motivation; work-engagement.

Introduction

Self-concordance impacts on people's positive psychological functioning (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999; Sheldon & Hoon, 2007). This includes the positive psychological functioning of employees in the work place (cf. Bakker & Demerouti, 2008; Bono & Judge, 2003; Judge, Bono, Erez, & Locke, 2005). Self-concordance is hereby conceptualised as the degree to which people pursue goals based on autonomous rather than externally controlled reasons. Goals are autonomously motivated if they fit with one's interests (intrinsic motivation) or with one's values (identified motivation). Goals are pursued for controlled reasons if goals are undertaken out of introjected reasons (striving for a goal out of anxiety, guilt) or out of external pressures (the situation demands it). The following example aims to further illustrate the various forms of goal motivation within the work context. An employee might work on a particular work project because s/he enjoys the work that the project entails (intrinsic motivation). Equally, the employee might be motivated to complete the project as the outcomes of this project are important to himself/herself or to others (identified motivation). The employee could also feel that s/he ought to work on it because otherwise his/her supervisor would think negatively of him/her (introjected motivation). Finally, the employee could also work on a work project simply because of the external rewards associated with the successful completion of the project (external pressures).

People's self-concordance is normally expressed in a self-concordance index, which is typically calculated by subtracting the sum of the controlled motivation scores from the autonomous motivation scores across the number of goals on which self-concordance is based (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999). Other researchers have focussed on people's autonomous and

controlled goal motivation separately, but again, autonomous goal motivation is still calculated by averaging people's intrinsic and identified goal motivation (Koestner, Otis, Powers, Pelletier & Gagnon, 2008). For both indices, it is important to note that the two forms of autonomous goal-strivings are conceptualised as equally important.

However, this means that individuals who exhibit high intrinsic motivation but low identified motivation would be given the same autonomous score as individuals who score high on identified motivation and low on intrinsic motivation. This assumption, particularly when used to predict work engagement, which is characterised as an affective motivational state of work related well-being (Bakker, Schaufeli, Leiter, & Taris, 2008) can be challenged for several reasons.

Firstly, self-determination theory itself states that intrinsic goal pursuits are a more autonomous form of motivation than identified goal pursuits (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Thus, individuals who report high intrinsic goal motivation but low identified motivation can be assumed to report higher levels of positive affective reactions at work (work engagement), than individuals who report strong identified goal motivation but low intrinsic motivation.

Secondly, research concerning implicit/explicit motive fit (McClelland, Koestner, & Weinberger, 1989) suggest that intrinsic and identified goal motivation are not equally important for people's psychological functioning. The pursuit of a goal that is supported by an individual's implicit motives is associated with pleasure, whereas the pursuit of a goal that is driven by explicit motives is pursued out of importance. Research on implicit/explicit motive discrepancies has shown that people quite often pursue goals that are important to them but are not supported by their implicit motives. Consequently, such goals are not experienced as enjoyable (Kehr, 2004). Most importantly, goals that are not supported by

implicit motives are associated with lower psychological functioning (McClelland et al., 1989) which might also be associated with lower work engagement.

Thirdly, the notion of intrinsic and identified goal motivation being equally important can be challenged by drawing on empirical evidence. Burton, Lydon, D'Allessandro and Koestner (2006) showed that intrinsic goal motivation is a significant predictor of affective well-being whereas identified motivation is not. However, as Burton et al.'s (2006) study was set in an educational context (school-children, students) it remains unclear whether their findings are applicable to predicting work engagement.

The three arguments presented suggest that intrinsic goal motivation is a stronger predictor of work engagement than identified motivation. The arguments also suggest that people who pursue goals out of intrinsic but not out of identified reasons should still report high levels of work engagement whereas people with high identified but low intrinsic motivation should report less engagement. Against this backdrop, the aims of this paper are, firstly, to analyse the relative importance of intrinsic and identified goal motivation for the prediction of work engagement. Secondly, to test whether high intrinsic/low identified motivated employees report higher levels of work engagement than high identified/low intrinsic motivated employees.

Method

Procedure

Participants completed a self-administered, online questionnaire whereby self-concordance was based on their two most important work-related goals. The latter part of the questionnaire contained measures on work engagement and demographical data. Participation

was voluntary and respondents were financially rewarded. Prior to data gathering ethical

approval has been obtained from the relevant research institute.

Participants

Participants of this purposive sample ($N = 388$) were non-profit sector employees in

paid employment. The average age was 46 years ($SD = 14.89$) with a 56% female and 44%

male distribution. 64% of employees were in permanent positions whereas 36% were on

temporary contracts.

Measures

Autonomous goal motivation was measured using the two items provided within

Sheldon and Hoon's (2007) measure of self-concordance. These are:'I strive for this goal

because I identify with it, even when it is not fun and enjoyable' (identified) and '... because

it is intrinsically interesting or challenging' (intrinsic). Respondents had to answer each item

on a scale from 1 (not true at all) to 7 (very true). Internal reliability for the two autonomous

goal motivation items in the study at hand was $\alpha = .80$. To be able to calculate an overall self-

concordance index respondents also answered the two items of Sheldon and Hoon's (2007)

measure representing controlled motivation. These were: 'I strive for this goal because I have

to or my situation demands it' (external pressures) and '... because I would feel guilty,

anxious or ashamed if I did not' (introjected). The index for overall controlled motivation

was created by averaging the items scores for the two controlled motivation items. A *self-*

concordance index (SCI) was created by subtracting the averaged item scores for controlled

behaviours from the averaged autonomous scores. The reliability index for SCI was $\alpha =.84$.

Work Engagement was measured using the short form of the Utrecht Work

Engagement scale. Internal reliability of this nine item scale is reported with indices ranging

between .85-.92 (Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2006) which, with $\alpha = .93$, was similar in

this study. Items have to be answered on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to

7 (always). Examples of items are: 'I'am enthusiastic about my job', or 'I feel happy, when I

am working intensely'.

Results

The descriptive statistics (Table 1) reveal that the majority of participants can be

characterised as high intrinsic/high identified motivated or low intrinsic/low identified

motivated. This is also reflected in the high correlation between intrinsic and identified

motivation ($r =.65, p < .001$). The criteria for being categorised as high or low on intrinsic

and identified motivation was based on a mean split. The two groups of interest (high

intrinsic/low identified; high identified/low intrinsic) represented 21% of the sample. These

two groups did not differ in their overall autonomous motivation (t [81] = .49, $p = .62$).

However, the two groups differed in their controlled motivation with high intrinsic/low

identified showing lower levels of controlled motivation (t [81] = 2.15, $p <.05$). Hence,

controlled motivation needed to be controlled for. The two groups did not differ from the rest

of the sample with regards to age (F [3, 388] = 2.09, $p = .10$), gender ($\chi2$: 1.18, *df:* 3, $p =.27$) or

employment status (F [3, 388] = .51, $p = .67$).

To test the importance of intrinsic and identified goal motivation for the prediction of work engagement, multiple regression analyses (Table 2) were conducted. The findings reveal that intrinsic motivation is the only significant predictor of work engagement. Furthermore, a t-test revealed that high intrinsically motivated/low identified individuals reported significantly higher work engagement (t [81] = -2.32, *p* <.05) compared to high identified individuals/low intrinsic motivated individuals.

Given these findings, a modified self-concordance index has been created without identified motivation (α =.77). Both indices, the classical self-concordance index (*r* =. 21, *p* < .01) as well as the modified self-concordance index (*r* =. 22, *p* <.01) revealed identical correlations with work engagement. Equally, the index for autonomous motivation (*r* =. 46, *p* < .01) yielded similar correlations with work engagement than intrinsic motivation only (*r* =. 47, *p* < .01).

Discussion and Summary

This paper tests the relative importance of intrinsic and identified goal motivation for the prediction of work engagement. This is a mostly overlooked issue as the majority of individuals within a sample score either high or low on both dimensions (Burton, et al., 2006). Consequently, prior studies which have used a self-concordance index based on equally weighted intrinsic and identified goal motivation found such an aggregated index significantly related to various outcome variables (Bono & Judge, 2003). The present study analyses whether a differential effect for intrinsic and identified goal motivation exists. Participants were non-profit employees, a group of employees, who are known for the fact

that meaningful work is important to them – hence identified motivation can be assumed to be relevant in this context.

Multiple regression analyses show that intrinsic motivation is a significant predictor of work engagement whereas identified motivation is not. This suggests that Burton et al.'s (2006) findings about the importance of intrinsic motivation in the prediction of general affective well-being in an educational setting are applicable in the work context when predicting work engagement. The results further show that high intrinsic/low identified motivated individuals report significantly higher levels of work engagement than high identified/low intrinsic motivated individuals. Based on the findings an additive index of intrinsic and identified goal motivation as a measure of autonomous goal pursuit seems not adequate when predicting work engagement.

Limitations

The findings should be treated with care due to various limitations of this study. The results are based on self-reported data which could have inflated the findings owing to common method variance. Furthermore, self-selection bias cannot be ruled out as participants were financially rewarded. Finally, given that the results are based on cross-sectional data no causal relationships can be inferred. However, prior research shows that self-concordance tends to have a causal effect on comparable outcome variables such as job satisfaction (Judge, et al., 2005).

Implications

The theoretical implications of this study are that identified goal motivation is less important in the prediction of work engagement than previously thought. Furthermore, an additive self-concordance measure of intrinsic and identified motivation, where a possible lack of intrinsic motivation can be compensated for by high identified motivation seems incorrect. Hence, a more parsimonious self-concordance index, without measuring identified motivation, is proposed. Such an index might be of particular importance in studies where self-concordance is based on a larger number of goals and where self-concordance is used as control variable. Here, researchers might find it useful to be able to reduce the amount of items within their questionnaire. However, drawing on Burton et al.'s (2006) findings, this is only advisable when the outcome variable is capturing affective work experiences.

With regard to practical implications, the results suggest that individuals who set goals for themselves or for others (coaches) should not be satisfied with having important goals but should aspire to having enjoyable goals – if goals are aimed to improve engagement. According to this study, 10% of the population fall into this category which is high enough to be of relevance. Equally, for individuals who are intrinsically motivated but low on identified motivation there seems little benefit in trying to increase the perceived importance of goals to further increase engagement.

Future research

The findings of this study also suggest avenues for future research. The study should be replicated using different samples but also use self-concordance indices based on more than

two goals. In the future, it is also important to show how large the proportion of low intrinsically/high identified individuals in other populations is. It also seems a promising avenue to include integrated goal motivation (goals are pursued because they are aligned with one's developed sense of self and broader life goals; Deci & Ryan, 2000), rather than identified goal motivation as this integrated motivation might be more closely linked to people's affective reactions.

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Table 1. Descriptive statistics

	N	Identified Mean (SD)	Intrinsic Mean (SD)	Engagement Mean (SD)
1) Overall sample	388	5.21 (1.31)	5.30 (1.29)	4.90 (1.22)
2) high-intrinsic/high-identified	168	6.25 (.58)	6.31 (.56)	5.40 (1.10)
3) low-intrinsic/low-identified	137	3.98 (.96)	4.11 (.92)	4.28 (1.17)
4) high-intrinsic/low-identified	45	4.31 (.77)	5.97 (.51)	5.16 (1.03)
5) high-identified/low-intrinsic	38	6.09 (.51)	4.30 (1.01)	4.63 (1.04)

Table 2. Multiple regression analysis with intrinsic and identified goal motivation predicting work engagement

	Work engagement
Variable	β
Identified	.13
Intrinsic	.39**
Controlled	-.02
R^2 *(adjusted R^2)*	.23 (.22)**

*Note. N = 388. *= p < .05, **= p <. 01.*