Brief Report

Concepts of job satisfaction in people with intellectual disability

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Abstract

Background There is a growing body of research on job satisfaction in people with intellectual disability (ID). However, little is known about the subjective concepts of job satisfaction in this population. Knowledge on the conceptualisation of job satisfaction in people with ID and whether currently used concepts are meaningful for this population are crucial prerequisites to purposeful research for this group.

Method Qualitative interviews on subjective concepts of job satisfaction were conducted with 129 employees of sheltered workshops. Relevant concepts and associated aspects were extracted using content analysis.

Results Concepts can be grouped into holistic concepts, facet-related concepts and self-actualising concepts of job satisfaction in people with ID. Twenty-five percent of the sample did not have any concept of job satisfaction.

Conclusions The concepts of job satisfaction in people with ID are closely related to those concepts as reported in organisational psychology. However, sufficient comprehension of the term has to be ensured prior to conducting research on job satisfaction in people with ID.

Keywords concept, intellectual disability, job satisfaction, sheltered workshop

Introduction

Over the last two decades, the body of literature on job satisfaction in people with intellectual disability (ID) has considerably evolved (Akkerman, Janssen, Kef, & Meininger, 2016; Kocman & Weber, 2018). By applying assessment instruments originating from organisational psychology, research in this domain is often implicitly or explicitly based on concepts of job satisfaction originating from organisational psychology (e.g. Melchiori & Church, 1997; Fornes, Rocco, & Rosenberg, 2008).

In organisational psychology, job satisfaction is most commonly defined as ‘a pleasurable or positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one’s job or job experiences’ (Locke, 1976, p.1300). This definition has been expanded to cover both affective and cognitive reactions (Brief, 1998). The concept of job satisfaction consequently includes two distinct features: the appraisal of a set of aspects of one’s job and the resulting emotional and cognitive reactions. Questionnaires used in organisational psychology commonly reflect this concept by either covering the appraisal of a specific set of aspects of the job satisfaction or the associated affective and cognitive
reactions. The latter are commonly referred to as global job satisfaction measures and the former as facet questionnaires (Brief, 1998).

To date, little is known about whether this concept provides a reasonable framework for discussing job satisfaction of people with ID. Despite ongoing efforts, employment situations of people with ID often differ from regular employment. These differences have an impact on how employment is perceived: Ferrari, Nota, and Soresi (2008) showed that concepts of employment in people with ID differ from those in people without ID, irrespective of whether members of the former group worked in supported employment or sheltered workshops. These differences in the fundamental conceptualisation of employment could also affect associated concepts like job satisfaction.

Yet, research on the concepts of job satisfaction in people with ID is sparse. Findings from Akkerman, Janssen, Kef, and Meininger (2014) provide initial evidence on the subjective perception of facets contributing to job satisfaction of this group. However, as concepts are defined as an individual’s entire knowledge about a given category (Cordes & Howard, 2005), job satisfaction concepts go beyond their contributing facets.

To the best of our knowledge, no study has systematically explored the fundamental understanding of job satisfaction in people with ID and concepts associated with that term. Knowledge of the conceptualisation of job satisfaction in people with ID and whether concepts used in organisational psychology are applicable for this population are crucial prerequisites to purposeful research for this group and essential to further enhancing working conditions for people with ID.

The aim of this study was to address this issue by examining the subjective concepts of job satisfaction in people with ID using qualitative interviews and to relate those findings to the concepts formulated in organisational psychology.

Method

Procedure

This study was part of a larger research project on the assessment of job satisfaction in people with ID (Kocman & Weber, 2017). Participants were recruited from five sheltered workshops across Luxembourg operated by APEMH, a local service provider for people with ID. Two weeks prior to the interviews, employees were verbally informed about the study by their managers and could volunteer for participation. Participants were only included if they comprehended Luxembourgish sufficiently to understand and provide informed consent.

Out of 136 volunteers, 129 participated. All seven individuals not participating were absent due to illness. No participant aborted the interview. Interviews were conducted on-site in a separate room by five interviewers. Interviewers were students of psychology or education sciences and participated in a preparatory interviewing-training workshop.

The study was conducted in accordance with the World Medical Association’s Declaration of Helsinki and after obtaining ethical approval from APEMH. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the interview.

Participants

The participants consisted of 129 people with mild to moderate ID. All interviewees had finished their on-the-job training and had no other employment besides the respective sheltered workshop. They had the legal status of employees and received regular salary based on the national scheme for people with disabilities working in sheltered workshops.

Fifty-five participants were female, 74 participants were male. The mean age was 32.1 years (SD = 10.5). Participants had been working on average for 7.8 years (SD = 5.6) on their current job.

Measures

Following the recommendations on increasing responsiveness (Finlay & Lyons, 2001), the interview consisted of two specific questions followed by one general question. The specific questions (‘If you hear “job satisfaction”, do you know what is meant or are you not sure what is meant?’ was followed by either ‘Do you rather know what is meant or do you exactly know what is meant?’ or ‘Do you rather not know what is meant or do you completely not know what is meant?’) aimed at assessing the subjective comprehension of the term itself. For assessing job satisfaction concepts, we used the general question: ‘Please describe what the term job satisfaction means to
you.’. It was asked irrespective of the response to the prior comprehension-related questions in order to assess potential acquiescence among participants.

Since the study was part of a larger project on assessing job satisfaction in people with ID, participants completed further questions on their job satisfaction after the interview on their subjective concept of job satisfaction.

Analysis

Based on recommendations for qualitative analysis in people with ID (Finlay & Lyons, 2001), responses were analysed using content analysis (Rössler, 2017).

During the development phase of the analysis, categories were iteratively added by one of the authors based on the content of the responses until all aspects of responses given could be assigned. In the subsequent testing phase, results of initial intra- and intercoder reliability indicated that three categories relating to co-workers were not sufficiently delimitable and were thus merged. A second testing phase carried out by two different independent raters resulted in a good intracoder and intercoder reliability $\kappa_{\text{intra}} = .94$, $p_{\text{intra}} < .001$; $\kappa_{\text{inter}} = .92$, $p_{\text{inter}} < .001$, thus completing category creation. Final coding was again conducted by two different independent coders (initial $\kappa = .86$, $p < .001$) followed by discussion until agreement was reached on all items. All coders worked at the authors’ department and received training covering the aims of the study, the questionnaire and the categories used for analysis.

Results

General comprehension

The participants’ level of comprehension of the term job satisfaction was heterogeneous. While 43.0% of the sample indicated high (23.4%) to medium (19.5%) comprehension of the term, 57.0% of the sample indicated low (26.4%) or no (30.5%) comprehension.

Responses to the subsequent open question confirmed similar levels of comprehension with 26.4% of our sample either not comprehending the term sufficiently to provide further information on their concept (22.5%), or providing answers that were not applicable or related to the question (3.9%).

Content analysis of concepts

Content analysis of the concepts revealed 13 different categories that in turn could be divided into three distinct second-level categories: holistic concepts of job satisfaction, facet-related concepts of job satisfaction and self-actualising concepts of job satisfaction. A complete overview of related concepts is illustrated in Table 1.

Holistic concepts

Forty-one of the concepts related to overall assessments or emotional states of happiness or satisfaction during work without relating to any further differentiation or causes for these feelings. Five responses were so close to the term job satisfaction that they were tautological (e.g. ‘Being satisfied with the job’).

Facet-related concepts

A high number of concepts related to classic facets of job satisfaction, like colleagues, income, work tasks and supervision. In total, 63 mentions were counted across the associated categories. Among these concepts, especially colleagues (21 mentions), supervision (19 mentions) and work tasks (17 mentions) were perceived as important.

Self-actualising concepts

Going beyond extrinsic concepts of job satisfaction, many concepts included aspects of self-actualisation: The feeling of doing a good job and of being able to perform was mentioned by 18 participants, autonomy by six and the ability to grow and learn on the job by four.

Conclusion

The present study investigated concepts of job satisfaction in people with ID. Using interviews and subsequent content analysis, we assessed whether concepts of job satisfaction as found in organisational psychology provide a meaningful foundation for research among people with ID. Our results indicate that people with ID’s concepts often relate to three different categories: holistic concepts, facet-related concepts and self-actualising concepts. Concerning the concept of job satisfaction in organisational

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psychology described earlier, self-actualising and facet-related concepts closely relate to the appraisal of job aspects, while holistic concepts relate to the emotional and cognitive reactions to these aspects.

Holistic concepts have a good match to common global one-dimensional operationalisations of job satisfaction (Brief, 1998). However, the emotional tonality that was frequent in the holistic concepts of our sample (e.g. ‘feeling happy’) needs to be reflected by global job satisfaction measures. This is not always the case: Some conventional measures such as the MSQ (Weiss, Davis, England, & Lovquist, 1967) were found to be rather cognitively laden (Brief, 1998). Other measures, like the JIGS (Ironson, Smith, Brannick, Gibson, & Paul, 1989), cover these emotional aspects in their items (e.g. ‘pleasant’, ‘makes me content’).

Facets identified within the facet-related concepts show a high similarity to those usually covered in facet measures of job satisfaction (e.g. the JDI covers co-
workers, supervisors, pay, work itself, promotion; Smith, Kendall, & Hulin, 1969). Furthermore, the facet-related and self-actualising concepts identified closely resemble the themes relevant to the job satisfaction of people with ID as found in previous research. Akkerman et al. (2014) found nine themes using Photovoice, a technique based on photographs taken by the participants: the nature of the work itself, working conditions, experienced job demands, social relations at work, received support, perceived autonomy, opportunities for using competencies, opportunities for growth and meaningfulness. Since the different approaches used in our study and the one of Akkerman et al. resulted in similar findings in two different countries, we believe that our results provide robust and valid insights in relevant facets of job satisfaction in people with ID. Holistic concepts were not found in the previous study. However, this is an artefact of the different research aims: Akkerman et al. (2014) aimed explicitly at identifying facets associated with job satisfaction, while the aim of the present study was to identify the entire concept of ‘job satisfaction’. Facet and self-actualising concepts are knowledge on subjective predictors of job satisfaction and hence represent the intersection between both research questions. Emotional and cognitive reactions associated with job satisfaction (the holistic concepts) are going beyond these associated predictors.

Overall, our findings indicate a high fit of approaches and operationalisations from organisational psychology in the field of ID, thus encouraging their application in future research. Additionally, we were able to provide initial evidence for the content validity of conventional questionnaires for the assessment of job satisfaction in people with ID: Due to the conceptual similarities, conventional assessment instruments like the JIGS (Ironson et al., 1989) or JDI (Smith et al., 1969) may be applied both in future research and practice if sufficiently easy to understand. However, one finding warrants caution: Almost one fourth of our participants expressed difficulties comprehending the term job satisfaction and were not able to associate any concepts with the term. The term itself does not seem to be self-explanatory and based on a solid understanding for many people with ID. Hence, it is of utmost importance to ensure sufficient prior comprehension of all participants when addressing job satisfaction in this population in future research.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors of this manuscript report no conflict of interest.

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