

Disparate measures in the workplace - Quantifying overall job satisfaction

ABSTRACT

Basing its critique on a close examination of BHPS data, the paper points to three inadequacies in recent treatment of the job satisfaction concept: 1. a *semantic confusion* between ‘job’ in the primary sense of ‘paid appointment’ and in the secondary sense of ‘work tasks actually performed’; 2. a *model of the employee* which places stress on affectivity and responsiveness, rather than on purposive rationality, throwing doubt on the possibility of competent and well-grounded actor judgements about the advantages of a job as paid appointment, while giving too much weight to shifting ‘attitudes’ and a supposed priority among employees of inner needs for self-actualisation, involvement, empowerment, etc; 3. an excessively laid-back confidence in the *performance of measures*, with a too frequent disregard for measurement basics and a routine failure to examine validity, resulting in oversight of the internal complexity of job satisfaction, construct bias towards the affectivity/responsiveness image of employees, and potentially serious misinterpretation. The paper argues that a major source of these difficulties lies in use of a single-item indicator for overall job satisfaction. This measure is shown to be biased, as well as too rough and ready for use in advanced analysis. Yet an alternative, composite measure is easy to create and has helped to disclose striking differences in the job satisfaction profiles of the unit occupations of SOC. The critical themes are illustrated by recent examples drawn from management psychology and labour economics. If objections to a single-item indicator of overall job satisfaction are valid, consideration might have to be given to discontinuing the version currently used in BHPS and to restoring the enquiries about the job facets a) *promotion opportunities* and b) *relations with own manager/supervisor*, which were suspended at wave 8.

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