

How to feel in order to be satisfied at work? A differentiating view on the Affective Events Theory

Hannah S. Klaas, Josef A. Fischer & Matthias Spörrle

Affective Events Theory (AET; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) states that emotions at work affect job satisfaction. We specified existing research by distinguishing between frequency and intensity of emotional episodes at work and by varying the time frame for which emotions were reported. In a paper-pencil study employed persons ($N = 228$) reported the frequency and the intensity of positive and negative work-related affective states. The time period, for which emotions were reported, was varied between subjects (last week vs. last month).

When predicting job satisfaction, regression analyses indicated that (1) the frequency of emotions is a better predictor than their intensity and that (2) positive emotions are a better predictor than negative emotions when reporting affective states for the last week, whereas this pattern reverses for the time frame of last month. Thus, with an increasing time interval, negative emotions seem to have a comparatively better cognitive representation.

1. Introduction

Since the formulation of Affective Events Theory (AET; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996), several studies have confirmed the main tenets of AET. That is, affective events at work lead to emotional states which in turn are associated with changes in work attitudes (i.e., job satisfaction). However, when investigating the association between emotional states and work attitudes, research has not been consistent in the operationalization of emotional states: Some researchers asked for the intensity of emotions (e.g., Wegge, van Dick, Fisher, West, & Dawson, 2006) whereas others were concerned with their frequency of occurrence (Mignonac & Herrbach 2004). Furthermore, either the reference period "week" or "month" was used as a time frame for affective reports (Herrbach, 2006; Mignonac & Herrbach, 2004). Why should these different ways to assess emotions be problematic? Answers to this question can be derived from two broad fields of research:

First, research in questionnaire design has shown that different time frames as well as the use of vague quantifiers (concerning AET: either dealing with frequency or intensity) can lead to highly different reports of emotional states (for a review, see Schaeffer & Presser, 2003; Schwarz, 1999). From this point of view, the strength of the association between affective states and work attitudes should vary depending on the response formats used.

Second, there is a domain of research involved with the so called "negativity bias". Having its roots in evolutionary concepts, this bias can be defined as a "propensity to attend to, learn from, and use negative information far more than positive information" (Vaish, Grossmann, & Woodward, 2008, p. 383). In line with this, negative affective states, experienced more strongly than positive ones, should remain in memory for a longer time period than positive experiences. Therefore, a longer time frame (concerning AET research: "month") might be more likely to activate negative emotional states than positive ones.

2. Method

Participants

Our convenience sample consisted of 228 full time workers (114 female, age: 19-60, $M = 36.66$, $SD = 10.76$). Participants had to meet the following criteria: (1) working at least 35 hours per week and (2) being employed for at least one month (months: 1-372, $M = 70.53$, $SD = 82.39$). They were either recruited personally (158) or via e-mail (70). To ensure anonymity, participants were asked to send the questionnaire back via mail.

Material

Affective states were operationalized by selecting five positive and five negative emotional adjectives from the German version of the Positive And Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Krohne et al., 1996; selection due to discriminatory power analyses).

Job satisfaction was assessed via five items dealing with different aspects of job satisfaction (Wegge & Neuhaus, 2002).

Procedure

Participants were asked to complete a paper pencil based questionnaire, concerning their affective states at work. On the first page, they should rate the vague frequency of their emotional experiences (5-point-Likert-scale, ranging from "never" to "all of the time"). Afterwards they were asked to rate the vague intensity of their emotional experiences (5-point-Likert-scale, ranging from "not at all" to "extremely"). The time interval subjects should refer to was either "last week (7 days)" or "last month (30 days)". Finally, participants should report their job satisfaction.

3. Results

Our results confirm central assumptions of the AET: Negative (positive) emotional experiences are associated negatively (positively) with judgments of job satisfaction (Table I). The significant correlations between the negative (positive) frequency scores and the negative (positive) intensity scores imply that people seem to be able to discern between the frequency and the intensity of emotions, however, they do not discern very well. Concerning the influence of the emotions on judgments of job satisfaction, for the time intervals separately, multiple regressions were conducted, with the emotional frequencies and intensities as independent variables, and job satisfaction as the dependent variable (Table II). This resulted in a higher beta-value for the frequency of positive emotions in the week condition, whereas in the month condition, the frequency of negative emotions showed the higher beta value. Thus, in evaluating their job satisfaction, people seemed to consider negative emotions more strongly than positive ones when reporting their emotions for the last month. This pattern reverses for the week condition. Significant changes in ΔR^2 underline the strength of this effect. In total, affective states could account for 43% (week) and 27% (month) of the variance in judgments of job satisfaction.

Table I: Correlation Coefficient Matrix

	FRE_NEG	INT_NEG	FRE_POS	INT_POS	JOB_SATIS
FRE_NEG	1	.80	-.30	-.29	-.44
INT_NEG		1	-.28	-.20	-.38
FRE_POS			1	.86	.53
INT_POS				1	.50
JOB_SATIS					1

For all correlations, $ps < .05$

FRE: emotional frequency
INT: emotional intensity
NEG: negative emotional states
POS: positive emotional states
JOB_SATIS: job satisfaction

Table II: Multiple Regressions for Different Time Frames

Variable	Week		Month	
	β	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2
Step 1: Demographic factors		.07		.09*
Sex	.11		-.02	
Age	-.24		.07	
Work time	.05		.27*	
Duration of employment	.01		-.16	
Step 2: Affective states		.43*		.27*
FRE_NEG	-.09		-.35*	
FRE_POS	.46*		.10	
INT_NEG	-.21		.00	
INT_POS	.06		.25	
Total R^2		.50*		.36*

* $p < .05$

4. Discussion

Our results strongly indicate that research confirming the AET has underlain specific biases due to different time frames used to assess emotional states. That is, when making judgments, people consider emotional experiences differently depending on the time frame they have in mind: Negative emotional experiences seem to have greater impact with longer time intervals (in our case: month vs. week). This not only is in line with biases due to different question formats, but also with the often postulated negativity bias underscoring the importance of negative emotions during human evolution. However, the underlying mechanisms to which the bias occurs remain unclear. Thus, future research should further investigate whether the effect is stable, and whether it can be broadened to more time frames, different samples, and additional behavioural indicators as dependent variables such as organizational citizenship behaviour.

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