

Pleasure and Displeasure - the conspiracy in Self-regulation of Employee Action

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ABSTRACT

The proposed motivational gratification theory explains how employee's self-regulate 'production' and 'reduction' of effort for achieving assigned organisational goals using the coactive activation of pleasure and displeasure, a theory of emotion. In management literature the coactive activation is rarely used to explain self-regulation of employee action compared to the commonly explained bipolar or antagonistic effects of pleasure and displeasure on approach and withdrawal behaviour. The discussion focuses on theoretical evidence of motivational gratification to unravel the conspiracy of pleasure and displeasure in self-regulation of effort. The practical and empirical implications suggest motivational gratification is a new ground to explore the understanding of employee disengagement, and behavioural outcomes of work motivation such as persistence and intensity.

Keywords: Motivation, emotions, work performance, self-regulation, dominant and passive activation, and subliminal activation.

Introduction

When employees achieve or don't achieve the expected performance outcomes for assigned organisational goals, do they experience an increase in pleasure or displeasure respectively? Does the pleasure of achievement of, or displeasure of not achieving performance outcomes, increase or decrease activation of effort for future action? The fact that pleasant and unpleasant emotions have antagonistic effects on approach or withdrawal behaviour means that the emotional inputs are invariably bipolar and reciprocally activated (i.e. when one increases the other decreases). Bagozzi, Wong and Yi (1999) theorized that in Western cultures pleasant and unpleasant emotions are conceived as oppositional or bipolar categories. One is either happy or sad but not both. However, in the Eastern thinking, pleasure and displeasure are perceived based on dialectic philosophies (Bagozzi et al, 1999); dialectic thinking (Peng & Nisbett, 1999, 2000), and hence it can simultaneously influence the approach and withdrawal manifestations of behaviour. In dialectic thinking, pleasure and displeasure are perceived as compatible with each other and not the opposite valence. The study by Schimmack, Oishi, and Diener (2002) revealed support for the predicted correlations between reports of pleasant and unpleasant emotions are less negative in Asian samples than in the Western samples.

In this article, an attempt has been made to include the dialectic philosophies and thinking of emotions to develop a motivational gratification theory that explains how distinguishable motivational substrates (pleasure and displeasure) are compatible to each other and influence self-regulation of behaviour simultaneously rather than from polar opposites or bipolar (positive-negative) evaluative dimensions. The purpose of this paper is to extend simpler bipolar – reciprocal conceptualization to a proposed complex motivational gratification theory to highlight how simultaneous activation of motivation forces (positive and negative) impact self-regulation of ‘production’ and ‘reduction’ of effort for assigned organisational goals. The aim of this article is achieved in four parts; firstly the background literature on self-regulation is explored and an explanation/demonstration of how this paper makes a significant and enriching contribution to the existing literature is outlined. The second part focuses on the definition of motivational gratification and the explanations for key concepts of the definition. Thirdly, the theoretical elaboration of motivational gratification is used to provide different explanations to the existing understanding of behavioral consequences of self-regulation. Finally the practical and empirical implications of motivational gratification are discussed.

Background

Human motivation is goal directed and occurs within the context of self-regulation (Seo, Barrett & Bartunek 2004). Locke and Latham (2004: 388) defined motivation as “the concept of motivation refers to internal factors that impel action and to external factors that can act as inducements to action”. Further, Russell (2003) provided the concept of “core affect” to explain emotion related to motivation. Core affects are commonly recognized as bipolar (pleasure/displeasure and activation/deactivation), and reciprocal.

Self-regulation refers to the process by which people initiate, adjust, interrupt, terminate or otherwise alter actions to promote attainment of personal goals, plans or standards (Baumeister, Heatherton & Tice 1994). The self-regulation perspective assumes that motivational processes are both dynamic and cyclical, consisting of two distinctive sub processes (Bandura 1991; Kanfer & Ackerman

1989). For example, an employee reduces his/her effort on achieving an assigned goal or the same employee might produce more effort when there is goal-performance discrepancy. In the literature many prominent social cognitive theorists (e.g., Bandura 1991; Bandura & Locke 2003; Locke & Latham 2002) have explained this self-regulation of behaviour from the bipolar perspective. One is the distal motivational process that includes components and processes affecting discrepancy production process to direct human effort to reduce the discrepancy. The other sub process, proximal motivation, refers to the components and mechanisms process that 'controls' the initiation and execution of actions for the purpose of attaining goals (Seo et al. 2004), and supports the self-regulation of 'reduction' or 'production' of effort from the bipolar perspective. Further, Bandura (1991) explains self-regulation using goal-performance discrepancy reduction and production regulates performance by alternating cycles or bipolar and reciprocal (i.e. increase of one will decrease the other).

Proposed contributions to the self-regulation literature

Many self-regulation behavioural actions in reality always do not fall at the extreme bipolar categorization of activation, but they are 'bivariate' or dual modes and nonreciprocal (Cacioppo, Gardner, & Berntson 1999). That is, stimuli that strongly activate both pleasure and displeasure elicit intense ambivalence and the consequent self-regulation behaviour will be different from the bipolar activation. In contrary to the earlier example, where on achievement of assigned goals an employee should reduce effort, an employee might not reduce his/her effort below the minimum required performance standard even after goal achievement. Why does this behaviour happen? In the literature this behavioural consequence is explained by the negative regulatory focus (Tubbs & Ekeberg 1991) and generative defensive action (Seo et al. 2004). These two explanations are again based on the bipolar behavioural consequences. However, in this article an attempt is made to theoretically propose the motivational gratification theory using bivariate activation (Cacioppo & Berntson 1994) to help explore differently the behavioural consequence discussed in the example. Cacioppo and Berntson in the bivariate evaluative space model conceived that the coactive or simultaneous activation occurs when a stimulus increases (or

decreases) the activation of both positivity and negativity to determine outcomes of distinguishable motivational processes of approach and withdrawal manifestation. The bivariate evaluative activation is rarely used in management literature to explain self-regulation of employee behaviour. Therefore, in this article an attempt is made to explain motivational gratification using a two-dimensional (bivariate or dual modes) affective activation of pleasure and displeasure to determine self-regulation employee behaviour.

KEY TERMS OF MOTIVATIONAL GRATIFICATION

Motivational Gratification

The proposed motivational gratification is defined as: *The coactive bivariate activation functions for gratified (positive) and ungratified (negative) motivational forces, depending on the dominant and passive characteristics, determine self-regulation of effort intensity for 'production' along with goal persistence or 'reduction' of effort to required minimum job performance standard.* The word 'gratification' in the term motivational gratification highlights the affective component of authentic happiness (Seligman 2002) drawn from using skills and dedication, and not from physiological happiness. The key terms used in the motivational gratification definition that need further explanation are a) the behavioural characteristics of gratified motivational force (GMF) and ungratified motivational force (UGMF), and b) dominant and passive affective types of motivational forces.

Gratified and ungratified motivational forces

The GMF is defined as *the subset of motivational forces that activates pleasure on goal achievement.* The UGMF is *the subset of motivational forces that activates displeasure based on goal-performance discrepancy.* The GMF and UGMF are the types of motivational gratification, which represents hedonic processes of hierarchy of motivational forces that is characterized by a heteroscedacity of antecedents (Cacioppo, Gardner & Berntson 1997). That is, the GMF and UGMF types of motivational forces provide the basis for conjunctions of motivational forces (antecedents) that have the behavioural characteristics for self-regulating 'reduction' and 'production' of effort respectively for future actions.

Dominant and passive types of motivational forces

The GMF and UGMF represent action hierarchy (Kuhl, 1994) of self-regulation of production and reduction of effort respectively for future actions. The action hierarchy is determined based on whether the GMF or UGMF is the dominant or passive type of motivational gratification. The dominant of the two types determine the overt behaviour of employees, and the passive type of motivational gratification continues to complement or compete with the overt behaviour. The passive type of motivational gratification explains the subliminal activation or “without awareness” activation (Merikle, Smilek & Eastwood 2001) of employees’ actions. The subliminal activation of action sustains activation even without the employee being aware of this stimulus (Sohlberg & Birgegard 2003). The dominant type of motivational gratification does not imply that the self-regulation of effort is more normal or common than the passive one. Cacioppo and Berntson (1994) posited that when positive and negative motivational forces were co-activated, the stronger dominated in determining behaviour. Therefore, if UGMF is stronger than GMF then that becomes the dominant type, and GMF will be a passive type of motivational gratification for an employee to determine behaviour.

THE THEORETICAL ELABORATION OF THE MOTIVATIONAL GRATIFICATION

The aim of this article is not to reject bipolar – reciprocal conceptualization introduced by Thurstone in early 1930s and subsequently widely used in psychology and management (see Cacioppo, Gardner & Berntson 1997). In doing so, the bipolar or hierarchical action characteristic of GMF and UGMF types is discussed first, so as to help contrast the differences in employee behavioural consequences with the bivariate perspectives of motivational gratification.

Motivational Gratification – A bipolar explanation for self-regulation of action

GMF and reduction of effort

The behavioural characteristics of GMF facilitate ‘reduction’ of effort because the motivational forces in this subset have lost their attractiveness to produce more effort to achieve assigned organizational goals in future. Content-based motivation theorists also subscribe to the effort ‘reduction’

argument, but they are more about ‘general’ motives applied universally, and their limitation lies in the inability to account for specific actions and to point to particular strategies for influencing behaviour (Bagozzi, Bergami, & Leone 2003).

In psychology, however, ‘antireductionism’ seems to be more prevalent because of its association with determinism and materialism (Vancouver, 2005). Nevertheless, the ‘drive reduction’ argument is supported by the control system theory, the behaviour self-regulation postulate (Heatherton & Baumeister 1996; Bandura 1986), and the resource allocation theory of motivation (Kanfer & Ackerman 1989). That is, when the needs are achieved then the drive for those needs is ‘reduced’ and that leads to self-regulation of behaviour by reducing the amount of effort that is required to maintain performance. Also, during the comparator function of perception of goal and achievement of goal in the control-system perspective (Vancouver 2005), it is suggested, “when the difference between the goal and the perception of the current state achievement becomes zero, the action stops” (p.42).

UGMF and production of effort

When an employee does not achieve the expected outcomes then there is ‘increase’ in displeasure (affective state of UGMF) because of the goal-performance discrepancy (Bandura 1986). However, the employee is activated to ‘increase’ the effort so as to reduce the goal-performance discrepancy, and this behaviour can be explained using control and social cognitive theories. Control theories are used in psychology and management (Vancouver 2005) in particular, to explain the physiological aspects of ‘production’ of effort for motivation (see Mook 1996). The control system explanation for motivational gratification helps to explain how the ‘mechanisms’ of the UGMF works in explaining ‘production’ of effort in motivation. Vancouver suggests that the input function creates the individual perception of goal; the comparator function creates the deviation or ‘error’ when perception of goal and achievement of goal differs. Finally, the output function creates ‘production’ of effort for action by the system on the variable when it receives the error signal.

In summary, it is proposed that GMF has the behavioural characteristics of effort 'reduction' and UGMF evokes effort 'production'. The bipolar characteristics of GMF and UGMF are substantiated in this section using existing literature.

Motivational Gratification – A coactive bivariate explanation for self-regulation of action

The proposed coactive or simultaneous bivariate activation characteristics of GMF and UGMF are contrary to the commonly held bipolar belief that achievement of goals (self determined) should facilitate reduction or non-achievement goals will lead to production of effort. The coactive bivariate explanation for this behavioural outcome is not common in the management and psychology literature. The reason behind that is, that the most salient structural basis to respond with are stored in memory – for instance, for simple and familiar stimuli toward which one has acted previously – is therefore more likely to be bipolarity (Cacioppo et al.1999). For example, Ito, Cacioppo and Lang (1998) analyzed the International Affective Picture System (IAPS: Lang, Bradley, & Cuthbert, 1995) that are used to measure valence, arousal, and dominance. They scaled these pictures again with 'unipolar' positivity, negativity and ambivalence ratings, and 'bipolar' valence, dominance, and arousal ratings. They found that most of these pictures were unipolar and characterized by reciprocal activation and hence the pictures elicited reciprocal activation too. This finding supports the assumption that the salient positive or negative characteristics of the stimulus determine respective responses. However, there exists little evidence to suggest the existence of coactive activation in the arousal ratings of the pictures because the stimulus is not ambivalent and hence it is not powerful in evoking ambivalent responses. Therefore, Ito, Cacioppo and Lang's finding is informative to explore and extend the existing work motivation literature by its use of motivational gratification, which is based on the coactive bivariate perspective.

A recent meta-analysis of reinforcement effects on task performance by Stajkovic and Luthans (2003) provides the theoretical basis to substantiate the possibility of coactive bivariate activation in determining task performances. They concluded in their study that the combined reinforcers of positive and negative characteristics have a synergistic (coactive) effect on the consequence of task performances.

Furthermore, Goldstein and Strube (1994) demonstrated the bivariate activation of positivity and negativity in affective reports collected from students at the beginning and end of three consecutive teaching periods. Students who performed well on an exam showed an increase in positive affect relative to their beginning-of-class level, whereas their level of negative affect remained unchanged. Such distinctions between positive and negative affective processes have also been observed in motivations (Elliot & Church 1997).

The concept of motivational gratification is built on the assumption that motivation is considered as a non-satiating motivation cycle. The transitory phase of motivational force from one motivation cycle to another is explained using employee's self-regulation of effort for job performances. Bandura's (1991) explanation of self-regulation using goal-performance discrepancy reduction and production regulate performance by alternating cycles. However, in this article using the motivational gratification model (Figure-1), an attempt is made to theoretically propose new explanations for work motivational behavioural outcomes, such as employee disengagement work persistence and intensity, using simultaneous or coactive activation of dominant and passive characteristics of GMF and UGMF. Vancouver (2005) confirms the plausibility of a new property emerging from the interactions of subsystems with different properties in motivation cycles. Hence, initially the coactive activation of dominant GMF and passive UGMF is theoretically discussed to highlight the emergence of a new behavioural outcome. Subsequently, the consequence of coactive activation of dominant UGMF and passive GMF is discussed.

“Insert Figure-1 about here”

Bivariate activation of dominant GMF and passive UGMF

The bipolar activation of dominant type of GMF determines reduction of effort for assigned organisational goals as discussed earlier. However, in reality, employees might not lower their performance standards below the minimum standard set by the management even if their dominant type of motivational gratification is GMF, which is reduction is effort because of achievement of assigned

goals. In this article it is proposed that this behavioural outcome happens because the behavioural characteristics of 'passive' UGMF influences employees to continue to produce effort for minimum job performances along with the characteristics of dominant GMF. That is, the dominant GMF and passive UGMF have coercive activation, and that explains why in reality employees are disengaged or 'checked out' in their jobs. Robison (2006) in the Gallup organisation's employee engagement study explains the term not-actively-engaged for those employees who are essentially 'checked out.' They sleepwalk through their workday, putting time but not energy or passion into their work. They show little to no long term commitment to the organisation.

The coercive activation of dominant GMF and passive UGMF also propounds a different explanation to the commonly held negative regulatory focus or avoiding punitive actions (Tubbs and Ekeberg 1991), and generative-defensive action (Seo et al. 2004) for not lowering performance standards below the minimum set by the managers even when the assigned goals are achieved. That is, the 'passive' type of motivational forces identified by the UGMF might be influencing employees to continue at minimum performance standards, compared to avoiding punitive actions by management, even when the dominant type of motivational force is GMF.

Bivariate activation of dominant UGMF and passive GMF

The bipolar activation of the behavioural characteristics of dominant UGMF facilitates production of effort for the future action, as discussed earlier. However, from the bivariate perspective, the passive GMF while interacting with the dominant UGMF emerges with additional characteristics to provide 'persistence' of effort apart from the characteristics of dominant GMF to 'reduce' effort intensity. In this context, the interaction of bipolar UGMF and GMF activation leads to an emergence of a new behavioural outcome in work motivation, 'persistence' of effort (Kanfer 1991; Locke & Latham 1990). Persistence as one of the major three major behavioural outcomes in work motivation along with direction and effort intensity, it refers to a behavioural pattern of maintaining the initially chosen course of action over time (Seo et al. 2004).

The coactive activation of dominant UGMF and passive GMF therefore influences employee's behaviour to 'persist' and also to 'produce' effort to achieve the assigned organisational goals in future. This observable behavioural consequence might look at surface as one behavioural manifestation (Cacioppo et al. 1997); however, they are two different behavioural outcomes in work motivation. Furthermore, these two behavioural outcomes of work motivation are consequences of the interaction of two distinguishable types of motivational forces. That is, the characteristics of dominant UGMF produces high effort (intensity) to achieve the assigned organisational goals based on the GPD. Furthermore, the characteristics of passive GMF helps employee's behaviour stay 'focused' and 'persist' based on the reinforcement characteristics (Stajkovic & Luthans 2003) of the performance outcomes achieved.

Practical implications

Bipolar and reciprocal activation of pleasure and displeasure, and activation and deactivation is commonly discussed in organisational behaviour literature. However, it is equally important for managers to understand the coactive nonreciprocal activation of GMF and UGMF on self-regulation of employee action. This article attempts to provide such understanding to extend and complement the existing self-regulation and employee engagement literature.

Currently managers while designing HR policies and practices tend to use only the dominant or obvious determinants of employee engagement. However, the bivariate coactive activation of dominant and passive types of motivational gratification provides a new insight for managers to understand that employee's job performance is a consequence of the interaction of two distinguishable behavioural characteristics of GMF and UGMF. For example, why employees do not lower their performance standards below the minimum even when they are not actively engaged or disengaged in a job can be explained by the bivariate coactive activation of dominant GMF and passive UGMF. Hence, it is important for managers to be aware while designing HR policies and practices for employee engagement based on combining both more obvious (dominant) and less obvious (passive) types of motivational

gratification instead of just using only the dominant type of motivational gratification. Employee engagement has become one of the main objectives of managers as engagement encompasses loyalty and productivity (Buckingham & Coffma, 2005). While productivity has been recognized as a key contributor to organisational success for some time, the value of employee loyalty is now also being recognized. Employee turnover costs organisations 70 to 200 per cent of each lost employee's salary (Kaye & Jordan-Evans 2001). When combined with the consequent intellectual loss, disengaged employees can cause considerable problems for organisations

Empirical Implications

It is important to empirically ascertain firstly, in assigned organisational contexts, whether the coactive activation of dominant GMG and passive UGMG is more powerful in explaining why employees tend to continue at minimum standard even after achieving their expected goals than the generative-defensive action (Seo et al. 2004). Secondly, can motivational gratification provide new grounds to explore and understand the antecedents for employee disengagement (Robinson 2006)? Thirdly, this article provides an opportunity to test if persistence, one of the three major behavioural outcomes of work motivation, is a product of the coactive activation of dominant UGMF and passive GMF. These explorations may provide future opportunities to empirically validate the motivational gratification theory.

To adequately study the dynamic impacts of motivational gratification on self-regulation of effort a technique to measure motivational gratification is proposed. The motivational force can be measured using the product of expectancies valences of each performance outcomes and average effort probability (Van Eerde & Thierry 1996; Porter & Lawler 1968). Further, the affective evaluation of the performance outcomes is measured based on the feelings of equity from the outcome received to expected, and labeled using nominal scale, i.e., label G (gratified) and UG (ungratified). That is, motivational force for an outcome is labeled as G, when an employee perceives that the outcome received and anticipated is equal for effort expended (Mowday & Colwell 2003; Adams 1963). However, when the performance outcome

is perceived that the outcome received is less than anticipated for effort expended then a label-UG is used. The labels help to identify and cluster the motivational force for performance outcomes into subsets of GMF and UGMF. Finally, motivational forces (the product of expectancies valences and average effort-probability) for all outcomes, identified using labels G and UG, are summed to measure the metric of GMF and UGMF subsets respectively. The dominant subset is based on the relatively higher metric of the two subsets of the motivational forces.

In conclusion, in addition to the bipolar affective evaluation, it is important to examine the bivariate affective explanation of pleasure and displeasure for scholarly understanding of self-regulation of effort for future actions. The motivational gratification concept proposed in this article unravels the coactive bivariate conspiracy of pleasure and displeasure to explain self-regulation of production and reduction of employee effort in assigned organisational goal context. Further, the motivational gratification concept extends the work motivation literature by theoretically proposing that the coactive activation of GMF and UGMF has the potential to determine the complex multi-layered employees' self-regulation of effort for employee disengagement, and behavioural outcomes of work motivation such as persistence and intensity.

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FIGURE 1 - Motivational Gratification Model

