

Does sense of entitlement predict desire for vengeance?

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Does sense of entitlement predict desire for vengeance?

ABSTRACT

HR managers note an increasing sense of entitlement at work. In the workplace, sense of entitlement is defined as an expectation for preferential treatment or rewards without regard to performance. Employees with an elevated sense of entitlement may perceive they are treated unfairly even if they receive treatment proportionate with actual performance. In this paper, we describe a study examining sense of entitlement as a predictor of vengeance tendencies. A total of 220 respondents completed measures of entitlement, vengeance, and affect across two time periods. The findings suggest that sense of entitlement may result in attitudes that predispose individuals towards negative behaviour. Implications for theory and practice are discussed.

Keywords: personnel psychology, workplace relations, performance management, employee relations

Recent research asserts that narcissistic and entitlement behaviours are increasing in western society, particularly in the younger generation (Twenge & Campbell 2008; Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Campbell & Bushman 2008). Entitlement is defined as an expectation for preferential treatment or rewards (Campbell, Bonacci, Shelton, Exline & Bushman 2004) and, in the workplace, this definition is extended to include “without regard to performance” (Harvey & Martinko 2009). This attitude of an expectation of reward without regard to performance has significant implications for HR professionals who are often responsible for improving performance as an essential element for maintaining or increasing profitability. In addition, Harvey and Martinko (2009) suggest that employees with a high sense of entitlement may perceive they are treated unfairly even if they receive treatment proportionate with actual performance. Again, the implication that employees with a high sense of entitlement may also experience unrealistic perceptions of unfair justice is important for HR managers as there is clear research evidence that perceptions of injustice are linked to counterproductive workplace behaviours (Herscovis et al. 2007; Martinko, Gundlach & Douglas 2005). On this basis, understanding the links between an employee’s sense of entitlement and counterproductive work behaviours is important for organisations and, is of particular significance to HR professionals who are expected to assist with managing performance, as well as distribution of rewards, compensation and benefits.

In this paper, we outline a study that examines sense of entitlement to determine if it is linked to positive vengeance attitudes. To provide a theoretical platform for our research, we draw on the

theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen 1991) which suggests that individual differences (i.e. entitlement) and attitudes (i.e. vengeance) will ultimately influence behavioural outcomes. Therefore, using the theoretical framework of the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen 1991), this study examines the relationship between entitlement and vengeance. In addition to presenting the results of the study in this paper, we discuss theoretical implications and, perhaps more importantly, practical implications for HR professionals who may find themselves dealing with employees who display a sense of entitlement. Finally, we address the study limitations and propose directions for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Entitlement

There is increasing interest by HR managers in the phenomenon of employee entitlement behaviours. Whereas there is minimal HR research into entitlement in the academic arena, in professional magazines the topic is being linked to talent shortages, organisational policies and, specifically, compensation and benefits policies are proposed to contribute to a sense of employee entitlement (Hellerman & Kochanski 2009; Wellner 2004). Fisk (2009) also suggests that “indulgent” organisational practices such as liberal recruiting bonuses, relaxed performance ratings and fixed compensation plans may influence employee entitlement attitudes. The difficulty with these articles is that although they raise some important issues, they lack empirical support. However, research into employee entitlement does appear to be gaining momentum in the HR management literature (Harvey & Martinko 2009; Naumann et al. 2002).

The research that is being undertaken in management draws heavily from the psychology discipline (Naumann et al. 2002) where entitlement is seen as a pervasive, destructive and global personality trait linked to narcissism (Campbell et al. 2004; Naumann et al. 2002). Conversely, there is also suggestion that individuals can differ in their levels of entitlement behaviour and can adapt their entitlement behaviour according to the situational context (Naumann et al. 2002; Snow, Kern & Curlette 2001; Lerner 1987). For the purposes of this study, entitlement is treated as a personality trait distinct from narcissism which is generally identified as a complex, broader, psychological disorder.

In relation to entitlement in the workplace, during development of the psychological entitlement scale, a measure that purports to measure entitlement in isolation to narcissism, Campbell et al. (2004) linked entitlement to aggression in hypothetical workplace scenarios. Harvey and Martinko (2009) found that entitlement is associated with supervisor conflict, increased tension, and turnover intent. Harvey and Harris (2010) found that psychological entitlement is positively associated with political behaviour and co-worker abuse with frustration levels mediating these effects. As well, their study suggests high levels of supervisor communication actually raised frustration levels with highly entitled individuals.

Hochwarter and colleagues (2007) and (2010) are also researching entitlement but are focusing their attention on “co-worker perceptions of entitlement behaviour”. Hochwarter, Meurs, Perrewé, Royle and Matherly (2007) found that co-worker perceptions of entitlement behaviour are associated with tension, depression, job dissatisfaction and reduced citizenship behaviour. Similarly, Hochwarter, Summers, Thompson, Perrewé and Ferris (2010) suggest that perceived entitlement behaviour predicted higher levels of work stress although this stress was at lower levels in those employees who had higher levels of political skills. Thus, the limited research to date suggests that employee levels of entitlement are rising in the workplace and, entitlement is associated with negative behaviours at work. This research has significant implications for HR professionals who are often expected to offer solutions to these negative attitudes and behaviours. On this basis, we argue that extending this research within HR management is important.

Vengeance

In the literature, vengeance has been treated as an attitude (Stuckless and Goranson 1992), as well as a behaviour (Bies and Tripp 1995). Attitudes towards vengeance were investigated by Stuckless and Goranson (1992) during development of a revenge measurement scale. Stuckless and Goranson (1992: 25) define revenge as “the infliction of harm in return for perceived wrong” and argue that there is a clear distinction between vengeance and other antisocial behaviours such as retaliation or retribution as vengeance can often over ride an individual’s safety or integrity. They argue that revenge is a motivator for aggressive behaviour based on perceptions of being wronged or

treated unfairly and may actually relieve the perpetrator's feelings of anger or distress (Stuckless & Goranson 1992:26). Furthermore, Stuckless and Goranson (1992) found that men have more positive attitudes towards revenge; there is a significant negative relationship between empathy and vengeance; and, there is a strong positive correlation between vengeance and anger.

Research by Cota-McKinley, Woody and Bell (2001) suggest that vengeance is tied to self-worth, as well as perceptions of unfairness and injustice. Cota-McKinley et al. (2001) found gender and age to be predictors of vengeance while men and younger individuals were more accepting of vengeance. Interestingly, the willingness to seek revenge was discovered to be highest in interactions with co-workers. The authors suggest this may be due to the type of relationship which is not necessarily developed from mutual interests or choice but simply occurs due to happenstance by virtue of being employed with the same organisation.

In terms of actual behaviour, vengeance is often placed under the umbrella of counterproductive workplace behaviour. Counterproductive workplace behaviours can range from minor actions (e.g. taking excessive breaks) to serious actions (e.g. theft) and can be enacted against another individual (e.g. verbal abuse) or against the organisation or its property (e.g. sabotage)(Robinson & Bennett 1995). Dealing with negative behaviours can take up an enormous amount of time and organisational resources. In fact, Porath and Pearson (2010) refer to a 2006 HR survey by Accountemps which suggests managers spend approximately 13% of their time (the equivalent of 7 weeks per year) resolving various forms of counterproductive work behaviours amongst employees. HR professionals are regularly expected to assist managers in dealing with these issues and, therefore, it is important that they have an understanding of counterproductive workplace behaviours, including revenge behaviours.

Bies and Tripp (1995) state that revenge or "getting even" are cognitive or behavioural responses to restore justice. Tripp, Bies and Aquino (2002) suggest that the desire for revenge will be influenced by anger and resentment, as well as the degree of blame (Bies & Tripp 1998). In addition, Tripp et al. (2002) state that individuals who are chronically angry, have negative affect, unstable self-esteem, hostile attribution style and believe in the norm of reciprocity are also more likely to seek

revenge (Bies & Tripp 2005). Furthermore, power differences and the procedural justice climate of the organisation will also influence whether an individual will enact revenge (or choose an alternative coping response such as forgiveness or reconciliation). From a HR perspective, if procedures are deemed to be fair in an organisation, the more likely it is that victims will pursue formal avenues such as grievance procedures to restore justice (Aquino, Tripp & Bies 2006).

Based on the above research by Bies & Tripp (1998, 2005) and Tripp et al. (2002) which identifies individual differences as antecedents to revenge, we believe that vengeance *attitude* (i.e. intention to seek revenge) may also be an antecedent to revenge *behaviour*, a form of counterproductive workplace behaviours. Therefore, given the suggestions that counterproductive workplace behaviours are a pervasive and universal phenomena (Vardi & Weitz 2004) with significant costs to the organisation and its employees (Fehr & Gächter 2000), we argue that attitudes towards revenge, as well as the antecedents to these attitudes and behaviours (i.e. entitlement) are important to understand as they may have a significant effect on HR practices and workplace behaviours.

Entitlement and Vengeance

A review of the literature only found one prior study that considers the relationship between entitlement and revenge but this was in a clinical setting. Based on two case studies of clinical patients diagnosed as displaying narcissistic behaviour, Bishop and Lane (2002:739) propose that those high in entitlement may retaliate to seek justice. The present research is differentiated from Bishop and Lane's (2002) research in terms of the construct definitions we apply in the research, the use of a non clinical sample and methods used. However, there is previous research on constructs related to entitlement and their relationships with vengeance, aggression and counterproductive workplace behaviours. Narcissism and narcissistic entitlement have been linked to vengeance (Brown 2004) and lack of forgiveness (Exline, Baumeister, Bushman, Campbell & Finkel 2004), as well as aggressive behaviour (Reidy, Zeichner, Foster & Martinez 2008), anger (Penney & Spector 2002; Witte, Callahan & Perez-Lopez 2002) and, counterproductive workplace behaviour (Penney & Spector 2002). Furthermore, as previously discussed, entitlement in the workplace has been

associated with supervisor conflict (Harvey & Martinko 2009) and co-worker abuse (Harris & Harvey 2010) which are specific forms of harmful or counterproductive workplace behaviours. Finally, anger and counterproductive workplace behaviours are related to vengeance (Stucke & Sporer 2002; Bies & Tripp 2005). Thus, based on prior research, we hypothesise:

Hypothesis 1: Entitlement will be positively associated with vengeance.

Hypothesis 2: Entitlement will positively predict vengeance.

METHOD

Procedure

Self report questionnaires were administered to undergraduate management students at a large Australian university. To address concerns over common method variance, there were two points of data collection. The time one and time two surveys were matched using unique identifier codes. Age and gender were also collected at time one and time two. The time one survey measured affect, psychological entitlement and vengeance. The time two survey was completed approximately three weeks later and measured affect and narcissistic entitlement, an alternative measure of entitlement.

Participants

At time one, 450 questionnaires were distributed and 378 were returned. After screening and cleaning the data, 362 useable surveys remained in time one. At time two, 520 surveys were distributed and 429 returned, resulting in 409 useable surveys remaining after screening and cleaning the data in time two. Following our matching the time one and time two surveys, 220 useable responses remained. Of these, 139 respondents (63.2%) were female. The mean age was 22.5 years, ranging from 18 years to 47 years. The vast majority of participants (90%) stated they had work experience.

Measures

Entitlement. A debate exists over the best way to measure entitlement. Exline et al. (2004) and Campbell et al. (2004) both consider entitlement behaviour as being a separate and distinct

personality trait, rather than just a sub-component of narcissism. However, Campbell et al. (2004) refer to their construct as “psychological entitlement” which they define as a “stable and pervasive sense that one deserves more and is entitled to more than others” whereas Exline et al. (2004) name their construct “narcissistic entitlement” and define it as an expectation of special or preferential treatment from others. In this study, we measured both psychological and narcissistic entitlement.

Psychological entitlement. Psychological entitlement was measured using Campbell et al.’s (2004) psychological entitlement scale. A seven point response format (1=strong disagreement to 7=strong agreement) was used. Item three of the original scale (“If I were on the Titanic, I would deserve to be on the first lifeboat!”) was excluded because it was believed that not all students would necessarily be familiar with this particular event. The remaining 8 items include statements such as “Great things should come to me” and “I feel entitled to more of everything”. A Cronbach alpha of .84 was obtained.

Narcissistic entitlement. The six item entitlement subscale from Raskin and Terry’s (1988) narcissistic personality inventory was included as an alternative measure for entitlement. This is a forced choice scale that included items such as “I will never be satisfied until I get all that I deserve” versus “I take my satisfactions as they come”. Campbell et al. (2004) cited difficulties with face validity, internal consistency and the six item forced choice format as impetus for developing the psychological entitlement scale. We included it in our study as an alternate measure of entitlement.

Vengeance. Vengeance was measured using Stuckless and Goranson’s (1992) 20 item vengeance scale. A seven point response format (1=disagree strongly to 7=agree strongly) was used. Items include statements such as “I try to even the score with anyone who hurts me” and “People who insist on getting revenge are disgusting”. Stuckless and Goranson (1992) obtained a Cronbach alpha of .92. Our study obtained an alpha of .89.

Controls. Age, gender and positive and negative affect were selected for our study based on previous research findings that have found links between age, gender, mood and vengeance (Aquino et al. 2006; Skarlicki et al. 1999; Stuckless & Goranson 1982; Cota-McKinley et al. 2001). The positive and negative affect scale (Watson, Clark & Tellegen 1988) was used to indicate positive (10 items) and negative (10 items) affect. This scale consists of a number of words that describe different

feelings and emotions. Examples of positive feelings/emotions include “strong” and “enthusiastic” and examples of negative feelings/emotions include “ashamed” and “nervous”. Participants were asked to read each item, mark the appropriate answer in the space next to that word, and to indicate how they were feeling at present. A five point Likert scale (1=very slightly or not at all to 5=extremely) was used to rate feelings/emotions. The Cronbach alpha for positive affect was .90 and for negative affect .84.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, correlations and alphas among the study variables. In this study, an unacceptable Cronbach alpha of .36 was obtained for the narcissistic entitlement scale. This subscale has consistently resulted in low alphas in other research (Moeller, Crocker & Bushman 2009; Pryor, Miller & Gaughan 2008; Campbell et al. 2004). Therefore, due to the low reliability of this measure, it was decided to exclude the scale from further analysis.

Insert Table 1 about here

Significant positive correlations were found between psychological entitlement and vengeance ($r = .31, p < .01$) and, age and positive affect ($r = .21, p < .01$). Significant negative correlations emerged between positive affect and vengeance ($r = -.25, p < .01$), gender and vengeance ($r = -.18, p < .01$) and, age and vengeance ($r = -.17, p < .05$). Our results support Hypothesis 1 that entitlement is positively associated with vengeance. Our results are also consistent with previous research that age is negatively related to vengeance (Cota-McKinley et al. 2001) and males are positively associated with vengeance (Cota-McKinley et al. 2001; Stuckless & Goranson 1992).

Regression Analysis

Next, standard multiple regression analysis was conducted to assess whether psychological entitlement predicted vengeance after controlling for the influence of age, gender, and negative affect.

Despite affect not showing relationships to entitlement or vengeance, we included negative affect in the regression analysis given prior research that links it to revenge (Aquino et al., 2006; Skarlicki et al., 1999). Table 2 shows regression results.

Insert Table 2 about here

In support of Hypothesis 2, psychological entitlement significantly predicted vengeance with a beta value ($\beta = .30, p < .001$). Using psychological entitlement as a predictor, $R^2 = .15$ and Adj $R^2 = .14$, the overall regression equation was statistically significant, $F(4,194) = 8.76, p < .001$.

DISCUSSION

As hypothesised, our results indicate that entitlement is related to vengeance and the data reveals entitlement as a significant predictor of desire for revenge. Revenge, of course, is a motivator to aggressive behaviour and a positive attitude towards vengeance may indicate a propensity for entitled individuals to intend to or actually engage in retaliatory or revenge behaviours when they do not get the treatment or rewards they feel they deserve. Thus, the results provide empirical evidence that supports prior research which indicates entitlement is associated with negative outcomes (Harvey & Harris 2010; Harvey & Martinko 2009).

This study adds to the growing body of research on entitlement and vengeance which have both received scant attention. The findings support previous research that indicates entitlement may be associated with destructive outcomes (Harvey & Harris 2010; Harvey & Martinko 2009; and Campbell et al. 2004). Our results suggest that there is a link between entitled individuals and higher vengeance attitudes. In a work situation, these vengeance attitudes may lead to aggressive behaviour and counterproductive behaviour, behaviours that HR professional are often expected to resolve. Significantly, when entitled individuals perceive unfair treatment in the form of not getting the special treatment or rewards they feel they deserve, their positive attitudes towards revenge may result in increased counterproductive workplace behaviours. Counterproductive workplace behaviours are said to cost organisations billions of dollar per year (Bennett and Robinson, 2000). On the basis of the

economic costs alone, HR professionals need to take notice of employees' sense of entitlement and manage this accordingly as this may help to minimise counterproductive work behaviours.

Furthermore, in addition to the economic costs, we note Hochwarter et al's. (2007 and 2010) studies that found job tension, depression and job dissatisfaction and decreasing organisational citizenship behaviour in employees who perceived entitlement behaviour amongst their colleagues. These findings suggest that not only may organisations be faced with economic costs associated with counterproductive behaviour but they may also be at risk of facing increased emotional costs amongst employees working alongside entitled employees. This is significant to HR professionals who are often assigned the responsibility for "employee well-being".

In addition, we recommend that HR managers pay close attention to the interpersonal treatment of employees, as well as the distribution of rewards, in developing policies and providing advice as this issue will be particularly important for individuals who display a sense of entitlement. Prior research suggests that entitled individuals experience more interpersonal transgressions with others (McCullough et al. 2003) and are more sensitive to how rewards are distributed (Byrne, Miller & Pitts 2010). These findings, along with the results of Harvey and Harris (2010) who found high levels of supervisor communication actually raised frustration levels with individuals high in entitlement, need to be considered by HR practitioners when preparing managers for dealing with employees with a sense of entitlement. Indeed, in undertaking training and developing the communication skills for managers when dealing with entitled employees, HR professionals need to address these issues.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The development of this study around a student sample with a relatively young average age (22.5) of participants, results in a limitation in terms of generalisability of our findings. Notwithstanding this was a student sample, the majority of participants reported having work experience which strengthens the applicability of the results to a working population. Past research by Stuckless and Goranson (1982) and Cota-McKinley et al. (2001) indicates that vengeance attitudes

tend to decrease with age. Therefore, there is a possibility that the younger age of participants may be influencing the findings between entitlement and vengeance. Finally, although we attempted to overcome common method variance in our study through a split administration of the variables, the poor reliability of the narcissistic entitlement subscale resulted in another limitation to the study.

The above limitations suggest a need for further research between entitlement and vengeance. We suggest that the study be replicated in an organisational setting in order to test the relationships in a sample population that may be older and, potentially, may have more experience in dealing with perceived unmet expectations in the workplace. Similarly, research should examine whether organisational justice perceptions (specifically, unfair justice perceptions) are “trigger events” for vengeance. Future research should consider other individual differences that may moderate the relationship with vengeance, for example, emotional intelligence, political skill and self monitoring.

CONCLUSION

The primary aim of our study was to examine entitlement, a relatively new individual difference variable to the academic HR literature, as an antecedent to vengeance attitudes. Our results show that there is indeed a relationship between entitlement and vengeance and, entitlement is a predictor of desire for vengeance. Due to previous empirical work points to increasing levels of entitlement amongst society, particularly, in the younger generation (Twenge & Campbell 2008; Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Campbell & Bushman 2008), as well as the growing research that links entitlement to negative attitudes and behaviour, we believe there is a need for future research in these areas. Indeed, it seems essential for organisations and, specifically, HR managers to increase their understanding of how entitled individuals behave in the workplace.

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TABLE 1: MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS, ALPHAS AND CORRELATIONS

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<i>Dependent</i>									
1. Vengeance	64.16	16.67	(.89)						
<i>Independents</i>									
2. Psychological Entitlement	30.85	8.21	.30**	(.84)					
3. Narcissistic Entitlement	2.1	1.35	.28**	.31**	(.36)				
<i>Controls</i>									
4. Gender	1.63	0.48	-.18**	-.05	.23**	-			
5. Age	22.5	4.70	-.17*	.01	.03	-.04	-		
6. Positive Affect	31.19	7.61	-.25**	.07	.10	.02	.21**	(.90)	
7. Negative Affect	15.10	5.65	.05	.07	.07	-.09	-.01	.01	(.84)

$n = 220$. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$. Alpha in parentheses on diagonal.

TABLE 2: ENTITLEMENT AS PREDICTOR OF VENGEANCE

Variable	β
Gender	-.17
Age	-.18
Negative Affect	.02
Psychological Entitlement	.30***
$R^2 = .15$	
$F = 8.76$	
$\Delta R^2 = .09$	

$n = 220$. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$