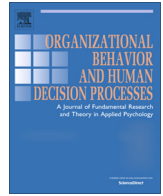




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Compensatory control and ambiguity intolerance



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ABSTRACT

When do people find ambiguity intolerable, and how might this manifest in the workplace where roles, guidelines and expectations can be made to be more or less ambiguous? Compensatory Control Theory (CCT; Kay, Gaucher, Napier, Callan, & Laurin, 2008) suggests a potential driver: perceived control. Recent CCT theory (Landau, Kay, & Whitson, 2015) has posited that people with chronically lower levels of perceived control may be especially likely to seek coherent and structured environments. Given that ambiguous workplace situations – such as flexible roles and titles, or loose guidelines and expectations – necessarily represent a lack of structure, these types of situations may therefore be especially aversive to those lower in perceived control. Four studies support this prediction. Specifically, we observe that low perceived control (both measured or manipulated) predicts greater ambiguity intolerance as well as greater negative attitudes towards ambiguous situations (Studies 1, 2 and 3), but not other types of problematic workplace situations (Study 1), and that this process can exert important downstream consequences, ranging from behavioral intentions to perceived self-efficacy (Study 4).

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1. Introduction

Autonomy. Freedom. Flexible work schedules. Work-life balance. These are catchphrases that represent what a significant number of people from all over the world claim to value and desire at work, even at the expense of lower salary or promotion delay (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2013). In order to cater to employees' wishes, an increasing number of organizations are beginning to offer more workplace autonomy. For example, Google designated 20% of employees' paid time for them to work on their personal projects. Best Buy has a Results-Only Work Environment (ROWE), which allows employees to work virtually from anywhere and anytime as long as they are able to deliver results (Dhawan, 2012). Gyms, sleeping pods, and yoga classes (Messieh, 2013) are becoming increasingly common features at modern workplaces. Everywhere in the world, the drive for more freedom and flexibility at the workplace is slowly and significantly changing the corporate landscape.

However, while the push for increased workplace flexibility may lead to many positive outcomes, it also causes work coordination conflicts, a lack of managerial supervision, and even changes in organizational culture (for review see Scandura & Lankau, 1997). These problems may foster greater workplace ambiguity, which some employees may find hard to tolerate. Ambiguity at

the workplace has been shown to decrease perceptions of job autonomy (Beehr, 1976; Jackson & Schuler, 1985), and job satisfaction (Abramis, 1994; Jackson & Schuler, 1985) as well as job performance (Tubre & Collins, 2000). Thus, it is feasible that workplace environments designed to “empower” workers by plying them with freedom and flexibility may sometimes instead foster negative attitudes and, ironically, reduce feelings of self-efficacy. But does this happen and, if so, why?

Drawing on hypotheses put forth by Compensatory Control Theory (CCT; Kay, Shepherd, Blatz, Chua, & Galinsky, 2010; Kay, Whitson, Gaucher, & Galinsky, 2009; Kay, Gaucher, Napier, Callan, & Laurin, 2008), we argue that some workers may find ambiguity intolerable because the associated lack of structure blocks a primary means of maintaining perceptions of an understandable, predictable and ultimately controllable world. Recent research has demonstrated that maintaining perceptions of control – a fundamental psychological need (Presson & Benassi, 1996; Seligman, 1975; Skinner, 1995) – often requires a balancing act between seeing the self in control and also the external world as orderly and structured (Kay et al., 2008; Landau, Kay, & Whitson, 2015). As a result, when personal control is chronically low or temporarily threatened, people often compensate by searching for and craving structure in the world around them (Whitson & Galinsky, 2008). Structure, defined as “simple, clear and coherent interpretations of the social and physical environment” (Landau et al., 2015, p. 694), is a crucial resource for those low in perceived control because it represents a necessary component to building the

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confidence to engage in long-term goal pursuit (i.e. self-efficacy, Kay, Laurin, Fitzsimons, & Landau, 2014). As such, ambiguity in contexts that are important and/or filled with goal strivings – such as the workplace – may be especially intolerable for people with low personal control. Leveraging this research and theory, we sought to test whether workers with low personal control would have a greater need for structure, and consequently be especially intolerant of ambiguities at the workplace.

By positing a novel account for why perceived control should influence the way people respond to ambiguity, we aim to fill theoretical gaps in ambiguity related organizational research. Existing organizational behavior research has examined the extent to which people perceive their jobs to be ambiguous ('role ambiguity', for reviews, see Jackson & Schuler, 1985; Tubre & Collins, 2000), and also their tendency to be threatened by ambiguity ('ambiguity intolerance', Budner, 1962; Schere, 1982). The research generally converges on the notion that sources of ambiguity can be stressful (Keenan & McBain, 1979) and the ability to tolerate ambiguity reduces occupational strain (Frone, 1990). However, it remains unclear why some people should perceive ambiguity to be intolerable in the first place, and when it is perceived to be especially threatening (Frone, 1990; Furnham & Ribchester, 1995). By proposing that people are intolerant of ambiguity because it represents a lack of structure, we aim to improve the field's theoretical understanding of the conceptual relationships between control and ambiguity, while also examining the utility of compensatory control theory for deepening our understanding of organizational and workplace preferences.

1.1. Control-motivated structure seeking

Researchers in clinical, personality and social psychology agree that people are motivated to feel in control of their lives (Presson & Benassi, 1996; Seligman, 1975; Skinner, 1995), and that they often dislike perceived uncertainty and chaos (Pennebaker & Stone, 2004). How do people cope when their personal control is low or threatened? One of the ways they may do so, according to CCT, is to seek external structure, that is, clarity and order in the external world. Personal control is not possible without an orderly and predictable environment, in which one can predict the contingencies of one's own as well as other peoples' actions (Kay et al., 2014). Turning to structure when personal control is low, therefore, can lay the foundation upon which personal control can then be built (or re-built).

Recently, the literature has become filled with examples of this type of control-motivated structure seeking. For example, research has shown that individuals who experience low psychological control prefer scientific theories that have clear stages and boundaries compared to those that are more continuous or fluid (Rutjens, van Harreveld, & van der Pligt, 2010; Rutjens, van Harreveld, van der Pligt, Kreemers, & Noordewier, 2013). People who have low personal control are also more likely to endorse socio-economic ideologies that involve clear rules of merit and deservingness (Goode, Keefer, & Molina, 2014), to prefer organizational structures that are hierarchical and objects with clear physical boundaries in pictures of brand logos (Cutright, 2012; Friesen, Kay, Eibach, & Galinsky, 2014), and even perceive more patterns in fuzzy pictures (Whitson & Galinsky, 2008). A considerable body of emerging research, then, shows that structure seeking can be motivated by low personal control, and is robust to a wide range of social, political, and ideological phenomena (for reviews, see Kay et al., 2009; Landau et al., 2015). Here, we seek to extend this literature by shedding new light on why, despite the intuitive appeal of the movement to "empower" workers through an easing of restriction, rules, and defined roles, employees may construe these initiatives

as sources of ambiguity, and thus find them to be aversive, troublesome, and even intolerable.

1.2. Structure seeking and ambiguity intolerance

Ambiguity is generally understood to involve an absence of guidance, certainty, or expectations (Bochner, 1965; Fox & Tversky, 1995, p. 585; Grant & Ashford, 2008; Knight, 1921; Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman, 1970). Though definitions can vary somewhat from economists, to psychologists and managerial scholars, all tend to converge on the notion that ambiguity necessarily implies a lack of structure. Economists, for example, suggest that an event is ambiguous when knowledge about the probability of an outcome is lacking, that is, when contingencies of actions are unclear (Fox & Tversky, 1995, p. 585; Knight, 1921). Psychologists similarly define ambiguity as a lack of information (McLain, 1993), and also as captured by events that cannot be "structured or categorized by the individual" (Budner, 1962, p. 30). The most common context in which organizational psychology scholars typically consider ambiguity – namely, role ambiguity – also captures this same set of structure violating attributes, ranging from unclear expectations and guidelines to a lack of clear action-outcome contingencies. For example, Van Sell and colleagues specifically defined role ambiguity as the degree to which "clear information is lacking regarding (i) expectations associated with a role, (ii) methods for fulfilling known role expectations and (iii) consequences of role performance" (Van Sell, Brief, & Schuler, 1981, p. 44). Ambiguous situations may be imposed or freely chosen. For example, organizations may introduce mandatory flextime program for all employees, or allow employees to choose whether they want to enroll in such programs. In both situations, such policies may lead to greater workplace ambiguity (e.g., unclear whether it is acceptable to telecommute to work today). However, ambiguous situations will elicit psychological reactance only if they also somehow restrict behavioral freedom (Brehm, 1966).

Ambiguity intolerance is the tendency to perceive ambiguous situations as sources of threat (Budner, 1962, p. 29). Those high on individual difference measures of ambiguity intolerance tend to judge a variety of phenomena in a fixed and rigid way, and prefer clear rules and expectations to social situations (including the workplace; Budner, 1962; Judge, Thoresen, Pucik, & Welbourne, 1999; Schere, 1982). Although ambiguity and lack of structure are conceptually similar, there are noted differences between structure-seeking and ambiguity intolerance. For example, in an empirical investigation of the discriminant validity of the Personal Need for Structure scale (PNS), Neubeerg and Newsom (1993) noted that although both PNS and ambiguity intolerance describe a preference for "simplicity and structure. . . the PNS scale is much better suited for the task of operationalizing. . . in a reliable, direct manner" a need for epistemic structure (p. 115). This suggests that the ambiguity intolerance construct may be broader than need for structure. For example, Bochner (1965) noted that ambiguity intolerance not only encompasses attributes similar to PNS such as "need for categorization," but also those that may be unrelated to structure seeking (e.g., "anxious," "aggressive," and "authoritarian"). Further, Thompson, Naccarato, Parker, and Moskowitz (2001, p. 20) noted that a "high PNS individual would prefer structure and clarity in most situations, with ambiguity and "grey areas" proving troublesome and annoying." Put simply, whereas ambiguity intolerance is only elicited in ambiguous situations, structure seeking can occur regardless of whether the situation is ambiguous or not. The fact that structure seeking and ambiguity intolerance occur under different situations further suggests that they may be independent and distinct processes. Finally, ambiguity intolerance refers to the tendency to feel threatened and uncomfortable in ambiguous situations. Although seeking structure and certainty

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