Journal of Environmental Psychology 36 (2013) 144–152

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Environmental Psychology

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jep

"My space": A moderated mediation model of the effect of architectural and experienced privacy and workspace personalization on emotional exhaustion at work

Gregory A. Laurence [a,*], Yitzhak Fried [b], Linda H. Slowik [c]

[a] School of Management, University of Michigan, Flint, 2151 Riverfront Center, 303 E. Kearsley St., Flint, MI 48502, USA
[b] Martin J. Whitman School of Management, Syracuse University, USA
[c] Department of Psychology, University of Detroit – Mercy, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online 27 July 2013

Keywords:
Workspace personalization
Privacy
Emotional exhaustion
Burnout

ABSTRACT

This research examined a model in which experience of privacy served as a mediator between architectural privacy and emotional exhaustion in the workplace and personalization of one's workspace served as a moderator, mitigating the adverse effect of low levels of experienced privacy at work on emotional exhaustion. The results generally supported our hypotheses by indicating that in its role as a mediator, experience of privacy is initially affected by architectural privacy and its effect on emotional exhaustion is contingent on (moderated by) personalization of the employee's personal work area (i.e., quantity of personal items in one's work area). As expected, higher personalization at work reduced the adverse effect of the experience of low levels of privacy on emotional exhaustion. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

1. Introduction

Emotional exhaustion is the key component of the construct of burnout (Grant & Sonnentag, 2010; Maslach & Jackson, 1981). It is a syndrome under which individuals feel that their emotional resources are depleted, a feeling that manifests itself through physical fatigue and the experience of feeling psychologically and emotionally "drained" (Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Shirom, 1989; Zohar, 1997). There is ample evidence indicating that when employees experience emotional exhaustion they tend to respond negatively by showing declines in such outcomes as job performance, organizational citizenship behaviors, or customer service, as well as increases in absenteeism, turnover, and physical health risks (see e.g., Cropanzano, Rupp, & Byrne, 2003; Firth & Britton, 1989; Grant & Sonnentag, 2010; Halbesleben & Buckley, 2004; Melamed, Shirom, Toker, Berliner, & Shapira, 2006; Taris, 2006). There is also ample evidence to support the notion that emotional exhaustion is affected by adverse conditions at work (e.g., high role ambiguity or overload) or the work environment (e.g., strained interpersonal relationships at work) that place constraints on employees' abilities to function successfully at work (Fritz & Sonnentag, 2005; Grant & Sonnentag, 2010; Halbesleben, & Buckley, 2004; Jahncke, Hygge, Halin, Green, & Dimberg, 2011). However, there is a need for a deeper understanding as to how contemporary conditions in the work environment may affect the experience of emotional exhaustion, and what factors might mitigate or buffer this experience (Grant & Sonnentag, 2010).

In the present study we aim to close the gap on these issues by investigating how the experience of privacy at work (associated with architectural privacy) is related to emotional exhaustion, and how personalization of one's workspace moderates the relationship between these variables. We theorize that low architectural privacy (i.e., not having a traditional office with four walls and a door) contributes to low experience of privacy and that this low experience of privacy has the strongest negative effect on emotional exhaustion when the amount of personalization is low rather than high.

2. Privacy in the workplace

Privacy has been discussed as a process of information control, as the regulation of interactions with others, and as freedom from control by others (cf., Altman, 1975; Kelvin, 1973; and see Newell, 1995; Stone & Stone, 1990 for reviews). Of these approaches, Altman's (1975) more comprehensive definition, focusing on privacy as a dialectic, optimizing process, seems most useful in the organizational context. At the core of Altman's definition of privacy

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 810 424 5527.
E-mail address: glaurenc@umflint.edu (G.A. Laurence).

0272-4944/$ – see front matter © 2013 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.
http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2013.07.011

are the notions of "selective control of access to the self or to one's group" (1975: 18) and of privacy as "a central regulatory process by which a person (or group) makes himself more or less accessible and open to others" (1975: 3). Because privacy is a regulatory process, when individuals gain a desired level of control over access by others to their selves, they are able to attain an optimum level of privacy. In many ways, the organizational context requires individuals to make themselves available to others, though certain mechanisms in organizational life can be expected to help employees regulate the amount of access others have to them.

3. Architectural privacy and the experience of privacy

The configuration of physical factors that contribute to individuals' establishing and maintaining control over their accessibility to others is likely to contribute to the level of privacy experienced by any individual at work (Altman, 1975; Elsbach & Pratt, 2007; Oldham & Fried, 1987). Overall, one can expect that individuals who work in offices that are architecturally secluded are likely to experience the highest levels of privacy (Elsbach & Pratt, 2007; Kelvin, 1973; Oldham & Fried, 1987; Robson, 2008). The highest level of architectural privacy is expected to be associated with working in a traditional office with a door and 4 opaque walls that stretch to the ceiling. This is because this type of architectural privacy helps protect employees against distracting noise and helps to reduce uncontrolled visual exposure to others. This contributes to a reduced experience for the focal employee of being monitored and/or having their private conversations compromised, and helps control interpersonal interferences (interactions) from others (e.g., Bentham, 1995; Botan, 1996; Elsbach & Pratt, 2007; Fried, 1990; Kelvin, 1973; Kupritz, 1998; Lyon, 2006; Maher & von Hippel, 2005; Robson, 2008), contributing to the experience of high privacy. In contrast, in workspaces that are not architecturally secluded (i.e., not a traditional office with four opaque walls and a door), control over visual, acoustic, and interpersonal interferences is limited, contributing to the experience of low privacy (Archea, 1977; Kupritz, 1998; Smith-Jackson & Klein, 2009).

Previous literature (cf., Brookes & Kaplan, 1972; Oldham & Brass, 1979; Riland & Falk, 1972; Sundstrom, Burt, & Kamp, 1980; Sundstrom, Town, Brown, Forman, & McGee, 1982) has provided evidence that architectural factors are positively related to employees' experience of privacy at work. However, there is a paucity of research as to how the experience of privacy associated with architectural privacy affects employee reactions (e.g., emotional exhaustion), and how these reactions may be mitigated by contextual factors (e.g., workspace personalization). In this study we aim to close the gap in our understanding in this area by testing a moderated mediation model including the variables of architectural privacy, experienced privacy, workspace personalization, and emotional exhaustion. The first part of this model, based on the discussion above, concerns the relationship between architectural privacy and experienced privacy, as follows:

H1. *Architectural privacy (associated with having a traditional office with four opaque walls and a door) will be positively related to experience of privacy.*

4. Experience of privacy and emotional exhaustion

Having described how experience of privacy derives from architectural privacy, and having described privacy as related to control over information flows about and access to the self, we turn now to describing the expected impact of experienced privacy on emotional exhaustion. Considering the role of control broadly, research focusing on the Job Demands-Control model (Karasek, 1979) has indicated that control over various aspects of the job is negatively related to emotional exhaustion. For example, Fernet, Guay, and Senècal (2004) showed that when levels of control at work, or job control, are high, the emotional exhaustion and depersonalization aspects of burnout are lessened. Similarly, Grandey, Fisk, and Steiner (2005), in a study of employees with customer service responsibilities, and Rafferty, Friend, and Landsbergis (2001) showed that control as reflected in job autonomy and skill discretion were negatively related to emotional exhaustion. Together, this line of research indicates that higher levels of control at work can be associated with decreased levels of emotional exhaustion. Extending this line of reasoning, we would argue that the degree to which an employee feels as though they experience privacy at work, and thus the degree to which they feel they are able to exercise control over the information about them that others have access to, and to control the access that others have to them as individuals, their levels of emotional exhaustion should similarly be reduced.

The effect of experienced privacy on emotional exhaustion can additionally be theorized on the basis of Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989). According to COR theory, inadequate resources to meet work demands are likely to strain individuals' emotional resources, and in turn, contribute to higher emotional exhaustion (Hobfoll, 1988, 1989). When the experience of privacy (caused by architectural privacy) is low, people will also experience a lack of adequate resources to pursue their work, resulting in adverse reactions (e.g., see review by Elsbach & Pratt, 2007). More specifically, when people experience their work environment to be low on privacy, it enhances the pressure on them to divide their mental attention between pursuing work assignments and handling the distractions, interferences, and feelings of being monitored that are associated with low experience of privacy (Bentham, 1995; Botan, 1996). This need to divide attention between work and non-work related issues is likely to tax people's mental ability, resulting in increased emotional exhaustion over time (cf., Cohen, 1980; Leroy, 2009; McGrath, 1976; Wright & Cropanzano, 1998).

To illustrate, constant or pervasive monitoring by superiors or co-workers, which seems more likely to occur in low privacy environments, is likely to result in employees feeling that they have to be more on guard or that they cannot act as freely as they might otherwise (e.g., Archea, 1977). Importantly, to connect to the discussion on control above, highly monitored employees are also likely to feel as though they lack control over others' access to information about themselves and how they are behaving at work. Thus, they may feel that they have to devote more of their energy to maintaining the appearance of diligence, enthusiasm, or professionalism that they expect their supervisor or co-workers are looking for. The lack of architectural privacy that causes employees to feel that they are being observed reduces control and may lead to employees exerting energy, concentration, emotional, and intellectual resources on "looking the part" (Archea, 1977; Elsbach & Pratt, 2007). This greater exertion of mental resources reflects these individuals' feeling that they are held accountable by their supervisors and peers who can observe them, and who may also choose to report their behaviors to others who are not in a position to observe them. Constant monitoring by the supervisor, or by co-workers, which is easier in situations of low architectural privacy, can thus be seen as one example of the type of stressful event that has been shown to be associated with emotional exhaustion (Lee & Ashforth, 1996; Maslach & Jackson, 1981).

In sum, we argue that emotional exhaustion is likely to increase when the experience of privacy decreases, because employees will experience diminished levels of control over access by others to information about themselves and because employees will need to simultaneously spend time and energy pursuing their work and