



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Behavior Therapy and Experimental Psychiatry

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

Effects of acceptance-based coping on task performance and subjective stress

Naoko Kishita^{a,*}, Hironori Shimada^b^a Graduate School of Human Sciences, Waseda University, 2-579-15 Mikajima, Tokorozawa-city, Saitama 359-1192, Japan^b Faculty of Human Sciences, Waseda University, Tokorozawa, Japan

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 3 October 2009

Received in revised form

7 August 2010

Accepted 25 August 2010

Keywords:

Acceptance-based coping

Control-based coping

Job control

Stress management

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the interactive effects of acceptance-based coping and job control on task performance, subjective stress, and perceived control. Forty-eight undergraduate and graduate students first participated in brief educational programs based on either acceptance or control coping strategies. They then participated in a 30-min high workload task under either high or low job control conditions. The results demonstrated a significant interactive effect of acceptance-based coping and job control on perceived control and task performance. No such effect was found for subjective stress. We conclude that to improve employees' perceived control and job performance, there should be an increase not only in job control through work redesign, but also in psychological acceptance.

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1. Introduction

High job demands, along with little job control, are considered to be a serious combination of work-related stressors. Kivimaki et al., (2002) conducted a 10-year prospective cohort study of initially healthy workers; their findings revealed that those who experienced high job demands coupled with little job control had twice the risk of death from cardiovascular disease, compared with people who did not work under such stressors.

The job demand–control model (Karasek, 1979) focuses on two dimensions found in the work environment—job demand and job control—and hypothesizes that “providing people control over their work serves to improve stress-related outcomes” (Bond & Bunce, 2001, p. 290). Job demand refers to control over the work process, that is, the ability to make decisions and the opportunity to exercise a degree of control over the work to be accomplished (Fernet, Guay, & Senecal, 2004, p. 41). Moreover, it is considered one of the most important dimensions in the work environment to improve mental health, job satisfaction, and performance (e.g., Fernet et al., 2004; Flynn & James, 2009). According to this model, it is suggested that even in cases where job demands are not easily reduced, it is still possible to maintain employees' mental health by increasing job control (e.g., Karasek, 1979). Thus, work redesign interventions aimed at increasing employees' perceived control are likely to improve stress and health-related outcomes in the workplace. Although the effects of such interventions have been demonstrated

(Bond & Bunce, 2001), work redesign approaches directly targeting organizational structures may meet with considerable resistance, depending on the organizational environment. Previous studies of industrial psychology have maintained that both the design of work (e.g., having job control) and employees' individual characteristics (e.g., active coping, locus of control) contribute to workers' mental health and job performance (e.g., De Rijl, Le Blanc, Schaufeli, & de Jong, 1998; Parkes, 1991). Evidently, these factors do not operate in a vacuum; they interact with one another. The current state of knowledge suggests that certain individual characteristics (e.g., coping style, explanatory style, proactive personality, and self-efficacy) could influence an individual's psychological adjustment to the constraints of the work environment (Salanova, Peiro, & Schaufeli, 2002; Schaubroeck, Jones, & Xie, 2001); therefore, it can be assumed that some people would be more effective than others at managing job control (Fernet et al., 2004). De Rijl et al., (1998) have examined the role of such individual characteristics and reported that the active coping style (i.e., a concrete action undertaken to solve a problem) moderates the job demands–job control interaction in the prediction of emotional exhaustion. Given the strong empirical support for job control, treatments for health-related outcomes in the workplace, which enhance the job control component, are most likely to produce clinically significant and meaningful results. For this reason, we suggest that by identifying the effective intervention, which has an effect on increasing the job control at the individual level and not organizational level, we will find important implications for developing effective stress management programs in the workplace.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +81 80 3404 9092; fax: +81 4 2947 6824
E-mail address: sun_village@suou.waseda.jp (N. Kishita).

1.1. Acceptance and job control

Bond and Bunce (2003) have suggested that acceptance, an individual characteristic, is a primary determinant of mental health and behavioral effectiveness, and that it plays an important role in the context of stress management in the workplace. The process of acceptance involves the willingness to experience psychological events (i.e., thoughts, feelings, and sensations) without changing, avoiding, or otherwise controlling those events (Hayes, Wilson, Gifford, Follette, & Strosahl, 1996). Bond and Bunce (2003) explain the underlying mechanism of the interaction effect of acceptance and job control as follows: Those people who show higher acceptance are better able to notice the degree to which they have control in a given situation, and because they are not very avoidant, they may, through trial and error, learn how they can most effectively use the control that they do have to promote their mental health. Through this same trial and error mechanism, individuals can also maximize their work performance. Bond and Bunce (2003) employed a two-wave panel study designed to examine acceptance's moderating role in the well-established relationship between job control and occupational health and productivity. Their results indicated that acceptance interacts with job control to affect these two outcomes, showing that higher levels of acceptance at Time 1 serve to increase the association between higher levels of job control at Time 1 and better mental health and productivity at Time 2. However, the causal relationship between enhanced acceptance and positive outcome is still an empirical matter.

Bond, Flaxman, and Bunce (2008) have conducted another intervention study, employing the quasi-experiment design, which focuses on the relationship between acceptance and job control. They have implemented the intervention through control-enhancing work reorganization, with the goal of improving employees' perceived control. In this study, the level of acceptance was treated as a personality variable rather than as an element that was manipulated through intervention. The results showed that in a call center, control-enhancing work reorganization improved employee mental health and reduced the number of days and occasions on which employees were absent; it was particularly successful among those employees who had higher levels of acceptance. Moreover, the findings suggested that these moderate intervention effects were mediated by job control, implying that individuals with high levels of acceptance perceived greater job control through the work reorganization intervention, which led to successful outcomes. This is consistent with the conceptualization of acceptance, which hypothesizes that a high level of acceptance allows for "the transfer of scarce attentional resources from controlling internal events to observing one's environment and deciding on and completing the right course of action for goal attainment" (Bond & Bunce, 2003, p. 1057).

According to a previous series of studies (Bond & Bunce, 2003; Bond et al., 2008), it is clear that increasing job control through work reorganization is useful in decreasing employee stress, as well as for improving their job performance; however, it is particularly successful among those who have higher levels of acceptance. On the basis of their research, Bond et al. (2008) have suggested that before increasing job control through work reorganization, it may be helpful to first improve acceptance. Thus, benefits from job control will be complemented by acceptance and will lead to better mental health and improved performance. However, in previous studies, only levels of job control have been manipulated by researchers, thereby relegating acceptance to the status of a static individual characteristic. Coping is an adaptive process that mediates between stress and its long-term effects on mental and physical health and functioning. Further, since ACT is based on functional contextualism, such functional processes should be

studied within the context of ongoing stimulus–behavior relations, but no study has yet been conducted that experimentally manipulated acceptance to reveal the possible interactive relationship between acceptance and job control. By presenting empirical evidence to support this possibility and by providing direct evidence of acceptance as a moderator of the relationship between job control opportunities and employee well-being outcomes, we hope to expand the application of our findings to workplace management strategies.

1.2. Purpose of this study

The purpose of this study was to examine the interactive effects of acceptance-based coping and job control on task performance and subjective stress when participating in a high workload task. We prepared instructions that were based on ACT (i.e., acceptance-based coping), as well as instructions drawn from control-based coping strategies (for the purpose of comparison). The control-based coping strategies are intended to link various actions to the control and modification of unwanted thoughts and feelings. In an acceptance-based approach, the user's intention to control emotions, thoughts, cravings, or bodily states is itself targeted for change, and clients are taught to think thoughts as mere thoughts, and to make behavioral choices that are congruent with valued life changes rather than avoiding private experiences (Hayes, Bissett et al., 1999). Because control-based coping is the theoretical opposite of ACT, we used these instructions for a comparison group in order to examine and compare the parameters' relative effects on task performance and subjective stress.

1.3. Hypotheses

On the basis of a theory supported by previous studies and by the research presented above, we predicted the following hypotheses. 1) The interactive effects between coping strategies (i.e., acceptance-based or control-based coping) and job control (i.e., high or low control) on perceived control would be significant, indicating higher levels of perceived control in individuals in the high job control condition after receiving the acceptance-based coping instructions. 2) As a result, such an interaction effect would be effective on subjective stress, motivation, and task performance. We predicted that participants in high job control conditions, after receiving the acceptance-based coping instructions, would experience less subjective stress and exhibit higher motivation and task performance as compared to those in the other three conditions (i.e., low job control condition after receiving the acceptance-based coping instructions and both high and low job control conditions after receiving the control-based coping instructions).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Forty-eight undergraduate and graduate students (10 males, 38 females; age range: 18–27 years; mean age = 21.2 years, $SD = 1.8$ years) who had no knowledge of the aims of the research participated in the study. Participants were randomly assigned to conditions in a 2×2 experimental design, with job control (high control, low control) and coping strategy (acceptance-based, control-based) as a between-groups factor.

2.2. High workload task

Participants were required to complete all the tasks within 30 min, which was impossible to achieve, and participating in tasks

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