

Non-Financial Employment Commitment and the Social Desirability Bias

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Abstract

Non-financial employment commitment (NFEC) is the intrinsic motivation for working. This kind of commitment has some important implications for actual behavior in the workplace. The present research aimed to examine if the measurement of NFEC is biased by social desirability. The sample consisted of 238 full-time workers. Two versions of the lottery question, which asks whether individuals would continue to work if there were no economic reasons to do so, were used to evaluate NFEC. Results indicate that the measurement of NFEC is biased by social desirability. A similar conclusion was already presented by Snir and Harpaz (2002), but the merit of the present research is the use of a social desirability scale in place of the somewhat problematic projective question technique, and a new alternative version of the lottery question, in addition to the classic version.

Keywords : Non-financial employment commitment, the social desirability bias, intrinsic work motivation.

Introduction

Warr (1982) refers to the intrinsic motivation for working as non-financial employment commitment (NFEC). This kind of commitment has some important implications for actual behavior in the workplace. For example, Warr and Lovatt (1977) found that individuals in every age group with high NFEC were significantly more likely to be employed six months after closure of their plant than were respondents with low NFEC. NFEC is also significantly predictive of the negative psychological impact of unemployment, with high scorers on NFEC suffering more than low scorers when unemployed (Stafford, Jackson, & Banks, 1980; Warr, 1978). Hence, people with a high level of NFEC are likely to be suitable candidates for participation in occupational training/reemployment programs. On the other hand, when unemployed or retired, they may need more psychological counseling than others. A useful indicator of NFEC is the classic lottery question, which was first posed by Morse and Weiss (1955) in their study on the function and meaning of work. It envisages a situation where the economic rationale or necessity of working is removed, so as to set the stage for assessing a person's non-financial commitment to work.

It is phrased thus: Imagine that you won a lottery or inherited a large sum of money and could live comfortably for the rest of your life without working. What would you do about work? (1) I would stop working, (2) I would continue to work at the same job, (3) I would continue to work, but under different conditions (e.g., Harpaz, 1989; Snir & Harpaz, 2002). Answers 2 and 3 are both considered an expression of a desire to continue working, so they are sometimes combined (e.g., Harpaz, 2002; Quinn & Staines, 1979; Tausky, 1969; Weaver, 1997). However, some suggest that the dichotomous classification of a desire to continue/stop working is misleading. For example, Paulsen (2008) differentiates a specific NFEC to the present job, as manifested by choosing answer 2, from a general NFEC which is not tied to a certain job, as manifested by favoring answer 2 *or* answer 3 over answer 1. Snir (submitted for publication) claims that for full-time workers, whereas answer 1 represents a low NFEC level and answer 2 a high level, answer 3 may express a weaker commitment to work than answer 2, as manifested in the vague term 'working under different conditions,' and thus represents an intermediate NFEC level.

Social desirability is individuals' tendency to respond to questions in such a way as to present themselves in socially acceptable terms, in order to gain the approval of others (Edwards, 1957). It is a common source of bias affecting the validity of research findings in social sciences (King & Bruner, 2000; Nederhof, 1985). A given measure is more conducive than others to social desirability responding if it has high face validity, and the measured trait or behavior pattern is well understood by the general public and has almost exclusively negative associations (Furnham, 1986). The degree of NFEC in Israel has proven to be high: at least 85 percent of respondents in various samples indicated that they would continue working (e.g., Harpaz, 1988, 2002; Shamir, 1990). Hence, expressing a desire to stop working might have negative associations. Moreover, the lottery question has relatively high face validity; and the attitude that it measures, NFEC, is likely to be well understood by most people.

Indeed, in a relatively recent Israeli study Snir and Harpaz (2002) found that the measurement of NFEC was biased. While 85.8 percent of the respondents in the high social desirability condition, as reflected through the classic lottery question, favored work continuation, only 73.4 percent of the respondents did so in the low social desirability condition, in which a projective question technique was used (i.e., asking a respondent how most people would act if they won the lottery, as an indirect means to reveal his/her true NFEC level). Arguably, when asked a projective question about how most people would act in a certain situation, a respondent may indeed refer to other people rather than to him/herself. The present study set out to tackle this issue by a different technique, namely assessing the relation between one's level of social desirability and its NFEC. Since expressing a desire to stop working might have negative associations in the Israeli society, it is assumed:

Hypothesis 1: Those who would continue to work at the same job after a hypothetical win will have a higher level of social desirability than those who would stop working and those who would continue to work under different conditions.

The exact nature of working 'under different conditions' (see answer 3 to the classic lottery question) is unclear. For some, working under different conditions may mean changing the existing job for a more suitable one, or perhaps opening one's own business. However, to assess the level of NFEC, the number of desired weekly work hours after a hypothetical win must be highlighted. Accordingly, in order to examine whether the measurement of NFEC is indeed biased by social desirability, a new alternative version of the lottery question (Snir, submitted for publication), was also used. In this version a different choice of answers to the lottery question was offered: (1) I would stop working; (2) I would continue to work a total of ___ weekly hours. The advantage of this over the classic version of the lottery question is the direct reference to the number of desired weekly work hours after a hypothetical win. Again, since expressing a desire to stop working might have negative associations in the Israeli society, it is assumed:

Hypothesis 2: NFEC, as measured by the number of desired weekly work hours after a hypothetical win, will be positively related with social desirability.

Method

Sample and Procedure

A convenience sampling technique was used. Respondents were recruited through intermediaries, that is, undergraduate students, in partial fulfillment of their research seminar requirements, were instructed to ask their acquaintances or relatives who work full-time (i.e., at least 35 weekly hours) to participate in the study. Respondents had to complete two questionnaires on work-related attitudes and behaviors, each taking an average of 15 minutes. The second questionnaire was administered four weeks after the first. Respondents were assured complete anonymity and confidentiality by means of an internal coding system. The sample consisted of 238 Israeli full-time workers, of whom 35.9 percent were men and 64.1 percent were women; 46.0 percent of the respondents were married. Mean age was 33.7 years ($SD=10.5$) and mean education level was 14.3 years ($SD=2.4$). Ninety-eight respondents (41.2 percent of the sample) answered the second questionnaire as well.

Measures

NFEC. NFEC was measured by two versions of the lottery question: the classic version, which was used in the first questionnaire; and the version probing the number of desired weekly work hours after a hypothetical win, which was used in the second questionnaire (see Introduction). In this new alternative version of the lottery question, answers of respondents who claimed that they would stop working were recorded as "0".

Social desirability. The M-C 2 is a short 10-item version of the Marlowe-Crowne social desirability scale (Strahan & Gerbasi, 1972). A sample item (#4) states: "I am always courteous, even to people who are disagreeable." The respondent has to answer each item in a dichotomic format (yes/no answers, which are coded 1/0, respectively). Answers to items 6-10 are reverse-coded. Range of scores on the M-C 2 is 0-10, where a higher score indicates a higher level of social desirability. Kuder-Richardson reliability coefficients for the M-C 2 were 0.62 in a sample of male students and 0.75 in a sample of female students (Strahan & Gerbasi, 1972). In the present study social desirability was measured in the first questionnaire by items 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10 of the M-C 2; hence the range of scores was 0 to 6.

Results

19.38 percent of the respondents indicated that they would continue working at the same job, and 70.04 percent indicated that they would continue working but under different conditions. Thus, a majority of respondents (89.42 percent) favored work continuation in the event of winning the lottery.

The mean of social desirability was 2.99 ($SD=1.59$). The average of desired weekly work hours after a hypothetical win was 20.90 ($SD=15.80$).

Hypothesis 1 was confirmed. A one-way ANOVA, in which social desirability was the dependent variable, revealed a significant effect for NFEC ($F(2,224)=3.14, p<0.05$). Means and standard deviations of social desirability in the three categories of the classic lottery question are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Means and standard deviations of social desirability in the three categories of the classic lottery question

NFEC level	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Those who would stop working	24	2.46	1.86
Those who would continue to work but under different conditions	159	2.95	1.53
Those who would continue to work at the same job	44	3.43	1.59

A Contrast test ($t(224)=2.43, p<0.01$) showed that those who would continue to work at the same job after a hypothetical win had a higher level of social desirability than those who would stop working. A second Contrast test ($t(224)=1.79, p<0.05$) showed their social desirability level to be higher also than that of those who would continue to work under different conditions. *Hypothesis 2* was also confirmed. NFEC, as measured by the number of desired weekly work hours after a hypothetical win, was positively correlated with social desirability ($r=0.25, p<0.01, N=94$). Moreover, according to the results of a hierarchical regression analysis (that are available from the author upon request) the additional contribution of social desirability to the prediction of NFEC beyond the contribution of age, gender, years of education, and marital status (married/unmarried) was positive and significant.

Discussion

The study's findings of a high level of NFEC in Israel are consistent with past research (e.g., Harpaz, 1988, 2002; Shamir, 1990). However, the measurement of NFEC is found to be biased by social desirability. A similar conclusion was already presented by Snir and Harpaz (2002), but the merit of the present study is the use of a social desirability scale in place of the somewhat problematic projective question technique, and a new alternative version of the lottery question, in addition to the classic version. The advantage of the new over the classic version of the lottery question is the direct reference to the number of desired weekly work hours after a hypothetical win. The fact that the classic version was used in the first questionnaire, and the new version in the second questionnaire, lessens concerns of common method bias (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003).

All in all, the results indicate that to assess the actual NFEC level, some means of detecting or reducing the social desirability bias should be applied (e.g., using a hierarchical regression analysis to examine the additional contribution of research variables to the prediction of NFEC beyond the contribution of social desirability). The present study has some limitations. First, since its data were gathered through a convenience sampling technique, we cannot generalize its finding to a population of full-time workers. In order to have high external validity, future research on this topic should rely on probability sampling. Second, this study deals with a highly hypothetical situation - winning the lottery. Since it is very unlikely that a person will experience a sudden increase in wealth, it is a mistake to surmise that individuals' answers to the lottery question will be directly predictive of actual post-award behavior (Warr, 1982). Research on behavior of lottery winners (e.g., Arvey, Harpaz, & Liao, 2004) would make a substantial contribution to further advancing our knowledge about NFEC.

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