WORK LONELINESS AND EMPLOYEE PERFORMANCE

HAKAN OZCELIK
College of Business Administration
California Sacramento University, Sacramento
6000 J Street, Sacramento, CA, 95819-6088

SIGAL BARSADE
Wharton School of Business
University of Pennsylvania

ABSTRACT

We studied employee loneliness, a prevalent workplace emotion that has received little attention within the organizational behavior field. Results supported our hypothesized model where greater loneliness led to poorer task, team role and relational performance as mediated by lowered affective commitment and to a lesser extent increased surface acting.

INTRODUCTION

Loneliness, defined as an unpleasant emotional condition where a person feels estranged from or rejected by others and feels deprived of secure and close relationships in his/her social environment (Rook, 1984), is an emotion that is particularly relevant to work. This is because loneliness is an inherently interpersonal and relational emotion (Weiss, 1989) and the quality of employees' interpersonal relationships has been shown to have a significant impact on how they perceive and connect with their organizations (Carmeli, 2009). Drawing on a number of compelling arguments from evolutionary psychology, recent studies have argued that people have an innate, primary drive to form social bonds and mutual caring commitments (Lawrence and Nohria, 2002) and they are adversely influenced when these social bonds are severed (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). Establishing and maintaining social bonds at work, however, may not be easy, for reasons that are both personal (Hazan and Shaver, 1990) and due to the structure of organizations (Pratt & Dutton, 2000). Indeed, the findings of a recent study suggest that about 53 % of the people in the U.S. felt intensely lonely in their public lives (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Brashears, 2006). Despite the pervasiveness of loneliness in work life and its potential linkages with important organizational outcomes, the existing research in organizational behavior provides us with little theoretical or empirical insights about why and how employees' feelings of loneliness could influence their job attitudes and performance. The aim of this study is to shed light on this important yet unexplored workplace phenomenon.

LONELINESS AT WORK

There is substantial evidence from both the social psychology and neuropsychology literatures showing that loneliness is an emotion that reflects a fundamental but also transient human motivational state, very much like hunger, thirst or pain; and that the traditional conception of loneliness as a form of depression, shyness or poor social skills is inaccurate (Cacioppo and Patrick, 2008). Loneliness is not a disposition, but consists of a person's feelings

1

about the adequacy and quality of his or her relationships in particular situations and thus differs from more often examined employee dispositional personality traits such as negative affectivity, introversion, and disagreeableness.

As with other workplace emotions (Barsade and Gibson, 2007) loneliness is predicted not only to influence how employees feel, but also their level of workplace performance. Specifically, as loneliness is a feeling that involves estrangement and alienation from others in the social environment, we predict that dealing with this estrangement and lack of security will trigger both attentional deficits and relational withdrawal from the work place, leading to lowered performance.

Attentional Mechanisms Explaining the Loneliness-Performance Relationship

Work loneliness is likely to raise self-evaluative and belongingness concerns as well as concerns about the possibility of being stigmatized if one's loneliness is revealed (Jones, 1982). Perlman & Joshi (1989) found that within North American society the norms of self-reliance can cause lonely people to feel they should deal with their own dilemma without burdening others with their problems. They also argue that many lonely people may not mention their sense of isolation because they feel others will be unable to help them alleviate their discomfort. These views suggest that, when employees experience work loneliness, they are likely to avoid the possible stigmas associated with feeling lonely at work and take on a more defensive approach in their interactions with other coworkers. This could lead to surface acting, a type of emotional regulation in which people hide or mask what they feel and modify their emotional expressions in a way that is inconsistent with their actual feelings (Hochschild, 1983). Previous research suggests that self-regulation of emotions can distract an employee's attention away from task completion and team relational contributions (e.g., Muraven and Baumeister, 2000). Thus, we predicted that work loneliness will be negatively related to employee performance, and this relationship will be mediated by surface acting.

Relational Mechanisms Explaining the Loneliness-Performance Relationship

Loneliness, because of its inherently relational nature, is expected to not only inform employees' individual attention and cognition, but also how they feel about the more social and relational aspects of their work environment. Because they feel more estranged and less connected to coworkers, lonelier employees will be more likely to experience a lack of belongingness at work, thus decreasing their affective commitment to their organizations. Affective commitment refers to an employee's emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in his or her organization through such feelings as affection, warmth, and belongingness which lead to a rewarding work experience (Meyer and Allen, 1997). Feeling lonely and disconnected from other organizational members can make the work experience less psychologically rewarding and decrease the employees' feelings of attachment and leading to lowered affective commitment to their organizations. Drawing from a social exchange perspective (Thibaut and Kelly, 1959), we also suggest that lowered affective commitment will also occur due to lesser feelings of obligation on the part of lonelier employees. As people are lonely because they lack their *desired* connection with other people, employees who feel lonely among their co-workers will judge that their organization is not adequately meet their affiliation and social needs and will be less willing to emotionally invest themselves in their organization

through affective commitment. This then influences performance, as employees with greater affective commitment have been found to work harder and perform more effectively than those with weaker affective commitment (Bycio, Hackett, and Allen, 1995). Thus we predicted that work loneliness will be negatively related to an employee's job performance, and this relationship will be mediated by affective commitment.

METHOD

Sample

Our sample consisted of 672 employees and their 114 supervisors across 143 work team units in two organizations - a for-profit private company (Private Company) and a not-for-profit (public) organization (City Government). The public organization is a city government of a major metropolitan area (n= 476 employees; 81 supervisors in 99 work units). We collected our predictor variables at Time 1 at which point surveys were sent out to 661 employees in the City Government and to 297 employees in the Private Company. 468 or 71% of employees in the City Government and 193 or 65% of employees in the Private Company completed the Time 1 survey. All the employees who completed the Time 1 survey were asked to participate in the study at Time 2 six weeks later. Only participants who participated at both Time 1 and Time 2 were included in the study. Of employees who completed the Time 1 surveys, 391 employees in the City Government and 167 employees in the Private Company completed the survey, yielding a Time 2 response rate of 84% and 87%, respectively.

Supervisor surveys were completed for 555 out of 694 employees in the City Government (response rate = 80%) and for 223 out of 326 employees in the Private Company (response rate = 68%). Among the employees who completed both Time 1 and Time 2 surveys, supervisor surveys were completed for 342 out of 391 employees in the City Government (response rate = 88%) and 139 out of 167 employees in the Private Company (response rate = 83%).

The average age of the respondents who completed both Time 1 and Time 2 surveys was 43.3, ranging from 18 to 71 years. Average tenure within the organization was 8.12 years. Mean participant work experience was 21.92 years. Fifty five percent of participants were male and 44 % female (1% did not specify gender). The most frequently reported education level was having some college education or Associate in Arts (AA) degree (44.2 %), followed by bachelor's (30.2 %), high-school (16.9 %) and graduate degrees (8.7 %).

Design

We used a multiple rater, multiple measure design to most completely understand the loneliness phenomena. Work loneliness was rated through self-reports, supervisor ratings and work team unit member ratings. Our performance measures included task, team role, and relational performance. Task and team role performance were rated by the supervisor and relational performance was rated by the other members of the employee's work team unit. A work team unit was defined as a group of 3 or more employees who work together, interact with each other on a daily basis and have a shared immediate supervisor - such as a shift, department, or work-team. Based on this definition, all work team units within each organization that met this

criterion were invited to take part in this study. Work team unit size ranged from 3 to 15, with a mean of 5.04 (s.d.= 2.63) for the City Government and a mean of 4.77 (s.d.= 2.28) for the Private Organization.

We employed a lagged design for the study. At Time 1, participants completed loneliness, individual difference and demographic measures. Six weeks later, at Time 2, we conducted a second survey in which participants completed attitudinal and behavioral measures, as well as a co-worker survey rating the other members of their work unit. The median number of co-worker ratings within a work unit was 4 (Mean=4.58, s.d.=2.65). This co-worker survey included measures of perceived loneliness of each of the other work-unit members, as well as ratings of each of their work-unit team-member's relational performance. At Time 2, we also obtained supervisor ratings of their employees' task performance and loneliness.

Loneliness Measures

At Time 1 employee's loneliness at work was measured with the very widely used 20-item UCLA Loneliness scale (Russell, Peplau, and Cutrano, 1980). We modified the scale so as to be appropriate to the work setting. The scale included items such as: "I feel in tune with my co-workers" (reverse coded), "I lack companionship at my work", "There is no one I can turn to in this organization", "I do not feel alone in my organization" (reverse coded), and "I feel left out in this organization" (reverse coded). The reliability of this scale was high, with a Cronbach alpha of 0.94.

We also measured employees' work loneliness based on the observations of the other members of the employees' work team units and their supervisors. At Time 2, all employees in each work team unit and their supervisor were asked to rate each of their other work team unit members on the following item, "This coworker/employee seems to be lonely at work." This item was aggregated across the work team unit for each employee (ICC=.77).

RESULTS

When testing the study's hypotheses, we conducted separate regression analyses for the self-reported loneliness predictor variable and the co-worker rated loneliness predictor variable. Employees' education level, age, organizational tenure, and the number of months supervised by their current supervisor were included as controls in the analyses. We also controlled for the following four employee personality factors: extraversion, agreeableness, trait positive affectivity, and trait negative affectivity in the event that they are antecedents to loneliness, as well as to confirm that loneliness differs from these personality traits, and predicts performance outcomes above and beyond these traits. The results of the regression analyses we have conducted supported our hypothesized model where greater employee loneliness led to poorer task, team role and relational performance as mediated by lowered affective commitment and to a lesser extent increased surface acting.

DISCUSSION

This study is the first to empirically examine the influence of loneliness on employee work performance. While loneliness may be thought of as a private emotion, we find here that in employee work loneliness is also a social phenomenon, observable by an employee's coworkers,

4

and having a significant influence on employee work performance, both in direct tasks, as well as employee team member and team role effectiveness rated by both the employee's work unit members and supervisor. The mediation analyses indicated that from a co-worker's perspective on employee loneliness, the employee's affective commitment was found to be a more relevant mechanism mediating peer loneliness ratings and employees' team role and task performance. Thus for employees who are perceived to be lonely by coworkers, the affiliative interactions that are part of displays of affective commitment provided stronger and more negative cues for the co-workers about the overall quality of their relationship with the employee. This could lead to an increasing negative emotional spiral of loneliness (Hareli & Rafaeli, 2008), as coworkers of lonely employees may likely withdraw as a result of their (accurate) perception that the lonelier employees are less affectively committed, thus offering even less connection for the lonely employees. For self-ratings of employee loneliness, both affective commitment and surface acting mediated almost all performance outcomes.

In sum, the results indicated that an employee's work loneliness triggers emotional withdrawal from their organization, as reflected their increased surface acting and reduced affective commitment. The results also show that co-workers can recognize this loneliness and see it hindering team member effectiveness. Thus, a practical implication of our results is that management should not treat work loneliness as a private problem that needs to be individually resolved by employees who experience this emotion; but rather should consider it as an organizational problem that needs to be addressed both for the employees' sake and that of the organization.

This study contributes to variety of research domains. It increases our understanding of a workplace emotion that has received virtually no attention within the organizational domain, yet has significant effects on employee outcomes. More broadly it contributes to our growing, more nuanced understanding of emotions in organizational life, as well as the mechanisms through which they operate. In addition to highlighting the importance of emotional dynamics within job environments, these findings support a relational perspective in understanding the workplace, including an emerging relational job design perspective (Grant, 2007) emphasizing that the social context of work can significantly shape employees' behaviors.

REFERENCES

Barsade, S. G. & Gibson, D. E. (2007). Why does affect matter in organizations? **Academy of Management Perspectives**, 21: 36-59.

Baumeister,R.F.,& Leary, M.R. 1995.The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. **Psychological Bulletin**, 117: 497 –529.

Bycio, P., Hackett R., & Allen, J. (1995). Further assessments of Meyer & Allen's (1991) three-component model of organizational commitment. **Journal of Applied Psychology**, 9: 617-626.

Cacioppo, J. T., & Patrick, B. (2008). **Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection**. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

Carmeli A. (2009). High-quality relationships, individual aliveness and vitality, and job

performance at work. In N. Ashkanasy, W.J. Zerbe, and C.E.J. Hartel (Eds), **Research on Emotion in Organizations** (Vol. 5). Oxford, UK: Elsevier JAI Press.

Emerson, R. 1976. Social exchange theory. In A. Inkeles (Ed.), **Annual Review of Sociology**, vol. 2: 335-362. Palo Alto, CA: Annual Reviews.

Grant, A. M. (2007). Relational job design and the motivation to make a prosocial difference. **Academy of Management Review***, 32: 393-417.

Hareli, S., & Rafaeli, A. (2008). Emotion cycles: On the social influence of emotion in organizations. **Research in Organizational Behavior**, 28: 35-59.

Hazan, C., & Shaver, P.R. (1990). Love and work: An attachment theoretical perspective. **Journal of Personality and Social Psychology**, 59: 270–280.

Hochschild, A.R. (1983). **The Managed Heart.** Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Jones, W. H. (1982). Loneliness and social behavior. In L. A. Peplau & D. Perlman (Eds.), **Loneliness***: A Sourcebook of Current Theory, Research and Therapy*: 238-252. New York: John Wiley and Sons.

Lawrence, P. & Nohria, N. (2002). **Driven: How Human Nature Shapes Our Choices**. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

McPherson, J., Smith-Lovin, L., and Brashears, M. (2006). Social isolation in America: Changes in core discussion networks over two decades. **American Sociological Review***, 71(3): 353-375.

Meyer*, J. &* Allen, N. *(1997).* **Commitment in the Workplace***. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Muraven, M. & Baumeister, R. (2000). Self-regulation and depletion of limited resources: Does self-control resemble a muscle? **Psychological Bulletin***, 126(2): 247-259.

Perlman, D., & Joshi, P. (1989). The revelation of loneliness. In M. Hojat & R. Crandall (Eds.), **Loneliness: Theory, Research and Application***: 63-76. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Rook, K. (1984). Research on social support, loneliness, and social isolation: Toward an integration. **Review of Personality and Social Psychology**, 5: 239-264.

Russell, D., Peplau, A. & Cutrano, C. (1980). Concurrent and. discriminant validity evidence for the UCLA Loneliness Scale. **Journal of Personality and Social Psychology**, 39: 472-480.

Weiss, R. S. (1989). Reflections on the present state of loneliness research. In M. Hojat & R. Crandall (Eds.), **Loneliness: Theory, Research and Applications:** 51-56. California: Sage Publications.