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The relationships of age and length of service with job satisfaction: an examination of hotel employees in Thailand

Relationships
with job
satisfaction

745

Shah Jalal Sarker

School of Applied Statistics, University of Reading, Reading, UK

Alf Crossman

School of Management, University of Surrey, Guildford, Surrey, UK, and

Parkpoom Chinmeteeputuck

Novotel Lotus Hotel, Bangkok, Thailand

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Abstract *Earlier studies suggest age is positively associated with job satisfaction, while others use length of service, or tenure, as a predictor of job satisfaction levels. This article examines whether age and tenure are individual determinants of satisfaction, or whether there is an interaction between the two. The results indicate that employee age is not significantly associated with overall job satisfaction level, but that tenure is. There is also significant relationship between tenure and facets of satisfaction (job, pay and fringe benefits), but the effect of tenure on satisfaction is significantly modified by age.*

The search for an understanding of the causes of job satisfaction or dissatisfaction is an ongoing area of interest for social scientists and managers; the premise being that satisfied workers will be more productive and remain with the organization longer, whereas dissatisfied workers will be less productive and more inclined to quit. Early studies (Myers, 1934; Maslow, 1954; Herzberg *et al.*, 1959) concentrated on the importance of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and rewards towards satisfaction, but few paid adequate attention to the impact of demographic and occupational variables. More recent research has investigated differences in job satisfaction levels according to age (Ang *et al.*, 1993; Oshagbemi, 1998; Luthans and Thomas, 1989; Groot and Maassen van den Brink, 1999; Hickson and Oshagbemi, 1999) or tenure (Hickson and Oshagbemi, 1999; Oshagbemi (2000a). Studies that report on the impact of the interaction between age and tenure on job satisfaction are relatively few (Gibson and Klein, 1970; Bamundo and Kopelman, 1980; Lee and Wilber, 1985; Luthans and Thomas, 1989). Therefore, tenure and age need to be considered simultaneously for better understanding of their effect on the level of job satisfaction. This study of 323 Thai hotel employees was designed to assess



whether tenure is, by itself, associated with their higher degree of satisfaction or whether it is due to the aging process or the interaction between the two.

1. Literature review

One of the most comprehensive pieces of research into demographic variables and job satisfaction is that of Rhodes (1983) who, drawing on the findings of previous bivariate and multivariate studies, suggests a positive linear relationship between age and job satisfaction up to the age of 60. This suggests that initiatives to improve satisfaction levels will be only partially successful, as much depends on the age distribution of employees. Crow and Hartman (1995) focus on the importance of reducing dissatisfaction, as well as increasing satisfaction, in order to improve employee performance. However, they appear to ignore demographic and tenure variables and adopt a rather mechanistic and prescriptive approach by advocating a concentration on working conditions. A similar stance is taken by Tietjen and Myers (1998) who suggest task variety as a means of combating declines in worker performance and to increase satisfaction levels.

In their study of job satisfaction and motivation, Herzberg *et al.* (1959) identified a number of attitudinal factors concerning job satisfaction and motivation. The motivators relate to the work itself and represent sources of satisfaction at work, such as achievement, recognition, work itself, responsibility, advancement and growth, whereas the hygiene factors relate to the work environment as potential sources of dissatisfaction, such as company policy and administration, supervision, salary, interpersonal relations, working conditions, status and security.

The majority of studies on the relationship of age and job satisfaction have found some association between employee age and job satisfaction. Some (Herzberg *et al.*, 1957; Clark *et al.*, 1996) suggest that job satisfaction is U-shaped in age, with higher levels of morale among young workers but that this declines after the novelty of employment wears off and boredom with the job sets in. Satisfaction rises again in later life as workers become accustomed to their role. In contrast, other studies report a linear positive relationship based on age (Lee and Wilber, 1985; Hulin and Smith, 1965; Savery, 1996). In their study of accountants in Singapore, Ang *et al.* (1993) report a positive linear relationship between age and job satisfaction (except for one respondent group for which the relationship is curvilinear). Metle (1997) also reports a positive linear relationship in his study of Kuwait bank employees, as do O'Brien and Dowling (1981, p. 49), who suggest that the "influences associated with aging (e.g. higher income and more responsible jobs) increase job satisfaction". Similar findings are presented by Oshagbemi (1998, 2000b), and Hickson and Oshagbemi (1999), who provide evidence of a strong relationship between age and job satisfaction of university teachers; the findings suggest that "job

satisfaction decreases with age but at a decreasing rate" (Hickson and Oshagbemi, 1999, p. 541).

Explanations of the correlation between age and job satisfaction are mixed. These include limited career prospects at a certain age (Ang *et al.*, 1993); that older workers may be more tolerant and have developed coping strategies (Oshagbemi, 2000b) or that intrinsic motivators become less important as people grow older (Savery, 1996). The attention Bernal *et al.* (1999) draw to the weakness of age as a reliable predictor of job satisfaction is also worth noting; this suggests that other physiological variables associated with the aging process may have a more significant impact on satisfaction than is generally recognised.

Regarding tenure, the underlying assumption appears to be that dissatisfied workers resign while satisfied ones stay with the organization (Oshagbemi, 2000a; Hom and Griffeth, 1995). In a study of the effects of tenure on job satisfaction levels of university teachers, Oshagbemi (2000a) found tenure to be positively and significantly related to overall job satisfaction. This appears to bear out the findings of earlier research by Ronen (1978), who suggests that intrinsic satisfaction in a job is a major contributor to changes in the overall satisfaction of workers over time, where tenure is related to job satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Other explanations are that workers tend to adjust their work values to the conditions of the workplace, resulting in greater job satisfaction (Baldamus, 1961; Mottaz, 1987), or that workers who experience little responsibility, interest, recognition or achievement are more likely to experience dissatisfaction and leave the organization (Savery, 1996). Workers with longer service may experience higher satisfaction because they have found a job that matches their needs (Clark *et al.*, 1996), or find opportunities for promotion which might lead to higher job satisfaction (Kalleberg and Mastekaasa, 2001). However, longer tenure in a job may result in boredom and lower levels of satisfaction (Clark *et al.*, 1996) and this may be exacerbated by low job mobility and external labour market conditions (March and Simon, 1958; Hom and Kinicki, 2001; Trevor, 2001).

In their study of the combined effects of age and tenure on satisfaction, Gibson and Klein (1970) found evidence of a linear positive relationship between age and satisfaction and a linear negative relationship between tenure and satisfaction up to 12 years' tenure, after which it leveled out. Bamundo and Kopelman (1980) present evidence of a non-linear relationship between job satisfaction and tenure when moderated by age. The relationship between job satisfaction and tenure was also found to be non-linear, with increases in satisfaction up to the six to ten year period, after which it declined. In a study of supervisors, in which they controlled for tenure, Luthans and Thomas (1989) also found a curvilinear relationship with satisfaction highest among respondents in their 40s and lower for those in their 30s, 50s and 60s. Snyder and Deitrich (1992), who adopt the job

descriptive index of Smith *et al.* (1969), present evidence of a similar curvilinear relationship. While their findings seem to confirm those of Luthans and Thomas (1989), the authors draw attention to possible weaknesses in the methods which fail to make adequate provision for individual and situational differences, and the effects these may have on individual behaviour and attitudes.

The two areas that have attracted much attention in terms of their influence on job satisfaction are age and tenure, with research findings being mixed and largely inconclusive. Some studies indicate a relationship between these factors, but the shape of the relationship, linear (positive or negative) or curvilinear, varies. Most studies reported the relationship between age and job satisfaction and between tenure and job satisfaction separately without controlling for the effect tenure/age. This raises the question of whether tenure is, by itself, a determinant of higher job satisfaction or whether it is due to the aging process or the interaction between the two.

2. Research method

Five of the 44 "Group 1" luxury hotels on the Tourism Authority of Thailand list were randomly selected. The employee population of the five hotels was 2,566, from which a random sample of 420 was drawn and questionnaires distributed. While the sample cannot be guaranteed as representative, its distribution by staff category is proportionate to the population. A total of 350 (83 per cent) were returned, of which 27 were either incomplete or unusable. Therefore 323 (77 per cent) were valid and used for analysis. As the questionnaire was anonymous, the non-response bias could not be checked and we must acknowledge that non-responses could be least satisfied employees, which might affect the results. Although it could also be argued that those with something critical to say might be more inclined to respond.

The bivariate distribution of the respondents according to their age and tenure indicate a relationship between age and tenure (see Table I). The number of respondents decreases more rapidly with the increase of tenure than with age. It is also apparent that the overall job satisfaction increases according to age and tenure.

2.1. Data collection instrument

Each participant was asked to complete one self-administered questionnaire presented in Thai. The questionnaire was designed to collect information on nine facets of satisfaction for analysis and respondents were asked to respond on a five-point scale. Section one contained questions on job satisfaction, while in section two respondents were asked to provide socio-demographic and organisational status information for the purpose of sample categorisation and profiling. A pilot study was conducted to test the validity and reliability of the instrument.

Length of service group (years) Frequencies						Overall JS mean (SD)	Relationships with job satisfaction
Age group (years)	0-5	6-10	11-20	21+	All LoS groups frequency (%)		
< 25	75	1			76 (23.5)	3.309 (0.64)	749
25-34	111	32	2		145 (44.9)	3.378 (0.69)	
35-44	37	25	12	2	76 (23.5)	3.620 (0.53)	
45+	1	1	5	19	26 (8.0)	4.068 (0.49)	
All age groups – frequency (%)	224 (63.9)	59 (18.3)	19 (5.9)	21 (6.5)	323 (100)		
Overall JS mean (SD)	3.390 (0.66)	3.397 (0.58)	3.918 (0.40)	4.185 (0.51)		3.474 (0.66)	Table I. Distribution of respondents by age and length of service

Section one: job satisfaction. Each question was based on an aspect of the Herzberg *et al.* (1959) dual-factor theory and/or Smith *et al.* (1969). Questions 1 to 4 sought to measure the level of job satisfaction according to motivation factors and questions 5 to 9 in relation to the hygiene factors (see Table II).

Salary was divided into pay and fringe benefits, in order to ascertain the significance of the latter as a source of satisfaction. Similarly interpersonal relations were divided into two categories, colleagues and supervisors. The structure of this section differed from previous studies insofar as it considered satisfaction as a positive phenomenon; the anchors of the five-point scale were “most satisfied” and “least satisfied”. Consequently, there was no facility for dissatisfaction. However, as the purpose of this research was not to measure degrees of satisfaction and dissatisfaction, but rather to show how satisfaction increases or decreases according to demographic or tenure variables, this is not considered a major weakness. Furthermore, it is probable that dissatisfied respondents would have demonstrated their feelings by selecting the most negative option available to them. Indeed, if the “dissatisfied” and “very dissatisfied” were substituted for the “less satisfied” and “least satisfied” categories, the results would not be dissimilar (see Table III).

Motivation factors	Hygiene factors
(1) Current job	(5) Pay
(2) Achievement	(6) Fringe benefits
(3) Recognition	(7) Interpersonal relation with colleagues
(4) Personal growth	(8) Interpersonal relation with supervisors
	(9) Working conditions

Note: Reliability testing of the questionnaire gives a Cronbach Alpha value of 0.86 indicating that the instrument is reliable to measure job satisfaction

Table II.
Questions 1-9

Table III.
Summary statistics for
employee job
satisfaction

Facet of job satisfaction	Percentage of respondents at levels of job satisfaction		
	Most and very satisfied (5 and 4)	Satisfied (3)	Less and least satisfied (2 and 1)
Current job position	51.7	32.8	15.5
Achievement	57.0	39.0	4.0
Recognition	42.1	43.0	14.9
Personal growth	48.3	37.2	14.6
Pay	27.2	44.9	27.9
Fringe benefits	39.3	39.9	20.7
Interpersonal relation with colleagues	72.1	24.1	3.7
Interpersonal relation with supervisors	61.0	29.1	9.9
Working conditions	56.7	32.2	11.1

Section two: sample profile data. There were seven questions in this section to collect information about demographic details, such as age and tenure, as were necessary for any sub-group analysis, where appropriate.

2.2. Statistical methods

Bivariate frequency distribution of the respondents, according to the age and tenure, was presented. Descriptive statistics were computed to examine the overall job satisfaction levels across the different lengths of service and ages of the respondents. A two-way analysis of variance was performed to test the direct effect of tenure and age on the respondents' job satisfaction level and the interactive effect between the two variables. Investigations were also made on some facets of job satisfaction in addition to the overall job satisfaction.

First, unadjusted associations of tenure and age with the overall job satisfaction and some of its significant facets were shown via line diagrams. Second, a clustered bar chart was generated showing the nature of the relationships between tenure and overall job satisfaction, and between age and overall job satisfaction. Finally, to augment the interpretation of the ANOVA results, trivariate line diagrams were plotted among tenure, age and job satisfaction.

3. Respondent's profile

Table IV provides the background to the respondents in the study. There was a roughly even split between "front-stage" and "back-stage" employees, and the distribution across the operational areas, although organizational seniority/status were not recorded. The educational level of respondents is varied; but it is interesting to note that 56 per cent held either a diploma or bachelors degree; this might have caused skewed results but full details of the population were not available. Length of service in the hotel industry was not

Background info			Background info			Relationships with job satisfaction
	Frequency	%		Frequency	%	
<i>Age (years)</i>			<i>Marital status</i>			751
20 and below	18	5.6	Single	177	54.8	
21-25	81	25.1	Married	135	41.8	
26-30	82	25.4	Divorced	11	3.4	
31-35	49	15.2		323	100	
36-40	50	15.5	<i>Level of education</i>			
41-45	22	6.8	Below secondary	21	6.5	
46-50	10	3.1	Secondary school	90	27.9	
51 and over	11	3.4	Certificate	25	7.7	
(Mean 31.28)	323	100.0	Diploma	61	18.9	
			Bachelor degree	121	37.5	
<i>Gender</i>			Masters degree	5	1.5	
Male	131	40.6		323	100.0	
Female	192	59.4	<i>Staff category</i>			
	323	100.0	Food and beverage	127	39.3	
<i>Length of service (years)</i>			House keeping	35	10.8	
Less than 1	70	21.7	Sales/reservation	8	2.5	
1-3	84	26.0	Front of house	23	7.1	
4-6	100	31.0	Technical	46	14.2	
7-9	23	7.1	Others	84	26	
10-12	12	3.7		323	100.0	
13-15	3	0.9	<i>Responsibility</i>			
16-18	6	1.9	Front-stage	172	53.3	
19 or more	25	7.7	Back-stage	151	46.7	
(Mean 5.70)	323	100.0		323	100.0	

Table IV.
Summary of
respondent' profile
information

recorded; instead age was used as a proxy for this, which may not be wholly reliable.

The most significant feature is the distribution of age towards the lower end of the scale, just over half the respondents being between the ages of 21 and 30, this is in contrast to the research by Oshagbemi (1999, 2000a) which, as he acknowledges, was based on an older age distribution. The more balanced age distribution in this study allows us to assess whether age is as significant a factor in job satisfaction as other studies suggest. Likewise, the tenure distribution is towards the lower end of the scale; approximately 79 per cent of respondents had six years or less tenure, whereas approximately 59 per cent of academics in Oshagbemi's (1999) research fell into this tenure category.

The gender distribution of the respondents was predominantly female, with the roughly 60/40 female/male split; almost exactly the opposite of Oshagbemi's (1999, 2000a) sample. As far as the educational level of the respondents is concerned, 61 per cent were below degree level. While educational level was not reported in Oshagbemi's (1999, 2000a, b) research it would be reasonable to infer that the academics in his sample were all degree-holders. The split between "front-stage" (customer contact) and "back-stage" (non-customer contact) staff was roughly proportionate (Table IV).

4. Results and discussion

When age and tenure are considered separately the overall job satisfaction increases progressively with both (Table I). Overall job satisfaction and satisfaction with the current job, pay and fringe benefits increases monotonically throughout the whole range of age for which data are available (Figure 1). As far as tenure is concerned, there is a plateau in satisfaction with current job position, fringe benefits, pay, and with overall job up to the first decade of tenure. This is followed by a sustained rise in satisfaction levels regarding all of these. The highest rise in satisfaction was with fringe benefits for the 11-20 years tenure group (Figure 2).

The results of multivariate analyses are presented in Table V, in which age and tenure were considered together including their interaction. Although Levene's test shows that the homogeneity of variances may not be assumed for some cases, the *F* test is robust against the violation of the homogeneity assumption. For the main effects, employees' age is not statistically significantly associated with their overall job satisfaction level at the 5 per cent level of significance, but their tenure is, with a *p*-value of 0.023. On the assumption that the employee starts his/her job in a Thai hotel at the age of 20, the overall job satisfaction increases relatively more with the tenure than with age. The interaction effect (Table V) shows that the significant dependence of

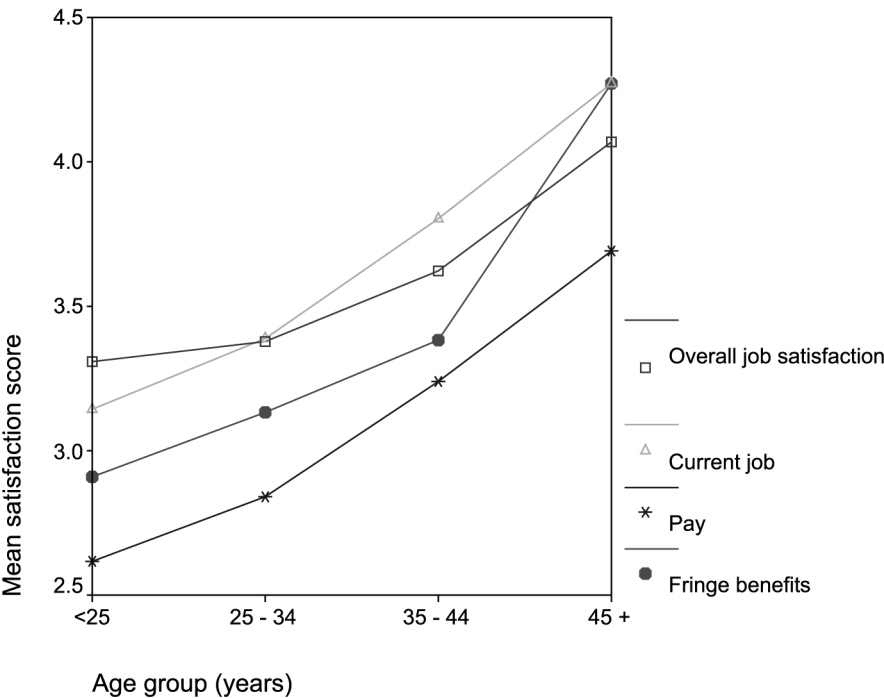


Figure 1.
The relationship between age and overall job satisfaction scores; satisfaction with current job, pay and fringe benefits

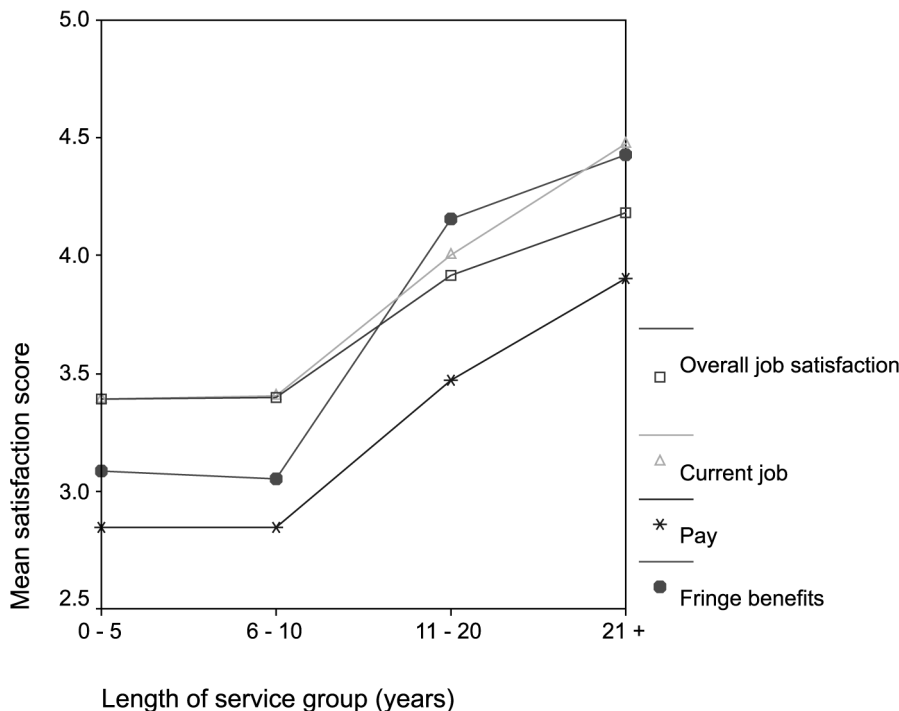


Figure 2.
The relationship between
tenure and overall job
satisfaction scores;
satisfaction with current
job, pay and fringe
benefits

the overall job satisfaction on tenure is not statistically significantly affected by the employee age.

The ANOVA results for overall job satisfaction show that overall job satisfaction level rises over the tenure in all age groups except < 25 years. This suggests that the overall job satisfaction level of hotel employees in Thailand is significantly dependent on tenure, despite the non-significant moderation of this effect by age. However, positive association between overall job satisfaction and employee age is not statistically significant, at the 5 per cent level, while this effect is adjusted for the effect of tenure. This result raises the question of whether the significant (linear, quadratic and U-shaped) relationship between overall satisfaction and age reported in the literature is the effect of the aging process by itself or a result of not controlling the effect of tenure. While the overall job satisfaction increases with the tenure for employees aged 25 or higher, this decreases for employees younger than 25 years. Therefore, the relationship between the overall job satisfaction and tenure among the university teachers, as reported by Oshagbemi (2000a), is likely to be confounded with the effect of age.

The results of the ANOVA for satisfaction with current job, pay, and fringe benefits are also presented in Table V. It is apparent from the ANOVA results in the table that the satisfaction level according to tenure is not only significant

Table V.
Results of two-way
ANOVA: overall job
satisfaction and
satisfaction with
individual facets

Source	df	Overall job <i>F</i> -value	Overall job Pr > <i>F</i>	Current job <i>F</i> -value	Current job Pr > <i>F</i>	Pay <i>F</i> -value	Pay Pr > <i>F</i>	Fringe benefits <i>F</i> -value	Fringe benefits Pr > <i>F</i>
Levene's test	12,310	2.03	0.022	1.836	0.042	1.645	0.078	1.459	0.138
Model	12	4.68	<0.001	4.678	<0.001	5.219	<0.001	5.029	<0.001
Age group	3	2.41	0.067*	2.803	0.040**	2.450	0.064*	1.655	0.177
Tenure group	3	2.23	0.023**	5.947	0.001***	6.621	0.001***	3.743	0.011**
Age group × tenure group	6	1.34	0.238	2.525	0.021**	2.859	0.010***	0.659	0.683

Notes: Tenure = organisational length of service; * = $p < 0.10$, ** = $p < 0.05$, *** = $p < 0.01$; overall job satisfaction = satisfaction level in (current job + achievement + recognition + personal growth + pay + fringe benefits + interpersonal relation with colleagues + interpersonal relation with supervisors + working conditions)/9

on overall job, but also on current job, pay and fringe benefits. Moreover, satisfaction level with current job is significant both with respect to age and tenure as well as with respect to their interaction. This indicates that the satisfaction level with current job is significantly associated with tenure, age and their interaction. With respect to pay, tenure and its interaction with age are each statistically significant, while the remaining *F* tests in the study are not. This means that except for the “current job”, “pay” and “fringe benefits”, the other dimensions of the job satisfaction do not explain the satisfaction level of hotel employees significantly. It is interesting to note that while tenure is in the model, age does not show significant association with the overall job satisfaction nor with its facets except the current job. Therefore, tenure appears to be a better predictor of (extrinsic) job satisfaction of hotel employees than age.

The results of tests for mean satisfaction with the current job by tenure show a negative relationship for the < 25 age group. There was, however, a linear positive relationship for the 25-34 age group. The relationships for the 35-44 and 45+ age groups are U-shaped with satisfaction declining among the six to ten year tenure group. This is somewhat different to the results of Herzberg *et al.* (1957), who suggest the age-related correlation with satisfaction among young workers, and implies that tenure is a more reliable measure of satisfaction.

The mean satisfaction scores for current job with respect to age increases for the 0-5 and 11-20-year tenure groups. The 21+ tenure group demonstrates highest levels of satisfaction that are constant. Satisfaction for the 6-10 year tenure group formed an upturned U-shape in terms of age, with the highest satisfaction level from age 25 to 44 years. The results indicated a significant interaction effect between age and tenure on the satisfaction level with current job.

The relationship between satisfaction with pay and tenure is the same as between satisfaction with current job and tenure, and indicate that the effect of tenure on the satisfaction level is significantly moderated by the effect of age.

For fringe benefits there is no significant interaction effect between age and tenure. As before, satisfaction with fringe benefit decreases with respect to the increase of tenure for the employees < 25 years age, probably due to the non-accrual of fringe benefits associated with shorter tenure. In all other age groups, there is a positive relationship between satisfaction with fringe benefits and tenure. While tenure has a positive effect on the job satisfaction level, a negative relationship exists between tenure and overall job satisfaction, satisfaction with current job, pay and promotion among the hotel employees younger than 25 years during the first decade of their service. This is probably due to high employee expectations not being met during the first decade of tenure.

5. Conclusions

To date, much of the job satisfaction research has sought to provide explanations by focusing on the age and tenure variables independently. The research reported here has considered the interaction of these variables and makes a contribution to the understanding of job satisfaction by providing evidence of the impact. Similar to the findings of other studies, overall job satisfaction and its facets increases monotonically with both age and tenure separately. However, the positive relationship of age with overall job satisfaction and with all of its facets is still positive, but non-monotone, when the effect of tenure is controlled and vice versa.

Job satisfaction is constant over the first decade of the tenure. However, after the first decade it starts rising with tenure. Thus, tenure appears to be a better predictor of extrinsic job satisfaction than the intrinsic satisfaction of hotel staff. In comparison with age (a proxy for length of service in the hotel industry) tenure appears to be a better predictor of job satisfaction level of hotel staff; this is probably due to satisfied workers remaining with the organization and accruing increased extrinsic rewards, while dissatisfied workers leave to obtain employment elsewhere. Indeed age may not be considered an independent predictor of job satisfaction, rather it may be better seen as a confounder that moderates the positive relationship between the tenure and job satisfaction.

There are a number of possible explanations of the significance of the interaction between age and tenure on job satisfaction levels. First, there may have been a high proportion of respondents between the ages of 25 and 34 who had been employed for a period of six to ten years and were highly satisfied with the overall job, thus making the interaction coincidental. Likewise there could have been a higher number aged 45+ which had been employed for 11+ years, who were highly satisfied with their level of pay; the earnings of these employees may have been relatively high thus contributing to higher satisfaction. It is also important to acknowledge that, at some point, age and tenure are unavoidably linked, particularly in the higher tenure bands where it is impossible to have “young” employees. Thus, increases in tenure are dependent on increases in age. The results might reflect a selection process, where employment opportunities elsewhere lead to the dissatisfied leaving, but the same could apply equally to other sectors.

This study builds on the research of Hickson and Oshagbemi (1999) and of Oshagbemi (2000a, b) by contending that although age and tenure are independently related to job satisfaction, their interaction is a more significant factor in job satisfaction measurement. It also takes the research into an industrial sector where age distributions are perhaps more balanced than higher education, yet employment patterns atypical and employees more transient resulting in fewer long-serving employees.

The findings of this study lead us to conclude that further research should be conducted into the impact of interacting variables, such as age and tenure, on job satisfaction levels. While measurement of single variables is somewhat simpler, it fails to provide adequate explanation of the causes of satisfaction at work. The impact of tenure on job satisfaction could be analysed in relation to job mobility using age as the explanatory exogenous variable. The relevance of skill status and job mobility on job satisfaction may also be worthy of further investigation.

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