EMPLOYEE ENTITLEMENT:
IS THERE A UNIVERSAL APPROACH THAT WE
CAN USE IN THE ORGANIZATIONAL SETTINGS?

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Employee entitlement has been studied over the years, yet few human resources management scholars and managers expected it to be a common phenomenon, especially among younger employees. Therefore, there is a need for deeper insight into employee entitlement as it has been analyzed in different ways over the last years. Due to dynamically and rapidly changing organizational settings, employee entitlement should be considered as a context-dependent variable. Additionally, it does not have to be perceived explicitly as a negative factor, as there are certain circumstances in which employee entitlement may be beneficial for the organization. Proper understanding of it will be possible through studying the interactions between employee entitlement and other variables, such as organizational identification, identification with coworkers, organizational justice, leader–member exchange, team–member exchange, organizational citizenship behavior, and counterproductive behavior. Factors that might affect the intensity of entitlement are discussed, as well as what we know about methods that can increase or decrease it. This article indicates the gaps and inconsistencies in existing research, simultaneously trying to find solutions and ideas for the difficulties encountered.

Keywords: entitlement; employee; human resources; identification; justice; counterproductive work behavior; organizational citizenship behavior.

Using the latest and the most current definition of employee entitlement, for the sake of consistency and coherence, it is perceived as a context-dependent sense when

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an individual unjustifiably deserves more (Brant & Castro, 2019). It is certainly not a new phenomenon as it has already been mentioned by numerous researchers before. Even in the previous century Samuelson (1995) claimed that the rising intensity of entitlement, at that time called deservingness, indirectly arises from increasing living standard, technology development, and the desire to experience satisfaction and gratification without delay.

Smola and Sutton (2002) replicated the study on employee behavior that had been conducted 25 years earlier. Results showed that the newer generation was more entitled towards employers than the previous one. Twenge (2010) highlighted that Millennials are perceived as the most entitled generation so far. Their discrepancy between expectations and reality may be a serious problem since they expect more status and money regardless of their involvement, previous experience, and performance. It is consistent with Fisk's (2010) assumptions that younger employees have higher expectations towards their employers and Bedi's (2021) findings that younger employees are more likely to feel entitled. According to Thompson and Gregory (2012), it stems from a society where children receive rewards for participation rather than performance. Researchers show that entitlement is an increasing phenomenon among employees and across organizations (Harvey & Martinko, 2009). Sohr-Preston and Boswell (2015) noticed that academic entitlement is spreading among the students who have become more demanding as they wish to have excellent grades irrespective of their effort and actual learning progress. According to Twenge et al. (2008), current students have a higher feeling of entitlement than students from the early eighties by 30%.

Despite the growing research on employee entitlement, there are many inconsistencies and incoherence in literature and research on this subject. The main goal of this review is to point out the missing gaps and apply a consistent conceptualization with the latest scientific knowledge. Some of these gaps have already been mentioned by other researchers such as Brant and Castro (2019) or Jordan et al. (2017), others are more extensively described in this paper. First, employee entitlement should be analyzed as a context-dependent variable and should be measured in the same way, not to mention that there is not much research on this kind of entitlement in organizational settings. Second, for many years employee entitlement has been perceived as an explicitly negative factor but the latest research showed that it may have positive outcomes (or may be indeed positive but only under specific circumstances). A broader study of this area might be positive for the organization as managers will not have to look only for a way to lower employee entitlement, but how to use it for the benefit of the organization or create the right circumstances to unleash the potential for its positive impact. Third, there is not much research comparing age differences in terms of the intensity of employee entitlement and

especially the underlining mechanisms link to these differences. Last, there is little knowledge of moderators and other factors which may explain the strength of employee entitlement such as organizational identification or identification with co-workers, organizational justice, leader–member exchange, team–member exchange, and more. Importantly, because of the use of different conceptualizations, some relationships between employee entitlement and specific variables in some studies are positive, whereas in some are negative (e.g. counterproductive work behavior and organizational citizenship behavior). Therefore, in this article, we describe and analyze some gaps mentioned above that may be explored in future research.

UNDERSTANDING ENTITLEMENT: TRAIT AND STATE CONCEPTUALIZATION

There are different approaches to understand and explore entitlement. By some researchers, entitlement is described as a general trait (e.g. Campbell et al., 2004), and by others it is characterized as a trait that can be activated in specific situations (e.g. Feather, 2003). According to Campbell et al. (2004) entitlement is a "stable and pervasive sense that one deserves more and is entitled to more than others" (p. 31). In other words, it describes an individual characteristic and feature of personality while excluding contextual influence. According to Feather (2003), entitlement can vary across specific rules, values and standards that provide an opportunity to express entitlement, which indicates that it may be context-dependent. Therefore, it is possible to score low on entitlement scales yet behave as an entitled individual in response to specific situations. Regardless of the way of understanding entitlement, it is in fact based on believing that one's contribution is better in terms of quantity or quality and is more significant than it actually is (Fisk, 2010).

Trait Conceptualization: Entitlement as a Stable Trait

According to Brummel and Parker (2015) entitlement as a stable trait has most often been analyzed as a factor of narcissism and is in fact one subscale of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Raskin & Terry, 1988). Entitlement as a factor of narcissism has been used in clinical settings (O'Leary-Kelly et al., 2017). For example, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM, 4th edition) defines entitlement as an "unreasonable expectation of especially favorable treatment or automatic compliance with expectation" and depicts it as an

indicator of narcissistic personality disorder. Kerr (2006) points out that entitlement may not include solely maladaptive beliefs, so it is important to separate Campbell's construct from the clinical understanding of the subject which indicates its maladaptive nature. Equating entitlement as a factor of narcissism (Raskin & Terry, 1988) to entitlement as an independent trait (Campbell et al., 2004) is inadequate because of its different understanding.

State Conceptualization: Entitlement as a Context-Dependent Trait

According to Feather (2003), entitlement should be considered a latent trait that can influence behaviors in specific situations through specific experiences. These particular situations provide an opportunity to activate the entitlement trait which means it is context-dependent. Tett and Burnett (2003) claim that entitlement is more likely to appear in some environments than in others (where cues that may activate demanding behavior are more prevalent). These cues include one's own and other people's experiences which can lead to certain perceptions of entitlement and situations that differ in standards, values and one's roles. It is consistent with Major's (1994) view that people can experience entitlement not necessarily in every situation, but in those that trigger the feeling which activates it. In order to clearly distinguish these two conceptions, Brant and Castro (2019) named the context-dependent traits as states (due to the definition implying that traits are stable and states can vary across situations). These authors define state entitlement as a context-dependent sense when an individual unjustifiably deserves more, and this definition will be used in this paper for the sake of consistency and coherence among researchers.

MEASURING ENTITLEMENT

According to many researchers, it is crucial to take situational factors into account when analyzing the entitlement variable. Rudolph et al. (2018) clearly indicate that perceived entitlement may change over time and varies depending on the situational (e.g. work or home environment) and individual context (e.g. maturation or one's motives). Going a step further, according to O'Leary-Kelly et al. (2017), considering entitlement as a stable trait is a pivotal factor that limits a broader view of understanding the subject. Firstly, because of its similarity to other individual features such as narcissism, superiority or self-esteem, and secondly because of the lack of consideration of the social context that surrounds the individual. Challenging

the conceptualization of entitlement as a stable trait is highly recommended, especially in dynamically and rapidly changing settings (e.g. in work and organization).

Also, inconsistencies resulting from the use of different conceptualizations can make it difficult to compare various results. Jordan et al. (2017) propose to use contextual scales in organizational settings. It allows employees to distinguish general entitlement (that relates to many life spheres, e.g. "If I were on the Titanic, I would deserve to be on the first lifeboat!") from employee entitlement (that relates to specific life sphere, e.g. "I expect regular pay increases regardless of how the organization performs"). Westerlaken et al. (2016) developed the Measure of Employee Entitlement (MEE) which is a self-reported context-dependent scale. Instead of taking cognizance of general beliefs, this measure captures the entitled individual in the role of an employee. It comprises items based on previous measures and definitions, however, contextualized and adapted to the work environment. It is a significant contribution to the entitlement research which may lead to replicating and verifying previous research on employee entitlement.

An important question also arises. Is it necessary to consider entitlement in reference to others? Regardless of the conceptualization used, references to others appear in measures using trait conceptualization (e.g. "I honestly feel I'm just more deserving than others") as well as state conceptualization (e.g. "I deserve to be paid more than others"). Brant and Castro (2019) suggested a new definition of state entitlement which is a context-dependent sense that one unjustifiably deserves more. They did not include reference to others in this definition on purpose (that one deserves more and is entitled to more than others) treating it as a limiting factor in analyzing this phenomenon. Although the definition was used from the perspective of others, we think it should be also applied from the perspective of the individuals (self-reported). Originally it has been raised regarding Millennials who, according to authors, have an inner, altruistic need to improve the quality of life for everyone (although it should be verified regardless of age). This understanding of the construct may reveal another positive side of entitlement. Entitled individuals show demanding behavior for the benefit of the group or at least without thinking they deserve more than other people in the same situation.

EMPLOYEE ENTITLEMENT

As employee entitlement is an increasing phenomenon in the workplace (Fisk, 2010), work and organizational psychologists as well as human resources management (HRM) scholars should understand it correctly. Definitions and operational-

ization of entitlement vary, so employee entitlement has been distinguished from general entitlement. Employee entitlement is generally linked with such behaviors as requesting a rise despite poor performance or demanding to get an allowance for doing the most basic tasks (Wellner, 2004). According to Westerlaken et al. (2016) employee entitlement is understood as an excessive self-regard and a belief in the right to privileged treatment at work.

According to Naumann et al. (2002) employee entitlement arises from individual and situational factors. To properly understand employee entitlement researchers should measure it in specific working conditions and be aware of its context-dependency (Tett & Burnett, 2003). Focusing on entitlement as a trait is insufficient (Jordan et al., 2017). However, there are still many researchers using measures based on trait conceptualization (e.g. Lin et al., 2022; Joplin et al., 2021; Schwarz et al., 2021; Irshad, 2021; Cerritos, 2020). Using measures based on state conceptualization as Westerlaken et al.'s Measure of Employee Entitlement (2017) is still not as common as their advantages might indicate (e.g. Deol & Schermer, 2021; Langerud & Jordan, 2020).

Employee Entitlement and Work Behavior

Entitlement can be associated with counterproductive work behaviors (CWBs) as a form of deviance when expectations do not reflect the job realities (Fisk, 2010). Significant link between employee entitlement and aggressive behavior has been suggested (Campbell et al., 2004), and Peirone and Maticka-Tyndale (2017) claimed that entitled employees may become demotivated, which affects future work behavior. Strongly (vs. weakly) entitled individuals are more likely to engage in CWBs towards coworkers (Cerritos, 2020), and are less engaged (Joplin et al., 2021).

Even though entitlement seems to be associated with many maladaptive outcomes, O'Leary-Kelly et al. (2017) suggest that entitlement may be also adaptive, which is consistent with Tomlinson's (2013) findings that under the right conditions, entitlement may generate positive outcomes for the organization. One example of the aforementioned conditions is the Schwarz et al. (2021) study that shows when the employee involvement climate level is high, the effects of psychological entitlement on organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs) through affective commitment are positive. What is more, Brummel and Parker (2015) indicate that entitlement does not predict a lack of prosocial behavior or a lack of organizational effectiveness. Surprisingly, entitlement in Brummel and Parker's (2015) research appeared to be related to higher task performance even though they initially assumed otherwise. Similarly, entitlement predicted more self-reported OCBs and was related to fewer

self-reported CWBs. Contradictory to previous findings, Lin et al. (2022) assumed that psychological entitlement is positively related to job involvement.

The above-mentioned studies indicate that there are inconsistent results regarding relationships between employee entitlement and OCBs and CWBs. OCB is behavior within the organization that is not part of an employee's formal job description and is perceived positively as an added value. CWB is behavior that harms the organization or colleagues. Both variables are considered being opposite to each other and at first glance, employee entitlement should be negatively related to OCBs and positively related to CWBs. However, findings to date are not entirely clear. Brummel and Parker (2015) found out that employee entitlement is positively related to OCBs and negatively to CWBs; Grijalva and Newman's (2015) findings are contradictory to the aforementioned and Żemojtel-Piotrowska et al. (2018) did not find any significant relationship between employee entitlement and CWBs. Importantly, OCBs or CWBs may be directed towards the organization or coworkers—this distinction should be also considered during studies as employees may show CWBs towards coworkers without harming the organization itself. Research on these relationships seems to have some ambiguity and therefore it is important to continue to explore them, especially given that a trait conceptualization rather than state conceptualization has been used previously. The exception is the recent studies conducted by Langerud and Jordan (2020) and Witten (2019) in which researchers used the MEE (a context-dependent scale). Langerud and Jordan (2020) found no significant relationship between employee entitlement and OCBs, however, excessive self-regard (one subscale of the MEE) positively correlated with OCBs. In Witten's (2019) study the direct cause–effect relationship between employee entitlement and CWBs was not statistically significant.

Similar doubts occur with organizational identification. Even if employee entitlement in line with previous studies is connected to CWBs (e.g. Bedi, 2021), organizational identification has the potential to be a moderator of this relationship. Although Irshad (2021) suggested that organizational identification enhances employee entitlement, Klimchak et al. (2016) demonstrated that highly entitled employees who had strong organizational identification are more likely to show positive organizational attitudes such as voice and taking charge behaviors. Importantly, it should be noted that organizational identification should not be equated with identification with coworkers as they appear to be two different variables depending on the context (employees may identify with coworkers, but not necessarily with the organization itself).

Another topic that has not been sufficiently explored is the possible mediation and moderating effect of organizational justice on the relationship between employee entitlement and CWBs and OCBs. Brant (2018) did not find a moderating

effect of organizational justice (nor with any of the four subscales) on the relationship between employee entitlement and OCBs in general. Although she found that interpersonal and informational justice is a significant moderator for OCBs towards the organization (but not towards coworkers). It is worth mentioning that employee entitlement in her research has been analyzed from the perspective of others, not from the perspective of a particular individual (self-reported). Lawlor (2017) assumed that there is no mediation effect of organizational justice on the relationship between employee entitlement and CWBs, but there is a significant mediation effect for the subscales of procedural and informational justice. In this particular case, the study was conducted using the self-reported scale of employee entitlement, although CWBs were not divided into behavior that may be directed towards the organization or coworkers.

What May Trigger Stronger Entitlement?

Employee entitlement may be developed earlier during higher education as students invest a great deal of time and money in course completion (Peirone & Maticka-Tyndale, 2017). They may think that right after graduation they will find a suitable job opportunity that gives them a satisfactory pay and a sense of fulfillment. It may generate high expectations that rarely meet reality, mainly because fresh graduates have little work experience and are not paid in the same way as experienced specialists. Naumann et al. (2002) also claimed that employees require from the organization what has been previously agreed upon during the recruitment and onboarding process. The discrepancy between reality and promises may lead to increased employee entitlement causing CWBs.

According to Fisk (2010), the intensity of entitlement may result from the recruitment practices and newcomers' onboarding experience. Attracting and encouraging candidates to join the company is an important part of the job interview, but if the pre-employment job presentation with all its properties and benefits contradicts reality, employee entitlement is more likely to occur. If these perks and bonuses are presented only regarding employees belonging to the organization and not regarding their performance, employees may develop a demanding attitude leading to CWBs. It is coherent with Tomlinson's (2013) postulate that pay practices not coming from one's performance may cause entitlement beliefs (e.g. employees may think that pay rise or promotion is their right because of seniority or external factors such as inflation regardless of their effort and results).

Employee entitlement and CWBs may occur especially in organizations with fixed pay systems where employee evaluation is permissive (Fisk, 2010) and where

indulgent practices such as excessive benefits for employees are used (Jordan et al., 2017). Also, entitlement may be triggered among temporary workers or independent contractors when they compare themselves to employees employed directly by the company under an employment contract in terms of benefits (Tomlinson, 2013). Nontraditional workers may not receive the same benefits as traditional workers even if they have the same responsibilities, complete identical tasks and work together on the same project.

The recruitment process of traditional workers may also influence their entitlement. According to O'Leary-Kelly et al. (2017), the view that companies should not hire entitled individuals is a limited strategy as Millennials are more entitled than previous generations. HRM scholars suggest companies should adopt recruitment or training practices to be ready for greater expectations from newcomers. It is consistent with Fisk's (2010) assumptions that training programs may acquaint employees with how the entitlement is triggered, demonstrate and explain the consequences of entitlement regarding work behavior, and clarify the dependence of pay rise and bonuses between performance and commitment. Also, transparent company policy regarding rules of a pay rise and a promotion path could be also beneficial.

Some unrealistic expectations may be lowered by transparent pay conditions for entry-level jobs and knowledge of promotion time in the workplace (Hurst & Good, 2009). Also, while interviewing candidates, recruiters and managers may use expectation-lowering procedures and realistic job previews to reduce job expectations. Realistic job previews are about providing an authentic picture of the job description, employee duties and general work environment, even when it comprises some negative outcomes. Besides reducing high job expectations and lowering the intensity of entitlement, realistic job previews may prevent reduced employee commitment, job satisfaction and performance. Peirone and Maticka-Tyndale (2017) indicate that providing information on realistic job descriptions, responsibilities and salaries should start during academic education.

SUMMARY AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

As the intensity of employee entitlement appears to be an important factor in proper organization functioning due to the demanding behavior of employees, there are several areas that may be further explored. We agree with Brant and Castro (2019) that replicating and verifying previous research on employee entitlement using a state perspective is crucial to properly understand this variable. It is especially important for organizations due to previous perceptions of employee entitlement

as a trait that have strongly neglected the work context. Trait conceptualization and its measures have been originally developed to explore general entitlement and it cannot properly capture dynamically and rapidly changing organizational settings. Although the state entitlement approach has been recently described by Brant (2018), it was considered from the perspective of others. So another line of research to explore the topic more broadly is to consider employee entitlement from the individual perspective (self-reported). Also, continuing this stream of research supports the idea of using linguistic precision to avoid inconsistencies as scholars should not equate and merge trait entitlement and state entitlement.

It is also significant to broaden our knowledge about generation differences as according to Fisk (2010) younger employees have higher expectations regarding salary or promotions compared to previous generations. Several years ago, Twenge (2010) as well as Harvey and Martinko (2009) assumed that Millennials have been perceived as the most entitled group so far—it is worth exploring the same area considering individuals from Generation Z that recently started their professional carrier. Due to increasing employee entitlement, work and organizational psychologists as well as HRM scholars may have to develop strategies facilitating effective management of demanding behavior. Also, adapting particular recruitment or training practices may be important to prepare for greater expectations and requirements from newcomers.

Additionally, Jordan et al. (2017) emphasize the importance of exploring the relationship between entitlement and justice due to the potentially moderating role of justice on employee entitlement. According to research, fair treatment at work may lower demanding behavior (e.g. Greenberg, 1990; Zitek et al., 2010). Exline et al. (2004) indicate that perceived injustice may lead to frustration and other adverse feelings (just like employee entitlement). It is worth exploring the impact of these two variables on each other. In particular, Brant (2018) proposed that all four of Colquitt's (2001) organizational justice factors should be considered (distributive, procedural, interpersonal and informational justice). It is important as Brant's (2018) recent studies on this relationship analyzed employee entitlement from the perspective of others, not from the perspective of a particular individual (self-reported), and studies conducted by other researchers have not analyzed this variable as a moderator.

A similar research direction should be taken considering employee entitlement and organizational identification. Organizational identification itself leads to a strong sense of belonging to the organization (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), which may have positive consequences such as engaging in OCBs. It has been already assumed by Klimchak et al. (2016) that highly entitled employees with strong organizational identification are more likely to indicate positive attitudes such as voice and taking

charge behaviors, however, there is not much research on this topic. Importantly, it should be noted that organizational identification should not be equated to identification with coworkers as they appear to be two different variables depending on the context (employees may identify with coworkers, but not necessarily with the organization itself). As we mentioned before, employee entitlement and CWBs are stronger among individuals who have a high sense of perceived injustice in the company—in this case, higher identification with coworkers (but not with the organization) should increase the effect size between the variables listed above. In this particular case, there would be a distinct division into "us" and "them". This is the reason why a distinction between organizational identification and identification with coworkers will be important in the conducted research.

Another research direction that has not been widely explored yet may incorporate leader–member exchange (LMX) and team–member exchange (TMX) (Banks et al., 2014). Both LMX and TMX measure the quality of reciprocity among employees in the workplace; however, LMX focuses on leader–subordinate relationships and TMX focuses on relationships among team members. These relationships are based on mutual trust, respect and reciprocity when LMX or TMX is high. Maintaining good relationships among team members or between leaders and subordinates may reduce organizational misbehavior (e.g. CWBs) and increase positive organizational behaviors (e.g. OCBs).

To sum up, we have presented a recent state of the research on employee entitlement and highlighted areas that are discussed by researchers and where consensus is yet to be obtained. The most important of them is still the often-used trait conceptualization in employee entitlement research that has been originally developed to explore general entitlement and does not capture dynamically changing organizational settings. Future directions were proposed, with stress on considering employee entitlement as a context-dependent variable and on an exploration of potential mediators or moderators of the relationship between employee entitlement and organizational behaviors (both negative and positive). Also, we outlined what may trigger stronger entitlement and how organizations may deal with it as practical implications from scientific considerations should be a priority for implementation in companies. Hopefully, the ideas presented in our article could serve as a springboard for future research and more applied-oriented endeavors.

CRediT Author Statement

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