

Rational Tactics and Work Outcomes: Differential Effects of Disability

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Abstract—There has been a substantial amount of disability research in disciplines such as sociology and rehabilitation psychology but such research remains limited in some others like organizational behavior and human resources management. Also, little attention has been paid to the behaviors and work outcomes of disabled people in real workplace settings. To address these research gaps, data were collected by means of survey questionnaires administered to supervisors and (disabled and non-disabled) subordinates representing various manufacturing and service organizations in Malaysia. The objectives are to investigate the use of rational tactics among disabled workers and its impact on two work outcomes i.e., salary progression and promotability. It was found that disabled workers similarly used rational tactics as did their non-disabled counterparts though to a lesser extent. Interestingly, rational tactics were found to have a stronger impact on promotability but not on salary progression when workers had a disability. The findings have implications for future efforts to enhance the work outcomes of disabled people.

Index Terms—Disability, rational tactics, work outcomes.

I. INTRODUCTION

Disability issues have received considerable attention from disciplines such as social psychology, special education, and rehabilitation psychology. Yet, research on disabled people in real workplace settings remains scarce [1]. Organizational research seemingly continues to examine race, gender, and cultural issues but tends to overlook the unique issues associated with disabled people in the workforce [2]. Hence, it is imperative that the work experiences of disabled people come under closer scrutiny of organizational researchers. A particularly worthwhile endeavor is to examine the impact of disabled people's own behaviors such as the use of influence tactics and how this will influence work outcomes.

Given the above, an empirical study was conducted with two objectives in mind: (a) to investigate the use of rational tactics among disabled workers; and (b) to examine how the use of rational tactics can potentially influence salary progression and promotability. The study findings hold important implications for disabled people, employers, and service providers in terms of future efforts to enhance the work outcomes of the disabled population.

II. DISABILITY AND WORK OUTCOMES

A report by United Nations disclosed that one person in twenty has a disability [3]. Disability may be temporary or

permanent, partial or total, fixed or changeable. Some disabilities have profound effects, whereas others are trivial or have no apparent impact on the working life of the persons concerned. In this study, disabilities are confined to those which posed no serious implications of occupational handicap. It is assumed that given proper placement, even if disabled, the individuals are employable and able to maintain the job at hand. Consistent with this assumption, this study viewed disability along 4 disability types (i.e., physical, visual, auditory/communication, and intellectual disability). The United Nations Standard Rules on the equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities [4] Ministry of Social Development, and Ministry of Education in Malaysia provided a similar four-fold classification of disability.

In most parts of the world, disabled people have generally been found to face various employment problems ranging from unemployment and unfavorable work outcomes [5, 6, 7, 8, 9]. In Malaysia, out of an estimated 2.4 million who found a job in the past ten years, only 3,523 disabled people were recruited in the private sector [10]. Even if they are gainfully employed, disabled people are largely concentrated in part-time, low status jobs that offer little opportunity for advancement [11]. Moreover, the earnings level of working people with disabilities is often found to be up to 35 per cent less than that of their non-disabled counterparts [5]. In view of the employment issues confronting the disabled, research should focus on examining factors that can contribute to more favorable outcomes for this population. For instance, how disabled people behave in the organizational settings such as using influence strategies to get ahead in their careers is clearly a worthwhile topic to explore. The following section discusses this topic in greater detail.

III. HYPOTHESIS

Zaleznik [12, p. 48] asserts that "organizations are political structures which provide opportunities to develop careers." It is thus not surprising that employees have consistently been found to use a number of influence tactics in their attempts to receive desired outcomes such as promotions and salary increases. Indeed past studies have invariably reported that managerial advancement and success are largely attributed to a manager's effective use of influence [13]. But no known empirical research has been conducted on disabled people to confirm whether the use of influence tactics similarly contributes to better work outcomes. Stone and Collela [2] interestingly noted that disabled employees are likely to use a wide array of behavioral and impression-management strategies. They added that these influence strategies are particularly essential for disabled people to help (a) modify

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others' expectancies and affective states, and (b) change environmental and organizational factors (e.g., legal systems, social norms, organizational policies and practices, nature of reward systems, and outcomes associated with the interaction).

Clearly, the consequences of using influence strategies such as rational tactics embody one important area for investigation. But why rational tactics? Prior studies have identified rational tactics as the most likely used tactics in upward influence attempts [14]. Exchange of benefits, personalized help, rational persuasion, and showing expertise are seen as rational tactics since they employ logical arguments or evidence in seeking compliance [14, 15]. Exchange of benefits involves exchange of favors and personal sacrifices, and indicates willingness to reciprocate a favor at a later time [16]. Personalized help involves helping the target in personal matters [16]. Rational persuasion is a flexible tactic such that it can be applied in any given situation [14]. Finally, showing expertise represents an employee's attempt to appeal to a superior by illuminating his or her abilities [17]. These rational tactics, through the social psychological process of affect and liking [17, 18], are likely to lead to favorable exchanges in terms of individual outcomes that include performance ratings, promotability, and salary [19, 20]. That being said, it would be worthwhile to examine how disability will influence the impact of rational tactics on work outcomes.

In one study by Colella and Varma [1], disabled employees were found to engage in more ingratiation than did their non-disabled counterparts. It is believed that in competitive work environment, these employees have learned to engage in influence behaviors as a method of dealing with potential avoidance and bias [1]. Colella and Varma [1] also found that ingratiation had a stronger relationship with LMX quality when the subordinate had a disability. In other words, if supervisors react positively to high level performance and ingratiation, they will react even more positively when subordinates have disabilities. Ingratiation and perhaps rational tactics, through the social psychological process of affect and liking [17, 18], may lead to favorable exchanges in terms of individual outcomes that include promotability and salary increases [19, 20].

In this light, it seems reasonable to argue that rational tactics could actually offer a method for a disabled employee to mitigate negative bias due to her disability [1, 2], and subsequently help improve her work outcomes. This contention is grounded in ambivalence response amplification (ARA) theory [21]. This theory postulates that non-disabled people hold ambivalent feelings toward people with disabilities (or other stigmata). Feelings of aversion and hostility and of sympathy and compassion clash. This conflict is accordingly resolved by strongly defending one type of reaction while resolutely denying the other. This pattern leads to extreme behavior toward the disabled person. The direction of the amplification is induced by the context of the situation. Contexts that are favorable toward the disabled person will lead to extreme positive responses, whereas unfavorable contexts will result in extreme negative responses. Hence, encountering a disabled person behaving positively would lead to more positive reactions than

encountering a non-disabled person behaving in the same manner. Simply put, if supervisors react positively to rational tactics, this reaction will be even more profound when a subordinate has a disability. Thus, it is hypothesized that:

The positive impact of rational tactics on salary progression and promotability is greater for disabled employees as compared to non-disabled employees.

IV. METHODOLOGY

Survey questionnaires were used to collect data from three different sources: disabled employees, non-disabled co-workers and immediate supervisors. Specifically, data on promotability were obtained from supervisors, whereas disabled and non-disabled subordinates provided data on rational tactics and salary progression. In total, 63 manufacturing and service organizations located in Malaysia participated in the study. Of the 229 employee respondents, 129 (56.3%) subordinates were disabled, whereas the remaining 100 (43.7%) were non-disabled co-workers. The breakdown of the number of disabled respondents in terms of disability type is: physical disability, 37; visual disability, 36; auditory/communication disability, 46; and intellectual disability, 10. As for the 109 supervisor respondents, the majority of them were non-disabled (105 or 96.3%).

With regard to measuring rational tactics, the 14 items were adopted from various sources [e.g., 14, 16]. The employees were asked to indicate how frequently they used these influence tactics at work. They were reminded to answer in terms of what they would generally do, and not what they would like to do. For instance, on a 7-point scale of (1) never to (7) always, the subordinate responded to the following: "I explain the reason for my request." (Cronbach's alpha = 0.74)

Salary progression is seen as one of the most relevant criteria against which individuals evaluate their careers, since pay increases as one's career progresses [22, 23]. Researchers [e.g., 22, 24] have frequently used salary progression and the hierarchical levels promoted to or attained [25, 26] to measure career success. Past literature [e.g., 23] suggests that salary relative to age would provide a reliable index of salary progression. Hence, on the assumption that compensation is related to general performance, the current study computed salary progression by dividing the monthly salary score (salary range of [1] RM500 to [12] RM2501 and above) by age of respondents. Salary range is preferred over actual income since respondents might be reluctant to disclose their actual income. A higher score indicates a higher salary progression.

$$\text{Salary Progression} = (\text{Salary score}/\text{Age}) \times 100 \quad (1)$$

Promotability represents the second dimension of work outcomes. A promotion can be viewed as a career progression in terms of the competence required to carry out work at progressive levels of responsibility or contribution [27]. Promotability was measured with a 4-item scale adopted from Wayne *et al.* [24] who combined two modified items from Landau and Hammer [28] with two of their own. On a 7-point Likert scale of (1) strongly disagree to (7) strongly agree, the supervisor gave a promotability rating on

the following item—"I believe this employee has what it takes to be promoted." In this study, an overall score was obtained by taking an average of the 4 items. A higher score implies higher promotion potential. (Cronbach's alpha = 0.86)

The new paradigm or social model of *disability* no longer views disability in isolation from human functioning, but in a broader context that encompasses the total environment [29]. Following this notion, disability was measured against job performance using a formula adapted from Lefebvre *et al.* [30]:

$$Disability = \sum e_j X c_j \quad (2)$$

where e_j represents the extent of the disability, whereas c_j is the degree of importance of the disability to job performance.

On a 7-point scale—with the anchors (1) not limited at all to (7) very limited, the supervisor was asked to gauge the extent of the disability (disabilities) that she had identified in her subordinate. Thereafter, she was required to judge how critical/important each disability was to the job performance of the subordinate in question. The rating was done on a 7-point scale ranging from (1) not important at all to (7) very important. To ensure that every supervisor had a common frame of reference when responding to this item, a definition of disability was provided. Specifically, a subordinate with a disability was scored with regard to her extent of disability measured against its degree of importance to the job performance. Likewise, a non-disabled coworker was scored in the same way. In other words, disabled as well as non-disabled subordinates would each have a disability score. The only difference is that those with disabilities would have relatively higher disability scores than those without disabilities. It should be noted that the results of a discriminant validity test led us to safely infer that the non-disabled group was comprised of those having low disability scores, whereas disabled workers were those with high disability scores.

V. ANALYSES AND RESULTS

To examine whether disabled workers similarly used rational tactics as did their non-disabled counterparts, the mean scores of rational tactics were computed. It was found that the level of rational tactics by disabled employees was lower ($M = 3.21, SD = 1.08$) than that employed by their non-disabled coworkers ($M = 3.69, SD = 1.07$).

A four-step hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the influence of disability on the rational tactics-outcomes relationships. It should be noted that gender, educational level, organizational level, organizational tenure and job tenure were accordingly treated as control variables [31, 32]. The resultant model ($F = 6.85, p < 0.01$) for salary progression indicated no statistically significant effect of disability for the proposed relationship. Also, disability was not significantly related to salary progression. Table I tabulates the regression results.

Conversely, the regression results for promotability showed that disability was a pure moderator (see Table I). Both R^2 change and F change were statistically significant at

the 5 per cent level. The resultant model was adequate ($F = 9.93, p < 0.01$), with an additional 5 per cent of the variation in promotability accounted for by the interaction term between rational tactics and disability.

TABLE I: REGRESSION RESULTS

	Salary Progression	Promotability
	Std. Beta	Std. Beta
Rational Tactics	0.40**	0.68**
DISABILITY	-0.17	0.70
Rational Tactics X Disability	-0.39	-0.70**
R^2	0.48	0.58
Adjusted R^2	0.41	0.52
R^2 Change	0.04	0.05
F Change	1.27	2.24*

Note: $N = 228$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

To graphically illustrate the interaction effect, regression lines as shown in Figure 1 were created. It can be seen that low to moderate level of rational tactics had negligible impact on the promotability of employees with low disability scores. The impact of rational tactics on promotability only became apparent when the use of rational tactics ranged from moderate to high. In contrast, the impact of rational tactics on the promotability of employees with high disability scores was consistent and positive, irrespective of the level of rational tactics employed.

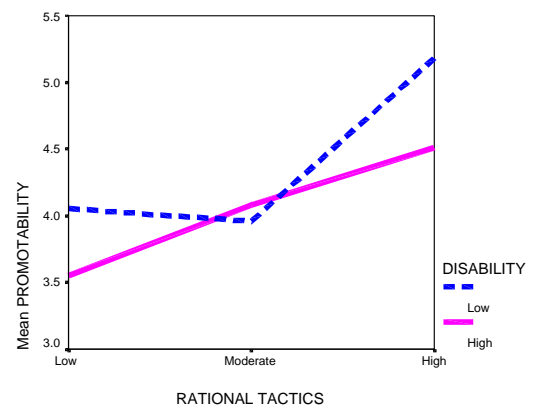


Fig. 1. Interaction between rational tactics and disability.

VI. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results demonstrated that disabled employees similarly resorted to using rational tactics but of lower level than that employed by their non-disabled counterparts. While rational tactics did not interact with disability to influence the dimension of salary progression, rational tactics were found to positively and consistently influence promotability for disabled employees.

Interestingly, for non-disabled workers, the impact of rational tactics on promotability was only evident when moderate to high level of rational tactics was employed. As previously stated, employing rational tactics cast these employees in a good light. And due to ambivalence effect, this in turn elicited extreme positive reactions from their supervisors who eventually gave them higher promotion ratings. It is clear now why even low level of rational tactics would already impact the promotability of employees with high disability scores, but not that of those with low disability

scores. The latter had to employ moderate to high level of rational tactics before their promotion ratings could increase. These results evidently espouse the view of Colella and Varma [1] that it is more important for disabled people to engage in influence tactics (such as rational tactics) than it is for others.

Collectively, the study findings revealed that disability effect was apparent when promotability was the criterion variable. However, disability did not have significant impact on salary progression. Typically, when an employee is assessed as promotable, this could be seen as a means for attaining increase in other rewards such as pay increase [33]. However, in the case of these disabled employees, their favorable promotability ratings somehow did not get translated into actual salary increments. This finding implicates an interesting, yet perturbing fact: although the dimension of promotability could be free of disability bias, the same cannot be said of the dimension of salary progression. Perhaps, it is true that "individuals may sympathize, but corporately, it is a different matter" [34, p. 24]. Presumably too, personal values normally credited to Malaysians such as charitable, accommodating, and having strongly humane orientation [35] may not always reflect those prescribed to at the corporate level. In a similar vein, Kleck *et al.* [36] elucidate that there may be conflicting norms about the treatment of disabled people. On one hand, there is the norm that one should help disabled individuals, and on the other, the norm that one should not be too condescending [2]. From another perspective, Cox [37] asserts that a high promotability rating could become a self-fulfilling prophesy; when one is rated as promotable, she would most likely work towards the realization of the prophecy. However, favorable promotion ratings do not appear to be considerable self-serving incentive for disabled employees. The reason may be that they are already contented with merely been employed and as such may not be overly concerned about other aspects of outcomes such as salary progression.

In terms of practical implications, the study findings behoove disabled people to play a more significant role in managing their own careers. Moses [38] posited that one needs to be a "career activist" rather than a passive player in one's career management. One way is to engage in desirable work behaviors (e.g., employing rational tactics) that appear to matter more for disabled people than non-disabled workers such that these behaviors can subsequently contribute to more favorable work outcomes. It follows that service providers and teachers in the special education class should realize the importance of presenting disabled individuals with realistic information in terms of how to manage their careers [39]. For instance, disabled people can be instructed in the application of rational tactics, or encouraged to hone these skills if they are already employing them. In closing, this paper calls for concerted efforts to ensure that disabled people experience successful employment as successful employment is not only the most powerful tool to enable and empower disabled people as they move toward real self-support, but is also a means of self-worth and personal pride [40].

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