Repositório ISCTE-IUL

Organizational Justice Mediates the Relation between Police Officers' Metaperceptions of Objectification and Health and Well-being

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Declaration of interest statement: The author report there are no competing interests to declare.

Data availability statement: The dataset analyzed in this article is not publicly available because the participants of this study did not agree for their data to be shared publicly. However, the dataset can be available under request directed to Isabel.Correia@iscte-iul.pt

Word count (including references and notes, but excluding figures, tables, and abstract): 4380 words

Abstract

This article intends to contribute to the study of the relation between workers' metaperceptions of objectification and their health and well-being, further testing the possibility that this relation might be mediated by a decrease in perceived organizational justice. The sample of the present study was composed by 573 police officers who voluntarily consented to answer to an anonymous online survey. Self-reported measures of the police officers' metaperception of objectification by their superior, organizational justice, and health and well-being were collected. It was found that the metaperception of objectification by the superior was associated with a decrease in health and well-being. Furthermore, the association between the metaperception of objectification by the superior and health and well-being was fully mediated by the decrease in perceptions of organizational justice. These results establish a theoretical relation between these three areas of research, and open important avenues for practice and future research.

Abstract word count: 147 words

Keywords: Objectification, Organizational Dehumanization, Health and Well-being, Organizational Justice, Police officers

Introduction

In recent years two issues have been increasingly received attention of researchers in the organizational context: workers' objectification (Baldissari et al., 2022) and workers' well-being (Nielsen et al., 2017). A few studies suggest the possibility of a causal link between objectification of workers and well-being, in the direction from objectification to a decrease in well-being (for a review, see Baldissari et al., 2022).

In this article we intend to contribute to the study of the relation between workers' objectification and their health and well-being, testing the possibility that this relation might be mediated by justice perceptions, namely organizational justice. Indeed, the workers perception of being treated as an object by the organization was found to be negatively associated with organizational justice (Bell & Khoury, 2016), and across a variety of occupations, justice perceptions have showed to have a unique impact on well-being (e.g. Correia & Almeida, 2020). However, as far as we know, no study has tested the possibility that the negative impact of objectification on well-being might take place through a decrease in justice perceptions. In this study we specifically addressed the metaperception of objectification by one's own superior. The study was conducted with police officers.

The Study of the Relations between Objectification at Work and Well-being

Workers' objectification is a form of dehumanization that is characterized by workers being perceived and treated as mere objects, and used as tools judged mainly by their usefulness for other's purposes (Nussbaum, 1995).

Baldissari et al. (2022) reviews empirical evidence showing that the metaperception of being objectified by the superior or by the organization as a whole (i.e. organizational dehumanization, Bell & Khoury, 2011), is associated with important consequences for the well-being of workers, such as emotional exhaustion and psychosomatic complaints (e.g., Caesens & Stinglhamber, 2019; Caesens et al., 2017); burnout (Baldissari et al., 2014); decreased job satisfaction and commitment (e.g., Caesens et al., 2018, 2017); lower self-esteem, self-efficacy, locus of control, neuroticism (Caesens et al., 2018); decreased job satisfaction and prosocial behaviours towards colleagues and the organisation (Belmi & Schroeder., 2021); a decreased sense of belonging (Belmi & Schroeder, 2021); and a lack of

self-control and increased aggression (Poon et al., 2020). Organizational dehumanization was also shown to be associated with negative consequences for the organization, namely counter-productive behavior and turnover intentions (e.g. Ahmed & Khan, 2016).

The Study of the Relations between Organizational Justice and Well-being

Justice has been acknowledged as a core human need, therefore when people perceive low justice this decreases their well-being (Correia et al., 2009; Lerner, 1980). More recently, organizational justice has been identified as an important predictor of health (Elovainio et al., 2002) and of burnout (Maslach et al., 2001). Several dimensions of organizational justice can be distinguished: distributive justice, procedural justice, and interactional justice. Distributive justice refers to the judgement about the relation between the resources that are allocated to people and their contributions (Adams, 1965); procedural justice refers to the fairness of rules and decisions (Thibaut & Walker, 1975); and interactional justice refers to the respectful and proper manner by which authorities communicate procedural details and justify their decisions using honest and truthful information (Bies & Moag, 1986). All these dimensions of organizational justice have shown to be negatively associated with burnout in several occupational groups (e.g. Correia & Almeida, 2020; Moliner et al., 2005).

The Study of the Relations between Objectification and Organizational Justice

Although the relation between metaperception of objectification by one's own superior and organizational justice has never been studied, previous studies found a negative association between organizational justice and the metaperception of objectification by the whole organization (organizational dehumanization): all dimensions of organizational justice were negatively associated with organizational dehumanization (Bell & Khoury, 2016; Stinglhamber et al., 2022); and, in another study (Ahmed & Khan, 2016), the negative association between procedural justice and organizational dehumanization was stronger for female workers than for male workers.

Furthermore, Bell & Khoury (2011) discussed the possibility that dehumanization can influence the perceptions of organizational justice. According to Bell & Khoury (2011), when employees perceive that organizations treat people as tools and instruments only for the fulfillment of the organizational own needs, they feel that the focus of the organization is not on issues that affect

employees, such as fairness issues. This explains why dehumanization can lead to decreased perceptions of organizational justice.

In sum, the evidence presented so far suggests the possibility that organizational justice can mediate the relation between perceived metaperception of objectification by one's own superior and health and well-being.

The Present Research

Our study was conducted with police officers for which all the three above-mentioned variables - objectification, organizational justice, and health and well-being - are especially relevant. Indeed, police officers' well-being and mental health has been an issue of concern all over the world (Queirós et al., 2020; Violanti et al., 2019). Regarding the relevance of organizational justice, research already showed that organizational justice is related with police officers' attitudes towards rule adherence and compliance with supervisor directives (Tyler et al., 2007) and organizational justice was also found to be associated with police officers' burnout (Kaygusuz et al., 2015).

As far as objectification in police institutions is concerned, this issue has not received similar attention from researchers. An exception is the recent work of Stinglhamber et al. (2022) that found that the prison guards' metaperception of objectification by the full organization (organizational dehumanization) was negatively associated with both organizational justice and job satisfaction.

In our opinion, the lack of attention of the study of objectification in police officers is somehow surprising because police officers work characteristics (Chappell, & Lanza-Kaduce, 2010) facilitate the perception of being treated like an object. Indeed, we can establish a relation between the five dimensions identified by Nussbaum (1995) and police officers' work, namely instrumentality, fungibility (interchangeability with others), denial of autonomy, denial of subjectivity, and violability. The fact that the police institution is very bureaucratic, with rigid rules, and police officers are defined as law enforcement agents, are directly related with the dimensions of denial of autonomy, denial of subjectivity, and instrumentality. Additionally, the use of a uniform, can be related with fungibility, and the fact that police officers face risks of injury and death in their daily duties (Henry, 2004) relates to the dimension of violability.

Our study is the first to study the metaperception of objectification by one's own superior in police officers. The hypotheses of the present study are the following: the metaperception of objectification by the superior in police officers is associated with a decrease in health and well-being (H1); the metaperception of objectification by the superior in police officers is associated with a decrease in health and well-being through a lower perception of organizational justice (H2).

Method

Participants

The sample of the present study was composed by 573 police officers, aged between 20 and 65 years old ($M = 40.03$, $SD = 7.95$), and 90.2% were male. The participants were from all regions in the country. The sample was a convenience sample of police officers that belong to Guarda Nacional Republicana. The police officers of this security force have military and police training and are organized in a special core of troops with the mission of maintaining public order and the security of people and goods (https://www.gnr.pt/missao.aspx).

Procedure

The variables analysed in this study were part of a larger data set that was collected during the Covid-19 pandemic.

An online anonymous survey was created using Qualtrics® (Qualtrics, Inc.; Provo, UT, USA) and the weblink was disseminated by one of the Trade Unions of Guarda Nacional Republicana (APG/GNR - Associação dos Profissionais da Guarda) through their official webpages and social networks, aiming to reach not only the associates of that specific trade union, but also of other trade unions of Guarda Nacional Republicana.

The study was carried out in accordance with the recommendations of the Ethics guidelines of the Scientific Commission of the research center CIS - ISCTE – Centro de Investigação e Intervenção Social and with the Declaration of Helsinki. Participants followed a link to the survey and viewed the information sheet. Participants were provided information about the general purpose of the study, they were told the study was non-invasive, that there were no physical, financial, social, legal or other risks connected with the study, and that their participation would be anonymous and voluntary. It was also explained that they could withdraw from the study by closing the web browser. Contact information

for the research team was provided to all participants in case they wished to obtain additional information or had any questions about the study. Participants consented by signaling an option that indicated this consent and by clicking on a "proceed to study" button and, only then, they were then presented with the survey. At the end, the participants were thanked for their participation, they were debriefed, and the research team contact information was again provided.

Measures

The variables included in this study were measured in the same order as they are presented below. The items of all measures are available at https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/H6XPK

Metaperceptions of Objectification

Following the procedure of Baldissari et al., (2014), the Objectification Scale by Gruenfeld et al. (2008) was adapted to measure police officers' metaperception of objectification by their superior (in this case, their "Commander"). The original version of the scale was modified in order to consider the perspective of objectified targets rather than the perspective of "objectifiers". Participants were asked to evaluate their relationship with their Commander with eight items (e.g. "My Commander tends to contact me only when she/he needs something"; $\alpha = .76$) on a scale from 1(totally disagree) to 5 (completely agree). Higher scores on this scale indicated higher levels of metaperception of objectification by the superior.

Organizational Justice Perceptions

We measured organizational justice perceptions with the three items of the "justice in the workplace" dimension ($\alpha = .81$) of the Portuguese version of the Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire – medium length version (COPSOQ-II; Kristensen et al., 2005; Silva et al., 2012). The items refer to whether the employees feel that they are treated fairly and considers three aspects: the distribution of tasks, the handling of conflicts, and the handling of suggestions from the employees. The items were measured on a 1 ("Never/Almost Never") to 5 ("Always") scale. Higher scores on this scale indicated higher levels of perceived organizational justice.

Health and Well-Being

We measured health and well-being, with the nine items of the medium length version of the Portuguese version of the Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire – (COPSOQ-II; Kristensen et al.,

2005; Silva et al., 2012). We combined all the items in one measure of health and well-being (α = .87). The items accessed the following topics: self-rated/perceived health (1 item); sleeping troubles (2 items); burnout (2 items); stress (2 items); depressive symptoms (2 items). All items were measured on a 1("Never/Almost Never") to 5 ("Always") scale. The items were recoded so that higher scores on this scale indicated higher levels of health and well-being.

Results

First, we examined the pattern of correlations between all the variables under study (Table 1). Metaperceptions of objectification by the superior correlated negatively and significantly with both organizational justice and health and well-being. Organizational justice correlated positively and significantly with health and well-being.

We used Macro Process Model 4 (Hayes, 2013) to test if organizational justice mediated the impact of objectification on health and well-being (5000 bootstrapping resamples and a 95% confidence interval, Figure 1). The mediation model accounted for 19% of the variation regarding health and well-being, $F(2,570) = 66.00$, $p < .001$. The metaperception of objectification by their superior had a negative direct impact in organizational justice (b = -.80), t = -17.83, $p < .001$, 95% IC = [-.892, -.715], that in turn had a significant impact on health and well-being (b = .38), t = 7.99, $p < .001$, 95% IC = [.288, .476]. Moreover, the indirect effect was also significant (b = -.31, 95% IC = [-.403, -.204]), which suggests that the metaperception of objectification by one's own superior also impacts on health and well-being through organizational justice. Because when considering the organizational justice in the path between perceived objectification to health and well-being (the indirect effect), the direct path between perceived objectification to health and well-being (direct effect) is no longer significant (b = -.12 p = .07, 95% IC = [-.008, .245]), we have a complete mediation.

We also tested the alternative model of a possible indirect effect of organizational justice on health and well-being through the metaperception of objectification by one's own superior. However, for this model, the indirect effect was not significant (b = -.05, 95% IC = [-.012, .122]).

Discussion

We predicted and found that in police officers the metaperception of objectification by the superior is associated with a decrease in health and well-being. Moreover, we predicted that the

association between metaperception of objectification by the superior and health and well-being would be mediated by a decrease in perceptions of organizational justice, and we indeed found a complete mediation. This means that the significant relationship between objectification and health and well-being was no longer significant when controlling for the perceptions of organizational justice (the mediator). This finding not only adds to the previous literature on the association between objectification and well-being, objectification and organizational justice, and organizational justice and well-being, but establishes a theoretical relation between these three areas of research, that can constitute an important advancement for future research.

Furthermore, our results also contribute to the discussion about the causal path between organizational justice and metaperception of objectification. According to Bell & Khoury (2011) the causal path between organizational justice and dehumanization can be been interpreted in both directions: the dehumanization as antecedent of (in)justice perceptions, as we propose; or, contrarily, the perceptions of being (un)justly treated as antecedent of dehumanization. Bell & Khoury (2011) manifested their preference for the latter possibility, considering that the perception of being treated with justice by the organization communicates the value the social group places on individual members, thereby satisfying the fundamental needs of belonging, control and self-esteem; on the contrary, unfair treatment by the organization communicates indifference or, even worse, the possibility of being exploited. In the same line, Stinglhamber et al. (2022) also considered organizational justice as antecedent of the perception of being dehumanized by organization.

However, as we stated before, Bell & Khoury (2011) also discussed the possibility of dehumanization as antecedent of organizational justice perceptions: when employees perceive the organization treats them as instruments, they feel the organization do not care about issues that can have a huge impact on them, such as fairness issues. Our results seem to be more supportive of this latter path (from objectification to organizational justice) than of the former (from organizational justice to objectification), because we found that organizational justice fully mediated the relation between the metaperception of objectification and well-being, and the metaperception of objectification did not mediate the relation between organizational justice and well-being.

This study has, however, some limitations. The first is the correlational design of the study, which limits the nature of the conclusions that can be drawn about the causal relations among variables. Experimental and longitudinal studies should confirm the existence and the direction of the causal relation between organizational justice and metaperception of objectification (or organizational dehumanization).

The second limitation is the fact that the sample was a convenience sample and, therefore, not representative of the population of police officers of the specific corporation (Guarda Nacional Republicana) and, even less, representative of police officers across the world.

The third limitation is related to the fact that all variables were self-reported, which might lead to possible overestimation of the associations between them, due to shared method variance.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

This study opens important directions of research. The first one is the study of how the impact of objectification on well-being occurs through the different dimensions of organizational justice. Although these dimensions are usually strongly correlated among each other (e.g. Moliner et al., 2005), it is possible that they don't have the same role as mediators between objectification and well-being. Future studies, that manipulate the dimensions of organizational justice independently, can compare the mediation role of each of the dimensions of organizational justice between objectification and well-being.

The second important avenue of research opened by the present study, is the possibility of investigating if the mediation role of organizational justice between metaperception of objectification by the superior and well-being can be extended to other professional groups. This would be especially relevant for professional contexts high in objectification. These contexts are those where, alternatively or cumulatively, the power relationships are highly asymmetric, there is a focus on money and a market-price mindset, and the performed work activities are characterized by repetitiveness of movements, fragmentation of activities, and the rhythm of pace is not directed by the worker itself (Blauner, 1964, Baldissarri, Valtorta et al., 2017). Factory work could be a very good possibility to start with when trying to replicate the present results.

A third direction of research is to explore the possibility that the relation between objectification, organizational justice and well-being, could be moderated by individual characteristics of workers or psychosocial characteristics of work that have been shown to protect workers' well-being. Two possibilities of protective factors whose moderation impact could be explored are meaning at work (e.g. Auzoult, 2020) and organizational identification (Avanzi et al., 2015).

A fourth implication is to test if the impact of the metaperception of objectification by the superior as considered in this study, also extends to other forms of objectification, such as organizational dehumanization or self-objectification. It has been already found that, in a work context, the metaperception of objectification by one's own superior was positively related with the workers' tendency to objectify themselves (Baldissari et al. 2014).

A fifth implication is the possibility of testing our model, extending it to include the antecedents of organizational dehumanization itself, namely the employees perception that the organization does not take their fundamental psychological needs into account (Demoulin et al., 2020).

Conclusion

This study contributed to strengthen the knowledge of the theoretical relation among objectification, organizational justice, and health and well-being in police officers. Indeed, we showed that an impairment of health and well-being of police officers is associated with the perception of being treated as an object by their commander through a decrease in perceptions of organizational justice. Even though police institutions have intrinsic characteristics that promote objectification and that might not be possible to reduce or eliminate, the present findings highlight the importance of reinforcing the other factors that may compensate the negative effects of objectification. An example, as found in this study, could be strengthening the actual organizational justice conditions in the police institutions (e.g. paying fair salaries, giving a voice to the police officers, and treating them with dignity); and another possibility could be to reinforce other resources that might directly promote health and well-being, such as implementing self-care programs (Burnett et al., 2019) or increasing meaning at work (Auzoult, 2020).

To conclude, beyond the theoretical interest of our findings for the academic community, they highlight the importance of considering objectification in organizations as a serious threat to well-being of police officers and, consequently, to conceive practices that can decrease objectification. Therefore, our study has an important potential for contributing to police officers' better health and well-being and, consequently, to the quality of police officers' role in our societies.

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behavioral sciences* (pp. 31–37). Elsevier Inc.

Table 1. *Descriptives (M, SD) and Correlations between Variables.*

	M	*SD*	1	2
1. Metaperceptions of objectification by own superior	3.49	0.61		
2. Organizational Justice	3.04	0.82	-.60***	
3. Health and Well-being	3.02	0.82	-.31***	.43***

Note: ***$p < .001$

Figure 1. *Mediation Model for Health and Well-Being*
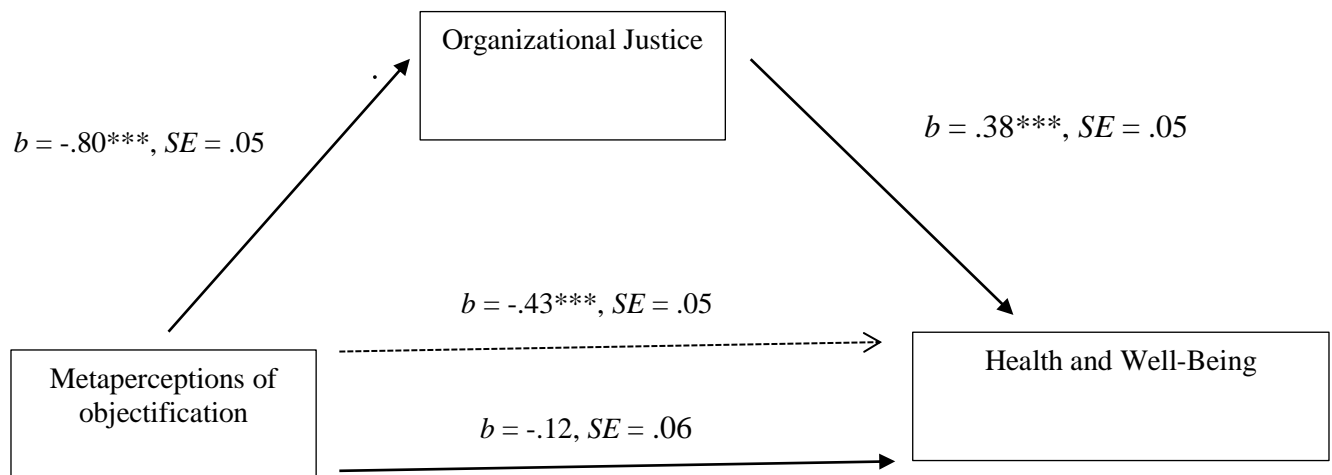
Note. Dotted line show coefficient weights for the relationship prior to mediation by organizational justice (total effect).
***p < .001, b= non-standardized coefficients, SE = Standard Error