Professional Commitment and Job Satisfaction: An Analysis of the Chinese Judicial Reforms from the Perspective of the Criminal Defense

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Abstract

Job satisfaction has long been argued as an important indicator of both the quality of an individual’s working life and organizational efficiency. Using the person-environment fit theory as an interpretive framework,
this study explores the extent of job satisfaction among Chinese criminal defense lawyers and its key determinants. Contrary to findings in Western studies claiming that overall job satisfaction is more likely to be affected by “job-content” than “job-context” variables, the results of our survey data suggest that in China job satisfaction is primarily driven by “job-context,” not by “job-content,” variables. In addition, professional commitment significantly impacts overall job satisfaction. An in-depth analysis of the context vs. content variables sheds light on both the progress and the limitations of the judicial reforms in China.

1. Introduction

Western research on organizational behavior has long recognized the importance of organizational members’ job satisfaction on their quality of working life and organization efficiency.\(^1\) The person-environment fit theory states that when a person and the environment are in congruence with one another (e.g., a creative person is assigned to a job that allows discretion), the job stress level is likely to be low and job satisfaction is likely to be high. In contrast, job dissatisfaction occurs when a person experiences high levels of job stress. This may be due to role conflicts and ambiguities, work over-load and/or under-load, as well as the demands and decision-making latitude of the job.\(^2\) A highly stressful and dissatisfied work force may result in burnout, low morale, absenteeism, a high turnover rate, and low productivity.\(^3\) Job satisfaction may also affect one’s physical and mental health as well as one’s general attitude about life.\(^4\)

Using survey data on 346 criminal defense lawyers in China, this study attempts to describe and analyze the extent and determinants of job satisfaction among criminal defense lawyers. The term “criminal defense lawyers” in this article is rather general and inclusive. It refers to both Chinese lawyers who specialize in criminal defense work and to those who have had any experience representing a client in a criminal case. Chinese criminal defense as a legal profession has evolved during the past thirty years or so, particularly since the legal reforms in the 1990s and the 2000s. This analysis will provide insights into Chinese defense lawyers’ professional commitment and/or job stresses. It will also help identify problems with the Chinese judicial reforms and contribute to an improvement in the overall quality of the legal profession. Although its value “as an object of social scientific study” has been