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Foster Care Workers’ Emotional Responses to Their Work

ALISSA SCHWARTZ

The field of child welfare struggles with high rates of job turnover. This study describes the contributors to and experiences of foster care workers’ emotional responses to their work. Uniquely drawing from the field of Positive Psychology, it describes and conceptualizes the relationships of multi-level contributors to foster care workers’ emotional reactions at work. In-depth interviews conducted with 25 foster care workers found that negative emotions were more prominently featured than positive, but that working in an agency with positive workplace characteristics mitigated this relationship. Theoretical implications and limitations of taking a Positive Psychology approach to the study are discussed.

Key words: child welfare, emotions, employee attitudes, social workers, well-being

High rates of staff turnover are prevalent within the human services field, with annual rates of up to 60% (Mor Barak, Nissly & Levin, 2001). Median annual turnover rates for child protective service workers was found to be 22% in a national survey of state and child welfare agencies (Cyphers, 2001). Similarly, a study of New York State child welfare caseworkers in the private sector reported an annual turnover rate of 26% (Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies [COFCCA], 2003).

Child welfare organizations are heavily burdened by rapid staff turnover, in both the time and resources required to replace people and in the ability of workers to work effectively with their clients (Cyphers, 2001; Lawson et al., 2005; Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare, September 2011, Volume XXXVIII, Number 3

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Mor Barak et al., 2001). Prior to taking on a full caseload, new employees need training and phasing-in time. Workers who remain in their jobs find their workloads increase due to unplanned personnel vacancies. Institutional knowledge is not as easily transferred or becomes lost.

Many studies (including Lawson et al., 2005; National Council on Crime and Delinquency [NCCD], 2006; United States General Accounting Office [USGAO], 2003; Zlotnik, DePanfilis, Daining, & Lane, 2005) cite the severe underpayment of child welfare workers as the root cause of turnover, yet child welfare workers make a choice to enter the field. While not earning princely sums, child welfare workers are, for the most part, college-educated (COFCCA, 2003) employees, many of whom hold advanced degrees and could very likely be choosing other fields of work that are more lucrative.

What, then, is attractive to child welfare workers? What do they like about their work? What keeps them coming back to work every day? The focus of this study is on the positive subjective experience of an occupation, that of foster care workers. By describing the contributors to and experiences of foster care workers' emotional responses to their work, it uniquely draws from the field of Positive Psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) to describe and conceptualize the relationships of multi-level contributors to foster care workers' affective reactions at work.

Positive Psychology, an emerging area of research in the broader field of psychology, offers a paradigm-shifting direction for inquiry into the experience of child welfare workers. In contrast with psychology's traditional emphasis on pathology and dysfunction, Positive Psychology's primary concern is in developing a greater understanding of how and when humans flourish (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Positive Psychology recognizes the power in how a question is framed; if one is interested in understanding a positive outcome, such as job retention, why not try positive inquiry?

Positive Psychology has three broad foci: the study of positive subjective experiences, the study of positive individual traits, and the study of institutions that foster positive experiences and positive traits (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The focus of this study is on the positive subjective
experiences of an occupation, that of child welfare workers. As such, it primarily examines child welfare workers’ positive relationships with clients and coworkers, as well as the institutions and larger environment within which they work.

In addition to being outcomes worthy of study unto themselves, the experience of positive emotions at work positively impact both job attitudes and job productivity. Fredrickson’s broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions (1998, 2001, 2003) has demonstrated that by broadening momentary thought and action options, positive emotions can fuel “upward spirals” that improve both individual and organizational functioning. Unlike negative emotions, which are associated with specific action tendencies that narrow a range of behavioral options (i.e. fear is linked with a desire to escape, anger is associated with a desire to attack), the thought and action tendencies for positive emotions, regardless of intensity, tend to be broad and vague. For example, joy breeds a desire to be creative, and pride in an achievement catalyzes the desire to imagine even better achievements; indeed, psychological well-being has been found to positively influence job performance in a number of studies (e.g., Staw, Sutton, & Pelled, 1994; Wright & Staw, 1999; Wright, Cropanzano, & Meyer, 2004).

The Conceptualization and Study of Workplace Affect

The concept of affect encompasses both mood and emotion and is considered to have both state-like and trait-like qualities (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). That is, both situational and dispositional sources have been identified that contribute to an individual’s affect. In general, mood is understood to be a diffuse affective state that is not associated with any particular incident, while an emotion (or feeling) is generally understood to be a reaction to a particular incident (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996).

While the phenomena of workplace affect was not formally studied until the 1930s, Taylor’s time-motion studies in the early part of the twentieth century focused on the reduction of workers’ fatigue and was motivated both by a desire to increase the productivity of organizations and to help foster a more satisfying work experience for the employee (Taylor, 1903, 1911). Fatigue reduction studies continued to be of
interest through the First World War.

At the beginning of the 1930s, the study of affect in the workplace was diverse and rich. Examples of the breadth of early studies in affect include Kornhauser and Sharpe’s (1932) examination of both workplace and individual factors on affect, Mayo’s (1931) well known Hawthorne study of the effect of the social organization of the workplace on affect, and Hersey’s (1932) study of how affect changes over time and influences job performance. While these early researchers tended to consider both individual and workplace factors that influenced individuals’ affect, by the end of the 1930s the study of workplace affect became narrowly conceptualized as job satisfaction, which was then narrowly measured as individuals’ workplace judgments and attitudes, thus losing its connection to the original construct of workplace affect.

While there is no universally agreed-upon definition of job satisfaction, Locke’s (1976) conceptualization as “a pleasurable or positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one’s job or job experiences” (p. 1300), given in what is still considered a seminal review on the subject, is used in a vast majority of contemporary studies. Job satisfaction, then, was generally considered by researchers in the 1960s and 70s to be a positive affective state towards one’s job or aspects thereof.

While job satisfaction was conceptualized during this era as an affective construct, it was measured using only items that related to a cognitive component of job satisfaction (Brief & Weiss, 2002). That is, respondents were generally asked to evaluate their job as positive or negative, but they were not asked to describe their moods or emotions resulting from their work. Thus, job satisfaction was conceptualized as a workplace affect but measured as a workplace attitude.

The 1980s and 90s brought a renewed interest in studying more broadly defined affective experiences in the workplace. Both individual dispositions and factors beyond the work environment were once again of interest (e.g., Davis-Blake & Pfeffer, 1989; Judge, Locke, Durham, & Kluger, 1998; Staw & Ross, 1985). In particular, the field of positive psychology has produced studies which examine the outcomes of positive affective experiences in the workplace (e.g., Cropanzano & Wright, 2001; Staw, Sutton, & Pelled, 1994; Wright, Cropanzano, & Meyer, 2004; Wright & Staw, 1999).
Study Questions

The two study questions chosen to explore how using a Positive Psychology perspective on foster care workers' emotional responses to their work could yield novel ways of understanding how to improve the retention of child welfare workers are: (a) What are the contributors (at multiple levels) which elicit foster care workers' positive emotions on the job? and (b) What kinds of positive emotions do foster care workers experience on the job?

Methodology

This study takes a multiple case study (Eisenhardt, 1989) approach. Multiple case studies draw from the traditions of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and case study research (Yin, 2003) and involve gathering data from several cases and generating findings both inductively and deductively (Lin, 1998). Unlike traditional grounded theory research, multiple case studies allow for the use of existing literature throughout all the stages of a study (Eisenhardt, 1989). Literature contributes to the a priori identification of important constructs to be explored, and it also aids in the data analysis process of identifying themes.

Sample

The unit of analysis in this study is the individual foster care worker, and in keeping with a multiple case study design, the sample of foster care workers was not predetermined, but developed as the study progressed (Eisenhardt, 1989). A group of five organizations providing home-based foster care services in New York City was conveniently chosen from the population of 34 agencies. These five organizations ranged in size, age, and locale within the five boroughs of New York City. Collectively, they worked at any one time with about 3,300 children in foster care, representing about 19% of the total census of 17,000 children (Administration for Children's Services [ACS], 2007). From these five organizations, a group of 25 individual foster care workers were purposely sampled according to demographic variance (e.g. gender, race/ethnicity, child welfare experience, and educational level). The sample size of 25 individuals yielded enough theoretical saturation in
the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) that it did not prove useful to conduct further interviews.

By purposefully (Miles & Huberman, 1994) sampling foster care workers from five conveniently chosen agencies, this study does not generate a representational sample of the population of foster care workers in New York City. The study's findings, then, may not be as transferable to the population of New York City's foster care workers compared to a study that made use of random probability sampling of the whole population. The generalizations, then, that do emerge from this study are not concerned with all foster care workers' experiences per se, but to theory regarding the contributors and outcomes of a range of positive psychological responses in the workplace of foster care workers.

Data Collection

A semi-structured, open-ended interview was used; it included eight questions that focused on the contributors and experience of positive emotions at work. The interview was pilot-tested on two social workers to ensure clarity. Interviews were generally between one and two hours long and digitally recorded, with permission from interviewees. In addition, a standardized survey with demographic items was administered following the interview. Interviews were then transcribed for analysis. Publicly available organizational data, such as founding year, number of employees, and annual budget, were also collected. This information allowed the findings from individual interviews to be embedded within organizational contexts.

Data Analysis

Multiple case studies engage in an iterative process of cycling between data collection and analysis and are flexible about the order and cycle of the research process' phases (Eisenhardt, 1989). From the time they were collected, data were analyzed on an ongoing basis, rather than at the end of the data collection cycle. The qualitative software program Atlas.ti (Version 5.2.7) was used in all stages of data analysis, including coding, memoing, supercoding (i.e. bundling together of codes), and forming of families (i.e. groups of cases).
After the initial reading and memoing of each interview, interviews were reread to determine emerging, potentially useful codes for analysis. Initial codes were also applied based on an ongoing review of the relevant literature and through constant comparison with interviews already coded. Initial coding yielded 479 separate codes, many of which overlapped and are not utilized in this present analysis.

Following the open coding process, initial codes were grouped by similarity into larger groups, allowing for greater ease with data analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This ultimately yielded 122 categories, many of which again overlapped and are not discussed here. This article primarily makes use of 32 grouped codes that were used to categorize six levels of emotional contributors (individual, coworkers, supervisors, clients, agency, and the larger environment) and 20 distinct types of emotions. It was at this stage that the underlying relationships between categories began to emerge and categories, themselves, were coded according to particular properties and dimensions.

The next stage of analysis involved developing hypotheses regarding the relationships between key constructs (e.g., descriptions of emotional contributors and particular emotions experienced at work). Tactics applied included the comparison of within-group similarities and across-group differences and the comparison of similarities and differences between two cases (or groups of cases) (Eisenhardt, 1989). Credibility of the study (Miles & Huberman, 1994) was assured by paying attention to deviant cases and developing alternate explanations of findings, as well as applying replication logic to confirm that emerging themes were evident across cases.

Results

Description of Participants

A total of 25 foster care workers were interviewed from five different agencies. Twelve of the interviewees had undergraduate degrees from various fields, and ten interviewees possessed graduate degrees in social work. Two interviewees had graduate degrees in other fields, and one interviewee had not completed their college education. More than three-quarters
(n = 19) of those interviewed were female, and most interviewees identified their race/ethnicity as either Black (non-Hispanic) (n = 9) or Hispanic/Latino (n = 8). The remaining interviewees identified themselves as White (n = 3), Asian (n = 2), or Other (n = 3).

While more than one-third of the interviewees (n = 9) had less than one year of experience in child welfare, more than two-thirds of interviewees (n = 17) had worked in their present organization for fewer than three years, indicating high rates of turnover even among more experienced workers. Nearly two-thirds of the interviewees (n = 16) were 30 years old or younger.

About half of the workers (n = 13) had an annual salary between $30,000 and $39,999. Three workers had salaries between $20,000 and $29,999, and nine workers had salaries between $40,000 and $49,999. The average caseload size was 19 children, and the average number of hours worked each week was 44. As a point of reference, the New York City chapter of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) recommended in 2008 that starting salaries for social workers with a BSW be $40,600 and for those with an MSW be $50,800 (NASW-NYC, 2008). The Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) recommends caseload sizes of 12-15 (CWLA, 1995).

Contributors to Foster Care Workers' Positive (and Negative) Emotions

Inevitably, the study of positive subjective experience among foster care workers unearthed the negative, as well. Although the purpose of this study was to examine the contributors and experience of positive emotions at work, the abundance of negative responses necessitated their inclusion in the analysis as well. In general, foster care workers made overwhelmingly negative comments about the larger environment within which their agencies were embedded. Most workers spoke very positively about their clients, coworkers, and supervisors, and accounts of agencies could be sorted into three organizational types: Positive, Negative, and Mixed. Interviewees also described a mixture of positive and negative personal characteristics influencing their emotions at work. Each of these levels is discussed in greater detail below.
Environmental factors. Perhaps not surprisingly, foster care workers had overwhelmingly negative things to say about how larger contextual factors and local current events affected their work. They were concerned with the public’s generally negative perception of foster care work, the implementation of a new web-based data system, and new Family Court hearing and reporting requirements. In addition, the much-publicized deaths four months prior to interviews being conducted of two children known to New York City’s Administration for Children’s Services (including 7-year-old Nixzmary Brown, beaten to death by her mother and stepfather) overloaded workers with newly conceived job tasks and further undermined the public’s perception of their profession. All but one worker made negative statements about the larger contextual environment within which they worked, while only five workers made positive ones. (Note that any given worker could give both positive and negative statements.) One worker sums up the many difficult changes workers faced in the year prior to the interview:

This year’s been awful. A lot of changes. These two children who died came at the same time Connections [the new data system] came into place, new permanency hearings reports. They changed all kinds of things... Everything happened this year.

Agency factors. Workers from different agencies reported many common, negative agency-level practices. They discussed overwhelming job demands, the poor initial training they received, and working for low salaries. Many workers described “drowning in a sea of work.” More than two-thirds of those interviewed said they spent half or more of their time on paperwork, describing it as “massive,” “frustrating,” and “overwhelming.”

Each agency, however, also embodied different amounts and types of unique positive and negative characteristics with regard to job characteristics, staffing issues, recognition and support, and agency culture. From workers’ comments, a typology of Positive, Negative, and Mixed agencies was created, based on the number and quality of positive and negative
agency-level characteristics described. Of the five agencies, there was one Positive, one Negative, and two Mixed agencies. (One agency was not typed, given that only two interviewees worked there.) It is important to note that agency histories and their plans for future service provision were not collected; thus, the descriptions and analyses of agencies should be understood as only "snapshots in time." As such, any of the agencies described could conceivably have experienced or will experience the unique characteristics ascribed to another agency.

*Interpersonal factors.* "My coworkers are great.... I have to say between that and the supervision, that's what kept me here." The individuals with whom workers interacted on a daily basis provided great sustenance and motivation. Almost every worker described the positive effect coworkers, supervisors and/or clients had on their emotions at work. Workers talked about three common benefits they received from their interactions with other individuals: recognition, emotional support, and help with their actual work. Workers also benefited from their supervisors' accessibility, knowledge, and guidance. They also enjoyed their clients' attachments and experienced vicarious pleasure in their clients' successes. One worker described her relationship with a former client:

> She still calls us and keeps in close contact with us, and that means a lot, because that's saying, 'You were the one constant in my life.'... That makes you feel good.... You really know, 'Okay, we made a difference in her life.'

While some of these workers also had negative things to say about particular coworkers, supervisors, and/or clients, far fewer negative comments were made than positive ones.

*Individual factors.* Most interviewees described at least one personal factor that had a positive impact on their emotions at work. Many interviewees also described at least one personal factor that had a negative impact on emotions at work, as well. No overall trend for how personal factors impacted emotions at work could be identified, however.
Foster Care Workers’ Positive (and Negative) Emotions

So far, multi-level contributors to foster care workers’ positive and negative emotions at work have been described. What about the actual range of emotions experienced? What kinds of positive and negative feelings were named? While foster care workers spent considerably more time during their interviews describing the contributors to their workplace emotions rather than discussing their feelings per se (see below for further discussion), they did name a wide range of feelings. From their varied descriptions, twenty different categories of emotions were created. Eight categories represented positive emotions (excitement, gratitude, happiness, hope, love/attachment, pride, relief, and satisfaction), and twelve categories represented negative emotions (apathy/desensitization, boredom, embarrassment, anger, frustration/annoyance, nervousness/anxiety, overwhelmed/confusion, resentment, sadness/depression, stress, exhaustion, and worry/fear).

Despite explicitly probing for positive feelings experienced at work, foster care workers named many more kinds of negative emotions than positive ones. While all but one worker named at least one negative emotion, only three-quarters of the interviewees named any positive emotions. This larger vocabulary and greater preponderance for describing negative versus positive feelings parallels current studies on emotion. Rozin and Royzman (2001) discuss how people have a “negativity bias” when describing events, objects, and personal characteristics. Their review of nine different taxonomies of emotion found a general preponderance of words used to describe negative emotions. The authors speculate that people, in general, have a greater need to be able to name and act against negative emotions and that pleasurable emotions are more “idiosyncratic” and require less action.

There is a second, important finding about emotional expression present in the data. In addition to interviewees naming more kinds of negative emotions than positive ones, workers described experiencing twice as many negative emotions compared to positive feelings, with an average of about four negative and two positive (not necessarily unique) feelings named per interview.
Foster care workers in this study may be particularly inclined towards expressing more negative than positive feelings because of commonly held attitudes about how to conduct oneself in New York City and how to operate within their profession. New Yorkers have a reputation for taking themselves very seriously. The City is popularly characterized as attracting strivers of all occupations and passions and is perceived by many people as competitive, crowded, costly, and—perhaps most importantly—cool. And cool people do not share their positive feelings. Cool, hard-working New Yorkers—including foster care workers—gripe about how tough they have it.

In addition, social work, as a profession, has a reputation for taking itself seriously and being humorless. Its focus on righting the wrongs of disadvantaged populations may cause many professionals to have an excessively serious and negative tone. Many social workers feel that it would be improper and reverent to express positive feelings in the midst of the grueling challenge of working to change conditions for society’s most disadvantaged populations. Although gallows humor is sometimes used to relieve the stress of working with particularly difficult clients, it serves as a counterpoint to a generally pervasive culture of grim and serious plodding (Siporin, 1984; Van Wormer & Boes, 1997).

A third important finding is that the arousal levels for foster care workers’ negative emotions were much higher than those for the positive emotions, when analyzed according to the circumplex model of affect developed by Larsen and Diener (1992). The circumplex model classifies emotions using two dimensions, that of hedonic tone (i.e. amount of pleasantness/unpleasantness) and arousal (i.e. amount of intensity). Emotions, for example, with high levels of pleasantness and high activation levels include excitement, euphoria, and elation. Emotions with low levels of unpleasantness and low activation levels include sluggishness and boredom.

Factor analyses of self-rated adjectives used to describe a wide variety of emotions have uncovered a circumplex pattern of loadings with a set of emotions, each housed in one of eight octants: high activation (neither pleasant or unpleasant); high activated pleasant; medium activated pleasant; low activated pleasant; low activation (neither pleasant or unpleasant); low
activated unpleasant; medium activated unpleasant; and high activated unpleasant (Larsen & Diener, 1992). The bi-dimensionality and factor structure of the circumplex model has been tested and confirmed in a more recent study of self-reported data, as well (Feldman Barrett & Russell, 1998).

Adjectives housed in the high activation and low activation octants that are neither pleasant nor unpleasant may not be commonly understood to describe emotional states, however. They include “aroused” and “astonished” at the high activation end and “still” and “tranquil” at the low activation end. They are not the subject of this current study.

Using Larsen and Diener’s (1992) circumplex model, each of the twenty positive and negative emotions present in the interviews was classified according to hedonic tone and activation level (see Table 1). Workers generally named unpleasant, highly intense negative emotions and pleasant emotions of low intensity. In particular, 23 individuals named highly activated unpleasant emotions, comprising 80% of all negative emotions named. In comparison, only four individuals named highly activated pleasant emotions. Of the 19 individuals who named pleasant emotions, 18 named emotions with low and medium activation levels, comprising 91% of all pleasant emotions named. These findings parallel those found in a qualitative study conducted by Dasborough (2006) of employees’ descriptions of their leaders’ impact on them. Dasborough found that 88% of employees’ positive responses had low or medium activation levels, while 82% of employees’ negative responses were highly activated.

Diener, Sandvik, and Pavot (1991) argue, however, that happiness results from the frequency, not intensity, of positive affect. Although it may not negatively impact foster care workers that most of their positive feelings have low and medium arousal levels, it may be a bigger problem that interviewees, in general, described experiencing more negative than positive feelings. For example, Fredrickson and Losada (2005) found that a ratio of three positive emotions to one negative emotion is required for flourishing psychological and social functioning.
### Table 1. Study Participants’ Emotions, Sorted by Hedonic Tone and Activation Level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emotions</th>
<th>Hedonic Tone</th>
<th>Activation Level</th>
<th># of Interviewees</th>
<th># of Quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Apathy/Desensitization</td>
<td>Unpleasant</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boredom</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Exhaustion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sadness/Depression</td>
<td>Unpleasant</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anger</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embarrassment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frustration/Annoyance</td>
<td>Unpleasant</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nervousness/Anxiety</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Overwhelmed/Confusion</td>
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<tr>
<td>Resentment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stress</td>
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<tr>
<td>Worry/Fear</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gratitude</td>
<td>Pleasant</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hope</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Love/Attachment</td>
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<td>Pride</td>
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<td>Relief</td>
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<tr>
<td>Satisfaction</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happiness</td>
<td>Pleasant</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excitement</td>
<td>Pleasant</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Membership in one of the three Positive or Mixed agencies had a strong relationship with the ratio of negative and positive feelings interviewees described. On average, interviewees in Positive and Mixed agencies expressed twice as many negative feelings than positive, while interviewees in the one
Negative agency expressed three times as many negative feelings than positive. Both positive workplace relationships and agency practices, then, seem to contribute to foster care worker well-being and may be the “glue” that keeps them from leaving their jobs, despite their experiencing more negative than positive emotions overall.

What if a foster care worker experiences a low number of possibly highly valued positive emotions about her agency and people at work and a larger number of less important (possibly taken for granted) negative emotions regarding her larger environment? Fredrickson and Losada’s (2005) ratio does not account for the relative valence of positive and negative emotions. Although this study did not inquire about the valence of interviewees’ emotions, it appears that positive feelings about people at work and one’s agency may act as buffers against the negative impact of the larger contextual environment, as well as the “need” for a higher ratio of positive to negative emotions.

In sum, despite the findings that workers had a greater vocabulary for negative feelings, named more instances of experiencing negative feelings compared to positive ones, and experienced more highly activated negative feelings compared to positive ones, interviewees in this study had thriving, positive interactions with their supervisors, coworkers, and clients, while being uniformly subjected to larger, negative environmental impacts. In addition, interviewees working in the three Positive or Mixed agencies expressed more positive feelings than those working in the one Negative agency.

Discussion

Study Limitations

One of the greatest limitations in this study is the difficulty people have, in general, in recognizing, describing, and recalling their emotions (Grandey, 2009; Sandelands, 1988). Sandelands (1988) writes: “The problem of describing feeling is linguistic. Feelings are not easily put into words” (p. 450). Indeed, with a preponderance of comments regarding the multi-level conditions at work with very little discussion of the resulting feelings experienced, foster care workers appeared
to have much greater ease in describing feelings about work, rather than particular emotions, or feelings in work.

Another limitation is the inherent condensation of 25 individuals' varied emotional expressions into 20 categories. Creating an emotional taxonomy is not unprecedented, however. In their discussion of humans' innate negativity biases, Rozin and Royzman (2001) describe nine taxonomies of emotion developed since A.D. 200. The taxonomies range in size from five to eleven emotions, and similar to this study's findings, two-thirds of them contain more negative categories than positive.

In addition, current contextual factors, notably respondents' mood and recent events, affect how individuals make evaluative judgments (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Given that interviews were conducted during a particularly volatile time for the New York City child welfare system (i.e., in the aftermath following Nixzmary Brown's death, the implementation of the new data system, and the establishment of more stringent Family Court permanency hearings and reports), findings about interviewees' workplace feelings and resulting job attitudes may be less generalizable to foster care workers employed during a more stable period.

Another limitation in this study was the lack of additional personnel, either co-researchers or study participants themselves, validating the analysis. This was largely due to a lack of resources. In addition, given that nearly all of the data for this study were self-reported by individual foster care workers, common method variance may explain the relationships among the variables discussed. The incorporation of behavioral observation and collection of data from other sources (case records, employment records, etc.) would have helped to eliminate this problem.

Future Research

Inspired both by the findings and limitations of this present study, many avenues for further research in the study of social and human services workers' subjective experiences in the workplace come to mind. First, given the difficulty or reticence that respondents had in retrospectively recognizing, describing, and recalling their emotions, one way of studying
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emotions in the workplace is by gathering data about emotions while they are being currently experienced, such as by using the experience sampling method (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

Fredrickson and her colleagues have studied how positive emotions have an "undoing effect" on negative ones and how resilient people are able to find positive meaning in negative events (Fredrickson, Mancuso, Branigan, & Tugade, 2000; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004). Given the preponderance of negative over positive feelings reported by respondents in this study, greater research is needed on the resiliency of social workers. Why are workers staying on the job despite a negative environmental context? Do positive agency characteristics and relationships with coworkers, supervisors, and clients mitigate the negative effects of the larger environment? If they do, how can they be fostered?

Conclusion

Framing this study from a Positive Psychology framework did not prove to be very useful. The tendency of studies making use of a Positive Psychology framework to dichotomize the positive and the negative can be problematic. Although workers interviewed for this study had a greater variety of words for, cited more moments of, and experienced more highly activated negative feelings compared to their positive ones, interviewees had strong, positive relationships at work, and those working in Positive or Mixed agencies expressed more positive feelings than those working in the one Negative agency.

In the present study, layers of positive and negative workplace characteristics are embedded within one another. Positive workplace relationships and agency practices operate within the context of a largely negative environment and may act to buffer those broader insults. In particular, it appears that the presence of positive agency characteristics, in the absence or presence of negative agency characteristics, can have a positive effect on employee well-being. It is important that agencies practice some positive workplace practices, even if other practices, such as high job demands and low salaries, are negative and cannot be changed. While the negative characteristics
of the larger environment (or within a particular agency) may be difficult to ameliorate, implementing positive agency practices with regard to job characteristics, staffing, recognition and support, and organizational culture may have a positive impact on employees' emotional well-being and retention. A few good feelings generated regarding people at work and the agency as a whole may offset pervasive negative responses regarding the larger environment.

References


Foster Care Workers’ Emotional Responses to Their Work


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