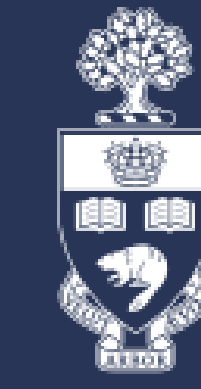


A Career Human Agency Theory Perspective of Emotion Regulation in the Workplace

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Purpose

The objective was to unpack the emotion regulation processes Canadian full-time employees undergo when they encountered an emotional event in their workplace, utilizing the framework of Career Human Agency Theory¹ (CHAT) to understand how employees' motivations shaped their goals and outcomes, influenced their emotional reactions to specific events, and impacted their perception and anticipations of future events.

Background

- Emotion regulation involves managing the type, timing, and intensity of emotions to align with social expectations.^{2,3} This is particularly important in the workplace, where employees must navigate social norms and display rules and regulate emotions to maintain professionalism.⁴
- Most research focuses on the relationship between specific regulation strategies and outcomes, overlooking the contextual aspects of emotion regulation, such as individuals' goals, values, and reflective processes.^{5,6}

Methods

- 15 participants (3 male, 12 female) aged 25 to 42 ($M = 30.1$). Eleven were from Ontario, two from British Columbia, and one each from Quebec and Alberta.
- Participants attended a 2-hour semi-structured interview, sharing their emotional values, goals, two emotionally salient workplace events, and their reflections.
- The study used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to explore how they made sense of and derived meaning from their workplace encounters.

Results

Emotional Self-Awareness

"I think of emotions as a fever. Instead of telling the fever to not come or use Tylenol to mitigate symptoms, what I really need to do is figure out what caused the fever."

"They are important because they affect how we relate to people around us and how we perceive everything."

Understanding of Workplace Emotion

"In the workplace I have to be more professional with how I speak and how I say things, like having a filter on."

"At work, I don't really share with people how I feel. I don't show if I'm struggling because people will take advantage of that. It's a sign of weakness."

Impact of Social Support

"We hold regular discussions about issues at work and update our personal lives, that including our feelings. And I felt more comfortable sharing since then."

Suppression of Emotions as A Regular Practice

"I was trying to hold myself together. I didn't want to waste time on regulating my emotions."

"I was really happy, but it was more about celebrating quietly."

Limited Regulatory Strategies

"I was so upset at the moment. I just kept replaying the situation in my head. I wasn't doing any breathing techniques. I don't think any technique crossed my mind."

Underappreciation and Lack of Support

"Why can't you appreciate what we're doing for you?" I think it was definitely the feeling of not being appreciated."

Perceived Lack of Control

"I didn't have any control over the situation at all. I was more surprised. I was thrown off. I was super quiet because I was like, what can I do?"

Past Attempts of Regulation

"I mean, it comes with experience, and once you work seven to eight different workplaces, the experience builds up. You learn to regulate it."

Emotional Self-Efficacy

"I thought I was a mentally strong person. But going to my work after last fall, I found that I was not able to complete all the tasks. I was maybe not that good at mentally controlling my emotions. Or maybe I was not a strong person anymore."

Goal Setting

"I hope they see that I am a workaholic and have certain standards."

"I think I still enjoy being an emotional person. I try to be honest and kind to everyone. I don't believe there is an absolute right or wrong in my emotions. I think that sometimes when you interact with others while carrying a bit of emotion, whether it is happiness or anxiety, people perceive you as a real person."

Self-Reflection on Emotion Regulation

"I feel very unprofessional that I made the session about my own vulnerabilities rather than focusing on what the student needed at that moment. I definitely didn't react in a rational way that aligns with my goal."

Re-evaluation of workplace culture

"I realized that I don't like this field. Although I think I can continue, I may not stay in academia in the long run. I plan to change careers in the future."

Changes in Relationships

"Before that, if there was a weekend gathering, I would go even though I never enjoyed these events. But now, if they have suggested going out, I would just refuse. I didn't want to build personal connections with them anymore. I was not going to waste my time."

Readjustment of Self and Expectations

"Before this event, I considered myself an absolute rationalist. After this, I realized that my emotional side can sometimes be useful, especially when my rationality is not enough."



Discussion

- Contextual factors such as norms, power dynamics, work culture, social support, leadership style, and team environment shaped participants' emotion regulation and career agency, highlighting the dynamic interaction between the individual and the broader workplace environment.
- Most participants identified with professionalism, which often demanded them to suppress their emotions to maintain composure in workplace settings, potentially resulting in emotional dissonance, stress, reduced job satisfaction, burnout, and strained personal relationships over time.
- CHAT helped advance the understanding of individuals in emotionally demanding work environments and shed light on the active role they played in regulating emotions and exercising career agency in life.

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