Exploring Career Well-being in Two Cultures

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For some time now, psychologists have been interested in people's attitudes to their work, and there has been sporadic attention to emotions in the workplace. The classic work by Herzberg, Mausner & Snyderman (1959) is an example: they asked employees regularly to rate their feelings, and this research led to Herzberg's well-known theory of job motivation. But emotions at work have only received concerted attention in the last 15 years or so. Emotional intelligence, a notion first introduced by Salovey & Mayer (1990), has become a popular concept. In addition, there has been a lot of interest in emotional labour in the service sector – the ways employees manage and display their feelings to meet the requirements of their job (Hochschild, 1983).

The two studies described in this article focus on people's *experiences* of emotions at work, and people's feelings of *well-being* in relation to their careers. Ideas of well-being at work are often conflated with notions of job satisfaction and career satisfaction. But assessing how far people are satisfied with their job or career seems rather superficial, since these general states do little to capture the range, richness and intensity of emotional tones at work.

Career well-being in the UK

The first study explored emotional aspects of careers with a UK sample. One aim of the study was to explore career well-being, and the lack of it, by identifying the career experiences people describe when asked to give accounts of times when their career was going well, and times when it was going badly. A second aim was to assess how far accounts of particular career experiences involve specific emotions. For example, what kinds of emotions are involved when someone is going through a career transition – a change of job or a move to a different organisation? The third aim was to look at the reported consequences of these experiences and emotions. How do the feelings produced by negative career experiences, for example, not getting a promised promotion, affect attitudes to work and career?

The sample comprised 89 employees, aged 24 to 69, employed in a range of managerial, professional and administrative jobs. 65% were female, and about half were in part-time post-graduate education. The respondents were emailed a questionnaire comprising open-ended questions about times when their careers were going particularly well or particularly badly and how they felt at these times.

Facilitators and threats

The questions about positive and negative career experiences produced responses that could be grouped into a range of what I have called 'facilitators of' and 'threats to' career well-being. These in turn were grouped into seven broader career categories. They are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Featurers of career well-being

Career characteristics	Conditions facilitating well-being	Threats to well-being
Career transitions	Opportunities for voluntary mobility, successful adjustment to new role	Involuntary mobility, lack of opportunities for mobility, problems adjusting to a new role
Interpersonal relationships	Support, feedback and recognition	Interpersonal difficulties, lack of support, feedback or recognition
Relationship with organisation	Autonomy, power	Adapting to organisational change, alienation, inequitable treatment
Work performance	Using skills, performing well	Dissatisfaction with performance, overload
Sense of purpose	Purposeful, optimistic orientation	Pessimism, uncertainty about the future
Learning and Development	Developing skills	Lack of challenge, lack of opportunities to develop
Work-life issues	Work/life in balance	Difficulties with personal life spilling over into work

The main facilitators in the broad category *career transitions* were moving into and adjusting to a new work role, or having a new career pattern, for example, working freelance. So people may need career mobility for career well-being, in the sense of opportunities for making transitions into roles which give them new challenges. The greater mobility that some commentators argue is becoming more common (e.g. Arthur & Rousseau, 1996) seems to be psychologically beneficial. Not surprisingly, threats to well-being in this category involved being made redundant, redeployed or not having a contract renewed, difficulties adjusting to a new role, and disappointment at not being promoted or being unsuccessful in a job application.

The category *interpersonal relationships* involved the facilitators of gaining support and recognition from others: either general support or feedback on performance. Difficulties in this category included conflict, lack of support and lack of feedback or recognition.

Facilitators in the category *relationship with the organisation* concerned being given the freedom to work autonomously or having the power to influence others. Threats included problems that arose from organisational change, feelings of alienation or inequitable treatment.

Work performance referred to times where the individual had been effective in fulfilling the demands of their role. On the negative side, issues were mainly concerned with having too much work to do or feeling that they had performed poorly.

Positive aspects of a *sense of purpose* involved making a career decision, or having a positive, purposeful or optimistic approach to a career. In contrast, having a negative, uncertain or pessimistic attitude seemed to be a threat to well-being.

The category *learning and development* included the development of knowledge and skills through participating in education or training or simply the prospect of learning new skills. Negative experiences in this category involved feeling stuck, unchallenged or bored or being unsuccessful in the attempt to learn new skills.

Lastly, *work-life issues* involved achieving a balance between work and personal life or problems with this as well as having personal or health problems.

Several of these features of career well-being support recent writings about career satisfaction and success. For example, Hall (2004) has described the importance of a 'protean' orientation to career, involving continuous learning and feelings of autonomy and Kram (1996) has emphasised the significance of people's connections with others in the workplace.

Emotions linked to career well-being

The emotions that respondents associated with significant career experiences were wide ranging – a total of 39 different emotions were described. Over one-third reported more than four emotions. The emotions most frequently reported were: excitement, pride, happiness, confidence, anxiety, unhappiness, frustration and anger. So career well-being seems to involve a wide variety of emotions, indicating the richness of feelings that arise as people pursue their careers. The challenge for career theory is to incorporate these emotions into models of career development.

Unsurprisingly, when their careers were going well, people tended to describe positive emotions. But in many cases, good feelings were tinged with anxiety and worries about performance. This was particularly common when the positive career experience involved taking on a new role. For example, a practice education facilitator employed by a health authority described how she felt when she was told that she had succeeded in getting a new job:

> **'….I learned that against all my expectations I had succeeded in getting a new post. These posts were for a new service across the country and this was (I felt) my opportunity of a (career) lifetime. My feelings included ...: disbelief, joy, pride/smugness, fear of the unknown, fear of not being 'up to it', determination.'**

Interestingly, women were more likely than men to report anxiety in response to a positive career event. This is consistent with the literature suggesting links between feminine traits and low self efficacy (e.g. Choi, 2004). Positive career experiences often involve new challenges, and some women may have lacked confidence in their ability to cope in these situations.

Sample size only permitted thorough exploration of relationships between career experiences and emotions for the positive experiences of moving into a new role or career pattern, and recognition or feedback from others, and for the negative experiences of interpersonal difficulties, and being unchallenged.

The emotions most frequently linked to moving into a new role or career pattern were excitement, anxiety, pride, happiness and confidence. For example, one respondent reported how she felt when she moved to a new organisation:

> **'I felt very confident and happy and really felt I was making a mark on the organisation and that my presence was noted and valued… I held my head up high and lived up to my own and others' expectations of me.'**

Few accounts of moves to a new role involved promotions, but many of the respondents who did experience promotion reported intense and diverse emotions. One wrote:

> '**I was really happy – felt proud, cheerful and motivated. Everything seemed more positive and I was invigorated… The only slight downside to these positive emotions was a twinge of guilt that a good friend of mine had not been successful, and feeling of annoyance with another colleague who was so cheesed off with their own failure that they couldn't bring themselves to even speak to me and another successful colleague who was younger than him. In a funny way it also made me feel older and more responsible… It also felt slightly embarrassing at the time to take up the role.'**

Pride was often reported as the dominant feeling when the positive career experience involved recognition or feedback from others, followed by excitement.

A range of emotions were linked to interpersonal difficulties. They included sadness, lack of confidence, frustration, anger, anxiety, guilt, irritation, depression and feeling upset. One respondent gave an account of a time when she was working for a manager whom she disliked and mistrusted, and who would challenge her publicly in front of her staff:

> '**I went from being a respected manager who knew how to do my job, to someone with no confidence… I felt deeply unhappy and inadequate, to the extent that I underwent counselling to enable me to continue work.'**

Another seemed to have allowed herself to be convinced by her unworthiness and incompetence:

> '**…a new boss completely dismantled my self confidence by going over my previous performance appraisals and claiming that the positive statements were all untrue. …I ended up believing him as he was very forceful… I was left completely devalued and worthless… in a way my greatest fears were realised (that one day someone would find out that actually I'm not good enough) and, therefore, I just shrunk and let him completely deconstruct me.'**

Reports of being unchallenged were linked to emotional states of low arousal and symptoms of physical tiredness. For example, one manager wrote:

> '**My circumstances are such that my current job is comfortable, well paid, convenient in terms of work-life arrangements and generally unchallenging…. I've almost felt myself becoming 'greyer' by the day, lacking vitality. Lack of**

> **challenge seems to be producing very negative 'symptoms' such as physical tiredness, mild depression, sleeplessness, lack of ambition.'**

Consequences of experiences and emotions

The most commonly described consequence of feelings about good and bad career experiences involved relationships with others. After a good experience some said they had become more sociable, some had worked more with others, and some had done more to help others in their place of work. For about one-fifth of the sample, negative experiences were reported to affect their relationships with others: for example, they engaged less with them, or were less agreeable. This suggests the importance of understanding careers in terms of social relationships. Relationships give rise to emotions and their quality is affected by them.

For nearly half the sample, having a negative career experience seemed to have some form of adaptive function. This commonly involved reconsidering their career, or deciding to develop new skills, perhaps by enrolling on a course. It was noteworthy that those whose emotional response to a negative career experience included anger were twice as likely to experience some positive consequences as to see only negative consequences. Perhaps anger serves an energising function in career development, mobilising career resilience.

Career well-being in Taiwan

The second study of career well-being, carried out in collaboration with Peter Yang, involved a sample of respondents from Taiwan. In contrast to the UK, which is seen as an individualist culture emphasising achievement, competition, freedom and autonomy, Taiwan is viewed as collectivist, characterised by attitudes that favour interdependence and values associated with duty, obedience, and in-group harmony (Hofstede, 1991). It has been estimated that around 70% of the world's population is collectivist (Triandis, 1995), and so it is important that theories and models developed in individualistic, western nations are examined for their applicability to collectivist cultures.

The aim of this study was to examine similarities and differences in the components of career well-being and associated emotions in Taiwan and the UK. In contrast to the UK, career well-being in collectivist cultures such as Taiwan may be influenced more by interpersonal aspects of work, such as support and recognition from others, and development activities and task outcomes that are socially oriented. It may be less influenced by having autonomy at work. Previous work (e.g. Triandis, 1995) has suggested that the emotions of collectivists tend to be other-focused (e.g. anger, gratitude and shame), and so we predicted that the Taiwanese sample would report other-related emotions with greater frequency than the UK sample.

A sample of 56 Taiwanese employees responded to the same questions about significant career experiences and the emotions associated with them as the UK sample. Their responses were compared to those of a sub-sample of the UK employees in the original study, matched by age, gender, occupation and the proportion engaged in part-time postgraduate study.

Findings showed that the main components of career well-being were similar for the two groups, with differences in emphasis. Although interpersonal relationships were equally significant, support from supervisors was more frequently mentioned in the Taiwanese sample. Two features of well-being seemed more important for the Taiwanese sample: performing well and social aspects of learning.

The importance of performing well could be explained by the fact that in Taiwanese culture, having a high level of achievement is important in order to conform with parents' expectations of a secure career. Also, achievement is a means of promoting the family's 'face' and it makes them proud. In contrast to the UK respondents, the Taiwanese group frequently reported that the outcomes of effective work performance involved benefits for others as well as the respondent. As one army officer wrote:

'I played an important role in several projects. High-level supervisors praised my performance. I was immensely proud of myself and in doing these tasks I learned several skills. I was filled with happiness and a sense of achievement because I controlled key processes and others relied heavily on my work.'

The Taiwanese respondents were more likely to describe social aspects of learning, such as learning in collaboration with others, learning that helped others improve, and the development of social networks as an outcome of learning.

For the Taiwanese, career well-being seemed less likely to involve opportunities for career mobility, and reporting problems with career transitions was fairly uncommon. At the heart of career mobility is change, for which a degree of risk taking is needed. However, a cultural value widely held in Taiwan is work security. As well as feeling pressure to meet parents' expectations for a secure career, individuals have a strong sense of duty to their family when they get married, and may be reluctant to make job changes that might not work out.

Another difference between the two groups was that the Taiwanese respondents were less concerned with having autonomy and power at work, as might be predicted on the basis of norms of collectivity. Also, this group were much less likely to say they felt 'stuck' or unchallenged in their career. One possible reason for this is that people from collectivist cultures may be less likely to seek to actualise their personal potential and aspire to a career

that matches their interests. Moreover, people may perhaps be inclined to put up with unsatisfying work to a greater degree than those from individualistic cultures, since being unemployed could lead to the family 'losing face'.

In relation to reported emotions, the Taiwanese sample did not report other-related emotions with greater frequency than the UK sample. The main difference between the two samples was in the frequency with which the Taiwanese group reported having a sense of achievement. The UK group, while not mentioning this as such, commonly described pride. The career experiences linked to these emotions seemed similar in the two groups, however, in that recognition by or praise from others seemed to be intrinsic to the experience.

Some of the findings relating to career well-being therefore support the literature on the attitudes and values of collectivist nations, and they lend weight to calls for career theories to be more culturally sensitive. However, the results relating to reported emotions could be interpreted as casting doubt on some of the differences between the two cultures as represented in the literature.

Conclusions

In interpreting the findings of these two studies, we have to be careful not to assume that that the experiences and emotions reported by the respondents reflect what they actually went through and felt at the time. (However, it is unlikely that people's recollections of emotionally-laden experiences are completely unrelated to what actually happened.) It is also, of course, impossible to conclude that there were any cause and effect relationships between experiences and emotions. Another limitation of the studies is in the nature of the samples. The respondents were all working in managerial, professional and administrative occupations, and women were over-represented. This limits the generalisability of the findings.

However, this model of career well-being and the emotions linked to it provides a starting point for exploring emotional aspects of career development. In particular, this research suggests that social relationships at work are key to well-being in both cultures. Career counselling often focuses on helping people choose occupations which match their interests, abilities and values, and differences between occupations are emphasised. These findings suggest that there are certain features of careers that are particularly important for well-being, irrespective of person-occupation fit. Therefore career practitioners working with young people and others going through career transitions might usefully help individuals assess how significant these features are to them personally, and examine how far the careers they are considering have these characteristics. In particular, practitioners need to help clients attend to the social context of work, so that they are better prepared to manage relationships and cope with interpersonal difficulties.

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