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The Lived Experience of Psychological Occupational Stress in Early Childhood Education

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The Lived Experience of Psychological Occupational Stress in Early Childhood

Education

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Abstract

Early childhood education (ECE) programs have been recognized by the Institute of Medicine and the Administration for Children and Families as excellent interventions to alleviate the long-term negative effects of poverty in the United States, but the quality of intervention provided and outcomes for the target population are adversely hindered by high occupational stress burdens for ECE teachers. According to Sheridan, Edwards, Marvin, and Knoche, the models used to address this concern are not empirically supported for specific applicability to ECE nonprofit settings. There is a need for deeper understanding of the lived experiences of ECE teachers, including the psychological aspect of their experience of occupational stress. This study aims to use the phenomenological methods described by Moustakas (1994) via Creswell (2013) to provide a description of the lived experiences of psychological-occupational stress for ECE teachers serving low-income families in a non-profit, quality-focused organizational setting. Semi-structured verbal interviews and written responses were collected from ECE professionals for a parent study on leadership and professional development in ECE. Data from participants in classroom teacher roles (n=4) were analyzed through steps of researcher bracketing, horizontalization of participant statements, and the development of clusters of meaning, and theme identification to provide an essential description of these ECE teachers' experience of the phenomenon of psychological-occupational stress.

Chapter 1—Introduction

Occupational stress has been recognized by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) as a public health concern since the late 20th century. Occupational stress includes physical and psychological components, and preventing its negative health effects is supported by understanding the experience of stress in the setting in which it takes place. One setting known to have high levels of occupational stress is early childhood education, where teachers are both physically and psychologically stressed on a daily basis (Wells, 2015; Whitaker, Dearth-Wesley, & Gooze, 2015; Jeon, Buettner, & Grant, 2018). Because the psychological component of occupational stress is inherently subjective, understanding it in an occupational context such as early childhood education can be enhanced through the use of phenomenological research methods. The lived experience of psychological-occupational stress for early childhood educators was observed to be a topic of interest through a larger study of early childhood education leaders in Nebraska.

Research Question

What is the lived workplace experience of psychological-occupational stress for early childhood educators serving low-income families and children in a non-profit, accredited organizational setting?

Specific Aims

This study aims to provide a phenomenological description of the psychological-occupational stress experienced by ECE professionals in centers serving families and children in poverty, for the purpose of better supporting these professionals in their occupational health.

Significance

High-quality ECE has been widely recognized in the United States as a successful targeted intervention to provide families with the tools and knowledge to alleviate the negative effects of poverty (Office of Administration for Children & Families [ACF], 2018; Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2015; Magnuson & Duncan, 2016). Much of the success of ECE intervention programs depends on the social-emotional relationships between the children and the teachers (ACF, 2018; Brandt, Perry, Seligman, & Tronick, 2014; Whitebook, 2014; Miller & Bogatova, 2009; Jones, Bub, & Raver, 2013).

A significant barrier to positive teacher-child relationships is known to be the reduced social-emotional capacity of teachers that results from inadequately supported occupational stress, particularly the psychological components (Hamre & Pianta, 2004; Miller & Bogatova, 2009; Zhai, Raver, & Li-Grining, 2011; Whitaker, Dearth-Wesley, & Gooze, 2015; Russell, Baumgartner, Ota, Kuhn, & Durr, 2017; Sottimano, Viotti, Guidetti, & Converso, 2017; Jeon, Buettner, & Grant, 2018). Since the late 1980s, quantitative occupational stress measurement tools with adequate internal validity and reliability have been used with this population (Whitaker, Dearth-Wesley, & Gooze, 2014; Wagner, Forer, & Cepeda, 2013; Wells, 2015). Other researchers of the occupational stress of this population have chosen to measure biomedical stress indicators; there is blood marker evidence of extreme stress in ECE teachers, as well as a pattern of physical injury incurred through the variety of strenuous demands the job requires (Nislin, Sajaniemi, Sims, Suhonen, Maldonado, Hyttinen, & Hirvonen, 2016; Converso, Viotti, Sottimano, Cascio, & Guidetti, 2018).

Phenomenological descriptions have the capacity to provide policymakers, healthcare providers, supervisors, and educators with vital deep descriptions of a phenomenon as it is experienced by a small group of individuals, in a way that cannot be captured through large surveys (Creswell, 2013). While existing research (Wells, 2015; Whitaker, Dearth-Wesley, & Gooze, 2015; Jeon, Buettner, & Grant, 2018) on early childhood education include the effects of teacher psychological-occupational stress on child outcomes, the majority of the descriptions of this phenomenon are brief and generalized, utilizing existing models to measure the intensity and outcomes of the experience of psychological occupational stress for these teachers. This study aims to provide a phenomenological description of the psychological-occupational stress experienced by ECE professionals in centers serving families and children in poverty, for the purpose of better supporting these professionals in their occupational health.

Chapter 2—Background and Literature Review

Description of Health Problem

Relevance of ECE teachers' experience to public health. Expert consensus on the social determinants of health emphasize that early childhood experiences are major predictors of lifetime health and quality of life (Institute of Medicine [IOM] & National Research Council [NRC], 2015). As knowledge about learning and development between the ages of 0 and 5 years grows rapidly, providing high-quality ECE is one of the primary intervention strategies recommended to address poverty and prepare children and their parents for engagement with the K-12 school system (IOM & NRC, 2015). It follows that publicly subsidized ECE programs are expected to implement up-to-date evidence-based practices to maintain funding and accreditation (IOM & NRC, 2015). The public health perspective endorses this expectation, but it is worth consideration that low-paid, racially diverse, primarily female teachers bear the majority of the stresses and responsibilities of meeting those requirements (National Survey of Early Care and Education [NSECE] Project Team, 2013). It is common for the children of the ECE teachers to attend the same programs where their parent teaches (Whitebrook, 2014).

The National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE) published the first nationally representative portrait of the roughly one million ECE direct-service professionals in 2013 (NSECE Project Team, 2013). Center-based teachers are often lifetime professionals, with only 23% of the 2012 United States ECE teacher population having less than 5 years of experience, and 50% having more than 10 years of experience (NSECE Project Team, 2013). ECE direct service professionals in centers

work a median of 39.2 hours per week, and 74% are employed by their center full-time

(NSECE Project Team, 2013). According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics' most

updated report, the median salary in 2017 for a United States preschool teacher was

$28,990 per year, and those who worked in programs providing day care were paid a

median salary of $26,870 per year (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). The racial

demographics of center-based ECE professionals in the United States in 2012 were

64% white, 17% African American, 14% Hispanic, and 5% comprised of individuals

identifying with a race category other than white, African American, or Hispanic (Ullrich,

Hamm, & Herzfeldt-Kamprath, 2016; NSECE Project Team, 2013). Regarding gender,

the NSECE demographic data indicated an overwhelming majority of female ECE

professionals and male professionals have been treated as outliers in the subsequent

analyses (Whitebrook, 2014; NSECE Project Team, 2013). A 2014 report through the

Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation compared the national ECE workforce with that of the

K-12 workforce, and illustrated that in addition to being staffed by a more diverse and

female-dominant population than K-12 schools, the unionization and employee

advocacy for the improvement of working conditions are quite rare in the ECE field. The

most common response by ECE professionals to poor compensation and working

conditions is to leave the organization or transfer to another employer in the field, which

has created a high organizational burnout and turnover rate (Whitebrook, 2014; Wells,

2015).

  Public and legislator perceptions that competitive compensation and professional

development are unnecessary for the care and education of very young children,

combined with the fragmentation of the ECE field into home-based, private, and public

operations, have led to inconsistent and inadequate support of the professionals who circulate between ECE positions (Phillips, Austin, & Whitebook, 2016). Particularly in the non-profit sector of ECE, low compensation has ironically perpetuated poverty among the teachers who are working to alleviate poverty among children (Zhao & Lu, 2019). What little has been documented on the psychological experiences of early childhood professionals has focused on teachers who serve children ages 3 to 5, rather than ECE professionals working with those aged 0 to 3. One study used a grounded theory approach to describe the psychological experiences of ECE professionals working with ages 3 to 5 at Head Start, using a job demands-resources model for analysis (Wells, 2017). There is no such qualitative description published, however, describing the experiences of ECE direct-service professionals working with the ages of 0-3 years. Psychological-occupational stress left unsupported by the ECE organization is associated with lower retention, poorer teacher response and child interaction, and worse depressive symptoms within the ECE workforce (Wells, 2015; Whitaker, Dearth-Wesley, & Gooze, 2015; Jeon, Buettner, & Grant, 2018).

Scientific Background

NIOSH defines occupational stress as the "harmful physical and emotional responses that occur when the requirements of the job do not match the capabilities, resources, or needs of the worker…leading to poor health and even injury", taking care to differentiate between "challenges", which are motivating components that can be met and do not produce long lasting stress responses (NIOSH, 1999, p 6). This phenomenology is focused on specifically the psychological (mental and emotional) element of overall occupational stress.

Existing models of psychological-occupational stress. The most widely used and validated model for understanding psychological-occupational stress is the Job Demands-Resources theory, which is also the basis of the Perceived Stress and Perceived Support model, the concept of burnout, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health's (NIOSH) model, and the Job Demands-Resources-Supports model (National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, 1999; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002; Wagner, Forer, Cepeda, Goelman, Maggi, D'Angiulli, Wessel, Hertzman, & Grunau, 2013; Blochliger & Bauer, 2018; Lesener, Gusy, & Wolter, 2019). Figure 1 depicts the Job-Resources and Demands theory model with components from NIOSH included as descriptions. This model has been used widely with the ECE teacher population since the research surveys and measurement tools from NIOSH are based on this understanding of occupational stress.

Two other models that have been used to explore the phenomenon of psychological-occupational stress in comparable environments are the emotional exhaustion/compassion fatigue model for working with vulnerable populations (Chang, 2009; Bernstein-Chernoff, 2016; Brown, 2016; Jeon, Buettner, & Grant, 2018; Blochliger & Bauer, 2018), and the ecological systems theory for social work and development (Ullrich, Hamm, & Herzfeldt-Kamprath, 2016; Julien-Chinn, 2017; Russell, Baumgartner, Ota, Kuhn, & Durr, 2017; Zhao & Lu, 2019). Compassion fatigue and its related concepts rely on the understanding that there is a limited amount of empathy that individuals are able to use for motivation. The ecological model is a philosophical assessment framework that recognizes the impact of the environment on the individual.

Figure 1. Synthesis of JRDT and NIOSH models of psychological-occupational stress

Negative Process for Employee and Organization

Job Demands		Burnout		Negative Outcomes
• Task design • Supervision provided • Interpersonal relationships • Role definition • Job security • Environmental conditions	INCREASE →	Demands disproportionate to resources	INCREASE →	• Individual: risk increased for injury, physical and mental illness • Organization: employee retention and performance decreased, days missed increase

DECREASE ↗

Job Resources		Work Engagement		Positive Outcomes
• Capabilities • Resources • Individual factors	INCREASE →	Commitment	INCREASE →	• Individual: health and job satisfaction increased • Organization: Employee retention and performance increased, days missed decrease

Positive Process for Employee and Organization

Role of ECE teachers. Teachers in ECE have a primary goal of preparing the children in their classrooms for success in K-12 education. Their role is to plan developmentally appropriate lessons for very young children (ages 0 to 5), provide secure attachment relationships for the children, and to engage the children in social-emotional learning and development (Miller & Bogatova, 2009; Denham, Bassett, & Zinsser, 2012; Bullough, Hall-Keynon, MacKay, & Marshall, 2014; Whitebook, 2014; IOM & NRC, 2015; Phillips, Austin & Whitebook, 2016; Denham, Basset, & Miller, 2017). The expectations for these teachers are increasing faster than the professionalization of the field is occurring (Sheridan, Edwards, Marvin & Knoche, 2009; Bullough, Hall-Keynon, MacKay, & Marshall, 2014). The most commonly referenced source of psychological-occupational stress for ECE teachers is economic insecurity,

followed by the physical and emotional energy required to perform this job, and clinical levels of depression (IOM & NRC, 2015; Whitebook, McLean, Austin, & Edwards, 2018). Some investigations have found that ECE centers providing time and resources to develop healthy workplace relationships with other teachers and supervisors and personally reflect have shown improvements towards lowered overall occupational stress, indicating that the lack of personal resources typically provided to ECE teachers likely contribute to their extreme stress as well (IOM & NRC, 2015).

Gap in Literature and Rationale for Study

A 2009 research needs assessment from the Nebraska Center for Research on Children, Youth, Families and Schools emphasized that while teacher accountability for ECE outcomes is high, our understanding of effective ECE teachers is limited (Sheridan, Edwards, Marvin, & Knoche, 2009). The gap in knowledge on ECE teachers in 2009 was broad, but centered around characteristics, development, relationships, and sustainability for ECE teachers (Sheridan, Edwards, Marvin, & Knoche, 2009). In the past decade, teacher characteristics have been documented quantitatively through the National Survey of Early Care and Education (2013) and suggestions for improved sustainability through wage increase and upward mobility have been made by the Institute of Medicine and National Research Council (2015). The emotional and relational everyday environment of ECE teachers remains an often-referenced but little-understood component of the profession's sustainability (IOM & NRC, 2015). Analyses of psychological-occupational stress in ECE teachers have thus far been based on models of stress developed in other occupational fields, while their workplace environment is unique. It is not yet known whether these existing models are able to

fully capture the experiences of ECE teachers. This study aims to capture a deep

understanding of ECE teacher psychological-occupational stress through

phenomenological exploration, without attempting to fit them into any existing

occupational stress models.

Chapter 3—Data and Methods

Study Design

The descriptive phenomenology research design model as recommended by

Creswell (2013) endorses methodological congruence, which is that the question,

purpose, and method are all interconnected parts of the whole, rather than a rigid

stepwise design (Morse & Richards, 2002 as cited in Creswell, 2013). The general

design used by descriptive phenomenological researchers as described by Moustakas

(1994) via Creswell (2013) is to begin analysis by stating the philosophical assumptions

of the researcher and those underpinning the phenomenological method, disclose prior

knowledge or understanding of the construct in an effort to set it aside through

awareness (referred to as bracketing), noting the specific components of the role of the

researcher, recruiting a purposive sample who has a shared experience of the

phenomenon of interest, collecting data on this experience using semi-structured

interviews, analyzing data through several stages of reduction (horizontalization of data,

clusters of meaning, and emerging themes) to produce an essential description of the

phenomenon of interest (Moustakas, 1994 as cited in Creswell, 2013).

This essential description, as well as the themes, were discussed and validated

using data triangulation (multiple types or timing of data sources) and rich, thick

descriptions including direct quotations from the participants speaking to the themes

and essential description. Creswell (2013) has also noted that reciprocal, ethical

relationships with the participants are an important part ensuring the credibility of the

study (Creswell, 2013). To this end, the researcher provided a corrective emotional

experience and referrals to resources as appropriate during the reflective interview

sessions for the participants to the best of my capability. Secondary analysis

additionally provides validation through ethical, reciprocal relationships, by utilizing

existing data from a larger study rather than requesting more of their time. These

participants gave time and effort to this study, which is able to be honored by gleaning

as much understanding as possible from their contribution.

Setting and Study Population

   Data collection site. The data for this study was collected as a part of a larger

study, University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO) IRB #583-17-EX: "Leadership in Early

Childhood Education and Care". Participants were recruited voluntarily through the UNO

Teacher Education course, Leadership in Early Childhood Education. The individuals

enrolled in the course were all employees of ECE centers funded by the Buffett Early

Childhood Fund (BECF), whose mission is to "invest in practice, policy and science to

maximize the potential of the youngest and most vulnerable children and their families

in NE and across America" (BECF, 2019, http://buffettearly.org/missionvision).

   Recruitment. BECF center employees self-selected to enroll in the semester-long

UNO course. Course components are summarized in Table 1 (Appendix A). Two

cohorts enrolled in the course: one in August-December 2017 (n=11) and the other in

August-December 2018 (n=15). These employees were voluntarily recruited to

participate in the study "Leadership in Early Childhood Education and Care." (University

of Nebraska IRB #583-17-EX). The IRB-approved research questions for the larger

study are: "How do early childhood leaders conceptualize leadership and enact positive

change in their current working context? What elements of a professional leadership

development (journaling, coaching, and action research/collaborative inquiry) contribute

to positive and lasting change? What type of personal growth that ECE leaders experience throughout a professional leadership development course? What are the lived complexities in early childhood leaders' professional roles? Did this course meet their needs? What did they learn?" This project will address the question "What are the lived complexities in early childhood leaders' professional roles?" as it pertains to the role of direct service and classroom teaching.

As a component of the larger study and to provide support for the class, the participants were asked to complete three in-person reflective supervision sessions with the graduate assistant for the course, using an interview protocol adapted from the social work model of reflective supervision (Michigan Association for Infant Mental Health, 2009; University of Nevada Las Vegas, 2017). Informed written consent was obtained to use de-identified responses for research and analysis. The de-identified reflective supervision transcripts, along with the online journal entries from the selected participants, comprised the data for this study.

Data Sources and Collection

Inclusion Criteria. As my research question is focused on classroom teacher psychological-occupational stress, this study explored only the responses of those participants who were in a direct teaching role during their study participation year of 2018.

Sample size. (n=4) These participants all identified as women; one as African American, and three as White American. All participants have a bachelors' degree level of education. According to Moustakas (1994) via Creswell (2013), a sample size as

small as n=3 is considered appropriate for a phenomenological analysis given the depth

of the construct being explored (Moustakas, 1994 as cited in Creswell, 2013).

Table 1. Study participants

Position (2018)	Lead teachers (n=4, 100%)
Education Level (2018)	Bachelor's degree (n=4, 100%)
Gender	Women (n=4, 100%)
Race	African American (n=1, 25%) White (n=3, 75%)

Data collection protocol. Semi-structured individual interviews using the

reflective-supervision-based protocol were conducted in September and November

2018. The questions for which this study explores the responses were bounded prior to

analysis are summarized in Chapter 4.

Administrative resources. Access to data collected by Dr. Debora Wisneski and

Brooke Fletcher, for the study Leadership in Early Childhood Education (UNO IRB

#583-17-EX). Interviews were conducted and transcribed by this researcher.

Human subjects ethics. This researcher obtained the approval of the Institutional

Review Board at the University of Nebraska Medical Center for the purpose of the

parent study. This study's question is within the boundaries of the research goals for the

parent study. All participants voluntarily gave their informed consent.

Analysis Plan and Operational Definitions

Moustakas's phenomenological procedure as described by Creswell (2013) employs several steps of examining and reducing the data to establish an essential description of the construct:

Bracketing. The researcher spent intentional time writing a description of my philosophical stance, prior academic understanding, and past personal experience of psychological-occupational stress for reference during the data reduction process. This allows me to check myself against my own stated possible biases and increases the credibility of the analysis.

Horizontalization. The researcher read and digested all participant statements as equally meaningful information, noting any patterns or repetition.

Clusters of meaning. The researcher organized data according to emerging patterns and summarize the patterns to name them.

Themes. Clusters of meaning were further reduced to themes, staying true to the original participant statements in the naming process. The researcher referenced direct quotations from participants to support the construction of themes.

Essential description. The response to the research question is an essential description of psychological-occupational stress for the participants, using the themes that emerge from the reduction process (Moustakas, 1994 as cited in Creswell, 2013). The essential description as described by Moustakas (1994) can include both a textural description and a structural description.

Validation Strategies

Credibility of the analysis was established through the following strategies as summarized by Creswell (2013):

Data triangulation. The researcher analyzed interviews collected from participants over the span of August to December 2018, with a space of 30-45 days between interviews. Data collected over time provides stronger credibility to an essential description than data collected at a single time point.

Rich, thick descriptions. The themes that I describe were supported by direct quotations from the participants.

Expert review. Capstone committee members provided critical feedback for unsupported or imprecise themes.

Ethical, reciprocal relationships with participants. The researcher provided the emotional support and unconditional positive regard for the participants expected of a social worker during the reflective supervision sessions to the best of my professional ability. Participants who were in need of outside resources were provided with referrals (Creswell, 2013).

Chapter 4—Results

Bracketing

In phenomenological analysis, bracketing involves the researcher disclosing personal and subjective prior understanding of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). For some researchers, bracketing is undertaken in order to reduce researcher bias and enhance reader interpretation, as the researcher is herself the tool for data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2013). However, not all phenomenological researchers agree that reducing bias is an appropriate goal for this research method, and instead treat bracketing as the disclosure of personal philosophical orientation and subjective understanding of the phenomenon as a part of the data analysis itself (Creswell, 2013). The epistemological stance of the researcher will determine the purpose of bracketing, and is therefore important to disclose.

This researcher's epistemological stance is heavily influenced by the committee members with qualitative expertise, and the phenomenological methodology. According to a summary of social constructionist epistemology by Andrews (2012), this researcher would disclose that her stance is aligned with social constructionism, and that this stance informed the following data analysis. Social constructionism can be described as the idea that knowledge is dynamic and constructed by its learners, particularly through social relationships and dialogue, rather than fixed and universal (Andrews, 2012). This researcher would additionally disclose that low-paid employment experience with direct service to vulnerable populations, as well as the prior knowledge of the theoretical models of psychological-occupational stress as described in the literature review, influence her analysis of the participants' statements. Lastly, the researcher has been

educated as a social worker, a profession for which there is special consideration for empowerment, especially in marginalized people whose identities have historically been stripped of self-determination. This professional training informs the researcher's attention to descriptions of powerlessness, and is both useful to the researcher as a compassionate presence during interviews, as well as a possible source of bias in the analysis.

Horizontalization

Horizontalization, or the practice of treating all statements as equally meaningful, is a crucial part of phenomenological analysis (Creswell, 2013). Through the process of determining which interview questions from the larger project would correspond with the research question of "What is the lived workplace experience of psychological-occupational stress for early childhood educators serving low-income families and children in a non-profit, accredited organizational setting?" For horizontalization, the researcher determined which interview questions for which the responses should be analyzed.

Interview questions chosen for analysis.

1. What are your expectations/needs from a supervisor?

2. How do you take care of yourself?

3. How do you experience the work environment?

4. How do you handle stress/conflict/crisis?

5. What experiences have you had since our first meeting?

6. What strengths do you bring to the relationship?

7. What personal limitations do you bring to your work?

8. How does this impact your role in facilitating change?

9. If you could change something, what would it be?

10. What kind of feedback is most helpful to you?

Phenomenological Reduction

Phenomenological reduction is the practice of determining which statements

made by participants respond to the primary research question (Creswell, 2013). The

researcher asked therapeutic clarification questions throughout the interview process,

which she also transcribed prior to horizontalization.

Initial codes. Because this secondary analysis uses data directly collected by the

researcher for a larger project, this researcher was able to utilize the documented

dialogue between herself and the participants as a form of initial coding. The nature of

the interviews allowed for member checking to occur during the conversations with the

codes are listed in quotations if code names were taken directly from participants' own

words, and listed without quotations if the researcher named the code.

Clusters of meaning. Several of the initial codes listed above arose multiple times

throughout the reduction process, leading to the creation of clusters of meaning as

described by Moustakas (1994) via Creswell (2013). The researcher spent time reading

the raw data and codes and identifying repeating concepts to name as clusters of

meaning. Table 2 below shows the clusters of meaning in the second column next to

the initial codes they were derived from.

Table 2. Initial coding and clusters of meaning identified

Initial Codes	Clusters of Meaning
"draining"	exhaustion
"freaking out"	personal life stressors
"harder on myself than I need to be"	culture of negativity/conflict avoidance/triangulation
"I have no idea what's going on"	confusion

"initial feeling that I did something bad"	dread of criticism
"it's busy and chaotic here"	chaotic environment
"overthinking"	uncertainty of performance
"We didn't know what was happening"	misinformed/not informed
"you lose taking care of yourself" in home role	personal life stressors
ability to have boundaries depends on kids' behaviors	external locus of control
afraid of parent being mad	worry about impact
being "beat up" on by kids	physical danger
being encouraged to take work home	discouraged from appropriate work life balance
boundaries are harder when kids have more going on	external locus of control
can't change anything	powerlessness
catastrophizing about being in trouble	dread of criticism
conflict averse culture	culture of negativity/conflict avoidance/triangulation
difficulty asserting needs	discouraged from asserting needs
difficulty focusing	exhaustion
difficulty of saying no	discouraged from asserting needs
directly stressed by lack of communication	misinformed/not informed
don't want to burden others	discouraged from asserting needs
dread of interacting with supervisor	not respected
environment feels like negativity	exhaustion
environment focus on what's wrong	culture of negativity/conflict avoidance/triangulation
exhausting	exhaustion
exhausting	exhaustion
fear of failure	worry about impact
feeling "nitpicked"	expectations unrealistic
feeling behind expectations	expectations unrealistic
feeling forced to work on vacation	paradox of not having a say but being held responsible
feeling I'm in trouble	dread of criticism
feeling incompetent without direction	uncertainty of performance
feeling judged for asking questions	discouraged from asserting needs
feeling judged for limitations	Expectations unrealistic
feeling like other teachers' advice is unhelpful	worry about impact
feeling trapped	personal life stressors
feeling trapped	powerlessness
fighting an uphill battle	culture of negativity/conflict avoidance/triangulation
having to scramble	"not my job"
hectic	chaotic environment
hectic	chaotic environment
input not valued	not respected
input not valued, voice not heard	not respected
isolated by negativity	culture of negativity/conflict avoidance/triangulation
just need "someone to listen to you"	External locus of control
lack of confidence	uncertainty of performance
lack of parent trust in teacher	paradox of not having a say but being held responsible
loss/grief making self-care harder	personal life stressors
miserable	chaotic environment
needing to explain staff leaving to kids	chaotic environment
needing to meet unrealistic expectations	unrealistic expectations
needing to sit and cry	personal life stressors

no direction on responsibilities outside job description	uncertainty of performance
no time to do job description responsibilities	not my job
not able to be proud of work	worry about impact
not enough training	misinformed/not informed
not feeling trust in leaders	discouraged from asserting needs
not knowing how to resolve conflict	culture of negativity conflict avoidance triangulation
not knowing if coworkers will show up	external locus of control
not knowing what's within your power	external locus of control
not provided with relevant information	paradox of not having a say but being held responsible
not respected	Not respected
overthink instead of relaxing	uncertainty of performance
overwhelmed	external locus of control
overworked	external locus of control
physically violent/destructive students	physical danger
pushed from both sides	paradox of not having a say but being held responsible
requests not taken seriously	not respected
responsibilities far outside of job description	not my job
responsibility for others' decisions	paradox of not having a say but being held responsible
responsibility for others' reactions	responsible for other's decisions
responsible for decisions teacher didn't make	responsible for other's decisions
self-harm	personal life stressors
strengths feel like weaknesses	External locus of control
stress feels self-caused	discouraged from asserting needs
structural lack of support	not my job, chaotic environment
support only provided if asked for	unrealistic expectations
support removed without replacement	personal life stressors
surprise structural changes	chaotic environment
survival mode	exhaustion
taking on the stress of others	culture of negativity/conflict averse/triangulation
tense	culture of negativity/conflict averse/triangulation
thinks grieving death will be perceived as an "excuse"	discouraged from asserting needs
to be avoided at all costs	culture of negativity/conflict averse/triangulation
triggered by interactions with supervisor	dread of criticism
uncertain of performance	uncertain of performance
uncertain of performance	uncertain of performance
uncertain of performance	uncertain of performance
Uncertainty of role specifics	uncertain of performance
uncomfortable asking for help	discouraged from asserting needs
uneasy	chaotic environment
using unhealthy coping mechanisms	personal life stressors
working full time as a single parent	personal life stressors
worried about impact of performance	worry about impact
worried supervisor is venting about them	dread of criticism
Worry about actions impact	worry about impact

Identification of themes. The researcher identified themes by creating and reorganizing groups of clusters of meaning until arriving at categories that seemed to best fit the underlying themes described by participants. This was accomplished with coaching from committee member Liam Heerten-Rodriguez. As the researcher reorganized the data to determine the essential underlying themes, new clusters and names for clusters arose, leading to the addition or rewording of several clusters to the third set of groups.

Grouped Clusters of Meaning (1)

  A. Not my job; not enough time; unrealistic expectations

  B. Discouraged from appropriate work/life balance; personal life stressors

  C. Toxic work culture; powerlessness; paradox of not having a say but being held responsible; culture of negativity; dread of criticism

  D. Exhaustion; discouraged from asserting needs

  E. Worry about impact; uncertainty of performance

  F. Confusion; physical danger; chaotic environment; external locus of control; misinformed/not informed

Grouped Clusters of Meaning (2)

  A. Discouraged from appropriate work/life balance; physical danger; discouraged from asserting needs

  B. Unrealistic expectations; uncertainty of performance

  C. Personal life stressors; exhaustion; culture of negativity; not enough time

  D. Misinformed/not informed; confusion

E. Powerlessness; external locus of control; not my job; paradox of not having a say but being held responsible; chaotic environment

F. Dread of criticism; worry about impact

Grouped Clusters of Meaning (3)

A. External locus of control; uncertain of performance; unrealistic expectations; not my job; discouraged from asserting needs; discrepancy between official statement and reality

B. Not enough time; exhaustion; worry about impact; poor work-life balance; high investment in outcomes for kids

C. Powerlessness; confusion; paradox of not having a say but being held responsible; misinformed/not informed; culture of complaining; dreading criticism

D. Physical danger; surrounded by chaos; stress at home

Creation of essential description. The essential description of the phenomenon can be written as several themes in response to the research question (Moustakas, 1994 via Creswell, 2013). The textural description included a narrative about the sensory components of the interviews with participants, and the structural description was formatted through themes. Themes emerged from the organization of the clusters of meaning, in consultation with the participants' own statements, to ensure credibility (Moustakas, 1994 via Creswell, 2013). The primary theme of powerlessness, as described in Chapter 5, is comprised of the paradoxical themes of the inescapable responsibility the participants feel to create positive outcomes for their students and the devaluing the participants describe feeling about their own recommendations to the organization to create those outcomes.

Key Results

   Structural description. The essential structural description created by this

researcher is that the lived workplace experience of psychological-occupational stress

for early childhood educators serving low-income families and children in a non-profit,

accredited organizational setting is one of structurally inherent powerlessness. The lived

experience of powerlessness underlies the themes that participants shared in their

responses, one in which the participants felt an inescapable sense of responsibility and

expectations to create positive outcomes for their students, which contrasts with the

participants' experience of being devalued. While there is evidence from the existing

literature that this population has experienced devaluation in multiple forms, in the

context of this project, the theme of devaluation for these participants primarily was that

their recommendations to the organization for an environment in which those positive

outcomes are possible felt unheard and unwanted. The essential description of

powerlessness is depicted in Table 3.

   Table 3. Essential structural description of psychological occupational stress with

supporting participant quotes

Powerlessness: Primary theme	
"Honestly I was gone, so I don't even know who specifically made the decision. I found out because the other teachers in my classroom texted me. And so even though we're not supposed to work outside of work, and it's against the rules, I did my paperwork on vacation. Because what was I supposed to do?"	
"I would change what I know I have control over."	
"Sometimes I don't really know what to change, because I don't know what CAN be changed."	
Supporting theme: Inescapable responsibility	**Supporting theme: Being devalued**
"It's hard if they're telling you all these things but not understandings of how you're gonna have to get it done."	"Sometimes you just need someone to listen to you."

"And then as teachers, we are rushed in getting it done, so it's not quality work that we're doing."	"And then also, us teachers getting our view of things, or how we feel, across to leadership sometimes. You can express things to your master teacher but she's not going to do anything about it, honestly."
"I'm only one person."	"I mean, with being positive, sometimes it's just really hard when you are trying to make it a more positive environment and you're not getting much back. It's really draining. It wears on you."

Textural description. During the interviews with these participants, the researcher's experience of the interactions was a palpable sense of anxiety. When participants approached structural theme of powerlessness, the researcher felt an urgency to provide emotional validation and grounding. In contrast, participants expressed a sense of relief at being listened to without being evaluated, as also illustrated in initial codes, Table 2 (p 21).

Chapter 5—Discussion

Summary

The essential description of the lived experience of psychological-occupational stress as powerlessness aligns with the current knowledge about the occupational experience of early childhood professionals. The theme of devaluation through unheard, unwanted recommendations adds a new depth to the current understanding of the economic devaluation of this profession through low wages and controversiality of the professionalization of the field. The sense of responsibility that participants felt to create outcomes for their students seems to be informed by the current understanding of the importance of early intervention for children at risk for social problems due to poverty. Both as an at-risk population themselves, and a group that provides interventions for vulnerable populations, early childhood educators should be the focus of future efforts towards empowerment. Further research is needed regarding the best ways to address their psychological-occupational stress, particularly as it pertains to the organizational structures and environments in which they work.

Strengths and Limitations

Limitations. A secondary analysis procedure does not provide as much depth and complexity to the description as a primary analysis would, in which the researcher directly asked participants for their responses to the research question (Creswell, 2013). This study's findings should be interpreted with an acknowledgement that the data were collected prior to the full development of the research question and methods, whereas the recommended chronological order of phenomenology is to develop the question and methods entirely before beginning data collection (Moustakas, 1994). It is possible that

findings would be different if the typical order of procedures would have been followed and the researcher would have been able to ask interview questions specifically designed for the purpose of this study. Because of the nature of the course through which participants were recruited for the parent study, inclusion criteria was limited to individuals employed in the position of "Lead Teacher" in 2018. The existing body of literature indicates that associate and aide teachers experience even higher levels of psychological-occupational stress than the population of this study (Whitaker & Dearth-Wesley, 2015; Wells, 2017; Ullrich, Hamm, & Herzfeldt-Kamprath, 2016). Further research is needed to gain a well-rounded understanding of the phenomenon of psychological-occupational stress in the full range of early childhood educator roles. Additionally, participants were all engaged in a self-selected leadership-focused course, and it is unknown whether leadership aspirations may effect the psychological-occupational stress that is experienced by teachers. The researcher recommends that future studies incorporate a phenomenological approach to understanding psychological-occupational stress using a primary analysis.

Strengths. Using phenomenological methods for this project means that the description created is not intended to be generalized to the entire population, rather to add to the depth and richness of understanding of the phenomenon as this particular group of participants experience it. Given what gaps are in the current literature about early childhood educators' psychological-occupational stress, the primary strength of this study is that it addresses one of those gaps. Additionally, the relational components of the data collection allowed the participants to receive something in return for their contribution to the understanding of this construct.

Although secondary analysis is a source of limitation, it should be noted that from a research ethics perspective, secondary analysis is a strength. Research participants consented to conversations about vulnerable, personal topics, and gave of their time to take part in this study. As ethical, reciprocal relationships with participants provide validation to qualitative work, secondary analysis may be considered a part of the validity of this project. Inasmuch as the research question was able to be answered from data that had already been collected, secondary analysis honors the participants' time and efforts.

Interpretation

Bracketing (as described in Chapter 4) provides a context in which phenomenological findings can be interpreted (Creswell, 2013). While the social work background of the researcher and attention to experiences of powerlessness have the capacity to bias the analysis process, it is a strength to have this training as a basis for the interviews with participants. Powerlessness as the essential lived experience of this population's psychological-occupational stress is consistent with clinical and subclinical depressive symptoms that have been found to be common among early childhood educators. The job of educating and caring for young children requires extensive management of emotional expression, which is known to be affected by depressive symptoms. The concept of powerlessness underscores the problems that have already been highlighted by the current literature (see Chapter 2). These findings align with the Job Resources-Demands Theory model of occupational stress in that there is a sense of powerlessness to follow through on what these professionals believe it is their duty

because of the lack of emotional support provided in the environment as it is currently

structured.

Generalizability

The nature of phenomenological research is such that the findings are specific to

the study population (Creswell, 2013). The results from this study have the capacity to

add a new dimension to what is already known about psychological-occupational stress

in early childhood educators, and could provide a foundation for future qualitative

research of this construct, as well as provide a starting point for the development of new

models or tools that could be used to improve the occupational health of this population

(Creswell, 2013).

Recommendations

Future studies should be conducted using a primary phenomenological analysis

of a variety of ECE professionals to provide a well-rounded sample to gain

understanding of this construct. Additionally, it would be beneficial at a pragmatic level

to consider emotional support a vital resource for ECE professionals to have good

occupational health and provide quality services. This could be done through both

continued explicit emotional support in reflective sessions with mental health

professionals. Given the theme of feeling devalued as a component of powerlessness,

need assessments including focus groups with teachers could occur regularly and

heavily inform organizational change.

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