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Workplace fear: a phenomenological exploration of the experiences of human service workers

Abstract

This chapter explores the meanings that human service workers employed in the airline industry and in Higher Education give to workplace fear, the ways it is expressed, and perceptions of its consequences. The findings reveal that fear is not a wholly 'negative' emotion, as it can contribute to the achievement of desirable outcomes when openly expressed, suggesting that simplistic evaluations of discrete emotions (i.e. positive or negative) and prescriptive organisational norms of emotional expression may block *positive* as well as *negative* outcomes (organisationally and personally). The chapter concludes that permitting a greater range of emotional displays at work could significantly improve workers' wellbeing and the effectiveness of their organisations.

Key words: fear; human service workers; flight attendants; academics; phenomenology

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Introduction

This chapter investigates experiences of fear in two specific human service occupational groups that require workers to inspire confidence in their customers: flight attendances and university lecturers. Both occupations are seen as emotionally rich governed by challenging feeling rules (e.g. Hochschild, 1983; Johnson et al., 2005), with the front-line workers having to either conceal or manage feelings of fear to ensure successful workplace interactions (Constanti & Gibbs, 2004; Gibbs, 2002; Hochschild, 1983; Kinman, 2009; Postareff & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2011). We examine workers' experiences of workplace fear, focusing on the meaning that workers ascribe in relation to fear, its antecedents, ways of expression and perceived outcomes. This research has particular relevance to the well-established emotional labour literature, where the accomplishment of organisational goals requires the display of certain emotions by workers. Similarly, in the emotional labour context, a central element of both sets of workers is the need to influence a sense of confidence in their customers/audience and appear fearless in often challenging situations.

Both studies were inspired by scholarly work that highlighted a lack of research on discrete (specific) organisational emotions and the tendency to treat emotions in an undifferentiated manner, simplistically categorising them as either positive or negative (Ashkanasy, 2011). Emotions are often classified as having either a positive or negative valence (e.g. Barsade & Gibson, 2007), which has undermined our understanding of discrete emotions. For example, service workers are often expected to suppress emotions generally referred to as *negative,* such as fear, whereas emotions referred to as *positive*, such as joy, are seen as more socially or organisationally appropriate (Hochschild, 1983). However, these arguments have been challenged, with recent research moving towards the development of theoretical and practical understanding of the functionality of discrete emotions in organisations, suggesting that the utility of an emotion can be interpreted differently within different contexts (Lindebaum & Jordan, 2014). Despite the apparent value of such a functionalist perspective of discrete emotions, there have been relatively few studies that address this topic, which raises the question of whether ‘we have become so wrapped up in the romance of studying emotion that we might have neglected fundamental issues that are central to any rigorous scientific inquiry’ (Gooty, Gavin, & Ashkanasy, 2009, p. 833). One apparent result of this is the relatively recent emergence of the asymmetrical consequences of emotion as a research agenda, suggesting that so-called positive emotions may not always be associated with positive outcomes (Lindebaum & Jordan, 2014). This is identified in situations where, for example, workers’ may experience pleasant or satisfying emotions when dealing with distressed people’s negative emotions (McMurray & Ward, 2014). Likewise, so-called negative emotions may not always lead to negative outcomes, so expressing anger may contribute to the progress of a project (Lindebaum & Fielden, 2011). We suggest that seeing emotional experience as asymmetrical is conceptually questionable and oversimplifies the phenomenon, especially if the basis of negativity or positivity is linked to pleasant and unpleasant feelings. Consequently, such labelling of positive and negative emotions is an inadequate indicator of workers’ emotional experiences, in that it ignores the importance of the extent to which an emotion is distinctive in relation to its subjective experience, antecedents and outcomes. Therefore, to develop each emotion’s meaning, there is a need to explore any events associated with it, based on workers’ own narratives (Brief & Weiss, 2002) without a preconceived and simplistic assessment of those emotions.

This chapter contributes to our understanding of the subjective experiences associated with discrete emotions, in line with research agendas identified in previous studies (Barsade & Gibson, 2007; Gooty et al., 2009; Lindebaum & Jordan, 2014; Lindebaum & Jordan, 2012; Oatley, Dacher, & Jenkins, 1996; Tiedens & Linton, 2001) and aims to explore the emotion of fear as it is experienced at work. Although there have been some recent exceptions, such as a study of fear and anxiety amongst Samaritans (McMurray & Ward, 2014)and an examination of workplace silence (Kish-Gephart, Detert, Treviño, & Edmondson, 2009),research on workplace fear experiences remains limited. The primary purpose of this chapter, therefore, is to make sense of the nature of fear among professionals in the human services. The specific research questions were: i) for what purposes do workers experience fear, ii) how is feared expressed in work settings, and iii) what are the consequences of workers' different reactions to fear. The chapter begins with a review of the literature on the nature of fear and its role within the organisational context; we then introduce our research design, demonstrating phenomenology as an appropriate methodology to explore experiences of workplace fear among human service workers. Finally, we analyse the emerging themes from the research, discussing our findings in relation to the relevant literature.

Literature Review

The experience of fear

One of the earliest recorded conceptualisations of fear dates back to Aristotle's Rhetoric II (1984), identifying fear (φόβος) as a physical or psychological disturbance arising from a mental image of impending danger that seems to be unpreventable. Contemporary accounts (Ekman, 1992; Fischer, Shaver, & Carnochan, 1990; Plutchik, 1980; Shaver, Scwartz, Kirson, & O'Connor, 1987) position fear within the culturally influenced *basic* human emotions, with fearful reactions being recognised as such from infancy. Fear is broadly defined as a state evoked by perceived risk or danger, whether real or not, and as being central to a person's existence and adaptation to the environment (Gray, 1988). When perceived threats affect the accomplishment of goals and personal defence resources are limited, our existential sense of vulnerability and inadequacy increases, generating fear (Lazarus & Cohen-Charash, 2001). It is also an emotion that contributes to our social identity and survival, because the threats that evoke it stem from narrations of crisis that we have observed as threats to others (Ahmed, 2003). In this sense, fear provides information that is essential to survival and is hardly a negative trait, playing an important role in adaptive human functioning, as evolution has equipped people with a tendency to associate fear with events that threaten their individual and species survival (Öhman, 2008).

Attempts to categorise perceived stimuli (Gray, 1988; Öhman, 2008) resulted in the identification of three types: *physical stimuli*, which include survival considerations, such as fear of dying, of injury, of heights, of animals, insects and reptiles; *social stimuli*, which emanate from the behaviour of others, such as fear of being criticised, rejection, and of becoming unwanted, disrespected or unvalued; and *personal stimuli*, which are associated with loss of self-integrity, such as fear of failure, embarrassment, humiliation, shame, and guilt.

Distinguishing between fear and other similar responses, such as anxiety, also helps to clarify its meaning. Whilst fear is an intense emotional reaction to a defined threat with comparatively shorter duration, anxiety is the anticipation of threat from more abstract and vague events, such as concern about what the future might hold (Fischer, 1970), while, fear always has an identifiable stimulus, whether real or imagined (Solomon, 2008). Fear can also result in behavioural responses, such as escape or avoidance, and if these attempts fail, fear may turn into anxiety (Epstein, 1972). Fear then, relates to an explicit danger located in space and time that must be dealt with, but anxiety is more a state of arousal following a vague or unclear perception of threat which is more difficult to cope with active defensive tactics (Epstein, 1972; Öhman, 2008).

Experience of fear in the organisational context

The literature tends to portray workers' fear as a naturally pessimistic experience, which is associated with various environmental threats. In physically dangerous occupations, such as ambulance driving, where workers are exposed to life-threatening situations and physically demanding activities, physical fear is common, with outcomes such as insomnia and depression interfering with their effective functioning (Lifton, 1967). Fear of being physically and emotionally victimised has also been reported in education, with teachers linking it with student disciplinary issues (Dworkin, Haney, & Telschow, 1988). Destructive behaviours, such as bullying and conflict amongst students and between teachers often result in psychological disruption, with teachers living in an atmosphere of fear of bullying (Kauppi & Pörhölä, 2012). The university environment can be a context of workplace bullying by managers, students and colleagues, especially if individuals are unwilling to report it, often due to the fear of future intimidation (Lewis, 2004).

Much of the research on fear at work focuses on potential job loss (e.g. Burchell, Ladipo, & Wilkinson, 2002; De Witte, 2005; Dickerson & Green, 2012). Economic uncertainty can increase fear of job loss, underemployment and financial difficulties among workers (Warren, 2015)and lead to reduced levels of job satisfaction and commitment (Lim, 1996). Conflict in hierarchical relationships, as well as status differences and interactions with disrespectful supervisors, may also contribute to professional/occupational related fear (Tiedens & Linton, 2001). Managerial control over a lecturer's labour process, enacted through performance interventions such as teaching observations and staff development initiatives, can be regarded as punitive and feared (Mather & Seifert, 2013). For human service workers, fear of those in power is common; however, it is also a feature of this sector that customers also often have more power than supervisors to evince fear (Hochschild, 1983). For example, in the airline industry, letters from passengers regarding service provision may result in rewards or punishments for flight attendants, who, through this, experience fear of the sovereign customer.

The expression and suppression of fear

The management literature predominantly links fear with perceived negative outcomes for the individual and the organisation, and tends to see fear as an emotion that needs to be eliminated and driven out of the workplace (Ryan & Oestreich, 1991). Psychological perspectives of emotion (e.g. Lazarus, 1991; Scherer, 1984), however, suggest that emotions are rule based, rather than irrational, and that there is a specific logic to and function of the experience and expression of each emotion. Emotional reactions reflect information that we use in our everyday life and help us to understand the nature of discrete emotions. In this sense, each emotion is associated with specific action tendencies, with fear being linked to the urge to escape from a situation appraised as threatening or change the situation to take away the threat (Frijda, 2007; Lazarus, 1991; Lerner & Keltner, 2001; Oatley et al., 1996). These action tendencies have a strong adaptive function, helping the individual to adjust to each situation. However, this does not mean that individuals necessarily act according to an emotion-specific action tendency in an everyday event; such psychological perspectives have been criticised for neglecting the role of culture, whether societal, organisational, occupational etc., in influencing the expression of emotions (Averill, 1980). Certainly, idiosyncratic factors (e.g. self-construal, motivation, conflicts, goals) are likely to influence the interpretation of an event causing an emotion while cultural factors (e.g. display rules, stereotypes, power/status imbalances) provide a set of socially acceptable attributions that are likely to influence the management of its expression (Goffman, 1959; Ochsner & Gross, 2005). Likewise, in certain contexts emotion expression can be intentionally tempered to influence and control interactions (Hochschild, 1983).

Organisations often seek to constrain certain expressions of emotion, encouraging workers to cover organisationally *inappropriate* emotions with more acceptable expressions during customer interactions (Gibson, 2006; Hochschild, 1983). In human service professions, explicit norms for emotional expression can be organisationally or occupationally prescribed (Hochschild, 1983). For example, lecturers are expected to display confidence and communicate their knowledge in an entertaining way, hiding any fear of revealing incompetence or lack of knowledge when facing demanding and potentially hostile students, to achieve a stimulating educational environment (Bellas, 1999; Zhang & Zhu, 2008). Thus, individuals may experience an unspoken fear of revealing something undesirable about themselves, damaging their image as experts (Hogan, 1998). Excellence in university teaching involves mastery of the subject matter as well as display of enthusiasm and confidence as part of their professional identity (Zembylas, 2004). Therefore, when academics confront any uncertainty in their subject area, where students and colleagues expect them to have expertise, they are unlikely to openly *express* such fear of revealing incompetence (Martin &

Lueckenhausen, 2005). Likewise, in emergency situations, flight attendants may experience fear, however, because they represent the airline company, they are required to display a confident face towards passengers (Ballard et al., 2004).

This apparent discrepancy between the experience and expression of emotion is highlighted in the emotional labour literature (Hochschild, 1983; Kruml & Geddes, 2000). As part of their emotional management performance, workers may use surface and deep acting, with surface acting involving hiding actual emotions and/or expressing an appropriate one, while deep acting is actively seeking to modify the experienced emotion (Hochschild, 1983). Emotional labour research recognises discrete emotions to the extent that it examines how role demands and organisational culture affect the display of specific emotions. Thus, an emotion may be demarcated into three forms which vary in terms of the congruence between the emotion felt and the emotion expressed: authentic (or expressed), silent (or suppressed) and controlled (Callister, Gray, Gibson, Schweitzer, & Tan, 2007). *Authenticity* occurs when workers display and communicate emotion without an effort to control it, despite perceiving it as inappropriate given the situational context; s*ilence* results when workers choose to withhold their natural reaction and do not allow others present to know how they feel about an issue; c*ontrol* occurs when the emotion is expressed at a level less than that at which it is felt, by delaying its expression with tactics, such as counting to ten, before addressing the situation.

Modern workers are particularly selective in the degree to which they authentically express their felt emotions (Lindebaum, 2012), with fear being linked to judgments of negatively-perceived consequences about risks, decision making and future outcomes. Such judgments may lead to a deliberative defensive silence and a tendency to avoid rather than address the emotion-inducing event (Ashton-James & Ashkanasy, 2008; Lerner & Keltner, 2001; Maner & Gerend, 2007; Ryan & Oestreich, 1991). Preference for such silence and avoidance, rather than authentic display, may well be an attempt to avoid any expected undesirable consequences (e.g. loss of social capital, job loss or diminishing promotion opportunities), associated with disappointing others at work (Milliken, Morrison, & Hewlin, 2003). In such cases, the original fearful object and experience are effectively subjugated by the stronger fear of the social consequences of expressing it (De Lara, 2006).

Although research relating to the experience and expression of fear is mostly concerned with unfavourable outcomes, a small body of research notes that it can contribute to advantageous organisational phenomena; its expression may facilitate learning in organisations, as it may influence top-level support (Fulop & Rifkin, 1997) and team member/leader interaction, communication, and improvement activity (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). Its adaptive nature also helps to prepare workers for possible challenges, heightening their sensitivity to, or encouraging withdrawal from, problematic situations (Hayward & Tuckey, 2011). In occupations associated with the safety or rescue of other people, the conscious awareness and management of fear can provide a sense of (self)control for workers (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). So, for example, fear can maintain or reinforce an awareness of the danger of firefighters' work and their own mortality, discouraging any unnecessary risk-taking that could endanger themselves and others (Scott & Myers, 2005). Fear, then not only protects certain professionals from physical danger, but also allows workers to address emergencies with a sense of urgency and control.

Research context

Exploring emotions from a phenomenological standpoint, this chapter primarily seeks to contribute to an exploration of the experience of fear and its potential utility within human services. To achieve this, we adopt two fundamental perspectives concerning the understanding of discrete emotions. The first sees emotions as the products of personal *interpretation*, so to understand emotion is to understand the ways in which people give meaning to certain events and how these events affect their personal well-being (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995). The second underscores the importance of the *context* in inducing the arousal, expression of and reaction to an emotion, given that specific kinds of work events are contingent upon the underlying context (Brief & Weiss, 2002).

Both studies were conducted in Cyprus. The Cypriot workplace is highly centralised and bureaucratic and is characterised by limited state intervention with regard to the regulation of working conditions, autocratic management structures, and low employer investment in training, all of which limit employees' job discretion, and result in lower employee skill levels, increased job security, and relatively low commitment to lifelong learning (Holman, 2013). Recent socio-economic changes in the international arena and more specifically in the European region (e.g. financial crisis, migration, rising unemployment) have adversely affected many Cypriot industries, including the main industry in the island, tourism. Research has focused on the consequences of the crisis amongst European countries, highlighting the rising levels of unemployment and societal responses to job loss (Lallement, 2011). After the 2008 economic recession, three of the biggest Cypriot airlines became bankrupt. In addition, the higher education sector has been expanding considerably in the current millennium, with three private colleges upgrading to University status in 2005 and the creation of two more private universities. Nevertheless, there has been little research within this context of economic and societal-based changes despite the potential value of better understanding how to achieve better quality workplaces.

Methodology

This chapter reports on two phenomenological studies that explored the lived experiences of human service workers in relation to fear's nature, antecedents, and consequences. A phenomenological approach was consistent with the study's interpretive perspective to explore the nature of fear, aiming to 'make explicit the implicit structure and meaning of human experiences' (Sanders, 1982, p. 354). Phenomenologists seek to capture the meanings that individuals attach to a particular phenomenon under investigation, depending entirely on the accounts of small samples of participants (Giorgi, 1985). Because of the reliance on smaller samples generating richly qualitative data, the criteria of reliability and generalisability, as understood within quantitative research, are unhelpful when assessing qualitative research in general and the interpretivist phenomenological approach in particular. This is not because of any weakness within the interpretive research but because of the complexity and changing nature of the social world and interpersonal phenomena and the data required to investigate them. In evaluating the quality of this study, we followed the traditions of the phenomenological method and of other qualitative researchers (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and we focus upon the concept of *trustworthiness*. Trustworthiness appears as a response to quantitative rigour (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002) and suggests that the truth can be a subjective concept based on multiple realities, in which case subjectivity can be useful when the examined phenomenon is about different people, each with their own individualised experience and story to tell.

Ensuring credibility is one of the most important factors in establishing trustworthiness. Credibility is the evaluation of whether the research findings represent an authentic interpretation of the workers' experiences. In the study, this was achieved by giving the participants sufficient space to express themselves freely with regard to workplace fear through answers to open-ended questioning. In addition, transferability involves the degree to which the findings of the study can be applied to other situations or contexts. For this study's transferability, we ensured there is a connection between its findings and other studies interested in discrete emotions and its expression outcomes (Lindebaum & Fielden, 2011).The criterion of dependability is an assessment of the quality of the integrated processes of data collection, data analysis and theory generation. This requires researchers to minimise any idiosyncrasies. This was addressed by adopting a reflective approach; the first author conducted the interviews and ensured reflexivity by noting down conscious presuppositions, in order to ensure these presuppositions do not affect the interpretation of the data. A basic principle of interpretative phenomenology is that the researcher is expected to recognise their biases and incorporate them into the research, as it recognises the impossibility of the researcher to remaining completely unbiased from their own prejudices and cultural context (Moustakas, 1994). Finally, confirmability is the qualitative investigator's concern with objectivity, as it is a measure of how well the study's findings are supported by the data collected. Here, the researcher needs to ensure that the findings are the result of the co-constructions of the participants and not just the preferences of the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The study employed strategies that were suitable for the evaluation of qualitative inquiry and means of enhancing trustworthiness (Creswell & Miller, 2000). These techniques included reflexivity by the first author who conducted the data analysis, member checking, peer review by the other three authors, and systematic reading of the interview scripts – as opposed to the creation of researcher distance and non-involvement.

Sample

The study's sample constituted workers from five Cypriot organisations: two airline companies (study one) and three Universities (study two). The two samples comprised of twenty-four human service workers, fourteen women and ten men, including flight attendants, lecturers and professors, with ages ranging from 25 to 57. The two studies were conducted separately, although using the same data collection methods. The two-study approach was helpful in revealing similarities and differences between the two work environments, participants' experiences and understanding of fear. Although the research was limited to two sectors, flight attending and higher education, the interviews revealed a wide range of insightful stories of how fear is experienced in both contexts. Consistent with other interpretive phenomenological methodologies (Benner, 1994) sample size in both contexts was restrained only when new informants did not reveal any new findings. In the case of flight attendants this was identified early, however for the academics, saturation was judged after interviewing more participants. The interviewees and organisations have been anonymised by giving each a pseudonym.

In an attempt to make participation more convenient, the participants were given the opportunity to select the place of the interview. Participants were provided with information about the study and its rationale and were asked to complete a consent form. Interviews were conducted in homes, offices and workplace cafeterias, dependent of participant preference.

Although there were clarifying questions to explore fear's expression and consequences, the primary question was 'what is fear at your work like?' Consistent with phenomenological practice that suggests asking the participants to describe the phenomenon under study through narratives, as a means of uncovering *their* perceived meaning of the phenomenon (Groenewald, 2004), participants were further asked to remember a particular time of when they experienced fear.

Data Analysis

The interviews were conducted by the first author in Greek and all interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and translated into English. The data was analysed following Sanders' (1982) recommendations. The transcripts were read several times, and common themes that emerged across the descriptions were identified (e.g. antecedents of fear, types of fear expression, and consequences of the experience and expression of fear). Deriving certain themes emerged from the interconnectivity of the interview data and the workers' unique fearful experiences. The identified themes were then established based on the participants' conscious experience (noema) and the meaning this holds for them (noesis). Data that appeared to fit the theme under investigation were grouped together. Finally, the researcher interpreted the reasons why the participants experienced workplace fear, in the way they do. The following sections present the study's findings.

Findings

Antecedents of fear in the workplace

Direct physical threats

Participants described fear associated with perceived dangers that could potentially lead to direct physical harm. From the flight attendants' perspective, stories about injuries and deaths resulting from accidents highlighted the dangerous nature of their work. Events such as severe turbulence and non-compliance with health and safety regulations on the plane by airport staff and passengers were seen as fearful. Such physical dangers were seen as hazards associated with flying generally and interviewees explained that ensuring the passengers' physical and psychological safety is their main priority, calling for a professional need to not allow their own fear to interfere with this responsibility. Chloe, a 34-year old flight attendant, with more than ten years' experience, described how her physical fear was elicited during an event when the landing gear was faulty:

> '[T]hat day, a few minutes before landing the captain privately warned us about a fault in the landing gear. I jumped from my seat and started bringing the emergency plan in mind… we weren't falling, but I became scared for my life and all the lives in the plane… the captain made an announcement to brace for impact. The emergency plan was in my mind. I had to stop thinking about death and do what was needed in case the pilot landed without the wheels… It suddenly became chaotic in the plane, as some women began screaming. The screaming made the children wailing and we were trying to calm everyone down "It's okay, these things happen, don't panic. It's just some technical difficulties". And deep inside me I was thinking how much I want to go home and give my daughter the little souvenir I got her from Italy… It was the scariest, most surreal thing in my work experience.

Flight attendants claimed that emergencies are rare and during the majority of flights if something does go wrong, the plane will still land safely. However, the fear of possible injury is common. Most of the stories about physical fear stressed the potential dangers of non-compliance with safety regulations during flights. Although most of the time the cabin crew have a feeling of omnipotence, threats such as passenger and airport staff disobedience, faults in the plane and other plane crashes can generate feelings of physical vulnerability, despair and powerlessness. People's refusal to comply with the attendants' requests regarding safety regulations often trigger their fear. The most common events that flight attendants mentioned as putting everyone's life in danger were when passengers are intoxicated, lose control or refuse to sit when required. There was also considerable concern that the airport staff regularly break safety rules. Athena, a female 25-year old flight attendant with three years of experience, described how she once opened the door of the plane after landing and realised that the air stair was still moving, although the airport worker had knocked the door - their agreed signal to show that everything is set for them and are allowed to open the plane's door:

> 'I became so scared when I saw the gap. Then I saw the worker giving orders to the driver "come closer, more to your right… now more to your left". I was scared, because it wasn't just that we have orders that, while the stair is moving, the plane's door must be closed to be protected, there was a big gap in front of me, threatening my life!'

Similarly, academics explained that students and their relatives act as agents of potential physical harm and fear. Lecturers claimed that the students' relatives criticise and even threaten them if they are not satisfied with their marking and teaching methods, leading to a fear of physical harm. Danae, a 33-year-old female senior lecturer, explained how she feels when parents interfere with her work:

> 'I've had fathers, mothers, aunts causing me problems because they think they can run the university! I give a 2.2 to a student and they make a big fuss. "Why did you do this to us? I demand to know exactly what my son wrote"… It's mad. They threaten that they will call the media to scare me. And I do get scared about my life…I live with the fear that they may do something to my car or attack me.'

Social threats

There was a preponderance of stories linking fear to the behaviour of others, threatening the workers' social and professional identity. Central to this was the perception that the workers' occupational reputation may be jeopardised, generating fears about not being socially and professionally worthy. Participants also feared losing or lacking respect, particularly in relation to how their job is perceived by other people, especially the flight attendants. For example, they described passengers and airport staff as arrogant and disrespectful and felt that they are often underestimated, often being stereotyped as sexually promiscuous, and dismissed as preoccupied with basic service tasks. Melissa, a 30 year old flight attendant with fifteen years of work experience, explained that the airport staff often ask her whether passengers flirt with them:

> 'They love the stereotype that flight attendants are easy. But this stereotype is hunting me, jeopardising my profession's integrity.'

Sexist comments from passengers and airport staff made the female flight attendants fearing about losing their respect and value as professionals. Chloe commented that people 'build a whole ideology around this perception', which creates fears about their social identity.

The most prominent, however, threat for the workers' social identity were the recent changes in Cyprus' economy. These changes generated fear of potential loss of employment and career progression, which threatened their connections with the wider society. Hermes, a 45-year-old male senior lecturer, with almost ten years working experience, commented:

> 'Ever since this economic crisis hit Europe, I could see its impact in education. Cutting salaries more and more every year, others are unpaid, firing people, people moaning. I have reached a point where my fear has become severe, to the point that I'm afraid I may lose my job and this will be the end of my academic career. I was so confident and sure about this job when I took it and now I am scared. Losing this job would not only hit me financially but would also hurt my already fragile social standing. And no one seems to be doing anything to help.'

Participants anticipated a threatening event (job loss) and a perceived lack of control over it, causing their fear about their professional future, and of losing the respect of other people, which to them would have had severe implications on the canvas of their social life.

Personal threats

Other stimuli were associated with fear of personal and professional failure, of being exposed and publicly humiliated, and of appearing unprepared or unable to deal with certain queries (e.g. from managers, passengers, students). This type of fear created feelings of pressure to be visibly perfect and of sustaining the integrity of the self. Participants from both studies mentioned events during which they were afraid of revealing incompetence, which would result in damaging their personal reputation. In particular, academics remembered the first lectures they had to deliver, which caused fear of exposure. Hector, a long-serving professor with nearly 30 years of experience, remembered feeling scared during his first lectures, as he thought he 'was not good enough to be a professor. I thought that maybe this is not the right job for me. The students' eyes were all over me and I didn't know what to say… I hesitated and for a few seconds I thought about the option of thinking of an excuse and leave.'

Although other participants from both studies shared stories of fearing to display signs of unprofessional behaviour only lecturers specifically mentioned fear of showing incompetence. For example, although she had been a lecturer for more than five years, Ariadne referred to fear of revealing incompetence with her students, because, as she said, students tend to have high formal expectations of their lecturers. The prevalent perception on subject expertise knowledge (as opposed to lecturing expertise) on her behalf created fear of failure and feelings of powerlessness. Urania, a female lecturer who has been in the profession for three years described her fear over making mistakes as follows:

> ‘I don’t want to give the impression to anyone that I may not know something that has to do with my research field. I am a perfectionist which may be a tyranny for some, but in my job there is constantly a pressure to be the expert, which triggers fears of either failing, underperforming or of making mistakes.’

The rationale for fear of showing incompetence seems to derive from both idiosyncratic factors (e.g. perfectionism) and from the nature of the profession, something that Jason, one of the youngest lecturers with three years of experience, also mentioned. He described being embarrassed during his teaching after being asked several challenging questions that he was unable to answer, and the fear of this happening again scared him as it is ‘a moment of weakness, as if you are “being caught”’. I’m afraid that this might make me lose my personal dignity and honour.’

Expressions of fear

Silent expression

Silent expression was apparent when participants described occasions when they attempted to suppress their fear or vent it outside of work when they feared undesirable professional consequences of expressing it there. All the flight attendants explained that, when they experience fear during flight emergencies, they are unable to relax and are troubled by intrusive thoughts deriving from their professional preoccupation with ensuring passenger safety. However, they claimed to rarely verbalise their fear, consciously attempting to suppress it. Participants stressed the need to hide their fears to avoid appearing unprofessional and incompetent, whether for personal protection or, in the case of flight attendants particularly, to reassure their customers and indirectly address customer fear as well as their own. Chloe said that her profession requires her to be ‘confident, as otherwise I would look weak and scared’. Helena, a 32-year-old flight attendant with three years of work experience, recounted a moving story of silent fear. She described her feelings a few days after the plane crash of another Cypriot airline resulting in the death of everyone on-board:

> ‘During the flight, we were laughing and joking with the passengers but inside us there was a feeling of inner turbulence. But whenever there were no onlookers I couldn’t stop crying… One day we saw a crew from that airline and one of my colleagues said: “They are fine! Their colleagues died and they are fine!” “No. They were not fine. They *seemed* fine. We are the ones who hide their fear, remember? We look fine, they look fine. How we feel is another story”’.

The silent expression of fear was evident in academics, but in rather different ways. In a situation where Paris, a 30-year old senior lecturer with four years of experience, was intimidated by the exposure and by the students’ challenging questioning during a guest lecture he had delivered, the fear of looking incompetent influenced how fear was enacted:

> ‘I felt paralysed, out of my depth. I kept thinking that this is not where I want to be. The insecurity of the unknown audience is terrifying...and their questions…so many! But you’ve got to bite your lips. In this sector you have to be very careful, not just what you say as a lecturer, but how you perform as a lecturer.’

Participants recognised that they needed to present an empowered image, rather than insecurity, as part of their job. When Aphrodite, a 31-year female old senior lecturer with just two years being in the profession, was informed about a salary reduction by her boss, the fear of job loss in the future emerged as undesirable and chose to vent it outside her working environment:

> ‘I knew I had to get out, I had to leave. It was very difficult to relax after that tough event. But the best thing I did for myself was to go home, get on the couch, turn on the TV or play with my kids and just not talk about it.’

Similarly, Artemis, a 42-year old female lecturer with almost ten years of experience, described her silent expression of fear about potentially losing her job. When her manager announced a salary reduction due to the financial crisis, she chose not to protest; rather she remained silent, after considering the estimated costs of doing so:

> 'I had to show I accepted the new terms, I had to show I understood, that I didn't mind, that I would keep doing my best for the university. But… It was hard. I wondered whether the next step would be to lose my job. I was frightened to ask… I felt unvalued that day, I remember thinking that I would disappoint him if I argued.'

Controlled expression

At other times, workers controlled their fear by reducing or delaying its expression and spending a few moments on their own prior to dealing with the fearful event. This gave them time to create a kind of intervention. Controlled fear was expressed when participants tried to remain faithful to their interpretation of the profession's feeling rules. For example, physical dangers and the danger of job loss were occasions when fear was often expressed with outpourings of melancholia and crying after the event and when workers were alone or alternatively they channelled it to other people, like their colleagues, by sharing their thoughts with them.

Controlling fear involved an understanding and acceptance of the fearful event with participants using tactics such as talking to themselves and deep breathing exercises to develop/display the socially appropriate emotion. In their descriptions, there was a feeling that surface and deep acting techniques were important when dealing with the challenges of the profession. For example, Calliope, a 32-year old senior lecturer with six years of experience, saw her fear of being exposed as professionally incompetent to her students as a big issue in her job. In her story, she described how she attempted to control this fear before confronting the students:

> ‘I started talking to myself “relax. It’s ok to be scared, but let it go.” It’s something I always do before going to teaching. I say, “You are fine. Take some deep breaths. It’s normal to feel this way, but you can handle this”’.

Authentic expression

On occasions when participants disregarded display rules associated with their environment, they would sometimes authentically express their fear immediately, particularly when reacting to a person who was involved in its elicitation or to people who could address the fearful situation. Authentic fear was accompanied with somatic changes, including shivering, blushing, palpitations, trembling voice, sweating, continuous swallowing, and by outpourings of crying and agony at what the expected consequences of the event. Athena referred to an authentic manifestation of fear resulting from her earlier story about the airport worker’s failure to position the air stair on time. In a calculated attempt to emphasise her fear and the danger, Athena said:

> ‘They should know how important safety is. I had to speak to him in an intense way and actually show how scared I was… there was a legitimate reason to be afraid because of him and his friends who thought that the air stair was a toy! There was a gap in front of me, someone could be killed and his childish behaviour scared me even more’

In the academics’ case, lecturing and dealing with persistent student questions are sources of fear, which they often express authentically with no attempt to hide it. For Calypso, lecturing in an unknown audience of young adults created a state of fear, which brought an automatic, authentic reaction:

> ‘…having butterflies in my stomach, continuous swallowing, biting my tongue (and) sweating. And because I knew I couldn’t hide it, I chose to tell them (students) that not knowing you makes me feel scared and nervous.’

Ariadne’s fear during her very first lecture revealed how fear was expressed as a bodily disturbance:

> ‘Two days before I was suffering from insomnia. The day had come… The first three minutes I even felt cowardice. I froze! I wanted to leave, I almost cried. My voice was trembling, my heart was beating so fast I thought I was having a stroke…So, rather than letting them wonder what was wrong with me, I told them that coming to a new environment is nerve-racking.’

Taken together, these narratives underscore the variety of ways that workers produced when asked about the experiences of fear expression in the context of their workplace. In relation to the authentic, silent (or suppressed) and controlled expressions (Callister et al., 2007), these statements also highlight that fear expressions are not fixed or static. Instead, as the next section shows, the expression of fear was negotiated within different interpretations with the consequences of the emotion differing greatly.

Perceived consequences of fear expression

Damaging consequences when silencing fear

Many participants perceived silent fear as an unpleasant experience, as it affected their physical and mental well-being. Concealing (and not simply experiencing) fear during service encounters was seen as stressful and emotionally demanding. They discussed the need to leave their *authentic* self aside, while at work, and recognised codes of emotional display as essential, leading to a need to hide their fear to keep other people satisfied. For example, in cases of emergencies, flight attendants felt they needed to show appropriate confidence to meet public and organisational expectations. Alexander, a 31-year-old flight attendant with six years working experience, explained that displaying himself, as a fearless and tough person to the passengers is stressful, as he is constantly aware of the need to be assertive and forceful with others. Similarly, lecturers recounted incidents where they needed to display confidence, even when extremely fearful. Calliope described the consequences of this falsification during her early years of lecturing as ‘an internal suffering’. Danae, a 33-year-old female senior lecturer, also recognised that it was not the actual fearful situation that was causing her disturbance, but its suppression. Falsifying her fear by showing reverse emotions, like confidence, during lecturing, especially in unknown audiences, claimed to be part of her job. However, this falsification brought damaging consequences:

> ‘…drained, knackered… a wreck…I had to show confidence…I thought about the option of finding an excuse to leave…I knew it’s unacceptable not to show confidence to the students. If this means wearing a mask then this is what I need to do.’

Temporary withdrawal when controlling fear

A pertinent consequence of having to conceal the expression of fear in the workplace was withdrawing from the fearful event that threatened to overwhelm them. In relation to personal and social threats, some workers reported venting their fear outside of their work because they found it impossible to relax in an environment lacking social support, like their workplace, in which they were not allowed to express any fears. Many participants talked about how they would disengage from their work, because they believed that showing fear would be seen by management and the public as a sign of weakness that could potentially be exploited. Therefore, these ‘exiting’ moments, resulted as a response for not having anyone in the workplace to speak out. The fear of losing the respect of the public and the loss of managerial support in situations of social, professional and/or personal difficulty led a number of workers to develop a rhetoric of disaffection and detachment from their job. Melissa supported this as she found her managers insensitive to the passengers’ sexist comments: ‘The lack of acknowledging that most people think of us as waitresses is offensive and hurts my professional and personal values, which leaves me little engagement in my work’.

Beneficial consequences when expressing fear

Our data suggest that, when fear has been reduced or delayed prior to its expression it often results in perceived beneficial outcomes for the workers and for the organisation, potentially contributing to a more self-supportive mind-set and developing a simple incentive to be more prepared for their duties. Lecturers recounted that controlling their fear motivated prudence and helped them to prepare themselves, practically and emotionally, contributing to an increasing sense of control over the demands of the job. For example, Calliope's fear of looking incompetent to her students was controlled by using self-reflection tactics, which helped her move to an emotional clearing and develop a proactive optimism:

> 'I reminded myself that fear actually works. I went to class early, plugged my computer to avoid technical issues, practised and then waited for the students to come one by one; that gives the advantage of memorising their faces, getting to know their names and a few things about them before I start.'

Other lecturers also referred to being better organised and proactive as a reaction to fear experienced during lecturing, a pattern that seems greatly adaptive. Controlling expression seemed to help the participants from both samples to make fear their friend, as it often helped them to engage with their work tasks in an optimistic and self-reflection state.

Participants reported more beneficial outcomes from authentic expression. Although not enjoying the experience of fear, they recognised that expressing it in an open and direct way generated at least some beneficial outcomes for them. In one case, Athena mentioned that authentic expression of fear was conducive to resolving others' dangerous misconduct. When her fear was generated by the airport worker's failure to place the air stair in time, she expressed her fear authentically and, although admitting that this may not have been the most professional reaction, she explicitly voiced her fear, by shouting at the guilty party. She then realised that her reaction of expressing her fear actually 'got things done' and resulted in the compliance of the airport staff with health and safety rules. Athena’s authentic expression derived from her thinking that sometimes silencing her fear and adopting more flexible or accommodating reaction to the dangerous behaviour of others and hiding her fear(e.g. letting the airport staff act as they want, allowing drunk passengers to walk in the corridors) would made her look too ‘soft’ and unprofessional. The flight attendants recognised that fear is not a frequently experienced emotion at their work, but when it is felt, and even more when it is expressed, then it acts as a signal which provides an internal mobilisation to protect the self and others from perceived threats.

Academics who chose to verbalise their fear of revealing incompetence to their students, claimed that this was positively perceived from them. When Calypso admitted her fear of exposure to an unknown audience, the students ‘gave me such a big applause to encourage me, which acted as a boosting injection to my confidence’, indicating the beneficial influence if its display. Authentic fear also surfaced when participants discussed channelling it to people who may not have been the original triggers of the emotion, but who could potentially do something to help the situation. Ares, a 55-year old senior lecturer, explained how his authentic expression helped to achieve a beneficial outcome for the whole department. His fear about possible job loss was generated when a close colleague was made redundant. This made him feel he was in danger, so he decided to approach his colleagues:

> ‘The constant thoughts about possibly losing my job made my body being in shock, so I realised I had to do something. I thought I should take action, respond, speak. That day being fearful of what would happen with my job made me talk to them (colleagues). And it worked because they felt just like I did. Then one of our managers joined us… he started to explain where things are now and that he would call a meeting to address the issues we were unsure about, like the security of our jobs. Seeing me so scared must have shocked him but it had an impact.’

Releasing fear helped Ares ease the pressure, contributing to a more optimistic attitude, and encouraging others to seek joint solutions. Ares' reflection on his behavioural response showed that authentically expressing his fear was beneficial for him and his department as it led to his manager's intervention. Ares even suggested that it strengthened his relationship with his manager after choosing to approach rather than avoid the threat of a potential job loss. Indeed, other participants suggested that talking to colleagues helped to address fear at work and to encourage optimistic thoughts.

Discussion

This study explores the contextual nature of the emotion of fear, particularly, focusing on its presence and role in human service workers. The study participants' stories offer an insight into the conditions that give rise to fear, its expression, and the perceived consequences of this expression, showing similarities and differences in the way workers react to events perceived as threatening. Fear appeared in three forms: as a vehicle to alert workers to physical danger, such as violations of safety regulations or other threats to their lives; as a response to social and economic threats, such as job loss, and loss of social identity; and as a response to personal threats, such as fear of appearing incompetent or unprofessional.

The emotion of fear is integral to workers' physical safety, social reputation and personal efficiency about their job and this chapter contributes valuable evidence to our understanding of the lived experience of human service workers in relation to perceived fear. Participants confirmed fear as an existential emotion (Lazarus & Cohen-Charash, 2001) because the threats it derives from tend to link to safety, to connections with wider social processes, and to the quality of existence in their workplace. Having an adaptive nature, fear served to alert workers to possible outcomes of perceived threat (Frijda, 2007). These threats were seen as lethal (death, physical injury) and symbolic in nature (threat of losing social reputation, status), consonant with premises that emotion is aroused in relation to achieving specific goals (Lazarus & Cohen-Charash, 2001). For the human service workers, the goal was to preserve theirs and other people's physical safety, their job, reputation, and autonomy, and to stay faithful to the professional status of the job. In flight attending and in academia, expertise and appearing as a fearless individual are of vital importance. As such, securing and sustaining these social representations accompanied their fear and its expression.

The consequences of recent socio-economic and political changes (e.g. financial crisis, salary cuts, unemployment) influenced the human service workers' fear in Cyprus, confirming the large impact of employment uncertainty on well-being (Dickerson & Green, 2012). Having a prestigious job appears to be an ideal for the Cypriot human service workers that not only gives them financial security but also an ego ideal, making its loss a fearful condition and an element of social failure, due to the loss of professional identity. Certain stakeholders were also sources of eliciting fear, due to the disrespectful way they could treat interviewees. The flight attendants stories of being stereotyped as sexually promiscuous revealed aspects of social fear about their profession's identity with senior management taking advantage of these perceptions to satisfy the customers (Bolton & Boyd, 2003). Lecturers also referred to experiencing fear due to regular physical threats they received from students and their relatives, in alignment with findings that such interventions result in loss of respect among Cypriot educators (Zembylas & Papanastasiou, 2004). Both young and senior academics referred to the fear of their students finding out they did not know everything, reflecting on how difficult it was to deal with student questions. Their comments gave a real sense of their fear of failure in their job and of possible managerial and student criticism (Mather & Seifert, 2013). The teaching profession in Cyprus seems to be perceived as receiving relatively high status and recognition from society (Menon & Christou, 2002) and teacher-identity was linked with expertise.

In terms of its expression, participants showed a conscious requirement to silence and hide their fear (Kish-Gephart et al., 2009; Milliken et al., 2003), due to the perception of creating unwanted social consequences after saying something that could disappoint others, or of being inappropriate for a situation (Lindebaum, 2012). For example, in the case of academics, the fear of appearing incompetent and vulnerable, resulted in solutions of keeping these thoughts for themselves rather than referring to their managers for support, confirming the social and ego-alien nature of fear in western societies (Lazarus & Cohen-Charash, 2001). Thus, the participants' role as subject experts imposes a feeling rule (Hochschild, 1983), requiring them to mask their fear of appearing incompetent to students.

Silencing fear, especially to superiors, seemed to have broader roots. Participants referred to the heavily centralised system in the Cypriot workplace, characterised by a lack of social and managerial support when it comes to important socio-economic changes (Holman, 2013). This centralisation stands in direct conflict with the workers' professional accountability, as participants were disappointed by senior management members and feared not receiving acknowledgment from them. In most cases, the workers' response was to suppress their authentic emotion or present it in a socially or organisationally acceptable manner. Our findings also confirmed that organisational context influenced the form of expression(Brief & Weiss, 2002; Callister et al., 2007). Although workers often did follow behavioural scripts learned from previous experiences (e.g. good time-management and self-reflection to prevent looking incompetent), most workers appeared to be influenced by organisational norms (e.g. social beliefs about their role in the organisation and the expectations people have of them in that role).

In terms of the emotion's consequences, attempts to silence fear often makes it difficult to recognise any utility in organisational life (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995). Suppressing fear was shown to drive withdrawal behaviour (Ashton-James & Ashkanasy, 2008) and disengagement with the profession, which can lead to anxiety in the longer-term (Epstein, 1972). However, when authentic expressions of fear occur in legitimated contexts, beneficial outcomes were evident, such as encouraging proactive, optimistic thinking, increased alertness and improved collegiality. In some fearful encounters, participants felt that remaining faithful to the normal display constraints of their environment could be physiologically and emotionally costly (e.g. somatic damage, job loss, anxiety), therefore they often chose to make use of and authentically express their fear. The achievement of desirable outcomes, through the legitimate enactment of fear, not only facilitates a re-appraisal of a perceived threat, but also fosters cooperation between co-workers, customers and supervisors. Here, the chapter offers a theoretical contribution to the phenomenology of fear through the lived experience of human service workers and in relation to its perceived consequences. Given the study's findings, the argument that the emotion of fear necessarily prevents people from performing to their best and is associated with employee ineffectiveness and pessimistic judgments about future outcomes (Lerner & Keltner, 2001; Maner & Gerend, 2007; Ryan & Oestreich, 1991), becomes rather unconvincing. Indeed, fear could be seen as a job-necessary rather a job-interfering phenomenon (Kish-Gephart et al., 2009; Ryan & Oestreich, 1991), helping human service workers' in communicating workplace situations and sensitive matters, especially to parties in positions of power. The study, therefore, has demonstrated how appreciating the asymmetrical relationships between emotions and outcomes can contribute to an enhanced understanding of discrete emotions and their implications to management and other organisational phenomena, such as leadership and followership relationships.

Limitations and future research

The study makes theoretical contributions by offering contextually rich insights into the nature of workplace fear and the behaviours that human service workers enact within a particular societal context. However, some limitations are evident. Firstly, the study was conducted amongst professional groups in a single European country and may have revealed different indications of workplace fear that are difficult to generalise to the rest of the EU. The findings, however, may be of relevance to EU policy-makers, as they offer a detailed understanding of how different types of fear impact the workers' well-being, thereby enabling policies to be targeted more accurately. Additional research could provide further insights into how other European workers experience and react to fear. Alternatively, research could explore the types of fear experienced (and in what ways) in other human service sectors internationally. Research into other types of human service workers, such as doctors and nurses, as professions who are perceived by the general public as devoid of fear, could help elicit more variations among participants and establish the generalisability of the types and expression of fear. Moreover, other parameters could be taken into account, such as gender, which could explore the fear's desirable outcomes for an organisation and at an individual level.

Secondly, the interpretations of the results were based on purely qualitative data. Although attempts were made to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings (e.g. member checking, prolonged engagement), the results were limited to the extent that the accounts of fear were necessarily based on subjective perceptions, rather than actual fear-related behaviours or observations from live fearful events. In addition, our own perceptions in the interpretation of the findings cannot be fully excluded. However, the study remained consistent with the phenomenological approach as a way of eliciting perceived experiences of workplace fear in the context of human service workers (Groenewald, 2004). We hope that other phenomenological work would help to find insights of other discrete emotions in more professions.

Conclusion and implications

The study responded to calls for research on discrete emotions in the workplace (Gooty et al., 2009; Lindebaum & Jordan, 2012), as well as calls for further exploring the contexts within which the expression of negatively-perceived emotions may yield desirable outcomes for organisations (Lindebaum & Fielden, 2011). Analysis of work-event antecedents suggests that physical, social, and personal situations, such as employment loss, personal failure threat, reputation damage, and showing incompetence were all implicated as etiological factors of fear. An important factor offsetting fear was the degree of expression that allows workers to respond to the challenges of the job. Stories revealed that when participants expressed their fear or when they adopted mechanisms that gave them a sense of confidence and autonomy, their fear was less prevalent. During the authentic expression of fear, workers found the intervention from colleagues and managers helpful as it meant their unpleasant feelings were released or mitigated. As such, these cases are consistent with findings that certain negatively-perceived emotional displays may result in beneficial outcomes for the workers' psychological being (Lindebaum & Fielden, 2011). The implications of this suggest that if organisations are open to some expressions of fear, beneficial outcomes may occur rather than when fear remains silent.

For organisational practice, it is clear that management's contribution is important. Greater awareness of the sources, nature, and expressions of fear could guide those in authority who seek to encourage routine upward input from employees at all levels. Managers need to recognise that becoming more knowledgeable of the antecedents of fear and more tolerant to its display may assist workers' efforts to overcome the discomfort during experiencing fear and potentially constructively address fearful events. Organisations that rely on social support for and show commitment to the well-being of their members by supporting emergent emotions and acceptance to their displays can increase the likelihood of more functional outcomes for individuals and organisations when fear is authentically expressed. A key issue that emerges from research into discrete emotions is that simplistically seeing an emotion as either good or bad effectively oversimplifies the nature of emotion in general, ignoring any signal or behavioural function that emotions can provide. Whether *pleasantly* or *unpleasantly* experienced (arguably more analytically useful than positive or negative) emotions can equally provide useful outcomes individually or socially. Thus, there is arguably no real asymmetry of emotion here, rather a demonstration that emotional experience is what it is, neither conceptually positive nor negative.

This study has advanced our understanding of the nature of workplace fear antecedents, types of expression and outcomes, but we are just beginning to build a foundation of knowledge on the topic.

We maintain that this perspective will broaden, as organisations could benefit from better understanding the nature of discrete emotions in the workplace.

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