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The Emotional Sponge: Perceived Reasons for Emotionally Laborious Sessions and Coping Strategies of Peer Writing Tutors

Abstract

While writing center scholarship acknowledges tutoring is an emotional endeavor, there has been little attention given to how tutors respond to the stressful facets of their role. In this study, peer writing tutors were surveyed about their engagement in emotional labor and work-related stress in three areas: (a) perceived reasons for emotionally laborious sessions; (b) emotions felt; and (c) strategies employed for emotion regulation and coping with stress. Thematic analysis of responses indicated the perceived reasons included issues in (a) session expectations, (b) tutor-writer dynamics, and (c) emotion regulation. Tutors generally reported more negative emotions than positive ones. However, a majority of tutors reported engaging in adaptive active and internal coping strategies to manage their work-related stressors. A select few tutors reported engaging in maladaptive coping strategies alongside adaptive ones. While results reflect a positive outlook for tutors' abilities to manage their stress, results indicate engagement in emotional labor is a regular task for tutors. Writing centers may benefit from considering stress management as a part of their tutor-training programs to maintain and promote well-being. Practical implications and possible avenues for stress interventions are given.



Introduction

“I can’t help but just soak up [the student’s] emotions like a sponge.”

These were the words of a disheartened and tired colleague of mine (the first author) after an all-too-common emotionally charged tutoring session.¹ We slumped over the writing center concierge desk, attempting to salvage whatever emotional energy we had left and confiding in each other the details of our past emotionally difficult sessions. Before scurrying off to class, she provided me with what I now like to refer to as the *emotional sponge* metaphor. I sat at the concierge desk both troubled at the dark connotations of a seemingly humorous metaphor and unsatisfied at the realization that we, as peer tutors, are often not well equipped with adaptive coping skills to wring out the emotional weight. Although writing center training sessions help prepare tutors to navigate the writers’ emotions during turbulent sessions, effective ways to handle the possible consequences of managing our own emotions or stressors in response to those emotional sessions are often neglected. This encounter I had with my colleague served as the impetus for launching a year-long endeavor into examining the underlying roots of emotionally laborious tutoring sessions, as well as how tutors respond to those sessions.

While many studies examine occupational stress for teachers and professors (e.g., Bellas, 1999; Hargreaves, 2000; Kyriacou, 2001), there has been far less attention given to stress experienced by tutors and consultants. This lack of attention is particularly troublesome given the wide use of writing centers in colleges and universities. To address this gap in the literature, this study sought to answer three key questions: (a) What kind of interactions induce emotional stress for tutors? (b) What kind of feelings do tutors have in response to those interactions? (c) How do tutors cope with emotional labor and stress? We first provide brief reviews of research on stress, emotions in tutoring, theories of emotional labor, and coping strategies from scholarship spanning writing center studies, education, and psychology. We then outline our theoretical approach to examining the themes that emerged from our respondents’ answers. Last, we discuss the implications of our findings regarding how tutors are handling their emotional stressors and provide a brief discussion on practical takeaways for writing center practitioners endeavoring to mitigate tutoring stress.

The concept of emotional labor has been tossed around in writing center scholarship to denote both emotion regulation (Rowell, 2015) and attention to emotions (Jackson, Grutsch McKinney, & Caswell, 2016). To avoid

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confusion, we use the term *emotional labor* in a broad sense to pertain to both regulation and attention with respect to how such needs manifest for tutors during their work. Accordingly, we describe sessions demanding engagement in emotional labor as being *emotionally laborious*.

Misconceptions in the Writing Center

As was first highlighted by Stephen North (1984), and is still relevant today, it is common for writers to visit writing centers asking for services that go beyond what is provided by the tutors, and these misconceptions can be sources of frustration for both writers and tutors. Possibly the most common misconception is the availability of copyediting services or proofreading. Roger Winder, Sujata Kathpalia, & Swit Ling Koo (2016) note writers and tutors were most likely to report addressing concerns if they pertained to higher order issues rather than lower issues. While Carol Severino, Jeffrey Swenson, & Jia Zhu (2009) report that both native English-speaking and multilingual writers often request a diverse range of feedback from higher order to lower order issues, other scholars observe that requests for grammar and punctuation feedback remain frequent among many visitors to the writing center (Eckstein, 2018; Raymond & Quinn, 2012; Winder, Kathpalia, & Koo, 2016).

Another common misconception held by writers is the notion that writing centers are instructional in nature, as writers may see the tutors as individuals with disciplinary expertise (Colvin, 2007). While some writing centers offer specialist tutors, many centers endorse a generalist approach that may be limited in the type of subject-specific feedback that can be provided (Walker, 1998). In an analysis that examined thousands of visitors' feedback responses about the writing center, 38.8% of negative feedback was regarding the nondirective pedagogy many writing centers, and their respective tutors, adopt (Hedengren & Lockerd, 2017). Despite efforts by centers, writers' misconceptions are common, and the task of correcting those misconceptions often falls on the tutors.

Emotions in Tutoring

Writing center scholarship has generated a great deal of discussion surrounding the inherent ubiquity of emotion in peer tutoring. Within the past two decades, scholars have studied emotion in writing centers, including emotional demands of tutoring sessions (Hudson, 2001); the wide array of emotions felt by tutors (Follett, 2016); the role of empathy in writing pedagogy (Leake, 2016); navigating emotional sessions (Perry, 2016); and the appropriate responses to tutee emotions (Mills, 2011). Tutors are bound to encounter emotionally charged sessions at some point during their work, stemming from a variety of situations, including writers discussing sensitive topics such as personal experiences with abuse (Honigs, 2001) or writers using

oppressive language (Suhr-Sytsma & Brown, 2011). Regardless of what the emotional source may be, tutors must respond appropriately by being both sensitive and attentive to how the emotions are being expressed by the writer.

Leigh Ryan & Lisa Zimmerelli (2010) offer various strategies for handling emotional and difficult tutoring sessions depending on the context of the session. Many of these strategies emphasize how to focus attention on the writing but also advise the tutor to “be patient, polite, and supportive” and not “become angry or hostile” (pp. 101–102). Corine Agnostinelli, Helena Poch, & Elizabeth Santoro (2000) provide similar advice that tutors should remain rational and emotionally distant. Tracy Hudson (2001) takes a firmer stance in suggesting tutors should aim to deescalate the intensity of present emotions and remain detached to avoid issues in the session. While all these scholars seem to emphasize the maintenance of a professional demeanor throughout the course of the session, which is certainly important to a productive tutoring session, we believe such emphasis is one key driver for further perpetuating tutors’ engagement in emotional labor.

Theories of Emotional Labor

Arlie Hochschild (1983) first coined the term “emotional labor” to denote the regulation of one’s emotions to adhere to occupation-appropriate display rules. Scholars have posited that emotional labor is prevalent in any people work (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Mann, 1999) in which the occupation imposes prescribed guidelines for the display of emotions or individuals feel emotion regulation is a necessary component of daily interactions (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Morris & Feldman, 1996). Two prominent strategies for engaging in emotional labor are deep acting and surface acting (Hochschild, 1983). Deep acting is a form of cognitive restructuring in which a person makes an effort to change their felt emotions to match the outward display, whereas surface acting entails faking or suppressing one’s outward emotions to match the appropriate display of emotions (Grandey, 2000; Totterdell & Holman, 2003).

Across various occupations, studies have documented a relation between emotional labor and work-induced stress (Hochschild, 1983; Mann & Cowburn, 2005). Emotional labor among teachers, for example, is found to be associated with emotional exhaustion and burnout (e.g., Chang, 2009). These effects largely stem from teachers’ perceived obligation to maintain a professional demeanor in the face of negativity. In a similar manner, tutors may feel obligated to regulate their emotional displays to maintain a professional demeanor. We argue such obligations may stem from mentions of prescribed rules in tutoring handbooks (see, for example, Ryan & Zimmerelli, 2010) or simply from their own interpretations of how a tutor ought to act (Rowell, 2015).

Coping With Work-Related Stress in Academia

A pattern emerges when examining studies that have investigated the ways teachers cope with work-related stressors. While teachers work differently from tutors, both roles engage in people work, so studies of teachers provide useful analogues. Many of these studies of teachers have pointed to coping strategies in seeking social support and disengaging from the stressor (Abouserie, 1996; Griffith, Steptoe, & Cropley, 1999). For teachers, active coping strategies (e.g., seeking social support) buffered the negative effects of stressors on psychological distress, whereas passive coping (e.g., disengaging/distancing) facilitated the negative effects (Chan, 1998). Indeed, prior literature has also shown that active coping, such as socially sharing experiences with others, leads to positive outcomes in managing emotional labor (McCance, Nye, Wang, Jones, & Chiu, 2013). However, other means of coping may also prove fruitful. Sandi Mann (1999) suggests that signals for disengagement from emotional labor, such as having a designated break period and then reengaging in active coping, can help attenuate the labor. Internal strategies for coping, such as breathing or muscle relaxation, may be utilized in situations where active coping may not be appropriate (Mann, 1999). However, avoidant coping strategies, with which the individual avoids the problem, have been shown to be related to higher rates of teachers' emotional exhaustion and depersonalization (Chan & Hui, 1995).

The Present Study

While emotion in tutoring is a common topic of discussion in tutor training across many centers, the discussion of emotional labor and its subtle but harmful consequences is far less typical, and it is unclear whether tutors are adequately coping with the related stressors. Workshops and training sessions are viable options in attempting to mitigate the consequences of emotional labor. However, tutors are likely to vary in their abilities to navigate emotionally laborious sessions and cope with emotional labor, and some tutors, particularly tutors of color, may have to engage in more emotional labor than others on staff (Hynes, 2019). In order to effectively and efficiently focus workshops and tutor trainings for targeted intervention, we set out to categorize the antecedents of emotionally laborious sessions, the feelings experienced by tutors in those interactions, and tutors' strategies for coping with stress.

We approach these goals through thematic analysis and apply preexisting models of emotional labor and coping with stress and explain the behaviors observed in practice. By isolating and thematically categorizing the three stages of emotional labor—engagement, experience, and coping—we provide a structured method of exploring which aspects of tutoring may require further attention for training and intervention by administrative staff and faculty. Thus,

this study serves as a much-needed exploratory, empirical first look at the emotionally laborious tutoring session. We then end with calls for action in writing centers and propose future avenues of research to further understanding of tutors' emotional labor.

Methodology

Procedure

The current study was conducted at a large public research university in the Pacific Northwest as a part of a larger training project that spanned multiple quarters in the form of presentations and workshops. During winter quarter of the 2016–2017 academic year, all active writing center tutors were sent an email containing a link to an anonymous, web-based survey. Upon reading and agreeing to an online consent form, participants completed the anonymous survey by answering three open-ended questions as well as demographic questions. Participants were free to skip any of the open-ended questions and exit the survey at any time. To compensate tutors for time spent training, the employing center paid them 25%–50% of their usual one-hour wage, an amount commensurate with the time needed to complete the current study and additional parts of the training project. The survey included additional questions not analyzed in this study.

The university writing center where the study was conducted regularly employed 50–60 tutors (both undergraduate and graduate students). A small break room was available for tutors. The writing center was interdisciplinary and provided writing-consultation services for various aspects of writing to anyone affiliated with the university. Like many writing centers, copyediting services were not offered. Tutors were trained in a pedagogical approach, which partly stemmed from North (1984), emphasizing peer discussion over directive teaching. The institutional review board at the university hosting this study granted exempt status (IRB ID: STUDY00001016).

Participants

Twenty-seven tutors took part in this anonymous qualitative study. The participant group was predominately female ($n = 22$) aged 19–43 ($M = 22.85$, $SD = 5.52$, $Mode = 21$), whose total time engaged in tutoring and mentoring experiences ranged from 5 to 45 months ($M = 17.19$, $SD = 9.90$). Due to the gender norms associated with emotional labor and coping strategies, it was important to us to consider the gender identity in the presentation of our study participants and their responses. We asked our participants their gender identity (female, male, other) and are using participant responses as identifying terms throughout. No participant indicated a gender identity outside male or

female. Information about academic level (i.e., undergraduate or graduate) was not collected to prevent possible participant identification.

Measures

Demographics

Participants were asked for their age, gender identity, and length of service in tutoring, mentoring, or teaching roles.

Qualitative Open-Ended Questions

To gain a general understanding of emotional labor in tutoring sessions and prepare for future studies that examine tutors' emotional labor in depth (e.g., interviews), we decided, in this exploratory study, to use open-ended questions in an online survey to elicit quick responses from tutors. The use of an online survey also allowed the participating tutors to remain anonymous in their responses and avoid any potential repercussions should any answers extend beyond the dynamics of the tutoring session into the writing center environment. Participants were asked to answer three open-ended questions. The first two questions asked participants to think about their most recent emotionally taxing session and write about "*why the session may have been emotionally laborious*" and "*the emotions [they] felt during the session.*" The third question asked, "*What kind of strategies or methods, if any, do you use to manage or regulate the emotional labor and stress that may be associated with working as a consultant/tutor?*"

Data-Analysis Procedure

Emotion Coding

In order to use a uniform operationalization of emotion, the researchers defined emotion as the expression, subjective interpretation and experience, and physiological responses stemming from a stimulating event, which are three components of emotion as defined by Klaus R. Scherer (2005). Additionally, the researchers also defined feeling as the subjective interpretation and experience of emotion (Scherer, 2005). The data of the second question were coded following Johnny Saldaña's (2009) guide for emotion coding, and researchers recorded the frequency counts of codes in the appropriate affective categories given in Scherer (2005).

Thematic Analysis

A thematic analysis of the data was conducted to address the first and third research questions. Widely used in psychological research, thematic analysis is a deliberate, rigorous, and theoretically flexible approach to organizing

and analyzing qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Through this qualitative technique, themes and patterns emerged from the data rather than from the researchers' assumptions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Theoretical frameworks and relevant literature were discussed prior to coding and guided the analysis. These theories included James J. Gross's process model for emotional regulation (1998) and Alicia A. Grandey's (2000) and Peter Totterdell & David J. Hollman's (2003) models for emotional labor. Using three closely similar, yet distinct, models in interpreting strategies for emotion regulation allowed for theoretical triangulation.

The first and second authors thoroughly explored the patterns in the data with guidance from our chosen emotional-labor theoretical perspectives. Specifically, for the first question, particular attention was given to how motives to regulate one's emotion in response to the antecedents of emotion labor would contribute to tutors' stressful sessions. For the third question, we were interested in how tutors would cope with stressful sessions and what types of resources would be used for coping. To capture the types of coping used by tutors, we drew on the approach-avoidance model (Roth & Cohen, 1986) and the external and internal resources one might utilize (Lu & Chen, 1996).

Using the determined theoretical frameworks, the first and second authors initially coded the data independently (i.e., blind coding) before subsequently comparing and discussing the coding schemes, as well as similarities and differences in our coding and interpretations of the data. To guard against possible biases, we took extra precautions during the coding process. First, although all participant responses were anonymous, the first author was employed at the writing center at the time of data collection. Thus, the second author, who did not participate in data collection and was not affiliated with the writing center, served as the external coder. Second, we also reflected upon our own experiences in university writing centers in relation to how we interpreted the data (the first author being a writing tutor through their undergraduate career and the second author an international student who visited the writing center frequently throughout college). Last, by utilizing three theoretical models, we triangulated possible conceptual interpretations of the data. The use of self-reflection and continued discussion throughout the coding process allowed for consideration and correction of both authors' potential biases. Any discrepancies in coding were discussed until mutual agreement was reached. This method of coding provides trustworthiness and soundness of emerging coding schemes (Patton, 2001).

Specifically, we first engaged in line-by-line analysis whereby we developed initial codes (Charmaz, 2006), such as *different expectations between tutor and tutee*, *tutor's high expectations from themselves*, and *session logistic issues* to capture reasons tutoring sessions might be stressful to tutors. We then started focus coding to refine the codes (Charmaz, 2006). That is, initial codes

were combined or renamed into new codes based on the most frequent and important codes that captured emerging constructs across participants. These new codes are the final themes presented in the results. For example, the code *session expectations* was created to account for any issues related to tutors' and tutees' expectations about the session that might result in tutors' stressful sessions, with two subcodes: *discrepancy between tutors' and writers' expectations* and *tutor's own expectations*. The coding scheme was revised four times before we finally agreed upon all codes.

Results

In the following sections, we first describe perceived reasons for tutors' most recent emotionally laborious session. Second, we report emotions experienced by tutors in their most recent emotionally taxing session. Finally, we present tutors' strategies used to manage stress, paying particular attention to mechanisms for coping with difficult sessions.

Reasons for Emotionally Laborious Sessions

A total of 25 of the 27 tutors answered the question about the causes of emotional labor in the session. Three themes and seven subthemes were identified (Table 1).

Table 1

Themes of reasons for creating emotionally laborious sessions

Themes	Number of Mentions by tutors
1. Session Expectations	
a. Discrepancy Between Writer & Tutor Expectations	6
b. Own Expectations	2
2. Tutor-Writer Dynamics	
a. Tutoring Effectiveness	6
b. Communication & Interactions	10
c. Interpersonal Conflict	3
3. Emotional Regulation	
a. Faking	2
b. Suppression	4

Note: The sum of mentions does not equal the total number of tutors, as some responses included multiple themes.

Session Expectations

Some tutors articulated that differences in students' expectations about the session made the session emotionally laborious. In addition, a few tutors

mentioned that their high expectations about how many goals should be accomplished during the session led to difficult sessions.

Discrepancy Between Tutors' and Writers' Expectations. Six tutors (all women) indicated that sessions could be stressful when students' expectations differed. Tutor A, a woman, explained,

The writer's expectations did not align with my own tutoring practices (and the [writing center's] philosophy) but we could not seem to reach a compromise; she wanted the session to go a specific way, which deviated from my own instincts. . . . I conceded and did what the writer wanted, which also made me feel downtrodden.

Although the inability of the tutor and student to "reach a compromise" might seem to be a communication issue, the discrepancy in session expectations made this session emotionally laborious for her. Indeed, such a misalignment of session expectations seems to have led to the tutor's concession, resulting in a difficult session. Similarly, another respondent who is a woman, Tutor B, stated, "The session was emotionally laborious because we had different expectations of what was going to happen in the session. She expected me to just 'fix' her essay, and I expected to have a conversation about writing strategies."

Tutors' Own Expectations. Two tutors who are women indicated that a session was made difficult when they could not meet their own high expectations. Tutor C said, "I think I was so exhausted because I expected too much out of myself. . . . Not being able to meet that expectation was tiring." The other respondent, Tutor D, mentioned that what made the session emotionally laborious was "the level of work [I felt] needed to be done but could not [be] fully address[ed]."

Therefore, on the one hand, discrepancy in expectations between tutors and student writers can be disturbing to tutors trying to balance tutoring practices with the diverse needs and desires of their student visitors. On the other hand, in order to be helpful, tutors may take on additional responsibilities and expectations, which may make the session emotionally laborious when such aims are not met.

Tutor-Writer Dynamics

For many tutors, the tutor-writer dynamics during the session were sources of difficult sessions. These tutor-writer dynamics are distinct from discrepancies in session expectations in that tutors emphasize how the interaction with writers made their session emotionally laborious. Specifically, tutors were more likely to feel their sessions were emotionally laborious when they 1. felt their sessions were ineffective; 2. had difficulties communicating with writers; and 3. experienced interpersonal conflicts with writers.

Perceived Tutoring Ineffectiveness. Six tutors (five women, one man) suggested that their perceived ineffectiveness during the session (i.e.,

not helpful to the writer) made them feel stressed. Tutor E, a woman, said, “Because I felt the ineffectiveness of our conversation and realized the writer was in her own world, non[e] of my words could get into her.” Another woman respondent, Tutor F, expressed concern with not being helpful to the writer:

It was emotionally taxing for me because I didn’t know if what I was saying was going to help him or giving him the advice that he wanted and needed and I got frustrated because I really was trying[,] but his emotional response was not helping me help him.

Difficulties in Tutor-Writer Communication and Interactions.

Ten tutors (nine women, one man) cited difficulties in communicating and interacting with writers. Some writers were perceived to be “passive” and “not responsive” during the session while others showed resistance to tutors’ feedback. Tutor G, a woman, wrote, “The writer kept questioning what I said, and I had to say something to comfort him and re-said everything I told him again.” Another woman respondent, Tutor H, added,

The person I was working with was unresponsive to feedback and [it] seemed as if everything I was doing was not what they wanted. They very much expected me to do their work for them.

Although the fact that the writer “expected [the tutor] to do their work for them” seems to suggest a potential discrepancy in session expectations among them, the writer’s unresponsiveness made the session dynamics difficult (i.e., emotionally laborious) for the tutor. Moreover, of note is that Tutor H was the only respondent in this category whose words indicated a potential discrepancy in session expectations, despite the possibility that discrepancies in session expectations might lead to problems with interaction between tutors and writers.

Personality Conflict. Three tutors (one woman, two men) indicated that writers’ behaviors made the session difficult. According to them, some writers “always cut in” and were “rude” and “insulting” during the session.

As demonstrated, tutors’ uncertainty about session effectiveness and struggles to work with writers (e.g., passive, questioning, and rude writers) created negative session dynamics, which could then lead to tutors’ engagement in emotional labor. Therefore, tutor-writer dynamics during the session might significantly affect whether tutors feel stressed and/or engaged in emotional labor.

Emotion Regulation

Some tutors suggested that trying to regulate their emotions (e.g., faking and suppressing) during the session contributed to making the tutoring session difficult.

Faking of Emotion. Two tutors (one woman, one man) faked their emotions during their session to appear “positive” and “friendly.” For example,

Tutor I, a woman, said about her most recent tutoring experience, “I had to pretend that I was feeling positive about the experience but I honestly didn’t feel comfortable at all.”

Suppression of Emotion. Four tutors (three women, one man) suppressed their emotions during sessions to appear “calm” and “professional.” Tutor J, a woman, was annoyed because she “was trying hard not to let [her] frustration show” when her session did not go well. Tutor K, a man, explained why the recent session was emotionally laborious: “The writer was stressed out and also at a stage in which they seemed to only want confirmation about the paper rather than any advice, so I was put in a position where I was expected to hold back any negative feedback and emotions.” Thus, to appear professional and positive in front of writers, tutors engaged in the processes of emotion regulation.

Emotions of Tutors in Their Most Recent Emotionally Taxing Session.

Table 2

Emotions experienced during an emotionally laborious session

Emotions	Corresponding Examples	Number of Mentions by tutors
Disappointment	“frustrated; let down; disappointed”	13
Tension/Stress	“stressed; agitated; defensive; overwhelmed; defeated”	12
Anxiety	“anxious; nervous; worried”	6
Irritation	“annoyed; fed up; irritated, impatient; grumpy”	6
Confusion	“confused; uncertain”	6
Exhaustion	“exhausted; tired”	5
Sadness	“Sad; hopeless”	4
Guilt	“guilty”	3
Surprise	“shocked; taken aback”	2
Anger	“angry; mad”	2
Miscellaneous-positive*	“excited; sympathetic”	2
Miscellaneous-negative*	“bored; contemptuous; fearful; unhappy”	4

Note: The sum of mentions does not equal the total number of tutors, as some responses included multiple emotions; categories with an asterisk (*) were created because each example listed was only mentioned by one participant.

Following Scherer’s categories of affect (2005), we classified tutors’ reported feelings into major emotion categories, with examples provided, and presented the numbers of tutors who reported feelings corresponding to each respective emotion (see Table 2). About half of the tutors reported feelings of disappointment or tension/stress during the most recent emotionally taxing session. About one-fourth of tutors reported having feelings of anxiety, irritation, confusion, and exhaustion; a few experienced sadness, guilt, surprise, anger, and other positive and negative emotions. Thus, tutors appear to be experiencing a variety of emotions—mostly negative ones—during difficult sessions.

Tutors’ Coping Strategies

Twenty-five tutors responded to the question inquiring about what strategies they employ in managing stress or regulating emotional labor. The subthemes and number of mentions made by tutors are given in Table 3.

Table 3*Themes of coping strategies*

Themes	Number of Mentions by tutors
Coping Strategies	
1. Active Coping	
a. Social Sharing	11
b. Situation Modification	11
2. Internal Coping	
a. Cognitive Restructuring	5
b. Self-Practice	4
3. Avoidant Coping	2
No Specific Strategy	3

Note: The sum of mentions does not equal the total number of tutors, as some responses included multiple themes.

Active Coping Strategies

Twenty-five tutors responded to the question inquiring about strategies employed in managing stress or regulating emotional labor. Except for three tutors who did not specify any strategies, all others utilized active, internal, and/or avoidant strategies to cope with stress from tutoring sessions.

Social Sharing. Eleven tutors (nine women, two men) engaged in social sharing (e.g., talking about difficult sessions with others). They found it helpful to “defer to fellow tutors for advice” and “to talk about [their] sessions to family or friends or with other tutors.” Tutor L, a woman, shared her ways to cope:

I mostly talk to other tutors about my experiences so that I can discuss it with people who are in a similar line of work. I’ve even met random writing tutors outside of school and work and talked about difficult sessions with them and what they do about tricky situations.

Modifying Tutoring Situations. Eleven tutors (all women) changed their tutoring practices to perform less emotional labor in their future sessions. For example, some became more “upfront with writers” about session styles. According to Tutor M, setting up the agenda with students at the beginning of a session made her less stressed:

I would love to let them know what kind of help I can provide for them first, so that we can be clear since the beginning of the session. I usually feel less stressed after letting the writers know what can be expected from the session.

Internal Coping Strategies

To cope with their stress, nine tutors (six women, three men) mentioned using internal resources (e.g., cognitive reorientation). Some respondents mentally prepared themselves by altering their own perceptions of their role

as tutors while other tutors utilized relaxation practices (e.g., deep breathing) during or after sessions. For example, those tutors who engaged in *cognitive re-orientation* told themselves they are “just a peer tutor and not a miracle worker” or “not to [be] so emotionally invested in things [they] have no control over.” Tutor I described *reenergizing* as a coping strategy:

I take a break after each session whenever possible so that I can “re-charge” myself to tackle another session, and to treat each session as individual experiences.

Avoidant Coping Strategies

Two tutors (one man, one woman) used avoidant coping strategies rather than directly dealing with their stress. Tutor N, a man, said he would “work out.” Tutor B, paradoxically, said she would “stress eat and drink” and “exercise.”

Therefore, whereas many tutors chose to talk to others and actively look for new ways to adjust tutoring sessions, a few other tutors decided to make changes from within to better prepare for emotionally laborious sessions in the future or to avoid directly dealing with their stressful sessions.

Discussion

Overall, our study provides a significant foundation for writing center administrative faculty and staff to develop interventions to improve tutor well-being. Three key themes emerged for tutors’ perceived reasons for emotionally laborious sessions, and tutors’ subsequent coping strategies present an optimistic outlook on tutors’ abilities to manage stressors independently.

Themes in the Antecedents of an Emotionally Laborious Session

Theme 1: Session Expectations

The misalignment of tutors’ and students’ expectations in the tutoring session was a commonly cited precursor to a difficult session. While it is impossible to infer from our data on what particular expectation tutors and writers may have clashed, this theme is at least partly in line with current literature pointing to previously reported issues with lower order concerns not being addressed (Winder, Kathpalia, & Koo, 2016) and writers’ dissatisfaction with the nondirective approach often employed by writing centers (Hedengren & Lockerd, 2017). Given our knowledge of both native and nonnative English-speaking writers’ tendency to request feedback across a wide spectrum of topics (Severino, Swenson, & Zhu, 2009), it is unlikely these difficult sessions were driven by specific demographics. Rather, as detailed in our analysis, generic discrepancies between a writer’s and a tutor’s perceptions of priority may cause these issues. To address this misalignment, writing center practitioners

might work to reemphasize to writers and instructors what can be expected in tutoring sessions. Tutors might also probe early in the session to determine whether the writer is open to readjusting goals. However, tutors should also acknowledge that particularly tense encounters may necessitate disengaging from their own determined priorities not only to preserve the writer's agency in their work but also to improve communication and productivity with the writer going forward.

Theme 2: Tutor-Writer Dynamic

Communication and personality conflicts were also commonly cited antecedents of difficult sessions. Writers may be resistant to engaging in a discussion with the tutor for numerous reasons, whether that be personality or that they simply needed to attend a tutoring session for course credit. This resistance is evidenced in one tutor's response in which the writer's disengaged state and unresponsiveness to the tutor's efforts to reengage the writer created a difficult environment. When the writer is not engaged with the tutor, the session can quickly devolve into an unproductive and emotionally laborious one. Strategies suggested by Ryan & Zimmerelli (2010), such as attempting to reengage writers by having them read the paper aloud, may prove fruitful in salvaging a difficult session. Tutors should, however, also recognize the importance of safeguarding and detaching themselves from sessions with contentious visitors.

Theme 3: Emotion Regulation

It is likely that the motivation of tutors to manage their expressions was primarily driven by perceived notions of what is appropriate for tutors' role. A deductive approach in analyzing the responses suggests many of the interactions can be explained by tutors' perceived need to maintain a professional demeanor. Many facets of being a tutor, such as introducing oneself to writers or even just entering the tutoring space, may serve as signals for tutors that they are taking on this specific role and obligated to act accordingly. Writing center administrators may work to be attentive to tutors' work-induced stress levels and provide adequate outlets for stress management, as discussed in the following sections.

While prior literature has offered some suggestions on how tutors may respond to emotion-laden tutoring sessions (e.g., be patient, polite, and supportive [Ryan & Zimmerelli, 2010]), we advise caution in ending the conversation with mere suggestions for professionalism because such efforts may be construed as prescribing guidelines that dictate the discourse of the tutoring session. The perception of prescribed guidelines may impose emotion-display rules that further exacerbate the emotional labor demanded by tutors. Thus, writing center practitioners might opt to supplement professionalism training

with exercises that teach tutors ways and methods of safeguarding themselves from emotionally laborious sessions.

Emotions Experienced in Emotionally Laborious Sessions

Not surprisingly, our results indicate tutors most frequently cite experiencing negative emotions from these difficult sessions, such as feelings of disappointment, tension/stress, anxiety, and irritation. This may be notably problematic when these negative emotions linger and spill over to other aspects of tutors' lives. Writing center practitioners may hold specific training sessions or workshops that aim to minimize spillover effects and contain experiences of negative emotions within the center. While no statistical analyses were run due to the small sample size, future research efforts might also attempt to utilize larger samples to examine causal relations between the types of emotion felt and the specific negative mental or health outcomes.

Coping Strategies in Response to Emotionally Laborious Sessions

By categorizing tutor coping strategies into two broad themes of adaptive (active and internal) and maladaptive (avoidant) strategies, we present an easily interpretable model of coping with stress, a model based on prior literature (Lu & Chen, 1996; Roth & Cohen, 1986). Results for tutors' coping strategies highlight both reassuring and troubling implications for writing centers. First, many tutors reported engaging in adaptive active and internal coping strategies. Among these tutors, most cited utilizing two active coping strategies of social sharing or modifying the situation. The prior strategy entails discussing the nature of the stressor with others (McCance, Nye, Wang, Jones, & Chiu, 2013) while the latter refers to the acting agent lessening the emotional impact of an unavoidable situation (Gross, 1998). One method of modifying the situation is to set guidelines for what can be expected in the session. While this display of problem-focused coping (Lazarus, 1993) directly confronts the issue, it may carry some negative consequences in how the writer perceives the tutor. On the one hand, tutors may clearly outline their role in the session, minimizing any discrepancies in expectations. On the other hand, in situations in which tutors set an agenda for how the session should proceed, it may be implied that the tutor is attempting to take a leading role, stripping the writer of agency over their writing. This move may thereby further perpetuate the writer's belief that tutors are there to "fix" their writing rather than to facilitate their development as a writer. In such cases, this strategy may not necessarily reflect the pedagogical philosophy of the center or may even reduce the writer's engagement. From our results, it is not clear which of the two possible outcomes was most common. Writing center practitioners should make clear during training sessions the strategies tutors may use to outline the limitations of the session clearly but not overstep the role of peer educator; in other words,

tutors might monitor the way they set limits on their sessions in order not to assume a position of power.

Nine tutors also mentioned utilizing internal coping strategies, such as cognitive restructuring and refocusing on positivity. The prior strategy entails changing one's perspective on an event while the latter involves focusing attention on positive aspects of the negative event (Grandey, 2003). All active and internal strategies mentioned by tutors have been suggested in prior literature (e.g., Gross, 1998; Mann, 1999; Mann & Cowburn, 2005) to yield desirable outcomes, providing us with strong empirical support that tutors, in general, have managed their stress well without external intervention. However, we cannot rule out the presence of maladaptive coping strategies; two tutors reported using both adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies, suggesting the two strategies are not mutually exclusive. It may be possible that more tutors engaged in some form of avoidant or maladaptive strategies but simply did not report doing so out of social-desirability bias.

Results from this study's analysis of coping strategies highlight an important aspect of the tutoring profession. Overall, the high number of tutors engaging in adaptive coping strategies provides us with an optimistic outlook on tutors' abilities to properly handle stress. However, approximately half the respondents reported engaging in only one coping strategy, leaving much to be desired. Interventions and workshops at the early stages of tenure as a tutor may help to expand tutors' toolkits to cope with stress better and handle the inevitable emotionally laborious sessions. To minimize work-induced burnout and stress, tutors and writing center practitioners alike may also advocate for the integration into tutor training of empirically tested stress interventions. Based on our results, we advocate for tutors to engage in active coping strategies, such as sharing negative experiences with others (McCance, Nye, Wang, Jones, & Chiu, 2013) and modifying the situation to minimize antagonistic interactions (e.g., setting clear expectations for what may be realistically achieved during the duration of the tutoring session). When such methods are not feasible, tutors may also use adaptive internal coping strategies, such as breathing exercises or taking a mental break.

Two fairly effective and resource-efficient evidence-based intervention activities that may be implemented by practitioners include expressive writing, in which one writes in detail the feelings, memories, and contents of the negative event (Gortner, Rude, & Pennebaker, 2006) and the practice of mindfulness meditation (Grossman, Niemann, Schmidt, & Walach, 2004). In particular, early evidence of the effectiveness of mindfulness exercises for writing tutors points to possible benefits in metacognition, self-regulation, and stress management (Featherstone, Barrett, & Chandler, 2019). Both activities may be exercised individually or as a group (i.e., part of workshops or tutor training). Future studies on interventions may help further expand tutors'

toolkits for coping with stress. Writing center professionals, however, need not take on the entirety of the burden associated with equipping tutors with coping skills and strategies, particularly if practitioners themselves are not properly trained in counseling. Professionals might also explore the possibility of inviting university campus counselors to present for tutor workshops incorporating evidence-based interventions. We believe the ubiquity of emotional labor in tutoring warrants attention and intervention. Early intervention workshops integrated into tutor training may help attenuate the stressors that occur throughout the tutor's tenure.

Limitations

This study's sample was limited to only tutors within one writing center, and caution is advised for wide generalization of findings. Tutors from centers that endorse different pedagogies may have different experiences of the tutor-writer dynamic. Furthermore, because the tutor body at this center was mostly female, the study also reflected this bias in its disproportionate sampling of women. It is not clear from our study whether the ratio of tutors who were women to tutors who were men in the sample biased the data. Nonetheless, caution is urged in generalizing the findings to centers where the gender ratio or composition is different. Future studies may seek to examine whether there are gender differences in the experience of emotional labor in writing centers. Moreover, social-desirability biases may have been present in the study. Indeed, given the tight-knit community within the writing center, respondents, despite the anonymous nature of the survey, may have been hesitant to expose socially questionable modes of coping. Last, while the sample size was large enough to allow for saturation of qualitative data, the sample size was too small to run any statistical analyses. Future studies might seek to expand the results of this work by utilizing a larger sample to explore more complex causal models.

Conclusion

Writing center practitioners should seek to monitor the overall well-being of their tutors where possible and carefully play an active role in helping them manage stress. To gain an accurate understanding of their tutors' stress levels and coping strategies, writing center practitioners might consider using anonymous surveys and, to ensure honest feedback, refrain from collecting information that might be used for identification. For writing centers that employ undergraduate tutors, monitoring stress levels and limiting the number of sessions a tutor can take in any given shift may be particularly important during midterms and finals.

We sought to provide an important and foundational insight into the role of emotional labor within the tutoring profession. By thematically categorizing our findings, we provide a structured, but nuanced, view of three stages of an emotionally laborious tutoring session lifespan: 1. tutor-writer interaction, 2. emotional experience of the interaction, and 3. coping with stress. The amount of attention needed across these three stages will likely vary from center to center and from tutor to tutor. Nonetheless, we hope that by establishing thematic categories, practitioners and tutors may be able to utilize these categorical models to more effectively and efficiently isolate and target areas of needed intervention. In particular, practitioners may adopt these categorical models as templates for assessing tutors' experiences with difficult sessions and current engagement in adaptive versus maladaptive coping strategies. Workshops might be developed to help equip tutors with the active (e.g., social sharing) or internal adaptive coping strategies (e.g., breathing exercises) and to reorient tutors away from maladaptive coping strategies (e.g., binge eating). While the topic of emotional labor for tutors is still in its early stages, we are excited at the prospect of sparking ideas for future intervention studies to improve tutor well-being. We also hope that with this paper, the discussion of emotional labor and stress coping strategies will become integrated widely into tutor-training programs and practices.

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