



# Motivating child welfare case managers: An application and extension of feedback information theory

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## ABSTRACT

No empirical studies in the child welfare literature have examined how job characteristics impact work motivation. The present study addresses this conspicuous research gap by surveying 419 county-based child welfare case managers across the state of New York. As predicted by feedback information theory, work motivation was enhanced by instrumental feedback and reduced when job complexity was introduced as a moderator. Consistent with the challenge–hindrance stress model, job control positively influenced job complexity's effects on the instrumental feedback–work motivation relationship. Findings advance the child welfare literature by demonstrating that the motivational effects of instrumental feedback are both conditional and dynamic.

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## 1. Introduction

Public child welfare case managers are entrusted with ensuring the safety, permanency, and well-being of vulnerable children and youth (Children's Bureau, 2000). Performing this vital societal function typically occurs in professional work settings universally depicted as extremely difficult, complex, and highly uncertain (Child Welfare League of America, 2001). Constant public scrutiny, budgetary constraints, inadequate supervision and training, emotionally demanding clients, restrictive agency policies, conflicting legislative mandates, high caseloads, and low pay all have been identified as contextual factors that challenge the practice effectiveness and well-being of these public servants (Pecora et al., 2009; US General Accounting Office, 2003, 2006). Understandably, child welfare scholars have largely concentrated research efforts on employee deficits arising from these demanding work conditions. Primary areas of interest include, but are not limited to job stress (Boyas & Wind, 2010; CWLA, 2001), job burnout (Drake & Yadama, 1996; Kim, 2010), emotional exhaustion (Stalker, Mandell, Frensch, Harvey, & Wright, 2007), employee turnover (Graef & Hill, 2000; Pecora et al., 2009; Strolin, McCarthy, & Caringi, 2007), and turnover intentions (Chernesky & Israel, 2009; Lee, Rehner, & Forster, 2010). Although current research has made significant contributions toward improving the general well-being of public child welfare case managers, it has done so at the expense of identifying

characteristics of the job that facilitate and bolster positive affective, attitudinal, and/or behavioral worker outcomes.<sup>1</sup>

The organizational behavior literature, for example, asserts that ambiguous and challenging occupational settings necessitate greater self-regulated motivation on the part of employees (Vancouver, 2000). Internally motivated staff not only display more effort and persistence when confronted with mentally and emotionally taxing job responsibilities (Latham, 2007), but also report lower levels of job strain and job burnout (Cooper, Dewe, & O'Driscoll, 2001), and higher amounts of organizational commitment (Meyer & Allen, 1997). Case managers in child welfare and other fields of social work practice, who exhibit such attitudes and behaviors, are more likely to meet or exceed externally-established standards of performance, demonstrate greater practice effectiveness, and produce higher quality client services (Mor Barak, Travis, Pyun, & Xie, 2009). These findings parallel recent evidence in the occupational stress literature that suggests demanding job characteristics, if construed as challenges rather than hindrances, can actually have strong motivational effects (LePine, Podsakoff, & LePine, 2005). Despite these extensive and robust scientific findings, no published empirical studies exist in the child welfare (or broader social work) literature that examine how characteristics of a

<sup>1</sup> Noted exceptions being the job satisfaction literature (e.g., Barth, Lloyd, Christ, Chapman, & Dickinson, 2008) and recent work examining commitment (e.g., Faller, Grabarek, & Ortega, 2010) and self-efficacy (e.g., Ellett, 2007, 2009).

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case manager's job impacts her/his level of work motivation.<sup>2</sup> The current study, therefore, seeks to address this conspicuous research gap.

## 2. Feedback information theory

Whereas deficit-based approaches to employee well-being characterize public child welfare case managers as passive victims of a hostile organizational environment, positive approaches, like motivation, portray them as efficacious actors who strive to fulfill valued professional, organizational, and personal performance goals (Preston, 2011, 2012). The successful pursuit of meaningful performance goals entails motivated self-regulation. Broadly defined, self-regulation is an active feedback-dependent cyclic process consisting of the establishment, monitoring, evaluation, and adjustment of standards of performance (i.e., goals) (Vancouver, 2000). Although numerous theories on work self-regulation populate the extant organizational literature (see Stizmann & Ely, 2011 for a complete list), only Kluger and DeNisi's (1996) Feedback Information Theory (F.I.T.) explicitly posits feedback as the central facilitative mechanism.

In their comprehensive historical and meta-analytic review of the feedback literature, Kluger and DeNisi (1996) concluded that the evidence for feedback's favorable effects were at best mixed and offered several possible explanations for these conflicting findings with locus of attention and task complexity being of most theoretical relevance to the present study. Feedback interventions that are most impactful alter an employee's locus of attention by diverting her/his thoughts toward either the self or job task. Unlike self-focused feedback (e.g., praise or threats), feedback focused on the task directs cognitive resources toward self-regulatory processes (i.e., goal establishment, monitoring, evaluation, and adjustment) that enhance on-task performance. As task complexity increases, however, performance decrements occur as mental resources are reallocated away from overseeing on-task performance toward learning new or unfamiliar task routines, correcting task-related errors, and managing concomitant emotions. Given that affective outcomes (e.g., satisfaction or frustration) to on-task performance possess motivational properties (Bandura, 1997; Latham, 2007), implicit in Kluger and DeNisi's (1996, 1998) work are hypotheses that speak to the dynamic impact that job characteristics have on the motivational effects of task-related feedback.

## 3. Hypotheses

### 3.1. Instrumental feedback

Earley, Northcraft, Lee, and Lituchy (1990) identify instrumental feedback as encompassing contextual information focused on advancing goal attainment. Conceptually, instrumental feedback is analogous to Kluger and DeNisi's (1996, 1998) task-focus feedback but is operationalized as a composite of process and outcome feedback. Process feedback consists of information on the implementation and adjustment of work plans, while outcome feedback is comprised of information on work plan results (Earley et al., 1990). Since process and outcome feedback are work-focused, instrumental feedback strengthens active learning (i.e., self-regulatory abilities, skill development, and problem-solving) and positive performance expectancies (Frese & Zapf, 1994; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996, 1998). Each of these feedback-dependent outcomes has been found to stimulate motivation (Latham, 2007). As such, instrumental feedback should have a direct and positive impact on the work motivation of public child welfare case managers.

**Hypothesis 1.** A significant positive main effect for instrumental feedback on work motivation is predicted.

### 3.2. Feedback–complexity interaction

Feedback information theory also asserts that job complexity negatively impacts work motivation (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). When the duties of the job are simple and relatively straightforward, employees can fully commit cognitive energy and easily apply well-learned work routines toward maintaining or raising job performance (Wood & Locke, 1990). As job complexity increases, motivation decreases. This is due, in part, to the fact that mental energy must be elevated and redirected from maintaining current levels of performance toward reactively learning new job-related activities and routines, as well as correcting more errors of execution (Frese & Zapf, 1994; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). Job complexity also impacts motivation by reducing the predictability of the work environment (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Osman, 2010). In complex unpredictable work settings, active learning is hindered due to the inability to effectively link work plans, activities, or actions to specific performance outcomes (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Schmidt & DeShon, 2010) (see Fig. 1). Not surprisingly, research has found that complex work roles negatively impact both objective estimates of job performance (Gilboa, Shirom, Fried, & Cooper, 2008) and subjective assessments of learning (Van Ruysseveldt & van Dijke, 2011). Thus, it is predicted that job complexity will moderate the effects of instrumental feedback on the work motivation of public child welfare case managers.

**Hypothesis 2.** A significant negative two-way feedback–complexity interaction on work motivation is predicted; such that under perceptions of high instrumental feedback the work motivation of public child welfare case managers reporting perceptions of high job complexity will be lower than their counterparts reporting perceptions of low job complexity.

### 3.3. Feedback–complexity–control interaction

In contrast with Kluger and DeNisi (1996, 1998), other organizational behavior and occupational stress scholars argue that the behavioral, attitudinal, and affective effects of complex jobs are far from uniform (Hackman & Oldham, 1980; Humphrey, Nahrgang, & Morgeson, 2007; Karasek & Theorell, 1990). Lazarus and Folkman (1984), for example, have documented that emotional reactions to external stressors (e.g., job complexity) are contingent upon subjective judgments. Building on this work, Cavanaugh, Boswell, Roehling, and Boudreau's (2000) challenge–hindrance stress model assert that workplace stressors can be construed as either challenges or hindrances. Challenge stressors are appraised as opportunities for increased growth and learning, and as such, raise self-confidence and arouse positive emotions.

Hindrance stressors, on the other hand, are construed as threats, barriers or obstacles to important performance outcomes and instill negative emotions. LePine et al. (2005) noted that the same workplace event, situation, or factor can be interpreted as either a challenge or hindrance stressor. Job complexity, for instance, can be perceived as a challenge if personal learning and goal attainment are forecast; or a hindrance if feelings of incompetence and performance failure are anticipated. Since receiving feedback, in uncertain environments, strengthens perceptions of competence and outcome expectancies when coupled with requisite methods of control (Osman, 2010); complex jobs are more likely to be appraised as a controllable challenge that stimulate work motivation if job control is perceived as high (see Fig. 2).

**Hypothesis 3.** A significant positive three-way feedback–complexity–control interaction on work motivation is predicted; such that under perceptions of high instrumental feedback and high job complexity, the work motivation of public child welfare case managers reporting perceptions of high job control will be greater than their counterparts reporting perceptions of low job control.

<sup>2</sup> The author conducted a literature review in the Psycinfo and Social Work Abstracts databases.

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