



Family transmission of work affectivity and experiences to children

Erik J. Porfeli^{a,*}, Chuang Wang^b, Paul J. Hartung^a

^a Northeastern Ohio Universities Colleges of Medicine and Pharmacy, Department of Behavioral Sciences, 4209 S.R. 44, Rootstown, OH 44272-0095, USA

^b University of North Carolina—Charlotte, 9201 University City Blvd., Charlotte, NC 28223-0001, USA

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ABSTRACT

Theory and research suggest that children develop orientations toward work appreciably influenced by their family members' own expressed work experiences and emotions. Cross-sectional data from 100 children (53 girls, 47 boys; mean age = 11.1 years) and structural equation modeling were used to assess measures of work affectivity and experiences and to test hypotheses suggesting that family work experiences and emotions influence the orientations children develop toward work and how they in turn influence children's work and school motivation. Results indicated that the family setting influences children's perceptions of and future orientation toward the world of work through adults' expression of positive work experiences, negative work affect, and negative work experiences. Furthermore, children's work and school motivations appear to be principally influenced by indicators of favorable work affect and experiences. Implications and suggestions for future research are offered that cast the family as an important core setting for children's vocational development.

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1. Introduction

Vocational development constitutes a life-long process beginning in childhood and occurring within the family context (Hartung, Porfeli, & Vondacek, 2005; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994; Watson & McMahon, 2005). Children learn and gain awareness about work directly through their own experiences and vicariously by observing the work experiences of others, principally parents and other adult family members (Bryant, Zvonkovic, & Reynolds, 2006; Lent et al., 1994; Levine & Hoffner, 2006). Despite the significant role accorded the family in shaping child career expectations, few studies have examined how children learn about and develop an orientation to work within the family context (Bryant et al., 2006; Whiston & Keller, 2004) and this study is an attempt to do so. We began with the proposition that children develop orientations toward work through their parents' work experiences (Bryant et al., 2006; Kohn & Schooler, 1983) and hypothesized emotions as part of the process and outcomes associated with children's career development.

1.1. Socialization to work through work affectivity and experiences

Emotions and emotional competence play key roles in child behavior (Eisenberg & Fabes 1998) and the development of social competence (Eisenberg, Cumberland, & Spinrad, 1998). Emotional competence denotes the ability to comprehend emotional content and is thought to be promoted primarily by parents through emotion-related socialization behaviors

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: eporfeli@NEOUCOM.edu (E.J. Porfeli).

(ERSBs; Eisenberg et al.). ERSBs play an important role in children's emotional arousal, emotional competence, and self-concept development (Eisenberg et al.) and influence children's ability to recognize adults' emotions (Dunn, Brown, & Beardsall, 1991).

Work represents an emotional environment (Payne & Cooper, 2001). Workers can feel powerful emotions yet the work context may inhibit them from expressing negative emotions (Kidd, 1998, 2004) leading to a form of distress known as emotional labor (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Diefendorff, Croyle, & Gosserand, 2005; James, 1989; Morris & Feldman, 1996). One way to mitigate emotional labor is to express negative emotions and experiences at home. Doing so may, however, result in family members bearing the strain of workers' emotional labor in the form of work spillover (Crouter & Bumpus, 2001) and lead children to develop either more realistic or, possibly, overly pessimistic views of workers' work emotions (Goldstein & Oldham, 1979; Levine & Hoffner, 2006).

Generalized emotional expression, or *trait affectivity*, comprises two independent dimensions: positive affectivity (PA) and negative affectivity (NA) (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). PA is a generalized form of positive emotion reflecting enthusiasm, activity, and extraversion (Watson & Clark, 1997). NA is a general form of negative emotion indicated by distress and displeasure and associated with anxiety, depression, and neuroticism (Clark & Watson, 1991; Silvia & Warburton, 2006). Personality research and theory suggest that adults (Bagozzi, 1993; Cropanzano, James, & Konovsky, 1993; Kercher, 1992; Thompson, 2007; Watson et al., 1988; Wright & Staw, 1999) and children (Laurent et al., 1999) develop trait affectivity leading them to respond to situations with typically more PA or more NA.

Combining literatures bearing on vocational and emotional socialization and development leads to the inference that parents' intentional and unintentional expression of their work experiences and work affectivity may constitute work ERSBs. Adults' expression of positive and negative work affectivity and experiences in the home, whether or not it is intentionally directed toward children, may socialize children to develop similar orientations toward work via vicarious learning (Lazarus, 1991). Typically, children have favorable attitudes about adult work and they know a fair amount about their parents' work lives (Galinsky, 1999). Some research suggests, however, that as children age from the elementary to middle school years, their attitudes toward work grow more negative (Goldstein & Oldham, 1979). This possibility prompts examining if and how adults actively and/or passively transmit work information to children and if these messages influence children's desire to learn about and engage in adult work (Goldstein & Oldham, 1979).

We advance a model suggesting that children establish an orientation to work through work ERSBs, which comprise adult family members' work affectivity and experiences expressed in the presence of children. We assessed children's perceptions of adults' positive and negative work affectivity and experiences in a way that accounted for positive and negative dimensions consistent with child PA–NA scales (Laurent et al., 1999) and work emotions in adult samples (Lazarus & Cohen-Chamash, 2001). Consistent with the PA–NA model, we predicted work PA and NA to be uncorrelated. Assuming that the family is an agent in socializing children to work, we predicted (H_1) children's perceptions of family members' work affect to be correlated with children's anticipated work affectivity, but respecting the PA–NA model, such associations were not predicted across the positive and negative dimension as seen in Fig. 1.

Consistent with the PA–NA model, work experiences were conceived as two classes yielding four variables: favorable and unfavorable adult family members' experiences and favorable and unfavorable children's anticipated work experiences. Given the lack of research in this area, the existence of relationships between the favorable and unfavorable work experience classes remains an open question that we explored in this study. The dashed arrows in Fig. 1 indicate the possibility that favorable and unfavorable work experience and expectations would be associated with one another.

1.2. Linking work affectivity and experiences

Children presumably view the work experiences and work-related emotions adults share with them as possible work experiences and emotions they could experience when they enter the workforce. This general hypothesis was tested with several specific and interrelated hypotheses. Pairing adults' work emotions with work experiences is a form of work ERSBs likely to increase children's arousal (Eisenberg et al., 1998). This heightened arousal may lead children to be more attentive to adults' work lives and to pair particular adult work experiences with commensurate emotions (e.g., positive affectivity to favorable experiences). Therefore, we predicted that (H_2) children's perceptions of adult family members' work experiences and work affectivity would be positively correlated within and possibly inversely correlated across the positive and negative dimensions.

We also predicted that children's anticipated work experiences and emotions would be the product of vicarious conditioning and work ERSBs. Children observe adults' expressed work experiences and emotions and establish commensurate conceptions of their future work lives. Children observing experience–emotion pairings (e.g., “My mother is always mistreated at work; therefore she is always sad at work”) are predicted to be vicariously conditioned to such pairings (e.g., “I will always be sad at work because work is a place where I will be mistreated.”) We therefore predicted (H_3) positive associations between adults and children's experiences and their emotions within the positive and negative dimensions. Consistent with PA–NA theory and research, we predicted no significant correlation across children's positive and negative work affectivity. Given no existing evidence, however, we tested the relationship between positive and negative experiences in an exploratory fashion.

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