

# Exploring feelings in the workplace ... Emotion at work

Guest Editor CATHERINE CASSELL introduces the special issue of the *Occupational Psychology Section*.

WHEN the Occupational Psychology Section was given the chance to produce a special issue of *The Psychologist* there was a considerable debate among Section committee members about what kind of topic would be appropriate. We were keen to bring to readers' attention the increasingly diverse and dynamic nature of occupational psychology, with its emphasis on the wide variety of experiences that individuals have in their work and organisational lives. We were also keen to demonstrate that the domain of occupational psychology is theoretically rich, while providing key insights for practitioners.

The topic of emotion at work was eventually chosen because all of us experience it. The work environment is an arena where experiences such as pleasure, sadness, jealousy, rage, guilt and love are displayed to the same varying levels of intensity and frequency as elsewhere in our everyday lives.

Yet, as a number of authors have suggested (Peckrun & Frese, 1992; Fineman, 1993, 1996), writers and researchers in work psychology and organisational theory have been slow to incorporate emotions into their analyses. Although emotion has had a long history as a key area for understanding and investigation within academic psychology, within work psychology it has remained relatively hidden. So an intriguing question, as Rob Briner points out in his article, is why is this so.

In searching for an answer, Fineman (1996) suggested that the ideological context within which work is construed is significant:

'Deeply rooted in Western (especially male) cultural beliefs about the expression of emotion is the belief that organizational order and manager/worker efficiency are matters of the rational, that is non-emotional activity. Cool strategic thinking is not to be sullied by messy feelings. Efficient thought and behaviour tame emotion. Accordingly good organizations are places where feelings are managed, designed out, or removed.' (p. 545.)

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This has implications more generally for the way in which organisational phenomena are studied. As Sue Walsh suggests in her article, traditionally there has been a decoupling between the 'emotional/ non-rational world' and the 'rational/technical' world of the organisation. This means that whole areas of psychological activity are lost as significant foci of research. Sometimes, these 'emotional' areas have been collapsed into all-encompassing categories such as 'stress' or 'job satisfaction'. But despite many studies within these categories, they remain fairly general in their application, rather than focusing on specific aspects of emotional expression (Briner, 1997).

The aim of this special issue is to bring together a collection of articles to demonstrate that emotion at work is an area of notable interest and worthy of investigation. Alistair Ostell, Sian Baverstock and Peter Wright focus on the practical strategies available to managers for handling emotion at work. Sue Walsh's article draws on a specific form of emotion: shame. Kevin Daniels considers the expression of emotion in a particular arena: strategic decision making. Rob Briner provides a useful overview by considering what occupational psychologists know about emotion at work. The articles, therefore, cover

suitably diverse topics, reflecting the range of human activity represented within the phenomenon of emotion.

Yet the articles also have something in common. Each of the contributors is an active researcher or practitioner in the field of emotion at work, and each concludes with a framework or suggestions for potential research directions or practitioner agendas. In doing this, the articles are indicative of the strengths of current work in occupational psychology, a thriving discipline in an increasingly complex working world.

## References

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