

Finnish Institute of
Occupational Health

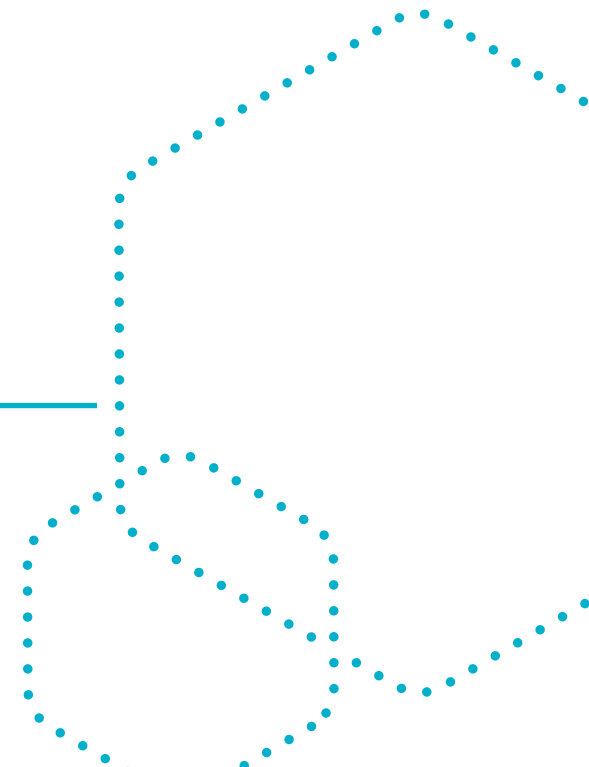
Changing emotional codes underlying generational differences in the understanding of mental health at work: A qualitative study in the municipal sector

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Background

- Mental health-related work disability and seeking treatment for mental health problems has become more common among workers under the age of 35 in the last decade in many Western societies.
- Prevalence of anxiety disorders has become more apparent.
- Mental health-related sickness absence and seeking psychological aid are often viewed as indicators of mental health problems.
- They may also reflect a cultural shift in how challenging emotions and subjective feelings are perceived as part of work-related well-being.

Purpose of this study

- To explore how the emotional experiences and interpretations are shaped by culturally shared norms, values and practices that in turn are influenced by broader cultural shifts and occupational macro-contexts.
- To outline how emotions contribute to the mental health-based well-being of young municipal employees.
- To explore the generational differences in the ways in which employees experience, interpret and tend to manage emotions at work.

Data

- In-depth interviews with 70 participants from the municipal sector in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area in 2021.
- Three groups were interviewed: occupational health professionals (n=21), workplace supervisors (n=12) and employees under the age of 35 (n=37).
- Semi-structured thematic interview as the method for producing data.

Thematic content analyses

- Recurring themes in the interview material were: emotional distress, mental resilience and its changes, the ideal of continuous development, different models of emotional expression and solution-seeking, moral evaluations, generational differences at work, and changes in employee subjectivity.
- We identified relevant emotional codes that articulate the views of the different younger and older generations and that underpin emotional and mental well-being and work ability.

Research questions

- (1) How do young employees from different backgrounds draw on emotional codes associated with the rise of individualism?
- (2) What other alternative emotional codes related to well-being at work may young employees from different contexts use?
- (3) How do supervisors and occupational health professionals perceive the changing emotional codes of young employees and what tensions do they raise?

Results 1: Emotional codes arising from the norms of individualistic self-development

- The demand for personal growth and authenticity was commonly recognized among young employees, especially among the well-educated in knowledge-intensive jobs. This easily led to intensified emotional reflection and seeking help from occupational health services.
- The ideal of self-development or striving for authenticity was as somewhat vague a normative principle, providing little guidance or structure beyond personal feelings.
- The responsibility for shaping one's own life often created uncertainty.
- Expectations that were in stark contrast with reality often led to a sense of failure, which contributed to feelings of exhaustion or burnout.

Results 2: Variations and overlaps in the emotional codes of young workers

- Occupational circumstances and subcultural contexts shaped experiences and interpretations of emotions and emotion management practices.
- Different organizational and cultural positions affected the demands of everyday life and formed different contexts for dealing with challenging emotions.
- The realities of poor and materially scarce working conditions caused negative emotions. These were often channelled into the mental health framework, as individuals sought relief for their emotionally distressing situations from occupational health services.
- Emotional codes were not only dictated by personal choices or motives; they were also shaped by one's position in the broader social framework.

Results 3: Generational differences in emotional codes and arising tensions

- Individualistic interpretation of working life and the subjective well-being brought about by the younger generations challenges the understanding of what belongs to work-related well-being.
- The younger generations are more likely to pursue mental health assistance to handle difficult emotions.
- Older generations often saw young people's way of dealing with emotions as a lack of stamina.
- Evolving emotional codes and behavioral norms has led to differing interpretations of work-related mental health at workplaces and at the occupational health care.

Conclusions

- The emotional codes among young employees born in the late 20th and early 21st century resonate with psychological and medical concepts and interpretative frameworks for individualistic emotional management.
- The field of mental health has expanded and become more diverse in ways not previously recognized.
- The application of generational and socio-cultural perspectives provides novel insights into the ongoing transition in mental health in the workplace and health care.
- The transition of emotional codes is already influencing the core content of occupational well-being and is creating a new behavioural setting in both work organizations and health care.

Thank you!

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