

## Please Pass the Peas: Influence of Emotions on Adult Learning Motivations

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Received: July 18, 2013 Accepted: July 31, 2013 Online Published: October 21, 2013

doi:10.11114/jets.v2i1.182

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.11114/jets.v2i1.182>

### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to expand the knowledge of adult motivation in unconventional professional settings. Nine focus group interviews were conducted with child care providers in child care settings from four states in the Western United States: California, Idaho, Oregon, and Washington. At each focus group interview three to eight participants viewed two video vignettes on feeding young children and participated in a facilitated discussion that was audio recorded, transcribed, and analyzed to identify themes related to participants' motivation to learn (Ely et al., 1997; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). A primary theme was the presence of hedonistic emotions. Child care providers' immediate and anticipated feelings of pleasure along with their desire to avoid pain influenced their motivation to learn. Hedonistic emotions were imbedded within and throughout participants' learning. To enhance adult motivation to learn and learning, adult educators should identify and attend to hedonistic emotions.

**Keywords:** adult motivation, motivation to learn, emotions, adult education, caregivers

### 1. Introduction

Education of adults covers a broad range of settings; identifying how best to educate professionals in any given setting can be rewarding for all involved. Caregivers of young children have a profound influence on children's psychological and physiological development (Gonzalez-Mena & Widmeyer Eyer, 2004). These same adults are responsible for feeding children in ways that will help shape children's food and health behaviors that will last their lifetime (Birch & Davison, 2001; Birch & Fisher, 1998; McGowan et al. 2013; Patrick, Nickals, Hughes, & Morales, 2005). When caregivers have the appropriate knowledge about feeding young children they are more apt to use feeding practices that will benefit children's health. Therefore, motivating caregivers to learn about feeding young children can directly impact children's health as well.

Identifying caregivers' motivation to learn begins with an understanding of motivation. A simple definition of motivation is a *drive to do something* (Kalat & Shiota, 2007), and the motivation to learn is a willingness to pursue a particular learning activity (Cropley, 1985), such as formal classes, continuing education trainings, or self-directed learning programs. Motivation to learn also involves the tendency to seek those learning activities that are meaningful and valued; while at the same time making a progressive effort to apply the information to an individual's lived experiences (Wlodkowski, 2008).

Information about motivation to learn is based on the assumption that adults are already involved in a learning activity. Understanding motivation to learn during an educational activity is essential, however, it is also important to address the basic notion of recruiting adults to learn (Ahl, 2006) or finding ways to entice adults to pursue further learning activities. Identified challenges for trainees include limited time they have available as well as resources to pay for training (Contento, 2007; Cropley, 1985; Johnson, Harrison, Burnett, & Emerson, 2003), calling for greater attention towards understanding why people choose to learn or initiate participation in a learning activity. The foundational question is, "Why do adults seek knowledge?"

From a brain science perspective, motivation is "a process that determines how much energy and attention the brain and body assign to a given stimulus—whether it's a thought coming in or a situation that confronts one" (Ratey, 2001 p. 247). Entrenched through the interplay between the body's senses and the brain's construction of neurons,

motivation presents a unique and complex process of thoughts, memories, and emotions that are both conscious and subconscious. Ninety-five percent of thinking takes place in the unconscious mind (Zaltman, 2003), suggesting that motivation also dominates our unconscious mind. While thoughts, memories, and emotions are important to motivation, emotions are what emerge as the driving force in subconscious and conscious action (Crossman, 2007; Wlodkowski, 2008). Emotions are “an inferred complex sequence of reaction to a stimulus including cognitive evaluations, subjective changes, autonomic and neural arousal, impulses to action, and behavior designed to have an effect upon the stimulus that initiated the complex sequence” (Kalat & Shiota, 2007, p. 5). Emotions are therefore a central driver of behavior (Baranowski, Cullen, Nicklas, Thomsson, & Baranowski, 2003) and often dictate whether information is worthy of retaining (Zaltman, 2003). Crossman (2007) recognized the role of emotions as a powerful tool for learners to use in processing, discussing, and assessing information to learn. Emotion and motivation are interrelated, as one is not present without the other (Kalat & Shiota, 2007).

Emotions determine what we pay attention to and the information that matters most to us (Wlodkowski, 2008). Knowles (1970) reported that adults prefer to learn information that is meaningful to them. Since emotions influence what individuals consider meaningful, they are the driving force behind what adults prefer to learn and thus what motivates learning (Wlodkowski, 2008). While emotions seem to play a key role in adults’ motivation to learn, additional knowledge is needed about how emotions are involved in motivation and learning.

The purpose of this study was to understand child care providers’ motivation to learn about feeding young children after viewing video vignettes of children eating. Two research questions aimed to capture this understanding. The first research question asked, “What are child care provider’s responses to videos on feeding young children?” Inquiry about their responses to the vignettes sought a greater understanding of what may influence their motivation to learn. A follow up question asked, “How do those responses influence their motivation to learn about feeding young children?”

## **2. Method**

Focus group interviews are deliberately planned group discussion session intended to gather information about the phenomena of interest (Krueger & Casey, 2009), and served as the qualitative methodological basis for understanding child care providers motivation to learn about feeding young children. During development of the focus group protocol, a one-on-one interview and three pilot focus group interviews (n=1, n=3, n=4, n=7) were conducted to provide formative data in the finalization of the focus group interview protocol.

### *2.1 Participant Selection*

Purposive sampling was used to locate participants from child care centers in four Western States: California, Idaho, Oregon, and Washington. Child care center directors were contacted using state child care resource and referral agencies and internet searches. Participants in each focus group were from the same child care center, and participating centers needed to meet the inclusion criteria of being licensed by their associated state and they needed to offer food as a meal or snack as a part of the services for the children in their center.

### *2.2 Procedures*

The focus group interviews began by welcoming participants, providing a brief overview of the purpose of the study, and gathering of signed consent forms. Participants were then asked to view three video vignettes: a neutral video vignette about physical activity not related to the purpose of the study and two video vignettes about feeding young children that were related to the purpose of the study. The neutral video vignette was shown to expose participants to patterns in the video vignettes. After watching each video vignette on feeding young children participants were asked to complete two projective technique response activities for a total of 4 activities described elsewhere (Ramsay, Holyoke, Branen, & Fletcher, 2012). The projective technique activities used stimuli to help reveal individuals’ true responses regarding their thoughts, feelings, and emotions (Bystedt, Lynn, & Potts 2003; Christensen & Olson, 2002; Krueger & Casey, 2009). After the projective technique response activities participants partook in an audio-recorded focus group facilitated discussion. Finally, each participant was given a personal and professional characteristics questionnaire along with a certificate of completion and packet of nutrition and feeding information.

Generated data included responses from the four projective technique activities, narrative data from the focus group discussion, demographic information, and a researcher’s journal. The audio recordings were saved in a windows media player format, and transcribed by a transcriptionist. Participants’ pseudo names were used on all reported data. Data analysis began upon receipt of each transcribed audio recording, and continued as each focus group interview was conducted and the transcription of the audio recording was received. Data analysis followed procedures recommended by Ely, Vinz, Downing, and Anzul, (1997) and Strauss and Corbin (1990). Categories

and themes related to child care providers' motivation to learn were generated. To establish consistency in coding and generation of themes, transcripts were reviewed to confirm codes as well as stay true to the transcript. Codes and themes were reviewed by content experts and confirmed through scholarly literature.

### 3. Results

Nine focus group interviews were conducted in California, Idaho, Oregon, and Washington. A minimum of three and maximum of eight participants attended each focus group interview, for a total participation of n=37. Details of focus group locations are listed in Table 1.

#### 3.1 Participants

All participants were female with a mean and median age of 35 years, ranging from 20 to 61 years of age. Participants worked in a child care setting for a mean of 10.6 years, ranging from one year to 45 years (both median and mode were 8 years), they worked with children from birth to four years, and on average, cared for 14 children a day. Fifteen of the 35 participants had taken at least one college course, workshop, seminar, or training on nutrition (two participants did not provide a response). Only nine of the 31 participants had taken a college course, workshop, seminar or training in feeding young children (six participants did not provide a response). Some participants indicated only one professional development training offered each year. Many participants were not sure how many training programs were offered in a year.

Table 1. Child Care Center Locations for the Focus Group Interviews

Center location	Number of participants	Number of focus groups
<b>California</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>1</b>
Santa Fe Springs	4	1
<b>Idaho</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>4</b>
Boise	3	1
Coeur d'Alene	7	2
Post Falls	8	1
<b>Oregon</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>
Portland	3	1
<b>Washington</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>3</b>
Liberty Lake	6	1
Spokane	3	1
Vancouver	3	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>9</b>

#### 3.2 Data Analysis

Data analysis showed child care providers' hedonistic emotions were the catalyst for their motivation to learn about feeding young children. The term hedonistic stems from the root word hedonism, which refers to the principle of seeking pleasure and avoiding pain (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Hedonistic emotions fall under two principles: (1) emotions that demonstrate pleasure or a desire to experience pleasure; and (2) emotions that demonstrate a desire to avoid pain or an experience of pain. When an individual feels joy, happiness, or pride about participating in a learning activity then he or she is demonstrating hedonistic emotions. If that individual anticipates outcomes that will result in joy, happiness, or pride then he or she is also experiencing a hedonistic emotional response. On the other hand, if an individual anticipates outcomes that will relieve stress, anxiety, or displeasure then he or she is experiencing a hedonistic emotion as a result of the possible outcome as well.

Mezirow's (1978) perspective on transformation presents the dimensions of thought and feeling in adult learning, however the concept of hedonistic emotions emphasize the emotional aspect that is embedded within learning. For example, a childcare provider expressed a hedonistic emotion of pleasure by describing happiness she felt knowing she appropriately feeds children in her care. Another child care provider also expressed a hedonistic emotion of avoiding pain by describing how she wanted to try family style service so the children could be "calm and relaxed during mealtimes, just like on the video," rather than chaotic. These reflective child care providers' comments were triggered by hedonistic emotions.

Participants responded with hedonistic emotions to the video vignettes as they reflected on their personal experiences, practices, and opinions/beliefs. For example, when participants described mealtime environments, they often stated emotions they felt, "[The mealtimes] can be stressful." Another participant recounted a situation when she tried to ensure a child ate, "I had a fight with Douglas. He just walked away from the table and he was done. He

didn't want to eat." The videos showed participants that mealtimes do not have to be stressful. Consequently, participants were motivated to learn how to design mealtimes that were calm and relaxed, just like the videos.

Hedonistic emotions were further demonstrated through participants' descriptions. One participant described an experience, "It's like my little boy, he tasted something that he would have never tasted and I made up this song. I am so happy, happy! I'm so proud." Another participant commented on how she felt pride in helping one of the children try new foods stating, "And I was like, I helped him try a new food], I did that. I was so proud and his mom was so happy." These emotions demonstrated how the child care providers were responding to positive emotions they felt from interacting with children at mealtimes. Child care providers have a value and appreciation for working with young children (Daniels et al., 2003); they feel pleasure optimizing children's health and well-being, and they feel they have an impactful role in children's lives. These positive feelings were demonstrated in this study.

Child care providers reactions to watching the video vignettes on feeding young children elicited hedonistic emotions. Participants described many different emotions they felt while watching the video vignettes: funny, good, pride, excitement, surprise, and pleasure in seeing cute and happy children. Crossman (2007) explained how learners' attitudes, beliefs, and values are impacted by emotions. These emotions influence a learner's motivation by stimulating a desire to replicate the emotions. For example, letting children serve themselves attributing to the children's happiness:

"The self-confidence that the kids looked [sic] like they had [in letting them serve themselves] was just really good though. The looks on their faces and, 'Oh, you know, I can do it myself.' That was kind of cute. They were in control and the teacher was kind of guiding them, but wasn't like, 'Do it this way.' Or it was just real nice, mellow, [the child] not getting told what to do. They were just given advice like when to stop. You know it wasn't, 'Okay, that's enough.' Or it was all like nice and easy."

The connection between letting children serve themselves and happy children created a hedonistic emotion that motivated child care providers to learn about letting children serve themselves.

#### 4. Discussion: A Process of Hedonistic Emotions and the Motivation to Learn

The analysis procedures of Strauss and Corbin (1990) describe the use of a questioning technique to gain a deeper understanding of the processes occurring between emerged themes. Using these procedures, child care providers' motivation to learn was captured in their responses and a process for their motivation was developed (see Figure 1). The process integrates five factors in child care providers' motivation to learn: (1) background beliefs and experiences related to the concept, (2) stated motivations about the concept, (3) what needs to be learned about this concept, (4) concerns to be addressed about the concept, and (5) what are their hedonistic emotions.

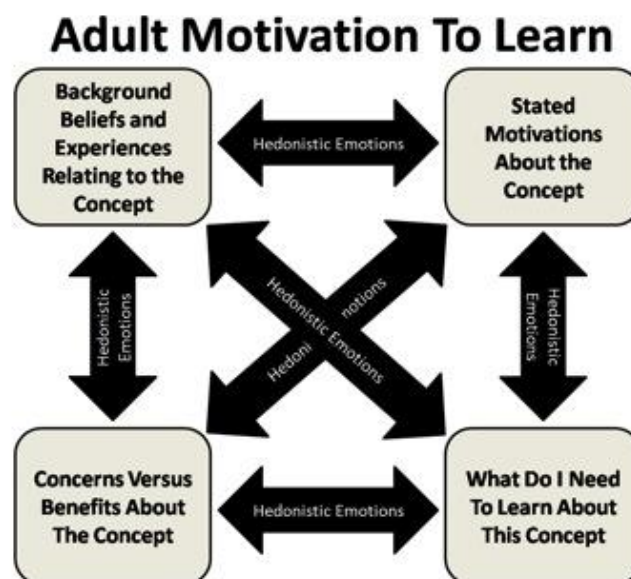


Figure 1. Process of Child Care Providers' Motivation to Learn

#### 4.1 Factor 1: Background Beliefs and Experiences

The first factor in the process involves *background beliefs and experiences* relating to the concept being learned. Learners' life experiences and values influence their motivation to learn. Research has demonstrated how caregivers' knowledge about feeding young children is largely due to their own feeding practices at home and personal experiences of how they were fed as a child (Brannen & Fletcher, 1999; McGarvey et al., 2006). While this study did not specifically look at where or how child care providers learned about feeding young children, it did ask about their feeding practices. Participants frequently described how their feeding practices were based on the way they were fed as a child. Not only did child care providers describe how they were fed as a child, but they also described their current experiences feeding children, their own practices in feeding children, and their opinions and beliefs about those feeding practices. Participants' current feeding practices were based on an inseparable combination of past and present feeding practices along with their future intentions about feeding.

#### 4.2 Factor 2: Stated Motivations

Participants *stated their motivation* to learn about feeding young children, the second factor in the motivation to learn process. Betterment of children's health and optimizing children's nutritional intake of food was most frequently identified as participants' motivation to learn about feeding young children. Child care providers were motivated to help children grow, develop, and prevent medical complications. Their desires to feed children well, which will in turn, keep the children healthy (Sellers et al., 2005). Participants also wanted to ensure they were feeding in a way to support children's growth and development and to prevent future diseases. One participant commented on her motivation to learn to support children's health and nutrition, "Starting them out right for a lifetime of proper eating. Making healthy internal [sic] decisions."

Another motivator was to create positive mealtime environments. Mealtimes have been identified as chaotic and stressful (Kaplan et al., 2006). Participants wanted their mealtimes to be more like those on the videos as demonstrated in the following comments, "If it would make the classroom run smoother, I would be willing to go to the library every day," "Yeah, not having a battle and just how to [get children to eat the foods they should eat] in a positive, you know loving way without it [the strategy] being like, 'Take your no thank you bite [an approach to get a child to take a bite of food], You know, or 'Please put [the food] on your plate,'" and "A smoother [sic] transition, you know, throughout the whole lunchtime. Just, yeah, that's what I want."

In their response to the video vignettes, participants identified a specific need for learning about feeding young children. They initially described their motivation to learn about feeding young children as a way to meet state training quotas and qualify them for financial advancement at their centers, giving them a higher economic return (Smith, 2000). Other child care providers cited an interest in learning about feeding young children to enhance their social interaction with other professionals and children, previously described as a social human motivation (Ahl, 2006; Drago-Severson, 2004). A few child care providers expressed motivation to learn because they have become accustomed to trainings, which has been described as a learned behavior (Ahl, 2006, Watson, 1948), while others felt a driven human need because it was the right thing to do for the children or because they sought the benefit of a more pleasant mealtime (Ahl, 2006; Maslow, 1987). For example:

"You get to a point in your classroom being a teacher that things just have to change. Like, there is no alternative. It's just things have to change and I think when you get to the point that you can't stand it anymore."

Finally, child care providers were motivated to teach parents about ways to support children at mealtimes, "So getting that [information about feeding young children], not only educating myself, but getting that out for parents." Being able to share information with others who may need it was motivating the child care providers to learn.

#### 4.3 Factor 3: What Do I Need to Learn

The third factor in the process involves *recognition of information needed to learn* about a concept not currently in their repertoire. Adults, including child care providers, want to learn about appropriate feeding practices (Carr & Conklin, 2000). Child care providers want to feed children in the best manner possible that is supportive of their growth and development. Participants in this study wanted to learn more about feeding young children. Once they identified the motivation to learn about a feeding concept, participants proceeded to describe what information they would need about the concept. Participants wanted information about how to implement concepts they observed from the videos such as, how to manage children's eating, and how to get information about feeding young children to parents. One participant sought to replicate the behavior in the videos, "How would you get one-year-olds to do what they did on the video?" Another response demonstrated frustration:

“Like we have certain children who pour tons of food on their plates and then they don’t eat half of it. They want to throw it away. Now do we let them sit down and eat it or do we let them throw it away? And do we let them continue serving themselves or do we, what do we do?”

#### 4.4 Factor 4: Concerns versus Benefits

*Concerns versus benefits* about the concept are the fourth factor in the process. Letting children serve themselves is a recommended feeding practice to support children’s health (Patrick, Nicklas, Hughes, & Morales, 2005; Sigman-Grant, Christiansen, Branen, Fletcher & Johnson, 2008). However, child care providers in this study expressed concerns with this practice stating that it was not going to work. Their concerns were about managing children’s eating, keeping food safety, mess/clean up, and time. For example, “[The videos] were motivational, but I don’t know if it’s... If it could be done here,” “I’m not confident in them doing it,” and “Yeah, that’s something else that the small ones have a hard time learning. Because when we get some of the toddlers in our room, the majority winds up in the trash can or in the sink.”

Challenges to managing children’s eating include control and organization of the type of food eaten, amount of food eaten, order food is eaten, frequency of foods eaten, and whether or not children needs limits on certain foods. While literature shows children deviate in their dietary intake, they eat according their caloric density cues (Birch & Fisher, 1998) and caregivers still want to manage children’s eating (Kaplan et al., 2006). For example, they made comments such as, “Some children need limitations as far as serving themselves. They should be allowed to serve themselves, but some children need help with portion control,” and “Choose what’s a balanced meal [sic] not just bread or just, you know, that they get some other things in too.” Other comments were made about food safety, mess and clean up, and time such as, “Our kids go through our kitchen, though, to wash their hands for lunch and half of them have had worms and snot and so they’re like on everybody’s plate and passing a cup, ” “They do a lot of, make a lot of messes, so I just have to build the nerve up to do it first,” and “Yeah, but time is short, tight.”

Irrespective of their concerns, child care providers continued to express motivation to learn about letting children serve themselves. They shared ideas about bettering their own practice at work in the child care center, and at home by trying self service at home. Child care providers’ motivation was torn between their concerns and their perceived benefits of the concepts.

#### 4.5 Factor 5: Hedonistic Emotions Influencing their Motivation

Emotions influence motivation (Crossman, 2007; Wlodkowski, 2008), therefore *emotions are present* throughout the motivation to learn process. In this study hedonistic emotions influenced each factor throughout the cyclic process of motivation to learning. Hedonistic emotions influenced participants’ background beliefs and experiences, represented in the first factor of the cyclical process. In the second factor, hedonistic emotions emerged from participants stated motivation to learn about feeding young children. Participants were motivated to seek positive experiences or to reduce negative experiences. However, in factor 3, participants recognized a need to learn about the concept to achieve desired outcomes. Subsequently, concerns versus benefits in factor 4 along with the hedonistic emotions determined their motivation to learn. Coming full circle, the hedonistic emotions influencing the motivation to learn further impact background beliefs and experiences. One example that captures the process:

“I think it opens up a lot of many options and doorways that we don’t see, as us just serving and passing out, but if we actually sit back and let them take charge you’d probably be amazed about how many things go on through that whole process. What they take out of it. Like they are learning to share and portion themselves and have decent conversations at the table and not talk about going to the bathroom and a lot of growth. A lot of things come out of just the table. It’s pretty...It’s pretty amazing actually.”

## 5. Conclusions and Discussion

Adult motivation to learn is the drive to participate and learn about a particular concept, and one that needs to be addressed in the education of adults (Wlodkowski, 2008). The purpose of this study was to understand child care providers’ motivation to learn about feeding young children. Distinct to this study was a discovery of the role hedonistic emotions in learning and the motivation partnered with it. The role of emotions (Crossman, 2007; Wlodkowski, 2008; Zaltman, 2003) and motivation (Ahl, 2006; Baranoski et al., 2003; Wlodkowski, 2008) in learning has been examined. These findings expand on previous literature demonstrating the importance of emotion in learning and the motivation to learn.

If emotions are central to adult learning, greater attention should be given to methods educators use to stimulate learners’ emotions. This study identified the role of hedonistic emotions as a trigger in adults’ motivation to learn. Child care providers’ hedonistic emotional responses of pleasure were described in the joy child care providers felt

watching the videos, or the happiness they reflected about their own mealtimes with young children. Child care providers also were motivated by an anticipated enjoyment (a hedonistic emotion) in future mealtimes with young children. They looked forward to having more of those experiences and wanted to replicate the pleasurable feeling. Hedonistic emotions that catalyzed child care providers' motivation to experience pleasure were not the only response; child care providers expressed hedonistic emotions of wanting to avoid pain. Motivation to learn was increased when child care providers recognized that they could avoid or minimize unpleasant experiences (a hedonistic emotion).

Depth and breadth of hedonistic emotions were not examined in this study, nor were the impact of deeper emotions on learning and the motivation to learn. Additional qualitative research such as focus groups interviews and one-on-one interviews is recommended to examine the depth and breadth of hedonistic emotions and the role of hedonistic emotions on the motivation to learn in other content areas. Quantitative studies should examine the presence of hedonistic emotions in learning activities.. It is noted that the qualitative nature of this study may have presented researcher biases in the phenomena of motivating child care providers to learn about feeding young children. Future research is warranted on the use of technology such as an electroencephalogram to further examine hedonistic emotions.

Additional research should also examine the role of educators and how they may influence hedonistic emotion and motivation as well as ways to trigger hedonistic emotions. If educators can facilitate the enhancement of emotions during learning, the motivation to learn will be increased. Qualitative observations of learning activities may be used to identify educator actions and students' emotional responses or surveys can be administered pre and post learning activities inquiring on hedonistic emotions.

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