How Do Pride, Stress, and Emotional Toll Influence Food Safety in Food Service?

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Introduction

Safeguarding consumers from potential foodborne illness whilst providing quality dining experience is paramount for any food service establishment. Food service managers and employees should be committed to implementing safe food handling practices and supporting a positive culture within an establishment to ensure food safety.

Previous research highlighted the importance of knowledge, positive attitude and risk perception of food handlers when food safety implementation is considered (4, 5, 14, 15, 17). However, it can be suggested that other cognitive factors may also influence food handler food safety behaviour in food service establishments.

In this study cognitive drivers such as pride, stress and emotional toll, were evaluated in the context of food safety.

Purpose

This study aimed to explore management and food handler perceptions of working in food service to understand how various cognitive factors could influence food safety compliance and food safety culture.

Methods

1. Qualitative interview schedule was informed by the preceding literature review.
2. In-depth interviews with food service management (n=9) and employees (n=4) were conducted to explore opinions and perceptions of working in food service.
3. Collated data were analysed using thematic analysis approach and emerging themes were identified.
4. Data relating to pride, stress and emotional toll were interpreted with considerations to food safety performance, food safety commitment and food safety culture.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Cardiff School of Sport and Health Sciences Ethics Committee (Project Reference Number: PGR-5508)

Definitions

For the purposes of this study, the definitions were used as follows:

Pride - a feeling of pleasure and satisfaction that you get because you or people connected with you have done or got something good (1).

Stress - state of worry or mental tension caused by a difficult situation (19).

Emotional toll – emotional state having a serious (bad) effect on someone (13).

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Results and Discussion

The thematic analysis of comments expressed by interview participants resulted in the identification of the three key areas of importance when commitment to food safety practices is considered: customer focus, teamwork and personal wellbeing. Further qualitative analysis determined that within these three key areas, cognitive drivers, such as pride, stress and emotional toll may influence food safety commitment and implementation of food safety practices.

Influence of pride on food safety commitment and implementation

Personal wellbeing	Customer focus	Teamwork
"[discussing the place of work] I love that place! I don't want it to sink! I love it! [laughing]" (Employee 9)	"And we have five-star Food Hygiene Rating. We are really proud of that." (Manager 6)	"I think generally here, people are quite proud of what they do. Like as in...people are not really lazy here, like they want to do it good. To get the job done." (Employee 8)
"[discussing documentation] I find that, when I do it the proper way, I actually feel really great about myself!" (Employee 3)	"It is my job. I want people to think that it is good in here, you know." (Employee 7)	

Interview participants positively described the feelings of pride in belonging to the individual establishment where they work:

- Following recommendations correctly was described as leading to feelings of personal accomplishment; and being proud of food safety achievements was described as a positive motivator. Pride and respect have been shown to increase self-identification with the organization and work engagement (20).
- Visible food safety rating at the establishments were perceived as a physical evidence of food handlers' food safety compliance by the food service employees; "5-star" ratings were discussed with pride (8). The quality of work by other members of the team was reported to be noticed by all; and feelings of collective pride were reported when a job was done well. Previous studies emphasised the importance of social recognition and increasing employee sense of accomplishment and pride, when employee job satisfaction and performance are concerned (7, 12).

It is suggested that personal and collective pride, and acknowledgement of hard work may reinforce the social norms and improve food safety culture.

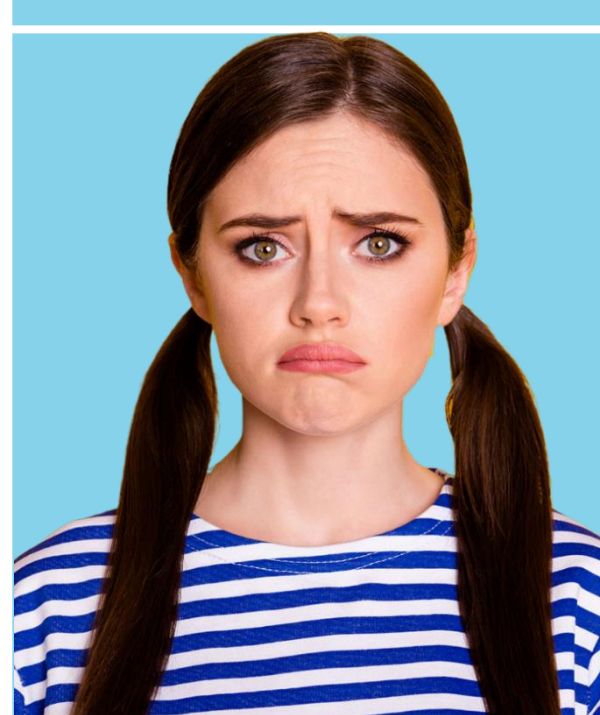### Influence of stress on food safety commitment and implementation

Personal wellbeing	Customer focus	Teamwork
"Even if the situation isn't pressurised, you can make it pressurized by like really focusing on the standards required and the level required." (Manager 13)	"I think it gets more stressful when you understand that the customers are waiting a long time on their food, or they're just not happy with service." (Manager 29)	"And then when people aren't pulling their weight sometimes it's a lot faster just to do it all yourself. But then you just kind of exhausted!" (Employee 3)
"It's very hard to switch off because of the irregular schedules as well. There's no routine, really." (Employee 3)		"And when you don't have the support of the managers, and that adds to the stress as well." (Employee 27)

Interview respondents negatively described the effects of stress:

- The "job pressure" and "long hours" were described as creating stress, whether it was mentally perceived or physically experienced.
- Serving customers was often considered to be stressful, due to high expectations regarding service quality and speed. Such stress may be perceived as a hindrance and a barrier to consistent food safety performance (2). A stressed food handler may prioritise the speed of service over food safety.
- Interviewees reported that doing more than others in a team and "pulling all the weight" was causing both physical an emotional stress. In such situation food handler motivation and commitment may be seriously affected.
- Interviewees highlighted that a lack of managerial support and effective communication may further increase stress. Previous research confirmed that the lack of effective employer-employee engagement may negatively impact organizational identification and work performance (20). Overall, any reports of stress should be taken seriously and treated as a signal that food service employees may experience burnout (3, 12).

It is suggested that stress may negatively influence food handler motivation and attitudes and lead to a lack of commitment to food safety performance.

Influence of emotional toll on food safety commitment and implementation

Personal wellbeing	Customer focus	Teamwork
"It's a hard industry and nobody realises how hard it is sometimes." (Employee 9)	"And I do feel like some people treat us like servants." (Employee 3)	"I see the attitude coming from my colleagues and the managers, and even then I'm thinking: "Why am I trying so hard? What's the point?" You know..." (Employee 27)
"And I don't think people understand how much goes into making coffee." (Employee 3)	"Because they [chefs] moan: "Why is it so busy?" and I go: "Well, you're working in the restaurant, what do you expect?"" (Employee 9)	

Interviewees shared experiences, indicating that work in food service may be emotionally demanding and lead to emotional toll:

- Food service employees reported a perceived lack of acknowledgement of their hard work and the need to be heard. Over time this emotional driver could create negative feelings towards the organization and deidentification, consequently leading to a lack of commitment and resulting in low performance when it comes to safeguarding consumers' health (12, 18). Food handlers not committed to safe food handling and protecting the consumer may neglect the recommended practices.
- Interview respondents described serving customers as an emotionally difficult task, which may prevent positive job satisfaction, and instead lead to resentment and burnout, as reported by previous studies (9, 12).
- Attitudes towards food safety among other team members may lead to specific social norms and behaviours which are not always appropriate. Employees in lower (non-managerial) positions are shown to be less likely to intervene if a food safety malpractice is observed (6). Going against the norm established by the team may require courage and may lead to conflict. On the other hand, it is suggested that following social norms knowing they are incorrect and endangering the consumer, may lead to emotional exhaustion due to internal emotional struggle.

It is suggested that emotional toll may negatively influence food handler food safety commitment, motivation and wellbeing, consequently leading to poor food safety compliance.

Significance of study

- Opinions expressed by the interviewees indicate that stress and emotional toll is high among the food service workers and may negatively affect personal wellbeing, customer focus and teamwork. This may lead to poor food handler commitment to food safety implementation.
- Feeling pride in one's work was indicated to motivate commitment to safeguarding the consumer, positively influencing teamwork and encouraging appropriate food safety performance.
- It is suggested that amplifying the effects of positive cognitive drivers such as pride, utilising social recognition, rewards, management and co-worker support may help cultivate positive food safety culture in food service establishments.