



Why Are OST Workers Dedicated—or Not?

Factors That Influence Commitment to OST Care Work

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Increasingly youth development advocates, educators, and communities recognize the importance of out-of-school time (OST) activities for academic achievement and youth well-being (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2007; Gordon, Bridglall, & Meroe, 2005; Hall, Yohalem, Tolman, & Wilson, 2003). Scholars suggest that youth-adult relationships may be key for program efficacy (Celano & Neuman, 2008; Cole, 2011; Gordon et al., 2005). Strengthening the OST workforce is thus a critical goal to enhance children's learning and development.

Commonly identified challenges with the OST workforce include retention and lack of education and experience (Asher, 2012; Khashu & Dougherty, 2007; The After-School Corporation [TASC], 2009). Asher (2012) raises some of the challenges with this part-time workforce and starts to explore job satisfaction and

career development issues. OST workers serve as potential educational change agents and make significant contributions to children's development, but they often see their jobs as transient rather than as part of a career path (Razavi, 2007; Richardson, 2012). Their positive contributions and job satisfaction are rarely studied, in part because of the nature of the OST workforce and workplace (Asher, 2012). OST care workers not only

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earn a low hourly wage, but also mainly work part time before or after school (Bradshaw, 2015; National Afterschool Association, 2006; Richardson, 2012; TASC, 2009).

Mentoring and professional development have been identified as important strategies for supporting OST workers (Bradshaw, 2015; Cole, 2011; Cooper, 2013). TASC (2009) articulates the value of strong professional development for both organizations and workers. The expectation is that supporting these workers might simultaneously improve program *content* by enhancing the quality of instruction and activities, while enriching program *process* by fostering a stronger social-emotional climate and better youth-adult relationships. However, there is no universal certification or license for OST positions (Cole, 2011; Gabrieli, 2011; Stonehill et al., 2011).

This study situates OST work in the workforce sector the career development literature calls “care workers” (Blustein, 2006; Richardson, 2012). Working within that framework, we surveyed OST line staff and site directors to attempt to quantify factors that led them to be more or less dedicated to their care work. Our findings have implications for staff recruitment, training, and retention and for the institutional and policy development of OST programs.

OST Labor as Market Care Work

To understand the influences on OST workers’ dedication, we started by considering OST work as a form of care work. Richardson (2012) identifies four social contexts through which people construct their lives: (1) market work, or work for money outside the home; (2) personal care work, which involves caring for oneself, one’s dependents, and one’s community; (3) personal relationships, or lifelong relationships with family and friends; and (4) market work relationships, which include connections with mentors, supervisors, colleagues, and students. Tutoring and mentoring youth after school was historically considered personal care work because it usually happened informally at home. Today, as OST programming has expanded beyond simple childcare into targeted educational and social-emotional interventions aimed at improving long-term youth development outcomes, it has evolved into what

psychology of work scholars call “market care work” (Folbre, 2006).

For OST care workers, Richardson’s (2012) contexts overlap and intersect. OST care work is relational and social; workers are tasked with multiple and diverse caring roles, which can include, for example, coaching, mentoring, teaching, tutoring, and even feeding the children in their program. OST care workers often come from the communities in which they work and have personal relationships with the families of the youth enrolled in their programs (TASC, 2009). Blustein’s relational theory of working (2011), which emphasizes relationships in work interactions, is particularly applicable to OST care workers. Though all work contains relational components (Blustein, 2011), the relational attributes of OST work are particularly salient because of the intersection of school, family, and community contexts.

OST care workers often feel dedicated to their jobs because they value programs’ social justice orientation, aligning with such goals as, for example, narrowing the achievement gap and promoting positive outcomes

for underserved youth (Nelson Chair Roundtable, 2014). External influences, such as sociopolitical development and life circumstances, also influence OST workers’ career beliefs and expectations and their attitudes toward their work (Diemer et al., 2010; Duffy & Dik, 2009). OST staff who work in programs in their own communities may have personal and work experience with the same local institutions that affect program youth; for example, they may have attended the same schools. These experiences will help to shape their ideas about their work and about the youth they serve. Understanding how the relational and cultural contexts of OST care workers influence their work is therefore necessary to a holistic concept of the OST workforce.

Context

To begin to understand what keeps OST care workers engaged in their challenging roles, we surveyed direct-service workers in OST programs delivered by a nationwide community-based organization in a large Northeastern city. At the time of survey administration in spring 2013, this organization ran 31 afterschool sites in the city, 22 of them in public schools. Programs typically served elementary-

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aged students; activities included homework help, physical activity, and specialized programs like Girl Scouts and STEM activities from community partners.

Each location had a site director and anywhere from one to eight group leaders, depending on the number of youth at that site. Group leaders typically managed a specific group of children and delivered all activities except those provided by community groups. Site directors supervised group leaders. They would frequently rotate among groups to provide assistance, coach group leaders, support lesson plan development, and coordinate with outside partners. Almost all group leaders were part time, as were most site directors.

Methods

In order to understand what leads to dedication among OST care workers, we had to measure the degree to which survey respondents were in fact dedicated to their work. We selected three dependent variables to measure dedication:

- Job satisfaction
- Career commitment
- Work as meaning

The primary assumption is that higher levels of dedication, as evidenced by these three variables, would lead workers to stay in the OST field and to pursue professional development and career advancement.

To understand the life experiences that could influence OST care workers' dedication, we selected three independent variables:

- Mentoring: respondents' experience of having been mentored
- Collectivist or individualist orientation: cultural orientation toward community or toward individuality
- Work volition: perceived degree of career-related choice

We presumed that workers' experience of being mentored would positively influence their dedication to market care work. A collectivist orientation would be likely to lead toward involvement in community programs; greater work volition would likely lead workers to perceive more opportunity in their work and thus be more dedicated.

Participants and Procedures

The sample consisted of 47 adults employed as either site directors or group leaders in the afterschool programs. We contacted the 31 site directors to ask them to get the permission of group leaders to share their email

Table 1. Respondent Demographics

Characteristic	N	%
Male	11	23%
Female	36	77%
White	21	45%
Nonwhite	26	55%
Site director	24	51%
Group leader	23	49%
High school diploma	14	30%
Associate's degree	6	13%
Bachelor's degree	25	53%
Master's degree	2	4%

Table 2. Respondent Age and Tenure

Characteristic	Average
Age	26.7 years
Time in current position	2.2 years
Time in this organization	4.1 years
Time in OST or childcare field	6.4 years

addresses. Through this process, we got contact information for 88 employees, whom we emailed an invitation to participate in the online survey. A grant enabled us to give each participant a \$2 gift certificate, an amount based on their hourly wage for the 10-minute survey.

As shown in Table 1, 48 participants completed the online questionnaire, which had been approved by our institutional review board. Of these participants, 51 percent were site directors and 49 percent were group leaders; 77 percent identified as female and 45 percent as white. Because of the small numbers of respondents in some racial categories, we combined respondents who identified as African American, Asian, Latino, multi-racial, and "other" into a single category, *nonwhite*. Table 2 shows that, on average, the participants were 27 years old and had been employed by the organization in some capacity for four years. Two older workers with many years of experience skewed the average, though this average is still younger than the average age of 35 reported by the National Afterschool Association (2006).

Measures

We used previously validated brief survey instruments to measure the three dependent variables and three inde-

pendent variables related to OST care workers' job dedication. All measures had strong internal consistencies, indicating strong reliability, except for the measure of individualist or collectivist orientation, which had a weak internal consistency.

Job Satisfaction

A five-item measure (Judge, Locke, Durham, & Kluger, 1998) evaluated participants' perception of their job satisfaction. We asked respondents to think of their OST work with their current organization, indicating their agreement with each question on a 7-point scale from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. Sample items included "I feel fairly well satisfied with my present job," "Most days I am enthusiastic about my work," and "I find real enjoyment in my work."

Career Commitment

The Career Commitment Measure (Carson & Bedeian, 1994) contains 12 items that examine individuals' commitment to their career. We asked respondents to consider their OST work in rating their agreement with the 12 statements on a 5-point scale. Items included, for example, "I have created a plan for my development in this line of work/career field" and "My line of work/career field is an important part of who I am."

Work as Meaning

The Work as Meaning Inventory (Steger, Dik, & Duffy, 2012) is a 10-item measure composed of three subscales: positive meaning, meaning making through work, and greater good motivations. Again, we asked respondents to think specifically about work at their current organization as they rated items on a 7-point scale. Example items included, "I have found a meaningful career" and "I know my work makes a positive difference in the world."

Mentor Experience

To measure experiences of being mentored, we used the 11-item mentor subscale of the Relational Health Indices (Liang et al., 2002). The 5-point scale ranges from *never* to *always* in response to such items as "I can be genuinely myself with my mentor." Respondents were free to select any mentor relationship from any period in their life to rate these items.

Individualist or Collectivist Cultural Orientation

Triandis' (1995) 13-item measure of culture assesses whether individuals are more collectivist or individualist in their cultural orientation. Respondents were asked to

rate, on a scale of 1 to 9, *true*, how likely they were to do what each item describes. An example of a collectivist item is "Ask close relatives for a loan." An example of an individualist item is "Live far from your parents."

Work Volition

We used the Work Volition Scale (Duffy, Diemer, Perry, Laurenzi, & Torrey, 2012) to assess respondents' perceptions of their capacity to make occupational choices despite constraints or challenging life circumstances. Respondents selected the extent to which they agreed with each item on a 7-point scale. The 14-item scale contains three subscales: volition, financial constraints, and structural constraints. An example of a volition item is "I've been able to choose the jobs I wanted." A financial constraints item is "Due to my financial situation, I need to take any job I can find." A structural constraints item is "I feel that outside forces have really limited my work and career options."

Results

Table 3 presents the correlations among the primary measures, dividing cultural orientation into its binary components of collectivism and individualism for a total of seven measures. The dark shading indicates a strong correlation. Lighter shading indicates a relationship that is statistically significant but not as strong. Note that the three measures of dedication—job satisfaction, career commitment, and work as meaning—are highly correlated with each other. These three measures therefore offer a good indicator of who is and is not dedicated to their work.

Moreover, some of the independent variables significantly correlated with the dependent variables in the expected direction. Work volition had the strongest association with all three indicators of dedication: job satisfaction, career commitment, and work as meaning. Positive experiences of being mentored showed significant correlation with two indicators: commitment and meaning. Although collectivist orientation was not significantly correlated with any measures, individualism was negatively related to job satisfaction—that is, respondents with an individualist orientation were less likely to express satisfaction with their jobs.

We conducted statistical analyses to see whether respondents' race (white or nonwhite) or role (site director or group leader) predicted differences among the seven measures. We found no statistically significant differences; we therefore did not control for race or staff role in the regression analyses described below. The other demographic variables were not normally distributed: The sample was largely female, and outliers skewed vari-

Table 3. Relationships Among Variables Related to Job Dedication

		Dependent Variables			Independent Variables			
		Job satisfaction	Career commitment	Work as meaning	Mentor experience	Collectivism	Individualism	Work volition
Dependent Variables	Job satisfaction		Dark	Dark			Light	Dark
	Career commitment			Dark	Light			Dark
	Work as meaning				Dark			Dark
Independent Variables	Mentor experience							Light
	Collectivism							
	Individualism							
	Work volition							

Note: Shading indicates a statistically significant relationship. Dark shading signifies a very strong relationship (correlation of 0.40 or greater). Light shading signifies a strong relationship (correlations between 0.30 and 0.40).

ables for age and length of career. These characteristics also were therefore not included in the analyses.

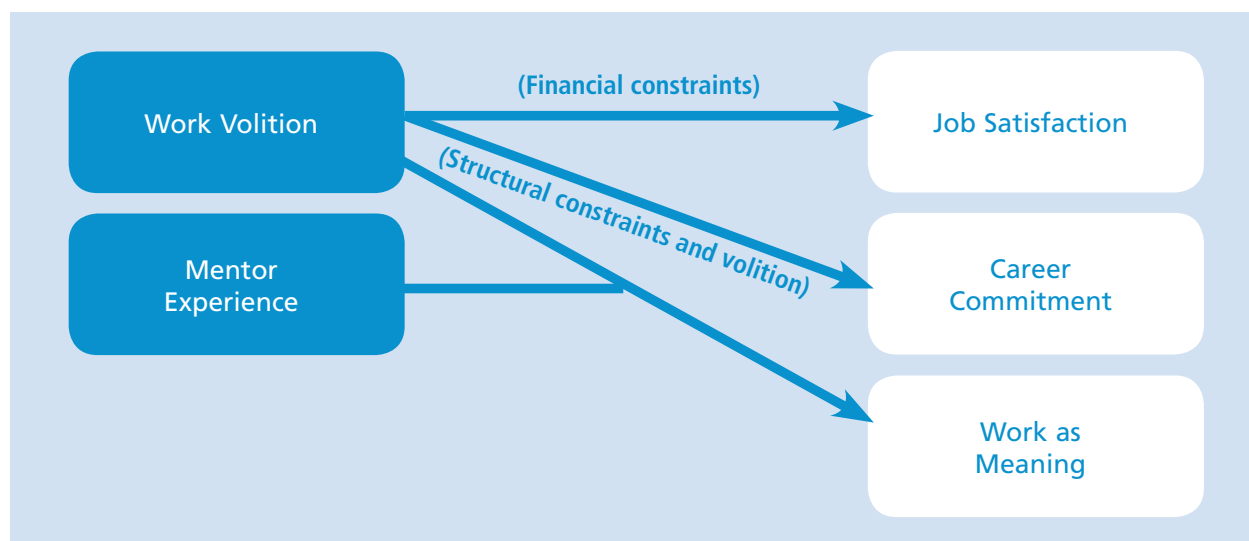
Using ordinary least squares regressions, we found that, as hypothesized, work volition did indeed predict both job satisfaction and career commitment. We used hierarchical linear regression analysis to look for additional influence on job satisfaction and career commitment from experiences of being mentored, but we found no significant effects.

We then conducted multiple regression analyses to examine how the three subscales of work volition—financial constraints, structural constraints, and volition—predicted job satisfaction and career commitment. The financial constraints subscale was the only statistically significant predictor of job satisfaction. That is, respondents who experienced fewer financial constraints and had greater work volition tended to have higher job satisfaction scores. For career commitment, structural

constraints and volition were related at a level that did not reach statistical significance but could constitute a trend: Respondents with fewer structural constraints and higher volition tended to be more committed to their OST careers.

For the third dependent variable, work as meaning, we used hierarchical linear regression analyses to look for predictors among the independent variables. Mentor experience and work volition, taken together, predicted work as meaning: People who had more positive experiences of being mentored coupled with higher work volition were more likely to find their OST care work meaningful. The results of our regression analysis are illustrated in Figure 1. Because the measures of collectivist and individualist cultural orientation had low internal consistency and weak correlations with the indicators of dedication, we could not conduct regression analyses of these relationships.

Figure 1. Life Experiences Leading to Job Dedication Measures: Regression Analysis Results



Discussion: Contextual Factors That Influence Dedication

OST care work is relational, community-based work. Its psychosocial mission aims to improve social-emotional and behavioral outcomes for youth. Understanding the factors that create dedicated and passionate OST care workers can enable the field not only to improve the work experience and retention of OST care workers but also, as a consequence, to better serve participating youth. We therefore examined how the contextual experiences of OST care workers—their mentor relationships, cultural orientation, and volitional constraints—affected their dedication to OST work, as evidenced by their job satisfaction, career commitment, and perception of the meaningfulness of their work.

Positive experiences of being mentored predicted greater dedication to OST care work, specifically influencing career commitment and work as meaning. Taken together, being mentored and higher work volition strongly predicted the perception of work as meaningful. The strong effect of being mentored might be expected in light of the relational nature of OST work. For one thing, OST care workers who have been mentored earlier in their development might easily recognize the value of their own work as mentors to youth. Secondly, evidence suggests that being

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mentored by someone in a specific line of work supports pursuit of that line of work (Whitely, Dougherty, & Dreher, 1991). Though we asked respondents to describe any mentoring relationship in their lives, some of those are likely to have been OST mentorships. Finally, mentoring that includes meaning-making dialogue may help mentees to be more adept at making meaning out of their life experiences, including their OST work.

Although collectivist cultural orientation was not associated with dedication to OST work, individualism negatively correlated with job satisfaction. Workers primarily focused on their own success, not surprisingly, found less satisfaction in OST work, which is characterized by low pay and little recognition. Workers with self-oriented, conventional career aspirations for success and prestige may be especially deterred by the marginalized nature and uncertain career direction of market care work.

OST care workers in our study who had higher levels of work volition also had higher levels of job satisfaction, career commitment, and work meaningfulness. Work volition measures whether people believe they can navigate or persist through constraints on their occupational choices. Individuals who feel less constrained by finances and organizational systems perceive themselves as having chosen to work in the OST field. They thus

find their work more meaningful and are more satisfied with and committed to their positions.

However, work volition is complicated. It can reflect resilience in the face of financial hardship and prejudice. For example, OST staffers may be committed to work in the underserved neighborhood in which they grew up even though they could find higher-paying jobs elsewhere. By contrast, work volition can also reflect privilege. Some OST workers with higher work volition, for example, may have family resources to fall back on. They can pursue lofty social justice goals in their work because low wages represent less of a financial obstacle than for workers with fewer resources. Whether or not they enjoy such privilege, OST staffers can experience work volition for additional reasons. Some may see long-term career possibilities in the care work sector (TASC, 2009), rather than perceiving their current position as transitional or as a stepping-stone. Some might strongly identify with OST social justice goals such as narrowing racial disparities in academic achievement.

OST programs and their youth would undoubtedly benefit if all OST care workers had high work volition: Such workers would be dedicated despite low pay and lack of recognition. However, hiring only workers with high work volition would be impractical in light of the field's challenges with staff recruitment and retention. In fact, diverse levels of work volition are likely to continue for programmatic reasons. Research indicates that matching nonwhite youth with nonwhite mentors yields better mentoring outcomes (DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002; Santos & Reigadas, 2000). Meanwhile, evidence also shows that nonwhite workers face more financial and structural constraints than white workers (Aud et al., 2013). OST organizations are therefore likely to continue to employ workers who have low work volition because they face significant financial and structural constraints. The best option may be to continue to hire care workers who can relate to children and then develop organizational strategies to enrich those workers' work volition and work meaningfulness. Such strategies might include providing staff mentoring and career guidance.

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Limitations and Future Directions

This study contributes to an empirical understanding of factors that influence the dedication of OST care workers. Though the study's sample was small, this modest sample was sufficient to produce meaningful findings. However, our sample represents OST care workers from just one urban organization, with its particular mission and context. The response rate we achieved out of the total possible sample was strong, at 50 percent, but more research is necessary to reach a more diverse population, for example, from other cities and other kinds of organizations.

Future studies may also expand on the questions to be investigated. For example, one important avenue for future research is the relationship between dedication among OST care workers and positive youth outcomes. One retrospective study, by Khashu and Dougherty (2007), did find that staff in higher-quality afterschool programs had greater enjoyment and commitment to working in OST than those in lower-quality programs. In addition to surveying OST care workers, future studies should expand to survey the youth with whom they work. Because relational elements are so vital in OST programming, youths' and staff members' perceptions of their interactions can provide insights into how these relationships contribute to OST program efficacy. Such future research may generate additional implications for the OST workforce and for policy development.

Implications for the Field

Our results suggest practical avenues OST leaders can take to improve the working experience of front-line OST staff. OST administrators would likely benefit from consultation about how to improve staff members' work volition, by, for example, offering career opportunities with related training and education. Professional development related to career advancement could help OST workers to find meaningful and practical ways to both commit to and contribute to the organization's mission (Cole, 2011; Cooper, 2013; TASC, 2009). OST workers could thus learn how to pursue future leadership positions, either with their current employer or in another OST organization.

Funders and state- and citywide intermediary organizations could support community-based organizations in providing clear career trajectories with steps toward upward mobility within the field. Boston College's Nelson Chair Roundtable, which brings together a network of national and international community-based organizations, is an example of how collaborative networks can develop career ladder strategies and build individuals' leadership capacity (Lynch School of Education, 2016). Another way OST organizations and coalitions could improve work volition is to find ways to help staff complete college credits and earn degrees.

Another step that may be more immediately practical within OST organizations is to foster staff mentoring. Our study found that, in the highly relational environment of OST programs, mentoring can facilitate work volition, which in turn facilitates career dedication. This support is particularly important in the face of the financial and structural constraints that work against the work volition of so many OST workers. A staff mentoring program can simultaneously offer vital relationship-based support for entry-level personnel while providing leadership opportunities for more experienced OST care workers. Such mentoring can be structured specifically to help workers navigate the constraints that work against their ability to find volition and meaning in their work. For example, experienced mentors can explain how they learned to navigate work-life balance while juggling part-time jobs. By fostering volition and perceived work meaningfulness, mentoring programs can help prevent staff burnout and boost retention.

Much more research remains to be done in this understudied work sector. Better understanding of the spectrum of OST workers in their diverse contexts can help to advance OST market care work as a viable occupational choice—one whose rewards go beyond salary and status to encompass such intangibles as relationships, commitment, and a sense of purpose.

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