Research examines conflicts within professional kitchens

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Craig Butler stands in Saranda's on Broadway in Bethlehem where he is a chef. He started as dishwasher and has worked his way up in the industry. Butler was interviewed by Tashina Khabbaz, undergraduate research assistant, about finding peace in the kitchen. Credit: Tashina Khabbaz

The professional kitchen is not a traditional workplace. It's dangerous; chefs must work quickly with fire and knives. Not to mention the frequent fatigue, stress and personality conflicts among the staff. It's a

heightened environment for common work issues, but the drama makes it a little more interesting.

Working in a professional kitchen is grueling. Cooks work in close quarters, with tremendous demands on their time while dealing with incredibly variable management practices.

"Professional kitchens mirror real life, maybe they are even more real," said David Livert, associate professor of psychology at Penn State Lehigh Valley. "There are always labor issues. People don't show up for a shift. People yell. It's intense. There are many different cultures present in the kitchen since it's a major source of entry for immigrants. Not to mention that every table counts, so there's very little room for error."

All of these things combined can cause serious stress and undeniable amounts of pressure on chefs and other staff in the kitchen.

The more variety, the more conflict

As a social psychologist, Livert studies how people's behavior is shaped by, and in turn impacts, their social world. He first became interested in the lives of chefs while working on his dissertation. He was looking for a unique social setting where strangers from different backgrounds had to work closely together and get to know one another. An acquaintance had graduated from the Culinary Institute of America (CIA) in Hyde Park, New York, and shared her experiences as a chef student.

"I realized that there was this wonderful natural experiment occurring every three weeks as students entered the school and were randomly assigned to kitchen teams of 15-18 people."

For his dissertation, he followed a cohort of CIA students for six

months, investigating group dynamics, friendships and conflict among the chef students.

Years later, he is still intrigued by this world. In fact, he is one of the few social psychologists looking at this topic.

He recently examined time management and conflict within kitchen teams. A paper based on this work won a best paper award at the Academy of Management's annual conference in Philadelphia last year.

Along with Susan Mohammed, associate professor of psychology at Penn State University Park, Livert collected data from teams of students at the CIA. Instead of examining surface-level team diversity, such as variations between members in terms of age or sex, they focused on deep-level differences, such as personality traits and the way individuals deal with time. They hypothesized that such differences in the composition of kitchen teams can lead to problems that can affect the production and quality of food they prepared.

"The kitchen is a very timed environment and a place where time management skills work well, but when the time management strategies differ within a team, that is where the problem lies," said Livert.

The research showed that it didn't matter if someone was a multi-tasker or mono-tasker, or if someone got to work right away on a deadline or pushed it off until the last minute. What mattered was the amount of variety in these work styles within the team. The more variety, the more conflict. And these conflicts over time affected performance, which, in a kitchen, is extremely important.

The question remains how to deal with varying time management styles, which are not just limited to professional kitchens, but may exist in most workplaces. Livert's research provides some helpful tips.

"The issue of time management styles is essential to deal with in any team environment. First, making others on the team aware of these differences and identifying them is key. Then I suggest trying to find a common ground among the different working styles while being aware of the fact that no style is the best."

Livert also found through his research that if someone is a leader on the team, that can help bring the team together and avoid conflict. Additionally, he discovered that teams who had people with higher levels of conscientiousness had less conflict overall.

Emotions in the kitchen a recipe for disaster?

His most recent research in the kitchen explores the emotional ability of professional chefs. Emotional ability or emotional intelligence is defined as the ability of a person to monitor their own emotions and those of others in order to strategically regulate one's display of emotions and to use emotions to guide behavior.

"In addition to interpersonal skills and work ethic, emotional management skills are critical for the kitchen leaders," Livert said. "Emotional ability of your staff can relate to the quality of your staff and possibly to the turnover ratio in your kitchen, which is a huge human resources issue. Yet, despite its importance to the food industry, few studies have examined the role of emotional abilities in the management of the professional kitchen."

Livert leads a team, including researchers at the CIA, that has employed a novel approach to measuring the emotional abilities of chefs. Rather than utilize a traditional self-report example where participants circle a number to show how well they manage emotions, Livert's team generated a set of critical incidents involving emotions in the kitchen and converted them into testable items. The team interviewed restaurateurs,

executive chefs and sous chefs from New York City, Philadelphia, San Antonio and San Francisco. They created scales out of their interview answers. On each item, chefs indicated what they would do in certain situations to gauge their ability to cope with and handle these incidents. A series of expert panels at the CIA were then used to evaluate the scales in terms of realism and relevance for the professional kitchen.

A pilot study of 300 students from the CIA completed the emotional ability scales as well as other personality measures. In the preliminary findings, they discovered that female culinary students had higher average emotional ability in the kitchen than did male students. They also found that culinary students, in general, were above the national adult average in terms of being conscientious: They are more prepared and thorough in their work.

Livert and his team presented the results of the pilot test at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Food and Society in June 2014 in Pittsburgh.

The current stage of this study is to see how well emotional intelligence predicts performance by looking at how the 300 CIA students scored on the emotional ability scales and then compare that to how they performed in the six month externships, which occurred at the end of last year.

Livert will be presenting his research in a paper at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association in August in Denver.

Finding peace in the chaos, a measured response

After exploring the challenges in a kitchen, which tend to have a negative connotation to them, Livert and his undergraduate research

assistant, Tashina Khabbaz, decided to explore the positive side to having a career in the kitchen.

Khabbaz, a senior psychology major at Penn State Lehigh Valley, is especially interested in positive psychology.

"My mom, who passed away in 2013 from breast cancer, was a positive life coach. She is my inspiration to embrace positivity in my life and in my education," Khabbaz said.

This piece of research aims to discover how chefs thrive and find peace among the stress that they face every day. Khabbaz has interviewed more than 15 executive chefs in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. She gathered background information and qualitative data about how the chef would respond to a scenario. She then asked them:

- At what times do you feel at peace in the kitchen?
- How often do you feel a sense of accomplishment?
- To you, what constitutes a good day at work?

Khabbaz, working with Livert, then analyzed the data. Using Martin Seligman's Well-Being Theory, they examined interview transcripts to identify any sense of positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment in the chefs' responses.

Craig Butler, chef at Saranda's on Broadway in Bethlehem, was one of the chefs Khabbaz interviewed. Butler started as a dishwasher and worked his way up in the industry. He wound up cooking for celebrities such as Michael Jackson, Vice President Joe Biden, and actor Ed Norton while working on the island of St. Croix.

While Butler had a hard time admitting he has ever found peace in the kitchen, since the atmosphere itself is not peaceful, what he describes as

"flow" (the loss of self-consciousness during an absorbing activity) is very similar to the "engagement" referred to in Seligman's Well-Being Theory.

"There are slower times, but I wouldn't say there is ever peace in the kitchen. But I love being in 'the zone' when we get crazy busy. It's an adrenaline high. It feels like I drank 15 cups of espresso ... It's almost like you are outside of your body."

Livert and Khabbaz presented their research in a paper at the Eastern Psychological Association last month in New York.

All of Livert's research pulls back the curtain on professional chefs. It allows a glimpse into their lives and demonstrates how they thrive in a fast-paced, stressful and potentially dangerous environment.

"We picture chefs throwing stuff together chaotically as they cook, but it takes way more effort and organization, almost so that it does feel like its improvised," Livert said.

Despite the fascination and intrigue surrounding life inside a professional kitchen, it seems the issues and stressors chefs face are fairly commonplace, and are more similar to what is found in other workplaces. Yet, a great deal can be learned from how these chefs cope amid all the heat.

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