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The Full Participation of Women in the Public Sector Workplace: Women's Emotions and (In)Authentic Expression

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In the push for ever-improved organizational performance, scholarship and practice may neglect the human elements that contribute to such performance. Emotional labor research focuses on the outward-facing aspects of public service, but inward emotional experiences are not commonly studied, despite their professional and personal impact. This study surveys women public servants about the emotions they experience at work and how they manage them. Respondents report a range of positive and negative emotions at work, and they manage them in professionally acceptable ways. Specifically, they suppress negative emotions more than positive ones. Results suggest that connections among emotions, emotion management, organizational support, and career success are nuanced: women report intangible rewards but are less satisfied with tangible ones. If women trade emotional authenticity for career success, this research suggests those efforts are only partially successful. This raises questions about women's ability to participate authentically and perform fully in public service organizations.

Keywords
women in public administration, emotion management, emotional labor, organizational support, career success

> *I don't think a woman should be in any government job whatever. I mean, I really don't. The reason why I do is mainly because they are erratic. And emotional.*
>
> —President Richard Nixon

President Nixon's comments from 1971 reflect one of the most pervasive and enduring gender stereotypes: that women are too emotional to be effective in their work. Shortly after these comments, he changed his stance and began appointing women to public service positions, both in middle-management civil service ranks and top policy positions. In 1973, Nixon proclaimed August 26 as Women's Equality Day and said, "In this era of great challenges and potentials, the nation—in the private sector as well as in government at all levels—needs the capabilities and brainpower of every single American. *The full and equal participation of women* is crucial to the strength of our country" (Nixon Foundation n.d., emphasis added). Over fifty years later, the efforts to achieve "full participation" of women have varied. For example, policies and initiatives by the Biden administration led to a near-70-year high in the workforce participation of working-age women (The White House 2025c). In contrast, the second Trump administration may bring about some regression, as efforts to end diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) practices (Executive Order 14151) and reduce the size of the federal workforce (The White House 2025a, b; U.S. Office of Management and Budget 2025) are underway.

Overall, while women's participation in the government workforce increased over time, assumptions about women, emotions, and their work persist. Despite stereotypes that women are more emotional than men, research shows that women do not experience more emotions than men; rather, they are more emotionally

expressive than men (Kring and Gordon 1998; Simon and Nath 2004). Yet, expressing emotion presents a double bind for women in the workplace. Their emotions are scrutinized more closely than men's (Smith, Brescoll, and Thomas 2016) and they can be equally penalized for displays of emotion and for lack of emotional expression (Brescoll 2016). In the context of public service work, women may be expected to constantly express positive emotions and suppress negative ones (Sloan 2012). This is referred to as *emotion management*, which is "workers' deliberate attempt to manipulate their emotional display" (Sloan 2012, 376).

Public servants may feel strongly about the importance of their work (Perry and Wise 1990) and experience positive emotions when good things happen in the course of serving the public (Jones 2021). At the same time, however, there are many reasons women may feel strong negative emotions in the workplace, including those related to experiences with sexual harassment, unfair treatment, lack of resources, and inadequate training (Johnson and Indvik 2000). Public sector workers, compared to their private sector peers, also report greater challenges with conflict in the government workplace (Ferguson, Ronayne, and Rybacki 2014). Overall, public service work includes substantial occupational stressors related to administrative policies, lack of support, inadequate resources, time pressure, and work overload (Doyle, Campbell, and Gryshchuk 2021). Persistent stress carries a toll on workers and can contribute to turnover (Hur and Abner 2024).

Regardless of the emotions felt, being labeled as "emotional" can delegitimize women's contributions, which may ultimately affect their success in the workplace (Frasca, Leskinen, and Warner 2022). Success can be measured in different ways. Indicators of success can include tangible rewards, like pay and promotion opportunities. Success can also be found in intangible indicators like meaningful work and social support in the workplace. This research considers the intersection between emotion management and indicators of success. Specifically, it explores whether emotional authenticity and workplace success are mutually exclusive. We ask: can women public servants participate fully in their work and find success in those efforts? Or must they compromise emotional authenticity?

These questions matter because answers to calls for the "full participation" of women in the workforce will fall short if women experience personal and professional consequences for being *one's full self* in the workforce. This could present an "equity iron[y]" (Guy and Williams 2025, 1), where women are included in the public workplace in terms of numbers, but they do not feel a sense of safety or belonging. As such, this study seeks to better understand the emotional experiences of women in public service. It also serves to answer the call for empirical evidence on discrete emotions in the work of public service (Hattke, Hensel, and Kalucza 2020; Vigoda-Gadot and Meisler 2010).

Emotions in the Public Service Workplace

Emotion is a "subjective feeling state" that varies in "intensity, duration, consistency, and valence" (Ashforth and Humphrey 1995, 99). Emotions are central to the human experience, but our professional neglect of this component of public administration has deep roots in the history of our field. As bureaucracy progresses, says Weber (1968, 975), "the more completely it succeeds in eliminating from official business love, hatred, and all purely personal, irrational and emotional elements which escape calculation." That is, bureaucracy dehumanizes the more it advances, which can stifle genuine emotion and connection. Indeed, tenets of Weber's bureaucracy can be counter to the ideals of human rights (Borry and Reuter 2022).

In a quest for rationality and legitimacy, organizations seek to control workplace emotions. Emotionality is the "antithesis of rationality" (Ashforth and Humphrey 1995, 97). As a result, people who express emotions may be seen as irrational. The human relations movement (Follett 1926; Mayo 1933; McGregor 1957; Roethlisberger and Dickson 1939) was spurred by criticisms of this perspective and reminded us that people—along with their complex emotional experiences—are what make bureaucracies work. Organizations cannot exist separately from the individuals who staff them, and emotions are an integral and inseparable part of everyday organizational life. "From moments of frustration or joy, grief or fear, to an enduring sense of dissatisfaction or commitment, the experience of work is saturated with feeling" (Ashforth and Humphrey 1995, 98). Indeed, feelings and emotions may arise *from* the work itself or can also be brought *to* work as employees' work and personal lives interact.

While the human relations movement signaled an important milestone in our evolving understanding

of public service work, it competes with other priorities such as predictability, rationality, objectivity, and neutrality. Being emotional in public service work can be seen as disruptive and dysfunctional. Ignoring these forces doesn't mean they do not exist. In fact, understanding emotions more fully might enhance our organizational and individual effectiveness. This is certainly the case with public administration, which is tasked with addressing complex community needs that often provoke strong emotional responses. From public health to emergency response to corrections, public service workers engage with people who are often at their most vulnerable.

In the context of the public service workplace, a very limited range of emotional expression is considered acceptable. Expressing negative emotions such as fear, anxiety, or anger tend to be the most unacceptable (Ashforth and Humphrey 1995). And there are gendered dimensions to emotional expression as well. In Western cultures, individualism, control, and assertiveness are traits socially ascribed to men. In contrast, empathy, vulnerability, and collaboration are socially ascribed to women. These "idealized images" exert pressure on both men and women to define and conduct themselves according to these gendered stereotypes (Fletcher 2004, 650). It is expected that women should not show negative emotions, especially anger (Brescoll and Uhlmann 2008), and they face an especially steep cost for expressing emotions at work. Failure to conform to socially accepted gender expectations may impact career success. For example, women's leadership competence and legitimacy may be questioned if women do not display a socially (or professionally) acceptable range of emotions (Brescoll and Uhlmann 2008, 269; Smith et al., 2016). Additionally, Burke and colleagues (2024) found that public displays of pride—which signal competence—by women in the workplace decreased how warm (or happy) others perceive them. Since warmth is not a trait typically ascribed to men, men are unlikely to experience these same costs at work.

In addition, professional display rules can dictate how employees should emote in particular work settings. Display rules "are expectations of appropriate emotional expressions that regulate employee behavior at work" (Humphrey 2021, 423; Buckner and Mahoney 2012). These expectations, from display rules and conforming to gendered norms, can contribute to dysfunctional management of emotions, including suppression and masking. Collectively, this is known as emotional labor, which is "the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display" (Hochschild 1983, 7) that is intended to produce a particular state of mind in others. The "labor" part of the definition is important because, according to Hochschild (1983, 7), it "is sold for a wage and therefore has *exchange* value." That is, emotional labor is part and parcel of the work one does on the job. Emotional labor studies in public administration often focus on the outward-facing work of serving clients (see Bisgaard and Pedersen 2022), but emotional labor is a component of any dynamic relationship between two people at work, which can include clients, coworkers, or other stakeholders (Newman, Guy, and Mastracci 2009).

Managing one's emotions can involve two types of acting: surface acting and deep acting (Guy, Newman, and Mastracci 2008). Surface acting occurs when someone suppresses an emotion they feel, subsequently masking it with a different, more professionally acceptable emotion they do not feel. Deep acting "involves 'pumping up' by trying to bring the required emotions and one's true feelings into alignment" (Guy, Newman, and Mastracci 2008, 101; Grandey 1998). Put another way, the former involves working to use the appropriate facial expressions while the latter involves working to have the appropriate emotions (Grandey 2000).

This type of emotion work can lead to emotional dissonance, which impacts individual well-being (Hochschild 1983). Studies have shown, for example, that emotional suppression can be a precursor to serious adverse health consequences, including cardiovascular disease and several forms of cancer (Thomas et al. 2000). Humphrey (2021, 423) found that surface acting, which involves regulating facial expressions regardless of what one feels, has a "harmful relationship with employee burnout and job satisfaction." Overall, emotional labor is, quite literally, work: it requires effort and can impact employees in myriad negative ways.

Yet, we know that emotional suppression and masking may be a daily reality for public service workers. This reality may be even more pronounced for women in public service, given the above-described gendered expectations of emotional expression. Also, women are expected to excel at displays of emotional labor, especially the suppression of negative emotional displays and the presentation of positive emotions (Erickson and Ritter 2001). This may even come at the cost of per-

formance, as emotional suppression can negatively impact one's memory and cognition (Richards and Gross 1999, 2000). Since the pursuit of professionalism and career success may mean hiding negative emotions in the workplace (Lindebaum, Jordan, and Morris 2016), it could be that workplace success is in part dependent upon authenticity—or rather inauthenticity—of self.

Research Questions

This exploratory study is guided by the idea of women's *full* participation in the workplace, emotions and all. While diversity in public organizations is important, diversity does not inherently lead to equity and inclusion. In their social equity call to action, Blessett and colleagues (2019, 296) state that "[r]esearch needs to be utilized as a tool for examining whether social equity goals are being realized." This present study is guided by the notion that workplace diversity does not inherently lead to full participation, and more work is needed to understand the extent to which women's participation is associated with the additional goals of inclusion and belonging in the public service workplace.

We seek to understand the emotions that women public servants feel at work and whether these women engage in emotional labor when it comes to managing those emotions. Emotions in the workplace may arise in several ways, including from interactions with clients, peers, and other agency stakeholders, as well as more mundane, and possibly more personal, interactions with peers and supervisors one interacts with regularly. Thus, our first research question is: what are the range of positive and negative emotions they experience in their work? Second, what is the extent of emotion management women engage in at work? That is, how often do women hide or suppress their emotions?

This study also focuses on the connection between emotional experiences and rewards of public service work, including social support. Interactions with close peers and supervisors can be a source of social support, which is a key element of work life. Research shows that one's coworkers and managers represent valuable sources of emotional support. Such support can offer a buffer for work stressors and provide beneficial effects for employees (Geddes and Stickney 2011). According to Uhl-Bien (2006), organizations are held together not by policies and procedures, but by webs of interpersonal relationships that are cultivated by ongoing and reciprocal interaction. The social self-concept theory (Andersen and Chen 2002; Brewer and Gardner 1996) indicates that individuals define themselves in terms of their relationship to others. These relationships can determine how people regulate and express emotions as well as how they behave in the workplace. Again, this emotional regulation and expression may be heightened for those who work in the public sector, as they may deal with vulnerable populations and challenging workloads.

In addition to social support, tangible rewards such as pay, promotions, and other forms of organizational support, and intangible rewards such as the meaning of work, respect of others, and acceptance among coworkers may relate to one's emotional labor. Those intangible rewards may be important motivators for public service employees (French and Emerson 2015; Park and Word 2012) since tangible rewards may be limited (Chen 2018; McGinnis and Ng 2016). As such, our third and final research question is: How do tangible and intangible elements of the workplace relate to women public servants' emotional labor? Put differently, do women see costs associated with being authentically themselves, feelings and all?

Data and Methods

With these questions in mind, we distributed an electronic survey to attendees of a conference for women working in public service. This regional conference was hosted by a midwestern university in August 2023 with 161 attendees. The response rate was 75% with 122 completed surveys. Almost all survey respondents (97%) identified as women (3% identified as non-binary), and 83% were White. Women 35 to 44 years old account for 29% of the sample; 75% of respondents were 25 to 54. Most respondents indicated they were married (61%), and most indicated they completed college (40%) or graduate school (37%). Almost half of the sample indicated they earn at least $75,000 per year. All demographic information can be found in Table 1.

To assess emotional experiences, we used Erickson and Ritter's (2001) Emotions at Work inventory. This inventory includes 12 emotions, ranging from positive (such as happy and proud) to negative (such as angry and irritated). Using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "never" to "almost always," survey respondents were asked to indicate how much they felt each of the 12 emotions at work in the past week. Respondents were

Table 1. Survey Participant Demographics

	Percent		Percent
Sex		Marital Status	
Female	97	Married	61
Non-Binary	3	Widowed	1
		Divorced	14
Race		Separated	1
White	83	Never Married	23
Black/African American	5		
American Indian or Alaska Native	1	Education Level	
		Some college	17
Asian	1	Completed college	40
Multiracial	6	Some graduate school	6
Other	6	Completed graduate school	37
Age			
18–24	6	Annual Income	
25–34	20	Less than $20,000	2
35–44	29	$20,000 – $49,999	17
45–54	26	$50,000 – $74,999	35
55–64	17	$75,000 – $99,999	22
65 +	1	Over $100,000	25

also asked to indicate, using the same 5-point Likert scale, how often they attempted to hide the same 12 emotions at work in the past week. Descriptive statistics for both feelings felt and feelings hidden at work can be found in Tables 2 and 3, respectively.

Table 2. Emotions Felt at Work

Please indicate how much you **felt** each of the following **at work** in the **past week:**

	n	Range	Mean	SD
Ashamed	116	1 – 4	1.63	0.82
Scared	116	1 – 4	1.70	0.90
Helpless	115	1 – 5	2.08	1.04
Guilty	116	1 – 5	2.01	0.94
Sad	116	1 – 4	1.94	0.84
Nervous	116	1 – 5	2.34	1.07
Angry	115	1 – 5	2.23	0.94
Irritated	116	1 – 5	2.91	0.89
Excited	116	1 – 5	3.32	0.82
Proud	116	1 – 5	3.59	0.89
Calm	116	2 – 5	3.66	0.79
Happy	116	2 – 5	3.78	0.73

We were also interested in the respondents' emotional labor in a general sense; that is, emotional labor not tied to specific emotions. We used two

Table 3. Emotions Hidden or Covered Up at Work

Please indicate how much you **tried to hide or cover up** each of the following **at work** in the **past week:**

	n	Range	Mean	SD
Ashamed	114	1 – 5	2.14	1.42
Scared	111	1 – 5	1.98	1.37
Helpless	113	1 – 5	2.29	1.37
Guilty	115	1 – 5	2.10	1.26
Sad	113	1 – 5	2.42	1.41
Nervous	113	1 – 5	2.27	1.28
Angry	115	1 – 5	2.68	1.36
Irritated	115	1 – 5	2.88	1.25
Excited	114	1 – 5	1.61	1.03
Proud	112	1 – 5	1.90	1.17
Calm	113	1 – 5	1.48	0.97
Happy	114	1 – 5	1.52	1.01

questions from Guy, Newman, and Mastracci (2008, 190): "My job requires that I pretend to have emotions I do not really feel" and "My job requires that I hide my true feelings about a situation." The Cronbach's alpha score for emotional labor of respondents is 0.826.

To capture career resources, we included an item from Hirschi et al. (2018, 347): "When I set goals for my career, I am confident that I can achieve them."

Table 4. Survey Items Assessing Organizational Support, Resources, and Success

Item	n	Range	Mean	SD
Organizational Support (Gattiker and Larwood 1986; Cronbach's alpha: 0.709)				
My supervisor supports me.	113	1 – 5	4.12	1.10
My supervisor has confidence in me.	113	1 – 5	4.19	0.91
I am respected by my peers.	114	1 – 5	4.03	0.77
I am accepted by my peers.	114	1 – 5	4.11	0.71
I earn as much as I think my work is worth.	114	1 – 5	2.73	1.21
My job offers promotional opportunities.	114	1 – 5	2.80	1.10
I like my work.	113	1 – 5	4.28	0.70
I am most happy when I am working.	114	1 – 5	3.15	1.08
I am dedicated to my work.	114	2 – 5	4.32	0.60
I am happy with my private life.	114	1 – 5	4.18	0.84
I enjoy non-work activities.	113	1 – 5	4.51	0.69
I am satisfied with my life overall.	114	2 – 5	4.26	0.80
Career Resources (Hirschi et al. 2018)				
When I set goals for my career, I am confident that I can achieve them.	113	2 – 5	4.01	0.84
Career Success (Shockley et al. 2016; Cronbach's alpha: 0.895)				
I think my work has been meaningful.	109	2 – 5	4.29	0.78
I believe my work has made a difference.	110	2 – 5	4.28	0.81
The work I have done has contributed to society.	110	2 – 5	4.27	0.79

Measures of career success (Shockley et al. 2016, 152–153) included:

- "I think my work has been meaningful."
- "I believe my work has made a difference."
- "The work I have done has contributed to society."

These career success measures represent intangible rewards and result in a Cronbach's alpha score of 0.895. Respondents also answered a series of items from Gattiker and Larwood (1986, 86) to capture organizational support. These included "I am respected by my peers," "I am accepted by my peers," and items about one's work and private life. Two of these items represent tangible rewards: "My job offers promotional opportunities" and "I earn as much as I think my work is worth." These differ from the intangible items noted above because they refer to external rewards made available to them based on their performance. The 12 items used to examine organizational support result in a Cronbach's alpha score of 0.709. Descriptive statistics for these items and others measuring organizational support can be found in Table 4. For all these items, respondents answered using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree."

Findings

Participants report feeling a range of emotions at work (see Table 5). Most respondents indicated they never felt ashamed or scared and sometimes felt excited at work in the past week. Half of the respondents indicated they often felt happy. Of those emotions that are experienced "sometimes," "often," or "almost always," many fall into the positive category, including feeling excited (52% sometimes; 29% often; 8% almost always), proud (30% sometimes; 44% often; 14% almost always), calm (33% sometimes; 47% often; 13% almost always), and happy (32% sometimes; 50% often; 16% almost always). Of those emotions in the negative category, the most frequent are feeling irritated (43% sometimes; 24% often; 2% almost always), nervous (31% sometimes; 10% often; 3% almost always), and angry (32% sometimes; 7% often; 1% almost always).

Over half (55.6%) agree or strongly agree that their job requires that they hide their true feelings about a situation (mean: 3.36/5.00) where about 44% indicate that their job requires that they pretend to have emotions they don't feel (mean 2.95/5.00) (see Table 6). The respondents also report suppressing a range of specific emotions (see Table 7). Table 7 includes the distribu-

Table 5. Emotions Felt at Work

Please indicate how much you felt each of the following at work in the past week (in percent):

Item	n	Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often	Almost Always
Ashamed	116	56	28	14	3	N/A
Scared	116	53	33	7	8	N/A
Helpless	115	36	34	19	10	2
Guilty	116	35	39	19	7	1
Sad	116	35	42	20	4	N/A
Nervous	116	26	30	31	10	3
Angry	115	25	35	32	7	1
Irritated	116	6	25	43	24	2
Excited	116	2	10	52	29	8
Proud	116	1	11	30	44	14
Calm	116	N/A	7	33	47	13
Happy	116	N/A	3	32	50	16

Notes: Because of rounding error, totals may not equal 100%. The option with the most responses is shaded in gray.

Table 6. Emotional Labor

Item	n	Range	Mean	SD
Pretend: My job requires that I pretend to have emotions that I do not really feel.	115	1 – 5	2.95	1.23
Hide: My job requires that I hide my true feelings about a situation.	115	1 – 5	3.36	1.24

Notes: Items adapted from Guy et al, 2008; Cronbach's alpha: 0.826.

Table 7. Emotions Hidden at Work

Please indicate how often you tried to **hide or cover up** these feelings **at wor**k in the **past week** (in percent):*

Item	n	Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often	Almost Always
Ashamed	51	18	24	20	16	24
Scared	54	31	24	13	20	11
Helpless	73	26	10	27	26	11
Guilty	76	25	29	24	12	11
Sad	74	22	23	22	19	15
Nervous	84	26	26	21	17	10
Angry	87	15	16	26	29	14
Irritated	75	13	16	31	25	15
Excited	112	65	19	7	6	3
Proud	111	53	18	19	5	5
Calm	113	74	13	5	4	3
Happy	114	73	13	7	4	4

Notes: *Excludes "never" responses to "how much you felt [feeling] at work in the past week."
Because of rounding errors, totals may not equal 100%. The option with the most responses is shaded in gray.

tion of responses to questions about hiding emotions and only includes respondents who first indicated they felt that emotion. That is, respondents who indicated they never felt a specific emotion are excluded from responses related to hiding or covering up that emotion. Most respondents indicated they "never" hid or

covered up feeling excited, proud, calm, or happy in the last week. Unsurprisingly, those emotions that respondents often or almost always suppressed could be categorized as negative emotions such as feeling irritated (40%), angry (43%), sad (34%), helpless (37%), scared (31%), ashamed (40%), and nervous (37%). Together, these results indicate that these respondents do engage in emotional labor and do so more for some emotions than others.

To provide an overview of the respondents' work context and experiences, survey results show that women in this sample see their work as meaningful and impactful (see Table 4). Respondents indicated agreement to strong agreement with items related to career success and intangible rewards: they believe their work is meaningful (4.27/5.00), that it has made a difference (4.28/5.00) and that it has contributed to society (4.29/5.00). These women also agree (4.01/5.00) that they are capable of achieving their career goals ("When I set goals for my career, I am confident that I can achieve them").

Respondents like their work (4.28/5.00) and are dedicated to it (4.32/5.00). They also indicate they are satisfied with their lives (4.26/5.00), but that work is only a part of that life satisfaction. Respondents are rather neutral (neither disagree nor agree; 3.15/5.00) about whether they are happiest when working, and indicate they enjoy activities outside of work (4.51/5.00) and are happy with their private lives (4.18/5.00).

The survey results are mixed when it comes to other elements of organizational support. They report supervisor support (4.12/5.00) and confidence (4.19/5.00) on the job. Women in this sample feel respected and accepted by their peers in the workplace (4.03/5.00 and 4.11/5.00, respectively) but they have concerns about other aspects of their jobs. They slightly disagree that they earn as much as they think they are worth (2.73/5.00) and question the availability of promotion opportunities (2.80/5.00). This indicates that despite support from their supervisors and peers, feeling capable and confident, and feeling that their work makes a difference and is meaningful, these respondents do not feel they are tangibly rewarded for their efforts.

Our third research question asks about the relationship between emotional labor and organizational support, to which our study presents some interesting answers. As noted, nearly half of the respondents (44.4%) agree or strongly agree that their job requires showing emotions they do not feel, and the results indicate a significant relationship between that and feeling accepted by peers ($p = 0.0287$) and feeling respected by peers ($p = 0.0426$). While this study does not test the nature of these relationships, the data do offer some insight. For example, all respondents who strongly disagreed and almost all (90%) who disagreed that their jobs require them to pretend to have emotions they do not feel also agree or strongly agree that they are respected by their peers. While only a small number indicated they do not feel respected by their peers ($n = 3$; disagree or strongly disagree), they agreed or strongly agreed that their jobs required pretending to have emotions.

A similar pattern holds with peer acceptance: though small in number, those who disagreed or strongly disagreed that they are accepted by their peers agreed that they must pretend to have emotions they do not feel. All respondents who strongly agreed or agreed that they are accepted by their peers disagree or strongly disagree that their job requires they pretend to have emotions they do not feel. Interestingly, there is no statistically significant relationship between "hiding my true feelings" and respect or acceptance by peers. Rather, this relationship exists only for showing emotions one does not feel.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal several insights related to women's emotions and organizational support. First, this study provides a descriptive understanding of the emotions that public sector women feel in the workplace. Our findings suggest that women in this public service sample experience a wide range of emotions in their work. In general, women in this sample indicated that they felt positive emotions more often and negative emotions less often over the past week. A majority of respondents indicated they felt excited, proud, calm, or happy at least some of the time, suggesting that there is reason to feel positively at work. However, this is also the case for some of the negative emotions: a majority of the sample indicated they felt guilty, sad, nervous, angry, or irritated at least some of the time. Overall, this points to a varied emotional experience over the course of a workweek.

Second, this study provides evidence that some emotions are suppressed more than others. Positive emotions had the lowest rates of suppression, whereas

negative emotions had the highest suppression rates. A majority of respondents indicated that when they felt ashamed, scared, helpless, guilty, sad, nervous, angry, or irritated, they hid that emotion to some degree, with angry and irritated suppressed at least some of the time at the highest rates (69% and 71%, respectively). Given that research indicates women may be penalized for not emoting in expected or "appropriate" ways, it is unsurprising that women report having to hide specific emotions and engage in emotional labor (Brescoll and Uhlmann 2008; Buckner and Mahoney 2012; Burke et al. 2024; Erickson and Ritter 2001; Humphrey 2021).

In order to avoid professional consequences for showing emotions inconsistent with societal expectations (Fletcher 2004) and/or professional norms or display rules, women may work to stifle their authenticity by pretending to feel more "professionally acceptable" emotions. Consequences could appear in other ways, however. Richards and Gross (1999, 2000) found that suppression of negative emotions is cognitively draining, which can negatively impact working memory. The additional cognitive demand to suppress emotions could negate one's ability to perform well at work. This suggests that there are possible consequences to both displaying authentic emotions *and* engaging in emotional labor to hide those authentic emotions or display more work-appropriate ones.

Third, despite evidence of emotional inauthenticity (which aligns with expected professional norms and anticipated consequences), this study highlights a chasm between women's intangible and tangible success. The women in this sample reported they are successful in the intangible elements of their work, such as meaning and purpose (Shockley et al. 2016), confidence in achieving their goals (Hirschi et al. 2018), and liking what they do (Gattiker and Larwood 1986). At the same time, however, they indicated a lack of promotional opportunities and not earning what they are worth. Said another way, if women trade emotional authenticity for success, this study suggests that the effort is only partially successful. Further, a chi-squared test indicates that there is a statistically significant relationship between earning what one is worth and emotional labor via hiding one's feelings ($p = 0.000372$). While this does not indicate causation, it does raise questions about how emotional labor and tangible elements of career success are related.

Finally, these findings raise intriguing points related to women's emotional expression and social support, such as respect and acceptance by peers, in the public service workplace. The statistically significant relationship between emotional labor in the form of deep acting (pretending to have emotions one does not feel) and peer acceptance and respect suggests that social support may be related to how well one is able to engage in emotional labor, or put differently, engaging in "appropriate" displays of emotions, regardless of emotions felt. This raises an intriguing question: Does one earn respect and acceptance because they successfully engage in emotional labor, or does one negotiate their emotions to maintain respect and acceptance?

Overall, emotional authenticity at work could represent a valuable—and unexplored—intangible reward, one that potentially made possible by social support. In an age when we may feel distanced from one another by technology or under threat of automation (see e.g., Borry and Getha-Taylor 2019), this study reminds us that the human relations elements of public service remain salient and powerful. Social interactions and connections in the workplace are meaningful elements of public service. Work gives people a sense of belonging and connection with others. These relational elements are important to remember in the formula for organizational performance, especially when considering long-term challenges such as recruitment and retention (Kissinger et al. 2009). This study suggests that social support—feeling respected and accepted by others—may be essential elements for women's emotional expression in the public service workplace.

Limitations

To our knowledge, this descriptive study is the first of its kind to examine the range and frequency of specific emotions experienced by women in the public sector workplace. While this study relies on the subjective emotional assessments by participants, this approach is considered the best way to assess the experience and management of emotions (Erickson and Ritter 2001). We view this as a first step in uncovering some important truths. Future research should consider the relative costs and benefits related to expressing or masking *specific* emotions. As well, though the literature indicates that women bear higher costs to displaying emotions in the workplace (Brescoll and Uhlmann 2008; Burke et al. 2024; Erickson and Ritter 2001; Sloan 2012), with-

out a comparative sample from men, we cannot say that the story we uncovered is totally unique to women.

Further, given the demographics of this sample, which is heavily comprised of White women belonging to higher socioeconomic statuses, these findings should not be considered generalizable to all women. Indeed, emotion work and display rules are not race-neutral (see e.g., Wingfield 2010). In addition, specific emotions may impact some women more than others. Because Black women face oppression based on their gender *and* their race, workplace emotional experiences and their impact on career success will vary greatly from those of White women. For example, Black women may need to work harder at hiding anger at work or else face additional costs, as the "angry Black woman" stereotype may lead to lower performance ratings and weaken perceptions of leadership potential (Motro et al. 2022). As Blessett (2023, 48) noted, "Black women are resilient, not necessarily because they want to be, but because they have to be." This resilience may factor into how women cope with emotional suppression and labor differently. As such, we recommend that future studies consider intersecting identities when it comes to understanding women's emotional experiences at work (see Humphrey 2022 for a racialized model of emotional labor).

The sample is also comprised of women from different organizations and in different positions and future studies should consider the jobs people hold when accounting for their emotional labor. The display rules required by some positions may require more or less emotional labor than the display rules of other positions. The display rules of a 911 operator may require more or less emotional labor than the display rules of a municipal clerk. Taken a step further, even when display rules remain consistent, situational factors may indicate that more or less emotional labor is required. As an example, a 911 operator answering a call from her daughter likely engaged in a larger amount of emotional labor to remain calm and neutral than when answering calls from people she does not personally know (Borry and Jones 2024). Further, display rules (Buckner and Mahoney 2012; Humphrey 2021), as opposed to gender, may explain more or less of the consequences of emotional labor.

Building upon this context, our sample focuses on American women. Professionally acceptable displays of emotion may vary across cultural contexts. While emotional labor is not unique to any specific nation or culture, Guy, Mastracci, and Yang (2019) show that there are differences across countries in terms of how emotional labor affects those performing it. Further, culture may influence professional norms and display rules. For example, in a study of emotion management in Russia, Simonova (2017, 140) noted that "[t]he professional culture of social work in Russia is in the process of formation" and uncertainty led "administrative social workers [to] resort to following the dominant, general rules of emotional culture in Russian society, where strong stereotypes are present." Because emotional labor and emotion management can be influenced by cultural contexts, we acknowledge that our findings may not generalize beyond a Western context.

Finally, we asked our respondents to self-report their regulation of emotional expression. However, it could be that some people believe they mask their emotions well but actually do not. In such cases, are people penalized for expressing an emotion they think they have successfully masked? For all of these limitations and lines of inquiry, we believe that a rigorous qualitative study could be a valuable next step in this research.

Future Research Directions

This study represents an initial effort at examining the emotional experiences of women in the public service workplace. There remains much work to be done on this topic. For example, how do years of experience and positions of power influence the emotional expression of women in the public service workplace? As noted by Erickson and Ritter (2001), those who occupy more powerful positions/statuses tend to be more empowered to express more negative emotions, including anger.

Second, more work is needed on emotional labor, including emotion management as a coping mechanism and its effects. Repeated studies have shown a strong link between emotional suppression and incidence of cancer and cardiovascular disease (Thomas et al. 2000). More recent work shows that surface acting (hiding emotions) is positively related to emotional exhaustion and negatively related to personal accomplishment (Humphrey 2021). Emotional masking can be a coping mechanism learned early in life that becomes dysfunctional in adulthood. Understanding the link between adverse childhood experiences and emotion management, for example, can help provide a more nuanced

understanding of why some individuals are more likely to suppress emotions.

Third, to understand complex workplace attitudes and behaviors, additional data is needed, including data from peers. One potential avenue for future work is to consider network studies of emotions to examine such concepts as "emotional contagion" in public organizations (see Mayne and Ambrose 1999). Research shows that in addition to one's own emotional experiences, "catching emotions" from others can affect individual well-being, either positively (Xerri et al. 2021) or negatively (Petitta et al. 2016). Further, it is expected that some individuals may be more susceptible to emotional contagion than others (Xerri et al. 2023). This developing area of investigation may inform future studies that can help explain why some individuals suppress or mask felt emotions. Our study offers a first step by identifying the range and frequency of specific emotions experienced in the public service workplace. Another potential avenue is to collect information on emotional expression from peers. As noted earlier, some people may think they are successfully masking their emotions, but their emotions may still be read on their faces. Insights from peers may help untangle this potential issue—when is masking "successful"?

Conclusion

Public administration's outward-focused emphasis on responsiveness to the needs of citizens means that our field puts less emphasis on the emotional experiences of public servants. In the pursuit of logic, rationality, performance, scientific thinking, and evidence-based decision-making, feelings are not prioritized. Yet, emotions have major effects on public personnel and can be valuable management tools (Vidoda-Gadot and Meisler 2010). As Newman, Guy, and Mastracci (2009) note, the most important challenge facing public administrators is not to make work more efficient, but to make it more humane and caring. This applies both to the care of clients and stakeholders as well as those who do the important work of public service.

Practically, this study sheds light on how leaders can make efforts to fully include women in the workplace. While women in this study reported that they achieved intangible career success via purpose and meaning, they reported less satisfaction with tangible indicators of success, such as promotions and pay. Inclusive leaders "dismantle stereotypes and prejudices and [limit] behaviors like oppressive language" (Sharma and Sabharwal 2025, 162). Leaders committed to inclusion and equity can make the workplace a safe one to express emotions and ensure that emotional expression does not negatively impact one's career. Leaders can also be mindful about how stereotypes about emotions affect interactions and decisions about employees. This is especially salient for leaders in high-stress public service work, where emotions and emotional labor are omnipresent.

This study adds to the growing work on emotion studies in public administration to offer insights into emotion management among women in public service. It reminds us that women experience a range of positive and negative emotions in their work. It also provides evidence of women's emotional management, including emotional labor and the masking of specific emotions. In addition, it speaks to the value of social support in the public service workplace. As noted by Newman, Guy, and Mastracci (2009, 15), government workers "face greater emotion management demands and fewer resources to address those demands." If social support is an essential resource—and reward—for women in the public service workplace, this study leaves us with a final question: how can we advance the goals of respecting and accepting women—and their full selves—in greater measure in the years to come? If the goal is to have the "full participation" of women in the workforce, government or otherwise, we also must consider that a goal is to have participation of the "full" woman, who is able to show up authentically, emotions and all.

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