REFLECTION

Reflections on the professional practice of nursing and happiness at work

Reflexões sobre a prática profissional de enfermagem e a felicidade no trabalho

Reflexiones sobre la práctica profesional de enfermería y la felicidad en el trabajo

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ABSTRACT

Objective: to present a theoretical reflection on professional nursing practice and happiness at work. **Method:** this is a reflective study grounded in positive psychology and in experiences described in the literature, organized around two guiding questions: i) how can happiness at work be built among nursing teams? and ii) what are the consequences of its application in nursing? **Results:** happiness at work is a complex and constructible phenomenon, influenced by antecedent factors and associated with positive outcomes such as increased productivity, improved quality of care, and greater well-being among professionals, who tend to be more engaged, motivated, and collaborative. **Final considerations and implications for practice:** nursing teams are essential for sustaining health systems; however, they often work under unhealthy conditions, as evidenced by their morbidity profile. Investing in strategies that promote happier work environments strengthens professionals' health and improves the quality of care provided.

Keywords: Happiness; Nursing, Team; Personnel Management; Psychology, Positive; Work.

RESUMO

Objetivo: apresentar uma reflexão teórica sobre a prática profissional de enfermagem e a felicidade no trabalho. **Método:** este é um estudo reflexivo fundamentado na psicologia positiva e em experiências descritas na literatura e organizado a partir de duas questões norteadoras: i) como construir a felicidade no trabalho nas equipes de enfermagem? e ii) quais as consequências de sua aplicação na enfermagem? **Resultados:** a felicidade no trabalho é um fenômeno complexo e passível de construção, condicionado por fatores antecedentes, e associado a desfechos positivos, como aumento de produtividade, melhoria da qualidade do cuidado e maior bem-estar dos profissionais, que tendem a apresentar maior engajamento, motivação e colaboração. **Considerações finais e implicações para a prática:** as equipes de enfermagem são vitais para a sustentação dos sistemas de saúde, porém frequentemente atuam em condições laborais insalubres, evidenciadas por seu perfil de morbidade. Investir em estratégias que promovam ambientes de trabalho mais felizes fortalece a saúde dos profissionais e aprimora a qualidade dos serviços prestados.

Palavras-chave: Equipe de Enfermagem; Felicidade; Gestão de Recursos Humanos; Psicologia Positiva; Trabalho.

RESUMEN

Objetivo: presentar una reflexión teórica sobre la práctica profesional de la enfermería y la felicidad en el trabajo. **Método:** estudio reflexivo basado en la psicología positiva y en experiencias descritas en la literatura, organizado en torno a dos preguntas orientadoras: i) ¿cómo se puede construir la felicidad en el trabajo en los equipos de enfermería? y ii) ¿cuáles son las consecuencias de su aplicación en la enfermería? **Resultados:** la felicidad en el trabajo es un fenómeno complejo y susceptible de construcción, condicionado por factores previos y asociado a resultados positivos, como el aumento de la productividad, la mejora de la calidad de la atención y un mayor bienestar de los profesionales, quienes tienden a mostrar mayor compromiso, motivación y colaboración. **Consideraciones finales e implicaciones para la práctica:** los equipos de enfermería son esenciales para el sostenimiento de los sistemas de salud, pero con frecuencia trabajan en condiciones laborales insalubres, como lo demuestra su perfil de morbilidad. Invertir en estrategias que fomenten entornos laborales más saludables fortalece la salud de los profesionales y mejora la calidad de los servicios prestados.

Palabras-clave: Administración de Personal; Felicidad; Grupo de Enfermería; Psicología Positiva; Trabajo.

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INTRODUCTION

Work may be understood as any human activity through which individuals expend effort to meet needs or achieve goals, whether personal or collective. It is also a vital practice that generates the material and symbolic goods necessary for social life and constitutes an essential driver of existential development, enabling learning, improvement, planning, and the realization of human potential.[1]

Historically, work has evolved across distinct contexts: from subsistence labor to slavery, from feudal servitude to free yet unprotected labor, and, following the Industrial Revolution, to wage employment. In the present, work is shaped by technological innovation, globalization, and increasing organizational complexity within the constraints of the capitalist mode of production.[1] In this scenario, several broad pathways emerge for workers, such as: i) passive acceptance, with risks of alienation and overexploitation; or ii) the active construction of a psychological state of self-realization at work — full satisfaction and expression of one's potential, with activities aligned to personal values and a sense of contributing to a larger purpose.[1] Achieving such realization requires self-awareness and the definition of a purpose consistent with one's professional convictions.

Through work, people transform both their environments and themselves, leaving tangible and intangible marks on the world. Because a substantial portion of life is devoted to professional practice, understanding these practices — and shaping them into predominantly positive experiences — becomes crucial for achieving broader life aspirations.

This perspective aligns with a global shift in people management, in which organizations are called upon to encourage and support the continuous development of their workforce. The focus should extend beyond performance and productivity to include the expression of individual potential in the workplace. This movement gained momentum with the advent of Positive Psychology in 1998, a field centered on human strengths, happiness, and well-being that informs interventions aimed at enhancing motivation, proactive/productive behavior, and performance while safeguarding workers' health.[2] Consequently, new concepts have gained prominence in the scientific literature, with particular emphasis on happiness at work.[2,3]

Happiness at work is a psychological state characterized by predominantly positive thoughts, emotions, and feelings that arise from meaningful, enjoyable, and purposeful work experiences. It is a social construct that involves an awareness of purpose.[4,5] It emerges at the intersection of pleasure and meaning in one's professional activities. When individuals find both pleasure and meaning in their work, they are more likely to endure adversity while maintaining an overall sense of happiness.[4]

Literature has long described the multifaceted nature of happiness.[2-5] Two concepts are particularly useful for its understanding: hedonic and eudaimonic happiness. From the Greek *hēdonḗ* ("pleasure") comes hedonism, which defines the "good life" as the pursuit of maximum pleasure and the avoidance of pain. The eudaimonic perspective, discussed by philosophers such as Aristotle, holds that every human activity has an end and that individuals should live in accordance with their *daimon* or self, striving for a life of meaning. In this view, *eudaimonia* involves mental processes that occur as one moves toward self-realization, developing potential and attributing purpose to one's life.[4]

In the workplace, happiness is relevant to both workers and organizations, as it is associated with motivation, productivity, commitment, and quality of life. Promoting happiness can also reduce conflict and foster healthier work environments. In nursing — a central field within the health sciences and essential to achieving the sustainable development goals and universal health coverage — translating this knowledge into practice is particularly important.[6]

Within nursing, whose epistemological object of praxis is the care of individuals, families, and communities, the relationship between work and happiness assumes strategic significance. Nursing professionals face stress, overload, high workplace pressure, substantial responsibility, and low remuneration.[6] Such conditions tend to decrease satisfaction and productivity and may even contribute to professional attrition. Conversely, the psychological state of happiness at work is linked to multiple benefits: greater productivity, improved quality of life, stronger engagement, and enhanced well-being, accompanied by reduced stress, increased fulfillment, and safer care delivery to health service users.[3,4]

Two central questions arise in this context: i) how is happiness at work constructed? And ii) what are the implications of this construct for nursing practice?

This study explores how building and sustaining a psychological state of happiness at work can promote experiences of well-being, peace, and satisfaction — with oneself and with others, including managers and colleagues. Accordingly, its objective is to present a theoretical reflection on professional nursing practice and happiness at work.

METHOD

This study was conducted using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), an approach that identifies patterns and themes in data while explicitly acknowledging subjectivity and the active role of researchers in interpretation. RTA requires critical examination of the authors' assumptions, experiences, and biases, as well as their influence on data comprehension and theme development.[7]

The central question was to understand how the construct of "happiness at work" applies to professional nursing practice, given its relevance to the category's labor challenges and its potential impact on well-being, engagement, and care quality. To address this question, we searched PubMed, LILACS, and CINAHL without time restrictions, using descriptors in Portuguese, English, and Spanish related to happiness, positive

psychology, work, and nursing. We included pertinent empirical studies, reviews, and theoretical essays. Selected publications were read critically, prioritizing those with greater conceptual alignment to Positive Psychology and higher relevance to Nursing, with particular attention to seminal authors such as Martin Seligman, an international reference, and Narbal Silva, a Brazilian researcher with extensive output on the topic.

The analysis followed an inductive and dialogical orientation, integrating specialized literature, the authors' clinical experience in nursing, and collective discussions within the Study Group on Nursing Workers' Health at the School of Nursing, Universidade de São Paulo. This process supported the development of structuring analytical axes organized around the symbolic, ethical, and relational dimensions of happiness at work.

RESULTS

The findings of this reflection coalesced into two analytical axes: i) how happiness at work can be built among nursing staff; and ii) the consequences of applying happiness at work in nursing.

DISCUSSION

How can happiness at work be built among nursing staff?

A central reference in Positive Psychology, Martin Seligman links a pleasant and meaningful life to core elements of happiness achieved through the generation/experience of positive emotions, engagement, and an understanding of meaning in lived experience.[2]

The original "authentic happiness" theory proposed three components — positive emotions, engagement, and meaning — later expanded to include relationships and accomplishment.[8,9]

From this expansion emerges the PERMA model, an acronym for positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement.[9] The concurrent presence of these elements moves individuals closer to a psychological state of happiness.[9]

Applying this construct to workplace contexts is, however, complex. In this study, PERMA served as the conceptual foundation, in line with organizational literature on antecedents of happiness at work. We therefore examined self-awareness, well-being at work, organizational support, social support, and engagement. Drawing on prior research that explored the relationships between meaning and the significance of happiness at work among faculty,[10] we developed Figure 1 to synthesize these elements.
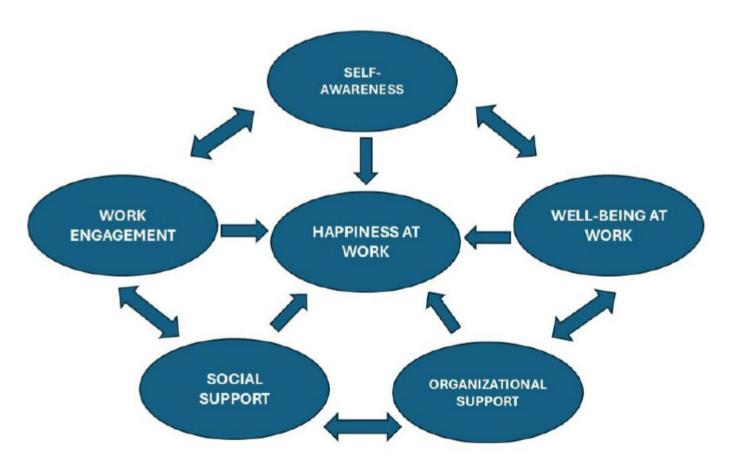

Figure 1. Elements for building happiness at work among nursing staff.
Source: Adapted from Ribeiro and Silva.[10]

The following section presents the development of each of these elements:

1. **Self-awareness.** A metacognitive state through which individuals identify and experience aspects of the self, gaining clearer insight into their mental states.[11] Self-awareness is fundamental to happiness at work because it supports emotion recognition and regulation, strengthens interpersonal skills, enables more effective decision-making, and informs strategic career planning — including the identification of weaknesses, strengths, and needs for leadership support. By knowing themselves better, professionals address workplace frustrations and anxieties more pragmatically, build relationships through authentic communication, deliver safer care to service users, and increase productivity and work involvement.

2. **Well-being at work.** A psychological state characterized by the prevalence of positive affect in the workplace, coupled with a sense of purpose and accomplishment in one's role. It comprises positive and negative affect (affective dimension) and personal accomplishment at work (cognitive dimension).[12] It stems from workers' literacy about their psychological states — recognizing them as amenable to development. Self-awareness amplifies purpose and accomplishment because reflection on professional role, strengths, and sources of gratification guides the path toward self-realization. Nursing staff with high levels of well-being tend to appraise themselves and their contributions positively, delivering their best performance in each situation.[13] Although unpleasant events are inevitable, strengthening well-being provides internal organization to overcome adversity and foster professional development.

3. **Organizational support.** A set of institutional practices and structures designed to promote efficient service functioning. Mechanisms for emotional, logistical, educational, and financial support foster healthy, safe, and productive environments, aligning the goals of users and workers.[14] Perceived organizational support encompasses workers' beliefs about reciprocity for effort, performance management, job demands and workload, availability of material resources, and policies for promotion, advancement, and remuneration. Workers are responsible for excellence and commitment in their duties; institutions are responsible for fulfilling legal, financial, and moral obligations to their teams.[15] When professionals perceive adequate conditions and consistent support, they move closer to a state of happiness at work.

4. **Social support.** Human beings have evolved through communal interaction; support from others is crucial for health across contexts, including the workplace.[16] The dynamics of work can generate strain and illness; thus, relying on colleagues for help during difficulties and for celebrating achievements is a meaningful pathway to building and strengthening happiness at work.

5. **Work engagement.** A psychological state marked by vigor/vitality, dedication, and absorption in activities. Engaged individuals feel energized, empowered, and enthusiastic about their roles.[17] They invest more effort in tasks and achieve positive results for themselves and for the institution.[18] This state tends to reduce stress complaints, decrease errors and rework, and facilitate socialization and adaptation to organizational culture.[4] Engagement can be viewed as an indicator of happiness at work, as professionals connected to their roles display greater energy, commitment to goals, and frequent immersion in their work.

Considering the elements described, happiness at work can be experienced when it is understood as a continuously evolving process sustained by multiple interconnected factors that simultaneously involve individuals and the organizations in which they operate.

What are the consequences of applying happiness at work in Nursing?

Over the past 2 decades, the literature on nursing work processes has emphasized occupational illness, with a predominance of musculoskeletal disorders and mental health conditions.[19-25]

The nursing work process integrates care and management, mediated by power relations and by philosophical, political, and technical foundations.[20] Since the 1970s, the restructuring of production within a globalized economy has introduced new management models that, overall, have weakened the working class. This has led to precarious employment arrangements, reduced wages, loss of rights, and worsening workplace conditions.[21] Within this context, the precarization of nursing work — a political, economic, and social phenomenon that subjects workers to regimes of overexploitation — has intensified, distancing professionals from the psychological state of happiness at work.[21]

Additionally, nursing teams are exposed to heavy workloads — biological, chemical, physical, mechanical, physiological, and psychological — and to inadequate working conditions.[22] These forms of strain impair work ability, promote illness, reduce productivity, increase absenteeism and presenteeism, and can negatively affect the quality of care provided to users.[22]

Among the most frequent disorders are work-related musculoskeletal disorders (WRMDs), resulting from routine activities such as intermittent walking, patient handling, prolonged standing, and tasks performed under poor ergonomic conditions.[23] WRMDs cause both physical and mental fatigue, affect professional performance, and may lead to functional limitations.[23]

Nursing professionals are also highly exposed to psychological distress, with symptoms of anxiety, anguish, fear, depression, and disturbances in sleep and appetite.[24] Organizational aspects — such as workplace climate, culture, and especially leadership style — can trigger or exacerbate stress and burnout.[24] Abusive leadership behaviors disrupt harmony and hinder the delivery of safe and effective care.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2023) exacerbated already critical conditions: beyond institutional precarization, fear of contagion, of transmitting the virus to family members, and of death intensified psychological strain.

By applying the epistemological principles of Positive Psychology to cultivate the psychological state of happiness at work, nursing professionals can find meaning and purpose in their profession and achieve fulfillment through their work. This does not imply the absence of unpleasant experiences or negative psychological states; rather, it suggests that happier workers tend to mobilize more effective coping mechanisms when facing adversity. Importantly, perceiving a sense of meaningful purpose at work — particularly in nursing, where actions directly impact people's lives — promotes higher levels of happiness. In this sense, building happiness at work should be a shared commitment among organizations, managers, and workers, supported by policies that foster healthy, safe environments and enable self-realization through professional practice.[4]

Human resources management across sectors shows that, beyond targets and outputs, it is essential to keep workers motivated, satisfied, and happy. Assessing psychosocial work factors has generated robust evidence of their impact on well-being and on optimizing organizational outcomes.[25]

Another reason underscoring the importance of happiness at work concerns workforce retention, already recognized by the World Health Organization as a global problem: an estimated shortage of 4.5 million nursing staff by 2030.[26] The morbidity profile within this workforce discourages new entrants and prompts those already employed to reconsider their career choices, contributing to attrition.[27]

Recent evidence indicates that effective conflict management, reward systems, flexible scheduling policies, and mechanisms for recognizing individual and team achievements positively influence the satisfaction and well-being of nursing staff by promoting practices and values aligned with healthy workplaces.[14] These findings suggest that a comprehensive, integrated institutional approach can yield significant benefits for health organizations.[14]

Thus, by investing in strategies that foster a healthier, more motivating environment, institutions strengthen workers' happiness and well-being while simultaneously improving service quality. Integrating organizational support, continuous learning, and valuing the workforce represents a promising pathway toward a more humanized, sustainable organizational culture aligned with the needs of both professionals and service users.

These organizational innovations are particularly relevant because they emphasize learning, growth, and development, creating space for a renewed relationship between people management and the cultivation of happiness at work — with tangible benefits for nursing.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The nursing work process is complex and has undergone substantial change in recent decades. Epistemologically grounded in care practices across the life course, it exposes nursing staff to unhealthy conditions that require prompt interventions to foster more favorable contexts.

Within this scenario, Positive Psychology offers relevant contributions to organizational management in nursing. Because work is a central activity of social participation and development, it should not be conceived solely as a source of suffering. On the contrary, nursing work can — and should — be oriented by elements that cultivate the psychological state of happiness at work.

This state is supported by theoretical and empirical evidence, countering interpretations that reduce it to utopia. Workers can understand, organize, and strengthen its constituent components. Having a clear purpose is essential, as is experiencing work as an opportunity for achievement and meaning. The predominance of positive affects and emotions contributes to greater resilience. Organizations, in turn, must ensure adequate material, intangible, and structural conditions; promote psychologically safe environments; and cultivate leadership that is responsive to the development and recognition of nursing staff, embedding these practices into institutional values.

A key limitation of this study is the scarcity of investigations specifically addressing the construction of happiness at work among nursing teams, which may constrain comparisons and the interpretation of the subjective aspects discussed.

DATA AVAILABILITY RESEARCH

The contents underlying the research text are included in the article.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None.

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