Conceptualizing Wellbeing in the Workplace

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Abstract

Well-being in the workplace has increasingly become a common topic in mainstream organizational research. The paper focuses on the factors associated with well-being at work, and it discusses two organizing frameworks for the conceptualization of well-being.

Keywords: Theoretical framework; wellbeing; workers; work setting

1. Introduction

Well-being in the workplace has increasingly become common topic in scholarly research journals (Cooper & Marshall, 1978; Smith, Kaminstein & Makadok, 1995; Danna & Griffin, 1999; Warr, 1990). There exists a vast, disjoined and unfocused body of literature across different fields relating to well-being in the workplace. Because of the broad domain in the literature, there is also a variation in the meaning and definition attributed to the term wellbeing. In the past, this term has been referred to the absence of disease, thus referring mostly to physical health. In time, however, the term has acquired a broader meaning, involving the physical, emotional, mental and social aspects.

Well-being in the workplace is an important issue that should occupy a much more prominent niche in mainstream organizational research for some reasons (Danna & Griffin, 1999). First, an individual's experiences at work, be they emotional or social in nature, obviously affect the person while working. Furthermore, these experiences also "spill over" into non-work domains. Workers spend about one-third of their time at work, and don't necessarily leave the job behind when they leave the work site (Conrad, 1988). Second, well-being can potentially affect both workers and organizations in negative ways. Workers with poor well-being may be less productive, make lower quality decisions, be more prone to be absent from work, and make consistently diminishing overall contributions to the organizations (Price, & Hooijberg, 1992).

For many organizational scholars the studies on wellbeing derive from motivation theories. These theories have, in fact, introduced the basic concepts for the study of well-being, because they attempt to understand the reasons why people behave as they do, and the processes that cause the behaviour. In the past, the individual was simply a task executor, today human resources are at the centre of the work organization and they may significantly contribute to the achievement of organisational performance. This means that you have to consider their needs, understand what makes them feel good. and then make them work better. Fundamental studies of motivation of Maslow, Alderfer, McClelland, Herzberg, Vroom, Adams, Locke have over time created major bases that could be helpful to understand the organizational well-being and its functioning.

The enhancement and support of organizational well-being are extremely important in health care setting, where aspects such as the continuous comparison of health care staff with the suffering, pain, death, but also their personal development and motivation can be supported by the richness and specificity of health care job.

2. An Organized Framework: Factors Associated to Well-Being

Consistent with the organizational framework (Cooper and Marshall, 1978; Smith, Kaminstein, and Makadok, 1995; Danna & Griffin, 1999), the concept of well-being in the workplace is seen as comprising the various life/non-work satisfactions enjoyed by individuals, work/job-related satisfactions, and general health.

Following from War (1990) wellbeing tends to be a broader concept that takes into consideration the "whole person". Beyond specific physical or psychological symptoms related to health, wellbeing should be used as appropriate to include context-free measures of life experiences (life satisfaction, happiness), and within the organizational research to include job-related experiences (job satisfaction, job attachment), as well as more facet-specific dimensions. Well-being can refer to mental, psychological, or emotional aspects of workers.

Figure 1 shows the organizational framework highlighting the factors associated to well-being in the workplace ((Danna & Griffin, 1999).

The literature suggests wellbeing is presumably affected by three general sets of antecedent factors (Danna & Griffin, 1999). One set of factors relates to *the work setting*. Health hazards, safety hazards, and perils can obviously create dangerous work settings, which, in turn, negatively impact health and wellbeing among workers. By direct implication, the absence of these various hazards may positively affect health and well-being.

Personality traits play a role in determining the extent to which any given individual will display indicators of high or low levels of health and well-being in a given organizational setting. The most widely researched personality factors are Type A behaviour pattern and locus of control (Danna & Griffin, 1999). Type A behaviour pattern generally means that the individual is hard driving, competitive, job involved, and hostile. Measures of locus of control focus on perceived control: people with a so-called "internal locus of control" believe their own behaviours are the primary determinants of what happens to them; people with an "external locus of control" believe that external influence, such as luck or powerful others, are more important determinants of what happens in their lives.

In a related but subtly distinct way, *occupational stress,* emerging from the lack of fit between individual needs and demands and those of the environment, will also have a direct impact on health and wellbeing. The potential sources of occupational stress, as conceptualised by Cooper and Marshall (1978) are:

- Factors intrinsic to the job including work overload or underload, shift work, long hours, and quality of the physical working environment;
- Role in the organization referring to role ambiguity, role conflict, and the degree of responsibility for others;
- Relationships at work with superiors, colleagues, and subordinates;
- Job insecurity and career development;
- Organizational structure and climate including the lack of participation and effective consultation, poor communication, ambiguous work environment, and individual cultural incongruence;
- Home/work interface that means managing the link between work and family.

The literature framework also identifies two interrelated sets of consequences of wellbeing in the workplace (Danna & Griffin, 1999). One set of consequences having the most direct implications for individuals includes physical, psychological, and behavioural consequences. The other set of consequences, including health insurance costs, productivity and absenteeism, is more directly relevant to organizations. Physical consequences at the individual level may clearly be related to consequences at the organizational level. Finally, the role of interventions is highlighted showing their potential impact on antecedent factors, actual well-being, and the consequential factors. For example, many interventions targeted at the organizational and individual levels have been implemented in an attempt to improve the safety and working conditions in the workplace, alleviate or lessen the potential occupational stressors, or improve the individual's coping mechanisms with these stressors. This, in turn, should correlate to increased employee well-being and health with concomitant improvements in individual and organizational consequences.

3. Other Model of Wellbeing at Work

Organizational scientists have been measuring aspects of satisfaction, and wellbeing at work for nearly a century. It is very clear that wellbeing at work is multidimensional (Grant, Christianson, & Price, 2007; Page, & Vella-Brodrick, 2009). Many concepts and measure used in organizational behaviour appear to straddle different dimensions of wellbeing, including job satisfaction, job involvement, affective organizational commitment, work engagement, positive and negative emotions and moods at work, intrinsic motivation, thriving, and vigor (Fisher, 2010). The separate aspects of well-being at work might fit together to comprise overall wellbeing in the workplace as shown in Figure 2. The inner circle includes the experience of pleasant emotions while working.

It's one of three components of subjective wellbeing at work. The second circle refers to negative emotions at work and cognitive judgements of work satisfaction and similar attitudes.

The higher level construct of overall wellbeing at work adds social and eudaimonic wellbeing components. The figure is another way to conceptualize and measure wellbeing in the workplace (Fisher, 2014).

3.1 Subjective Wellbeing

The term subjective wellbeing describes a person's overall experience in life and reflects a person's self-described happiness. Subjective wellbeing includes positive attitudinal judgements as well as the experience of positive and negative effect.

Job satisfaction, an important component of subjective wellbeing, is a positive emotional state resulting from an appraisal of one's job or job experiences (Locke, 1976). It's the most commonly researched phenomenon in organizational behaviour studies (Brief & West, 2001).

Organizational commitment is also a commonly assessed job attitude. It refers to: normative commitment based on personally identifying with the organization's goals and values; and affective commitment based on feeling part of the organizational community. Organizational commitment may be an important component of wellbeing at work.

Since the mid-1990s, there has been an explosion of interest in positive and negative affect at work, defined as typical or transient moods or emotions experienced while working. According to Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory, positive emotions function in the short term to broaden one's thought-action repertoire and thereby build in the long term one's cognitive, social, psychological, and physical resources (Fredrickson, 2001).

Positive affect reflects levels of energy, excitement, enthusiasm, joy, interest, appreciation, vigor or physical strength, and cognitive liveliness. Positive emotions engender social interactions (De Simone, 2014). *Negative effect*, on the other hand, reflects aversive mood states such as anger, anxiety, depression, tiredness and fearfulness. Negative emotions will always be a part of organizational life, just as they are a feature of life outside work. Negative emotions don't automatically equate to subsequent negative outcomes, just as positive emotions don't automatically equate to positive outcomes following the emotional experience. Negative emotions often provide useful signals to people in regards to areas where learning is required (Härtel, Ashkanasy, 2011). The ability to respond constructively to negative emotions depends on how frequently people are exposed to negative emotional experiences. Positive emotions play an important role to buffer the impact of negative emotions on people, to build psychological resiliency towards negative events and to promote functional coping strategies (De Simone, 2014). An emotional climate that promotes human flourishing is one where positive emotional experiences outweigh negative emotional experiences (De Simone, 2013).

3.2 Eudaimonic Wellbeing

A number of constructs in organizational behaviour display at least partial overlap with eudaimonic wellbeing. These include job involvement, work engagement, thriving, flow and intrinsic motivation, meaning in work.

Job involvement consists of identifying closely with one's work and basing identity and self-esteem on one's work role (Fisher, 2014).

Work engagement is described as a positive work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption. Vigor refers to high levels of energy and mental resilience while working. Dedication refers to being strongly involved in one's work and experiencing a sense of significance, enthusiasm, and challenge. Absorption means being fully concentrated and happily engrossed in one's work, whereby time passes quickly and one has difficulties with detaching oneself from work (Bakker, & Demerouti, 2008).

Thriving is made up of feeling of vitality and the belief that one is learning, developing, and making progress toward self-actualization (Spreitzer, & al. 2005).

Flow occurs when one is totally absorbed in using one's skills to progress on a challenging task. *Intrinsic motivation* is often measured as the subjective experience of interest or enjoyment while engaged in a task, which may overlap with subjective wellbeing.

Meaning in work is related to the work role itself, doing something important and self-actualizing.

3.3 Social Wellbeing

Social wellbeing at work is the third leg in the wellbeing tripod. This component has received the least attention in organizational literature. It consists of feeling embedded in meaningful communities and having satisfying short term interactions and long term relationships with others.

Spreitzer et al. (2005) explain that quality connections to others at work in a climate of trust and respect is integrally related to eudaimonic wellbeing as it enables growth and thriving. Individuals are more engaged at work when their leader cares about them as a person. Social well-being includes satisfaction with peers as well as satisfaction and exchange relationships with leaders. Another relevant construct is social support having two main dimensions such as emotional support and instrumental support. Giving as well receiving social support is a predictor of wellbeing. An additional aspect of social well-being at work might include feelings of belonging to and being embedded in work communities, be they teams or the whole organization.

4. Conclusion

The concept of well-being in the workplace has been increasingly elevated to the same importance to organizational scholars as the more commonly concepts of leadership and motivation. The real importance of this concept for scholars, researchers, managers and executives is quite evident, given the link to everyday work and life experiences of all organizational members. Literature from different fields, such as organization behaviour, psychology and medicine, contribute to a unified understanding of wellbeing in the workplace. In fact both models presented draw from an interdisciplinary perspective.

Measures and conceptualizations of wellbeing at work may vary. The typical approach of organizational scholars is to think in terms of relatively stable differences between people. Wellbeing might be measured once and expected to remain constant over a considerable period of time. When comprehensive measurement of wellbeing is contemplated, including subjective, eudaimonic, and social aspects, this stable level is probably the most appropriate (Fisher, 2014).

It's time to agree on a more comprehensive definition of overall well-being at work, in order to encourage research on how to best maximize the desirable state for employees that predicts important outcomes for organizations.

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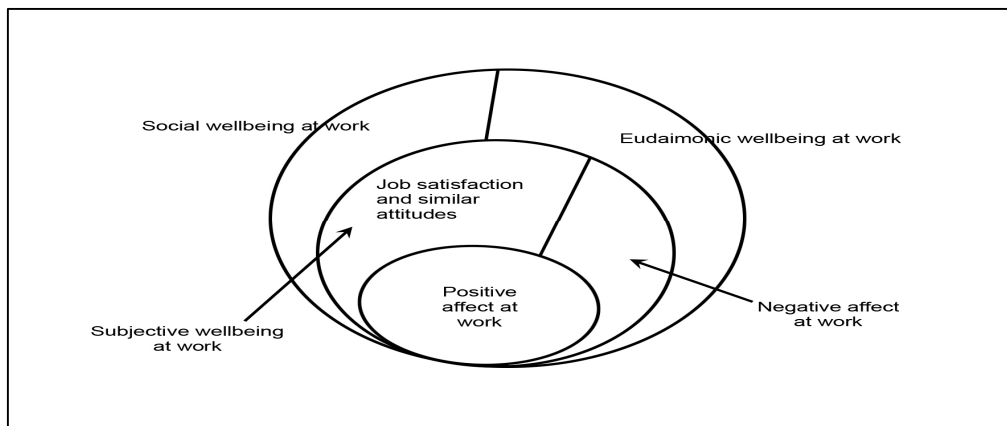
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Figure 1: Components of Wellbeing in the Workplace
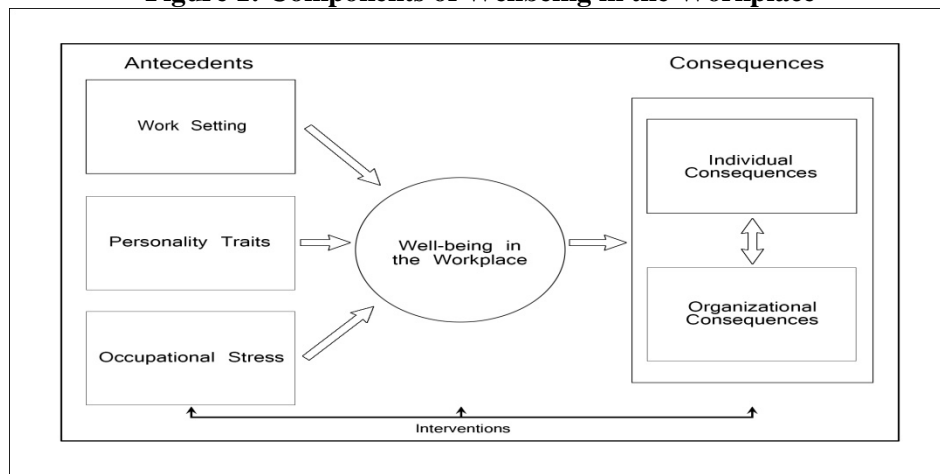
Source: Adapted from Danna & Griffin (1999)

Figure 2: Other Model of Overall Wellbeing at work

Source: Fisher (2014)