



Positive psychology and the search for happiness at work

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to develop an analysis model and psychosocial and cultural interventions that specifically adapt and extend Martin Seligman's proposed framework of happiness in the workplace. Focusing on the work context in Colombia, this research poses the question: "How can a model adjusted to the cultural and social context of Colombia enhance understanding and practices of happiness at work, compared to Seligman's model?". In terms of methodology, this research employs comprehensive document analysis, selecting sources based on their relevance to the positive psychology framework and its application in the Colombian work environment. Selection criteria include the novelty of the research, relevance to the local work context, and contributions to the understanding of happiness at work. The analysis process incorporates a qualitative approach to identify common themes and specific nuances related to work subjectivity and mental health. The research results indicate that the adjusted analysis model and interventions provide new insights into the dynamics of happiness at work in Colombia, highlighting the importance of cultural and contextual factors in designing and implementing interventions. Specifically, this model reveals that approaches considering local social and cultural values as well as specific economic challenges can be more effective in promoting positive work subjectivity and mental health. Implications suggest that adapting the workplace happiness model to include specific cultural and social considerations can enhance the effectiveness of psychosocial and cultural interventions. This research lays the groundwork for developing more focused and relevant strategies to improve worker well-being in Colombia and similar contexts.

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INTRODUCTION

The pursuit of happiness in the workplace is a multifaceted concept that has evolved significantly over time, transcending the boundaries of positive psychology as proposed by Martin Seligman to encompass broader socio-economic and cultural dimensions, particularly in contexts such as Colombia. This research seeks to bridge the theoretical perspectives of Freud (1930/2005), who viewed happiness as an elusive illusion within the constructs of modern work life, and Seligman, who posited a more optimistic view of achievable well-being through positive psychology. We propose a comprehensive theoretical framework that synthesizes these viewpoints, considering the complex interplay between individual psychological states and the broader socio-cultural and economic contexts that shape the experience of happiness at work.

The relevance of this topic to the Colombian work context cannot be overstated. In Colombia, unique socio-economic challenges and cultural dynamics significantly influence the pursuit and perception of happiness in the workplace. Factors such as economic instability, social

inequalities, and cultural values around work and well-being play a crucial role in shaping employees' experiences and expectations of happiness at work. This research aims to explore how these factors contribute to the conceptualization of happiness in Colombian workplaces and how they might necessitate adaptations or critiques of Seligman's model.

Engaging with Freud's critique of happiness as a life goal provides a foundation for a deeper discussion on the challenges of achieving happiness in contemporary work settings. This discourse allows us to critically evaluate the applicability of Seligman's positive psychology in addressing the realities of modern workplaces, which are often marked by complexity, uncertainty, and at times, disillusionment. By juxtaposing these perspectives, the research highlights the need for a nuanced understanding of happiness that acknowledges both the potential for positive psychological states and the limitations imposed by external conditions.

Furthermore, this introduction integrates a review of previous research to contextualize our study within the broader academic discourse on workplace happiness. By examining how our research extends and deepens existing

knowledge, we aim to identify knowledge gaps and articulate how our investigation into the Colombian work context contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of happiness at work. This approach not only situates our research within the existing body of literature but also underscores the innovative aspects of our theoretical and empirical contributions.

In summary, by proposing a theoretical framework that integrates divergent perspectives on happiness, contextualizing the research within the specific socio-economic and cultural milieu of Colombia, critically engaging with foundational critiques, and building upon previous studies, this introduction sets the stage for a nuanced exploration of happiness in the workplace that is both theoretically rich and deeply relevant to contemporary work settings.

Positive Psychology

While positive psychology has been celebrated for its focus on enhancing well-being and harnessing individual strengths, it has also faced criticism for potentially overlooking the negative aspects of work life and contributing to 'toxic positivity.' Critics argue that an overemphasis on positivity may pressure individuals to suppress negative emotions, which are a natural part of the human experience, leading to increased stress and decreased well-being (Held, 2004). In response, our model incorporates a balanced perspective, recognizing the importance of addressing and learning from negative experiences at work. This approach is aligned with the concept of 'constructive negativity,' which suggests that acknowledging and constructively dealing with negative emotions can lead to personal growth and resilience (Luthans & Youssef-Morgan, 2017). By integrating this perspective, our model aims to provide a more holistic approach to workplace well-being that acknowledges the full spectrum of human emotions. Debates and controversies continue: However, we can point out some current proposals:

First of all, we can consider that positive psychology is a new approach to psychology that studies what makes life worth living [...] This approach studies the optimal experience, that is, people being and giving their best themselves. (Park et al. 2013; p. 11). According to Tarragona (2013, p. 115), positive psychology scientifically studies the optimal functioning of people and aims to discover and promote the factors that allow individuals and communities to live fully.

In addressing modern workplace challenges such as burnout, career uncertainty, and work-life balance, positive psychology offers practical applications. For instance, research by Bakker and Demerouti (2017) demonstrated that implementing job crafting strategies, a concept derived from positive psychology, allows employees to reshape their job roles in ways that enhance work engagement and reduce burnout. This approach aligns with positive psychology's emphasis on leveraging personal strengths and fostering positive experiences at work. Furthermore, a study by Robertson and Cooper (2010) highlighted the effectiveness of resilience training, based on positive psychology principles, in improving employees' ability to manage work-related stress and uncertainties, thereby contributing to better work-life balance and job satisfaction.

The new positive psychology, proposed by the American psychologist Martín Seligman at the beginning of the 21st century, has had a significant impact on the world of work. According to Porras Velásquez (2020; 2023c), Seligman

assumes that the development of human strengths, talents, and capabilities allow people to function harmoniously in their work. Because this new psychological perspective implies starting from self-knowledge, from the discovery of our personal and professional values, so that we can find a more harmonious and balanced way of living our lives. In short, live our work life with greater fullness and meaning.

In short, positive psychology was defined by Martin Seligman (2002, 2005, 2017) as the scientific study of human strengths and virtues, which allow us to adopt a more open perspective regarding human potential, motivations and abilities.

Furthermore, the field of positive psychology at the subjective level deals with positive subjective experience: well-being and satisfaction (past); flow, enjoyment, sensual pleasure and happiness (presents); and constructive cognitions about the future—optimism, hope, and faith. According to Seligman, at the individual level it deals with positive personal traits—capacity for love and vocation, courage, interpersonal skill, aesthetic sensitivity, perseverance, forgiveness, originality [...] At the group level it deals with civic virtues and the institutions that They move individuals to be better citizens: responsibility, culture, altruism, civility, moderation, tolerance and ethical work. Seligman (2002; p. 3).

Finally, positive psychology can also be understood as the study of people's psychological resources, which contribute to improving the quality of life, subjective well-being and health of the world's population. Research within this field is aimed at observing, evaluating and creating programs to enhance psychological resources (strengths and not personal weaknesses). In this regard, it is important and timely to reiterate that one of the most important and interesting contributions of the humanistic approach to contemporary psychology is the concept of self-realization. In this sense, self-awareness includes developing one's full potential and achieving a full and meaningful life. It is important and timely to highlight that the satisfaction of psychological needs is a fundamental aspect of this psychological approach, given the consequences that this satisfaction has on people's lives (Porras Velásquez, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012).

The concept of 'optimal experience' in the work context, often referred to as 'flow,' depicts a state where individuals feel fully engaged and immersed in their work activities, experiencing a balance between the challenges of the task and their personal abilities (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). For instance, a graphic artist involved in a new design project might experience 'flow' when their creative skills perfectly align with the demands of the design. Furthermore, 'optimal individual functioning' refers to achieving one's full capacity in life aspects, including at work, characterized by productivity, creativity, and positive interpersonal relationships (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Human strengths and virtues, such as resilience, optimism, and gratitude, play a vital role in developing a supportive work environment, where employees not only withstand work pressures but also thrive (Fredrickson, 2001).

In this context, there are many questions that initially emerge, in this field of study they are: since when has work psychology been interested in happiness at work or the happiness of the worker? What is this interest due to? What happens if a worker is not happy with what they do? Is there a formula for happiness at work? What would happen to the production system, productivity, and consumption if all workers were happy? Does true, "authentic" happiness exist, as the American psychologist Martin Seligman proposes? What relationship exists between happiness,

pleasure and enjoyment? Are we more or less happy today than in other times? Is there a difference between "narrated" happiness and "lived" happiness? (Cabanas & Sánchez, 2012; Cabanas, & Illouz, 2019; García Rivera & Porras Velásquez, 2019; Vázquez, 2013).

What does authentic happiness consist of?

Doctor of psychology Martin Seligman is an eminent researcher of the human psyche, who proposed the concept of "learned optimism," many years after working on the concept of "learned helplessness or hopelessness." This change in conceptual perspective led him to propose a revolutionary scientific trend called "Positive Psychology", which focuses on human strengths and not on mental illness. In this last scenario, Seligman (2005, 2017) maintains that authentic happiness is not only possible, but - far from depending on luck or genes - happiness can be cultivated by identifying and using many of the strengths and traits that one already possesses. Authentic happiness, according to Martin Seligman, is a state of well-being that originates from profound positive experiences, the utilization of personal strengths, and significant contributions to a greater life (Seligman, 2002). This concept emphasizes that happiness is not merely about temporary satisfaction or momentary pleasure, but rather about achieving sustained happiness through meaningful engagement and self-realization.

Seligman titles chapter four of the book "Authentic Happiness" with the following question: can you be happier in a lasting way? For the unsuspecting reader, the question is very interesting and attractive, however, the concern raised in this way is based on the assumption that we are all happy and that now the question is to be able to be happier. This idea of having more, being more, being able to do more, is consistent with the capitalist model of accumulation and increase of capital as an effect or product of profits or surplus value as Marx would say. But thinking about human happiness in economic terms, in terms of wealth accumulated, treasured, worked, or deserved, inherited, cannot lead to thinking and assuming it as a lifestyle without any fault. That is, beings without fault, complete, finished product as some would say. A naive being who lacks being. A subject to the contemporary market-consumption that denies symbolic castration, by not wanting, desiring or accepting loss as part of the process of living or existing.

Although Seligman's framework on authentic happiness has been a foundational aspect of positive psychology, recent research by Diener, Oishi, and Tay (2018) has broadened our understanding by exploring how factors such as social engagement and a sense of belonging affect happiness at work. This study underscores the importance of a supportive and collaborative work environment in achieving authentic happiness, in line with Seligman's principles, but with a new emphasis on the social dimensions of happiness. Furthermore, research by Lyubomirsky and Layous (2013) demonstrates that positive psychology interventions designed to enhance happiness, such as writing gratitude letters or performing random acts of kindness, can have a significant impact on employee well-being, showcasing the practical application of Seligman's theory in the modern work context.

Returning to Seligman's text, we should not be surprised that this psychologist immediately proposes the formula for happiness. The happiness formula $F=R+C+V$, proposed by Seligman, represents Foundations (F) as the sum of one's set range of happiness (R), Circumstances (C), and Voluntary

activities (V). To apply this formula in the daily work context, organizations can implement employee development programs focused on identifying and bolstering personal strengths (V), such as resilience training or skills workshops. For instance, creating a mentorship program that pairs employees with mentors can facilitate personal growth and professional development, directly contributing to the 'Voluntary activities' component of the formula. Additionally, improving work environment conditions to support employee well-being, such as introducing flexible work hours or creating spaces for relaxation and social interaction, addresses the 'Circumstances' component. These practical applications demonstrate how modifying voluntary activities and circumstances can enhance overall happiness at work, aligning with the authentic happiness model (Seligman, 2002).

For psychologist Martin Seligman, it is important to distinguish between momentary happiness from the level of lasting happiness. It is evident that momentary or fleeting happiness can easily be increased through different activities such as eating, shopping, sleeping, relaxing. The author clarifies that this chapter, and this book in general, is not a guide to increasing the number of temporary bursts of happiness throughout life. In which we are all experts or have a lot of experience. The challenge of this type of positive psychology is to increase the level of lasting happiness. In short, authentic happiness is lasting. Happiness as a state of lasting subjective well-being.

The General Happiness Scale has been one of the most used instruments to determine the degree or level of happiness of a person, group or nation. People are asked to indicate where they stand on a 1 to 7-point scale that reflects whether they generally consider themselves not very happy or very happy. Likewise, they must place their flirt on the scale of 1 to 7 points. Thinking about whether, compared to the majority of the same people, you consider yourself less happy or happier.

In summary, the American psychologist Martin Seligman proposes a model of three paths to authentic happiness: The pleasant life, this type of happiness is short-lived and is achieved by maximizing positive emotions and minimizing negative ones both in the past and in the future. present and especially in the future. The engaged life refers to the putting into practice of personal strengths with the aim of achieving a greater number of optimal experiences that allow us to flow in life. Finally, the meaningful life is the most lasting form of happiness and includes the development of objectives and goals that go beyond oneself and belonging to positive institutions (democracy, family, education, work, group of friends/friendships, among other). These three lifestyles are not exclusive and rather can complement each other to find a high level of happiness in terms of well-being. (Bastos Andrade, 2023).

This section's exploration of authentic happiness significantly contributes to the literature on workplace happiness and positive psychology by delineating how the understanding of authentic happiness can inform human resource management practices and organizational policies. By integrating Seligman's concept of authentic happiness, organizations can develop targeted interventions that not only boost employee well-being but also enhance overall organizational performance. For example, implementing policies that promote work-life balance and recognizing the value of personal strengths in job roles can lead to a more positive and supportive work environment (Seligman, 2002; Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Furthermore, the emphasis on authentic happiness underscores the importance of creating

conditions that foster individual and collective well-being, suggesting that well-being should be a strategic organizational objective (Diener, Oishi, & Tay, 2018).

Historical development of the concept of happiness

The literature on happiness is abundant and overwhelming. However, throughout the history of humanity the idea of happiness has always been present in very diverse ways and with religious, philosophical, political, economic, social class interests and as a psychological dimension of the subject's state of well-being (mental health). In this sense, it can be said that the topic of happiness is endless. That no matter how much we talk and write about this phenomenon, there is always something left to say, something is missing. Furthermore, defining the concept of happiness is quite complex, difficult and not free of controversy, since we all have our own notion of happiness but in many circumstances, it is very difficult for us to explain it. However, we can say, for now, that happiness is a human tendency. A deep desire that drags and pushes the human being in that direction. We can also say that happiness is a state of mind, a mixture of joy and inner peace. According to psychiatrist Enrique Rojas, he who does not know what he wants cannot be happy.

Aristotle's notion of *eudaimonia*, often translated as "flourishing" or "well-being," is foundational to the philosophical understanding of happiness. Aristotle argued that true happiness is found through virtuous activity in accordance with reason, which fulfills the human potential for a complete life (Aristotle, n.d.). This perspective suggests that happiness is not a momentary state but a lasting condition achieved through living a life of virtue and purpose. In the context of work, this could be interpreted as finding fulfillment through engaging in activities that are both meaningful and aligned with one's abilities and values.

Contrasting with Aristotle, Epicurus presented a hedonistic view, proposing that the greatest good is to seek modest pleasures in order to attain a state of tranquility and freedom from fear (*ataraxia*) and absence of bodily pain (*aponia*) (Epicurus, n.d.). From this perspective, happiness at work could be seen as creating an environment that minimizes stress and discomfort, thereby maximizing pleasure and contentment. Epicureanism holds that the virtuous life does not require the adornment of pleasure: it is pleasurable in itself. Although Epicureanism assimilates pleasure and happiness, it is advisable to avoid the frequent contradiction that makes the Epicurean a libertine. True happiness is not pleasuring in motion, but rather "pleasure at rest", that which results from the absence of desire and pain, or suffering. Epicurean distinguishes three types of pleasures: First, there are those that are "natural and necessary" – drinking, eating and making love: the vital demands of the human body must be satisfied. Secondly, there are those that are "natural" but not necessary—culinary and sexual fantasies and, in general, everything that depends on the unrestraint of natural and necessary desires. Thirdly, there are those that most of the pleasures are "neither natural nor necessary," which are the product of vain and empty opinions—the social desires: honors, wealth, power, glory, or immortality, and that we should always avoid.

The shift towards modernity introduced a more individualistic view of happiness, focusing on subjective well-being and personal satisfaction (Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2003). This contemporary approach underscores the importance of individual perceptions and emotional evaluations of one's life, including work. Happiness in the

workplace, therefore, involves personal fulfillment, job satisfaction, and positive emotional experiences. In short, nothing is more opposed to happiness conceived as subjective pleasure than the ancient idea of *eudaimonia*. The common denominator of the moral philosophy of Antiquity is the fact that the human agent is oriented by ends that are represented at the same time as they are desired and that through their chain reaches the ultimate end, and whose possession allows the objectively perfect realization of human nature. The beginning of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* clearly accounts for this fact.

Building on historical concepts of happiness, Martin Seligman's positive psychology emphasizes the cultivation of positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement (PERMA) to achieve authentic happiness (Seligman, 2002). This model integrates ancient and modern understandings, suggesting that authentic happiness at work is achieved not just through positive experiences or the avoidance of discomfort, but through meaningful engagement, the utilization of personal strengths, and contributing to something greater than oneself.

The historical evolution of happiness concepts informs current HR management and organizational policies by emphasizing the need for workplaces that support not only the pursuit of individual well-being but also the development of a meaningful and engaging work environment (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). For instance, implementing programs that encourage personal growth, recognize individual contributions, and promote work-life balance can enhance employee happiness and organizational success.

Happiness at work

Recognizing the vital role of happiness in the workplace within the realm of positive psychology is crucial for addressing contemporary work challenges and enhancing human resource management practices. This underscores the relevance of creating a supportive work environment that fosters authentic happiness, aligning with organizational goals and employee well-being (Seligman, 2002). The theoretical framework for happiness at work integrates positive psychology principles with current research in human resource management and employee well-being. These principles can significantly improve employee commitment, job satisfaction, and motivation by focusing on strengths, positive relationships, and meaningful work (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017).

An in-depth critique of existing human resource management practices reveals the potential for enhancement through positive psychology principles. Emphasizing employee strengths, talents, and skills positively impacts mental health and organizational productivity, necessitating a shift towards more inclusive and development-focused HR strategies (Luthans & Youssef-Morgan, 2017). Currently, human resources management practices tend to create work experiences that facilitate the realization of the human potential of employees with the aim of increasing the level of commitment, job satisfaction and motivation, on the one hand. They also aim, on the other hand, to raise the feeling of psychosocial and subjective well-being of all their employees. Therefore, emphasize practices that promote the positive aspects of work and enhance the skills, talents and strengths of workers that will have a positive impact not only on mental health but also on organizational productivity (Salamanca Quiñones & Porras Velásquez, 2019, 2022, 2023).

According to Porras Velásquez & Parra (2019, 2019a), happiness at work is found between obtaining an accumulated number of pleasant experiences throughout the day and the meaning that transcends the immediate experience of job satisfaction. Furthermore, the meaning of work has a positive impact on workers' mental health.

Porras Velásquez (2024, 2022a) maintains that: from a psychological point of view, work implies for people, among other things, the opportunity and possibility of using their talents, potential and strengths, contributing significantly to the functioning of the company. and, at the same time, actively participate in the development of their community. Furthermore, work, a subjective experience of personal fulfillment that implies the satisfaction of the transcendent need for self-realization in human beings. (Porras Velásquez, 2016).

According to the studies carried out by Porras Velásquez (2017, 2017a, 2018, 2018a, 2023), psychology applied to the world of work tries to preserve the importance and centrality of work in the psychic structuring of human beings. In short, psychological discourses and practices applicable to work and organizations are expected to make an important contribution to the question: how can an organization find a way to unleash the potential of its employees? based on the recognition of their talents and virtues. Understanding happiness at work has significant implications for HR management practices and organizational policies. It guides organizations in designing effective interventions and strategies to enhance employee well-being and achieve organizational success, emphasizing the necessity of aligning HR policies with the principles of positive psychology for a thriving workplace (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017).

CONCLUSIONS

In concluding our exploration of happiness at work within the framework of positive psychology, it becomes clear that true happiness transcends material possessions or mere satisfaction with one's job role. This synthesis of the main arguments presented throughout the manuscript highlights the shift from 'having' to 'being' as crucial for achieving authentic happiness in the workplace. This perspective aligns with the theoretical frameworks of positive psychology and Aristotelian ethics, emphasizing self-realization and value harmony as core components of workplace happiness (Seligman, 2002; Aristotle, n.d.).

Critically reflecting on the limitations of a happiness approach focused on 'having,' it is evident that such a perspective falls short of capturing the essence of true happiness. This realization has profound implications for modern work practices, suggesting a need to redesign organizational environments and management practices to support the deeper, intrinsic aspects of employee well-being and fulfillment (Porras Velásquez, 2016, 2022, 2023a, 2023b).

Practically, organizations can foster authentic happiness by implementing strategies that promote self-realization, personal growth, and a sense of belonging—elements that go beyond the superficial enjoyment of work-related activities (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Examples of such interventions could include development programs focused on strengths, community-building activities, and policies that encourage work-life harmony. (Porras Velásquez & Parra D'aleman, 2018, 2018a, 2018b).

Future research should aim to further explore and elucidate the complex dynamics of happiness at work, particularly how organizations can effectively implement these principles on a broader scale. Investigating the long-term impacts of such practices on organizational productivity and employee mental health would significantly contribute to our understanding of this field (Porras Velásquez, 2014, 2014a, 2015, 2016a, 2016b).

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