DEVELOPING A NEW SURVEY SCALE MEASURING THE PSYCHOLOGICAL EXPERIENCE OF MEANINGFUL WORK AMONG HEALTHCARE STAFF

Authors

Dr Laura Kudrna, Associate Professor, l.kudrna@bham.ac.uk; Dr Lailah Alidu, Dr Suvi-Jonna Martikainen, Tom Lingard, Prof Richard Lilford, Helen Hunt, Dr Daniel Wheatley, Prof Paul Dolan

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM | College of Medicine and Health

Introduction

- Measures of wellbeing often emphasise hedonic experiences such as happiness or stress, but neglect eudaimonic experiences—moments of meaning, fulfilment, and purpose at work
- Existing meaningful work scales typically assess overall perceptions rather than everyday experiences, and they may not adequately capture experiences across culturally diverse groups
- In some cultures, participants may respond positively on mental wellbeing measures because it is not socially desirable to report low wellbeing (Diener et al., 1995)
- When developing official wellbeing questions to monitor social progress, the UK Office for National Statistics conducted qualitative research with 44 people but only were from an ethnic minority background (Ralph et al., 2012)

What feels meaningful to one person might not feel meaningful to someone else. For example, making a cup of tea might not feel meaningful to you, but it might feel meaningful to your colleague.

Objectives

- A literature review to identify already existing meaningful work scales
- Qualitatively co-produce new survey scale measure with diverse NHS staff
- Reliability and validity of a new survey scale

Objective 1 - literature review

- Updated 2019 review by Bailey et al. (2019)
- Reviewed 140 studies and found 46 scales about meaningful work with 693 items - but only 52 items (7.5%) were about how people felt

Objective 2 - qualitative phase

- We conducted six focus group discussions and writing exercises with 36 people (23 nurses, 9 doctors, 1 healthcare assistant, 1 cardiac physiologist, 1 clinical radiologist, and 1 interactive communications professional)
- The majority (75%) were from Black, African, Caribbean, Asian, or mixed-race groups
- Also included data from our study published in 2022 about the same topic with 54 participants from a range of backgrounds
- Used a computer program called 'Python' to find every instance somebody mentioned the word 'feeling', 'experience' and 'moment' or similar (feel, feels, felt, moments, momentary, etc)
- There were 672 instances reviewed, reduced to 323 about work-related participant experiences, and 81 that strongly aligned to the background of the project, reducing to 67 after removing very similar items
- The 67 items were reviewed in a design thinking workshop with 9 participants (range of backgrounds) – for final items scan QR code

Objective 3 - proposal to assess reliability/validity of new survey scale

- Internal consistency using Cronbach's alpha
- Factorial validity using principal components analysis
- Predictive validity, collect data in Jan/Feb '26 & Jun/Jul '26 to identify behaviours (and intentions) about sickness absence, changing jobs, and symptoms of burnout, stress, and depression

Results

The review revealed a substantial gap in measures of felt experiences of meaningful work. In contrast, healthcare staff provided rich descriptions of how meaningful moments at work feel to them, including feelings of worthwhileness, futility, appreciation, and purpose. These insights informed the development of new, experience-based scale items.

Conclusion

Current measures inadequately capture the psychological experience of meaningful work. This study provides initial item development grounded in diverse healthcare staff perspectives. Future research will test the reliability and validity of the new scale to support more inclusive assessment of workplace wellbeing.

Key Sources

- Bailey, Catherine, et al. "A review of the empirical literature on meaningful work: Progress and research agenda." Human Resource Development Review 18.1 (2019); 83-113
- Diener, Ed, et al. "National differences in reported subjective well-being: Why do they occur?" Social Indicators Research (1995); 34: 7–32
- Ralph K, Palmer K, Olney J. Working paper - Subjective well-being: a qualitative investigation of subjectivewell-being questions, https://analysisfunction.civilservice.gov.uk/wp- content/uploads/2018/10/Subjective-well-being-a-qualitative-investigation-of-subjective-well-being- questions.pdf