



# Subjective well-being at work: Disentangling source effects of stress and support on enthusiasm, contentment, and meaningfulness

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## ABSTRACT

The experience of meaningfulness in one's work is an important predictor of individual and organizational outcomes. We advance a model of nonhedonic (i.e., meaningfulness) subjective well-being (SWB), to assess the potential impact of work role stress (specified by source) in this new model of SWB, and examine the direct and indirect effects of potentially supportive communication (specified by source and type of support). Item Response Theory (IRT) and Classical Test Theory (CTT) frameworks confirmed the proposed factor structure of SWB. Results suggest that positional status of the source of stress determines the magnitude of effect. Specifically, supervisors who are sources of role stressors have the largest negative impact on SWB. Alternatively, social support had the largest positive effect on SWB when the source was a supervisor and communication type was positive or non-work related. In addition, role stressors and communication from supervisors have the strongest direct effect on nonhedonic SWB. Unexpectedly, communication wherein content was negative had the strongest effect when source was a co-worker, followed by the subordinate. Finally, positive communication with coworkers attenuated the effect of supervisor role stress on one dimension of SWB (enthusiasm). Overall, supervisors have a strong ability to affect subordinates' SWB, particularly in terms of meaningfulness.

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## 1. Introduction

The increasing recognition and popularity of positive psychology (Sheldon & King, 2001) has led organizational researchers to investigate employee happiness and other positive emotions (e.g., Luthans, 2002). Applied to health and well-being of workers, positive psychology suggests that well-being is something other than simply the absence of illness. There exists, however, a dichotomy in the definition of well-being. One approach is the *hedonic* view of well-being and emphasizes such experiences as pleasure, happiness, satisfaction, and the presence of a positive mood (Diener, 1984; Kahneman, Diener, & Schwarz, 1999); this approach has dominated the work and well-being literature (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). The other view of well-being emphasizes experiences of greater depth such as *meaning* (Jim, Purnell, Richardson, Golden-Kreutz, & Andersen, 2006; Schnell & Becker, 2006; Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006; Weems, Costa, Dehon, & Berman, 2004), *purpose* (Jim et al., 2006; Reker, 1992; Steger et al., 2006; Weems et al., 2004), *importance* (Weems et al., 2004), *fulfillment* (Reker, 1992), and *eudaimonia* (Waterman, Schwartz, & Conti, 2008). The current study investigates psychological well-being at work and primarily helps to develop the usefulness of the second approach: examining the sense of meaningfulness that employees experience at work. Whereas most previous research on the

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experience of meaningfulness emphasizes cognitive evaluation of one's life in general, the current study extends prior theory by increasing our understanding of nonhedonic subjective well-being at work (Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010). Designing jobs that enhance feelings of purpose or significance can dramatically enhance individual outcomes and performance (e.g., Grant, 2012). Not only has meaningful work gained popularity among scholars (see Dik, Byrne, & Steger, 2013), but practitioners suggest that meaningful experience at work is a common feature among the most successful and innovative companies (Bain, 2007).

Previous researchers have obfuscated the topics of meaning and meaningfulness by using them interchangeably. Meaning is an outcome of having made sense of something, such as when an individual employee interprets what one's work or organizational life connotes (Gray, Bougon, & Donnellon, 1985). Meaningfulness refers to the magnitude or amount of significance one feels (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). Two individuals may assign the same meaning to a work activity and yet differ in the valence of meaningfulness. There have been numerous studies of meaning at work (e.g., MOW (Meaning of Work) International Research Team, 1987) and more recently meaning associated with objective virtue of work (Kashdan, Biswas-Diener, & King, 2008). The measurement of meaningfulness, however, as it relates to subjective well-being (SWB) has received relatively little attention (e.g., Ryff, 1989), and, therefore the present research contributes to our understanding of this type of well-being. These two studies advance a new model of SWB, assess the impact of role stress on this model, and test boundary conditions of the model by examining moderating variables. First, measurement qualities of the hypothesized components of SWB were assessed. This first step was intended to create a brief psychometrically appropriate assessment of hedonic and non-hedonic SWB. Next, relationships of work-related stressors with these different types of SWB were examined. Finally, social support as both a direct correlate of SWB and a moderator of the stressor and SWB relationship was tested.

## 2. Subjective well-being

Hedonic SWB has typically been assessed by asking respondents to report their own affective state, often conceived of as having two orthogonal components; arousal and pleasure (Russell, 1980; Warr, 2006). Thus, SWB can be explained by a two-dimensional circumplex, with arousal being the y-axis and satisfaction being the x-axis (Green, Goldman, & Salovey, 1993; Remington, Fabrigar, & Visser, 2000; Russell, 1979; Yik, Russell, & Barrett, 1999). Conceptually, this results in two hedonic forms or dimensions of SWB (i.e., satisfied-aroused and satisfied-calm). We propose that a more comprehensive model involves a three-dimensional model wherein meaningfulness is represented by a z-axis. This axis represents SWB as the experience of meaningfulness rather than hedonic fulfillment.

### 2.1. Employee subjective well-being: experience of meaningfulness at work

Thus the present study offers an extension of the circumplex of SWB, heeding a call (Remington et al., 2000; Warr, 2006) for exploration of new models to account for additional types of affect that do not fit the current model well. The importance of this additional component of employee well-being is central to numerous early theories of human behavior and has been referred to as meaning (Crumbaugh, 1968), coherence (Antonovsky, 1993), and self-actualization (Maslow, 1943), as well as related beliefs, values, and attitudes (Brief & Nord, 1990; Gomez & Fisher, 2005; Nord, Brief, Atieh, & Doherty, 1990; Ros, Schqartz, & Surkiss, 1999).

Previous studies of nonhedonic well-being measures have shown promising external validity, displaying convergent validity with related constructs and the ability to predict individual distress (Debats, van der Lubbe, & Wezeman, 1993). Scores on perceived meaningfulness have been found to positively relate to ultimate life goals (Battista & Almond, 1973), integration of personality (Orbach, Iluz, & Rosenheim, 1987), effective coping (Debats et al., 1993, and other measures of well-being (Debats, 1990, 1996; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992). More recent results have supported earlier findings on the convergent and discriminant validity of hedonic and non-hedonic well-being (Triado, Villar, Sole, & Celdran, 2007). These studies have examined general rather than domain specific well-being however; the current study builds on that general psychological research of meaningful experience by investigating this new dimension of SWB in the workplace.

Therefore, the current study assesses the viability of a three-dimensional circumplex of SWB: two established hedonic dimensions (contentment and enthusiasm) and a new nonhedonic dimension (meaningfulness). Although hedonic and nonhedonic well-being are conceptually distinct they are likely to be related to each other, because multiple positive states are likely to be experienced together. In terms of the hedonic space of the model, the off-axes of enthusiasm (high in activation and high positive valence) and contentment (low in activation and high positive valence) are measured. These factors are congruent with previous research (Warr, 1990). A third, non-hedonic SWB construct is developed and confirmed in the present study.

**Hypothesis 1.** Data will support three dimensions of subjective well-being: two hedonic (contentment and enthusiasm), and one non-hedonic (meaningfulness).

## 3. Social support: sources and contents of communications

Research findings regarding the relationship of social support to psychological well-being are complex. The degree of social support an employee receives is typically related to individual well-being, but support sometimes interacts with stressors to produce ambiguous results (e.g., Beehr, Farmer, Glazer, Gudanowski, & Nair, 2003; Beehr, King, & King, 1990). Some research finds buffering interactions in which the positive relationships between stressors and outcomes are weaker under conditions of higher social support, whereas other findings suggest nonsignificant interactions (e.g. La Rocco, House, & French, 1980; Wade & Kendler, 2000), and yet

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