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# An integrated framework for academic staff well-being: Positive and relational lenses



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**Orientation:** The well-being of academic staff is crucial in higher education, where stress, workplace conflict and strained relationships negatively impact health and performance. Existing wellness programmes often focus on either psychological or relational aspects rather than integrating both.

**Research purpose:** This study examines South African university wellness programmes, assessing individual (Positive Psychology Interventions [PPI]) and relational (Relational Social Constructionism [RSC]) approaches, and proposes an integrated framework for academic staff well-being.

**Motivation for the study:** Positive Psychology and RSC have each contributed to well-being research, but their combined potential remains underexplored. This study addresses this gap by demonstrating how their integration can offer a more holistic approach.

**Research approach/design and method:** A systematic review strategy using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses framework, analysed studies on PPI and RSC in academic staff well-being. A qualitative synthesis was conducted with mixed-method elements.

**Main findings:** Findings show that PPI and RSC are mostly applied separately. Positive Psychology Interventions emphasises individual well-being, while RSC highlights relational and systemic factors. Integrating both addresses their limitations, enabling a more holistic, equitable and context-sensitive framework for academic staff wellness in higher education institutions.

**Practical/managerial implications:** The study provides insights for Human Resource managers and university administrators to design wellness initiatives that integrate both psychological and relational dimensions, fostering a more supportive academic environment.

**Contribution/value-add:** By combining Positive Psychology and RSC, this study enhances theoretical understanding and offers practical recommendations for institutional wellness programmes.

**Keywords:** positive psychology interventions; relational social constructionism; academic staff; wellness programmes well-being; systematic review; higher education.

## Introduction

Academic staff well-being is a critical issue in universities, as it directly impacts teaching quality, research productivity and institutional effectiveness. Academic environments are often characterised by high workloads, job insecurity and performance pressures, which can lead to burnout, stress and reduced job satisfaction (Burr & Dick, 2022). Therefore, implementing well-being interventions is essential for fostering a supportive work environment that enhances both individual and institutional success.

While Positive Psychology Interventions (PPIs) and Relational Social Constructionism (RSC) originate from different paradigms, one emphasising individual flourishing and the other relational meaning-making, this study intentionally integrates both to offer a more holistic understanding of academic staff well-being.

Early applications of PPIs tended to focus on individual strengths and resilience. However, contemporary scholarship has expanded the paradigm to include social dimensions of flourishing. For example, Redelinghuys et al. (2019) highlight how positive organisational practices, such as caring, compassion, meaning and gratitude, promote social coherence and integration, contributing to collective flourishing at work. This broader conceptualisation aligns well with the

relational emphasis of RSC and supports the integration of both perspectives in the current framework.

Similarly, RSC, although traditionally grounded in social constructionist epistemology, foregrounds the co-construction of meaning through relational processes within dialogical and cultural contexts (Gergen, 2009; McNamee & Hosking, 2012). It emphasises language, interaction and context as central to how individuals experience and make sense of their realities. More recent developments extend RSC into organisational and well-being contexts, viewing relationships as essential not only for meaning-making but also for fostering resilience, identity and flourishing (McNamee & Hosking, 2012). This shift underscores the importance of creating supportive, appreciative and reflexive relational environments, particularly vital in higher education settings marked by complexity and stress.

Viewed together, PPIs and RSC are not opposing but mutually enriching paradigms. Positive Psychology Interventions contribute by enhancing positive emotions, personal strengths and psychological resilience (Carr et al., 2021), while RSC brings a relational lens that highlights the co-constructed nature of well-being through interactions, shared meaning and belonging (Gergen, 2009). The integration of PPI and RSC enables a comprehensive approach to academic well-being, one that supports both individual flourishing and the cultivation of collaborative, socially connected institutional cultures.

## Research problem and rationale

In the context of higher education, wellness programmes are increasingly promoted to support academic staff facing increasing pressures. However, these programmes often reflect the dominant narrative of individual performance, centred on metrics such as publication output, personal resilience and self-regulation, while neglecting the broader social and relational dimensions of academic life. This emphasis on personal agency, although valuable, can obscure the influence of workplace culture, power hierarchies and systemic inequalities that significantly shape staff well-being (Saleebey, 2006; Wachtel, 2014).

Positive Psychological Interventions have traditionally focused on individual strengths and positive affect. Yet, emerging scholarship reveals that PPIs also hold potential for cultivating social well-being, particularly when aligned with organisational practices that foster compassion, meaning and collegiality (Redelinghuys et al., 2019). At the same time, RSC emphasises the co-construction of meaning through dialogue, relationships and institutional culture (Gergen, 2009; Ness & Von Heimburg, 2020). Integrating RSC with PPIs offers a more balanced and socially grounded approach, one that can counteract the isolating effects of performance-driven environments by promoting collaboration, shared meaning and institutional care.

This study addresses a critical gap by systematically reviewing wellness programmes for academic staff in higher education through the dual lens of PPIs and RSC. It explores both the synergies and tensions between these paradigms and proposes a novel, integrated framework that supports holistic well-being. By highlighting the social and relational factors that influence the impact of well-being strategies, the study contributes towards building more contextually sensitive and sustainable interventions for academic staff in increasingly complex institutional settings.

## Objectives and research questions

This study aims to explore how integrating PPIs and RSC can enhance academic staff well-being interventions. The key objectives are as follows:

- To explore the scope, focus and reported outcomes of PPI-based wellness programmes implemented in higher education settings – What types of interventions have been reported, and what psychological or relational benefits are attributed to them?
- To analyse the limitations of individual-focused wellness interventions – How do PPIs fall short in addressing the relational, institutional and systemic dimensions of well-being in academic contexts?
- To evaluate the role of RSC in shaping academic staff well-being – How do social interactions, institutional culture and collaborative practices contribute to promoting well-being among academic staff?
- To propose an integrated well-being framework combining PPIs and RSC – How can universities implement interventions that balance personal strengths with relational and contextual factors?

By addressing these questions, this review aims to provide evidence-based recommendations for universities' Human Resource (HR) departments to develop more holistic and sustainable well-being strategies for academic staff.

## Theoretical framework

### Conceptual foundations of well-being

Well-being among academic staff is a multi-dimensional construct encompassing both individual and relational aspects. Traditionally, well-being has been understood through an individual lens, focusing on psychological health, resilience and personal satisfaction. However, growing research highlights the crucial role of relational and organisational factors in shaping well-being within academic environments. For instance, Ryan and Deci's (2000) Self-Determination Theory underscores the importance of relatedness and supportive environments for optimal functioning. Similarly, Wray and Kinman (2021) emphasise that collegial support, leadership style and institutional culture are significant predictors of academic staff well-being. The Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) further supports this view by illustrating how organisational resources, such as supportive relationships, autonomy and recognition, buffer against burnout and promote engagement. These frameworks

collectively establish a more holistic understanding of academic well-being, extending beyond the individual to include relational and structural dimensions.

### Individual dimensions of well-being

From an individual perspective, well-being in academia includes psychological resilience, emotional regulation, job satisfaction and the ability to manage stress effectively. According to Rothmann (2013), psychological well-being involves having a sense of purpose, autonomy and competence, core aspects that enable academics to thrive in often challenging environments. Personal coping strategies and positive psychological resources, such as optimism and self-efficacy, and adaptive coping strategies are known to bolster personal well-being and enhance individuals' capacity to thrive in the workplace (Coetzee, 2021). Additionally, emotional well-being is characterised by the presence of positive emotions and the absence of burnout, anxiety and job dissatisfaction remains a key indicator of academic staff well-being (Barkhuizen et al., 2014).

### Relational dimensions of well-being

Beyond individual factors, social well-being is defined by Rothmann (2013) as experiencing positive social integration and supportive relationships, which is critical to staff well-being. Academic work is inherently relational. It is deeply embedded in social and institutional contexts. Trusting and supportive relationships with colleagues, students and administrators play a pivotal role in fostering a sense of belonging and psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999). A collegial work environment characterised by collaboration, mutual recognition and shared goals contributes to higher levels of engagement and job satisfaction (Education Support, 2023). Conversely, academic toxicity, marked by competition, a lack of recognition and poor leadership, can severely undermine well-being (Morrish & Sauntson, 2019).

### Wellness programmes

Wellness programmes in higher education institutions are structured initiatives aimed at promoting the health, resilience and overall functioning of academic staff. Traditionally, these programmes have leaned heavily on PPI, which focuses on enhancing individual strengths, emotional well-being and self-regulation through tools, such as counselling services, mindfulness training and stress management (Rothmann & Cooper, 2015; Seligman, 2011). This individual-centred framing positions well-being as a personal responsibility, often divorced from broader institutional or relational contexts.

However, a growing body of work emphasises the significance of RSC perspectives, which view well-being as socially co-constructed through institutional culture, power relations and meaningful interactions (Gergen, 2009; McNamee & Hosking, 2012). Wellness programmes informed by this approach recognise the importance of collegial relationships, community belonging and structural equity in shaping staff experiences (Gergen, 2009).

This review underscores the need to reimagine wellness programmes as integrated ecosystems that bridge the gap between individual flourishing and collective well-being. Effective programmes do not merely offer personal development tools, but also embed structural reforms, such as leadership development, workload equity and diversity transformation that foster enabling environments (Mackinlay et al., 2022). A conceptual shift towards an integrated model combining PPI's focus on psychological strengths with RSC's emphasis on relational and systemic dynamics offers a more comprehensive and context-sensitive response to the complex, multi-layered nature of academic staff wellness in South African universities.

### The interplay between individual and relational factors

A holistic understanding of academic staff well-being requires integrating emotional, psychological and social dimensions and relational dimensions. As Rothmann et al. (2019) argue, workplace flourishing arises from the interaction of personal strengths and organisational resources. Similarly, the Relational Well-Being Theory suggests that well-being is not an isolated individual state but a dynamic process shaped by social connections and organisational structures (White & Jha, 2023). Kutsyuruba and Walker (2024) support this view, emphasising that well-being is co-constructed through interactions, where institutional culture and workplace conditions significantly influence personal experiences. This perspective aligns with calls for systemic changes in higher education, advocating for policies that prioritise both personal development and community well-being (Education Support, 2023). Rothmann et al. (2019) reinforce this integrated view through their empirical model of workplace flourishing, which includes emotional, psychological and social well-being, and highlights how positive organisational practices, such as compassion, gratitude and meaning, serve as key antecedents of staff well-being.

Defining well-being in the context of academic staff requires an integrated framework that recognises emotional, psychological and social aspects of flourishing (Rothmann, 2013). While individual strategies, such as resilience-building, are important, institutional culture, social interactions and leadership practices play a fundamental role in shaping well-being outcomes. By embracing both personal and social dimensions, higher education institutions can foster conditions that promote thriving academic communities.

## Theoretical framework: Integrating positive psychological interventions and relational social constructionism

### Positive psychology interventions

Positive psychology interventions are based on positive psychology and designed to improve well-being by fostering positive emotions, identifying personal strengths and enhancing resilience (Carr et al., 2021). Rooted in positive

psychology, these interventions aim to enhance job satisfaction, reduce stress and improve emotional well-being through practices such as gratitude exercises, mindfulness and strengths-based coaching (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). In academic settings, PPIs help staff navigate workload pressures and maintain motivation (Holmedal Byrne & Gustafsson, 2024). While PPIs emphasise personal agency and internal resources, they risk overlooking the wider relational and structural conditions that also shape well-being (Kutsyuruba & Walker, 2024).

### Relational social constructionism

Relational social constructionism shifts the focus from internal traits to relational and discursive processes, asserting that well-being is co-constructed through everyday interactions, language and institutional practices (White & Jha, 2023). From this standpoint, academic staff well-being is not merely a matter of personal coping, but is deeply influenced by organisational culture, leadership, collegiality and opportunities for meaningful collaboration (Wray & Kinman, 2021). Relational social constructionism highlights how institutional environments either support or erode psychological safety and belonging. Relational social constructionism provides a vital counterpoint to PPIs' individualistic inclination by bringing attention to the relational and structural aspects of academic life that are frequently invisible.

## Theoretical framework integration

This study considers well-being from both the individualistic and social perspectives. It notes that while PPIs provide instruments for enhancing personal psychological resources, RSC makes sure that these initiatives are contextualised within and sensitive to the institutional and social realities of higher education. This dual grasp allows for a deeper understanding of the elements that promote or hinder academic flourishing.

## The need for an integrated approach

Relational Social Constructionism and PPIs may seem different, but when combined, they provide a more thorough understanding of academic well-being. Positive Psychology Interventions emphasise the cultivation of positive emotions, resilience and personal strengths as key mechanisms for enhancing mental health and well-being. For example, Holmedal Byrne and Gustafsson (2024) conducted an exploratory clinical trial involving PPIs combined with positive emotion regulation training among patients with severe mental illness. Their findings show that PPIs emphasise the development of positive emotions, resilience and personal strengths, thus helping academic staff manage stress and maintain motivation in demanding work environments. However, when larger social and institutional factors are ignored, their focus on individual agency may limit their effectiveness.

Conversely, RSC foregrounds the social, relational and linguistic dimensions of well-being, emphasising the importance of collegiality, leadership practices and institutional culture in shaping well-being (White & Jha, 2023). While RSC offers a valuable lens for understanding how well-being is co-constructed within academic communities, it may not provide specific tools for cultivating personal psychological resources.

Recent literature underscores the need for a multifaceted and integrated approach to well-being in academic settings, one that bridges individual and relational perspectives (Gergen, 2009). By combining the strengths of PPIs and RSC, institutions can design well-being strategies that empower individuals while also transforming organisational environments.

According to White and Jha (2023), well-being necessitates both individual and group efforts and should be seen as a relational dynamic rather than an isolated state. Similarly, universities need to put in place interventions that foster psychological safety, a sense of belonging and a shared purpose in addition to enhancing individual capacity (Edmondson, 1999). In the end, an integrated framework offers more inclusive and sustainable well-being initiatives in higher education by acknowledging the interplay between psychological resources, job demands and systemic support.

This integrated lens is particularly relevant for evaluating wellness programmes in higher education, as it provides a framework to assess not only individual-focused interventions (e.g. mindfulness or resilience training) but also systemic efforts that cultivate relational and institutional support. The forthcoming review draws on this integrated approach to examine how existing wellness programmes address (or overlook) both psychological and relational dimensions of academic staff well-being.

## Existing well-being models and their theoretical roots

Several well-being models have shaped current understandings of academic staff well-being, each emerging from distinct psychological paradigms. A critical examination of their theoretical foundations helps clarify their relevance to this review, particularly concerning the PPI and RSC frameworks guiding this study.

The PERMA model (Seligman, 2011), rooted in the positive psychology tradition, conceptualises well-being through five core pillars: Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment. (PERMA). Although primarily individual-focused, the model does acknowledge interpersonal relationships, thus providing a partial bridge towards relational well-being. It has been widely applied in higher education contexts and validated across diverse populations, including academic staff (e.g. in a 2025 study of higher education teacher educators using the PERMA model) (Fitzsimons et al., 2025). Studies such as Fitzsimons et al. (2025) indicate that although the PERMA model provides

valuable insights into personal development and internal states of well-being, it does not adequately account for broader structural and relational factors that significantly impact academic staff members' quality of life.

The Flourishing at Work Framework (Keyes, 2002; Rothmann, 2013) also draws from positive psychology but expands upon the PERMA model by explicitly integrating dimensions of both emotional and psychological functioning in work contexts. This model includes aspects, such as emotional well-being (e.g. job satisfaction, positive affect), psychological well-being (e.g. autonomy, purpose, mastery) and social well-being (e.g. social contribution and integration). The framework not only aligns well with PPI approaches by emphasising the cultivation of psychological resources but it also begins to touch on relational components, particularly in its social well-being domain. However, it still largely conceptualises these domains as properties of individuals rather than as emerging from co-constructed, relational contexts.

The JD-R model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) introduces a dual-process theory of well-being based on the balance between job demands and job resources. It recognises the interplay between stressors and support mechanisms, such as autonomy, collegiality and institutional recognition. The JD-R model is compatible with both PPI and RSC perspectives to the extent that it acknowledges both personal resilience and workplace factors. Nevertheless, it leans more heavily towards the occupational stress tradition and often lacks a deeper relational or systemic focus (Schaufeli & Taris, 2014; Van den Broeck et al., 2010).

In contrast, Social-Ecological Models (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) emerge from a systemic paradigm that emphasises human development and behaviour as shaped through ongoing interactions within and across multiple environmental levels. These models conceptualise well-being as arising dynamically through nested layers of influence – from the microsystem of personal relationships to the ecosystem of institutional culture and the macrosystem of broader societal norms. This systemic approach aligns closely with the relational and developmental focus of the RSC paradigm, which views well-being as co-constructed through social interactions, power relations and shared meaning-making processes embedded within these multiple systems. By foregrounding the interconnectedness of individual, relational, institutional and cultural contexts, social-ecological frameworks challenge individualistic assumptions and emphasise the embedded, emergent nature of well-being. Recent applications in academic contexts further illustrate how institutional policies, collegial dynamics and societal expectations jointly shape conditions for staff well-being (Kovács et al., 2024; Dlamini & Dlamini 2024). Taken together, these models provide a layered understanding of academic staff well-being. The PERMA and Flourishing at Work frameworks reflect the PPI paradigm, emphasising personal strengths and emotional functioning. The JD-R model offers a hybrid approach that includes environmental factors, but remains grounded in stress-coping theory. In contrast, social-ecological models are firmly situated within the RSC paradigm, prioritising relational, systemic and cultural dynamics. This theoretical diversity reinforces the need for an integrated approach that synthesises individual and relational models to address the complex realities of academic well-being.

### Strengths and limitations of these models

The PERMA model is beneficial for enhancing individual well-being, but does not sufficiently account for relational and systemic factors (Huppert & So, 2013). The JD-R model acknowledges workplace influences but often treats relational aspects as secondary rather than integral to well-being (Taris & Schaufeli, 2015). Social-ecological frameworks provide a more holistic approach, but their complexity can make them challenging to implement in practical interventions (Stokols, 1996). Moreover, recent studies suggest that while these models contribute valuable insights, they remain limited in fully capturing the dynamic interplay between personal and relational dimensions of well-being (Cooke & Smith, 2024). Hence, this manuscript engages with the JD-R model and social-ecological theory in a way that informs the design and evaluation of *Human Resource Management* (HRM) interventions. By offering a multilayered integrated framework, as presented in Figure 2 the study enhances understanding of how well-being can be embedded into HRM structures at individual, team and institutional levels.

### Identifying the gap in the literature

Despite the growing body of work on academic staff well-being, few studies offer an integrated analysis of how wellness programmes incorporate both individual-focused interventions from the PPI tradition and relational, systemic insights from RSC. Most evaluations emphasise either personal psychological resources or structural factors in isolation, resulting in fragmented approaches to well-being. This lack of integration leaves a critical gap in understanding how higher education institutions can design comprehensive well-being strategies that are both psychologically empowering and relationally supportive. This review addresses that gap by exploring how existing wellness programmes reflect, or neglect, this dual emphasis, to advance more holistic and context-sensitive models of academic well-being.

## Research design

### Approach

This study adopted a systematic review design, guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework as presented in Figure 1. The review applied a qualitative synthesis strategy with mixed-method elements, enabling a comprehensive analysis of existing literature on PPI and RSC in the context of academic staff well-being. The design was chosen to

synthesise conceptual and empirical insights from a broad range of interdisciplinary sources, combining both qualitative and quantitative evidence through thematic integration and interpretative analysis.

### Reliability and validity measures

To enhance the credibility of the findings, triangulation was applied by integrating data from multiple sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, institutional reports and publicly accessible documents (Maddux, 2002). The validity of the findings was reinforced through systematic thematic analysis, ensuring consistency in data interpretation. In addition, expert feedback was sought through peer review to enhance the robustness of the analysis (Ryff & Singer, 2000).

### Systematic search strategy

A systematic review was conducted following PRISMA guidelines, presented in Figure 1, with searches performed across databases, such as Scopus, Web of Science, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar. The search strategy incorporated keywords related to PPI, RSC, well-being and academic staff. Inclusion criteria comprised peer-reviewed articles published from 2000 onwards, focusing on well-being interventions for academic staff. Exclusion criteria included non-peer-reviewed sources, studies unrelated to academic staff and non-English articles. Thematic analysis was applied to identify key themes, examining the role of PPI and RSC in institutional well-being initiatives. Content coding facilitated the identification of recurring patterns and relationships between interventions and academic staff well-being outcomes.

### Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses flowchart

The study followed the PRISMA framework to ensure a systematic and transparent selection of relevant studies. A PRISMA flow diagram illustrates the selection process. Initially, 872 records were retrieved from databases, with an additional 29 records identified through other sources. After duplicate removal, 719 unique records remained for screening. During the screening phase, 512 records were excluded based on relevance. The eligibility phase involved assessing 207 full-text articles, of which 126 were excluded for various reasons (e.g. insufficient focus on academic staff, a lack of direct relevance to well-being interventions). Ultimately, 81 studies were included in the qualitative synthesis, forming the foundation for analysis.

### Ethical considerations

This study adhered to ethical research standards by ensuring the responsible use of publicly available data from academic articles, university websites, public reports and library resources. No human participants were involved, and all sources were properly cited to maintain academic integrity. An ethical waiver was obtained from Rhodes University with reference number: RUHREC-2025-0024.

## Results

The employee wellness programmes at South African universities are systematically mapped in Table 1, which shows a strong reliance on PPI that focuses on personal development, mental health and resilience. Institutions, such as the University of the Free State (UFS), University of Cape Town (UCT), University of Johannesburg and University of Pretoria, among others, exemplify this trend through programmes that offer confidential counselling, online mental health support, stress management and self-empowerment tools. These initiatives reflect a framing of academic staff well-being primarily as an individual responsibility, with wellness construed as an internal, self-managed pursuit.

However, only a few universities – most notably Rhodes University and the University of Fort Hare – explicitly incorporate RSC perspectives, recognising the relational and social embeddedness of well-being. The emphasis on interdepartmental cooperation, community support networks and holistic care in their programmes indicates a change in perspective towards seeing wellness as jointly created by institutional culture and meaningful relationships.

This discrepancy makes clear a crucial conclusion: while PPI has been useful in emphasising psychological health and personal strengths, it frequently ignores the systemic and relational elements that affect academic work environments. The sector's relative lack of RSC-informed practices suggests a lost chance to promote institutional belonging, collegial support and shared meaning-making. These findings support the need for an integrative framework that combines the relational depth of RSC with the strengths of PPI in order to more fully support the well-being of academic staff in higher education.

Table 2 provides an integrated overview of wellness programmes implemented across South African universities, illustrating how academic staff well-being is supported through coordinated interventions spanning institutional policies, leadership development, organisational culture and dedicated support structures. This systematic mapping highlights the need for combining diverse theoretical frameworks, particularly those from Positive Psychology and RSC perspectives, to address the complex and multi-dimensional nature of wellness in higher education. By drawing on both individual-focused and relational-systemic models, these initiatives reflect an evolving understanding of academic wellness as both a personal and collective experience shaped by institutional context, social interactions and broader structural conditions.

As shown in Table 2, programmes, such as leadership development, equity audits, workload policy reforms and diversity transformation initiatives, reflect a clear institutional commitment to rebalancing the organisational environment in support of academic staff well-being. For example, Rhodes

**TABLE 1:** Employee wellness programmes at South African universities: Approaches and strategies.

| Name of University | EWP for staff members | Approach used and explanation | References |
|---|---|---|---|
| UFS | The 'I Am' Wellness programme provides strategies for personal and professional effectiveness, promoting self-empowerment and resilience through an online platform. | PPI – Focuses on individual strengths, self-empowerment and resilience-building, aligning with PPI. | University of the Free State (2020). *I Am Wellness Programme: Employee wellness at UFS*. Organisational Development and Employee Wellness Division. Retrieved from https://www.ufs.ac.za |
| UCT | The Employee Health and Wellness Programme (EHWP) offers free, confidential counselling for employees and their immediate family, covering work-related stress, financial difficulties and relationship issues. | PPI – Supports individual well-being through mental health interventions, voluntary participation and confidential counselling services. | University of Cape Town. (n.d.). *Employee Health and Wellness Programme (EHWP)*. UCT Human Resources. Retrieved from https://www.hr.uct.ac.za |
| UWC | The Wellness @ Work programme offers mental health support, health screenings, fitness programmes and educational wellness initiatives to promote self-care. | PPI – Emphasises individual well-being through self-care, stress management and proactive health maintenance. | University of the Western Cape. (n.d.). *Wellness @ Work Programme*. UWC Wellness Office. Retrieved from https://www.uwc.ac.za |
| UJ | The Employee Wellness Programme (EWP) is a holistic initiative addressing multiple aspects of employee well-being, including career, financial and emotional health. | Both PPI & RSC (More PPI) – Incorporates individual well-being strategies while acknowledging relational support structures. | University of Johannesburg. (n.d.). *Employee Wellness Programme*. UJ Human Resources. Retrieved from https://www.uj.ac.za |
| Wits | The Employee Wellness Programme (EWP) offers mental health counselling, financial and legal support and access to wellness resources via a digital platform. | PPI – Focuses on individual well-being through counselling, financial planning and stress management, rather than emphasising relational dynamics. | University of the Witwatersrand. (n.d.). *Health and wellness at Wits*. Retrieved from https://www.wits.ac.za/people/health-and-wellness/ |
| UP | The Employee Well-Being Programme (EWP@UP) provides mental health counselling, crisis support and resilience-building strategies through online and in-person resources. | PPI – Focuses on individual mental well-being, self-care and coping strategies. However, UP's Health & Well-being Programme for students aligns with RSC, as it emphasises peer support, shared meaning-making and relational well-being. | University of Pretoria. (n.d.). *Health & well-being at UP*. Retrieved from https://www.up.ac.za/article/2749577/health-well-being |
| Nelson Mandela University | Wellness@work provides services including a 24-hour helpline, face-to-face and telephonic counselling, and support for personal and work-related concerns. The programme also includes wellness resources and a practitioner for on-site counselling. | PPI – Focuses on individual well-being, resilience-building, and personal growth through counselling and holistic wellness support. | Nelson Mandela University. (n.d.). *Wellness@work*. Retrieved from https://www.mandela.ac.za/Wellness-at-work |
| UFH | The Health & Wellness programme offers preventative, promotive, curative and rehabilitative care for staff and students, along with events, such as the Wellness Fair. | RSC – Focuses on holistic, community-based well-being and fostering supportive relationships among individuals. | University of Fort Hare. (n.d.). *Health and wellness*. Retrieved from https://www.ufh.ac.za/student/health-wellness |
| TUT | The Directorate of Health and Wellness provides counselling, health education and wellness programmes aimed at promoting staff and student well-being. | PPI – Focuses on improving individual well-being through counselling, health education and self-empowerment activities. | Tshwane University of Technology. (n.d.). *Health and wellness*. Retrieved from https://www.facebook.com/TUTHealthandWellness |
| UL | The Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) provides counselling, health risk assessments and wellness days to promote staff well-being. | PPI – Focuses on individual mental and physical well-being, stress management and a balanced lifestyle. | University of Limpopo. (2021, March 31). *UL staff wellness day touted to boost productivity and healthy living*. Retrieved from https://www.ul.ac.za/hrs-staff-wellness-day |
| UNIVEN | The Employee Wellness Programme (EWP) includes health assessments, counselling and stress management services. | PPI – Focuses on promoting individual well-being, resilience and growth. | University of Venda. (n.d.). *Employee wellness*. Retrieved from https://www.univen.ac.za/hr/employee-wellness/ |
| UKZN | The Employee Wellness Programme (EWP) provides counselling, health promotion and stress management programmes. | PPI – Promotes mental health, stress management and resilience. | University of KwaZulu-Natal. (n.d.). *Employee wellness*. Retrieved from https://hr.ukzn.ac.za/hr-development/employeewellness/ |
| UNISA | The Employee Wellness Programme offers counselling, health screenings, stress management and wellness days. | PPI – Promotes personal well-being, resilience and a healthy work-life balance. | University of South Africa ( 09 September 2020). *UNISA's wellness day takes a holistic approach to well-being*. Retrieved from https://www.unisa.ac.za/sites/myunisa/default/News/Articles/Unisa%E2%80%99s-Wellness-Day-takes-holistic-approach-to-wellbeing |
| Rhodes University | Staff Wellness Programme – A holistic initiative promoting employees' physical, social, emotional, spiritual, financial and intellectual well-being. It includes partnerships with various university departments and provides free consultations and medication for staff not on medical aid. | RSC & PPI – Incorporates both relational and individual approaches by integrating social support structures with well-being initiatives. | Rhodes University. (n.d.). *Staff Wellness Programme*. Retrieved from https://www.ru.ac.za/staff-wellness/ |

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PPI, Positive Psychology Interventions; RSC, Relational Social Constructionism; UP, University of Pretoria; UCT, University of Cape Town; UFS, University of the Free State; UJ, University of Johannesburg; UWC, University of the Western Cape; Wits, University of the Witwatersrand; UFH; University of Fort Hare; TUT, Tshwane University of Technology; UL, University of Limpopo; UNIVEN, University of Venda; UKZN, University of KwaZulu-Natal; UNISA, University of South Africa.

University has implemented leadership development workshops and equity transformation teams aimed at building inclusive cultures. Similarly, the UCT has adopted workload allocation policy reforms to reduce staff strain and promote fairness. Stellenbosch University and the UFS have conducted institutional climate surveys and equity audits to identify systemic barriers to staff well-being and inclusivity. These structural interventions correspond with the JD-R model in that they aim to reduce organisational stressors (e.g. excessive workload, marginalisation) while increasing job resources, such as support, recognition and fairness. However, while such initiatives provide a strong foundation, they do not fully address the relational and cultural dimensions of institutional life that are central to a more integrated understanding of academic wellness.

While the JD-R model provides a helpful framework for addressing burnout and promoting individual resilience, it is often limited in its attention to the relational and systemic issues that underlie deeper institutional challenges.

**TABLE 2:** Integrated overview of wellness programmes implemented across South African universities.

| University | Structural and contextual factors | Relevance to structural and contextual factors | Outermost institutional factors | Relevance to outermost institutional factors |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Rhodes University | Departmental leadership training, internal equity audits, promotion criteria consultations. | Recognises how leadership, equity and performance systems shape well-being. Aligns with RSC's focus on institutional relational ethics and PPI's emphasis on enabling flourishing environments. | Equity and Institutional Culture Office; Institutional Transformation Forum; Staff Wellness Programme. | These initiatives frame staff wellness within transformation, decolonisation and relational justice, enabling a culturally attuned PPI through RSC. Staff are supported as relational beings embedded in post-apartheid structures. |
| UP | Mental Health in Leadership training, diversity transformation task teams. | Targets systemic change in leadership culture and psychological safety. Acknowledges organisational demands and their effect on staff. | Centre for Human Rights; Transformation@UP; Health and Well-being (student and staff units). | Rights-based and transformation-driven structures offer systemic scaffolding for PPIs to integrate with RSC, ensuring wellness programmes account for equity, institutional bias and social connectedness. |
| UCT | Inclusive transformation dialogues, revised workload policies post-FeesMustFall. | Engages directly with institutional culture, justice and recognition, especially through post-colonial critique. | Inclusion and Change Unit; Transformation Services Office; Staff Wellness Programme. | UCT's institutional emphasis on social justice and transformation makes its wellness programmes naturally receptive to RSC-enhanced PPIs that prioritise relational and contextual healing. |
| UFS | Managerial capacity-building on well-being, decolonisation policy workshops. | Brings organisational culture and structural transformation into wellness conversations. | Institutional Transformation Plan (ITP); Anti-Discrimination and Social Justice Office. | These platforms promote equity and social justice, offering the necessary systemic framework for PPI and RSC to co-exist. Wellness is rooted in both personal empowerment and institutional change. |
| UJ | Holistic Faculty Climate Surveys, Equity and Wellness integration in policy review. | Connects climate data to structural reforms in workload and recognition – aims for systemic well-being. | Centre for Social Change; Division for Institutional Planning, Evaluation and Monitoring. | The university's broader equity and societal change focus provides fertile ground for PPIs infused with RSC principles, highlighting systemic influences on individual well-being. |
| UWC | Integrated Human Resources and Wellness Strategy, emphasis on equity. | Institutional view of well-being that links diversity, justice and workload. | Gender Equity Unit; Centre for Humanities Research. | These initiatives address cultural and social injustice, enabling a collective and relational interpretation of well-being, aligning closely with RSC and enriching the impact of PPIs. |
| Wits | Transformation and Employment Equity Office embedded in wellness framework. | Brings structural inequities and justice conversations into the wellness portfolio. | Transformation and Employment Equity Office; Wits Transformation and Employment Equity Plan. | These offer the structure to interpret staff wellness through an intersectional and systemic lens, essential for an RSC framework layered on PPIs. |
| Nelson Mandela University | Strategic Health and Wellness Office under the DVC: People and Operations. | Institutionalises wellness at executive level – framing well-being as a core operational issue. | Transformation Office; Humanising Pedagogy Project. | The university's emphasis on humanising practices and relational ethics positions PPI within a broader cultural and political context, in line with RSC. |
| UFH | Annual Wellness Fair tied to organisational audits, staff recognition projects. | While still emerging, these link wellness to broader workplace structures and recognition cultures. | Institutional Forum on Transformation; Office of Institutional Advancement. | UFH's commitment to inclusive transformation fosters relational resilience and cultural belonging, crucial for RSC-based augmentation of PPIs. |
| TUT | Health and Wellness embedded in HR strategy, inclusive leadership programmes. | Anchors well-being in organisational policies and leadership culture. | Transformation, Equity and Diversity Directorate. | TUT's policies create systemic awareness within wellness structures, opening space for integrated PPIs that are sensitive to race, culture and power dynamics, as championed by RSC. |
| UL | Managerial training and performance management reforms. | Connects stress management with structural workload distribution and support. | Transformation and Gender Office. | This office supports equity and cultural inclusion, setting up a contextual framework for wellness interventions that combine personal (PPI) and relational (RSC) dimensions. |
| UNIVEN | Staff Consultative Forums, formalised grievance mechanisms linked to wellness. | Ties well-being to organisational justice mechanisms and fairness. | Directorate of Transformation and Equity. | Helps contextualise wellness programmes, ensuring they do not isolate individual resilience from broader social and cultural realities – a key RSC concern. |
| UKZN | Leadership Accountability forums, institutional anti-discrimination policies. | Promotes justice, transparency, and psychological safety. Structural grounding of wellness. | Transformation and Equity Office; Centre for Critical Research on Race and Identity. | Promotes institutional culture change, social justice and decolonial thinking, aligning with RSC values and expanding the scope of PPIs to address collective trauma and healing. |
| UNISA | Restructuring of HR to include wellness under the strategy portfolio, a virtual wellness HR portal. | Embeds wellness structurally within HR policy, aligning with systemic PPI-RSC integration. | Institutional Transformation Office; Department of Leadership and Transformation. | Embeds wellness into broader change and equity discourses, ensuring PPI interventions are implemented through a relational and contextual lens (RSC). |

Note: Please see the full reference list of this article, Zwane, N.C. (2025). An integrated framework for academic staff well-being: Positive and relational lenses. *SA Journal of Human Resource Management/SA Tydskrif vir Menslikehulpbronbestuur, 23*(0), a3032. https://doi.org/10.4102/sajhrm.v23i0.3032, for more information.

DVC, Deputy Vice-Chancellor; PPI, Positive Psychology Interventions; RSC, Relational Social Constructionism; HR, Human Resource; UP, University of Pretoria; UCT, University of Cape Town; UFS, University of the Free State; UJ, University of Johannesburg; UWC, University of the Western Cape; Wits, University of the Witwatersrand; UFH; University of Fort Hare; TUT, Tshwane University of Technology; UL, University of Limpopo; UNIVEN, University of Venda; UKZN, University of KwaZulu-Natal; UNISA, University of South Africa.

In addition to these structural reforms, Table 2 also highlights broader institutional wellness programmes that address cultural, relational and systemic aspects of well-being. For instance, the University of Pretoria has established a Transformation Office and implemented inclusive wellness strategies that respond to staff diversity and cultural context. The University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) and North-West University (NWU) have institutionalised Staff Wellness Units and Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs) that integrate mental health, work-life balance and organisational support services. These initiatives are indicative of a social-ecological understanding of wellness, wherein academic staff well-being is seen as emerging from dynamic interactions between individual, interpersonal, institutional and societal

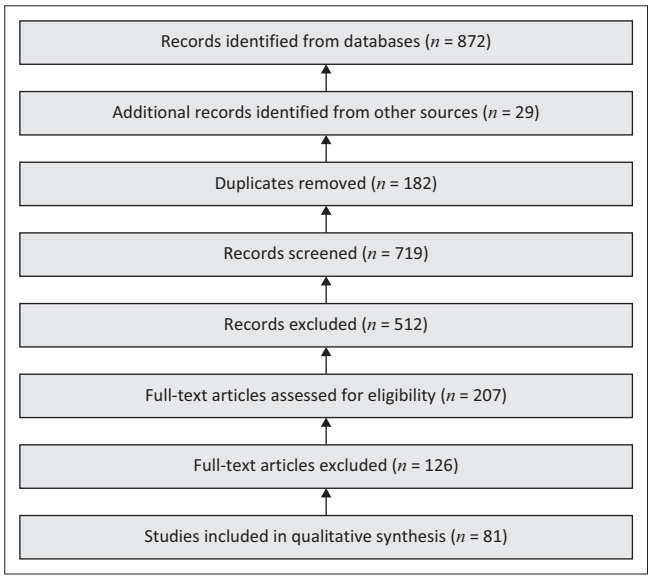


**FIGURE 1:** Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses diagram.

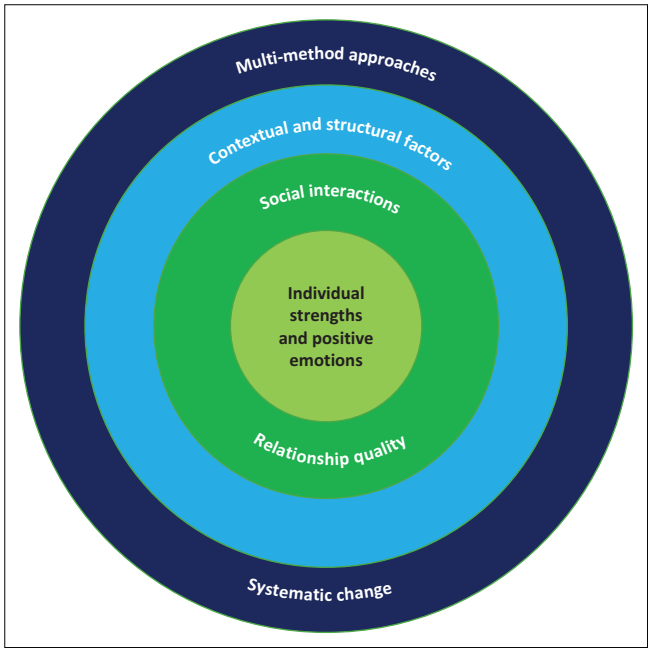


**FIGURE 2:** Proposed integrated well-being framework.

domains. Efforts that embed transformation, decolonisation and social justice within wellness programmes – such as those at Stellenbosch University and Walter Sisulu University – reflect a growing alignment with RSC perspectives. These approaches move beyond the individual focus typical of conventional wellness models, emphasising instead the importance of context, power and meaning-making in shaping academic experiences.

In parallel, many institutions integrate concepts from Positive Psychology – particularly the PERMA model and the Flourishing at Work framework – by cultivating environments that promote positive emotions, engagement, meaning, accomplishment and supportive relationships. However, when these positive psychology elements are implemented without attention to relational and institutional realities, they risk reinforcing an overly individualistic approach. The integration of RSC perspectives addresses this by reframing wellness not merely as a psychological state to be achieved, but as a dynamic process shaped by social, cultural and institutional interactions.

The initiatives summarised in the table exemplify how wellness programmes in higher education can benefit from integrating the strengths of both Positive Psychology and Relational Social Constructionist approaches. Leadership development, policy reform and equity-focused structures create the necessary organisational conditions, while culturally embedded wellness strategies support personal growth and collective transformation. In this way, wellness is reimagined as both a personal and institutional goal – one that requires ongoing attention to systemic equity, relational dynamics and shared responsibility.

Ultimately, the review demonstrates that sustainable academic staff wellness depends on multi-level, context-sensitive interventions. Programmes that respect individual psychological strengths while engaging with institutional culture, power and history are more likely to foster meaningful, equitable and lasting well-being in the academic context.

## Using positive psychology interventions or relational social constructionism alone versus an integrated approach

In addition to Table 2, the literature highlights the limitations of using either PPI or RSC in isolation while suggesting that their integration offers a more comprehensive approach to well-being. Studies indicate that while PPIs improve well-being and reduce depressive symptoms (Bolier et al., 2013), critics suggest that an exclusive focus on positivity may neglect the complex interplay of emotions and contexts (Lomas & Ivtzan, 2016). Held (2002) described this limitation as a 'tyranny of the positive attitude', where negative emotions are pathologised and deeper relational issues overlooked. Similarly, Lomas et al. (2015), writing in Frontiers in Psychology, caution that many PPI frameworks inadvertently marginalise socio-cultural influences and systemic constraints, thus risking an individualistic and decontextualised model of well-being.

Relational social constructionism-based approaches, such as Relational-Cultural Therapy, emphasise interpersonal relationships as central to well-being (Jordan, 2018). While this focus on social dynamics fosters mutual growth and support, it may overlook individual psychological factors such as cognitive patterns and personal resilience, which are essential for mental health (Jordan, 2018). Without integrating PPI's individual-focused strategies, RSC alone may fail to address key personal coping mechanisms (Levine et al., 2024).

An integrated approach combining PPI and RSC could address these limitations by balancing individual strengths

with relational dynamics. While PPI enhances personal resilience and positive emotions (Carr et al., 2021), RSC complements this by embedding well-being within meaningful social interactions and support systems (Jordan, 2018). This synergy provides a more holistic framework that fosters both personal and interpersonal well-being, ultimately leading to more sustainable wellness interventions (Parker et al., 2024). The evidence suggests that PPI and RSC, when used separately, each have significant limitations. However, integrating them can enhance both individual psychological resilience and relational well-being, resulting in a more effective and balanced approach to wellness programmes (Parker et al., 2024).

# Discussion

The results reveal that South African universities predominantly apply PPI and RSC approaches in isolation. Positive Psychology Interventions-based wellness programmes tend to emphasise individual development, mental health and resilience, framing well-being largely as a personal responsibility. In contrast, institutions adopting RSC-informed practices highlight the importance of relational, cultural and systemic factors in shaping staff well-being. However, the integration of these two paradigms remains limited. The review demonstrates that combining the strengths of both PPI and RSC perspectives offers a more comprehensive and contextually grounded framework – one that addresses the limitations of each approach by uniting psychological, relational and structural dimensions of academic wellness. This integrated model promotes both personal flourishing and collective transformation within higher education institutions.

This study proposes an Integrated Well-Being Framework that synthesises the strengths of PPIs and RSC, creating a multi-level approach to enhance academic staff well-being. This framework highlights the interaction between individual, relational and systemic factors, offering a holistic model that addresses both personal and collective well-being. By aligning strategies targeting individual strengths with those focusing on relational and structural dimensions, the framework promotes an inclusive, thriving academic environment.

Lastly, within the South African context, higher education institutions are increasingly relying on HR divisions to respond to staff burnout, retention concerns and transformation goals. This manuscript aligns with these trends and provides evidence-based insights that HR professionals in the public sector and academic settings can use to inform strategic planning.

## Framework overview

The study proposes an integrated well-being framework, illustrated in Figure 2, which places individual strengths at its core and progressively expands outward to encompass relational, contextual, and systemic forces shaping academic staff well-being.

### Inner circle: Individual strengths and positive emotions (positive psychology interventions focus)

The innermost layer reflects individual psychological capacities that promote well-being, rooted in the positive psychology tradition. Wellness programmes targeting this layer typically include mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), resilience training, self-care workshops and strengths-based coaching. These interventions aimed to enhance attributes, such as optimism, self-efficacy, emotional regulation and goal clarity, often aligned with the PERMA model (Seligman, 2011) and the Flourishing at Work framework (Keyes, 2002). For example, several studies reported improvements in staff morale and emotional well-being following participation in gratitude journaling or mindfulness exercises (Romano et al., 2025). These findings underscore the role of individual agency in cultivating well-being, while acknowledging that such psychological resources are nested within broader relational and institutional systems.

### Second layer: Social interactions and relational quality (relational social constructionism focus)

This layer focuses on relational dynamics within the academic workplace and reflects both Positive Psychology (via the 'Relationships' pillar in PERMA) and RSC. Wellness programmes engaging this domain included peer mentoring initiatives, communities of practice, collegial coaching circles and social support groups. These interventions fostered trust, belonging and reciprocal support, especially critical in isolating work environments. Evidence from the review indicated that relational interventions, such as fostering social support and satisfying employees' need for relatedness, not only buffered stress but also cultivated a sense of identity affirmation and workplace cohesion (Van den Broeck et al., 2010). Within the JD-R model, these relational supports acted as job resources that mitigated emotional exhaustion. The review also highlighted relational gaps: several programmes were overly individualistic, overlooking the importance of co-constructed well-being. The inclusion of this layer in the model addresses that gap.

### Third layer: Contextual and structural factors

The third layer addresses how wellness programmes responded (or failed to respond) to the structural realities of academic institutions. This includes leadership practices, workload management, career progression policies and organisational justice. The review identified a growing shift from narrowly focused individual well-being interventions towards more systemic efforts, such as leadership development for department heads, workload redistribution pilots or policies promoting psychological safety and diversity. However, many programmes remained fragmented or tokenistic, failing to address the root causes of staff distress, such as overwork or lack of recognition. The framework incorporates this institutional layer to acknowledge how job demands and resources, as conceptualised in the JD-R model,

are shaped by organisational culture. It also draws from social-ecological thinking, which positions institutions as key mediators of well-being.

#### Outer layer: Multi-method approaches and systemic change

The outermost layer situates academic staff well-being within broader socio-political and cultural forces. The review found few wellness programmes that explicitly addressed this level, pointing to a significant conceptual and practical gap. Nonetheless, some programmes did attempt to resist or critique dominant neoliberal discourses (e.g. performativity, productivity metrics, academic capitalism) by advocating for social justice, epistemic diversity or indigenous knowledge inclusion. These examples suggest a move towards relational accountability and systemic advocacy as a form of wellness intervention. Grounded in RSC and ecological theory, this layer calls for wellness programmes to evolve from isolated efforts to broader cultural change strategies, challenging deficit-focused models and reimagining what it means to thrive within higher education.

## Integrated framework for enhancing academic staff well-being

Positive psychology interventions have been shown to improve psychological resilience and job satisfaction by promoting personal strengths, enhancing self-regulation and helping individuals manage stress (Bolier et al., 2013). Positive Psychology Interventions, however, might not be able to address more profound systemic and social dynamics in academic settings if they are utilised in isolation from relational and contextual influences.

The JD-R model emphasises that while individual resources are crucial, social support serves as a key job resource that buffers work-related stress and fosters belonging, engagement and well-being across diverse work settings (Naidoo-Chetty & Du Plessis, 2021). Furthermore, studies conducted on academic staff members attest to the importance of job resources in influencing well-being and reducing burnout, such as cooperation, collegiality and organisational support (Naidoo-Chetty & Du Plessis, 2021).

Consequently, an integrated, multi-level framework, combining PPIs with relational and systemic resources, provides a more comprehensive approach to academic staff well-being (Christensen et al., 2021). It balances individual growth with relational connectedness and contextual support, aligning with evidence-based models such as JD-R and Conservation of Resources theory.

## Strengths and limitations of the framework

The framework offers several strengths that make it a comprehensive and holistic approach to enhancing well-being. It integrates individual, relational and systemic dimensions, ensuring that all factors influencing well-being are addressed. The layered structure of the framework allows for tailored interventions depending on departmental needs, which enhances its applicability across diverse academic settings. Additionally, it promotes inclusivity and equity by addressing cultural sensitivity and structural inequalities, ensuring that well-being strategies are fair and inclusive.

However, the framework also faces certain limitations. One of the main challenges is its complex implementation, as balancing individual, relational and systemic elements can be difficult, particularly in institutions with limited resources. There may also be resistance to change from institutional leadership or entrenched policies, which could hinder efforts to implement systemic changes. Furthermore, measuring the impact of relational and contextual factors can be more nuanced and challenging compared to measuring individual strengths, requiring sophisticated assessment tools.

The Integrated Well-Being Framework combines the strengths of PPIs and RSC, addressing the limitations of traditional well-being models by incorporating relational and systemic perspectives. This multilayered, holistic approach provides a comprehensive strategy for enhancing the well-being of academic staff, ensuring both individual flourishing and the creation of a supportive, inclusive academic environment.

## Synthesis of findings

Integrating PPI and RSC provides a more holistic approach to academic staff well-being. While PPI emphasises individual strengths, resilience and self-empowerment, RSC highlights the importance of relational and social contexts in shaping well-being (Gergen, 2009; Wachtel, 2014). The predominant focus of South African universities on PPI aligns with the emphasis on individual well-being, as seen in wellness programmes that promote counselling, stress management and resilience-building. However, the integration of RSC offers a complementary perspective by addressing the social and institutional dynamics that influence well-being. This combined approach acknowledges both personal agency and the collective structures that shape individual experiences, thereby creating more inclusive and context-sensitive interventions.

## Complementary strengths: Integrating positive psychology interventions and relational social constructionism

One of the limitations of PPI, as noticed by Lopez et al. (2002), is its narrow focus on individual strengths and universal principles of well-being, often overlooking the influence of cultural and societal factors. In a multicultural context, PPI may neglect how social, cultural and environmental forces shape identity, goals and happiness (Chin, 1993). Chin (1993) critiques individualistic psychological models for their limited applicability to culturally diverse populations. Chin (1993) emphasises that social, cultural and environmental forces fundamentally shape identity, goals and well-being, and that interventions such as many PPI risk overlooking these contextual influences. In order to fully capture the complexity of

well-being in multicultural contexts, Chin (1993) promotes a 'psychology of difference' that emphasises relational dynamics and cultural diversity. This viewpoint emphasises how PPIs might not adequately address important socio-cultural aspects in various populations. By contrast, RSC emphasises the co-construction of meaning and identity within social and relational contexts, offering a more inclusive understanding of well-being (Gergen, 2009; Wachtel, 2014). Integrating RSC into PPI allows for an expanded focus that not only nurtures individual strengths but also acknowledges the social dynamics that shape personal experiences of well-being.

Moreover, while PPI tends to emphasise positive emotions and individual traits, often at the expense of negative emotions, RSC suggests that both positive and negative emotions play a vital role in growth and adaptation (Fredrickson, 2013). By merging these two approaches, well-being frameworks become more balanced, recognising that emotional experiences are dynamic and culturally situated.

Positive psychological interventions also tend to overlook structural and relational factors, focusing primarily on individual agency while neglecting broader societal influences, such as inequality (Saleebey, 2006). Relational social constructionism addresses this gap by emphasising the co-construction of meaning within social contexts, fostering a holistic perspective that incorporates collective factors (Gergen, 2015). However, RSC's emphasis on relational dynamics may sometimes underplay the individual's agency. By integrating PPI's focus on strengths with RSC's contextual depth, interventions can balance personal development with structural awareness, ensuring a comprehensive approach to well-being in academic settings.

### Theoretical implications

This review contributes to organisational psychology theory by demonstrating how the integration of PPI and RSC enhances the understanding of well-being in academic institutions. While PPI aligns with traditional psychological models of well-being that focus on internal traits and resilience, RSC shifts the focus towards relational and institutional influences. By bridging these perspectives, organisational psychology can develop more nuanced frameworks that account for both individual strengths and the broader socio-cultural environment.

### Practical implications

For universities, policymakers, and HR departments, the integration of PPI and RSC suggests several key recommendations:

- Developing relational well-being initiatives: Universities should complement existing PPI-based programmes with interventions that foster community engagement, peer support and institutional collaboration.
- Addressing structural challenges: Well-being programmes must consider systemic factors, such as workload, career progression and institutional support, rather than focusing solely on individual resilience.
- Cultural responsiveness: Policies should recognise the diverse experiences of academic staff by incorporating culturally inclusive well-being strategies that acknowledge social and relational dynamics.

### Limitations, future research directions & practice recommendations

Despite its contributions, this review has several limitations. Much of the literature examined focuses predominantly on Western conceptualisations of well-being, underscoring the need for future research that explores PPIs and RSC in diverse cultural and institutional contexts. Furthermore, the reliance on cross-sectional studies in the field restricts insight into the long-term impact of interventions, highlighting the necessity for longitudinal designs. There is also a gap in experimental validation of integrated PPI-RSC interventions, which limits our understanding of their practical effectiveness in academic settings. Future research should explore how individual and relational well-being interact across different cultural and organisational landscapes and consider using mixed-method approaches to evaluate well-being interventions comprehensively.

In terms of practical application, academic institutions should adopt a holistic well-being strategy incorporating individual and relational dimensions. Positive Psychology Interventions have been shown to improve stress management, resilience and job satisfaction; however, focusing solely on personal development may overlook the more significant institutional and relational elements that impact well-being. By encouraging cooperation, mentoring and encouraging social interactions, RSC-based practices can help close this gap. This dual emphasis can foster cohesive academic environments that support personal and collective thriving. Moreover, culturally sensitive approaches are essential to ensure inclusivity, equity and relevance for staff from varied backgrounds.

Institutions are urged to adopt integrated well-being frameworks that match personal development objectives with relational quality. Tailored interventions, such as enhancing communication in low-morale departments or mentoring early-career development, should be supported by systemic changes, including flexible work policies and leadership training. Leadership plays a crucial role in this transformation by modelling supportive behaviours and championing well-being initiatives. Finally, evaluating these interventions through regular surveys, interviews and focus groups will help ensure their ongoing relevance and effectiveness. By combining the strengths of both PPIs and RSC, academic institutions can create sustainable, context-sensitive strategies that promote long-term staff well-being and resilience.

## Conclusion

This study explores the strengths and limitations of PPI and RSC in addressing academic staff well-being. Positive

Psychology Interventions are effective in fostering resilience, self-empowerment and personal growth, but often overlook the broader social and cultural factors shaping well-being. In contrast, RSC emphasises relational and contextual influences, but may underplay the role of individual agency. Integrating PPI and RSC offers a more holistic approach to well-being, combining the focus on individual strengths with relational dynamics to design more comprehensive well-being strategies. This integration ensures academic staff develop personal coping mechanisms while benefiting from supportive institutional environments that consider relationships, organisational culture and societal structures. A blended approach enhances psychological well-being, fosters a sense of community and addresses systemic challenges within academic institutions.

The integration of PPI and RSC promotes both personal and collective well-being, merging individual-focused strategies with relational and systemic approaches. This balanced model nurtures personal strengths within a supportive social context while addressing broader systemic issues that impact well-being. Such an integrated framework not only provides holistic but also sustainable interventions, supporting the flourishing of individuals within their professional environments while fostering an inclusive institutional culture. By embedding these practices within academic institutions, universities can create supportive environments that enhance staff well-being, leading to improved teaching performance, increased motivation and reduced burnout rates. Ultimately, the application of PPIs in universities is crucial for academic staff well-being, contributing to a more positive, productive educational environment.

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The author reported that they received funding from the National Graduate Advancement Programme (NGAP), which may be affected by the research reported in the enclosed publication. The author has disclosed those interests fully and has implemented an approved plan for managing any potential conflicts arising from their involvement. The terms of these funding arrangements have been reviewed and approved by the affiliated University following its policy on objectivity in research.

### Author's contribution

N.C.Z. is the sole author of this research article.

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### Data availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author, N.C.Z. Restrictions apply to the availability of these data, which were used under licence for this study.

### Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and are the product of professional research. They do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency or the publisher. The author is responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

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