

The subjective well-being experiences of mine employees in a South African mining organisation

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Orientation: The focus on the subjective well-being of employees has been identified as a general motivator and driver of productivity in the workplace.

Research purpose: The purpose of this study was to explore, using a hermeneutic phenomenological perspective, the subjective well-being experiences of mine employees in a South African mining organisation.

Motivation for the study: The motivation of the study was to offer valuable insights to industrial and organisational psychologists, human resource practitioners and well-being practitioners regarding the subjective well-being experiences and dynamics affecting mining employees. Specifically, plant operators have faced challenges because of economic turbulence, increased market pressures, globalisation and rapid technological advancements in the mining industry.

Research approach/design and method: A qualitative exploratory case study approach was used in this study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore the subjective well-being experiences of the participants. A purposive sample of nine plant operators (mining employees) who met the inclusion criteria was selected. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data.

Main findings: Five themes were predetermined and identified from the data analysed, as directed by the PERMA model: display of emotions, level of engagement, texture of relationships, meaning and value of work and accomplishment dynamics.

Practical/managerial implications: The study holds significant importance for well-being professionals, including industrial and organisational psychologists and human resource practitioners.

Contribution/value-add: It contributes to new knowledge that can be used to create a positive work environment where individuals, teams and organisations thrive.

Keywords: subjective well-being; employee well-being; work engagement; quality of life; mining organisation; plant operator.

‘A healthy outside starts from the inside – all of what is inside.’

Robert Ulrich

Introduction

There is a plethora of research that has examined the criticality and direct impact of employee well-being on work outcomes (e.g., Bayhan et al., 2020; Kundi et al., 2021; Turban & Yan, 2016; Ogbonnaya & Messersmith, 2019; Ray & Pana-Cryan, 2021). However, what remains less understood is how employees working hundreds of kilometres underground in a South African mining organisation experience and manage their subjective well-being. This study explored the nature and importance of the subjective well-being of mine employees with a particular focus on plant operators in a South African mining organisation. The study analysed factors influencing employees' subjective well-being in the workplace and considered how these insights can improve their daily work experiences. By extending the scope of the existing literature, this study sheds light on various aspects of the subjective well-being of employees, particularly in a mining organisation. According to Diener (1984), subjective well-being encompasses factors that contribute to employees' overall life satisfaction, including their feelings about work and personal experience.

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Subjective well-being plays a crucial role in workplace motivation. By promoting a conducive work environment for employees, it contributes to an organisation's success (Mahadea & Ramroop, 2015; Odirile et al., 2009). Additionally, it can help boost an individual's engagement and feelings of value (Elsamani et al., 2023; Jackson & Fransman, 2018). Organisations should prioritise employee well-being by ensuring that their workers are well equipped to meet the physical and psychological needs of today's fast-paced work environment.

Owing to the global increase in volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA), organisations are increasingly concerned about employee well-being (Coetzee, 2018; Lundqvist et al., 2022). These authors argue that well-being is directly linked to both individual and organisational well-being. They contend that in the presence of volatility, organisational uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity because of an increasingly volatile external environment, individuals and organisations find it difficult to operate. These VUCA characteristics essentially undermine confidence and stability, the capacity to predict and plan and create individual and organisational anxieties (Mahadea & Ramroop, 2015; Odirile et al., 2009). Despite these challenges, the workplace remains a space where individuals can develop their talents and find meaning in life (Van Rensburg, 2019). However, the rapid pace of change in the work environments can disrupt predictability, potentially hindering an organisation's ability to capitalise on growth opportunities (Kumar, 2016; Teetzen et al., 2022). In today's complex, all VUCA landscape organisations must prioritise tools and resources to support employee well-being (Mutizwa, 2019). It is essential to explore subjective well-being dimensions for well-being custodians to cultivate it among employees.

The study has shown that higher levels of subjective well-being positively impact creative problem-solving abilities (Jackson & Fransman, 2018; Lundqvist et al., 2022) and prosocial behaviour among individuals (Kundi et al., 2021; Mahadea & Kaseeram, 2020). Additionally, subjective well-being contributes to increased work engagement in employees. As a result, organisations are increasingly prioritising employee well-being by implementing wellness programmes and strategies aligned with their daily operations (Jackson & Fransman, 2018).

The study aimed to explore the subjective well-being experiences of mine employees at a South African mining organisation. By doing so, the researchers sought to fill the gap in the literature (regarding how employees working deep underground in a South African mining organisation perceive and manage their subjective well-being). Numerous studies have been conducted to explore subjective well-being in different organisational settings; however, fewer have explored the subjective well-being experiences of mining employees in South Africa from a hermeneutic phenomenological perspective. The study also aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the factors influencing employee well-being and identity strategies for improvement. The

research is valuable for industrial and organisational psychologists and human resource management as it contributes to new knowledge that can inform wellness programmes for both national and multinational South African mining organisations.

Research objective

The objective of this study was to explore, using a hermeneutic phenomenological perspective, the subjective well-being experiences of mine employees in a mining organisation in South Africa. This objective was motivated by the desire to offer valuable insights to industrial and organisational psychologists (IOPs) and human resource (HR) practitioners on the subjective well-being (SWB) experiences and dynamics affecting mining employees in an increasingly volatile work context, banned by the fourth industrial revolution.

The mining industry of South Africa

The next section briefly explores the history, importance and challenges of the South African mining industry. This contextualisation is important to locate the relevance of well-being in this dynamic context.

By 1886, mining had become a prominent industry in the country. Since then, South Africa's mining industry has continued to grow, especially after the inauguration of the country's first democratic government in 1994 (Macmillan, 2017). Over the past 30 years, the mining industry has undergone significant changes (Ngcobo et al., 2022). Notably, during the 1980s, South African mining history was shaped by the implementation of industrial relations planning procedures (Economics Department, 1994). Most mine labourers work in deep mines in the gold or platinum sectors. Although there are signs of improvement, the industry still faces challenges in enhancing its image, performance and stability (Government Gazette, 2022; Moraka & Jansen Van Rensburg, 2014).

The mining industry is considered as one of the most vital industries in South Africa (Minerals Council South Africa, 2020). In 2018, it contributed over 7.3% to the nation's gross domestic product (GDP), and its growth is expected to continue. With numerous companies operating in this industry, it generates substantial revenue. According to a 2021 report presented by the Minerals Council, the South African mining industry employed more than 458 954 people and contributed R78.1 billion to the country's tax revenue.

South Africa, known for its abundant natural resources, holds a special place for the mining industry. It ranks among the world's largest producers and exporters of commodities such as gold, chromium and platinum. Notably, approximately 90% of the planet's platinum mineral reserves can be found in South Africa's bushveld region (Kotze & Rossouw, 2017; Ngcobo et al., 2022). These contributions underscore the industry's significance to the nation's socio-economy.

Despite its significance, the mining industry is characterised by its instability, inequality and frequent industrial action. Labour strikes and unrest are commonly observed challenges in this sector (Ngcobo et al., 2022; Nkwadi & Matemane, 2022). Researchers have identified wage disputes among miners as a prevalent issue (Alexander, 2013; Bohlmann et al., 2015; Bolt & Rajak, 2016). Additionally, the impact of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and the fourth industrial revolution on mining employment has been substantial and often adverse (Laing, 2020; MacIntyre, 2021; Malemela, 2021; Mayer, 2024).

The mining industry is currently at a critical juncture, grappling with challenges and global developments associated with the fourth industrial revolution (Beerthuis & De Meijer, 2022; Lane et al., 2015; Mayer, 2024; Ntsoelengoe, 2021). These challenges have led to a decline in the industry's contribution to the country's GDP, employment and foreign investment. It is evident from the discussion that the nature, history and dynamics of the South African mining industry would have a negative impact on the well-being of mining employees. The context, which has been detailed above, indicates that the nature, history and dynamics of the mining industry have always been characterised by turbulence, inequality, tension between employer and employee, unsafe working conditions, the perception of basic human rights abuses and intermittent reports of industrial unrest. It is therefore highly likely that employees' sense of well-being would be adversely impacted by these dynamics.

Subjective well-being of employees

The gap in the literature which this study seeks to address is the limited studies on employee subjective well-being in the South African mining industry. International studies in different settings are presented and discussed below to highlight the nature, importance and salient findings of these studies in relation to employee well-being. Studies by several authors, including Nima et al. (2020), Stansfeld et al. (2013), Harry and Gallie (2019), Warr and Nielsen (2018) and Krekel et al. (2019), are presented below.

Subjective well-being encompasses various components of an individual's life, including affective balance and judgements of life satisfaction (Bryson et al., 2017). An employee has high subjective well-being related to work if (1) the individual is satisfied with her or his job and (2) experiences frequent positive emotions and infrequent negative emotions aligning with the definition by Diener et al. (2018a). Subjective well-being reflects an individual's perception that life is going well (Nima et al., 2020).

Work conditions significantly impact an employee's subjective well-being (Stansfeld et al., 2013). Essentially, subjective well-being refers to an individual's happiness with his or her job. Furthermore, happiness is believed to enhance skill development and talent utilisation. Happy employees tend to be more engaged and focused on their work as well as empathetic to their colleagues (Harry &

Gallie, 2019). Furthermore, a contented employee can positively influence a company by enhancing related resources through favourable behaviour. For example, when an employee makes others feel valued, it encourages them to provide additional support (Krekel et al., 2019).

Subjective well-being encompasses both positive and negative evaluations that individuals make about their lives as well as their emotional reactions to experiences (Bryson et al., 2017). In simple terms, it reflects how individuals perceive their own life satisfaction or feels that their life is going well (Nima et al., 2020). Employee well-being is linked to traits such as optimism, confidence and sociability and encourages goal-oriented behaviour and active engagement in an organisation. Personal experiences of well-being can impact job performance, as employees observe how their moods influence their behaviour (Warr & Nielsen, 2018). Consequently, employees with high levels of subjective well-being are likely to be happy, engaged and productive contributors to the organisation.

Theories of well-being

Several divergent theories seek to explain the phenomenon of well-being (Chang et al., 2019; Fredrickson & Joiner, 2018; Seligman, 2018; Ryff et al., 2021). In this study, theoretical models served as the foundation for analytical frameworks. The study sought to identify factors affecting the overall well-being of mine employees in a mining organisation in South Africa. This study was further underpinned by a theoretical perspective of Frederickson's broaden-and-build theory and Seligman's PERMA theory. These theories were selected because both directly address the well-being experiences of employees. Frederickson's theory highlights the value of experiencing positive emotions in order to broaden and build personal resources to enhance well-being and flourishing (Ching & Chan, 2020; Frederickson, 2001). Seligman theory advances the notion that positive emotions correlate with higher levels of meaning, engagement and accomplishment (Compton & Hoffman, 2019; Seligman, 2019). These theories are briefly discussed below to further address the theoretical underpinnings of the study. By applying theories, primarily those suggested by Fredrickson and Seligman, it was possible to uncover data that could be used to improve the subjective well-being of employees.

Frederickson's broaden-and-build theory

The first theory relevant to this study is Frederickson's broaden-and-build theory (Frederickson, 2001). This theory emphasises the importance of experiencing positive emotions, as they expand a person's momentary imagination in a broader context (Xiang & Yuan, 2021). In addition, Frederickson (2001) asserted that positive emotions contribute to feelings of happiness and enthusiasm for life, prompting individuals to explore new ways to enhance their well-being. Furthermore, Veenhoven (2021) argued that positive feelings are essential components of life fulfilment contributing to overall satisfaction and happiness. The theory involves four steps: (1) experiencing positive

emotion; (2) broadening of thoughts and behaviours; (3) building personal resources; and (4) transforming the self by increasing health, well-being and survival (Ching & Chan, 2020).

According to Fredrickson (1998), people who exercise a wheel of positive emotion are more likely to be sociable, explore new things and enjoy changes. Furthermore, positive emotions can stimulate changes in one's cognitive activity, which can result in more evolved and adaptive thought-action strategies. For the purpose of indicating the challenges faced by mining employees, the theory of broaden-and-build (positive emotion) may motivate employees to think in a broader way of doing and managing themselves while facing these daily dynamic challenges at the mining workplace.

Seligman's PERMA theory

Seligman's well-being theory focuses on the concept of happiness in life (Seligman, 2018). According to his theory, positive emotions are associated with higher levels of accomplishment, meaning and engagement (Goodman et al., 2018). Seligman (2018) introduced the PERMA framework that comprises five core elements of happiness and well-being: Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishments (Farmer & Cotter, 2021; Goodman et al., 2018; Nebrida & Dullas, 2018). It is argued in the literature that when employees experience high levels of positive emotions, engagement, good relations, significant meaning and accomplishment, they will be likely to experience high levels of positive subjective well-being (Butt et al., 2020; Choi et al., 2019; Seligman, 2019).

The PERMA model serves as the foundational theory for this study. It stands out from other well-being theories because of its connection to the concept of eudemonic well-being – the practical application of the model's domains in one's personal life (Farmer & Cotter, 2021). The theory was also selected because the PERMA model helps individuals recognise how a healthy lifestyle contributes to overall well-being (Seligman, 2011). The study of Goodman et al. (2018) supports our selection, as they argued that the PERMA model represents subjective well-being with its component structure suggesting the presence of other elements in an individual. In summary, the PERMA model provides a conceptual framework for understanding the facets of a well-rounded individual (Seligman, 2018), including how to enhance the SWB of mine employees.

It is evident from the literature that certain workplace health promotion and well-being practices enhance SWB in the workplace (Gorgenyi-Hegyey et al., 2021; Sakuraya et al., 2020). The concept of a well-being practice refers to a programme designed to enhance employee adjustment and coping mechanisms (Daniels et al., 2021). Researchers have observed an increasing number of studies supporting the concept of well-being practices (Bevan & Cooper, 2022; Grenville-Cleave, 2021). These findings show that providing

support to workers through these programmes can enhance their efficiency and performance (Molino et al., 2020).

Established organisations commonly employ various well-being strategies and practices to enhance employee well-being. Two critical workplace interventions aimed at promoting lasting healthy behaviours and improving employee well-being used in the workplace are stress management and employee assistance programmes. Stress management interventions, as highlighted by Fourie and Brand (2020), focus on reducing stress and enhancing well-being among individuals in the workplace. These interventions involve identifying stressors or finding ways to mitigate their impact on individuals. On the contrary, employee assistance programmes provide formal support to help individuals address work-related problems (Grobler & Joubert, 2012; Matlhape, 2003; Willemse, 2021). In addition to problem-solving, employees should also consider their overall health in the context of their work. In this study, these interventions are designed to assist mine workers in developing coping skills and reducing stress levels associated with the dynamics of their complex and often hazardous working environment.

Research design

The next section discusses the research approach, the research strategy and the research method selected for the study.

This study was conducted using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach within the qualitative research methodology (Flick, 2020). This approach focused on understanding the lived experiences of individuals (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021; Kafle, 2013), specifically exploring the subjective well-being of mining organisation employees (Tuffour, 2017). The researchers employed a qualitative case study strategy (Creswell & Poth, 2017) to gain an in-depth understanding of well-being experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The findings that address complex phenomena can be potentially applied to similar work environments (Yin, 2018).

Research method

This section covers various aspects of the study. It explains the research setting and provides a description of the entrance, researcher roles, sampling techniques, data collection methods and the scope of the study. It also provides details about the ethical principles followed.

Research setting

The empirical analysis was conducted in the North West province, specifically in a mining organisation located south of Bojanala District Municipality. The mine primarily focuses on chrome extraction. The study used the mine's operation to explore the subjective well-being experiences of its employees in the workplace.

Sampling and participants

In this study, researchers employed purposive sampling that involves using judgement to select participants (Braun &

Clarke, 2023). The inclusion criteria were full-time employees working in the mining organisation for a period of three and more years and willing to share their experiences. Initially, the plan was to conduct 12–15 interviews (Barrett & Twycross, 2018). However, because of the data saturation (the point where no new information emerged to enhance existing themes), only nine participants from the plant operation (specifically the plant operators section) were interviewed (Liu, 2016). Nel and Kotze (2017) defined a plant operator as a worker who is responsible for using various tools and machinery to carry out tasks such as moving equipment, removing soil and creating new structures. Mine workers coincidentally, in the form of plant operators, dominated the sample as these workers are the largest section of mining employment. Table 1 provides details on the characteristics of the participants including one female employee and eight male employees.

Data collection, recording and analysis

With assistance from the Human Resources Department personnel at the mine who acted as gatekeepers for the organisation, the invitation was sent to eligible employees, and those who showed interest in participating contacted the researcher. Individuals expressing interest in the study were selected. These individuals were then provided with cover letters that further explained and described the study's aims, objectives and procedures. Subsequently, interviews were scheduled with volunteers (potential participants) after receiving all consent (Kallio et al., 2016). The interview schedule was prepared based on a literature search. The purpose of the interview questions was to encourage participants to talk about (describe) their personal experiences of well-being, including feelings and emotions related to subjective well-being in the workplace. The primary question was, 'Please tell me what it is like to work as a mine worker/plant operator in this organisation?' Another question was, 'Describe your well-being as a mine worker/plant operator?' By asking targeted questions and seeking clarity, we collected detailed, descriptive and comprehensive information about the subjective well-being phenomenon under investigation. The semi-structured interviews were recorded, and interviews were conducted in Setswana, which is the mother tongue of the participants and the first author. To ensure trustworthiness, Lincoln's and Guba's (1985) methods were used to verify the accuracy of translation data protocols. The recorded interviews were translated from Setswana into English for the purpose of data analysis. A skilled professional

proficient in both English and Setswana, with expertise in culture and translation, assisted with the transcriptions and translations.

The hermeneutic phenomenological approach proposed by Lindseth and Norberg (2004) was used to validate and analyse the data protocols. The analysis involved several steps: naïve reading, structural analysis and comprehensive understanding (Ricoeur, 1981). Firstly, each interview was examined separately. Secondly, we started with naïve reading to grasp the overall content followed by thematic structural analysis. Finally, a comprehensive understanding of each interview was achieved. To construct themes and sub-themes, the hermeneutic circle principle that involves moving back and forth between individual parts of the experience and the entire text was applied. This interactive process enhanced the overall understanding of the texts (Annells, 1996) and facilitated reflexivity and transparency (Meyer & Dykes, 2019).

Quality directives and criteria

The researchers followed the classical qualitative quality criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to ensure trustworthiness in the study, that is, credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. This involved several steps keeping detailed records of the research process, the data coding, labelling and derivation of categories and themes. Participants were informed about the importance of maintaining anonymity to protect their credibility. Continuous data collection was conducted to improve the transferability of data until saturation was reached. Field notes were taken and kept in a reflective journal to supplement the recordings. By incorporating rich verbatim quotes from the participants, credible interpretations were created (Creswell, 2013) which enhanced the rigour and trustworthiness of the study. These authentic quotes were carefully crafted to be easily readable and included specific details from participants' words used in relevant situations. Thus, by adhering to the above, the researchers ensured that the study was robust, thoroughly documented and well informed (Nassaji, 2020).

Ethical considerations

The study received ethical approval from the University of South Africa's Research Ethics Review Committee, with ethical clearance number: Ref. 2021_CEMS_IOP_035.

TABLE 1: Research participants' socio-demographic characteristics.

Research participants	Race	Gender	Age (years)	Language	Occupation	Code
RP 1	African	Male	60	Setswana	Plant operator	RP1/BM/60
RP 2	African	Male	24	Setswana	Plant operator	RP2/BM/24
RP 3	African	Male	39	Setswana	Plant operator	RP3/BM/39
RP 4	African	Male	41	Setswana	Plant operator	RP4/BM/41
RP 5	African	Male	30	Setswana	Plant operator	RP5/BM/30
RP 6	African	Female	52	Setswana	Plant operator	RP6/BF/52
RP 7	African	Male	35	Setswana	Plant operator	RP7/BM/35
RP 8	African	Male	28	Setswana	Plant operator	RP8/BM/28
RP 9	African	Male	32	Setswana	Plant operator	RP9/BM/32

The Human Resources Department of the mining organisation was approached to assist with the process of recruiting and engaging with interested individuals to participate in the study. Interested participants were ultimately provided with a comprehensive information sheet and consent form. Participants signed the informed consent form, explaining the aim and procedures of the study and the benefits, participant rights and the research procedures to be followed. Participants were informed that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any stage, without adverse repercussions. The participants were also encouraged to participate voluntarily. Access to all collected data was restricted to the translator, transcriber, supervisor and primary researcher. The recordings were kept in a folder secured with a password. Confidentiality agreements were signed to protect the anonymity of the participants. Overall, the study adhered to the basic principles related to respect for persons, beneficence, justice and respect for the community (Taquette & Borges da Matta Souza, 2022).

Results

The following section highlights the most important aspects of the data analysis related to the research questions. Drawing primarily from the PERMA model, because of its overlap with Frederickson's model, five themes were pre-determined and identified: (1) display of emotions, (2) level of engagement, (3) texture of relationships, (4) meaning and value of work and (5) accomplishment dynamics. Additionally, the themes include various sub-themes because of the richness of the data. The themes are discussed using the verbatim quotes obtained from the interview transcripts. Table 2 provides an overview of the themes and sub-themes in tabular form.

Theme 1: Display of emotions

The first theme that emerged, relating to the subjective well-being experience of mining operators, is the display of divergent emotions. The participants were asked how they would describe working in the mining industry. From the responses, three distinct sub-themes emerged, which are discussed below.

Sub-theme 1.1: Work creates a means to provide for their family's need's survival

The first sub-theme that emerged, relating to the subjective well-being of mining employees, is that work is a positive experience because it creates the means for them to be able to provide for their families. The narratives show that most participants mentioned that they are satisfied with the support and development they are getting from the mine. When employees feel that work enables them to provide for their families, it has a positive impact on their sense of identity, which in turn could enhance their sense of well-being. One of the participants responded as follows:

'I am able to support and provide my family. I am satisfied here. I enjoy working here.' (RP1/BM/60)

This narrative concurs with the experience shared by RP 4 who mentioned how happy he is at work and grateful for being able to provide for his family:

'I am well and healthy. I am very satisfied with my job. I have no issues; my work provides me with something to put on the table for my family.' (RP4/BM/41)

These narratives indicate that participants are optimistic about the work because it allows them to provide for their families. They noted that working enables them to meet their essential needs. In addition, RP 6, the only female participant, shared the following:

'The lockdown regulation has made our lives difficult as some of the mines have been closed at all, but I can say I have been able to provide for my family and I am very thankful to work here. It has been hard, but I am grateful to put food on the table for my family.' (RP6/BF/52)

Sub-theme 1.2: Work provides growth, leisure and opportunity in the employee's personal life

In a positive sense, the participants were excited about the opportunities for growth and development at the mine. Work does not only provide them with the means to provide for their respective families but also provides them with leisure and growth opportunities. Thus, one's sense of well-being is nurtured when work facilitates personal and professional growth, development and advancement. Some of them shared that they were able to acquire additional

TABLE 2: Research themes and sub-themes.

Themes	Sub-themes
1. Display of emotions	1.1. Work creates a means to provide for their family's need's survival 1.2. Work provides growth, leisure and opportunity in the employee's personal life 1.3. Unhealthy working conditions on the well-being of employees
2. Level of engagement	2.1. Positive appreciation by colleagues 2.2. Quality engagement that creates belonging as employees have a feeling of belonging to work because of the support among one another 2.3. Long working hours with boundaryless tasks which lead to employees experiencing fatigue
3. Texture of relationships	3.1. Relationships characterised by unity and love which are formed by working together and helping one another 3.2. Relationships characterised by knowledge sharing as employees work as a team 3.3. Unresponsive management not addressing employees' concerns
4. Meaning and value of work	4.1. Work has meaning and purpose 4.2. Work creates a sense of security to enable employees to provide for themselves and their families
5. Accomplishment dynamics	5.1. A sense of achievement in employees gaining multiple skills to create more opportunities 5.2. Concerns of being unfairly compensated

skills through development training programmes offered at the mine. One of the participants shared the following:

'I have not worked at any other mine, but I am happy here. I am personally happy when I come to work. I love the experience and exposure we get in addition to the skills certificates we get. We can use that to apply for jobs elsewhere. I still need more experience though.' (RP9/BM/32)

Another participant supported this sentiment:

'The way they are treating us, they provide good valuable experience. Especially when you are fresh from school. When we arrived fresh from school, they gave us a chance to get trained/school led so we could be operators. One of my motivations is being a safety rep. I was recruited a while ago. This motivates me daily to encourage a safe working environment while I work at the plant.' (RP7/BM/35)

One of the participants also mentioned feeling positive about growth and leisure opportunities at work:

'When one learns new things daily, it provides that pleasure of learning and I become optimistic about my work and that brings happiness to myself.' (RP4/BM/41)

Sub-theme 1.3: Unhealthy working conditions on the well-being of employees

Despite the positive emotions associated with work such as growth and leisure opportunities, some participants expressed concern about their health because of the various issues in their daily work environment. These concerns highlight the need to identify alternative approaches by improving work conditions. This sub-theme is particularly relevant to emotions because it is argued that when employees experience unsafe and unhealthy working conditions, their well-being could be undermined, thereby resulting in negative emotions. One participant specifically voiced apprehension for working in unhealthy conditions:

'There is too much dust, especially at the crushers. When the aircon is working, and [personal protective equipment] PPE is adhered to, we are fine. However, when there is no spraying water to eliminate dust, it becomes unhealthy for our well-being.' (RP2/BM/24)

In addition, RP 5 elaborated that:

'I'm not emotionally impacted by the issues at work, I'm well even physically. Apart from issues like an air conditioner that doesn't work sometimes then it becomes a challenge because there is too much dust at the plant.' (RP5/BM/30)

RP 3 supported this sentiment by noting the following:

'My well-being is a concern when it comes to the working environment. It is just the dust that is an issue for me. We have an old man who cannot see, due to the dust he experienced over the years.' (RP3/BM/39)

While some participants reported positive emotions resulting from work experiences, others expressed concerns about their well-being because of various problems encountered at the plant. Overall, the dominant narrative suggests that being at work was generally a positive experience, but issues relating to working conditions could diminish that positivity.

Theme 2: Level of engagement

This theme emerged as participants responded differently to how they relate and engage with one another in this very harsh and challenging context. Three sub-themes supported the main theme, which are presented below.

Sub-theme 2.1: Positive appreciation by colleagues

Some participants expressed mutual appreciation among themselves as employees and acknowledged the support they received from their superiors (supervisors) in the workplace. They experience the workplace as a safe environment. It may be concluded that when employees experience appreciation and feel acknowledged, a higher level of emotional engagement may be experienced. One of the participants shared the following:

'I am happy daily, there are not so many challenges with the support we are providing to one another. Just as the mine was closed before, there are still things that must be improved. We struggle a bit, but the management tries. I appreciate working here, I love this job I do.' (RP3/BM/39)

Another one supported this sentiment:

'I acknowledge that we work in harmony to avoid safety incidents of injury and protect each other. Communication is key, to successfully executing tasks. It is important to communicate before executing a task. If we do that, we will all go home at the end of the day. Harmony is very important. Harmony and communication make the job easier.' (RP1/BM/60)

Sub-theme 2.2: Quality engagement that creates belonging as employees have a feeling of belonging to work because of the support among one another

According to the participants, their sense of belonging, increased participation, a positive work environment and openness in sharing personal issues all contributed to enhanced subjective well-being. Additionally, recognising acts of kindness among colleagues added meaning to their sense of belonging at work. Some participants also highlighted improved employee engagement as a factor that promotes a sense of belonging in the workplace.

RP 8 shared that:

'I appreciate working with my co-workers, I love it. Even how we treat each other makes it easy for me to cope' (RP8/BM/28)

This is also demonstrated by RP 7 who recounts how he is supported and that helps to feel at home at work:

'Being respectful to others makes a big difference in my life at work. It helps me get through each day at work and I feel at home when I am at work, even when I encounter a challenge my co-worker helps me to resolve it.' (RP7/BM/35)

Sub-theme 2.3: Long working hours with boundaryless tasks which lead to employees experiencing fatigue

While participants are engaged in their work, some also feel overworked because of long working hours and boundaryless work. They express the need to use their leave days for

recovery. According to the participants, extended working hours negatively impact their well-being. Specifically, Participant 2 and Participant 7 highlighted fatigue and reduced presence at work as common consequences of these extended hours. One participant shared that:

'Yesterday I had a morning shift just like the past three days. When one rests for only one day maximum. Sometimes I sleep because I'm tired. And those I work with tell supervisors that I am sleeping. There's not enough rest time. We end up taking sick leave to stay at home and rest.' (RP2/BM/24)

RP 7 expressed a similar view, noting that employees who lack sufficient rest experience frustration because of fatigue and decreased physical ability, this can lead to challenges in managing work effectively:

'We work very hard but when we need a day off, we have to struggle. We have allocated leave days but accessing them is a problem. This results in fatigue and ends up with incidents. This is frustrating. Even applying for sick leave is a problem.' (RP7/BM/35)

Theme 3: Texture of relationships

When asked about their typical workday and relationships, participants provided varied responses. Some emphasised the strong unity among colleagues, particularly in terms of mutual assistance. Others described their workplace as a close-knit family, highlighting the sense of camaraderie. Participants responded in different ways, namely: (1) there is a great unity when working together in terms of helping one another and (2) employees feel like a family to one another. Overall, participants showed unity and mutual respect among employees.

Sub-theme 3.1: Relationships characterised by unity and love which are formed by working together and helping one another

Some participants indicated that their relationships with their colleagues are characterised by love and unity. This is evident in the support they receive from other employees. In the presence of care, unity and support, one's psychological safety is nurtured, which may have a positive impact on subjective well-being. One of the participants shared the following:

'The working environment is great. We always crack jokes, and we even miss each other when we aren't at work. Even during COVID times, we are extra careful. We conscientise each other to wear masks and sanitise, it is all done in a good spirit of our well-being and safety and no grudges or squabbles, and we live well.' (RP8/BM/28)

The availability of peer support as a resource is evident as stated by RP 4:

'After being home for days because of flu, when I went back employees told me that they missed me. This is what I love about the work environment, and it's because of the way the employees are always looking out for each other. With COVID, they are even more careful.' (RP4/BM/41)

The participants therefore noted that working together as a team is a contagious bond that can be created by love and unity.

Sub-theme 3.2: Relationships characterised by knowledge sharing as employees work as a team

The participants noted that the positive relationships they experienced were also characterised by the sharing of knowledge. This was also apparent in the way the work environment was made more approachable. This was a very inspiring theme. The authors got the impression that the sub-theme of knowledge-sharing could flow from the presence of care, love and unity in the working environment. This is particularly significant in a conflicting, dangerous and uncertain environment, such as the mining industry. The participants alluded to the notion that a sense of community also fosters selflessness in the form of knowledge-sharing. One of the participants shared the following:

'I have been here since 1979. My manager also likes my work ethic. I wish others could be as experienced as I am. I use my experience to assist my fellow employees as I have been here for a while. I always avail myself to help.' (RP1/BM/60)

RP 2 supports the view of a relationship that is characterised by knowledge-sharing among employees:

'As I am still young, it is encouraging to work with the people who are experienced around and always giving advice and supporting us who are still young, we are using a collective intelligence not only one person's views. Using our brains and ideas is important as well as working as a team, we are united.' (RP2/BM/24)

According to the participants, their daily routines are enhanced by the love and support they receive from their co-workers. Working as a team positively impacts their overall experience. Collaborating and sharing information play an important role in promoting self-directed improvement of well-being.

Sub-theme 3.3: Unresponsive management not addressing employees' concerns

While some participants emphasised unity among staff members, others pointed out a lack of communication between management and the employees when addressing the various issues that employees have. It was evident from this theme that it was one of the major issues that created negativity in the form of the perception of them 'not being taken seriously' by management.

One of the participants observed the following from the communication of management communication:

'When I initially came here, I did tests and had to check my chest. It was declared well but I am now starting to have chest pains. When we take concerns to our supervisors, they don't do anything. They feel we are controlling them and telling them what to do. It's frustrating.' (RP7/BM/35)

Another participant shared the same sentiment:

'The issue of our health is critical for a friendly working environment; this can be fatal. Negative things eventually boil over and affect work when the management is not addressing our concerns. This affects our concentration and leads us to experience anger which is not good. When you hold things in,

you eventually react and retaliate. Next thing one makes faults because your mind got blank, and you were overcome by anger.' (RP5/BM/30)

Theme 4: Meaning and value of work

Based on the data, participants reflected on the impact of working in the mining industry and the struggle to make ends meet. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic further complicated their search for meaning in their experiences. The main theme of meaning and value of work was supported by two sub-themes.

Sub-theme 4.1: Work has meaning and purpose

According to the participants, COVID-19 regulations had a detrimental impact on the workplace, resulting in their search for meaning in their lives. This often resulted in negative encounters. During that time, employees had no choice but to stay home as mandated by the rules. It was clear from participants' COVID experiences to what extent work had become an important and integral part of their lives. One of the participants shared the following:

'I am not just happy to earn my salary at the end of the month. My joy comes from successfully doing our work. We always look forward to work. We discuss the daily objectives, and God willing this will continue.' (RP4/BM/41)

It was interesting to hear RP6, the female employee, mention that:

'... being at work is better than being home, because we were required to stay home during the lockdown, and I was desperately waiting to come back to work.' (RP6/BF/52)

Sub-theme 4.2: Work creates a sense of security to enable employees to provide for themselves and their families

Participants also expressed that achieving their goals and producing the desired outcomes make them feel better. One of the participants emphasised this:

'We must see progress in our poor lives, have homes, afford medical aid, and experience the good life. Even if I talk, I really don't have much of a choice since we are in survival mode. There may be expectations, but one needs to be realistic till things get better.' (RP6/BF/52)

Another participant alluded to how work creates a sense of security:

'Working in the mine provides me with fulfilment, I am able to see progress in my life, have a home, and afford to support my family and experience the good life.' (PR3/BM/39)

Theme 5: Accomplishment dynamics

Participants were asked about factors that facilitate coping with their work at the mine. A substantial portion of the data highlighted that mining managers provide support to employees through various means, such as providing training and development programmes aimed at enhancing the necessary skills for their work.

Sub-theme 5.1: A sense of achievement in employees gaining multiple skills to create more opportunities

The participants appreciate the work environment, given the significant development and learning opportunities available at the mine. These acquired skills open up additional work opportunities including the possibility of working in various sections of the mine.

Participant 2 shared the following:

'The important thing is doing what you need to do. What I am happy about, mainly, is the skills development programmes. They aren't many and they are insufficient, but there are training opportunities.' (RP2/BM/24)

Another participant expressed the same feeling:

'I am happy with my job; I just wish the plant would grow so we can grow and be promoted to supervisor.' (RP4/BM/41)

According to the narratives of the participants, the possibility of achieving goals plays a crucial role in enhancing their sense of accomplishment. They view it as an avenue for personal improvement and development.

Sub-theme 5.2: Concerns of being unfairly compensated

While most participants acknowledged a sense of achievement, some felt that they are underpaid for the work they do. This underpayment affects their ability to afford a lifestyle they aspire to. One participant explained that employees experience high levels of stress because of various reasons, including financial strain:

'Firstly, one must enjoy one's work, secondly don't overwork yourself, avoid fatigue and thirdly your earnings must correspond with your work. If not, this results in stress which is a factor in these issues. Then you end up grumpy at work. We must see progress in our lives, have homes, and cars, afford vacations and experience a good life.' (RP5/BM/30)

Another participant shared the same sentiment:

'Money is critical, the food we eat depends on how well we earn. Affordability is a critical factor. We are in rural places and our food choices are limited; we need to be paid very well.' (RP6/BF/52)

The general perception of the participants is that mine workers seem displeased with their remuneration, but they are still happy to work in the mine.

Discussion

The objective of the study was to explore and describe, using a hermeneutic phenomenological perspective, the subjective well-being of mine employees in a South African mining organisation. Using the PERMA model (Seligman, 2018), which emphasises positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, accomplishments and subjective well-being, the findings revealed that employees' subjective well-being is multifaceted. These insights offer potential opportunities for improvement and can enhance well-being

in the workplace. The study identified five themes aligned with the PERMA model: (1) display of emotions, (2) level of engagement, (3) texture of relationships, (4) meaning and value of work, and (5) accomplishment dynamics.

This study supports the core tenets of the PERMA model, which suggest that positive emotions contribute to improved physical and mental health, ultimately enhancing subjective well-being (Akhtar, 2012; Mahadea & Kaseeram, 2020). In addition, positive emotions play a role in building relationships and developing optimism (Ryff, 1989). Schwartz and Sortheix (2018) found that individuals with strong moral values tend to have better subjective experiences. High moral values can increase employee motivation and engagement (Osborne & Hammoud, 2017). Furthermore, this study also highlighted the importance of moral character and team commitment in the workplace. Employees voluntarily engage in actions such as sharing information, supporting and recognising one another, and 'looking out' for one another, based on their positive emotions, as observed by Kun et al. (2017).

Research by Frederickson, Seligman and other researchers indicates that high levels of positive emotions correlate with increased staff satisfaction, affecting both their emotional and cognitive well-being (Butt et al., 2020; Choi et al., 2019; Diener et al., 2020; Harry & Gallie, 2019). Conversely, when employees experience low satisfaction because of the presence of negative emotions, their subjective well-being suffers, impacting their cognitive abilities (Görgens-Ekermans, & Steyn, 2016; Salgado et al., 2019). Participants in this study expressed happiness about working at the plant and various aspects of their roles as plant operators in particular. Thus, emotional positivity plays a crucial role in workplace well-being (De Carvalho et al., 2023; Diener et al., 2018b; Seligman, 2018). Therefore, a higher sense of well-being and resilience could be attributed to a positive mindset.

Employee engagement has become a critical factor in employee well-being (Garg & Singh, 2020; Seligman, 2018). The study indicates that positive appreciation among employees creates a deeper sense of engagement. Therefore, the subjective well-being of employees seems to be closely tied to workplace engagement, particularly in terms of leisure time. Additionally, the study suggests that meaningful work should tap into personal resources, as they contribute to sustained work engagement (Garg & Singh, 2020). These findings align with those of other studies, indicating that employee engagement results in positive workplace outcomes (Knight et al., 2019; Schaufeli, 2018; Wheatley & Bickerton, 2017).

In this study, participants reported that personal engagement with positive experiences promotes feelings of belonging and love. The support they receive from their co-workers positively impacts their well-being. Additionally, the significance of maintaining and promoting the subjective well-being of employees is evident in their 'brotherhood',

which significantly influences their health behaviour (Diener et al., 2017; Kushlev et al., 2020).

The findings of this study indicate that employees who are engaged in their work tend to experience greater happiness (Joo & Lee, 2017). Furthermore, these findings support the notion that engaged and happy employees exhibit higher levels of proactivity and motivation, compared to their less engaged counterparts (Nielsen, 2017). Work-related engagement is also emphasised in research which demonstrates that positive employee-organisation relationships contribute to increased engagement (Barik & Kochar, 2017; Datu & King, 2018; Johnson et al., 2018). Interestingly, contrary to the common perception, study participants noted that the mining organisation generally fosters a positive atmosphere and is accommodating to its staff members.

According to the PERMA model, another crucial factor contributing to the subjective well-being of employees is their relationship with their co-workers. Positive relationships among employees play a vital role in maintaining a favourable work environment. The participants observed that strong relationships with their colleagues facilitate their job performance, particularly during challenging situations, like mining plant shutdown, as experienced during COVID-19. Furthermore, fostering a collaborative setting can enhance subjective well-being and improve relationships among mine workers.

The PERMA model emphasises the concept of meaning, which relates to how individuals perceive their life's purpose and direction (Farmer & Cotter, 2021). Meeting family needs and having job security in the mining industry contribute to a sense of purpose. Previous research supports the idea that people who describe their lives as meaningful tend to experience contentment (Kun et al., 2017). Additionally, a study by Dullas and Acoba (2013) highlights meaning as a crucial component of happiness. Seligman (2002, p. 249) further suggested that a meaningful life involves, 'using one's strengths and virtues in the service of something greater'. The findings indicate that meaning can manifest as a sense of intrinsic worth or purpose that transcends self-interest.

In the context of the PERMA model, the concept of accomplishment represents the pursuit of a productive and meaningful life (Goodman et al., 2018; Wilczyński & Kołoszycz, 2023). Participants in the study highlighted the importance of processing relevant transferable skills for their work responsibilities in the mine plant. They attributed their ability to perform well to the support provided by mine owners. Enhancing employee achievements within the mine plant context is crucial for promoting subjective well-being. The PERMA model positively impacts well-being. Previous research has demonstrated that the accomplishment aspect of the PERMA model impacts subjective well-being by allowing individuals to achieve their goals and aspirations (Farmer & Cotter, 2021).

While the discussion may convey an overall positive impression of the mining organisation, it is essential to acknowledge certain challenges. Unhealthy working conditions, long working hours, boundaryless tasks and perceived management unresponsiveness can undermine employee well-being. However, despite these negatives, employees can still find a sense of belonging in the workplace.

In their conclusion, the authors highlight two intriguing aspects of well-being. Firstly, participants noted that collective intelligence (tapping into the multiple views, opinions and experiences) enhances team performance. Secondly, well-being seems to involve feeling comfortable and open in the presence of different ideas, philosophies and suggestions. Additionally, a collaborative mindset and spontaneous sharing of information contribute to building a self-directed team.

Practical and managerial implications of the study

Limited attention has been directed to the well-being experiences and concerns of workers in the mining sector. The study highlighted the significance of the subjective well-being experiences of mine workers, considering the challenging work conditions of the VUCA setting. Industrial and organisational psychologists, along with other wellness practitioners, play a critical role in advocating for more consistent and resonant well-being support for mine workers in the often-adversarial context of the mining industry.

Managers should prioritise interventions that enhance the subjective well-being of mine workers, helping them adapt to the changes in our VUCA environment. Providing emotional and practical support to manage employee anxieties is a crucial role for managers and supervisors. Additionally, employees must strike a balance between work and family time, and neglecting this balance can negatively impact their well-being and job performance.

Supervisors should enhance their management and work scheduling skills to create a conducive environment for subordinates. This support should also include emotional assistance to enhance the subjective well-being of all employees. Understanding mineworkers' subjective well-being experiences in the workplace is crucial for establishing a well-being culture and designing effective wellness programmes in an industry characterised by turbulence, and sometimes questionable health and safety practices.

Limitations of the study

The study had a couple of limitations. Firstly, it focused exclusively on one specific mining organisation with a relatively small sample of participants. The notion is that a small sample makes generalisation to a larger population difficult. However, this aligns with qualitative research where the size of the sample in order to generalise findings is not critical. The goal, consistent with qualitative research,

was to uncover meaning and understanding related to the phenomenon under discussion. Secondly, there is a scarcity of qualitative studies on the subjective well-being of mining employees. Therefore, the available literature for comparison was limited. Additionally, the study sample was predominantly males, reflecting the reality of the mining industry. To enhance the depth and comprehensiveness of exploring mine workers' subjective well-being, a more diverse sample, potentially including other occupational levels at the mine, would have been beneficial.

Recommendations for future research

While there is a wide variety of literature on the nature of subjective well-being, there remains a need for further research to understand the practical applications of the PERMA model. Additional studies on the effectiveness of customised wellness programmes, such as employee assistance programmes (EAP) in the mining industry, are recommended. Furthermore, conducting an explanatory study and longitudinal and quantitative research within mining organisations would allow for the analysis of the impact of subjective well-being on mine workers. Replicating the study from different psychological paradigms could also yield more meaningful conclusions regarding the construct of subjective well-being.

Conclusion

The study findings revealed the multifaceted nature of mine workers' subjective well-being. While certain elements contribute to well-being, there are also areas for improvement to enhance employees' subjective well-being in the mining industry. Understanding the factors influencing their positive subjective well-being is crucial, as happy individuals tend to be more productive (Calitz et al., 2022). Furthermore, the findings reveal that employee satisfaction is positively influenced by emotions in the workplace. Creating a sense of 'brotherhood' (and, implicitly, 'sisterhood') that fosters a sense of belonging could significantly impact employees' overall subjective well-being.

In this study, positive emotions were associated with a sense of fulfilment at work and linked to positive outcomes. Notably, even simple acts of acknowledging fellow employees can positively impact one's subjective well-being. Active engagement in work fosters connections with co-workers, increases productivity and generates high levels of energy and enthusiasm. Providing the necessary support boosts employee engagement and strengthens relationships, creating a more favourable work environment for subjective well-being. Ultimately, promoting positive employee interactions can have beneficial effects both inside and outside the workplace.

Finally, the study suggests that management's perception of employee concerns can significantly impact employees'

subjective well-being. Therefore, it is crucial for leadership to display empathy and responsiveness when dealing with issues and concerns. Implementing strategies to address ambiguity, confusion and dissatisfaction in the workplace is essential. Leadership should leverage well-being to foster a workplace culture that respects collective intelligence, encourages collaboration and promotes a strong sense of belonging and self-directedness.

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Competing interests

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Authors' contributions

F.S.K. was responsible for the conceptualisation of the study, methodology and data analysis. A.-P.F. also assisted with the conceptualisation of the study, discussion and conclusion and acted as the supervisor of the student.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, F.S.K., upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

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

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