

Work Between the Duality of Stress and Psychological Well-being

العمل بين ثنائية الضغط والرفاه النفسي

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Abstract:

Work represents one of the fundamental axes in human life, as it can be a source of well-being and psychological satisfaction, yet it can also transform into a stressor that negatively impacts mental health and even physical health. This manifests in the duality of "occupational stress and psychological well-being," through the inverse relationship between high job demands and the limited support or control that individuals receive in the work environment. The greater the stress without protective resources—such as social support or decision-making freedom—the higher the likelihood of psychological strain; conversely, enhancing well-being through a flexible and supportive work environment contributes to elevating job satisfaction and improving performance. Therefore, achieving balance between occupational pressures and well-being requirements is essential to ensure a healthy and sustainable work environment.

Keywords: Work; Mental health; Well-being; Stress.

ملخص:

يمثل العمل أحد المحاور الأساسية في حياة الإنسان، إذ يمكن أن يكون مصدراً للرفاه والرضا النفسي، كما يمكن أن يتحول إلى عامل ضاغط يؤثر سلباً على الصحة النفسية وحتى الجسدية، وهذا ما يتجلى في ثنائية "الضغط المهني والرفاه النفسي" وذلك من خلال العلاقة العكسية بين متطلبات العمل المرتفعة

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والدعم أو السيطرة المحدودة التي يحظى بها الفرد في بيئة العمل؛ فكلما زاد الضغط دون توافر موارد الحماية، كالدعم الاجتماعي أو حرية اتخاذ القرار، زادت احتمالية الإصابة بالإجهاد النفسي، بالمقابل، يساهم تعزيز الرفاه من خلال بيئة عمل مرنة وداعمة في رفع مستوى الرضا الوظيفي وتحسين الأداء؛ لذا فإن تحقيق التوازن بين الضغوط المهنية ومتطلبات الرفاه يعدّ ضرورة لضمان بيئة عمل صحية ومستدامة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: العمل؛ الصحة النفسية؛ الرفاه؛ الضغط.

1. Introduction:

In the modern era, professional ambition has become a key factor motivating individuals to work diligently to achieve their personal and career goals. However, if this ambition is not balanced, it can generate psychological pressure that negatively affects personal well-being and quality of life, both professionally and personally. Therefore, achieving a balance between professional ambition and psychological well-being has become a vital issue influencing the quality of work life and mental health.

Work is often regarded as one of the most significant human aspirations, forming an essential part of daily life and contributing to social and economic status. Yet, the role of work goes beyond providing income—it also satisfies psychological needs and promotes self-recognition. Nevertheless, this aim is not always fulfilled. When work does not align with an individual's aspirations or abilities, it may adversely impact mental and physical health. If individuals feel compelled to perform tasks inconsistent with their interests or strengths, work can turn into a source of psychological and occupational stress, leading to harmful effects on their mental well-being. Hence, it is crucial that work harmonizes with a person's vision and capacities so that it remains a source of ambition rather than a burden that undermines health and well-being.

This article investigates ways to achieve a balance between professional ambitions and psychological well-being within the Algerian workplace. It also suggests practical solutions and strategies aimed at creating a work environment more supportive of mental health.

Work is commonly associated with social integration and self-actualization, often seen as an ideal setting for psychological comfort and well-being. Unfortunately, reality sometimes diverges from this ideal, as work is frequently connected with pain and psychological distress rather than comfort and fulfillment.

According to the World Health Organization, mental health is closely linked to psychological well-being, which enables individuals to face life's challenges and be

productive members of society. Mental health is not a fixed condition; it is influenced by dynamic factors since individuals continuously strive to maintain or restore balance when it is disrupted.

Experts agree that mental health depends both on the psychological resources individuals possess and the social context in which they live. Social, economic, and environmental factors play a significant role in contributing to various psychological disorders and forms of distress.

Accordingly, societies, through their development plans, strive to improve living standards to help individuals adapt to and be satisfied with their lives while achieving well-being. This goal is pursued by ensuring access to material necessities such as housing, food, healthcare, and clothing, alongside attention to mental health, education quality, and social connectivity. Societies also aim to assist individuals in meeting their needs and realizing their goals.

Problem Statement:

Common perceptions of work and its significance often reflect both positive and negative dimensions of an individual's life. At times, work is viewed as a source of psychological comfort and equilibrium; at other times, it is perceived as a cause of stress and mental strain. Because these perceptions directly influence an individual's overall health, the effect of work on mental health varies according to personal expectations and interpretations.

These perceptions also shape how individuals experience stress in the workplace. Some mental health disturbances may stem from how people conceptualize the meaning and role of work—whether it is regarded as a duty to be fulfilled or as a preferred choice. Such perspectives can intensify feelings of pressure and contribute to a noticeable decline in psychological well-being. For example, when an individual faces multiple stressors in their professional performance and is asked what work means to them, the response might be either “Work is health” or “Work is a source of stress.” These contrasting views demonstrate how personal perceptions of work can range from positive to negative, depending on its perceived impact on psychological and physical health.

Several studies have explored this topic. Research by George Friedman and his colleagues revealed that individuals' perceptions of work are linked to its meaning and to

role differences in the workplace. Work, in some instances, is viewed as a path to recognition and esteem.

In another study (Tausky, 1969), 11% of French workers reported that work had no viable alternative. Meanwhile, an Algerian study conducted by Mokaddem in 1992 showed that a large proportion of university students (91%) valued work for its positive implications.

A study by M. Bousnina, D. Merabetine, and Ch. Zahi found that employees in telecommunications companies considered work a means of livelihood, with 90% viewing it positively, while only 10% saw it as merely an economic necessity.

Similarly, a French study by Kaplan (1970) indicated that 76% of Canadian workers held a positive view of work, seeing it as a source of psychological well-being, while 20% regarded it as an economic tool. Jonathan Katz's 2018 study suggested that high aspirations may drive individuals to excel at work, but constant pressure can lead to psychological exhaustion and diminished performance.

Another study by Harrison et al. (2019) examined the effects of chronic workplace stress on mental health. It concluded that ongoing stress contributes to reduced creativity and higher rates of depression. (Arzeki, A, 1997)

Despite the value of these global studies, regional challenges remain influential. In Algeria, economic and social pressures exacerbate the difficulty of reconciling ambition with mental well-being. A study by Lamia Bouchoucha (2020) conducted among employees in Algiers found that 45% of workers in both public and private sectors experience chronic work-related stress. Furthermore, 30% indicated that economic challenges increase their anxiety levels, negatively affecting their psychological well-being.

Additionally, a 2021 study by the Algerian Center for Social and Economic Studies reported that over 40% of employees in Algeria suffer from mental fatigue due to job-related pressures. More than half of the participants noted that low salaries and limited promotion opportunities lead to feelings of frustration that undermine their mental quality of life.

A separate study by the National Office of Statistics (2021) revealed that 55% of public sector employees struggle to balance personal and professional life due to long working hours, which increases their sense of fatigue and psychological strain. According to a 2022 report by the Algerian Ministry of Labor, 35% of employees in Algerian institutions face psychological challenges due to workload accumulation and daily stressors, leading to higher rates of depression and anxiety.

Main Research Question: When does work become a source of stress, and when does it serve as a source of psychological well-being?

2. Conceptual Framework of the Study

2.1 Definition of Mental Health

The World Health Organization defines mental health as “a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to contribute to his or her community” (Fertan, H, 2017, p. 93).

Based on this and similar definitions, several indicators can be derived to reflect good mental health, including:

- **Absence of psychological disorders:** No clinical symptoms that negatively impact an individual’s behavior or mental state.
- **Psychological adjustment:** The individual’s ability to adapt and respond flexibly to life’s various stressors.
- **Sense of psychological satisfaction:** A general feeling of comfort and acceptance regarding one’s life circumstances.
- **Self-acceptance and self-realization:** Respecting and valuing oneself while striving to achieve personal potential.
- **Productivity and social contribution:** The ability to work effectively and participate constructively in society.
- **Psychological well-being:** Often equated with happiness and inner peace.

2.2 Occupational Mental Health

In a 1964 meeting, the joint committee of the World Health Organization and the International Labour Organization defined occupational health as the set of activities aimed at promoting and maintaining the highest level of physical, mental, and social well-being among workers in all professions. This includes protecting workers from occupational hazards and environmental conditions in the workplace, as well as ensuring that job tasks are adapted to the workers’ physical, mental, and psychological capacities. It is worth noting that occupational health is not limited to industrial jobs but also encompasses agriculture, commerce, clerical work, administration, and other fields (Khoury, N, 2019).

2.3 Well-being

Seligman (2002) noted that following World War II, scientific focus was largely directed toward mental illness, with a medical vocabulary centered on disorders and diseases. This led to the development of numerous models to explain psychological problems such as stress and burnout. In this context, attention gradually shifted toward the concept of “well-being,” with emerging interest in topics such as happiness, quality of life, and life satisfaction becoming integral to scientific research.

The roots of the well-being concept date back to the 1930s and 1940s, when the role of affect and emotional experience in human relationships was increasingly recognized. Worker performance was found to be closely linked to emotional well-being, such as workplace happiness.

2.4 Occupational Well-being

Occupational well-being refers to a collection of programs, initiatives, and services designed to promote and enhance employees’ mental, physical, and psychological health. These efforts are essential for improving employee behavior, job performance, and productivity, while also boosting motivation and job engagement. These factors collectively contribute to employee happiness, loyalty, and organizational commitment. Occupational well-being can be cultivated by fostering a positive and enjoyable work environment.

Employee happiness is significantly influenced by the nature of their work and the quality of time spent in the workplace. A positive work environment, paired with well-being programs, supports employee efficiency and enhances organizational culture. This, in turn, positively affects the institution’s ability to retain talent, stimulate innovation, and strengthen employees’ sense of fulfillment and harmony within the workplace (Federal Authority for Human Resources, 2017, pp. 5–6).

2.5 The Concept of Stress

Psychologists have offered various definitions of stress, each based on different conceptual frameworks. Some definitions focus on the stimulus that triggers arousal, others on the response elicited by the stimulus, and some incorporate intermediary factors between stimulus and response. According to the Dictionary of Psychology and Psychoanalysis, psychological stress refers to external pressures acting on the individual—either wholly or partially—that generate feelings of tension or cause a disruption in personality integration.

When such stress increases, individuals may lose their equilibrium and adopt new behavioral patterns (Waqad, S, 2017, p. 214).

Selye defined psychological stress as “a state of imbalance in the organism, provoked by a perceived or actual discrepancy between environmental demands and the organism’s capacity to cope. This is expressed through multiple physiological, emotional, and behavioral responses” (Abu Naddah, M, 2015, p. 11).

Lazarus defined psychological stress as “an external force that affects the physiological, psychological, and social systems of the individual. Stress results from the evaluation of threatening situations, and this evaluative process varies from one person to another” (Al-Juwa’i, M, 2017, p. 253).

2.6 Psychological Well-being at Work

Ryff (1999) defined psychological well-being as “a multidimensional construct that reflects individuals’ self-regard and the quality of their lives.” In his well-known framework, Ryff identified seven core dimensions of psychological well-being:

- **Self-Acceptance:** This dimension refers to an individual’s ability to positively accept themselves, including recognizing both strengths and weaknesses, and coping with past experiences without lingering regret or psychological scarring.
- **Autonomy:** This dimension relates to the individual’s ability to make decisions independently, resist social pressures, and maintain control over their personal behavior in interactions with others.
- **Environmental Mastery:** Environmental mastery involves the individual’s capacity to manage and shape their surrounding conditions, effectively handle various life activities, and adapt the environment to suit their needs through personal flexibility.
- **Personal Growth:** This dimension signifies an individual’s ability to develop their personal skills and competencies, increase effectiveness across life domains, and maintain an optimistic outlook for future growth.
- **Purpose in Life:** Purpose in life reflects the individual’s ability to set clear and realistic life goals, maintain a sense of direction, and persist in pursuing these goals with determination and purpose.

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- **Positive Relations with Others:** This dimension indicates an individual's capacity to build meaningful, reciprocal relationships based on mutual affection, empathy, respect, and understanding, with a balance of give-and-take in daily interactions.

2.7 Factors Related to Psychological Well-being at Work

- **Income and Well-being:** Income is one of the key determinants of living standards. It is influenced not only by the material goods a household consumes but also by other factors such as the education level of family members, the number of children who have completed their education, housing type, health status, and the number of working or unemployed household members. Social and economic factors also interact to affect individual and family well-being. For instance, social support plays a role in helping individuals obtain income that ensures a decent quality of life. Additionally, savings and higher personal income contribute positively to family well-being.
- **The Relationship Between Social and Economic Well-being:** Research indicates that social well-being can be closely tied to individual income levels. Social well-being enhances psychological, material, and social stability. As such, higher income is often associated with a more comfortable and prosperous life.
- **Health and Well-being:** Some studies suggest that individuals with positive emotions are less prone to diseases, such as cardiovascular conditions. These positive emotions contribute to an overall sense of well-being. People who experience high levels of psychological well-being are more likely to maintain good physical health, while others may face health issues as a result of psychological stress (chaabani, M, 2016, p. 4).
- **Work and Well-being:** Certain studies indicate that individuals who feel a strong attachment to their profession and possess a genuine desire to work tend to experience higher levels of happiness. When people enjoy their work and recognize its significance and impact on others, it enhances their overall well-being and fosters psychological stability.
- **Quality of Life and Well-being:** Quality of life is shaped by factors such as family size and birth rates. Research shows that children are a source of happiness for many families, and those with children tend to report higher levels of happiness. A greater number of children may also contribute to improved well-being. Family income is also closely linked to quality of life, serving as a key factor in preserving mental and physical health and reducing social

issues such as child delinquency and limited educational opportunities (chaabani, M, 2016, p. 5).

2.7 Work and Distress in Contemporary Organizations

An individual's overall well-being is derived from a variety of life activities, such as family relationships, friendships, recreational and athletic activities, and work—each of which plays a crucial role in shaping one's general state of well-being. This view aligns with objective or bottom-up theories of well-being, which posit that the individual is akin to a "blank slate," directly influenced by their environment. According to this perspective, well-being is considered a cumulative outcome of the positive and negative experiences encountered by the individual.

In contrast, subjective or top-down theories of well-being propose a different logic: the level of self-perceived well-being affects various areas of life. Individuals are not passive recipients of external circumstances—they actively interpret their experiences, choosing either positive or negative interpretations depending on their psychological readiness.

Accordingly, well-being at work is not merely one of the factors influencing general well-being; rather, general well-being serves as a foundational state that enables individuals to experience happiness and satisfaction in their work environment (Achte et al., 2010, p. 31).

It is essential to distinguish between two interconnected but distinct concepts:

- **Personal well-being at work:** This includes aspects such as cleanliness, safety, health, and improvements to working conditions and environments.
- **Employee well-being at work:** This takes into account the specific nature of the tasks and roles performed by the individual, as well as the psychological and social dimensions associated with them.

3. Models and Frameworks of Psychological Well-being at Work

This section focuses specifically on models of psychological well-being in the workplace, rather than general theories of well-being, as these are more directly related to the topic of this study. Below are some of the most prominent models addressing this concept:

3.1 Warr's Model (1987/2009)

Warr posits that the environment—particularly job-related characteristics—directly impacts psychological well-being. He identifies a linear relationship between the work environment and well-being, categorizing work-related features into two main types:

- **External characteristics:** These include salary, physical safety and security, social status, individual perceptions of career trajectory, supervisor support, and fairness in the workplace.
- **Internal characteristics:** These refer to the use of skills and competencies, job control, task variety, physical environment, professional roles, and social relationships.

Warr emphasizes that the absence of these characteristics leads to a decline in well-being. Moreover, an excessive presence of certain external features may also become detrimental, suggesting the need for an “optimal threshold” that must be maintained.

3.2 Danna and Griffin’s Model (1999)

This model asserts that psychological well-being is linked to an individual's satisfaction with their overall life and work experience. It encompasses various dimensions, including satisfaction or dissatisfaction with salary, promotion opportunities, and relationships with colleagues, among others.

The model integrates both psychological stimuli (such as anxiety and frustration) and physiological responses (such as high blood pressure and physical health disorders) (Danna & Griffin, 1999, pp. 369–370).

3.3 Daniels’ Model (2000)

Daniels conceptualizes psychological well-being at work as an emotional state expressed through five interrelated dimensions:

- Depression – Pleasure.
- Anxiety – Effort.
- Fatigue – Vitality.
- Boredom – Enthusiasm.
- Anger – Calmness.

This model provides an emotionally nuanced framework for understanding well-being as a dynamic, affective state within the work environment.

3.4 Cotton and Hart’s Model (2003)

Cotton and Hart's model focuses on well-being at work as a combination of psychological distress, morale, and job satisfaction. It aims to assess organizational health within the workplace using these indicators.

4. Consequences of Diminished Mental Health and Well-being in the Workplace

The decline of mental health within the work environment can lead to a range of negative consequences that affect both the individual and the organization. These consequences manifest at physical, psychological, behavioral, and organizational levels:

4.1 Physical and Emotional Effects

Occupational stress is linked to numerous harmful outcomes on both physical and psychological levels, due to increased pressure from work and daily life. Research indicates that inconsistencies in workplace health and safety practices can create additional risks to employees' well-being (Cartwright & Cooper, 1994).

4.2 Organizational and Behavioral Consequences

Studies have shown that unhealthy work environments may foster unacceptable behaviors, such as retaliation (Bies, Tripp & Kramer, 1997), workplace violence (O'Donovan, 1997), sexual harassment (Martell & Sullivan, 1994), and other disruptive conduct. Additionally, the nature of relationships between subordinates and supervisors significantly influences mental health and work outcomes (Blanchard, p, 1993) (Cooper & Cartwright, 1994) (Hornstein, h, 1996).

4.3 Reduced Job Performance

Research consistently points to a strong correlation between poor mental health and decreased productivity, impaired decision-making, and increased absenteeism (Boyd, 1997) (Karen Danna & Ricky W. Griffin, 1999, p. 358).

4.4 Economic Losses for Organizations

The deterioration of employees' mental health directly impacts an organization's profitability and financial stability. It results in both direct and indirect costs, including insurance claims, compensation expenses, elevated medical costs, and lost workdays (Karasek, R, 1979). Some estimates suggest that stress-related expenses in American organizations exceed \$150 billion annually.

4.5 Individual and Social Repercussions

Stress and psychological pressure can lead to immediate health problems among employees, such as high blood pressure, diabetes, fatigue, anxiety, depression, and lack of concentration. These issues also adversely affect social relationships within the organization, leading to behaviors such as violence, interpersonal conflict, and organizational tension. The cumulative effect impairs employee performance, satisfaction, and productivity, potentially escalating to neglect and frequent absenteeism, ultimately hindering the organization's ability to achieve its objectives.

5. Conclusion

Work is not simply a means to earn income; it is a fundamental part of human life through which individuals seek self-fulfillment and align their ambitions with reality. However, as research indicates, when work is not balanced with psychological well-being, occupational stress can become a heavy burden that adversely impacts both mental and physical health. Occupational stress remains one of the most significant challenges faced by individuals in modern workplaces, demanding a thorough understanding of the factors that affect this delicate balance.

Highlighting the importance of fostering a supportive and balanced work environment shows that employees' psychological well-being depends largely on how the workplace is organized, the presence of stress reduction programs, and the availability of opportunities for both personal and professional development. Addressing employees' psychological needs—through social and professional support—is essential in enabling them to pursue their career goals without compromising their mental health.

Recommendations and Suggestions

- Creating a flexible work environment contributes to reducing stress and increasing job satisfaction.
- Investing in employee mental health is not a luxury but a necessity for ensuring sustainable productivity.
- Organizations should reconsider workplace cultures that glorify exhaustion and equate it with success.
- When employees feel psychologically safe, they are more likely to take initiative and be creative. Work-life balance should not remain a mere slogan; it must be practiced daily and concretely.

- Continuous pressure might produce rapid outcomes, but it ultimately exhausts individuals over time.
- Employee well-being does not mean reducing effort, but rather creating a climate where people work out of passion, not fear.
- Leaders must be attentive to subtle signs of employee fatigue before they escalate into psychological crises.
- Working under pressure should be an exception, not the norm.
- Sometimes, simply feeling appreciated can help an employee handle high workloads with confidence and ease.

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