

# PARADOX OF EMPLOYEE WELL-BEING: THE COEXISTENCE OF HAPPINESS AND UNHAPPINESS IN ACADEMIA

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## Abstract

Employees well-being has always remained a hot topic among diverse streams of literature. Although extant research from different disciplines sheds light on multiple factors causing happiness as well as the potential outcomes of happy workforce, however, despite its well established position, there still remains the gap to explore the question of what makes employees happy and what hinders their happiness, simultaneously. This study builds on paradox theory to unveil the simultaneously experience of positive emotions that is, happiness and negative emotions; unhappiness. To address the gap, we collected the data using open ended questionnaires from 359 academicians working in higher education universities of United Arab Emirates. Data analysis unveiled the paradox of employees well-being by showing that happiness and unhappiness happens together, in a simultaneous manner. Thematic analysis of responses showed that collegiality, job safety and security, person-organization fit, career prospect, and job flexibility made employees happy. Whereas, toxic organizational culture, micro-management, organizational politics as well as lateral violence led them toward feeling unhappy. The study discusses theoretical contribution, and offers practical implications for practitioners. Based on the study's limitations, we bid several future avenues.

**Keywords:** Paradox of well-being, Paradox theory, Happiness at work, Unhappiness, Ill-being, United Arab Emirates

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Owing to prominent significance positive attitudes holds not only for employees but organizations too, happiness at workplace has drawn scholar's attention. Happiness lies among one of the top positive organizational behavior (Seligman, 1999) causing employees well-being (Higgs & Dulewicz, 2014). Working individuals' good amount of time goes at work, hence, happiness at work and workplace holds a significant importance in their lives (Adnan Bataineh, 2019, p. 101). Generally, happiness refers to individuals' perception and evaluation of their lives (Fisher, 2010). Even the national level conferences emphasize prioritizing happiness at work in order to enhance country's competitiveness by providing for and evaluating happiness and facilitating good workplace (Kjerulf, 2017). Because facilitating happiness at work helps in smoother organizational management (Aphaiphak, 2020).

Though the concept has been well established for numerous decades in positive psychology research (Atkinson & Hall, 2011; Veenhoven, 1991). However, positive attitudes has been gaining management researchers attention rather recently (Kolodinsky et al., 2018; H. Lee et al., 2018). The reason behind burgeoning interest in the phenomenon lies in engendering multilevel effective outcomes such as job effectiveness and cooperation (Harrison et al., 2006) learning and teamwork (Fredrickson, 2001) (Lian, 2016) and organizational citizenship behavior (OCB). The certainty that happy workers happen to be more productive (Yang & Hung, 2017) has attracted researcher's attention as being happy yields positive outcomes for both individuals as well as organizations (Sender et al., 2021). Research reinforces that greater job satisfaction, involvement in the job and commitment toward organization makes employee stay at the job with the lesser chances to quit the organization (Holtom et al., 2008).

Researchers highlight that despite HAW burgeoning attention, empirical research addressing the factors causing happiness needs attention (Salas-Vallina et al., 2020). Özdemir (2022) also noted that the research exploring factors causing positive attitudes and work behaviors needs to be conducted. Despite well-grounded importance happiness

holds for both individuals as well as organizations, Sender et al. (2021) noted that even decades of research had been insufficient to summarize a definitive conclusion about the factors making people happy at work.

Pradhan et al. (2022) continued with the same curiosity to identify predictors of happiness at work. He founds that due to changes in work–life balance employees feel unhappy at work. As happiness manifest from positive work experiences (Benevene et al., 2019), accordingly, research declares happy employees healthier who can cope with stress in much better ways (De Stasio et al., 2017). Also, avoiding conflict and stress in an organizational setting motivates employee to work in the best interest of the organization and help it develop and progress in an efficient and effective manner (Oswald et al., 2015). Most of the research focuses on what makes employees happy and what negatively impact their happiness (Warr, 2011) without extensively exploring the simultaneous nature of both the behaviors. This is well grounded in paradox theory which assumes that organizations deal with multiple paradoxes in their daily life (Lewis, 2000).

Despite the growing attention well-being and happiness has drawn, there still exist scarcity of research recognizing the factors affecting causing well-being and ill-being (Salas-Vallina et al., 2020). This makes it imperative to qualitatively explore the reasons ranging from psychological, social and emotional perspectives. Hence, due to established significance a happy workforce necessitates and HAW embodying a comprehensive set of positive attitudes (Fisher, 2010), this study addresses aforementioned lacunas in the literature. Responding to researchers calls (Canboy) (Salas-Vallina et al., 2018; Salas-Vallina & Fernandez, 2017) we aim to holistically understand the paradoxical nature of the phenomenon.

In line with the literature studying positive psychology and well-being of employees, seeking to understand what makes employees and what leads them toward unhappiness, we aim to build on paradox theory (Lewis, 2000) to explore what makes them happy at their work by also adding that what hinders their happiness at work. To do so, this study adopts a qualitative approach to unveil the factors causing happiness and hindering happiness at the same time.

Open ended questionnaire was used to collect the data from 359 professionals working in higher education sector of United Arab Emirates. Open ended questionnaire asked respondents about the potential factors making them happy and unhappy as well. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings unfolded two opposite categories of well-being and ill-being. Thematic analysis of the data showed that employees who enjoy work flexibility and autonomy, job security and organizational stability, collegiality and person-organization fit and have greater career prospect are more likely to experience well-being. At the same time, those who experience toxic organizational culture, filled with organizational politics and micro-management found themselves unhappy from their work as well as organization. The study fundamental contribution lies in exploring the paradox of employees well-being. We found that happiness and unhappiness co-exist and persists. Study also unveils significant determinants of happiness and unhappiness, apart from existing literature.

The study aims to extend the literature on broader well-being and ill-being literature by unfolding its determinants in a simultaneous manner. So doing extends the positive psychology literature to paradox theory and offers fundamental contributions toward the HAW literatures. The study findings extend positive psychology in a novel direction by equally shedding light on the darker side. Our study bids practical implications for practitioners. Grounding in study's limitations, we offer potential avenues for future scholarship.

## **2. Background and theoretical underpinning**

The concept of Positive Psychology emerged and developed in the late 1990s to early 2000s, dates back to Maslow (1954) attempt to understand the quality of life. Happiness, a positive psychological state, tricky to be defined, refers to an “optimal psychological experience and functioning” (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Happiness at work consist of three dimensions; higher pleasure and activation such as engagement, organizational commitment, positive affect (Eisenberger et al., 2020) and job satisfaction (Xanthopoulou et al., 2012). The measure which informs the extent of employees' happiness gauges happiness level by incorporating hedonic such as pleasure and comfort as well as eudemonic such as satisfaction and feelings of fulfillment (Salas-Vallina et al., 2020). Happiness at work, a broader concept, consists of numerous constructs' (Fisher, 2010). Happiness at work measure, consisting of three dimensions, was developed by Salas-Vallina et al. (2018). The versatile measure comprises on passion and excitement, association with the company and job feature (Salas-Vallina et al., 2020). Happiness conceptualization ranges from single to multi levels drawing notable consequences for individuals and organizations (Fisher, 2010).

In psychology literature, the studies relevant to happiness and positive psychology emerged simultaneously with the main focus on unfolding positive experiences, individual traits, as well as positive institutions in order to boost happiness (Seligman, 2002). Undoubtedly, management scholars pays special attention to positive attitudes and behaviors such as job satisfaction, commitment, and happiness (Kolodinsky et al., 2018; H. Lee et al., 2018). Ever since it has been established that happy employees happen to be more productive (Yang & Hung, 2017), the concept

of happiness at work lies among one of the most appreciated positive attitudes imperative for employees as well as organizations' well-being. HAW grabs a greater share of organizational research due to its significance in workers lives (Dejours & Deranty, 2010). The concept has not only remained a topic of discussion in psychology literature, rather it drew attention from a variety of disciplines such as Philosophy, Sociology, Psychology, Biology, and Economics.

Positive attitudes consisting of job satisfaction, happiness and commitment has become management researcher's attention (Kolodinsky et al., 2018; J. Y. Lee et al., 2018). Apart from management researchers, businesses are also increasingly inclined to put efforts to promote employees' happiness and positive work behavior resulting in fruitful outcomes (Smith et al., 2012). This is evidenced in research increasingly gathering data from diverse industries such as self-employed (Benz & Frey, 2004) and education (Chen et al., 2022). Lately, proved interest of both public and private organizations toward individual's happiness at work has been noticed.

The discussion on what makes workers happy is not a novel concept as it dates backs to Adam Smith suggestion that people happily work for salary and their productivity depends on organizing work (Smith, 1776). Gradually researchers acknowledged the significance of considering physical conditions along with emotional, cultural aspects and individual's aspirations (Brannigan & Zwerman, 2001).

Though recently research has been focusing on the determinants of happiness, one recent study unfolded scattered and diverse set of factors ranging from transformational leadership, sufficiency economy philosophy, and OCB (Singh et al., 2023). The Research shows that happiness causes life satisfaction, triggers abundant positive emotions and reduces personal negative states (Kesebir & Diener, 2008).

Based on paradox theory (Lewis, 2000), we suggest the simultaneous co-existence of employees well-being and ill-being. We assume that happiness and unhappiness, both psychological states, coexist in an organizational system. Smith and Lewis (2011, p. 382) defined "paradox as contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time". Paradoxes in organizational system consist of tensions among continuity while also simultaneously stressing on change, managing both the corporate social responsibility (CSR) and financial mission. Organizational leaders experience themselves stuck between two competing elements. For example, whether to explore or exploit, be both flexible as well as efficient, participate in both adaptation as well as alignment (Gupta et al., 2006; Hansen et al., 2019). Traditional approaches suggest to choose between either happiness or unhappiness, where as paradoxical model assumes that in such cases of contradiction between A and B, the fundamental challenge lies in finding ways for both to co-exist (Cameron & Quinn, 1988). Hence, in line with paradox theory assumptions, this study believes in co-existence of both happiness and unhappiness. Moreover, literature also shows that studies simultaneously exploring the determinants of happiness and unhappiness are scarce (Warr, 2011). The scare literature studies the concepts unhappiness in terms of burnout, strain, stress, negative affect and job dissatisfaction (Cartwright & Cooper, 2018). For example, different studies have considered the concept of happiness revolving around the variables such as pleasure, subjective well-being, satisfaction. Whilst unhappiness varies from dissatisfaction, anxiety, strain and depression (Warr, 2011).

To this end, this study adopts a qualitative approach to go beyond existent determinants of unhappiness and asks respondents that what actually makes them unhappy apart from distant concepts to be used to measure unhappiness. Based on Warr (2011) assumption that workplace factors causing happiness may also lead to distress, building on paradox theory, we seek to understand the paradox of employees well-being.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Data collection and participants' details

Data were collected through Dun & Bradstreet, a virtual crowdsourcing platform who compensated potential respondents to complete their surveys. To address the study's research question, we collected data from a convenience sample of academician working in variety United Arab Emirates higher education institutes. The qualitative analysis for this study was based on data extracted from a free-text responses to an open -ended question placed at the end of online survey investigating the factors that affect the employee happiness at the workplace: "What factor(s) do you think are contributing to your happiness/unhappiness at the workplace?".

In this study, we draw on employees' responses to an optional open-ended survey question. Such data are increasingly recognized in HRM and organizational research as a valuable source of qualitative insights (Hahn, Kroehne, and Merk, 2024; McGillivray, Jensen, and Heil, 2020). Open-ended questions allow respondents to articulate their views in their own words, providing authentic perspectives that extend beyond the constraints of closed survey items. Although individual responses are often brief, the large sample size in our study ensures breadth of perspectives, while systematic thematic analysis enhances the rigor and trustworthiness of our findings. This approach is particularly

suited for our exploratory aim, enabling themes to emerge inductively while capturing diverse employee voices across the organization.

Respondents, consisting of all levels of hierarchies, were approached through their organization’s proper permission. The purpose of the study was explained to them and consent was taken with guaranteed anonymity. With regard to respondents’ designation, 39% were lecturers, 23% assistant professors, 18% associate professors and 20% full professors. Among these participants’, 96% were reported as expats and 4% as locals. Final participants consisted of employees working in UAE institutions, hence, 39% from Sharjah, 22% were from Abu Dhabi, 4% from Ajman, 2% from Al Fujairah, 4% from Umm Al-Quwain, 4% from Ras-Al-Khaima and 25% from Dubai. Table 1 lists the demographic details of the study participants.

Open ended questionnaire was utilized to collect the data. Open ended questionnaire as a data collection method helps capture rich data relevant to participants’ experiences. Open ended questionnaire sound more appropriate when the study purpose is to collect the spontaneous responses free from biasness (Reja et al., 2003). All the responses were taken at respondents’ workplace in official rooms and offices to warrant privacy. Prior to data collection, study participants were approached with a consent letter explaining the research purpose.

Study participants were asked a series of questions about how they feel about their job and workplace to get detailed insights. Regarding happiness, respondents were asked that “What factor(s) do you think are contributing to your happiness/unhappiness at the workplace?” All the data collection process was conducted by first author of the study. All the responses were collected in English. In terms of ethical considerations, we took care of all possible ethical considerations involved in a qualitative study. Consent of all the participants were taken and anonymity was guaranteed. The respondents were informed that the data will only be used for study purpose.

### 3.2 Data Analysis

The coding of answers to the open-ended question was done by study authors who have good expertise in qualitative data analysis. To analyze the data, we employed (Braun & Clarke, 2006) thematic Analysis. Thematic analysis process consists of following steps discussed below.

First of all, we transcribed verbatim the responses. After transcription, we familiarized ourselves with the data. Familiarization occurs with reviewing, continuous reading and re-reading the data. Third step of thematic analysis required us to start initial coding. We coded the data line by line in order to determine the possible concepts, themes and patterns appropriate to this study (Wiltshire & Ronkainen, 2021). We started initial coding using inductive coding method. Initial coding transformed into theme emergence, where initial codes were categorized into latent themes and sub-theme. In order to align emergent themes with study’s objectives, we attempted to map study’s research questions with the theoretical frameworks. After aligning, we started refining themes in order to make sure that the themes suitably reflected the data. At this stage, we started defining and naming each theme with concluding a final written report having interpretation supported by extracts from participants’ responses.

Initial coding resulted in numerous codes. These initial codes were afterwards refined and consolidated into broader subthemes. We further categorized these sub-themes into two main themes. Thematic analysis captured the essence of both the categories making employees happy and unhappy. Employing thematic analysis as a methodological framework allows the study to safe guard both coherence as well as depth to understand the determinants of happiness at work. Moreover, the fundamental cause to use thematic analysis was to go beyond apparent reasons and capture complexity of the phenomena to be studied. See Table 1 for Thematic table.

Table 1: Thematic Table

Theme	Sub-theme	Representative Quote
1. Drivers of Happiness	Person-organization fit	Aligning with Organization vision Interest alignment Supportive environment Recognition
	Career Prospect and Growth	Recognition Career growth Professional Development Trainings for growth
	Collegiality	Collegiality Good terms with colleagues Understanding colleagues
	Job autonomy and flexibility	Autonomy Work flexibility Flexible work schedule

	Job safety and security	Job security Work stability Organization's financial stability
2. Drivers of Unhappiness	Toxic organizational culture	Excluding from decision making Less input Constant competition
	Organizational Politics	Ethnic biasness Unfairness Lesser transparency
	Micro-management	Controlled environment More often Feedback Detailed feedback
	Lateral Violence	Thinking less of others Withholding information Undermining others

#### 4. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

Study findings indicated that employees psychological state reflects two way responses, that is, feeling happy and unhappy. Findings reflected that factors making employees happy were not limited to their own mental states but also depends on multiple factors such as fit with the colleagues and with workplace, playing a significant role in their psychological responses. Whilst in case of reasons making employee unhappy were more relevant to overall organizational culture.

##### 4.1 What makes employees happy?

###### 4.1.1 Job Autonomy and Flexibility

Job autonomy and flexibility emerged to be a most recurring and theme. Job autonomy and flexibility fulfills fundamental psychological needs as well as fosters an engaged, positive work environment. Respondents were able to pursue their job tasks the way they wanted to, which transitioned their work into something more meaningful. Authorizing employees to have a say in how they want to work makes them more creative, curious, and enhances their willingness to take initiative. Being authoritative toward assigned work and be able to schedule their work made them experience more positive emotions as well as well-being. Workplace leadership trust in employees' ability to take decisions in their capacity and provide diverse viewpoints was encouraged. They were authorized to complete their assigned tasks according to their own ease. This sense of empowerment encouraged a strong psychological bond and respondents showed more responsible behavior.

Respondents (R-03) was of the view that *right amount of* job authority helps him perform better and own his work. Owning one's work transforms job performers into more responsible individuals.

*"Our work environments providing me with the right amount of authority to own my work and make decisions makes me feel well"*(R-03).

At the same time, another study participant (R-09) found one's right to adjust working hours according to his/her own ease and schedule makes him a better job performer.

*"For me, flexibility to manage my work and time makes me a better performer (R-09)."*

This statement asserts the positive influence of work flexibility on employee performance. Scheduling *when* and *how* to work boosts their efficiency. Respondents viewpoint suggests the significance flexibility holds as it supports convenience as well as actual job performance. While reflecting on the worth of autonomy in the work environment, respondents valued being their own boss and being given the authority to make decisions and own their doings. All these contributed toward employees' satisfaction and feelings of well-being.

###### 4.1.2 Person-organization fit

Theme person-organization fit emerged from congruence between employees and organizational interests, participants' assertion on common goals and vision, as well as sense of being purposeful and belongingness. Respondents emphasized on the fit between their expectations from the assigned job, peers, workplace and what organization provides them makes them happy. Compatibility between employees' requirement and organization's provisions was of greater value.

*"This organization and its broader aim, we have something in common, this is what makes me going"* (R\_13).

The respondent asserted on his collective sense of purpose with his workplace. The emphasis on *"we have something in common"* narrates that the mission, values and organization goals relates profoundly with his own set of beliefs. This shared fit plays a motivational role, fueling their commitment to keep going, specifically in front of challenging

situations. Witnessing a meaningful and deep connection among employees own values and the organization's overall mission, serves as a strong intrinsic motivator, nourishing their engagement as well as dedication.

*"Not only my role but it's the feelings of belonging, a sense of being part of a larger system, which makes me feel good about my work, every day." (R\_16).*

*Being satisfied from one's job does not merely stem from the responsibilities and tasks or of the role they are playing. Emotional connection and sense of being part of a broader identity is actually what adds to the employees' sense of fulfillment. Considering themselves as a part of something bigger gives them feelings of meaningfulness and purposefulness. Different work aspects such as feeling integrated, valued, and aligned with the bigger organization's mission helps build employees well-being.*

*"Actually I believe what I want to do with my life aligns well with the purpose of my organization, and these mutual goals guides the way forward"(R\_20).*

Participant expressed value fit among their personal goals and organizational mission. This fit generates direction as well as clarity in their professional endeavors, where individual and institutional goals strengthen each other. Individual experiences, work motivation and personal vision rarely conflicts with, but rather gets support from organization's goals. This kind of common alignment results in higher engagement, satisfaction, commitment as the employees perceive their work not merely considering it a job, but a significant pursuit that adds to something they personally find comfort in.

#### **4.1.3 Career prospect and growth**

A main theme, career prospect and growth, consisted of sub themes of opportunities for professional development and Job stability and certainty. What made employees happy and contented was not about how they were treated but also about what organization holds for their future. Safer, secure and transparent career pathway was found to be a strongest factor contributing to employees well-being. Respondents shared their satisfaction over the development programs and trainings they have gone through, all in order to upsurge the human resource value of the organization.

*"I felt like that clear path for growth was not there (R-27)."*

*"What truly value is support in leading a cross-functional workshops and training, it helps get, you know the exposure and skills (R-08)."*

*"Training sessions to develop career, good mentors having and transferring unique benefits of courses via workshops and training (R-77)"*

Respondents' reflections highlight the significance of mentorship as well as structured training plans for career growth. Employees identify that practical workshops by expert mentors' augments learning and helps excel career-relevant skills. Training and faculty development programs helped employees master multiple skill sets. Achieving high intensity trainings and workshops to align well with ongoing advancements made them more capable. This enables them to have a diverse skill set with least dependency on others to complete job and aligned tasks in a smoother manner.

#### **4.1.3 Collegiality**

Collegiality appeared to be one of the most recurring factor making employees happy at their workplace. Emphasis on having a high degree of friendship with work fellows shows the significance companionship holds. Good working terms with colleagues makes individuals happy.

*"High degree of companionship with my colleagues (R-350)"*

*"Good relations with colleagues (R-215)"*

In a similar manner (R-30) reflected that work environment effects can be compensated by having supportive and understanding colleagues.

*Having supporting colleagues at work can make the place less stressful (R-30)"*

To summarize, collectively respondents' responses showed that support from friends, good relationships with them and companionship enabled a cohesive and socially fulfilling environment. Collegiality found to be relational factor leading toward happier workforce.

#### **4.1.4 Organization's Stability and job Security**

Job security and organizations' stability was found to be correlated themes emerging from the data. That being said, study respondents shared that having a secure job without the doubt of being laid off was due to having a financially stable work place. Respondents reflections cleared that their job security was a product of enjoying the benefit of working in a stable organizational system.

When inquired about his happiness, (R-287) spontaneous response was

*"Company's financial stability (R-287)"*

Along with job security what mattered the most for participants was the workplace felt safer when it showed financial stability.

*"The thing which makes me happy is the feelings of working at a safer place, at-least the organization is stable and so are we (R-259)".*

*“Sense of working at a secure place (R-90)”.*

Security in terms of both job as well as organizational is underlined as a fundamental contributor toward employee satisfaction. Analysis suggests that employees prioritize long-term safety and stability as key requirements prior to pursuing higher order career objectives. In sum, not only job security but organizations’ financial situation was of paramount importance for employees in order to make them happy. Analysis showed that employees well-being and satisfaction lies in job safety and organizational security.

## **4.2 Factors Hindering Happiness**

### **4.2.1 Toxic Organizational Climate**

Themes pertaining to toxic organizational environment consisted of lateral violence, micro management, and excluding one from providing opinions and not letting them participate in decision making. Respondents shared their concerns how their voices were never welcomed while making decisions even at lower levels.

*“Clearly, speaking up is not encouraged. Over time, I learned to stay quiet, irrespective of the apparent problems (R-10)”.*

Respondents altogether were of the view that speaking up for apparent injustice was strongly discouraged. The people who raise voice were not appreciated and eventually they learnt to stay quite no matter how disturbed they were. This assertion came with the respondents’ choice to compromise on their basic rights in order to pursue their jobs.

*“You know constant competition between all of us, injustice on so many levels were a big off (R-02)”.*

The work environment was competitive but not healthy. Such situations create distance among employees and leads to peer envy. Which may cost organizational members mental peace. Organizational culture rich with constant undermining, criticism, least amount of authority, peer jealousy, unhealthy competition enables environment filled with toxicity, making study respondents unhappy.

### **4.2.2 Lateral violence**

Lateral violence emerged to be a significant theme. Study participants expressed that aggression, lack of acceptance and keeping information up to oneself was a common practice among colleagues working at same level of hierarchy. The hostile behavior only adds to the insecurity, surfaces underlying interpersonal conflicts and boost unhealthy competition among the colleagues, creating a negativity centered toxic organizational culture.

*“Nothing was outspoken straightly, but the exclusion was made evident. They made decisions of our work relevant tasks without asking for any opinion (R-05).”*

Respondents shared their experience of being excluded from any kind of discussion relevant to the task being allocated to them. This sense of exclusion led them toward isolation. They started considering themselves as unimportant for the organization, a more of a transactional relationship. made them unhappy and they felt a disconnection.

*“It was the sense of constant undermining (R-11)”.*

When asked about what makes them unhappy in their organizational settings, *constant undermining* was given significant importance. Respondents felt left out and shared that such feelings make one less interested to contribute more than required or out of their capacity. Important and relevant information was deliberately held and controlled with the intention to influence, take charge and control the people around. All this mistreatment made respondent’s feel ignored, and undervalued.

### **4.2.3 Micro-management**

Respondents informed and strongly opposed the idea of micro-management. According to them, micro management in terms of getting every minute details and updates, along with questioning the every move they wanted to take. This constant check and questioning made the study respondents doubt their own self.

*“There was always questioning even when making the smallest decisions, the things which were not potential enough (R-21).”*

A constant wave of uncertainty lingered over the whole environment where every move was full of doubt. Even the decisions worth nothing were carefully observed, taken care of and made by those in authority. Micro management at such minute level shatters self-confidence, doubting not only one’s ability but the whole organizational set up.

*“Constant checks in and update at minute level (R-13).”*

### **4.2.4 Organization politics**

Theme named organizational politics emerged out of individuals’ assertion on lack of trust and reliability coupled with conspiracies against colleagues. Conspiring specifically against expats and providing more opportunities to their own people was found to be a common practice experienced by respondents as unpleasant. Respondents were bothered by lobbies working on and favoring certain agenda which made them concerned.

*“The lobbies working on certain issues (R-45)”.*

Moreover, lack of trust in management made respondents feel that system wherein they work is less reliable and trustworthy.

*“What lacks here is trust and reliability in the system (R-109)”.*

Organizational politics was also evident from respondents' assertion on ethnic biasness toward certain ethnicities. Most of the respondents were expats originating from different parts of the world. It was evident from responses that appointments and promotions were to be made on favoritism. The main reason of favoritism was rooted in ethnic biasness toward outsiders. All these led employees toward a sense of unhappiness.

*"Transparency and fairness appointment of leadership should be based on qualifications and not based on ethnicity (R-202)".*

In nutshell, the responses answering the factors or causes making employees unhappy at their workplace comprises of individual as well as organizational. Most of the causes were more relevant to organizational factors. The precursors of unhappiness were rooted in employees' being organizational culture being toxic filled with injustice, lack of transparency, and biasness. Workplace jealousy caused spontaneous and unplanned rivalry toward colleagues. Whereas individual causes which bothered employees was relevant to being managed at minute level with very limited opportunity to plan their work according to their own way.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The purpose of the qualitative study was to understand what makes employees happy and unhappy at their workplace. We collected data using open ended questionnaires from 359 academician working at different levels of hierarchy from higher education institutes of the United Arab Emirates. By employing thematic analysis, a qualitative data analysis technique, we developed a model of employee's happiness and unhappiness. In this study, we base the theoretical framework on paradox theory. This study offers numerous key theoretical contributions.

Study main contribution lies in unveiling the paradox of well-being. Based on study findings, we develop a model which suggest that happiness and unhappiness co-exist simultaneously. This co-existence keeps creating tensions in an organizational environment requiring organizational leaders to continuously navigate. That being said, as evident from findings, respondents found work flexibility and autonomy as a factor making them happy, but at the same time, leadership inquiring them about certain tasks left employees unhappy, as they consider it micromanagement. In a similar vein, we found that employees' fit with the organization was a determinant of happiness, at the same time, they found the organizational culture toxic owing to ethnic biases. As paradox theory assumes that nature of organizational tensions remains persistent as well as interdependent, not in the pursuit of being solved but existent (Schad et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2012). Organizational leaders are not required to prioritize either happiness or select unhappiness, but the ideal course of action lies in acknowledging, embracing to navigate effectively (Smith & Tushman, 2005). We shed light on the dual facets of employees mental, physical and emotional health, well-being and ill-being from the same work environment. Focusing on both sides of the coin yields greater insights and earns one of the novel attempt to extend research on work behavior, work psychology and happiness at work. Simultaneous existence of dual and opposite arenas, that is, factors causing well-being as well as ill-being, forms the basis for studying opposing work behaviors simultaneously.

Second, this study goes beyond traditional and repeated concepts to measure unhappiness. That is, earlier research considers stress, burnout and strain as factors making employees unhappy, we extend the literature on ill-being by shedding light on reasons apart from established literature. We show that organizational toxic culture and politics, and micromanagement makes them unhappy at their workplace.

Study findings revealed that employees consider job autonomy and flexibility, person-organization fit, career prospect and development, collegiality, job security and organizational stability as the factors which contributes toward their happiness and well-being. Whereas, toxic organizational culture was one of the most significant factors triggering employees' ill-being. Along with such organizational culture, micro management, organizational politics, and lateral violence were found to be factors brining unhappiness.

While discussing the factors which makes employees unhappy, toxic organizational culture and environment proved deteriorating. Quite contrary, research found that facilitating a supportive work environment significantly augment employee well-being. Findings indicated that micro management has been found negatively impacting employees' happiness, thus making them unhappy. Extant research also asserts that micro management is perceived negatively because it compromises their autonomy over work and job satisfaction.

Although there are a few studies quantitatively examining the impact of person-organization fit on employee happiness and well-being (Warr, 2013). We extend current research by providing detailed insights on how PO fit positively influences employees well-being. Person-organization comprises of the compatibility among individual as well as organizational characteristics that exists when one of the both entities be it individual or organization meet other entity needs. Fit may also happen when both the entities share similar major characteristics consisting of values, personality or goals Kristof-Brown et al., 2005; Verquer, Beehr, & Wagner, 2003). Recent research also shows that employees having high person-organization fit were found happier at their workplace and felt more satisfied (Yildiz &

Uzunbacak, 2021). Karadaş et al. (2025) also found that Person-organization fit positively predicted workplace happiness. This finding finds support from literature.

We found that lateral violence, micromanagement, and excluding employees from providing any kind of opinions creates a toxic work environment, not only compromising employees well-being and happiness but also triggering their ill-being. These negative aspects, quite opposite of employees well-being, contributes toward employees ill-being. That being said, earlier research rarely focuses on this side of the organizational phenomenon, we shift the focus from merely studying well-being to a new stream of research, that is, studying well-being and ill-being altogether. Doing so advances theory by encompassing a variety of reasons hindering happiness at workplace.

Job autonomy and flexibility was found to be a key determinant of employees well-being and happiness. Job autonomy in terms of flexibility has not received significant attention from earlier research. This novel finding provides important insight by extending research beyond already established relationship of job autonomy and happiness. When it comes to the question about what makes employees happy, we found that job autonomy as well as flexibility makes employees happier. This is in line with recent research indicating that being one's own boss makes people happier. Extent of autonomy employees experience, more satisfied they are. Employees with a high degree of job autonomy feel more satisfied in their jobs than others. findings also supported the notion that job autonomy as well as work-life balance simultaneous existence leads toward happier workforce of startup.

#### **Practical Implications**

In terms of practical contribution of the study, we assert the notion that organizations and practitioners can benefit from the study findings in multiple ways, specifically from the factors making employees unhappy. By following our key contribution, organizational managers who closely deal with employees can provide for the arrangement to make the organizational culture healthy by limiting micro-management. A safer and healthier organizational environment need to work on reducing aggression and should nurture bonding between peers. This can be done by creating healthy competition, eradicating differences based on favoritism and unjust promotions and making the system transparent. Moreover, considering the well-being and ill-being a paradox which need not to be solved but managed by understanding and embracing the situation, organizational leaders can reap the maximum of paradoxical situation rather putting efforts to solve the apparent issues.

#### **Study Limitations and Future Research**

The study was limited in the sense that data was collected solely from higher education sector of one country, United Arab Emirates. Although United Arab Emirate hosts diverse national and ethnic working individuals, hence it can be counted as strength of the study. However, data collection from multiple organizational settings and from opposing contextual settings may yield different triggers of happiness and unhappiness. Moreover, qualitative studies bear the tag of limited generalizability and replication. Findings of this qualitative study forms the basis for quantitatively examining the potential findings.

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