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A family-oriented view on well-being amongst low-status expatriates in an international workplace

Article

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Abstract

Purpose

The pandemic emphasised the importance for society of the 'hidden' workforce – cleaners, delivery drivers, security guards and hospital porters. This paper explores the well-being of low-status expatriates in the international workplace exemplified by the United Arab Emirates. This is one of the first studies examining the well-being of people at the bottom of the pyramid, living in difficult circumstances, and undertaking work that is hard and sometimes dangerous.

Methods

We adopt an exploratory approach. Using semi-structured interview data from 21 low-status expatriates, we examine their experiences in the UAE in relation to their well-being, allowing us to suggest the need to develop our understanding of the concept of well-being and its application.

Findings

Low-status expatriates live restrictive lives, away from their family and friends for extended periods, and subject to rigid terms and conditions of employment. Difficult circumstances, long working hours, late or arbitrarily reduced salary payments, and a lack of voice affect their personal well-being, sacrificed to consideration for their family well-being. Applying the concept of well-being in such cases requires us to develop the notion beyond the individual to encompass the wider family.

Originality

We believe this to be the first study to examine the impact of family orientation on the well-being of low-status expatriates, forcing us to challenge and suggest developments to current understandings of well-being.

Research implications

This exploratory analysis opens new avenues for well-being studies and highlights the need for contextualised research. Future research might benefit from quantitative methods being used alongside qualitative methods and collecting multiple perspective data, including the views of managers and policymakers and data from the 'left-behind' families of these low-status expatriates.

Practical implications

There is plenty of scope for managers of low-status expatriates to improve the latter's well-being. Given the lack of interest in doing so, we suggest that policy makers may need to modify extant legalisation to ensure a greater focus on low-status expatriates.

***Key Words*:**

Well-being; low-status expatriates; international work; United Arab Emirates

INTRODUCTION

According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), migrant workers in the Arabian Gulf states account for more than 10% of all migrants globally, with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) hosting the fifth largest proportion of migrant populations in the world (ILO, 2020). Given the near impossibility of these workers achieving citizenship, these are expatriates - workers temporarily resident in a country (McNulty and Brewster, 2017) - and many are self-initiated (i.e., they make their own way there and are not sent by an employer). Whilst there is an extensive literature on expatriates (McNulty and Selmer, 2017), much of it is focused on high-status, highly qualified, elite workers (e.g., Tarique and Schuler, 2018); the considerable number of low-status expatriates has largely remained 'hidden' from the management and employee relations literature (Haak-Saheem and Brewster, 2017).

Low-status expatriates are individuals with little education who live outside their country of origin as low-paid workers; typically, in sectors such as food production, construction, security, distribution and sales, care-giving and domestic work. They are the base of the employment and social hierarchy (Holtbrügge, 2021). They come predominantly from developing countries, and their main motivation is to provide for a better life for their families by overcoming poverty and unemployment in their home country (Haak-Saheem, 2016). In the host country, their remuneration is almost invariably less than local employees and they may have to put up with poor living and working conditions (Connell and Burgess, 2013), but the salaries that they make are significantly greater than they could possibly make (legally) back at home. Depending on country and industry (Wilkinson, 2012), such low-status expatriates are subject to exploitation (Lau and Shaffer, 2021). Despite the low salaries they earn, most of their income is sent home to help support children and aged parents, to pay for accommodation, and to provide a 'nest-egg' for when they return to their families. Extraordinary amounts of money - over (US)$ 700 billion just before the pandemic (World Bank, 2019) - were 'remitted' by low-status, low-paid, workers to middle income and poor countries (Ratha *et. al*., 2019). Around a quarter of that came from the Arab Gulf States.

The UAE is an extreme example of an international workplace. The population of this geographically small country is almost ten million but only 12% are nationals, mostly

working in government and family businesses (CIA, 2020). Many of the world's largest multinational enterprises have regional offices in the UAE. More than 90% of the workforce consists of expatriates (Ewers, 2017) and in the private sector this is almost 99% (Al-Waqfi and Forstenlechner, 2014). Contrary to high-earning western expatriates, low-status expatriates come from the sub-continent, far east Asia and African countries; and they generally come alone, without their families. Many of them live in 'dormitories', sharing space in a single room, bussed back and forth from work and enjoying little of the glamour of the lifestyle that the UAE provides to nationals or high-status expatriates (Connell and Burgess, 2013).

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic revealed their critical contribution to the host country's economy but also their vulnerability. During the pandemic, societies' reliance on low-status workers, in vital roles, continuing to work as normal through the crisis, became apparent (Harney and Collings, 2021). This applied to the UAE as elsewhere, but in this international workplace substantial numbers of expatriates lost their employment and, as a consequence, were sent home. The pandemic highlighted the disproportionate consequences for such workers (Nagaraj *et al*., 2020). However, governments and organisations have begun to recognise the importance of introducing health and well-being policies in the workplace amid the pandemic (Caligiuri *et al*., 2020).

Throughout the pandemic, the UAE continued to invest in its national 'Happiness' agenda (UAE Government, 2021, March 22). Public and private sector organisations were encouraged to launch, recommend, and adopt practices which address the 'happiness and well-being' of all their employees. We ask how far that discussion extends beyond elites to encompass people at the bottom of the pyramid, how low-status expatriates interpret 'well-being' and whether that has implications for the theory of well-being and our understanding of people management.

LOW-STATUS EXPATRIATES' WELL-BEING

In recent years, employee-centred research linked to employee well-being (EWB), has gained importance in the research literature (Peccei and Van De Voorde, 2019). Whilst organisations have a responsibility for the well-being of their employees, this surge in academic interest is driven by EWB's potential to influence individual and organisational

performance (Huang *et al*., 2019, Kowalski and Loretto, 2017). Employee well-being is a broad multi-faceted concept which has been operationalised in various ways in different empirical studies (Edgar *et al*., 2015, Cooper *et al*., 2019). Well-being in the context of employment typically refers to an employee's overall affective experience and functioning at work (Cafferkey *et al*., 2021; Lin *et al*., 2020): affective well-being refers to the cumulative experience of feelings created at work (Diener and Larsen, 1993); functioning at work reflects "work-related improvement, enlargement, development, and advancement" (Korff *et al*., 2017, p. 418). Research has mainly focused on the effects of organisational practices on individual experiences (see e.g. Reh *et al*., 2021) with little or no attention to employees' social factors outside of the workplace.

It has been argued that this will give 'mutual gains', providing benefit to both employees and employers, improving individual and organisational performance (Peccei and Van de Voorde, 2019; Cafferkey *et al*., 2021). Other scholars (e.g., Harris and Ogbonna, 2001) argue in favour of a 'conflicting outcomes' approach, where either one party or the other gains, or even for a 'mutual losses' approach, representing a lose-lose model (Van De Voorde *et al*., 2012).

The evidence for any outcome is ambiguous and even contradictory (Edgar *et al*., 2015, Huettermann and Bruch, 2019): Guest (2017, p. 22) lamented that the existing literature has focused on performance "at the expense of a concern for employee well-being". This is especially true in the global workplace context with international employees. Batat (2021) highlights this gap and calls for more research, given the increasing numbers of employees working across international organisations in myriad forms.

In the context of expatriation, the well-being literature notes issues of cross-cultural adjustment (e.g., Davies *et al.*, 2019), work adjustment (e.g., Aryee and Stone, 1996) and marital adjustment (e.g., Gupta *et al.*,2012). The well-being of this category of expatriates is described as constituting an organisation's competitive advantage (Kowalski and Loretto, 2017), and proposals made for dealing with comprehensive and competitive remuneration packages, relocation assistance, cross-cultural training, organizational and spousal support (McNulty and De Cieri, 2016; Tarique and Schuler, 2018). These

findings, however, only apply to the privileged high-status expatriates from western countries, generally with their families with them.

We note that nearly all of these studies and analyses of EWB (including international employees), like most management research, have taken place in WEIRD - western, educated, industrialised, rich, democratic - countries (Henrich *et al*., 2010). How well do these theories of well-being apply to non-traditional international employees from other countries? By addressing this topic, we not only make EWB theories more inclusive of marginalised groups of international workers, but we also give the underrepresented a voice.

The Covid-19 pandemic created an inflection point in the global economy and as a result a 'shifting' landscape for HRM and employee well-being (Cooke *et al*., 2020; Harney and Collings, 2021). During the pandemic, low-status expatriates made up the majority of cases in the Gulf States region, a direct result of living and working requirements and conditions (Zimmer and Smith, 2020). Many low-status expatriates lost their jobs. Others refrained from taking time off when they were unwell for fear of losing their jobs, driving COVID-19 spread among migrant workers and local citizens (Zimmer and Smith, 2020). Normally, they would have been required to immediately leave the country, but many were unable to fly home due to travel restrictions or unpaid salaries: they were caught in a sort of limbo, unable to earn money but unable to return home. Others did not lose their jobs, but had their pay cut arbitrarily, or they were paid late, or they lived in fear of one of these consequences.

In this paper, we bring the well-being of international employees from non-WEIRD backgrounds centre stage, through exploring their experiences in the UAE in relation to their well-being. We ask: how do low-status expatriates experience and think about well-being?

METHODOLOGY

Our research was based on extended interviews with 21 low-status expatriates in the UAE, though we used government and other publications to inform our knowledge of the context. Our inductive approach provides an appropriate means for understanding

complex social processes by using in-depth contextualised insights about a phenomenon (Siggelkow, 2007), in this case, employee well-being.

Research setting

The UAE is of significant economic importance internationally given its oil reserves and heavy investment in tourism, construction, financial services, education and healthcare. In line with the government's national vision, the UAE has focused on achieving happiness and well-being and was ranked 27th in the World Happiness Report 2021(Helliwell *et al*., 2021), making the UAE an interesting location for this research. The Happiness Agenda aims to address core aspects of well-being amongst the population of the UAE in both the short and long term (Happiness Agenda, 2021). But does that sense of well-being apply to those at the bottom of the UAE employment pyramid? Archive and website data including government information about the national programme on happiness and well-being were used to develop a deeper understanding of the contextual factors informing management practices. For example, low-status expatriates' employment relations are not governed by Federal Labour Law. Additional data sources gave us a nuanced understanding of the contextual factors influencing the views and experiences of low-status expatriates.

Data collection and sample characteristics

We draw on 21 in-depth semi-structured interviews. Initially, we employed theoretical sampling, but as the data collection progressed, we added snowball sampling. We selected participants who could provide different perspectives to maximise the diversity of viewpoints (Charmaz, 2006). Given the living and working circumstance of low-status expatriates, it is challenging to arrange interviews, so first contacts were established at their workplaces, where potential respondents were asked whether they were interested and would be willing to participate in an interview. The purpose of the interview was explained, and participants were ensured anonymity. About 75 potential participants were approached; 21 agreed to an interview and a meeting point and time were arranged (outside of their work premises and working hours). Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of interviewees.

<<INSERT **TABLE 1** ABOUT HERE>>

We employed open-ended interview questions to allow participants to respond based on their own experiences and perspectives. We asked them to talk with us about (1) their living and working experiences in the UAE, (2) how they cope with being separated from their families, (3) how they feel about their treatment by their employers, and (4) what support they receive to overcome loneliness, separation and stress. In addition, we collected data on respondents' personal characteristics, and asked them about their perceptions of their employment conditions, compensation and well-being. These low-status expatriates are recruited by agents in their home countries and told (sometimes incorrectly) about their contracts (Haak-Saheem, 2016). Interviews lasted 30-45 minutes and were conducted in English, the language of work in the UAE. Interviews were recorded, though five respondents refused to allow recordings, and, in those cases, intensive notes were taken. We continued interviewing until additional interviews added little new information.

We adapted a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006, Strauss and Corbin, 1997), with open-ended questions that avoided forcing the data and encouraged respondents to discuss their experiences and views. Our contextual analysis is based on "the perspective of those living it" (Corley, 2015, p. 601).

Data Analysis

Using an inductive coding approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1997), we collected and analysed data simultaneously. We organised our data manually and in NVivo12, coded and recoded as patterns and themes changed during our analysis. We began by identifying key themes in the data (Van Maanen, *et al*., 2007), organising core and recurrent expressions into categories (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996) encapsulating our respondents' views and experiences, describing the general employment situation and conditions and employers' approaches towards diversity, inclusion, and well-being. Then we carried out axial coding, which is a second coding step in grounded theory, drawing connections and relationship in the research between the emerging issues (Strauss and Corbin, 1997), going back and forth between the empirical data and the literature to ground the emerging concepts. For example, our open coding resulted in emerging

concepts such as ‘loneliness and separation from family’, ‘family needs’, ‘support wife and children’, ‘help my parents’ ‘send my sister to school’ which, together, pointed clearly to the entanglement of expatriates’ wellbeing with that of their family. Hence, we pursued this relationship in our remaining data and consolidated our findings.

FINDINGS

We present our major findings below. Direct quotes from our respondents are given below with (anonymised) identifiers enabling them to be linked to the respondent data in Table 1.

The search for work

All our respondents reported that they had come to the UAE due to severely restricted employment opportunities in their home countries. Agencies frequently ‘sold’ these workers the idea that they could make considerable sums of money in the UAE (there were numerous reports of ‘promised’ contractual arrangements not being substantiated on arrival in the UAE). The sole objective of all the expatriates we interviewed was to make the kind of money that would have been impossible for them at home, to support their families and build their futures. For most, there was satisfaction that they had, in practice, been able to provide a better lifestyle for their families.

> *‘In my country there are no jobs which can feed me and my family. I am grateful that I can earn the money my family needs’ (REF)*

The cost was to their own well-being. Most reported considerable distress triggered by loneliness and separation from their immediate families. Since their ability to continue living in the UAE was entirely dependent on their employer, who held their passports and other documentation, they felt unable to refuse any request. Their living standards were sharply constrained, they were not free to enjoy the ‘lifestyle’ of the UAE, and some reported ill-treatment, even physical ill-treatment.

Lack of management care

Despite the government making several changes in the legislation to ensure organisations pay salaries on time (UAE, 2021), participants reported that their salaries were often paid late or reduced without explanation:

> '*It is stressful to wait for your salary. I can survive somehow, but my family needs the money. They have to pay rent and buy food. If my salary is late, they are in trouble. We complained several times, but the management doesn't care. Nobody cares about us'* (Kamuri, 29, Nepal)

Employers are required to offer accommodation and transportation to/from work. It is also common practice to provide shared accommodation paid by the employer. Most low-status expatriates live in shared rooms with other low-status expatriates they did not know previously, which can result in tension. There may be little privacy, and sleep may be interrupted, as roommates return from or get ready for work:

> '*After 12-14 hours of shifts, you are just tired and need to sleep* [but we do] *shift duties. While some of us sleep, others need to get ready for work or they come back from work. There is always constant noise. Sometimes, there is fighting. How can we stay healthy and perform good work, if we don't get the rest we need? I am a taxi driver; I need to rest in order not to put my life and the life of my passengers in danger.*' (Maryam, 38, Bangladesh)

No respondents reported organisational support, and most are left alone with their emotional and physical distress. Ironically, such distress negatively impacts work performance which can result in the employers then penalising workers by reducing their salaries or cancelling their employment contract and residency visa. Some of them have experienced physical abuse:

> '*My manager is very bad. Always angry. Always rude. If he is very upset, he kicks or slaps the employees. We know this is against the law, but we can't complain because we don't know how to reach out to the authorities. My manager would kill us if someone made an official complaint'* (Sabu, 41, Ethopia).

Separation from family

Despite this, many of our respondents considered themselves fortunate, as they were in situations in which they could help their families. In comparison to their friends and family in their home country, they felt lucky to be able to work in the UAE (Haak-Saheem, Woodrow and Brewster, 2021).

All our respondents were separated from their families, being unable to earn enough to bring them to the UAE. Their salaries and living conditions (e.g., shared rooms) makes relocation of family members impossible. Furthermore, living costs in the UAE are high:

> '*Theoretically, I could afford to bring my wife and children, but rent and schooling are expensive. If they lived with me here, we won't be able to save some money, help my parents or send my sister to school. I miss them, but this is what we need to do*' (Hassan, 24, Pakistan)

Many respondents mentioned the psychosocial and physical distress resulting from being apart from their families:

> '*I am counting days and nights and hope my situation gets better. I miss my children, my mother so much that it pains my body* (Amo, 28, Ghana)

Low-status expatriates in the UAE work long hours and generally have just one day a week off work. High workload pressure and limited leisure time affect their well-being and reduce possibilities to get in touch with their families.

> *'Often, we work longer than scheduled, because the work is not finished. During seasonal peak times we work seven days a week. Sometimes we have to wait hours for the bus to take us back to the accommodation. Often, I am not able to speak with my family for days'* (Sono, 23, Uganda)

Offering financial help to family back home

Despite the challenges low-status expatriates experience at the workplace, their motivation to keep going and make the best of their situations is anchored in their family-oriented views. Furthermore, they find a sense of well-being in their beliefs and spirituality. For example, Muslim respondents highlighted the decree of God's will:

> ‘*This life is meaningless and temporary. I have full trust in Allah’s promise and as stated in the Quran “Whoever fulfils their pledge to Allah, He will grant them a great reward”. I am happy and grateful with whatever I have been provided with’ (*Muhamed, 34, India).

Others reported a stronger sense of their families’ well-being and were willing to tolerate higher level of abuse and mistreatment for the sake of their families:

> ‘*Things are not good, but what can I do about it? I try to forget what is around me and focus on the future of my children. Their future is so much more important to me than my personal feelings’* (Luna, 33, Philippines).

With the literature on expatriate well-being mainly focused on assigned or highly skilled self-initiated expatriates (Presbitero, 2020), the situation of low-status expatriates has largely been ignored. Overall, our findings show that the rewards, working time, health and safety and well-being of these low-status expatriates are shaped by their employers, and are often poor, substandard, and arbitrary. Low-status expatriates experience harsh working and living conditions which appear unnecessary and clearly undermine the UAE government’s ‘Happiness Agenda’ initiatives on well-being. Surprisingly, we did not find any evidence for different perceptions of well-being based on the wide range of nationalities included in our sample. We assume that this finding is mainly based on their shared characteristics (they are all from poor countries, from rural areas, poorly educated and working in menial and manual job), which override any national differences.

Despite these findings, which might have led us to summarise that low-status expatriates are woefully short of any current definition of employee well-being, our respondents generally were accepting of their situation and what they were doing for their families. Their reference point was not the lives and work of others in the UAE, but the kind of living and working they may have been experiencing back at home. Clearly, on most extant understandings of EWB, there is room for considerable improvement. Low-status expatriates understand their situation and they are prepared to accept it, and the low levels of well-being that it creates for them personally, in order to improve the well-being of their (absent) family.

Although they experience poor personal well-being, they remain resilient. Given the vulnerable position of low-status expatriates, organizations pay little or no attention to their personal well-being in their management related practices. In light of our data, the personal well-being of low-status expatriates is substituted by their strong family orientation.

DISCUSSION

Theorising about and research into employee well-being has mainly been based around a universalistic approach, arguing that individual employee well-being is important and should, where it is absent or inadequate, be enhanced.

In the case of low-status expatriates, an EWB perspective yields a paradox. Much of their treatment would, in other circumstances, lead to feelings of very low or absent well-being, but from an emic perspective these workers feel that they do have a degree of well-being and are prepared to accept, and even take pride in, their circumstances. Due to the economic, political and social structures in their home countries, their families rely on them as a key resource. While research on the work-family interface (Grzywacz and Marks, 2000) suggests individual characteristics may affect contextual factors on individual-environment interactions, we found that family factors where significant in influencing individual well-being experiences. While research (see e.g., Greenhaus, *et al*.,1987) suggests perceptions of a non-supportive work environment are associated with low levels of quality of life outside of work, our date shows positive spillovers from the family domain into the workplace.

For our respondents, the family acquiring new resources involves generating international remittances, and thereby ensuring their families can achieve better living conditions. Being able to provide for family gives them a positive feeling which goes beyond their immediate personal affective well-being. While affective well-being has been studied as the cumulative experience of affects at work (Diener and Larsen, 1993), our results show low-status expatriates' affective experiences is associated with their contribution towards the well-being of their families. Hence, for these workers, family-oriented well-being is more salient than their individual well-being: their well-being is embedded in a relationship system (Gurman and Kniskern, 2014).

Although literature outlines the importance of development and professional growth in the context of well-being (Korff *et al*., 2017), that is not an option for low-status expatriates, based on the structural traits of the employment market. Low-status expatriates are willing to work for lower wages since for this group the option to earn money is the decisive parameter. They disregard other factors like professional growth and are not perceived as suitable candidates for these kinds of positions, because they plan to return home after having earned a certain amount of money. Further, the easy supply of low-status expatriates contributes to organisations' decision to provide little or no developmental opportunities.

The willingness and effort of these low status workers to ensure the critical functioning of organisations and societies during the Covid-19 pandemic calls for reconsideration of elite-focused management practices. Human resource management scholarship, management practices and policy making may consider redirecting their attention, and develop a more comprehensive understanding of low-status expatriates' well-being.

There is a lack of research, and we cannot be certain how this extended view of EWB applies in the case of those (locals or expatriates) living with their families. This may be a finding that is more relevant in the poorer countries from which low-status expatriates are drawn, where the national cultural differences literature indicates that 'family' is interpreted as covering a larger number of people and assumes greater importance. However, in the absence of research, we cannot be sure. We argue that as a guide to future research and as an issue worth examining, the voices of low-status workers should be listened to, and our understanding of EWB extended to include family.

This empirical study sought to shed light on the individual experience and well-being of low-status expatriates working in the UAE. The findings expand our knowledge of employee experience and well-being in international workplaces, especially in the context of low-status, self-initiated expatriates. Our findings reveal that for low-status expatriates, of whom there are large numbers around the world, dire workplace and well-being conditions are common, characterised by involuntary separations from family, harsh living conditions, unpaid overtime, delayed, deducted or deprived salaries, arbitrary employer sanctions, silenced voice and physical and verbal abuse. Individual well-being

oriented HRM practices/systems for this group of workers barely exist. This means that the existing theories of well-being and HRM developed from the WEIRD countries (e.g., mutual gains, conflicting outcomes and mutual losses models) have limited traction to this group of low status, non-WEIRD international employees, as these models are premised on the existence of developing and continually modifying HRM policies and practices that aim at enhancing EWB (Peccei and Van De Voorde, 2019).

Theoretically, our findings raise the question of whether the concept of well-being can be applied to such workers or, to enable us to maintain the concept, to ask whether it has the same meaning and importance in the context in which such workers find themselves. The concept of personal well-being, developed by researchers in the WEIRD countries and applied generally by such researchers to elite categories of employee, has very little relevance in the context of low-status expatriates. They accept that they will have to live with their circumstances for the duration of their contract to achieve the objectives that they have set for themselves and their families. Their understanding of their own well-being is entirely subsumed by the living situations of their families.

We note that in this particular case there is an ironic gap between these workers grim reality and the push by the UAE government to implement a National Programme for happiness and well-being at work and its ambition to be among the best in the world in the Human Development Index and the happiest of all nations (The UAE Government, 2021, March 22).

As Peetz and Murray (2011) and others highlight, in research on working in extreme or alien environments, it seems likely that many of the negative findings of previous researchers may still apply to these workers even though the concept itself and their responses to it may need adapting. Thus, the fact that social isolation produces a sense of alienation from the wider community (in which the family now is psychologically grouped) – with the accompanying marked negative effects on individual health (increased distress, impaired attention and concentration), relationship health (interpersonal strain and relationship tension), and workplace performance (decreased satisfaction and productivity) – probably applies here too (Costa, 2003). Separation from

family and friends, especially intimate partners, has been reported as a major stressor (Haslam-Mckenzie, 2016).

But if the outcomes of previous research apply here, our findings show clearly that we need to acknowledge the importance of context (Johns, 2006, Parry, *et al*., 2021) in studying well-being in a more meaningful way and the importance of a more critical lens (Delbridge and Keenoy, 2010). Our exploratory study reveals that, despite their apparent obvious utility, extant notions of well-being are of limited value in understanding those at the bottom of the employment pyramid. If we are to continue using the concept in such cases, it may need to be opened up to include the present and future well-being of the individual employee *and* their family.

The individual EWB of our respondents can only be addressed through responsible leadership of the organisation and policies and practices which do not trade performance for well-being (Marques *et al*, 2021). As Beer, *et al*., (2015) argued what is needed is a wider view of stakeholders and a more contextual and multi-layered approach to the long-term requirements of the relevant stakeholders, in which all benefit.

LIMITATIONS, FUTURE RESEARCH, AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

This study used a qualitative methodology. This approach allowed us an in-depth exploration of well-being amongst low-status expatriates. We postulate whether the assumption in the literature that EWB is individual - rather than family-related - applies only to expatriates who do not have their families with them is correct and we would encourage research to examine this issue. We believe that our findings provide an insight into the work environment of a wide range of low-status workers (especially international workers) in many different locations but that cannot be shown through our methodology. Therefore, we would encourage further research in other contexts and the use of quantitative methods alongside qualitative methods in future. Our data is restricted to the perspectives of low-status expatriates themselves, and it would be valuable in future to collect multiple perspective data, including the views of managers and, where relevant, agency specialists. It would also be fascinating to collect data from the ‘left-behind’ families of these low-status expatriates. Overall, our exploratory analysis opens several new avenues for well-being studies and highlights the need for contextualised research.

CONCLUSION

We explored the well-being experiences of low-status workers in a unique environment, where expatriates make up 90% of the workforce. Despite a proactive approach to well-being proposed by the UAE government, this study provides evidence of the ineffective nature of these well-being policies and practices for this significant proportion of the workforce. We suggest that is largely because existing understandings of well-being are limited to the context of a particular group of workers – high-status workers. A wider concept of well-being and a more critical approach to the management of people would do much to increase understanding and therefore potentially improve the situation of these workers. There is plenty of scope to do better. Given the lack of interest in doing so, we suggest that policy makers need to better understand these issues to be able to modify extant legalisation or deploy stronger enforcement measures to ensure a greater focus on low-status expatriates. In addition to improvements, policy makers could consider modifying the legal requirements for family sponsorship. Such a change might be valuable to, for example, mothers with young children. The key point being incremental change in this EWB context can facilitate major support for this critical workforce.

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