RHM
2020
Research in
Hospitality Management

Happiness at work: a phenomenological study of the experiences of hospitality industry employees

Anne Eline Frederique Melief, Jan Arend Schulp & Marte Rinck de Boer* (iD)

International Hospitality and Service Management School, NHLStenden University of Applied Sciences, Leeuwarden, The Netherlands
Correspondence: marte.rinck.de.boer@nhlstenden.com

ABSTRACT: Though happiness might be an interesting factor to consider in the discussion on retaining employees, only a limited number of studies on happiness of hospitality employees has been done. This master's thesis study, rooted in the tradition of the interpretative phenomenological analysis, unpacks the connection of work experiences and feelings of happiness of five hospitality employees aged between 20 and 30. In-depth interviews revealed that happiness is found in moments of external recognition of professional achievements, while contributing to the company's performance or to guest experiences. We see that these moments reinforce a high-performance attitude that, however, could also create a form of addiction. We recommend integrating appreciative feedback of staff achievements on a regular base during operations. Furthermore, we suggest staff coaching with the aim to develop self-awareness and self-acknowledgement.

KEYWORDS: added value, external recognition, happiness, interpretative phenomenological analysis, transient level

Introduction

During my undergraduate internship in a Dutch hotel, I, the first author, observed a paradox. I saw unhappy colleagues in an industry that strives to make its guest feel welcome and happy (Wilson, Zeithaml, Bitner, & Gremler, 2016). This triggered the idea for a study of happiness in work. A positive outcome from a quantitative study on happiness among 582 Dutch hospitality employees using the Oxford Happiness Scale — 8.1 on a scale of 1 to 10 (Consumatics, 2018) — reinforced the idea of the paradox. Despite their aim of making guests feel welcome, comfortable and satisfied, hospitality companies seem to struggle with making and keeping its staff feeling happy (Brown, Thomas, & Bosselman, 2015). Though happiness might be an interesting factor to consider in the discussion on retaining employees (Vasquez, 2014), only a limited number of studies on happiness of hospitality employees has been done. The phenomenon is, however, often researched from the perspective of job satisfaction, job performance and organisational commitment (Lee, Back, & Chan, 2015; Tsai, Cheng, & Chang, 2010; Yang, 2010), addressed by Fisher (2010, p. 386) as the "person level". This phenomenological master's thesis research followed the so-called "transient level" looking into the "within-person level" (Fisher, 2010, p. 386) as it aimed to explore the experiences, articulation and sense-making of happiness at work.

Conceptualisation and critique

Attention to staff happiness in organisations emerged in the wake of the rising positive psychology in the 1990s (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Besides psychologists, economists and sociologists also became interested in the topic (Frawley, 2015). From definition by Kashdan, Biswas-Diener and King (2008), it becomes clear that the conceptualisation of happiness revolves around two original ethical principles from Aristotle: *hedonism* with a focus on pleasure, and *eudaimonia*, developing internal virtue, bringing life to its fullest potential. In Aristotle's own words,

> … a man should […] if he wants to become good, have been well-bred and have acquired good habits, and then continue to live his life with righteous pursuits, and neither intentionally, nor against his mind do evil deeds (Aristotle, X.10 1180a15)

This is a definition of a good life, leading to happiness.

Nevertheless, in general it remains difficult to define happiness. In her comprehensive meta-study on happiness at work, Fisher (2010, p. 386) identifies three levels that decide the perspective on happiness: the "transient" or "within-person level", the "person level", and the "unit or organizational level". She concludes that happiness must be seen as an important factor for employee functioning. As Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) state, staff happiness is essential for better moods and physical health in the workplace. This affects staff development, guest/customer satisfaction and thus organisational performance (Fisher, 2010; Kerfoot, 2012).

According to Frawley (2015), a focus on happiness and happiness research is not unbiased. She identifies three main points of critique, namely a limited focus on the cultural embedding of the phenomenon, the chosen scientific approach, and the instrumentalisation of human characteristics. Another point of critique addresses the neo-liberalist societal emphasis on happiness (De Wachter, 2019) that is rooted in hedonism that is very much reinforced by social media. It can be argued that though positive psychology tried to move away from diseases (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), a turn to happiness might

have created a new problematic condition, perhaps a new illness (De Wachter, 2019).

Methodology

A constructivist ontological and epistemological belief guided our choice to embed the study in the tradition of the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). This approach — developed as an alternative to quantitative methodology in psychological research — is rooted in phenomenology, hermeneutics and ideography. IPA is a

> dynamic process with the active role of the researcher who influences the extent to which they get access to the participant's experience and how through interpretation they make sense of the subject's personal world (Pietkiewicz & Smith 2014, p. 8).

Moreover, IPA aims to create thoroughly explored individual and "first-person accounts" which can then be used to elaborate on the lived experience in further research.

We conducted 90-minute semi-structured interviews (Kvale, 1983; 2007; Rubin & Rubin, 2011) with five participants aged between 20 and 30 years. Immersing oneself in the life-world of participants requires one's full attention, which led to the decision to limit the number of participants to five. The five participants essentially formed a convenience sample from the first author's network, supported by well-considered selection criteria. Initially, some of them were personal acquaintances on a professional level. Others were recommended by professional acquaintances because they demonstrated an interest in the subject. Besides interest, the other selection criterion was working in the hospitality industry (irrespective of the job position).

The interviews included questions to create trust and rapport, to explore the factual experiences and to connect related feelings with metaphors (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). While the interviewer immersed herself in the participant's life world, the participant put themselves in the position of the researcher, becoming self-reflective and giving voice to feelings and experiences. Interpretation and understanding gradually developed through intensive reading of the transcripts and listening to the recordings guided by note-taking. Notes were transformed into a thread of emerging themes, while seeking for patterns and connections within and between the stories (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun, Clarke, & Weate, 2016). All interpretations and emerging themes were discussed with the participants before the final conclusions were drawn.

Results

The interviewing author turned her impressions of each interview into five personalised poems and narratives or so-called vocative texts (Nicol, 2008, p. 317; Van Manen, 1997). Two of them are published here as examples.

In the picture

> It feels like any other day at the office until a higher ranked male manager enters the office — immediately the atmosphere changes. As I am very sensitive to what happens around me, colleagues moving around distract me from my work and I look up. Everyone's attention is centred around him: it is wonderful to see the authority and power radiating from his skin. Tasks are dropped,

and my colleagues gather around him to say: "Hello!". I shake his hand, "Hello, nice to meet you!" is what I say while trying to control my nerves. "Oh, so this is you! You are the one that brings in all the revenue at our groups department. You are doing a great job!". I feel my body getting warm, my face turning red, I feel more energetic and prouder: I AM THE ONE THAT RECEIVES THESE COMPLIMENTS! I also feel confusion. This moment in front of colleagues, I feel embarrassed; yes, I like to be seen, but I feel uncomfortable with all these faces looking at me. Once the big boss has left the room and I am back at my desk, I cannot stop smiling — I feel like a powerful woman able to conquer the world. A jolt of awareness flows through my body, a sense of purpose, meaningfulness. It is ME that contributes to the success of the company. And it is ME who is seen and recognised. This jolt and pride, however, slowly fade away over the rest of the day. But, the energy stays and keeps me going. It is like an addiction, ready to keep going, longing for the next compliment. It feels like an acknowledgement. People recognise me and see me. I'm more than a robot just doing the tasks. I am needed and a part of the company.

> It is the sparkle in her eyes, the speed in her voice
> When she is not seen as a second choice.
> It is the energy, pride and a sense of flow
> When her colleagues make her glow.
> It is the recognition of her own abilities,
> the confirmation of her capabilities.

Teamwork creates dream work

It is a hot summer's day; the sunlight reflects on the quiet water of the harbour and some sailing boats move slowly on the rippling waves. I walk to the entrance of the pretty restaurant I work at and realise how beautiful its location is. It is the best location and restaurant I can think of. I am looking forward to again entertaining our guests and making them feel at home. But today I have a special mission as well. As it is still early, it is not busy yet. This is my moment. I go to the chef: "Chef, do you have some time? I have a perfect idea..." I start pitching my gin and tonic idea. He immediately responds enthusiastically, and we discuss some ideas, add ingredients from the herb garden at the back of the restaurant, taste the drink. Excited, I present the cocktail to the first guest, and before we know it the whole terrace is brightly coloured by the new cocktail in everyone's hands. I see that our regular guest and famous television-chef has taken a seat in the sun on the terrace. I cannot wait to tell him about the cocktail: "Let's give it a try; it looks delicious", he replies with a face full of joyful expectation. First, my colleagues and I take the empty plates from another table: together we quickly clean the terrace, so I can start making another gin and tonic with our chef. Our famous guest is surprised when taking a sip, he gives me a compliment: "It's delicious; let's post a picture on my social media!" As I walk to the kitchen to share his positive reaction with our chef. I feel this tickling in my belly, this kind of butterflies feeling. I can hardly hide the proud smile on my face; the energy and feeling of power is almost

overwhelming: "We did it!" I joyfully call out — the warm feeling in my belly remains for a while. I am happy: it is the teamwork, it is my colleagues and it is pleasing guests with the high quality that we deliver.

> It is the feeling in his belly, the smile on his face
> When perfection is achieved at his workplace
> It is the power, energy and pride
> He feels when his guests thank him out loud
> Together he feels stronger,
> becoming better fulfils his hunger.

Discussion

The interviews gave different perspectives on the emerging importance of recognition of personal achievements and contribution to a company's performance and guest satisfaction.

Explicit appreciation for adding value to the company — especially from people in the hierarchy — and to the guest experience, meant to them that they were more than just a passing presence. One participant explains that he derives moments of happiness from creating his own high standards regarding the quality of provided products and service, while imposing upon himself very high standards that he can achieve most of the time. To him, the standard for quality and for his behaviour is located within himself, and that it is not just his desire for praise. A further external source of happiness is seeing the team working together and providing the best quality and service: the feeling of "doing it together". When talking about their feelings, the participants talked about having pleasure, feeling pride and excitement, and feeling energised. Non-verbally, they started to smile; they raised their voices and spoke at a higher pace; and their eyes started to shine.

The conversations also illustrate the transient character of feelings of happiness. This was already mentioned in earlier research (Fisher, 2010; Harter & Gurley, 2008). Fisher (2010, p. 396) states that feelings of happiness are not caused by (a series of) momentous events, "but rather by individuals' perceptions, interpretations and appraisals" of these circumstances. This finding makes us concerned for two reasons. On the one hand, the employee can develop a form of addiction striving for external recognition. We fear that this form of addiction might lead to a constant inner focus on high performance, while accepting periods of high work pressure, long working days and unsociable working hours. It might be questioned whether hospitality managers that welcome this so-called excellent attitude explore underlying drivers that when known give a different understanding. On the other hand, an organisation's human resource management policies might — consciously or unconsciously — reinforce the need for recognition. We see in only one interviewee something of an internalised feeling of goodness that guides his actions and gives him the feeling of "doing the right thing".

Conclusions

Immersing oneself in and correctly understanding the life world and experiences of participants was quite challenging. The risk of subjectivity had to be avoided. Therefore, the interviews were used to discuss explicitly with the participants the role of recognition in combination with the actual innate need for moments of happiness. Moreover, we constantly questioned and reflected on our interpretation in the light of the process and texts.

The results emphasise the importance of cautious attention to the phenomenon of happiness at work. On the one hand, recognition could be integrated in daily operations and in the supervision and coaching of staff. For instance, focus on timely appreciative feedback might contribute to a more constant feeling of happiness. Current practice of performance appraisals might be reconsidered. Besides evaluating the person and giving feedback on how to improve performance, appraisal conversations could also integrate explicit identification of what makes an employee happy in the job. On the other hand, it might be relevant to strengthen the self-awareness of employees regarding the innate needs for inner and outer recognition to become more autonomous. Considering a lack of qualitative designs in happiness studies and the fruitful phenomenological research in both participants and industry, we advise to continue phenomenological research on this particular topic and for hospitality research in general.

References

Aristotle (1999). *Ethica Nicomachea*. (Dutch translation by Christine Pannier and Jean Verhaeghe). Groningen: Historische Uitgeverij.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology. 3*, 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Braun, V., Clarke, V. & Weate, P. (2016). Using thematic analysis in sport and exercise research. In: B. Smith & A. C. Sparkes (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Qualitative Research in Sport and Exercise* (pp. 191–205). London: Routledge.

Brown, E. A., Thomas, N. J., & Bosselman, R. H. (2015), Are they leaving or staying: A qualitative analysis of turnover issues for generation Y hospitality employees with a hospitality education. *International Journal of Hospitality Management, 46*, 130–137. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2015.01.011

Consumatics (2018). *Gelukkige Hotello's HotelloTOP*. https://www.consumatics.nl/nl/cases/gelukkige-hotello-s-hotellotop

De Wachter, D. (2019). *De kunst van het ongelukkig zijn*. Tielt: LannooCampus.

Fisher, C. (2010). Happiness at work. *International Journal of Management Reviews, 12*(4), 384–412. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2370.2009.00270.x

Frawley, A. (2015). Happiness research: A review of critiques. *Sociology Compass, 9*(1), 62–77. https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12236

Harter, J. K. & Gurley, V. F. (2008). Measuring well-being in the United States. *Association for Psychological Science, 21*(8), n.p. https://www.psychologicalscience.org/observer/measuring-well-being-in-the-united-states

Kashdan, T., Biswas-Diener, R., & King, L. (2008). Reconsidering happiness: The costs of distinguishing between hedonics and eudaimonia. *The Journal of Positive Psychology, 3*(4), 219–233. https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760802303044

Kerfoot, K. M. (2012). The pursuit of happiness, science, and effective staffing: The leader's challenge. *Nursing Economics, 30*(5), n.p. https://www.nursingeconomics.net/necfiles/kerfoot/SO_12.pdf

Kvale, S. (1983). The qualitative research interview: A phenomenological and a hermeneutical mode of understanding. *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology, 14*(2), 171–196.

Kvale, S. (2007). *Doing interviews*. London: Sage Publications.

Lakoff, G, & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Lee, J., Back, K. & Chan, E. (2015). Quality of work life and job satisfaction among frontline employees: a self-determination and need satisfaction approach. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management, 27*(5), 768–789. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJCHM-11–2013–0530

Nicol, J. J. (2008). Writing vocative texts. *The Qualitative Report, 13*(3), 316–333.

Pietkiewicz, I. & Smith, J. (2014). A practical guide to using interpretative phenomenological analysis in qualitative research psychology. *Journal of Psychology, 20*(1), 7–14.

Rubin, H. & Rubin, I. (2011). *Qualitative interviewing: The art of hearing data.* (3rd edn). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications Inc.

Seligman, M. E. & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). Positive psychology: An introduction in flow and the foundations of positive psychology. *American Psychological Association, 55*(1), 279–298. http://www.bdp-gus.de/gus/Positive-Psychologie-Aufruf-2000.pdf

Tsai, M., Cheng, C. & Chang, Y. (2010). Drivers of hospitality employees job satisfaction, organisational commitment and job performance. *African Journal of Business Management, 4*(18), 4118–4134.

Van Manen, M. (1997). From meaning to method. *Qualitative Health Research, 7*(3), 345–369.

Vasquez, D. (2014). Employee retention for economic stabilization: A qualitative phenomenological study in the hospitality sector. *International Journal of Management, Economics and Social Sciences, 3*(1), 1–17.

Wilson, A., Zeithaml, V., Bitner, M., & Gremler, D. (2016). *Services marketing: Integrating customer focus across the firm* (3rd edn). London: McGraw Hill Education.

Yang, J. (2010). Antecedents and consequences of job satisfaction in the hotel industry. *International Journal of Hospitality Management, 29*(1), 609–619. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2009.11.002