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Article

Cutting Through the Clutter: Cleaning the Lens on Work-Related Wellbeing Concepts

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Abstract

Work-related wellbeing research is increasingly constrained by conceptual and terminological clutter. Labels such as worker wellbeing, employee wellness, wellbeing at work, occupational health, quality of working life, and other terms are often treated as synonyms, defined at different levels of abstraction, or operationalised through proxies, limiting cumulative theory and cross-study comparability. This conceptual paper traces the historical evolution of work/er wellbeing across three overlapping strands—occupational safety and risk mitigation, a remedial organisational/occupational psychology focus on distress, and contemporary holistic and positive approaches, synthesises how semantic drift, interdisciplinary language gaps, and recurrent category errors contribute to conceptual and definitional disarray, and proposes an integrative meta-framework and conceptual map to help resolve this state of affairs. The framework distinguishes overall wellbeing from work-related wellbeing domains, separates domain labels from wellbeing components, clarifies population segmentations, and offers unified set of definitions to these wellbeing constructs. This conceptual work is intended to improve construct selection, specification, and measurement in both research and applied settings. The paper concludes with a forward agenda.

Keywords: worker wellbeing; work wellbeing; wellbeing at work; employee wellbeing

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1. Introduction

The Greek physician Galen asserted that employment is "nature's physician", essential to human happiness (Strauss, 1968), hence recognising that purposeful labour is a fundamental element of human physical and psychological flourishing. However, in today's complex and demanding work environments, such a view may be contested. While employment is vital for mitigating the adverse effects of unemployment and economic hardship, work may not always promote wellbeing or happiness, and can undermine and even actively impair workers' physical and psychological health. Hence work can be seen as a double-edge sword, which has the capacity to both enhance and erode workers' wellbeing.

Given its potential to yield contrasting outcomes for employees, and that these outcomes in turn impinge on organisations functioning and bottom lines, it may not be surprising that work-related wellbeing scholarship has spanned a century, and shows no sign of waning.

During this period, research on work/er wellbeing has evolved from an early emphasis on industrial safety and the prevention of occupational disease, through remedial and clinical psychological perspectives, to contemporary humanistic and holistic approaches (Martela, 2025; Wallace, 2022; Hamlin et al., 2015), as it shifted from scholarship rooted primarily in Management to a broad interdisciplinary domain, with psychological perspectives, particularly those drawing on Positive Work and Organisational Psychology, currently taking the lead (Martela, 2025).

Work/er wellbeing is increasingly recognised as a central driver of individual functioning, spanning performance, creativity and innovation, productivity, and organisational commitment, and

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resulting at the organisational level in profitability and sustainability, hence strengthening the business case for continued investment in employee wellbeing (Pandey et al., 2025; Martela, 2025).

Despite the importance and longevity of the concept, recent upsurge in the volume of research, and widespread organisational interest and applications, it has faced repeated critique, with researchers describing the field as "messy" (Wijngaards et al., 2022) and a "conceptual jungle" (Makikangas et al. 2016, p. 62). Fisher (2010) claimed that research in this domain is conducted in a manner similar to the proverbial elephant examined by blind men, whereby researchers "have developed a good if isolated understanding of its parts" but they may have "decomposed the beast into almost meaninglessly small pieces" (p. 391). Persistent issues such as multiple incompatible terms, terminological ambiguity, overlapping constructs, multiple and inconsistent definitions or lack of definitions, the absence of a unifying meta-theory, incompatible measures, and the use of numerous incongruent proxies, impede the progression of the field and further innovation, undermining the effective translation of its findings into practice, hence widening the gap between research and practice (Pandey et al., 2025; Wijngaards et al., 2022; Martela, 2025; Lomas et al., 2023, Pincus, 2023).

In this conceptual and critical paper we aim to address a key point of critique noted by scholars, but not fully addressed: the multiple concepts and terms used by scholars to refer to work/er wellbeing (for example: *worker wellbeing, employee wellbeing, occupational wellbeing, work wellbeing, wellbeing at work, work wellness, quality of working life, employee health, etc)*. Specifically, we summarise and explore the myriad concepts referring to work/er wellbeing, review their definitions, examine the roots or sources of indistinction, and propose a way to address the critique by mapping key terms, and demonstrating their points of convergence and divergence. Through this conceptual mapping exercise we aim to clear the terminological jumble, and clarify, reconfigure and refine this scholarly terrain. We note that the paper does not offer a complete and exhaustive review or a systematic review of *all* the concepts that refer to wellbeing in the work domain. Rather, it focuses on **key terms** and **critical areas of ambiguity** that have the potential to advance the field when resolved.

The paper begins by offering a historical overview of the field, which we consider a key cause of the conceptual muddle. Next, we depict key concepts that scholars often use to refer to work or worker wellbeing, alongside their definitions, highlighting some areas of vagueness, and reviewing the critiques articulated in the literature on the concepts and their definitions. We then consider the underlying causes or origins of the reported issues. In response to the critique, we propose a conceptual map that demarcates the relationships among these terms, hence distinguishing between distinctive terms and synonymous terms. Finally, the paper highlights current research gaps and outlines directions for future research.

2. Work/er Wellbeing: A Historical Overview

Over more than a century, scholarship on work/er wellbeing has evolved in step with industrial, psychological, technological, and social transformations. This development can be categorised into three broad phases:

2.1. Phase 1: A Focus on Occupational Safety and Risk Mitigation (1900–1950)

During this early period, worker wellbeing was predominantly construed from a preventative perspective, with the key aim of mitigating workplace injuries and occupational illnesses during a time of rapid industrial expansion. Legislative reforms and organisational practices centred on physical safety, limiting exposure to hazardous substances and unsanitary conditions through policies and statutory safeguards. Institutions such as the International Labour Organization (est. 1919) and the International Commission on Occupational Health (est. 1906) helped formalise occupational health as a field oriented toward risk control and hygiene, promoting standards for safe work and the systematic recording and notification of occupational accidents and work-related diseases (Greenfield, 2020; Grut, 1951).

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Throughout this era, wellbeing was largely framed as a public health concern, focused on mitigation and protection—prioritising defence against physical hazards over proactive health promotion (Wallace, 2022; Greenfield, 2020).

Over subsequent decades, this orientation developed into the contemporary Health and Safety paradigm implemented across numerous organisations. This perspective encompasses the policies, practices, and systems designed to protect, maintain, and promote employees' health and safety at work, principally by preventing accidents, injuries, and occupational diseases (Hughes & Ferrett, 2011). The evolution of labour movements and advances in scientific knowledge substantially shaped the emergence of modern safety regulations (Aldrich, 1997), which commonly require employers to provide safe working environments, conduct risk assessments, and introduce preventive measures.

Within this framework, worker wellbeing is therefore often equated with physical health, and defined as the absence of injury or illness, and many organisations still operate with this bounded conception.

2.2. Phase 2: Organisational Psychology – A Remedial Focus (1960–1990)

This period marked a shift toward organisational psychology with a distinctly remedial orientation, extending the notion of wellbeing to encompass psychological phenomena such as stress, burnout and workaholism. Researchers investigated the mental load of modern work, and interventions included employee counselling, and efforts to harmonise personal and organisational goals. The concept of wellbeing shifted during this period toward the management of psychological distress, moving beyond physical aspects (Wallace, 2022).

Two strands of research and practice rose to prominence during this period—Occupational Health Psychology and Business Psychology— which brought about the recognition of the impact of work on psychological health.

- Occupational Health Psychology (OHP) is an applied field dedicated to enhancing the quality of working life and safeguarding worker wellbeing. Core concerns include preventing and addressing stress and burnout, shaping safety behaviours and safety culture, supporting healthier work–life balance through policy and programme design, and mitigating or treating the consequences of aggression and bullying at work (Quick, 1999; Schonfeld & Chang, 2017). Today OHP remains more explicitly health-centred, prioritising workers' wellbeing, safety, and health. Its interventions typically target the reduction of workplace stressors and risks to improve wellbeing.
- **Business (Organisational) Psychology** is defined as the science and practice of improving working life and organisational functioning. Key domains include personnel selection and recruitment (e.g., designing tests, interviews, and other selection procedures), training and development, performance appraisal and improvement systems, leadership and management development, change and restructuring support, and team effectiveness (Mckenna, 2020). While often intersecting with OHP, Business Psychology has a broader remit encompassing recruitment, performance, leadership, and organisational design. Interventions commonly aim to enhance outcomes such as productivity, retention, and efficiency.

Due to the dominance of these approaches, psychological work-related conditions and disorders began to attract the attention of researchers and practitioners (Maslach et al., 2001), and organisations began to adopt policies and practices that aim to support employees by addressing factors that undermine employees' wellbeing (such as overwork, occupational risk, organisational change, and bullying)

Today, both disciplines sit alongside the Health and Safety model and retain a largely curative orientation to wellbeing. By definition, they focus on compromised work wellbeing, and the factors that can erode it. At the same time, they bring together several aspects of wellbeing, including physical wellbeing (seen as the absence of illness or injury), and psychological wellbeing (mainly assessed through the absence of occupational psychological disorders), examining organisational

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factors that impinge on wellbeing such as organisational culture, policies, structures and job design, and by looking into the work-life interface (Quick, 1999; Mckenna, 2020).

2.3. Phase 3: The Holistic and Positive Wellbeing Era (1990–Present)

Contemporary approaches adopt multidimensional models that span physical, psychological, social, and economic domains. Current thinking draws heavily on Positive Work and Organisations—an interdisciplinary field synthesising Positive Psychology with Management and Organisational scholarship, defined as the study and application of psychological processes that foster employee and organisational flourishing (Warren et al., 2017). The overarching term Positive Work and Organisations (or Positive Work and Organisational Psychology) is a relatively recent ~~overarching~~ label that integrates three closely related sub-domains:

- **Positive Organisational Psychology** (POP; Donaldson & Ko, 2010).This field is concerned with the scientific study of positive subjective experiences in the workplace. Its primary focus is on individual employees and the interface between employees and their organisations. Its key aim is to develop applications that enhance individuals' quality of life within their work context. Typical topics include occupational wellbeing, positive leadership, job satisfaction, work engagement, motivation, positive relationships, and meaningful work.
- **Positive Organisational Behaviour** (POB; Luthans, 2002).POB is defined as "the study and application of positively oriented human resource strengths and psychological capacities that can be measured, developed, and effectively managed for performance improvement in today's workplace" (Luthans, 2002, p. 59). The emphasis is therefore on individual-level positive psychological states and resources that relate to wellbeing or performance, such as strengths, hope, optimism, resilience, and prosocial behaviour.
- **Positive Organisational Scholarship** (POS; Cameron et al., 2003).POS is defined as "the study of that which is positive, flourishing, and life-giving in organisations" (Cameron & Caza, 2004, p. 731). It focuses on organisational characteristics and processes, and on their implications for both employees and organisations. This sub-domain examines the interpersonal and structural dynamics that are activated in and through organisations (Cameron & Caza, 2004), including phenomena such as organisational virtuousness, positive deviance, and appreciative cultures (Cameron et al., 2003). Its core concern is the achievement of work-related outcomes through positive means.

As these definitions illustrate, the three sub-domains overlap to some degree, which has led to conceptual ambiguity and confusion. To reduce such misunderstandings, Warren et al. (2017) proposed the umbrella term Positive Work and Organisations (PWO) to encompass all three areas. The overarching purpose of PWO is "to encourage dialogue across subfields and serve as a clearinghouse for best practices in positive psychology theory building and practice" (Donaldson et al., 2019, p. 114).

PWO promotes virtuous organisational practices—"formal organisational practices that focus on employees' psychological wellbeing and optimal health" (Aubouin-Bonnaventure et al., 2021, p. 2), to cultivate environments that actively enhance wellbeing rather than merely preventing harm or treating disorders. In parallel, it examines individual contributors to wellbeing, thereby placing some responsibility on workers themselves. Definitions of work wellbeing have accordingly shifted from an exclusive harm-avoidance or remedial lenses to more holistic accounts (Kentta & Virtaharju, 2023: Wallace, 2022).

Despite this progress, for nearly three decades the conceptualisation of work/er wellbeing remained ambiguous and contested (Martela, 2025). Much of the research in Positive Work and Organisational Psychology borrowed from broader Positive Psychology wellbeing frameworks and measures, resulting in scarce constructs tailored specifically to the work domain. This relative stagnation may reflect the maturation trajectory of wellbeing as a concept (Pipera & Fragouli, 2021). Recent advances in conceptualising wellbeing (see for example Lomas et al., 2023) have prompted a

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renewed interest in its workplace expression, spurring fresh conceptual analyses and reviews (Martela, 2025; Bautista et al., 2023; Pandey et al., 2025) (see details below).

As these historical trends unfolded and progressed from one phase to the next, the concept of work/er wellbeing underwent changes in its meaning, definitions, and associations—a process known as semantic drift (Stavropoulos et al., 2019). However, although such drift can result in conceptual replacement, this did not occur in this instance. In fact, the three traditions—Health and Safety, Organisational/Occupational Psychology, and Positive Work and Organisations seem to operate side by side in contemporary practice, though in some organisations they are beginning to converge into integrated wellbeing strategies that couple psychosocial risk management and job design with growth-oriented practices and individual supports (Aubouin-Bonnaventure et al., 2021). In scholarship, however, they proceed both in parallel and in concert: researchers draw selectively across frameworks, mix constructs, and apply heterogeneous measures (Jarden et al., 2023). This simultaneous separation and blending, we argue, contributes to persistent terminological and conceptual imprecision and measurement issues in the worker wellbeing literature, as detailed below.

3. Work/er Wellbeing: Terminological Clutter

A persistent weakness and a major source of confusion in the work/er wellbeing literature is the abundance of labels for the same underlying ideas. Disaggregating the phrase "work(er) wellbeing" reveals that multiple constructs are used interchangeably with "*wellbeing*" (or *well-being* in US spelling), including *quality of life*, *health, welfare, wholebeing* and *wellness*. Likewise, the "work" referent is variously phrased as *work*, *workplace*, *worker*, *employee*, *personnel*, *staff, organisational* or *occupational*. These building blocks are then recombined into a wide array of terms that commonly feature in the literature, including for example *worker wellbeing* (Wijngaards et al., 2022), *employee wellbeing* (Valtonen et al., 2025), *occupational wellbeing* (Saraswati et al., 2019), *work wellbeing* (Jarden et al., 2023), *workplace wellbeing* (Kinowska & Sienkiewicz, 2023), *wellbeing at work* (Clifton & Harter, 2021), *work wellness* (Klerk, 2005), *employee welfare* (Lintong & Bukidz, 2024), *quality of working life* (Horst et al., 2014), *quality of life at work* (Schmidt et al., 2008), *staff wellbeing* (Jayman et al., 2022), *organisational wellbeing* (Kenttä & Virtaharju, 2023), *employee health* (Kleine et al., 2023), and *employee wholebeing* (Rani et al., 2024) to name a few.

Some of these terms are used synonymously in the literature, while others are seen as distinct concepts. For example, in reference to *work wellbeing,* De-Neve and Ward (2025) used the term synonymously with *workplace wellbeing.* Laine and Rinne (2015) conducted a review on *wellbeing at work*, using the term interchangeably with *work wellbeing*. To conduct their review, they used the search terms *wellbeing at work, work wellbeing, occupational wellbeing* or *employee wellbeing.* Similarly, in their systematic review of measures of *worker wellbeing,* Jarden et al. (2023) used the search terms *worker wellbeing*, *employee wellbeing, staff wellbeing* and *personnel wellbeing*. Daniels et al. (2019) noted that the distinction between *workplace health and wellbeing* particularly from the perspective of service providers is fuzzy. Making a similar point but in reference to research, Danna and Griffin (1999) observed that researchers often use the terms *health* and *wellbeing* inconsistently, with terms such as *psychological wellbeing, physical wellbeing, mental health* and *physical health* used interchangeably, and argued that the terms *employee health* and *employee wellbeing* should not be conflated. Wijngaards et al. (2022) also made some useful distinctions between *worker wellbeing*, *employee wellbeing*, and *work wellbeing* (detailed below).

An additional muddle arises from failing to differentiate between umbrella, context-free constructs - such as *overall wellbeing,* which aggregates multiple domains (psychological, social, occupational, financial wellbeing, etc.), from domain-specific wellbeing concepts such as *occupational wellbeing* or *work wellbeing* (Wijngaards et al., 2022; Warr & Nielsen, 2018). For example, Pandey et al.'s (2025) review of *employee wellbeing* literature indicates that scholars often conflate *overall wellbeing*, with specific work-related wellbeing concepts such as *employee wellbeing* and *wellbeing at work*. Bartels et al. (2019) criticised the tendency to adopt conceptualisations or measures of *general*

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wellbeing and "re-tool" them "to fit the work domains" (p.2) and noted that this is a key limitation in the contemporary *workplace wellbeing* literature, since the broader wellbeing concept does not capture accurately what it means to *flourish at work*. Similarly, Pipera and Fragouli (2021, p. 2) cautioned that "the term of *employee wellbeing* should not be confused with the concept of *general wellbeing*".

Additionally, researchers often adopt *psychological wellbeing* models and measures, such as Seligman's (2012) PERMA model or Ryff's (1989) Psychological Wellbeing model, as means to conceptualise and assess *employee wellbeing* or *work wellbeing* (Laine & Rinne, 2015**;** Pandey et al., 2025). Kenttä and Virtaharju (2023, p. 562) critiqued this tendency while noting the "increasing dominance of the psychological vocabulary" in *organisational wellbeing* scholarship.

Compounding this, constructs that are considered components of the work/er wellbeing construct, such as *subjective wellbeing at work* (Magnier-Watanabe et al., 2023**),** *emotional wellbeing at work* (Salavera & Urbón, 2024), *happiness at work* (Fisher, 2010), *workplace happiness* (Kun & Gadanecz, 2022), and *job satisfaction* (Wartenberg et al., 2023**),** and on the negative side - *work stress* **(**Burman & Goswami, 2018) and *occupational burnout* (Demerouti et al., 2021), are sometimes used as proxies for larger wellbeing concepts (though it is often unclear which one) and at other times treated as distinct constructs. For example, Valtonen et al. (2025) observed that some studies conflate *employee wellbeing* with constructs such as *job satisfaction, psychological wellbeing*, and *subjective wellbeing*. Likewise, Schmidt et al. (2008) noted that *satisfaction with work* is often treated as a proxy for *quality of life at work*, while Warr & Nielsen (2018) noted that several proxies are used in the literature for *job-related wellbeing*, including *job-satisfaction, life satisfaction,* and *job-related affect*. Zheng et al. (2015) similarly noted that *psychological wellbeing, subjective wellbeing*, and *job satisfaction* have often been used as proxies to represent *employee wellbeing*.

Further ambiguity arises from the multiple terms that denote high or low levels of work wellbeing, such as *flourishing at work* (Peethambaran & Naim, 2025) *thriving at work* (Kleine et al., 2023**),** and, on the negative side, *work illbeing* (Jarden et al., 2023) *suffering at work* (Allard-Poesi & Hollet-Haudebert, 2017), and *languishing at work* (Rautenbach, 2015). In the literature these terms are mostly used as synonymous terms for a variety of broader wellbeing concepts. For example, in one study the term *flourishing at work* has been used to denote *employee wellbeing* (Redelinghuys et al., 2019), and in another paper it depicts *workers' mental health* (A'yuninnisa et al., 2023).

Kelley (1927) coined the term *jingle–jangle fallacy* to characterise two common conceptual errors, proposing that a jingle fallacy arises when a single label is used for different constructs, whereas a jangle fallacy occurs when different labels are used for what is essentially the same construct. As seen in the depiction above, both types of errors seem to feature in the work/er wellbeing literature.

Surprisingly, only few scholars acknowledged the abundance of terms and the terminological ambiguities. Martela (2025) noted that multiple constructs are used to examine *employee wellbeing* and some have developed largely in isolation from one another. Fisher (2014) observed within the work domain, "a great number of concepts might be construed as belonging to the family of wellbeing constructs" (p. 14). Both authors noted that this state of terminological tangle has severe ramifications for research. It cascades into the definitions of these terms, and into the scales developed to measure these constructs, and undermines the ability to compare findings across studies, thereby constraining the development of cumulative science and high-level theorising.

4. Work/er Wellbeing: Definitions in Disarray

Alongside the proliferation of ambiguous concepts described above, authors have noted that researchers struggle to reach a consensus on the definitions of these terms. For example, with regard to *employee wellbeing*, Pradhan and Hati (2022, p. 387) remarked that its definition remains "unclear and unresolved", while Pandey et al. (2025) identified six partially converging and diverging definitions of the construct. Similarly, Valtonen et al. (2025) criticised both the absence of an accepted definition of the term and the heterogeneity of its measurement tools, which typically reflect

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researchers' own interpretations, ranging from scales that assess depression and anxiety, to psychological wellbeing, or job satisfaction.

Similar concerns have been raised about other constructs. Saraswati et al. (2019) argued that the term *occupational wellbeing* has not been fully integrated into occupational therapy practice, partly because of difficulties surrounding its conceptualisation and definition. Regarding the term *quality of life at work*, in their review of 17 studies, Schmidt et al. (2008) observed that there was no consensus on the meaning of the concept. With respect to *wellbeing at work*, Schulte & Vainio (2010) noted that numerous definitions exist, and they vary by discipline, while Fisher (2014) observed that it has been operationalised in a wide variety of ways, and suggested that "it is time to agree on a more comprehensive definition of overall *wellbeing at work*" (p. 25). Similarly, Danna and Griffin (1999) described wellbeing in the workplace as conceptually vague. Focusing on *worker wellbeing*, Wijngaards et al. (2022) underscored the complexity of the construct and noted that the multitude of conceptualisations and measurement approaches makes it difficult for researchers to select and convincingly justify their chosen research strategies. Likewise, in relation to *work wellbeing*, Jarden et al. (2023, p. 2) noted that "theoretical models and definitions are varied and usually from a Western perspective", while De-Neve and Ward (2025) commented that the concept of *work wellbeing* is regarded by many as vague and ill-defined, thereby hindering both its scientific development and its practical implementation. Finally, Penttä and Virtaharju, (2023) examined the concept of *organisational wellbeing* and questioned whether "a single wellbeing vocabulary be all-encompassing" (p. 560) and noted that a theory or a concept "cannot be accurate, simple, and comprehensive at the same time" (p.560).

Table 1 presents a sample of concepts and their definitions to illustrate the extent of the conceptual disarray. It is noteworthy, however, that most papers do not define the work-related wellbeing construct being examined.

Table 1. A sample of work-related wellbeing concepts and their definitions.

Concept	Definition
Overall wellbeing	*Personal wellbeing* may be understood as life satisfaction derived from an individual's perceptions of their health, happiness, and sense of purpose (Litchfield et al., 2016).
Overall health	*Overall health* comprises a range of factors, including physical, mental, and social wellbeing, and is not merely the absence of disease or infirmity (Jarden et al., 2023).
Worker wellbeing	Chari et al. (2018) conceptualised *worker wellbeing* as a quality-of-life construct, referring to an individual's health in relation to environmental, organisational, and psychosocial factors associated with work. Wellbeing is understood as the experience of positive perceptions and enabling conditions at, and outside of, work, that allow workers to thrive and realise their full potential. The authors further stressed that *worker wellbeing* should encompass both work and nonwork domains and should be assessed using both subjective and objective indicators.
	Jarden et al. (2023) proposed that *worker wellbeing* can be understood as the balance between an individual's resources and the challenges they face at work, with key components including subjective wellbeing, eudaimonic wellbeing, and social wellbeing.
Employee wellbeing	*Employee wellbeing* refers to the overall quality of an individual's experience at work, encompassing their *physical, psychological, social, financial, and spiritual wellbeing* (Pandey et al., 2025).
	Page and Vella-Brodrick (2009) posited that *subjective* and *psychological wellbeing* should be regarded as key components of *employee wellbeing*.
	Warr (1990) defined *employee wellbeing* as the overall quality of an employee's experience and functioning at work. He later refined this definition (Warr, 1999), describing it as the employee's experience and functioning, incorporating both physical and psychological dimensions.

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	Martela (2025) conceptualised *employee wellbeing* as a broad, subjective umbrella construct that encompasses the various factors that make work a positive experience for employees.
	Kinowska and Sienkiewicz (2023) observed that *employee wellbeing* is frequently conceptualised in terms of psychological wellbeing, which comprises two perspectives: a hedonic perspective, concerned with positive emotions and satisfaction, and a eudaimonic perspective, centred on the realisation of human potential.
	Employee wellbeing can be defined as an evaluation of employees' physical, mental, and social state, encompassing both their work and non-work life experiences (Pipera & Fragouli, 2021).
	Grant et al. (2007) defined *employee wellbeing* as the overall quality of employees' experience and functioning in the workplace.
	Boxall and Macky (2014) conceptualised *employee wellbeing* as a holistic construct comprising job satisfaction, physical health, mental health, and relationship outcomes.
	Danna and Griffin (1999) described *employee wellbeing* as encompassing employees' physical and mental health, spanning both their work and broader life experiences.
	Employee wellbeing can be defined as how individuals feel and function within their workplaces. (Valtonen et al., 2025).
	Zheng et al. (2015) maintained that *employee wellbeing* can be understood as employees' quality of life and psychological state in the workplace.
Occupational wellbeing	*Occupational wellbeing* denotes the sense of meaning and satisfaction that individuals derive from their occupational lives (Doble & Santha, 2008).
	Saraswati et al. (2019) proposed a framework in which *occupational wellbeing* is understood as the subjective meaning a person ascribes to their occupational life. It comprises several intrinsic needs: agency, accomplishment, affirmation, pleasure renewal, coherence, and companionship.
Work wellbeing	Laine and Rinne (2015), in their review of 316 papers, observed that most contemporary definitions of *work wellbeing* employ *subjective wellbeing* as a key indicator, referring to individuals' cognitive and affective evaluations of their lives. *Psychological* wellbeing constitutes another core component of *work wellbeing*, reflecting positive psychological functioning.
Work/place wellbeing	De-Neve and Ward (2025) used the term *work wellbeing* interchangeably with *workplace wellbeing* and observed that researchers frequently conflate *workplace wellbeing* with *workplace subjective wellbeing* (often labelled *workplace happiness*) and therefore proposed a definition of *workplace wellbeing* grounded in *subjective wellbeing*. *Workplace subjective wellbeing*, in their view, comprises three elements: evaluative job satisfaction, emotional experiences at work, and eudaimonic work wellbeing, that is, experiencing work as purposeful, worthwhile, or meaningful. They further argued that eudaimonia is embedded within subjective wellbeing.
Workplace wellbeing	Wallace (2022) conceptualised *workplace wellbeing* as a biopsychosocial construct encompassing physical, mental, and social health.
	According to Leiter and Cooper (2017) *workplace wellbeing* encompasses physical health and comfort, mental health, a predominance of positive over negative affect, and favourable attitudes towards one's work.
	Workplace well-being, is "defined as an employee's subjective evaluation of his or her ability to develop and optimally function within the workplace" (Bartels et al., 2019, p.3) and incorporates 11 dimensions: Six that are incorporated in Ryff's (1989) Psychological Wellbeing model (purpose, autonomy, mastery, relationship, and self acceptance), and five drawn from Keyes' (1998) Social Wellbeing model (social integration, social acceptance, social contribution, social actualization, and social coherence).

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	Workplace wellbeing refers to employees' overall experience and functioning, encompassing both physical and psychological dimensions. It is a construct that is partly determined by employees' personality traits and partly shaped by their working conditions (Kinowska & Sienkiewicz, 2023).
Wellbeing at work	Fisher (2014) proposed that *wellbeing at work* comprises three components: *subjective wellbeing at work* (including positive attitudinal judgements and the experience of positive and negative affect), *eudaimonic wellbeing at work* (involving engagement in growth-oriented, self-actualising behaviours), and *social wellbeing at work* (centred on the relational aspects of work).
Work wellness	*Work wellness* is an optimal state of living that each individual can attain, encompassing physical, mental, and spiritual wellbeing. It may be defined as a way of life oriented towards optimal health and wellbeing, in which body, mind, and spirit are integrated to enable fuller participation in both human and natural communities (Klerk, 2005).
	Wicken (2000) described *work wellness* as a component of *overall wellness*, defined as the process of becoming aware of and making choices toward a more successful existence. It encompassed several dimensions such as social, spiritual, physical, occupational, emotional and intellectual.
Employee welfare	Lintong and Bukidz (2024) defined employee welfare as a state in which individuals feel happy, healthy, and safe, and have opportunities to develop their potential.
Quality of work life	Horst et al. (2014) defined quality of work life as employees' evaluation of the demands they face and the aspirations they hold in relation to working conditions, remuneration, professional development, work–family and role balance, safety, and social interactions in the workplace.
	Quality of work life refers to the favourable workplace conditions and environments that support employees' welfare and wellbeing (Huang et al., 2007).
Quality of life at work	*Quality of life at work* "has been understood as the dynamic and comprehensive management of physical, technological, social, and psychological factors that affect culture and renew the organisational environment" (Schmidt et al., 2008, p.331).
Subjective Wellbeing at Work	*Subjective wellbeing at work* refers to employees' day-to-day emotional experiences at work, both positive and negative, as well as their *satisfaction with their work* (Magnier-Watanabe et al., 2023).
Workplace happiness	*Workplace happiness* describes employees' experience of feeling energised and enthusiastic about their work, perceiving it as meaningful and purposeful, enjoying positive relationships at work, and feeling committed to their jobs (Kun & Gadanecz, 2022).
Happiness at work	Fitriana et al. (2021) defined happiness at work as feeling good about one's work, feeling positive about job characteristics, and feeling aligned with the organisation as a whole, reflected in pleasant judgements and experiences such as positive feelings, flow at work, moods, and emotions.
Job satisfaction	Judge et al. (2017) defined *job satisfaction* as the overall evaluative judgement one holds about one's job. It represents an assessment of the favourability of the job, typically conceptualised along a continuum from positive to negative. Organisational psychologists distinguish between overall satisfaction—one's evaluation of the job as a whole—and facet satisfactions, which concern specific aspects of the job, such as work tasks, pay, promotions, supervision, or coworkers, such as those that make up the job.
Workplace flourishing	According to Rautenbach (2015) *workplace flourishing* comprises three dimensions: emotional, psychological, and social wellbeing.
Flourishing at work	*Flourishing at work* refers to a high state of *employee wellbeing* that arises from positive work experiences and the effective management of job-related factors (Redelinghuys et al., 2019).

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Thriving at work	Spreitzer et al. (2005) conceptualised *thriving at work* as a psychological state characterised by employees' vitality and learning. Thriving employees feel energised and alive, while simultaneously perceiving that they are gaining new knowledge and skills.

A close review of the concepts and definitions presented in Table 1 highlights some intriguing points. First, some terms are conceptualised in different ways (for example - *employee wellbeing*). Second, definitions vary in what they refer to and in their levels of abstraction. Some definitions state what the term means (see for example Huang et al.'s (2007) exploration of *quality of work life*), while others highlight the components of the construct, (see Fisher's (2014) definition of *wellbeing at work*), or refer to its sub domains (for example, Pandey et al.'s (2025) e*mployee wellbeing* definition), or examine the factors that shape wellbeing (see Martela's (2025) *employee wellbeing* description). Lastly, some of the definitions also use other, similarly vague terms, to explain the concept they aim to unpack (see for example Zheng et al.'s (2015) *employee wellbeing* definition).

Taken together, the abundance of concepts in this domain, the heterogeneity in how each is defined, the lack of precision, and the varying levels of abstraction and categorisations all suggest that work/er wellbeing research has reached a critical point of fragmentation and conceptual disarray, and is in pressing need of clarification and unification. In the next section, we therefore turn to examine the underlying causes or sources that prompted this state of affairs.

5. Tracing the Sources of the Terminological and Conceptual Tangle in Work/er Wellbeing Scholarship

What underlies the proliferation of concepts, ambiguous terminology, and inconsistent definitions? Only a small number of authors have sought to examine this issue, and their discussions have largely centred on three aspects: the challenges arising from interdisciplinary work, the legacy of the three historical research traditions outlined earlier, and difficulties associated with the overarching construct of wellbeing.

5.1. Interdisciplinary Challenges

Wassell and Dodge (2022) attributed these ambiguities to the multidisciplinary nature of work/er wellbeing scholarship arguing that "different fields of study use different vocabulary and models to understand the complexity of wellbeing" (p. 98). Contemporary work/er wellbeing research indeed draws on a wide range of disciplines, including various branches of Management and Psychology, as well as Philosophy, Health, Economics, Policy studies, Neuroscience, Education, Social Work, and Environmental studies, among others.

This multidisciplinary interest has generated an abundance of constructs, synonymous terms, varied definitions, and diverse interpretations of wellbeing, its dimensions, and its components, which speaks to the richness of the field. At the same time, it exposes the underdevelopment of one of the key foundations of interdisciplinary work – a common language, giving rise to substantial misunderstandings and recurring critique.

Importantly, as noted earlier, Positive Work and Organisations, now regarded as a leading perspective in this area, is itself an interdisciplinary field that integrates Positive Psychology with Management and Organisational scholarship. However, there has been no assessment of the extent to which these two parent disciplines have been successfully integrated within Positive Work and Organisations.

In their examination of the processes involved in the emergence of new interdisciplinary scientific domains, Lyall et al. (2011) distinguished between three distinct approaches to integrating knowledge across disciplines:

- **Multidisciplinary research:** In this approach, researchers from different disciplines engage with a shared research problem while largely retaining their own disciplinary lenses. The contributing

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disciplines remain separate, offering parallel inputs to the research question without substantial integration of their methods or theoretical frameworks.

- **Interdisciplinary research:** This approach is more integrative, involving the deliberate amalgamation of theories, concepts, and methods from multiple disciplines. Researchers collaborate across disciplinary boundaries to co-create new frameworks and methodological approaches, with an emphasis on synthesising and unifying diverse perspectives.
- **Transdisciplinary research:** This category represents the highest level of integration, extending collaboration beyond academic disciplines to include non-academic stakeholders such as policymakers and practitioners. The focus is on addressing complex, real-world problems, rather than remaining confined to discipline-based theoretical concerns.

Each of these approaches embodies a distinct degree of collaboration and integration across different fields of study, and many interdisciplinary domains move from one approach to the next as they mature, and as the amalgamation between the parent disciplines becomes robust and applied more widely. We maintain that Positive Work and Organisations has advanced well beyond multidisciplinary research, as there are strong indications of interdisciplinary work and new theoretical frameworks and methods emerging (see reviews by Van Zyl et al., 2023; Meyers et al., 2022; Donaldson et al., 2022; Sonnentag et al., 2023). There are also signs that its applications are being adopted outside the academic sphere – indicating a transdisciplinary approach (see Nielsen et al., 2017; Saleh, 2025).

Lyall et al. (2011) emphasised that a key stage in the development of new interdisciplinary domains is the creation of a shared language, which is crucial for sustaining the discipline's growth. When this stage is absent or only partially completed, the differing 'languages' of the disciplines mean that, even when partners believe they have achieved mutual understanding, it may later become evident that their interpretations diverged—by which point difficulties in coordinating strands of work may already have arisen. Consequently, the same term may be used to denote different concepts across disciplines, and different terms may be used to describe the same construct – a classic jingle jangle fallacy (Kelley, 1927). We argue that this characterisation aligns closely with the current jumble of terminology in the work-related wellbeing field and may offer an explanation as to how this state has evolved. The fact that only a small number of authors have remarked on this issue suggests that there has been no substantive discussion of language and terminology in this sphere, which we hope to instigate.

5.2. Legacy Terminology

A second source of the current terminological ambiguity, conflation, and clutter in our view stems from the three historical research streams outlined earlier, which continue to run in parallel today, each with its own vocabulary and evolving meanings. For example, the varied *quality of work* terms have emerged from the remedial scholarship and practice, while the *health* related terms emerged from the health and safety tradition. These legacy terms are not only in ongoing use but continue to evolve, with most scholars aligning with the core paradigms of Positive Work and Organisations in how they conceptualise the components of the constructs under examination (see below). However, they often do so without adopting the more mainstream labels or clearly differentiating between those that refer to health, wellbeing, or quality of life.

5.3. The Construct of Wellbeing

A third, and arguably central, source of the current conceptual clutter concerns the developmental status of the overarching construct of wellbeing. Pipera and Fragouli (2021) observed that overall wellbeing is a complex, multidimensional concept that is difficult to define and measure, and that this lack of clarity is reflected in related work-focused constructs. We agree with this observation and note that the concept of wellbeing has seen similar challenges to those reviewed above and likewise attracted fierce critique.

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Several authors noted the multitude of synonymous terms used in the literature to represent wellbeing. These include *health*, *quality of life* and *wellness* (Lomas et al., 2023; Pincus, 2023; Roscoe, 2009).

Furthermore, and similar to the conundrum reported in work/er wellbeing scholarship, in much of the research, terms that represent components of wellbeing, including *subjective wellbeing, emotional wellbeing, happiness, utility and life satisfaction* are often either conflated with the term wellbeing or used as proxies (Lomas et al., 2023, Pincus, 2023).

Terms that denote high or low levels of wellbeing including *optimal wellbeing, flourishing, thriving, prosperity*, and on the low side, *distress, suffering, struggling and ailing*, are also used interchangeably with wellbeing (Lomas et al., 2023).

Reflecting on this state of affairs, Pincus (2023) argued that, due to the varied starting points of different research traditions, the *wellbeing* literature has become saturated with a proliferation of constructs, dimensions, components, and subcomponents. Lomas et al. (2023) likewise observed that these core terms carry multiple meanings and are employed in contested, and at times conflicting ways, which makes establishing common ground difficult. They considered the concepts of *wellbeing* and *health* particularly difficult to disentangle, since contemporary discourse variously treats them as synonymous terms, presents health as a subset of the broader notion of wellbeing, or vice versa, or depicts them as only partially overlapping—with the boundaries between them often left unclear.

The very notion of wellbeing carries distinct connotations across different languages. For example, Lomas (2016) identified 216 'untranslatable' terms related to wellbeing drawn from a broad array of world languages.

Analogous to the conceptual ambiguity surrounding work-related wellbeing constructs, the lack of a shared definition of the broader term *general (or overall) wellbeing* has also been the subject of substantial critique. Lomas et al. (2023) noted that, despite extensive scholarly work, the question of how wellbeing should be defined remains largely unresolved. Consequently, definitions of wellbeing have become "blurred and overly broad" (Forgeard et al., 2011, p. 81). In a similar vein, Thomas (2009, p. 11) contended that wellbeing is "intangible, difficult to define, and even harder to measure," while Pollard and Lee (2003, p. 60) characterised it as "a complex, multi-faceted construct that has continued to elude researchers' attempts to define and measure." Drawing on an extensive review of wellbeing scholarship, Pincus (2023) observed that, although few concepts have achieved such rapid and widespread uptake across diverse disciplines, the field is "highly fragmented with muddled theoretical and operational definitions beset by category errors, with most frameworks failing to separate causes from effects, state variables from trait variables, and endogenous psychological variables from exogenous environmental or policy variables" (p. 1542). Other reviews have catalogued the diverse ways in which wellbeing has been defined (Blount et al., 2020; Oliver et al., 2018; Linton et al., 2016; Roscoe, 2009), but their findings offer little reassurance to those seeking greater conceptual clarity.

A similar line of critique has been directed at the concept of *wellness*. Roscoe (2009, p. 216) observed that "despite significant attention to *wellness* in the literature, there is surprisingly little consensus on the definition of the construct". This point was echoed by Oliver et al. (2018), who characterise the state of the field as follows: "*wellness* is a concept at the forefront of health promotion. It has practical and therapeutic benefits applicable across a plethora of life domains. However, to date, there is no agreed-upon definition on what constitutes wellness among researchers in the field" (p. 41). Blount et al. (2020) argued that *wellness* is conceptualised differently across professions, hence complicating its application. In the helping professions for example, *wellness* underpins therapeutic philosophy, codes of practice, and policies, and therefore the absence of a shared definition has direct implications for the care provided to clients.

As seen earlier, these terminological ambiguities seem to have cascaded into work-related *wellbeing* concepts as well as into other domains of wellbeing, where constructs such as social, psychological, physical, and financial wellbeing are likewise characterised by multiple synonymous labels and imprecise definitions and interpretations. For example, in reference to *financial wellbeing*

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García-Mata & Zerón-Félix (2022) identified 18 definitions of the term, while Riitsalu et al. (2023) highlighted the lack of consensus around a definition.

Intriguingly, the conceptualisation of the sub-domains of *overall wellbeing* has become in itself an area of ambiguity within the wellbeing scholarship. Pincus (2023, p.1544) argued that the field has been gripped by an "arms race of expanding domains. In the 1970s, wellbeing models included an average of four domains; this increased to an average of five in the 1980s and 1990s; since 2000, the average number of domains has again increased to seven domains, with some entrants proposing 12 and up to 17 domains of wellbeing". This indicates that there is no consensus on how many life domains the *overall wellbeing* concept encompasses with some authors working with broader terms, while others focus on narrower concepts.

5.4. Category Errors

An additional cause of the terminological jumble in our view is the lack of distinction between terms that refer to different aspects of the wellbeing concept:

- **Context free concepts:** These are concepts that refer to general or overall wellbeing.
- **Wellbeing domains:** These are context-specific concepts, such as such as psychological wellbeing, physical wellbeing, social wellbeing, occupational wellbeing, etc.
- **Components of wellbeing:** These refer to terms such as happiness, hedonic, or eudaimonic wellbeing, etc.
- **Population segmentations:** Referring for example to worker wellbeing, employee wellbeing, entrepreneur wellbeing, etc.
- **Levels of wellbeing:** Use of terms such as flourishing, languishing, suffering, illbeing, etc.

Pincus (2023, p.1547) defined this lack of distinction and the erroneous conflation of terms that draw from different conceptual foundations as "category errors" and argued that the *broader wellbeing* literature is "awash in category errors," including failures to distinguish between a context-free, overarching construct and domain-specific forms of wellbeing, conflations of causes and effects, applying psychological wellbeing models as proxies for other domains, and confusion between components and predictors of wellbeing—that is, between what *wellbeing is* and the factors that shape or promote it.

We concur with this assessment and further propose that additional category errors arise from insufficient distinctions between meta-theories of wellbeing, which offer foundational accounts of the core components of wellbeing (for example, the widely cited claim that wellbeing encompasses hedonic and eudaimonic elements (Lomas et al., 2023)), theoretical models of work/er wellbeing, which elaborate and operationalise these meta-theories into specific components or pathways through which wellbeing can be attained (for example the PERMA+4 model which entails 9 components – positive emotions, engagement, positive relationships, meaning, accomplishment, physical health, mindset, work environment, and economic security (Donaldson et al., 2022)), empirical models of work wellbeing, which typically test particular predictors of wellbeing (which vary across studies), and measures of work/er wellbeing, which frequently cut across these levels (Cooke et al., 2016; Jarden et al., 2023).

One way to resolve these ambiguities is to create a conceptual map of the terrain that shows the points of convergence and divergence between these terms, which we attempted to offer below.

In conclusion, the current conceptual disarray in work/er wellbeing scholarship appears to stem from several interrelated sources: its interdisciplinary development and lack of agreement on terminology, the coexistence of three largely parallel research strands – the Health and Safety tradition, the remedial ~~business~~ psychology approach, and Positive Work and Organisations, and, most fundamentally, persistent ambiguities in the overarching concept of *wellbeing* that have cascaded into the work domain. Encouragingly, recent advances in the conceptualisation of wellbeing more broadly offer promising pathways for resolving these issues, and it is this point that we explore next.

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6. Reconceptualising Work/er Wellbeing: Towards an Integrative Meta-Framework

Despite growing recognition that work/er wellbeing scholarship is messy (Wijngaards et al., 2022) and characterised by a dense terminological and conceptual tangle (Makikangas et al. 2016), relatively little systematic effort has been made to untangle it. While authors have commented on the proliferation of overlapping constructs, the lack of clear definitions, or the ambiguity surrounding existing terms, these critiques have seldom been accompanied by substantive proposals for conceptual clarification or integration. Instead, most contributions either draw on an existing definition, introduce yet another definition—often with limited engagement with prior usage, or proceed without offering any explicit definition, thereby perpetuating the underlying ambiguity.

The few authors who attempted to offer ways to disentangle the conceptual maze firstly differentiated between *work-related health* and *wellbeing* constructs (Danna & Griffin, 1999), arguing that wellbeing is the broader of the two, and that health encompasses both physical and psychological indicators.

Wijngaards et al. (2022) proposed several other useful distinctions between *overall wellbeing*, *worker wellbeing*, *employee wellbeing*, and *work wellbeing*. The authors positioned *overall wellbeing* as the broadest category pertaining to the *overall wellbeing of an individual.* Nested within this broader term is *worker wellbeing* which describes the *overall wellbeing of working people*, while *employee wellbeing* is a narrower category which refers to the *overall wellbeing of those employed by organisations*. *Work wellbeing* however is a narrower term that is specific to the work domain. One point that remains unclear in Wijngaards et al.'s (2022) analysis is whether the term *overall wellbeing* aggregates several domains (such as physical wellbeing, psychological, social, financial and work wellbeing), and whether *worker wellbeing* and *employee wellbeing* terms entail these domains.

However, there are also conflicting claims regarding the hierarchical relationship between these terms. Zheng et al. (2015) argued that overall wellbeing is an inadequate proxy for employee wellbeing, whereas Pipera and Fragouli (2021) contested this view, proposing that employee wellbeing should be conceptualised as encompassing both work-related and non-work-related physical, mental, and social states.

Below we attempt to resolve some of these points by offering a hierarchical structure that classifies how the varied work/er wellbeing constructs relate to one another.

6.1. Mapping the Key Concepts that Feature in Work/er Wellbeing Scholarship

The suggested conceptual map (shown graphically in Figure 1 below) is hierarchical, progressing from the broadest to the specific constructs. It mainly draws on Positive Work and Organisational Psychology scholarship due its interdisciplinary scope and its widespread contemporary use, applying its conceptualisation and meta-theory of wellbeing (see details below) to clarify how the terms relate to one another.

The starting point for the conceptual map is the broadest wellbeing term – *overall wellbeing*.

6.1.1. Overall Wellbeing

We consider this concept to represent a *general wellbeing* construct aggregating key wellbeing domains (see below its definition and domains). It is often applied in work-related research where the some or all target participants may not engage with work, such as retirees, students, or the unemployed.

We then outline four elements that partition the overarching concept of wellbeing into distinct sub-categories including:

6.1.2. Wellbeing Domains

Wellbeing can be evaluated across specific life domains, including:

- Physical wellbeing

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- Psychological wellbeing
- Social wellbeing
- Financial wellbeing
- Occupational wellbeing

As noted above, the domains of wellbeing represent another contested area within the literature. Pincus (2023) observed that contemporary accounts identify between 4 and 17 distinct domains. Most frameworks include physical, social, and mental dimensions; around 60% also incorporate spiritual, intellectual, occupational, financial, and environmental dimensions, while only a minority address additional, more nuanced facets such as growth, creativity, identity, and autonomy. Consequently, the domains depicted in Figure 1 may not encompass every area of potential research interest, although we sought to include the principal domains highlighted in the literature.

- ***Occupational wellbeing:*** We treat this construct both as a domain of overall wellbeing and as an overarching term that encompasses wellbeing within the vocational sphere. It encompasses three specific occupational domains:
- Employment wellbeing
- Career wellbeing
- Work wellbeing

Table 2 provides definitions for each of these terms.

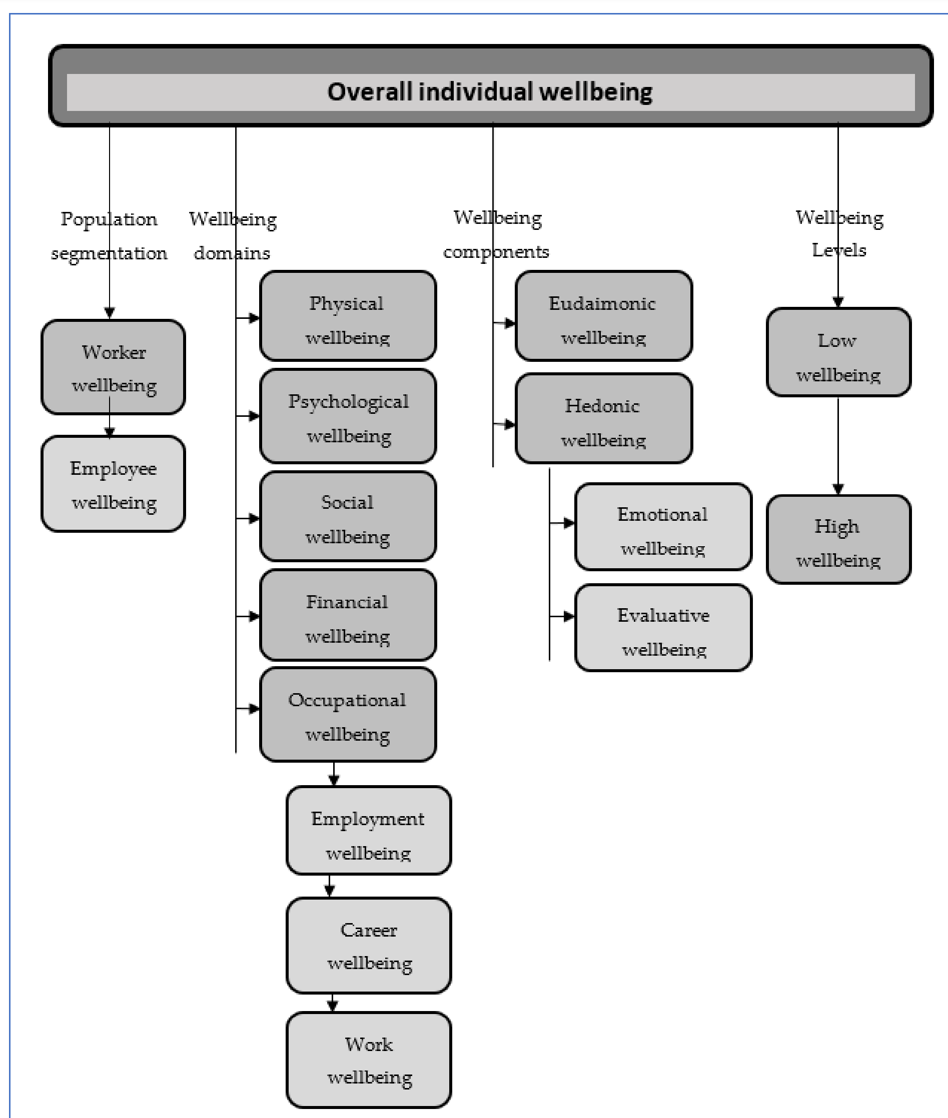

Figure 1. A conceptual map of key worker and work wellbeing terminology.

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Table 2. Overall and work-related wellbeing concepts.

Concept	Definition	Notes	Synonymous terms
Overall wellbeing	A continuum that reflects the relative attainment of a personal subjective state of quality across key life domains (Lomas et al., 2023).	Represents "a life well lived." Aggregates several wellbeing domains (physical, psychological, occupational, financial, and social wellbeing).	*General wellbeing, global wellbeing, complete wellbeing*
Population segmentation			
Worker wellbeing	A continuum that reflects a worker's relative attainment of a personal subjective state of quality across key life domains (Lomas et al., 2023).	The overall wellbeing of working people (Wijngaards et al., 2022). Similar to overall wellbeing, it aggregates several wellbeing domains.	
Employee wellbeing	A continuum that reflects an employee's relative attainment of a personal subjective state of quality across key life domains (Lomas et al., 2023).	The overall wellbeing of those employed by organisations (Wijngaards et al., 2022). Similar to overall wellbeing, it aggregates several wellbeing domains	
Work-related domains			
Occupational wellbeing	A continuum that reflects the relative attainment of a personal subjective state of quality in the occupational domain.	An overarching term that encompasses a person's employment wellbeing, career wellbeing, and work wellbeing.	
Employment wellbeing	A continuum that reflects the relative attainment of a personal subjective state of quality in the employment domain.	Pertains specifically to the domain of employment, encompassing wellbeing in relation to one's current employment circumstances, including unemployment, employment, overemployment, underemployment, and other related conditions.	
Career wellbeing	A continuum that reflects the relative attainment of a personal subjective state of quality in the career domain.	Refers specifically to the career domain, encompassing an individual's longer-term career trajectory and mobility across workplaces and roles.	
Work wellbeing	A continuum that reflects the relative attainment of a personal subjective state of quality in their current work domain.	Denotes wellbeing specifically in relation to an individual's present work situation.	*Workplace wellbeing, wellbeing at work*

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6.1.3. Population Segmentations

Building on Wijngaards et al.'s (2022) conceptualisation (discussed above), we contend that overall wellbeing can be assessed within specific populations, such as:

- Worker wellbeing
- Employee wellbeing

We note that within each of these populations, *overall wellbeing* should be assessed as an aggregate of its specific life domains (eg: *psychological wellbeing, physical wellbeing, social wellbeing, financial wellbeing*, etc).

Worker wellbeing is therefore a broader term than *employee wellbeing*, and there are other populations that this conceptualisation can apply to (for example: *entrepreneur wellbeing*, *gig-worker wellbeing*, *teacher wellbeing*, etc).

6.1.4. Components of Wellbeing

Drawing on Positive Psychology's meta theory of wellbeing (Hart, 2020), which has been widely adopted in the work/er wellbeing scholarship, we contend that wellbeing includes two key components:

- Eudaimonic wellbeing, and
- ***Hedonic wellbeing***, which is commonly subdivided into:
- Emotional wellbeing
- Evaluative wellbeing

These can be applied to the overall wellbeing concept as well as to each of its subdomains. Definitions for these terms are suggested below.

6.1.5. Levels of Wellbeing

Here we refer to concepts that denote high or low wellbeing levels such as flourishing, languishing, optimal wellbeing, suffering, illbeing and others. These can be applied to the overall wellbeing concept as well as to each of its subdomains.

Having clarified the hierarchical relationships between work-related wellbeing concepts, we proceed to define the key terms and identify synonymous terminology.

7. Defining the Key Terms in the Work/er Wellbeing Scholarship

In this section, we draw on recent advances in defining the broad *wellbeing* concept, which we consider as a genuine semantic breakthrough, with Lomas et al.'s (2023) seminal contribution being particularly influential.

Within Positive Psychology scholarship, wellbeing has come to denote a broad conception of a "life well lived", that is, the extent to which an individual leads "a good life" (Hart, 2020). However, this broad and somewhat abstract characterisation requires further specification regarding what "a good life" entails. In a recent paper, Lomas et al. (2023, p. 8) deconstructed, and then refined the concept of overall human wellbeing, defining it as a continuum that indicates "the quality of one's personal subjective state" or "the relative attainment of a personal subjective state of quality". This definition suggests that wellbeing reflects a state, rather than a person's experience or evaluation of this state, and when referring to overall wellbeing, it aggregates specific life domains to offer an overall assessment. Hence *overall wellbeing* can be defined as "the quality of one's personal subjective state across the physical, mental, social, and spiritual dimensions of existence" (Lomas et al., 2023, p.11).

We endorse this definition and, in Table 2 below, we have sought to apply it to the various work-related wellbeing constructs depicted in the conceptual map in Figure 1 above. We also highlight where relevant some synonymous terms.

This exercise helps to resolve some of the conceptual ambiguity noted in the earlier section by drawing clearer distinctions between key terms. For instance, *worker wellbeing* is conceptualised as

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continuum that reflects a worker's relative attainment of a personal subjective state of quality across key life domains, whereas *work wellbeing* is conceptualised as continuum that reflects the relative attainment of a personal subjective state of quality in their current work domain, hence the two definitions clearly highlight the differences between these terms.

7.1. Distinguishing the Concepts of Health and Wellbeing

Lomas et al. (2023) further distinguished between *health* and *wellbeing*. The authors noted that when the two terms are not used synonymously, *wellbeing* appears to refer primarily to subjective aspects of the person (how one perceives their own state – physically, mentally, financially, careerwise, etc), whereas *health* tends to denote more objective aspects (how well an aspect of life are functioning based on an objective assessment). On this basis, they proposed that a useful way to differentiate *health* and *wellbeing* is via a subjective–objective distinction, and accordingly, they defined *health* as "the quality of one's personal objective state" or "the relative attainment of a personal objective state of quality" (p. 8). While we concur that differentiating the objective and subjective dimensions is valuable, we note that the authors did not indicate how this distinction should be operationalised in empirical research or in practice. Specifically, does the *health–wellbeing* distinction depend on how a construct is defined or measured? A further difficulty with this binary concerns constructs that involve both objective and subjective elements. The authors do not provide guidance on how such constructs should be classified.

One way to resolve these points is to suggest that the distinction between *health and wellbeing* should be made in accordance to how they are measured. The term *wellbeing* should be used when researchers and practitioners use subjective measures, while health should be assessed through objective means. For example, a person's subjective physical wellbeing can be assessed by inviting a person to subjectively assess their own physical state, while an objective assessment of their physical health can rely on physical test results, or hospitalisation reports.

This suggests that the map presented above could be replicated for health. In this health-focused map, each objectively measured construct could be labelled accordingly (e.g., *overall employee health*, *occupational health*, etc.). For example, *worker health* can be defined as the overall health of working people: A continuum that reflects the quality of a worker's personal objective state across key dimensions of existence, while *occupational health* would be defined as a continuum that reflects the quality of one's personal objective state in the occupational domain.

As to situations where both objective and subjective assessments are used, we suggest using the term *wholebeing*. Accordingly, *general wholebeing* can be defined as a continuum that reflects the relative attainment of a personal subjective and subjective state of quality across key life domains. The narrower concept of *work wholebeing* can therefore be defined as a continuum that reflects a the relative attainment of a personal subjective and subjective state of quality in one's current work domain.

7.2. Components of Wellbeing

Within contemporary Positive Psychology scholarship, wellbeing is regarded as an inherent human objective, reflecting the aspiration to satisfy basic needs, accomplish valued life goals, and live a balanced, harmonious and fulfilling life. As noted, Positive Psychology encapsulates wellbeing in the idea of a 'life well lived', comprising two central elements: **feeling good** and **functioning well** (Huppert & So, 2013; Hart, 2020; Keyes & Annas, 2009; Deci & Ryan, 2008). These dimensions are grounded in two major philosophical traditions (Huta & Waterman, 2014):

- **Hedonia,** characterised by the pursuit of pleasure, and
- **Eudaimonia,** concerned with optimal functioning across life domains.

The hedonia–eudaimonia distinction can be traced back to Aristotle's view that wellbeing arises not only from meeting basic needs and desires, but also from performing well in diverse life domains, enacting virtues, engaging in morally worthy pursuits, and realising one's potential (Huta, 2016). Aristotle used the term eudaimonia to describe a way of life that enables the attainment of an elevated

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state of quality and value (Huta, 2020). Hedonia, by contrast, is commonly equated with happiness. In traditional Greek philosophy, hedonism was viewed as a central component of the good life, reflected in a cognitive and emotional state of contentment (Ryff et al., 2021). It is also understood as an outcome of eudaimonia—that is, of how well a person is functioning (Huta, 2016).

With the emergence of Positive Psychology, research on both concepts has expanded substantially, revealing a strong association between them (Seligman, 2018). There is also an increasing recognition that "happiness constitutes a subset of wellbeing" (Lomas and VanderWeele, 2023, p. 3), and that the relationship between hedonia and eudaimonia is bi-directional: an individual's level of functioning influences their happiness, while their level of happiness, in turn, shapes their functioning (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2019; Pavot & Diener, 2004). Building on these insights, a growing consensus within Positive Psychology holds that overall wellbeing comprises both hedonic and eudaimonic components, and that each is essential for a fulfilling life (Seligman, 2012). We argue that this conception is increasingly recognised as a meta-theory of wellbeing and is currently being applied in numerous disciplines.

This leads us to the concept of happiness. In the academic literature, happiness is commonly described as hedonic or subjective wellbeing (SWB) (Diener, 2000), which consists of two principal components:

- **Cognitive component**: This involves an evaluation of one's overall life satisfaction, requiring a subjective assessment of contentment with key life domains such as health, relationships, work, and finances.
- **Emotional component**: This reflects the frequency with which individuals experience positive emotions (e.g., excitement, joy, love) and negative emotions (e.g., fear, anger, disgust) over a given period.

Subjective wellbeing is often expressed using the following formula:

$$\text{SWB} = \text{Satisfaction with life} + \text{Positive affect} - \text{Negative affect}$$

By definition, individuals with high subjective wellbeing tend to be satisfied with their lives, experience positive emotions frequently, and negative emotions infrequently (Diener, 2000). The experience of positive emotions is therefore central to happiness, which is why happiness is frequently treated as synonymous with hedonia (Huta, 2020).

Lomas and VanderWeele (2023) defined happiness as a "mental experience of quality" (p. 11), thereby conceptualising it as a psychological phenomenon that involves a cognitive judgement, accompanied by an emotional response. They further describe satisfaction with life—the cognitive component of happiness—as "evaluative happiness" (p. 12). This framing positions happiness as a continuum reflecting a person's mental evaluation and experience of quality, drawing directly on the eudaimonic dimension of wellbeing.

We do not fully endorse this definition, as we consider that it is too closely worded to the wellbeing definition, and therefore likely to generate further confusion. Instead, we propose that *overall happiness* may be defined as a continuum reflecting an individual's overall life evaluation and emotional experience. This definition can be applied to overall happiness, which spans across key life domains, or to happiness within a specific domain, such as work, relationships, finances, etc. In Table 3 below, we applied this definition to the components of work-related wellbeing concepts identified in the literature.

Table 3. Definitions for overall work-related wellbeing components.

Concept	Definition	Notes	Synonymous terms
Overall happiness	A continuum that reflects a person's contentment and emotional experience across key life domains.	Includes both the emotional experience and the evaluative component. Aggregates several life domains (physical, psychological, occupational,	*General / global / overall subjective wellbeing, general / global happiness*

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		financial, and social wellbeing).	
Life satisfaction	A continuum that reflects a person's overall contentment with life across key life domains.	Contains the evaluative component of happiness.	*Satisfaction with life.*
Emotional wellbeing	A continuum that reflects a person's emotional experience across key life domains.	Contains the emotional experience of happiness.	*General / overall / global emotional wellbeing, hedonic / affective wellbeing*
Population segmentation			
Worker happiness	A continuum that reflects a worker's contentment and emotional experience across key life domains.	Pertains to working people. Includes both an emotional experience and the evaluative component. Aggregates several life domains (physical, psychological, occupational, financial, and social wellbeing).	*Worker Subjective Wellbeing*
Employee happiness	A continuum that reflects an employee's contentment and emotional experience across key life domains.	Pertains to employees. Includes both an emotional experience and the evaluative component. Aggregates several life domains (physical, psychological, occupational, financial, and social wellbeing).	*Employee Subjective Wellbeing*
Worker life satisfaction	A continuum that reflects a worker's contentment with life across key life domains.	Contains the evaluative component of happiness.	*Worker satisfaction with life.*
Employee life satisfaction	A continuum that reflects an employee's contentment with life across key life domains.	Contains the evaluative component of happiness.	*Employee satisfaction with life.*
Worker emotional wellbeing	A continuum that reflects a worker's emotional experience across key life domains.	Contains the emotional component of happiness.	*Worker hedonic / affective wellbeing*
Employee emotional wellbeing	A continuum that reflects an employee's emotional experience across key life domains	Contains the emotional component of happiness.	*Employee hedonic / affective wellbeing*
Work-related domains			
Happiness with one's occupational state	A continuum that reflects a person's contentment and emotional experience within their current occupation.	Includes both the emotional experience and the evaluative component. Refers specifically to the occupational domain.	*Subjective occupational wellbeing*

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Happiness with one's employment	A continuum that reflects a person's contentment and emotional experience within their current employment.	Includes both the emotional experience and the evaluative component. Refers specifically to the employment domain.	*Subjective employment wellbeing*
Happiness with one's career	A continuum that reflects a person's contentment and emotional experience within their career domain.	Includes both the emotional experience and the evaluative component. Refers specifically to the career domain.	*Subjective career wellbeing*
Happiness with work	A continuum that reflects a person's contentment and emotional experience within their current work domain	Includes both the emotional experience of quality and the evaluative component. Refers specifically to the work domain.	*Workplace happiness, Happiness at work, subjective wellbeing at work, subjective work wellbeing*
Satisfaction with one's occupational state	A continuum that reflects a person's contentment with their current occupational state.	Includes only the evaluative component. Refers specifically to the occupational domain.	*Occupational satisfaction*
Satisfaction with one's employment	A continuum that reflects a person's contentment with their current employment.	Includes only the evaluative component. Refers specifically to the employment domain.	*Employment satisfaction*
Satisfaction with one's career	A continuum that reflects a person's contentment with their career,	Includes only the evaluative component. Refers specifically to the career domain.	*Career satisfaction*
Satisfaction with work	A continuum that reflects a person's contentment with their current work.	Includes only the evaluative component. Refers specifically to the work domain.	*Job / work / workplace satisfaction*
Occupation related hedonic wellbeing	A continuum that reflects a person's emotional experience within their current occupation.	Includes only the emotional component. Refers specifically to the occupational domain.	*Occupation related emotional / affective wellbeing*
Employment related hedonic wellbeing	A continuum that reflects a person's emotional experience within their current employment.	Includes only the emotional component. Refers specifically to the employment domain.	*Employment related emotional / affective wellbeing*
Career related Hedonic wellbeing	A continuum that reflects a person's emotional experience within their career.	Includes only the emotional component. Refers specifically to the career domain.	*Career related emotional / affective wellbeing*
Work related hedonic wellbeing	A continuum that reflects a person's emotional experience within their current work.	Includes only the emotional component. Refers specifically to the work domain.	Job / work / related emotional / affective wellbeing

In conclusion, building on recent advances in how wellbeing and happiness are defined, and key distinctions between their core components, notably hedonic and eudaimonic wellbeing, we applied these frameworks to the work context and, in doing so, helped to clarify longstanding conceptual confusion and ambiguity. We also identified several commonly used synonymous terms and considered the constituent elements of happiness. Most importantly, we distinguished the

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components of wellbeing from the domains in which wellbeing is experienced, and from terms that refer to population segmentations.

7.3. Levels of Wellbeing

In this section, we unpack terms that denote a person's level of wellbeing—such as flourishing, languishing, and illbeing. Notably, relatively few authors have attempted to define these concepts explicitly, with Keyes (2002) and Lomas et al. (2023) providing leading contributions:

- ***Flourishing*** is defined as a desired state of overall wellbeing, indicating the relative attainment of a condition where all aspects of a person's life are positive, and their living environments are conducive (Lomas & VanderWeele, 2023).
- ***Thriving*** is conceptualised as a desired state of overall wellbeing attained despite facing challenging or inhospitable contexts and circumstances (Lomas et al., 2023).
- **Languishing** denotes a lower level of wellbeing located around the middle of the wellbeing continuum (Keyes, 2002). It can be defined as an ambivalent condition characterised by a relative absence of positive states of quality, without the presence of distinctly low-quality states (Lomas et al., 2023)
- ***Struggling*** is a lower state of wellbeing, described as an ambivalent condition in which individuals attain some personal states of quality while simultaneously experiencing personal states that lack quality (Lomas et al., 2023).
- ***Illbeing*** (floundering or ailing) can be understood as an undesirable condition characterised by the absence of personal states of quality alongside the presence of personal states that lack quality (Lomas et al., 2023; Venning et al., 2013).

These can be applied to refer to a person's overall wellbeing across their key life domains, or within a specific life domain such as career or work.

The key point is that these terms should be used only when authors are referring to specific levels of wellbeing, rather than as proxies for the broader concept of wellbeing.

8. Conclusion

This paper set out to address a persistent, field-limiting problem in work/er wellbeing scholarship**:** a proliferation of partially overlapping terms, inconsistent definitions, and widespread proxy use that collectively obstruct cumulative theory-building and the translation of evidence into practice. It positioned this "conceptual jungle" not as a superficial terminological nuisance, but as a structural barrier to interdisciplinary integration and measurement coherence. The paper's core contribution is therefore conceptual: it clarifies *what* is being discussed when scholars (and practitioners) invoke work/er wellbeing language, *why* confusion has arisen historically, and *how* a more ordered vocabulary can be established via mapping and definitional refinement.

The historical overview traced the evolution of work/er wellbeing across three partially co-existing traditions: (1) early occupational safety and risk mitigation, (2) a remedial organisational/occupational psychology phase focused on distress (e.g., stress and burnout), and (3) contemporary holistic and positive approaches (including Positive Work and Organisations). A key insight here is that a "semantic drift" occurred without conceptual replacement: older paradigms persisted while newer ones layered on top, creating parallel vocabularies and blended measurement practices that continue to generate ambiguity.

Building on this, the paper documented the scope of terminological clutter—multiple labels (e.g., worker wellbeing, employee wellbeing, workplace wellbeing, wellbeing at work, work wellness, quality of work life, employee health) used sometimes as synonyms and sometimes as distinct constructs—along with the accompanying jingle–jangle problems. It then showed how definitions remained "in disarray", with many studies providing no definitions, and others offering definitions that vary in abstraction (meaning vs components vs determinants), which further encourages construct conflation and incompatible operationalisations.

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The analysis then traced the sources of the tangle: interdisciplinary "language gaps" (including underdeveloped shared vocabulary), the persistence of legacy terminology across the three historical strands, and—most fundamentally—the contested nature of *wellbeing itself* (including category errors such as confusing domains, components, populations, and levels; and conflating causes with indicators). This diagnosis motivates the paper's proposed remedy: an explicit classification system that reduces category errors and makes it easier to select, define, and measure constructs in defensible ways.

In response, the reconceptualisation section advanced an integrative, hierarchical meta-framework and conceptual map that distinguishes between context-free overall wellbeing concepts and wellbeing specific domains (including occupational wellbeing and its sub-domains), terms that refer to population segmentations (worker vs employee wellbeing), concepts that describe the components of wellbeing (hedonic/eudaimonic; emotional/evaluative), and expressions that depict different levels of wellbeing (e.g., flourishing, languishing, illbeing). The paper adapts recent definitional advances in wellbeing scholarship to the work domain, yielding clearer definitions for key work-related terms.

Future work can build on the conceptual map and unified definitions presented in this paper to refine existing measures and develop new ones. This foundation should also help researchers select appropriate search terms and proxies for the constructs under investigation. We anticipate that this work will stimulate new theoretical models of work-related wellbeing—another area characterised by a comparable semantic tangle that has constrained cumulative progress. Such models should further unpack the meta-theory proposed here into more specific accounts that clarify the antecedents of work-related wellbeing, its consequences, and evidence-based pathways organisations can follow to promote staff wellbeing.

Further work is also needed on the interdisciplinary front. Closer collaboration across disciplines is required to enable transdisciplinary translation through the co-production (with practitioners, policymakers, and employees) of a usable taxonomy and decision aid for selecting constructs and measures in organisational wellbeing strategies. This would support alignment of integrated practice (risk management alongside positive approaches) with coherent concepts and robust indicators.

Ultimately, the central claim of this paper is that progress in work/er wellbeing science is currently constrained less by a shortage of studies than by a shortage of shared meaning. By "cleaning the lens" on work-related wellbeing concepts—clarifying domains, components, populations, and levels, and separating wellbeing from its proxies—we provide a foundation for more cumulative theory, more comparable evidence, and more defensible measurement. This is not merely a semantic exercise: conceptual precision is a prerequisite for designing workplaces that can reliably tilt the "double-edged sword" of work towards flourishing rather than harm. The next stage, therefore, is collective adoption of a shared vocabulary and mapping logic, so that scholarship and practice can converge on clearer targets, stronger inference, and more effective wellbeing strategy.

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