





The psychological well-being category and its importance in healthcare practice: a semi-systematic review

La categoría bienestar psicológico y su importancia en la práctica asistencial: una revisión semisistemática

A categoria bem-estar psicológico e sua importância na prática assistencial: uma revisão semisistemática

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: psychological well-being is a fundamental category in the performance of healthcare personnel, as it contributes both to improving their comprehensive care and to supporting their professional performance.

Objective: to explore the main conceptualization trends and thematic lines in the development of the psychological well-being category. **Method:** a study was conducted, with a semi-systematic review design, which allowed the selection of a total of 30 articles, their processing and fundamental topics ranging in a time period of four decades.

Results: the main results achieved suggest that a specialization process has occurred in the study of psychological well-being, the psychological approaches and schools aimed at its study have been consolidated and the main changes are manifested in the relationship

between variables and the commitment to mental health promotion. **Conclusions:** the category studied has gained relevance in the literature, with a predominance of positivist positions and studies aimed at large populations, without any depth being appreciated in the professional aspects of its observation by healthcare personnel. It is concluded that there is a need for mixed studies that address the uniqueness of the contexts and the needs of health specialists, patients and families.

Keywords: psychological well-being; assistance personnel; health promotion; mental health



RESUMEN

Introducción: el bienestar psicológico es una categoría fundamental en el desempeño del personal asistencial, pues contribuye tanto a mejorar la atención integral al mismo como a sustentar su actuación profesional. **Objetivo:** explorar las principales tendencias de conceptualización y líneas temáticas en el desarrollo de la categoría bienestar psicológico. **Método:** se condujo un estudio con diseño de revisión semisistemática, que permitió la selección de un total de 30 artículos, su procesamiento y establecimiento de tópicos fundamentales en un espacio temporal de cuatro décadas. **Resultados:** los principales resultados alcanzados sugieren que se ha producido un proceso de especialización en el estudio del bienestar psicológico, los enfoques y escuelas psicológicas dirigidos a su estudio se han consolidado y los principales cambios se manifiestan en la relación entre variables y el compromiso con la promoción de la salud mental. **Conclusiones:** la categoría estudiada ha ganado en relevancia en la literatura, con predominio de posiciones positivistas y estudios dirigidos a grandes poblaciones, sin que se aprecie profundidad en los aspectos profesionales de su observación por parte del personal asistencial. Se concluye en la necesidad de estudios mixtos que atiendan a la singularidad de los contextos y las necesidades de especialistas de la salud, pacientes y familiares.

Palabras clave: bienestar psicológico; personal asistencial; promoción de salud; salud mental

RESUMO

Introdução: o bem-estar psicológico é uma categoria fundamental na atuação do pessoal de saúde, pois contribui tanto para melhorar o seu cuidado integral como para apoiar o seu desempenho profissional. **Objetivo:** explorar as principais tendências de conceituação e linhas temáticas no desenvolvimento da categoria bem-estar psicológico. **Método:** foi realizado um estudo com desenho de revisão semisistemática, que permitiu a seleção de um total de 30 artigos, seu processamento e estabelecimento de temas fundamentais em um período de quatro décadas. **Resultados:** os principais resultados alcançados sugerem que ocorreu um processo de especialização no estudo do bem-estar psicológico, as abordagens psicológicas e as escolas voltadas para o seu estudo foram consolidadas e as principais mudanças se manifestam na relação entre as variáveis e no comprometimento com a promoção de saúde. **Conclusões:** a categoria estudada tem ganhado relevância na literatura, com predominância de posicionamentos positivistas e estudos voltados para grandes populações, sem que se aprecie qualquer aprofundamento nos aspectos profissionais de sua observação pelos profissionais de saúde. Conclui-se que há necessidade de estudos mistos que abordem a singularidade dos contextos e as necessidades dos especialistas em saúde, pacientes e familiares.

Palavras-chave: bem-estar psicológico; pessoal de assistência; promoção de saúde; saúde mental

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INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, humanity, as individuals and as a social system, faces multiple problems. These range from environmental and sustainability-related issues to those related to large, medium and small-scale armed conflicts.^(1,2) In this context and in the face of an increasingly virtual society, the range of problems, conflicts and difficulties is growing. So much so, that the prevalence of negative experiences, various addictions and other socio-health problems has increased, especially in people suffering from chronic diseases.^(3,4,5)

Given this complex scenario, one of the main categories to be considered from the perspective of psychology, both as a science and as a professional practice, is psychological well-being. This category, like many others studied by the different psychological schools and disciplines related to the health-illness process, is not without controversy.

At the end of the 1980s, Ryff⁽⁶⁾ argued that the use of the term was based on a poor theoretical conceptualization, despite having found an extensive bibliography on the subject. For this author, to operationalize the term and incorporating it into an identifiable theoretical body was a priority.⁽⁶⁾ To this end, the author conducted a study whose result allowed the operationalization of aspects of the term, which she had extracted from the reviewed antecedents.

As a result, the category was divided into the following variables: self-acceptance, positive relationships with others, autonomy, contextual mastery, life purpose and personal growth.⁽⁶⁾ An important conclusion reached by this author is that the way in which these variables actually occur or behave in individuals and groups is conditioned by class values, shared social representations, culture and history, race and other sociocultural aspects.⁽⁶⁾

From the reading of this research report it can be deduced that psychological well-being, although it may appear in colloquial language, and even in the language of non-specialized health professionals, as a term that fundamentally refers to pure or internal psychological aspects; an in-depth study calls for a more comprehensive approach.⁽⁷⁾ However, this does not mean that this approach is always used for its study, since articles focused on psychological well-being as an internal condition or a state of mind were identified in the literature.

Such readings can be particularly dangerous in the psychological sciences, as they may focus exclusively on internal factors, although the importance of external factors and the unique and singular convergence of both groups is widely recognized.^(8,9)

Although not from the cultural-historical approach, but from life cycle theories, Ryff⁽¹⁰⁾ emphasizes that in general, it is a progressive growth through the life course, integral and conscious functioning, as well as the achievement of socially valued goals. However, the author stresses that being psychologically well goes beyond the absence of problems or stress, but is characterized by positive coping and the representation of gradual achievement of purpose in life.



Therefore, in addition to the identification of contextual aspects that influence or determine the general state of individuals and culturally shared definitions, it is necessary to know the subject's personal assessment, his or her experiences related to these two groups of factors and his or her own vision of the world and well-being within a specific social context.⁽¹¹⁾

In order to deepen the meaning of the category of psychological well-being for the different schools and approaches in psychology, as well as its implications for the professional practice of health care personnel, it was decided to conduct a literature review study.

According to Snyder,⁽¹²⁾ the literature review is one of the main bases of a research, and although there may be different types, a semi-systematic typology with a narrative approach was chosen. The main research questions were: What characterizes the conceptualization of the category of psychological well-being? What is the importance of the category for the practice of care?

METHOD

A semi-systematic review approach with narrative orientation was used to conduct the research. This type of study allows two fundamental achievements: to review the evolution over time of a specific topic and to explore the different approaches used for its study.⁽¹²⁾ The research carried out with these designs is fundamentally qualitative and is characterized by the use of analytical syntheses for the study of the topic in question.⁽⁹⁾

To design the protocol for the thematic synthesis, the proposal of Vindrola-Padros and Johnson was used.⁽¹³⁾ These authors propose that a study should be conducted in phases based on the questions identified, with an adequate breakdown of the strategy followed and a statement of the inclusion and exclusion criteria. The sampling strategy was based on using the Google Scholar search engine with the keywords Elsevier and Taylor & Francis, to reduce the number of results and ensure quality.

In order to guarantee the quality of the sources, the following inclusion and exclusion criteria were designed: a) Scientific articles, b) Explicit and evaluable methodology, and c) The main category of study or a dimension of analysis was The Psychological well-being.

Studies whose methodology could not be evaluated, essays or opinion articles were discarded, in addition, texts where psychological well-being was used as an auxiliary category (variable of minor importance) or as an accessory to improve the discourse were discarded.

To fulfill the purpose of a semi-systematic review, the search was divided into two periods: prior to 2010 and from 2011 to the present. This division allowed us to explore in greater depth the conceptions defended on psychological well-being, the methodologies used and the approaches for the analysis and interpretation of the results. In this sense, an auxiliary indicator of quality was used, whereby the relevance of the articles (number of citations and databases) was taken into consideration.



The closure of the sampling was decided based on the saturation criterion. This decision allowed an extended study of articles and their abstracts, which were saved using the My Library tool, offered by Google Scholar, but it were not included in the present study.

The analysis of the selected texts was complemented with the proposal of Saunders, et al.⁽¹⁴⁾ for qualitative thematic analysis to be performed by multidisciplinary health teams. This decision allowed the individual and joint analysis of the texts in three phases from individual databases and a collective database stored and processed in the ATLAS.ti software.

The first was aimed at general and focused reading for the development of notes and proposals. The second was directed to the coding process, the comparison of the authors' codebooks, the elimination of weak codes, the elaboration of a single codebook and the check that all relevant data were coded. The last phase was directed to the assessment of saturation, the development of the central themes individually and collectively, as well as the writing of the report and its discussion among the author team.

DEVELOPMENT

A total of 30 articles were selected for processing and 62 more were registered in the My Library tool. The articles were divided into three databases, which implied adding a third group related to the relationship between psychological well-being, coping styles and mental health. This decision was made to respond to the research topic of the first author of this study and based on the frequency with which they appeared in the conducted review.

The analysis of the thematic lines will be presented according to the databases. This decision favors a presentation in accordance with the purposes of the study and benefits the evolutionary analysis of the category in the selected articles.

Psychological well-being, primary approaches and topics of interest

A total of 8 articles were selected, which were chosen on the basis of quality and impact assessment. The oldest was published in 1979 and the most current in 2004. Through the articles, the conception of psychological well-being was explored in four decades (1970s, 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s). The eight selected articles were published in English.

The study of these articles made it possible to determine that the category of psychological well-being can be used as part of the theoretical body of various disciplines of the psychological sciences and others within the social sciences that study human-related phenomena. The fields identified were Positive Psychology, Organizational Psychology, Personality Psychology and Psychology of Emotions (it can be identified as an independent field in these studies). Other disciplines addressed were Ergonomics, Labor Justice and Architecture and Urban Planning.



The main topics of interest were the impact of working conditions on psychological well-being and the temporality of symptomatology associated with factors affecting general well-being; the effect of the environment (in an ecological and landscape sense) on affective processes and stress-related experiences; the relationship between stress, socio-demographic variables (gender, socio-labor status, among others) and psychological well-being; as well as the influence of external control mechanisms on behavioral regulation in poorly controlled environments and their impact on psychological well-being. Other topics addressed were specifically oriented to the relationship between psychological well-being and emotions.

In this sense, the articles with this orientation sought to explore the relationship between emotions and work context and their influence on phenomena such as burnout and job satisfaction; the relationship between happiness and psychological well-being and the techniques for measuring both variables; as well as the relationship between humor, spirituality and positive emotions as predictors of psychological well-being. In general, the results of the studies showed the authors' concern for both the study of psychological well-being and its promotion, although more emphasis was placed on the first approach.

Regarding epistemological and design aspects, there was a predominance of quantitative methodology, with a greater presence of correlational and descriptive studies. Two systematic reviews and studies aimed at the validation of questionnaires for specific populations were also identified.

Several approaches were observed in the study of psychological well-being. As an artificial division, psychological well-being can be categorized in these studies according to the following approaches: a) Psychological well-being as a variable, b) Psychological well-being as a goal of individuals, organizations and campaigns, c) Psychological well-being as a personality factor/trait (the result of a combination of these) and d) Psychological well-being as a state.

Psychological well-being, diversity of approaches and new positions on biopsychosocial phenomena

This group was the largest, with a total of 12 articles selected. The division by years yielded a single text corresponding to 2019, four to 2020, two to 2021 and five to 2022. The twelve selected articles were published in Spanish and express concern for a wide range of topics related to psychological well-being.

As in the previous group, there was a wide dispersion in terms of disciplines; however, in these studies it was more difficult to unequivocally identify the discipline or field in question. Although not explicitly stated in the studies reviewed a greater interest in the social and health sciences to extend studies on psychological well-being to diverse contexts, populations and to achieve a multi- or interdisciplinary approach (depending on the scope of the research) is assumed to be the cause.

A marked difference with the first group was directed at the population specificity of the studies. This discrepancy was manifested in the number of specific samples: caregivers, diverse samples of students, urban and rural adolescents, health personnel, elderly and elderly people, patients with specific diseases, and young drug users.



In the first group, the studies were characterized by addressing topics related to psychological well-being in large population groups or contexts. In contrast, this group showed a greater interest in well-defined samples. From the results and the discussions examined, it was deduced that in addition to having an extensive tradition of studies on psychological well-being, professional specialization may play a fundamental role in the interest in specific samples.

The main topics of interest studied were psychological well-being of professionals in the care sector; the relationship between psychological well-being, academic stress and academic performance; effects of lifestyles on quality of life and psychological well-being; relationship between common negative experiences (anxiety + depression) and well-being in different life stages and life situations (normative and paranormative); psychological well-being and positive emotions as protective factors. In addition, the expected impact of COVID-19 as a pandemic was appreciated in these studies, which was manifested in several studies dedicated to understanding the effects of the different aspects of its confrontation on psychological well-being.

In this section, we classified studies that showed interest in coping in situations of confinement; fear of infection; experiences of anxiety before diagnosis and the critical phase of the disease due to infection with the virus. It should be noted that, in this aspect, the largest number of articles were archived in the My Library tool, as they presented a rapid saturation in terms of topics and results (n=31).

Unlike the first group, where psychological well-being was the focus of attention, in this group there is a greater interest in the category as a cross-cutting theme. This means that instead of exploring psychological well-being in a biased way, it is understood that it can appear as a desirable state, as a goal, as a social or individual representation. This did not mean that it was not addressed in the studies, but rather that they showed a more complex and less mechanistic approach in understanding the relationships between traits, factors and variables (as the remaining categories studied were called).

An important aspect that distinguishes these approaches to the meaning of psychological well-being is the distinction with other typologies of well-being that appear in the studies (human well-being, group well-being, social well-being). Moreover, this concern with individual and social aspects leads to an opening towards internal factors (experiences, emotions, habits, styles, spirituality) and external factors (engagement, social demands, vulnerability, among others).

It can be deduced from the results and discussions studied that studies on psychological well-being have undergone a change that is expressed in a more complex and integral vision of human phenomena. Although this assertion may seem to contradict the aforementioned specialization, it is understood that they are not mutually exclusive, but rather refer to the complexity and accelerated life of today's society and its impact on human beings as a whole.



Likewise, it is vital to highlight that the concern for health, no longer as presence/absence of disease, but as a complex process, continues to be one of the main topics associated with the study of psychological well-being. However, causal determination seems to be less relevant in these studies, which benefits the understanding of the continuum as a cause and outcome, among other factors/variables, of psychological well-being.

Psychological well-being and coping styles as an expression of the health-illness process

A total of 10 articles were selected, of which nine were published in English and one in Spanish. The division by years yielded one text from 2016, three from 2020, five from 2021 and one from 2023. Largely related to the coping style category and the global context, the topic most addressed in these studies was mental health and human response to different groups of stressors, mainly related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

This approach did not mean a major difference with respect to the general conceptions assessed on psychological well-being, but it is important to highlight that an important change in the hierarchy between the categories and approaches to the study was valued. This change was manifested in the representation of mental health as a category that includes psychological well-being.

For example, the studies showed that mental health can be understood on a continuum that includes good mental health, lack of a mental disorder, poor mental health, and the presence of a severe mental disorder.⁽¹⁵⁾ This position implies, depending on the state in which an individual is, that his or her psychological well-being will depend on that state of mental health, which does not necessarily imply that there is no psychological well-being in the presence of a mental disorder.

However, as already mentioned in the analysis of the previous group, the new trends in studies on psychological well-being understand that this is not an isolated state nor can it be understood out of context. Therefore, in this group there is a marked interest in understanding the relationship between the processes of interaction between the individual and his or her environment, from the perspective of the double conditioning between psychological well-being and mental health.

The main aspect in which this group differed from the previous one was related to the scope of the research. This cannot be understood in the classical methodological sense of diagnosis or intervention, since the emphasis of these studies was on promoting mental health through psychological well-being in itself, or by working with the variables that the authors considered to be its components.



The main topics studied in this group were personal resources that favor psychological well-being and mental health; factors involved in coping that condition psychological well-being; the relationship between coping strategies and mental health in conditions of isolation; personality traits and their influence on psychological well-being; characterization of coping with COVID-19, psychological well-being and professional performance of health care personnel during the pandemic; as well as the impact of psychological well-being and mental health on daily life. As mentioned, there are marked similarities between this group and the previous one, whose main divergence is the almost generalized concern for the promotion of mental health and psychological well-being through different experiences.

Although coping was the main focus of these studies, other variables such as physical exercise, social support, resilience, personality, protective factors and stressors were investigated. Although quantitative studies (mainly systematic reviews and correlational studies) are more common, two studies with a qualitative approach were selected. Specifically, a thematic analysis study, mixed studies with nested qualitative designs and greater emphasis on aspects related to the experiences of the participants.

Summary of topics, studies and authors

Below is a table with the studies analyzed.

Table 1 Main topics, authors studied and groups of articles

Groups	Main lines	Authors
Psychological well-being, primary approaches and topics of interest.	Impact of working conditions on psychological well-being and temporality of symptomatology; effect of the environment on affective processes; relationship between stress and sociodemographic variables; influence of external control mechanisms.	(16), (17); (18); (19); (20); (21); (22); (23)
Psychological well-being, diversity of approaches and new positions on biopsychosocial phenomena.	Psychological well-being in healthcare personnel; relationship between psychological well-being, academic stress and academic performance; lifestyles and quality of life; common negative experiences (anxiety + depression); well-being in different stages of life and life situations; positive emotions and protective factors.	(24); (25); (26); (27); (28); (29); (30); (31); (32); (33); (34); (35)
Psychological well-being and coping styles as an expression of the health-illness process.	Personal resources; factors involved in coping; relationship between coping strategies and mental health in conditions of isolation; personality traits; characterization of coping and professional performance; daily life.	(36); (37); (38); (39); (40); (41); (42); (15); (43); (44)

Source: own elaboration

The study conducted presented three fundamental limitations. First, its qualitative approach favors the understanding of the theoretical and epistemological movements in the category of psychological well-being, but these results are not possible to generalize, but offer a necessary support for future studies.



Likewise, it is necessary to state the exploratory scope of the research, since it directly contributes to a broader project related to coping styles in the face of stress and comprehensive care for patients in the Nephrology ward, especially those receiving hemodialysis treatment. This subordination conditioned the process of text selection and processing.

Another limitation was precisely referred to the selection of the texts, because, although a replicable protocol was followed, it does not fully reproduce the guidelines proposed in PRISMA, since it is proposed for systematic reviews and its emphasis is on the results of the interventions. Instead, the texts were selected by means of purposive sampling, once the search strategy and the established parameters yielded results, what is typical for this type of study, as noted above.

CONCLUSIONS

Psychological well-being is a category of vital importance for health care personnel, especially for the health psychologist. Its study has been the subject of multiple disciplines within the psychological sciences, but also in the social sciences and health sciences.

Its study in the articles analyzed has moved from an approach aimed at large population groups to one focused on specific topics in defined samples. In addition, there has been an epistemological movement towards multi- and interdisciplinary approaches.

In a general sense, there is a growing commitment to the promotion of psychological well-being and mental health through different proposals. Likewise, the need for qualitative and mixed designs that allow a deeper understanding of the individual, group and social meaning of psychological well-being has been identified.

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