The Meaning and Determinants of Workplace Happiness among Outsourced Employees: A Phenomenological Study at Indonesian State Universities

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ABSTRACT

Happiness at work has proven to be important for both companies and employees. However, outsourcing employees are faced with conditions that do not support happiness at work, such as: (1) job insecurity, (2) status conflicts, and (3) no career path. This research aims to explore the meaning of happiness at work for outsourcing employees and determine the factors that can influence it. This research used a qualitative phenomenological method with 5 outsourcing employees who were placed to work at one of the state universities in Indonesia as resource persons. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and data analysis using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). The research results show that the meaning of happiness at work for outsourced employees is when they have a job amidst limited job opportunities. They are happy because they can earn a living to meet their family's needs without losing their main role in the family. They feel happy at work when there are good relationships with coworkers and gain recognition from the work environment. The research results show 5 factors that influence happiness at work, namely: (1) Relationships with coworkers, (2) Work Environment, (3) Difficulties faced, (4) Evaluation of the company, and (5) Gratitude. As the outsourcing system continues to develop, more and more workers will have outsourcing employee status. These findings fill the gap in literature/information related to workplace happiness among outsourced employees so that they can be used as material for consideration by policy makers in companies and in government.
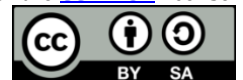
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1. INTRODUCTION

Being happy is very important to most individuals, and happiness has become a highly valued goal in most societies [1], [2], [3]. As an important goal for most humans, happiness has attracted the attention of researchers in various scientific fields, including psychology and human resources. The development of positive psychology has contributed to the rapid growth of research that has produced new knowledge and empirical evidence related to happiness. Positive psychology research shows significant growth in numbers [4], [5]. Happiness and subjective well-being are areas of research that have experienced a significant increase, as evidenced by the existence of around 170,000 articles and books published on this topic in the last 15 years [6], [7].

The meaning of happiness in psychology has been defined by various researchers who use the term subjective well-being to describe happiness, which is a positive emotional condition that is subjectively defined by each person [8]. Happiness is defined as a unity of positive psychological characteristics with high satisfaction in life, having a high level of positive affect and a low level of negative affect [9]. Happiness generally refers to positive emotions felt by individuals, as well as positive activities that individuals like [10]. Happy individuals are individuals who often experience positive emotions such as joy, interest, and pride, and rarely experience negative emotions such as sadness, anxiety, and anger [11]. Diener [12] defines happiness as the quality of all human life in terms of health, work, housing, and income that can improve their lives. These researchers define happiness by equally emphasizing the presence of positive emotions that are more dominant than negative emotions experienced in various aspects of life.

Developments in positive psychology research are not limited to individuals as the main focus of inquiry, but also look deeper at the groups and systems in which these people exist [13]. One of the developments in psychological research interest, along with the development of positive psychology, is the theme of happiness in

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the workplace or organizational sphere. Causal Positive Psychology led to an explosion of empirical research on happiness as a cause, not just a consequence, of desired outcomes at work, at school, in health, in relationships, and in aging [10]. Various studies have examined happiness at work in various types of work, such as happiness in teachers [14], medical workers [15], the hospitality industry [16], and others. The focus of the research is not only on individuals/employees but is also linked to company profits.

Diener [17] describes happiness at work as feeling enthusiastic about work, eager to come to work, having good relationships with coworkers, being able to collaborate with other coworkers, and being willing to work on several side projects aimed at improving the quality of the workplace, products, and services. Fisher [18] argues that happiness at work is a concept that encompasses a large number of constructs ranging from transient moods and emotions to relatively stable attitudes and highly stable individual dispositions at the individual level to organizational factors. Fisher [18] defines happiness at work as a pleasant assessment or pleasant experience at work. In simple terms, workplace happiness can be defined as how happy people are at work. Although happiness at work is generally understood as a synonym for job satisfaction, this concept is much broader and complex because job satisfaction is only a part of happiness at work. According to Pryce-Jones [19], happiness at work is an individual's ability to feel happy at work so that the individual can maximize work performance and achieve the full potential that exists within the individual. This can be done by being aware of your position in an organization, both when working alone and with other people. Happiness at work is related to each individual's assessment of their experiences at work, so happiness at work is subjective.

The concept of happiness at work is becoming increasingly important because it is a cause and effect of human well-being, more than just job satisfaction [20], [21]. According to Fisher [18], Happiness at work plays an important role in improving an individual's overall well-being and happiness. Feeling happiness at work is not only limited to providing happiness at work, but also goes beyond the work itself and is transmitted to other people outside the workplace [20]. Considering the amount of time adults spend working each day, this is consistent with researchers'

statements that the scope of work is one of the factors that most influences individual happiness, especially in adults.

In addition to its link to individual happiness, workplace happiness has also been shown to have positive implications for organizational success. Happiness at work has a positive and significant effect on employee performance [22], [23]. Al-Ali et al. [24] found that happiness at work mediates the relationship between job satisfaction and employee performance and turnover intention. Happier workers tend to show higher levels of engagement, creativity, productivity, and job satisfaction, as well as lower turnover [25]. The results of these studies prove that happiness at work has a positive impact on overall organizational performance. Therefore, happiness at work is not only a need for individual employees but also a company need.

With increasing evidence of the importance of happiness at work, researchers are also conducting exploratory research regarding the factors that influence happiness at work. Ruetrakul [26] in research conducted involving hospital head nurses, found that factors that influence happiness at work include job satisfaction, organizational climate, social support, and leadership characteristics. Salas-Vallina et al. [27] found that workplace relationships, recognition, career advancement, work environment, and job characteristics were factors that influenced workplace happiness of supervisor-level employees in the technology industry. Apart from the factors above, there are many other factors that have been proven to influence employee happiness at work, such as meaningful work [28], work autonomy, and gratitude [29]. From the results of previous research on happiness factors in the workplace, it was found that many different factors were found to be associated with happiness at work because happiness at work is a subjective condition felt by each individual in carrying out work activities, so that the nature of work is relatively subjective. However, these studies have focused more on formal workers with stable employment status, while studies on workers in precarious employment, such as outsourced workers, are still very limited. Outsourced workers face unique situations that differ from those of permanent employees, particularly in terms of job insecurity, limited career paths, and status conflicts. Unfortunately, the literature on the psychological consequences of these precarious

working conditions, particularly in the context of job satisfaction, has yet to be critically synthesized.

In the current era, strategy outsourcing has become a common strategy used by modern companies. Outsourcing is a concept that expresses the change in activities carried out by a company with its internal resources, the elimination of units that provide services, the reassignment of employee tasks, and, if necessary, their dismissal [30]. Strategy outsourcing is one of the sustainable business trends that companies use. The most important internal factors for using service outsourcing in service companies are strategic and economic factors [31]. The company chooses service outsourcing over personal contact to reduce costs and focus on its core business [16]. In Indonesia, outsourcing practices have expanded following the enactment of Law No. 11 of 2020 on Job Creation. This regulation has sparked debate because it is considered to suppress the humanity of workers, increase vulnerability, and marginalize labor rights. Therefore, it is important to place studies on the job satisfaction of outsourced workers within the framework of national labor policy as well as the socio-economic realities faced by non-standard workers.

Permanent employees and employees who are outsourced are both individuals who want happiness and are also an important part of the company, where the happiness they experience at work influences the company's overall performance. Hence, the happiness at work that employees experience from outsourcing is as important as the workplace happiness of other employees. However, despite having the same need for happiness, employees who are outsourced face different situations compared to other employees. Conditions faced by employee outsourcing are closely related to job satisfaction, work engagement, and organizational commitment, where, according to Fisher [18] and Salas-Vallina et al. [27], it is a dimension of happiness at work. Job satisfaction, engagement, and organizational commitment play an important role in improving employee happiness and performance in the workplace [32]. However, the Fisher and Salas-Vallina framework needs to be criticized because it may not be entirely relevant to outsourced workers who face job uncertainty. A more inclusive conceptual framework is needed, one that not only highlights aspects of job satisfaction and organizational commitment but also

subjective factors such as gratitude, personal meaning, and coping strategies for dealing with unstable working conditions. With the challenging conditions faced by employees outsourcing, researchers have not found research that explores the meaning of happiness at work more deeply and the factors that can influence happiness at work for employees outsourcing. Thus, the research question in this study not only fills a gap in the literature but also stems from an empirical need to understand how outsourced workers in Indonesia perceive their job satisfaction in the context of vulnerable policies and work structures. This study uses a phenomenological approach in order to explore the subjective experiences of workers in greater depth.

With the ratification of Law Number 11 of 2020 concerning job creation, there is an increasingly wider gap between companies ' outsourcing at the company level, especially in Indonesia. Regulations for deep outsourcing in the job creation law are considered to exploit and marginalize the human side of workers because they expand the scope of work outsourcing [33]. In other words, more and more of the workforce in Indonesia will be working as outsourced employees in the future. Therefore, this research is important not only to fill a theoretical gap but also to provide practical insights for policymakers and institutions regarding the psychological well-being of outsourced employees.

2. METHOD

This research uses qualitative methods with phenomenology [34]. The phenomenological approach was chosen because the aim of this study is to capture and interpret the lived experiences of outsourcing employees regarding happiness at work. Phenomenology allows researchers to explore the subjective meaning that participants attach to their work experiences, which cannot be adequately captured using quantitative approaches. By applying Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), this study emphasizes how individuals make sense of their personal and social world. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling with specific inclusion criteria: (1) currently employed as outsourced staff at a state university in Indonesia, (2) having at least one year of work experience in the outsourcing system, and (3) willing to share their experiences voluntarily. The final sample

consisted of five participants (aged 28 - 45 years, tenure 1- 5 years). Although the sample size appears small, in phenomenological research, this is considered sufficient because the depth of exploration is prioritized over breadth, and data saturation was reached when no new themes emerged during analysis. Data collection is conducted with semi-structured interviews with theory-based interview guides, Fisher [18] and Salas-Vallina [27], but adapted to the context of outsourced employment. The guide was reviewed by two qualitative research experts to ensure content validity and piloted with one outsourced employee outside the study sample to refine the clarity and relevance of questions.

The data analysis technique used in this research is data analysis technique interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) [35], namely: (1) reading the interview transcript several times for immersion, (2) making exploratory comments on significant statements, (3) coding emergent themes from each transcript, (4) clustering themes into superordinate categories across cases, and (5) interpreting findings in relation to theoretical frameworks and existing literature. To enhance reliability, coding was conducted independently by two researchers and then compared to reach consensus. An audit trail of coding decisions was maintained to ensure transparency. Credibility of the data was ensured through several strategies. Member checking was conducted by sharing summaries of interpreted themes with participants to confirm accuracy and resonance with their experiences. Prolonged engagement was applied by conducting multiple interactions with participants, including informal conversations before and after interviews, to build trust and obtain richer data. Peer debriefing sessions among the research team were used to critically review interpretations, and triangulation of data sources (different participants with varied job roles) strengthened the robustness of findings. Therefore, the research flow chart is as follows.
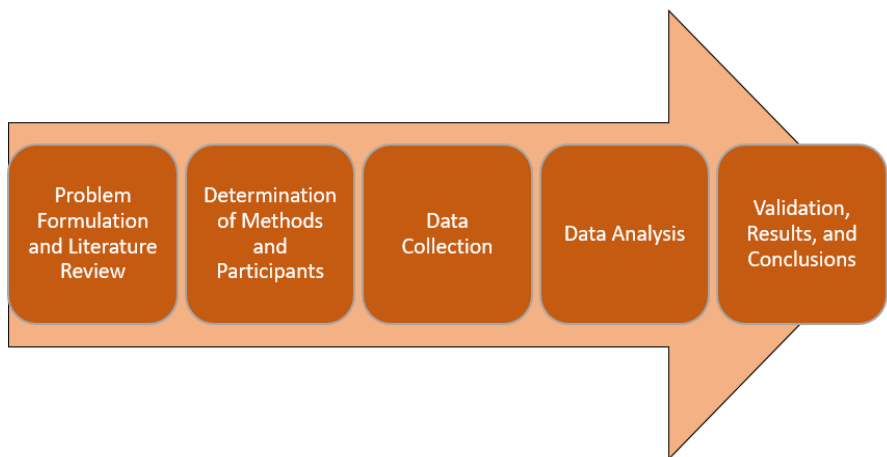
Figure 1. Research Flow Chart

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following are the five interviewees who were resource persons in this research, namely:

Table 1. Interview Data Details

No	Name	Age	Gender	Status	Years of Service
1	HK	28 years old	Man	Married	5 years
2	FC	30 years old	Man	Married	1,3 years
3	YY	28 years old	Woman	Married	1,1 years
4	DR	26 years old	Woman	Married	1 years
5	TY	45 years old	Woman	Married	4 years

All interviewees in this research have the same meaning in interpreting happiness at work as being strongly based on feelings of gratitude. Even though employees in an outsourcing environment face many challenges/conditions that tend not to support the dimensions of happiness at work, they can still interpret happiness at work. Source person TY, who has worked as an outsourced employee for 4 years, has been a housewife with a husband who works as a technician, freelancing with irregular income. Apart from that, TY also takes care of his elderly and sick parents, who live with his family. TY feels happy because she is grateful and proud to be able to help her husband in meeting his household needs. TY also feels happiness because he can care for and pay for his parents'

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medical treatment. His greatest happiness at work is not focused on his personal career but on how he contributes to meeting the needs of children, parents, and their families. TY feels the work he does as an employee is so important and meaningful to his family. Apart from that, his relationships with co-workers and recognition for his performance give TY happiness when he is at work.

Interviewees YY and DR are also housewives with husbands who have precarious jobs. They also interpret happiness based on gratitude for their achievements in contributing to meeting household needs. Even though both of them have work backgrounds in sales, they are slowly able to interpret happiness with their current work. The current distance to their workplace, which does not require long travel times, and working hours that do not last until the afternoon, give them more time to care for their children. Happiness for them is when they can fulfill their basic household needs while still being able to carry out their function as mothers in caring for their children.

Interviewees HK and DC are the backbone of their respective families. As heads of families, they feel they have a big responsibility to earn a living. On the other hand, in the current situation, they feel that finding work is difficult. For them, even though they are employees, outsourcing has many weaknesses, but they feel grateful to have this job. The meaning of work happiness for them is how, as the backbone of the family, they have a steady, reliable income/salary every month. They also feel happy because they have given hope and peace to their families with their working status. Similar to the other three interviewees, HK and DC also felt happy at work because of their good relationships with co-workers and permanent employees from service-using companies.

From processing the data obtained from interviews with informants, five main themes were identified that influence employee happiness in outsourcing jobs, namely relationships with coworkers, work environment, difficulties encountered, assessment of the company, and gratitude. To clarify the relationship between these factors, see the diagram of relationships between themes, which illustrates how each theme interacts with the others in shaping the work happiness experience of outsourced employees.
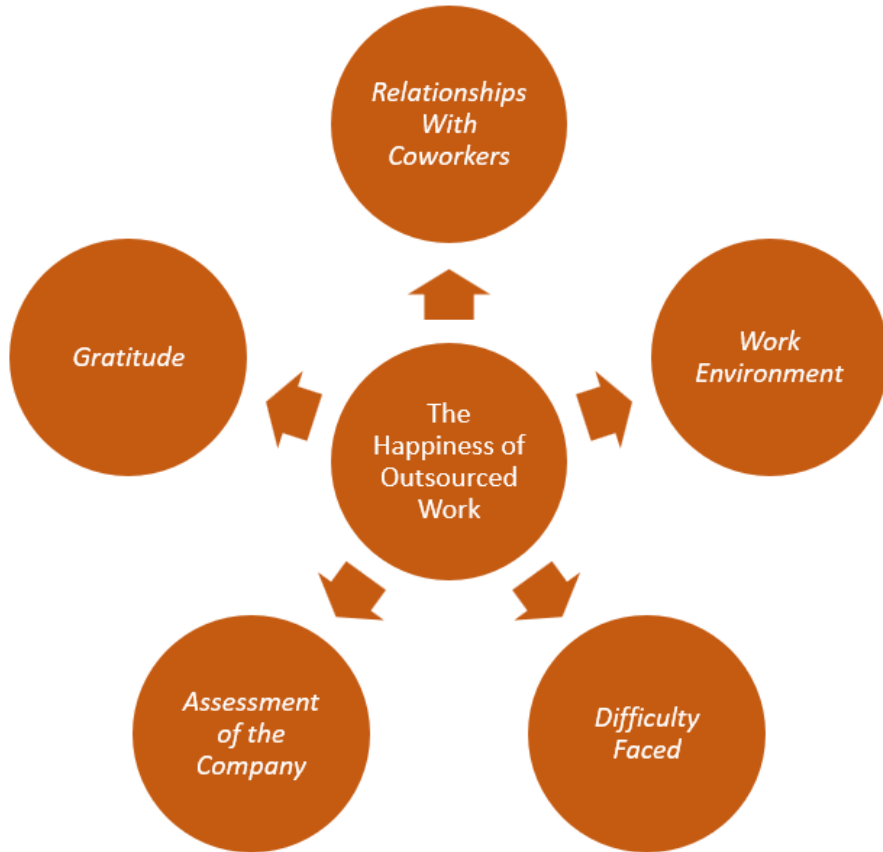
Figure 2. Theme Relationship Diagram

3.1. Relationships With Coworkers

This theme was obtained from two categories found from interviews with informants, namely agreement and togetherness. The interviewee interpreted happiness, which is influenced by this factor, as positive feelings that arise due to support between colleagues, feelings of shared destiny, togetherness, and the attention they receive from colleagues, both related to work and their personal life. The five speakers conveyed that there were mutual agreements between employees, one of which was an agreement on late fines, where the proceeds from the fines were used as social funds between employees and for joint activities at the end of each working month. Apart from agreement and

cooperation when facing problems at work, the activity of visiting colleagues who have experienced a disaster also has a significant meaning for the interviewees. This factor is the most dominant theme of happiness at work, as shown in the interview results. Based on the dimensions of happiness in the workplace, Salas-Vallina et al. [27] states that this is part of job satisfaction, in which positive relationships with co-workers are one of the factors that influence happiness at work. This result is also in line with the findings of Ruetrakul [26], which states that relationships with coworkers are a factor that contributes to happiness at work.

3.2. Work environment

This theme was conveyed by participants TY, HK, and DR through the categories of work location and relationships with placement employees. The interviewee interpreted happiness at work as gratitude, where the source, TY, stated that his current work distance is much closer than his previous work location, so it does not require a long travel time (TY, 28 October 2023). HK and DR conveyed the same thing, where they felt grateful for the distance and travel time to their current workplace by comparing the distance to their previous work location, which was a positive value of their current job because they could always arrive on time. Participants TY, HK, YY, and DR also said that their frequent involvement in placement company activities and attention, such as giving t-shirts, providing food, and small things, such as employees' willingness to greet them, gave them deep meaning. The feeling of being "recognized" by company employees who use services fosters positive feelings that influence their happiness at work. These findings are in line with research by Pookkaman & Sripradit [36], where the work environment is one of the factors that influences happiness at work. Salas-Vallina et al. [37] classifies happiness at work as a related aspect of job satisfaction.

3.3. Difficulty faced

This theme is obtained from the workload category and the availability of work support tools. Participants FC, YY, and DR said that their current work is not in accordance with their education or previous work experience, but rather because they do not require special skills, and the existence of adequate work support tools makes it easier to do their work well (YY, 28 October 2023). These

results are in line with the results of Desi's research, Wulandri and Megawati [38], where the difficulties faced are one of the factors that influence happiness at work. This theme is also included in the dimensions of job satisfaction according to Salas-Vallina et al [27].

3.4. Assessment of the Company (Provider Outsourcing)

This theme is obtained from the category of company policy and guarantee of work continuity. Participants HR and TY, who were the participants with the longest tenure compared to other participants, expressed how the experience of delays in salary payments and recitation policies by the company affected morale and gave rise to negative emotions in carrying out work. These results are in line with the research results of Dahiya and Raghuvanshi [39] and Wulandri and Megawati [38], where the assessment of the company, including company policies, is one of the factors that influences happiness at work. This theme is the only factor outside the aspects of job satisfaction found in this study and included in the aspects of Affective organizational commitment according to Salas-Vallina et al, [27].

3.5. Gratitude

The researcher concluded that the gratitude factor was based on the entire interview process with the resource person. All the interviewees conveyed various shortcomings, weaknesses, problems, and difficulties faced while working, but the interviewees were able to interpret happiness at work with gratitude. The resource person's ability to interpret general work happiness with gratitude is also a factor that influences specific happiness at work, which gives the resource person strength in facing difficulties at work. This finding is in line with research by Lomas et al. [29], where gratitude is one of the factors that influences happiness at work. Further details can be found in the Comparison of Findings Based on Category in Table 2.

Table 2. Comparison of Findings Based on Category

Main Theme	Sub-theme	Meaning for Participants
Relationships With Coworkers	Support, togetherness, solidarity	Feeling valued and not alone in facing challenges

Main Theme	Sub-theme	Meaning for Participants
Work environment	Distance to workplace, recognition from permanent employees	More time-efficient, feel recognized even as an outsourced worker
Difficulty faced	Workload, limited facilities	Challenges are considered normal, but can cause frustration.
Assessment of the Company	Policies, delayed salaries, job security	Influencing motivation and sense of security
Gratitude	Acceptance, family contribution, religious	Being a source of psychological resilience despite uncertainty

The results of the study show that happiness at work among outsourced workers is largely supported by social factors, particularly relationships with coworkers. This finding is in line with the research by Ruetrakul [26] and Salas-Vallina [37], which emphasizes the role of social support in increasing happiness at work. However, unlike formal workers, these relationships also involve experiences of exclusion, such as when outsourced workers are not included in meetings. This shows that the sense of belonging among outsourced workers is partial and vulnerable.

The work environment also contributes to happiness. A nearby location and simple recognition from the client company provide positive meaning, although limited facilities remain a source of dissatisfaction. These results reinforce the findings of Pookkaman & Sripradit [36] that work environment factors are important determinants of happiness, but this study adds the nuance of unequal access to facilities between outsourced workers and permanent employees.

Work difficulties are perceived differently. Some participants consider challenges to be surmountable with adequate work tools, while others feel stagnant. This variation confirms the subjective nature of happiness as emphasized by Fisher [18] and reveals negative cases that reject a singular narrative of happiness. Assessments of outsourcing companies reveal ambivalence: on the

one hand, late payments and sudden policy changes cause insecurity; on the other hand, small gestures of attention from the company are perceived as a form of recognition. This confirms that outsourcing happiness cannot be separated from the structural context and unequal power relations, which are rarely captured in the Fisher or Salas-Vallina models.

Gratitude emerged as a common thread linking the participants' experiences, albeit with different expressions. For some, gratitude became a coping strategy to maintain happiness; for others, gratitude was mixed with frustration and anxiety about the future. These findings expand the discourse that gratitude is not merely an indicator of happiness but also a mechanism for adapting to job insecurity. Overall, this study shows that work happiness among outsourced workers cannot be understood solely through the classic framework of happiness, work engagement, and commitment. The conditions of work uncertainty following the Job Creation Law [33] demand a more critical approach that acknowledges the role of structural factors, social exclusion, and personal strategies such as gratitude in shaping the experience of work happiness. The following is an illustration of the research findings on happiness in the workplace.
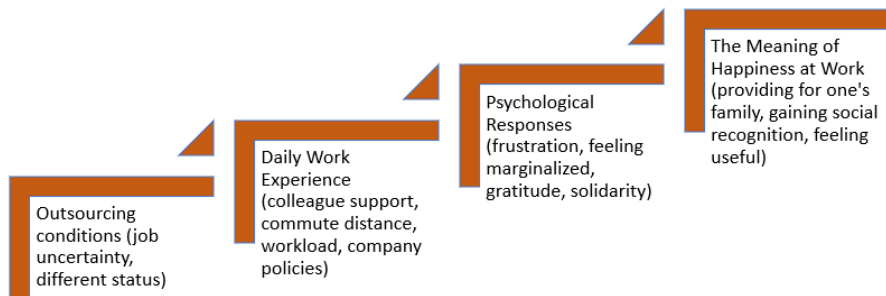

Figure 3. Illustration of Findings on Happiness at Work

4. CONCLUSION

This study found that happiness at work among outsourced workers at a state university in Indonesia can be understood through five main themes, namely relationships with coworkers, work environment, difficulties encountered, assessment of the outsourcing company, and gratitude. These findings confirm that

happiness in the context of outsourcing is highly contextual and influenced by vulnerable structural conditions as well as the personal adaptation strategies employed by workers. However, the results of this study cannot be generalized widely because the number of participants was limited (five people) and they came from only one institution, so the findings are best understood as illustrations of specific experiences. The transferability of the results must be considered carefully, taking into account the suitability of the context in other places. From a theoretical perspective, this study shows that widely used models of happiness, such as the Fisher and Salas-Vallina framework, do not fully cover the unique dynamics of outsourced workers. Factors such as gratitude, experiences of social exclusion, and job status uncertainty need to be taken into account in the development of theories of happiness in non-standard employment. From a practical perspective, these findings can serve as initial considerations for outsourcing service providers and labor-using institutions to be more sensitive to the psychological well-being of workers. Improving communication, ensuring salary payments, and providing recognition equivalent to that of permanent employees are small but meaningful steps in supporting their happiness. This study has significant limitations, not only related to sample size and single location, but also due to its qualitative cross-sectional nature. These conditions limit our understanding of changes in work happiness over the long term and variations across sectors. Therefore, further research using a mixed methods design is recommended in order to combine the depth of qualitative data with quantitative reach, as well as a longitudinal approach to capture the dynamics of work happiness over time. Comparative studies between sectors or locations, as well as intersectional analyses based on gender, age, or family status, can also provide a more comprehensive picture of how outsourced workers perceive work happiness in diverse social and economic contexts.

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