

Finding the Pulse: Job Satisfaction in Healthcare Professionals

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PSY 5501: Self, Society and Health - What's Work Got To Do With It?

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April 13, 2025

Abstract

This literature review sought to understand the current state of job satisfaction and dissatisfaction in healthcare providers, as well as its determinants. The importance of the topic lies in the current state of mass turnover and global shortages within the healthcare industry, where burnout and work environment were reported as the most common causes for employees to either seek a new position, or leave the industry altogether. The study seeks to emphasize the role of burnout and environment on both the employees themselves, and the patients they seek to provide care towards. Literature found a disproportionately strong prevalence of dissatisfaction within the industry, as well as correlations between dissatisfaction and the outcomes of employee health, organizational, and patient outcomes. Literature suggested organizational level interventions such as job crafting to be successful in increasing agency and perceived support within the workplace, but it is important to note that healthcare providers work in uniquely fast paced and unpredictable work environments where many interventions may prove incongruent. An important implication for future research is to focus research on specializing interventions to increase satisfaction, especially in the context of healthcare in a post-pandemic world.

Keywords: Job Satisfaction, Job Dissatisfaction, Healthcare providers, Healthcare industry, Nurses, Doctors, Burnout, Work environment, interventions

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As job markets adapt towards social, technological, and economic innovation and change, job satisfaction becomes an essential key to retain a key workforce. The term, defined as “pleasurable or positive emotional state, resulting from the appraisal of one’s job experiences” (Locke, 1976) has been found to affect everything from employee life quality, family connection and perceived health status to absenteeism, work behavior and job performance. (Montuori et. Al, 2022) These findings have brought forth major implications in the importance of job satisfaction and has heightened our understanding of the detrimental effects of dissatisfaction. A 2020 Gallup study found that about 13% of American full-time workers report being “actively disengaged” from their work and workplace. Citing “miserable work experiences” (Harter, 2023). Another 47% of the over 3,000 surveyed individuals reported being “not engaged” and psychologically unattached from their positions. (Harter, 2023) While certain industries yield natural variability across higher or lower levels of satisfaction, studies have consistently shown a shocking discrepancy in the field of healthcare. A 2023 healthcare experience report from Qualtrics, surveying over 3,00 healthcare sector employees in 28 countries, found that healthcare employees consistently had the lowest scores in comparison to other industry employees across the core pillars of employee experience, engagement and intent-to-stay. Only 52% of respondents reported believing they are paid fairly, while 38% of healthcare employees were found to be at risk of severe burnout, and 39% reported considering leaving their organization. (Qualtrix, 2023) This highlights a disproportionate issue within a critical sector of public work and calls for immediate action.

To understand the impacts of this dissatisfaction, studies across both employee and patient experience will be analyzed. Across all types of work, employee dissatisfaction leads to higher

proportions of burnout and job turnover. (Salama et al., 2022) Where this becomes especially worrisome, is the limitations of skilled workers in the healthcare industry. In a field that requires so much training and education, the working pool is not only limited in size, but also in qualification. (Fagefors, 2022) The turnover of employees holds a significant impact on the organization and efficacy of the healthcare sector, where labor pools with inadequate skills or short-staffing lead to reduced work performance, affecting the implementation of healthcare and health programs. (Griffiths et al., 2021) This dissatisfaction has contributed to the current estimated global shortage of 7.2 million healthcare workers, a number which according to The World Health Organization, is expected to reach 11 million by 2030. (WHO, 2025) In response to the urgency of this issue, this literature review aims to analyze the current determinants of job dissatisfaction and explore interventions designed to improve job satisfaction specifically within the healthcare sector. While cross-sector studies provide valuable insights into universal trends, the unique challenges faced by healthcare professionals (such as elevated stress levels, physical strain, and burnout) necessitate specialized approaches. (Galanis et al., 2023) This review will also identify gaps in existing research and propose areas for future exploration, with the goal of informing strategies to enhance job satisfaction in healthcare. This literature review will be broken down into 3 key elements: The impacts of job satisfaction on patient care, determinants of dissatisfaction, and interventions to increase job satisfaction. It will then address gaps in research related to the topic and discuss future research opportunities.

I. Importance of Job satisfaction on employee and patient outcome

Job satisfaction is an important consideration in any sector, but in the healthcare industry, job satisfaction is not just a matter of employee well-being; it is a critical factor that directly impacts

patient care and outcomes. In 2002, a study found that physicians who reported dissatisfaction within their workplace were subsequently reporting difficulties in caring for patients, feeling they had adequate time for patients, and ability to provide quality care within their work environment. (DeVoe et al., 2023) Additionally, Nurses , who play a crucial role in the frontline of healthcare and patient relations, are affected significantly by their levels of satisfaction within their work environment. In a 2024 meta-analysis examining results of 85 studies, dissatisfaction and specifically burnout within nursing was found to be associated with lower safety grades and lower patient satisfaction scores, as well as higher incidence of patient infection, patient safety incidents, missed care, and medication errors. (Li et al., 2024) In contrast, nurses who report satisfaction within their work environment have patients that do too. A 2024 nurse work environment report from Press Ganey, surveying over 112,500 registered nurses, found that hospitals with the highest-rated work environments receive 7.4% higher patient experience scores and 6.7% higher “Likelihood to Recommend” scores . (Press Ganey, 2024) The largest contribution to this satisfaction was the work environment, where nurses who believe their workplace and management interactions to be healthy and supportive are 21.1% less likely to leave . (Press Ganey, 2024). These statistics underscore the profound impact of job satisfaction in healthcare, highlighting how it extends beyond the practitioners to significantly influence patient safety, satisfaction, and overall healthcare quality.

II. Causes of Job Dissatisfaction

Now understanding the importance of job satisfaction and its effects on patient outcomes, we must understand what may be causing such disproportionate rates of dissatisfaction within the healthcare industry. This literature review found two commonly cited causes. burnout, and work

conditions. Burnout, which is defined in the International Classification of Diseases as “a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed” (WHO, 2022), is divided into three dimensions of affect. Exhaustion, mental distance from one’s job, and reduced professional efficacy.(WHO, 2022) burnout can have detrimental effects on not only work but also individuals themselves, where APA research studies have found that employees who experience burnout are at a 180% increased risk of developing depressive disorders, and burnout acts as a strong predictor for hospitalization due to cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, respiratory issues, and mortality under the age of 45. (Salvagioni et al., 2017) Unfortunately burnout exists within most work experiences of medical providers. The National Center for Health Workforce Analysis found that in 2022, after surveying over 49,000 registered nurses, 82.3% of nurses who had worked the same position in the last year reported symptoms of burnout. 88.8% of those nurses indicated their feelings of burnout increases during the pandemic. Burnout was also listed as the primary reason for both switching workplaces, roles within workplaces, retirement, or leaving the industry altogether. (NCHWA, 2024) This same pattern is seen in doctors and other clinicians, where the huge numbers of burnt-out providers that either distance themselves within or leave the profession entirely pose a huge risk to patient quality and continuity of care.

The second consideration in job dissatisfaction is the work environment. The high pace and high stress nature of the field has been coupled with issues due to both resource and personnel shortages. These shortages have restricted providers both physically and mentally, where strains such as strict time pressure, environmental unpredictability, no or little control over work pace, and unfavorable organizational culture have been frequently cited as major determinants of negative working experience. According to the Commonwealth Fund’s 2022 International Health

Policy survey, less than 30% of primary care physicians in the ten surveyed countries were satisfied by the time they were able to spend with patients. (Gumas et. Al, 2023) this same survey reported even providers who reported themselves as satisfied, more than a third of primary care providers reported a decrease in the quality of care they were able to provide due to work environment. (Gumas et. Al, 2023)

III. Proven Interventions to Increase Job Satisfaction

Although a large shift in research has happened on the topic of increasing workplace satisfaction, the conventional approaches to improving the environment or reducing burnout are often incongruent with the actual work realities of healthcare professionals. In meta-analytic review, Organizational preventative or primary approaches are far more effective in promoting healthier workplaces, but pose higher difficulty in implementation. (Shiri, 2023) However, it is important to note that these interventions do work, with structured workplace promoted practices of wellbeing reducing burnout, improving adaptive behavior, and mitigating emotional exhaustion (Tetrick & Winslow, 2015). Beyond encouraging personal change, organizations can implement small structural changes to help employees feel a sense of agency and control over their work environments. According to a 2022 study, the practice of job crafting, or allowing employees to alter tasks or interactions to best suit their skillset, results in higher levels of satisfaction self-efficacy, and perceived motivation, while decreasing cynicism and perceived effort. (Gabriel & Aguinas, 2022) An important takeaway, especially in such a demanding work environment, is that encouraging employees to make changes within their own lives is nonconductive to real change. According to a 2010 study, organizational level initiatives are significantly more effective than individual level action and are shown to have longer lasting effects on employee

health. These findings emphasize that though difficult to implement in a medical setting with low predictability, organizational intervention is deeply important to the future of the profession. By prioritizing structural changes and providing organizational support within those changes, healthcare institutions can create an environment that not only alleviates burnout and increases retention but also indicates a shift in general industry culture that may encourage interest and intention to join the field.

Gaps in The Research:

The public healthcare industry has come under intense politicization in the last few years, due to the results and process of the COVID-19 pandemic. Their work came under intense scrutiny and has drastically changed both internal and external perceptions and experiences of the healthcare sector. According to the American Public Health Association, local health officials, who were often used as scapegoats for covid-19 restriction policies, have seen a skyrocketed rate of harassment and violence within their working experience. (Yeager, 2022) These findings are strengthened by a 2021 study, which assessed data from National Association of County and City Health Officials. This study found that half of the local health departments reported at least one type of harassment of their health official, while one in three health officials who left their positions within the first 10 months of the pandemic, had reported experiences of harassment on the job. (Yeager, 2022) though important to note a vast majority of those reporting harassment had stayed on their positions within that first year, a Definitive Healthcare report, which utilized data from over 2 million physicians and nurses, found that in 2021, approximately 334,000 healthcare workers resigned from the workforce due to pandemic related stressors.(Popowitz, 2023) This mass resignation subsequently heightened the severe industry shortage, and

increased burnout on remaining employees due to larger work burden. This burnout was further accompanied by depression and trauma from personal loss, where the World Health Organization estimates that 115,500 healthcare providers working on the front lines of the Covid-19 crisis died in the first year of the pandemic alone. (Gholami et. al, 2022) These statistics show a major shift in the healthcare environment that has not been adequately researched or contextualized in fighting burnout or job dissatisfaction.

Implications for Future research:

Looking towards future research opportunities, there may be great reward in the working experience of healthcare providers if we bring in post-pandemic context in forging solutions to issues within organizational culture and climate. As workplace satisfaction is continuously associated with the workplace environment, we must be able to adapt our strategies to recognize the unique working experience of healthcare professionals, which may decrease the efficacy of other job satisfaction strategies. To inform new, specialized strategies, we have a responsibility to authentically understand the impact of work impacts from the pandemic and other modern health contexts, such as decreased staffing, personal trauma, and political hypervisibility. By doing so, we can design interventions that are not only evidence-based but also empathetic, addressing the nuanced circumstances healthcare workers must navigate today. This approach can pave the way for more sustainable workforce engagement, retention, and better outcomes for both employees and patients.

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