

Emotional Well-being Among Public Employees: A Comparative Perspective

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Abstract

There is growing agreement on the importance of well-being in general and among employees more specifically. One area that has attracted significantly less attention is the well-being of public sector employees, especially from a comparative perspective. This study explored the factors explaining emotional well-being among public sector employees in seven countries. Using data from the European Social Survey, round 6, it examined the importance of the work environment, of belonging to the public sector, and of belonging to the country and their effects on well-being. We found public sector employees had a higher level of emotional well-being than non-public sector employees. However, belonging to the public sector was less important than other factors. The country context and soft features of the work environment were important to public sector employees, but not just to them, and were reflected differently in different countries.

Keywords

public employees, well-being, emotions, comparative, administrative culture

Introduction

Well-being has become an important term in how we evaluate our lives. (De Smedt, 2013; Diener & Seligman, 2004; Gowdy, 2005; Huppert & So, 2013; Kahneman & Krueger, 2006). Concomitantly, there is a growing awareness of the significance of well-being among employees and its effect on organizational outcomes (Brunetto et al., 2018). More specifically, well-being is seen to be “a major determinant of

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productivity at the individual, enterprise, and societal levels” (Kuoppala et al., 2008, cited in: Schulte & Vainio, 2010, p. 422).

While the importance of well-being at work is well understood, well-being among public employees is less explored. Moreover, while some studies explore well-being or similar behavioural and psychological traits among public sector employees in a specific country (Borst et al., 2019; García-Juan et al., 2018; Green, 2004; Hsieh et al., 2012; Johari et al., 2018; Noblet & Rodwell, 2008; Tummers et al., 2018; Vigoda-Gadot & Meiri, 2008; Vigoda-Gadot & Meisler, 2010), to the best of our knowledge, a comparative perspective is missing. Therefore, in our study, we embraced a comparative perspective and examined the well-being among public sector employees in seven countries with diverse administrative cultures. We explored the differences between countries and the effect of the belonging to the public sector, as well as more specific features of the work environment and their effects on well-being. The use of a comparative perspective permits a closer look at shared factors that improve public sector employees’ well-being. More importantly, the differences between countries become apparent, possibly leading to more effective human resource management practices to fit a country’s unique features.

The research was based on quantitative methods, using data from the European Social Survey, round 6, in 2012. This survey’s rigorous sampling method enabled a comparative analysis. We used descriptive statistics, as well as ordinary least squares (OLS) regression, to explore rival explanations of public sector employees’ well-being.

The findings revealed that public sector employees have a higher level of emotional well-being than non-public sector employees in six out of seven countries. However, those differences are not significant in all countries. Belonging to the public sector is less important to well-being than other variables. The article makes three contributions to the literature. First, it deals with the less explored subject of emotional well-being among public sector employees. Second, it examines rival explanations of the achievement of well-being. Third, it offers a comparative look at public sector employees’ well-being across seven countries.

Literature Review

Why Are We So Interested in Well-being?

Well-being, as reflected in a person’s health, social relations, and enjoyment at work, is perceived as an indication of satisfaction with life. With the economic development of societies and the meeting of people’s basic material needs, well-being becomes more important (De Smedt, 2013; Diener & Seligman, 2004). Seligman (2002) defines well-being as “people’s positive evaluations of their lives, including positive emotion, engagement, satisfaction, and meaning” (in Diener & Seligman, 2004, p. 1). It includes satisfaction with life, a positive mood, and the absence of negative mood (Ryan & Deci, 2001, p. 144).

Well-being has two aspects: hedonistic well-being, which reflects happiness and joy, and eudemonic well-being, which reflects the notion of fulfillment or flourishing as the basis of a meaningful life. They are correlated but different (Helliwell et al., 2015; Vanhoute, 2013). The first refers to feeling good and the second to functioning well. Various measurements focus on subjective feelings - positive (happiness, fulfillment) or negative (depression, stress). Some use a one-question indicator, usually framed as "All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole, these days?" (World Value Survey), while others use more complex methods (De Smedt, 2013; Diener & Seligman, 2004; Huppert & So, 2013). In many respects, our ultimate goal is to live a more fulfilled life and have better well-being. Since our work surroundings strongly affect our lives, it is important to understand their effect on our well-being. Such an understanding can guide public organizations' HR departments in their quest to promote well-being among their employees.

Well-being at work has a close connection to general well-being and affects workers' productivity (Green, 2004; Schulte & Vainio, 2010), making it more than just job satisfaction (Brunetto et al., 2018). Diener and Seligman (2004) also found that better well-being on the job correlates with civic organizational behavior, such as helping others and sharing information. The few studies investigating well-being among public sector employees (Baptiste, 2008; Peccei, 2004) have used several kinds of variables to assess well-being, including a low level of stress, lack of fatigue, organizational commitment, vitality, work-life balance, work engagement, and job satisfaction (Borst et al., 2019; Boxall & Macky, 2014; Green, 2004; Ogbonnaya & Valizade, 2015; Tummers et al., 2018; Van der Voet & Van de Walle, 2018). Many studies explore job satisfaction, motivation, and organizational performance (for a review, see Casey et al., 2012). The job design literature focuses on the characteristics of the job that can affect the motivation, satisfaction and productivity of the workers. The better-known model, in that respect, is Hackman and Oldham's (1974); it refers to such features affecting job satisfaction as skill identity, task identity, task significance, autonomy, and feedback. The main aim of their job design model is to redesign the characteristics of jobs to achieve higher worker motivation. Casey et al. (2012) review findings from different studies looking at job redesign and its positive effect on such aspects as product quality, reduced absenteeism, job satisfaction, and productivity. However, a comparative perspective is still lacking (Casey et al., 2012).

To sum up, we know that various factors affect motivation, satisfaction at work and, in some cases, well-being, but few comparative studies include the effect of macro factors on public sector employees' well-being. We do so in the next section through the concept of administrative culture.

Administrative Cultures

Public sector employees work in surroundings that affect their well-being, but these surroundings differ from country to country. Jamil et al. (2013) defined administrative culture as broadly "associated with the dominant values and norms in public organizations." These influence interpersonal relations both within and beyond the organization,

thus impacting performance and outcomes for the wider society. Administrative culture defines what acceptable and legitimate behavior is and therefore provides a framework for behaving, acting, and forming preferences (Jamil, 1994; Lam, 1994; Denison & Mishra, 1995; Jabbara & Dwivedi, 2004 in Jamil et al., 2013; p. 901). It is influenced by the general norms, relations and structures of the political, economic and social structure of a given society (Peters, 2009) and, as such, may shed light on differences between countries. Exploring the organizational work characteristics in the context of administrative culture can help to identify the magnitude of their different effects on public sector employees' well-being.

We examined the administrative culture of the public workforce in seven countries. As shown in Table 1, we included five countries with a *continental European public administration style*: France, Italy, Spain, Germany, and Belgium (see Rodríguez Bolívar et al., 2015). The *continental European public administration style* has historically been reflected in the importance of "public law" (vs. "common law") and the centrality of the state legal system to citizens, as well as the operation of the public administration (Kickert, 2002). Within this general categorization, three have a *Napoleonic administrative culture* - France, Italy, and Spain. This administrative culture is state oriented, centralistic, bureaucratic, and based on law. Two countries, Germany and Belgium, have an *organicist administrative culture*. The organicist tradition is reflected in the cooperation between state and social actors. While founded on bureaucratic traditions and law, it also features collaboration between sectors and decentralization (Loughlin et al., 2011: in Huxley et al., 2016; Rodríguez Bolívar et al., 2015). The Netherlands is denoted by some as closer to a Scandinavian administrative culture (Rodríguez Bolívar et al., 2015) and by others as an organicist culture (Huxley et al., 2016).

The Scandinavian tradition has a mixture of the characteristics of organicist and Anglo-Saxon administrative cultures. The latter culture itself has a mixture; it is a state (government) oriented administration that includes pluralistic relationships with social actors. An example is the United Kingdom (Loughlin et al., 2011: in Huxley et al., 2016; Rodríguez Bolívar et al., 2015).

Different administrative cultures might therefore have different effects on public sector employees' well-being. For example, in more formal administrative cultures with strong bureaucratic and law-based traditions, such as the *continental European* culture, the stable work environment might have more effect on public employees' well-being. In administrative cultures based on pluralistic and collaborative features, such as the organicist tradition and the Anglo-Saxon administrative tradition, relationships in the workplace might have more effect on public employees' well-being than in other cultures.

Given the deficit of comparative studies on well-being among public sector employees, we took an exploratory perspective. Consequently, our first research question was formulated as the following:

Q1: Are there differences in emotional well-being among public sector employees from different countries with different administrative cultures?

Table I. The Seven Countries and Their Features.

| The country | Administrative culture ^{2,7} | Administrative features and trends |
|-------------|--|--|
| 1 | France Napoleonic Continental European | Statist country tending to resist the New Public Management (NPM) reform, high involvement of the state in social and economic life. Administration based on legal tradition; professional civil service based on diverse categories of professional expertise. Reform focused on decentralization, autonomy in personal management and modernization; some privatization and orientation toward performance budgeting. While steps of modernization and decentralization were implemented, still a central state. Implemented more Neo Weberian State (NWS) reforms. ¹ Reforms from the 2000s mainly focused on downsizing and mergers; less transparency and citizen collaboration ⁴ . |
| 2 | Italy Napoleonic/ Continental European | Napoleonic model, state based on law, and high involvement of the state in social and economic life. Includes 4 layers - state, region, province, municipality. Strong central government alongside specific cultural differences at the regional level. Known to be less efficient; reforms mostly implemented in the context of budgeting pressures, characterized in elements such as: privatization, decentralization, client oriented and employment with difficulties in implementation. (NWS) ¹ |
| 3 | Spain Napoleonic/Continental European | Young democracy since 1978; federation that gives high power to the regions. Napoleonic, bureaucratic model based on law. Reflected in expansion of the public sector and expansion of the welfare state at a later stage than other European countries. Relatively influential civil service as a source of political advice. Reforms include: planning, programming, and budgeting system, modernization, agencification and territorial reform (in local and regional government) only partly and fragmentally implemented. ³ Due to austerity measures steps were taken to cut public servant pay ⁵ |

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

| The country | Administrative culture ^{2,7} | Administrative features and trends |
|-------------------|--|---|
| 4 Germany | Organicist/ <i>Continental European</i> | A <i>Rechtsstaat</i> state based on tradition of the law; federal republic that includes 16 <i>Länder</i> and local government (counties and non-county municipalities). Complex and varied public administration. Central government has only a modest part in public services. Very bureaucratic, fragmented and incremental reforms; process of modernization and steering more “bottom-up”, and due to budgetary needs, more so at the local government. (NWS) ^{1,5} |
| 5 Belgium | Organicist ⁶ <i>Continental European</i> | Federal state that includes 3 level - central government, provinces and local authorities. From the change in 1993 that made it a federal state, the role for federal civil service became more modest. Reforms influenced by the need to economize alongside modernization while preserving the traditional structure, influenced, among others, by unions. ¹ (NWS) |
| 6 The Netherlands | Organicist/ <i>Scandinavian</i> | Unitary structure but very decentralized, based on consensual and corporatist style. High importance and responsibility for the central government ministries. Separation of civil service and political influence. High importance to the province and the local authorities in supplying services. Some privatization, performance measurement and decentralization implementation but in a gradual way and less intense than in New Public Management model. (NWS). ¹ However, it is perceived as more managerial oriented in its capabilities ⁵ |
| 7 United Kingdom | Anglo-Saxon | Unitary and centralized state. Civil service with generally high power and neutrality from political influence; central in implementation of managerial ideas and private sector methods into the public sector. Major reform of new public management, including major privatization steps alongside modernization and joint-up in the last decades - New Public management reform ^{1,5} |

Note. ¹Adapted from Pollitt and Bouckaert (2011); ²Adapted from Loughlin et al., (2011) in Huxley et al. (2016, pp. 260–261); ³Ongaro and Parrado (2008); ⁴Bezes and Jeannot (2016); ⁵Andrews et al. (2016); ⁶We refer to Belgium as organic because it is a federal state and has a tendency to collaborate with other actors, such as unions (Bouckaert et al., 1999); ⁷Rodríguez Bolívar et al., (2015).

Public Sector and Non-public Sector Employees: Divergence or Convergence?

Another interesting question is whether public and non-public sector employees differ in terms of well-being. The public service motivation literature suggests the former have a unique motivation, one that goes beyond “rational choice theory” and self-interest (Borst et al., 2019; Levitats & Vigoda-Gadot, 2019; Perry, 2000) and can contribute to their well-being. In their comparison of public and private sector employees in 30 countries, Bullock et al. (2015) demonstrated that in most countries, public sector employees have a specific public service motivation, and they feel their job is important to society. In this context, some studies have shown public sector employees are more trustworthy, public-spirited, motivated to serve the public or to contribute to society and altruistic than others (Borst et al., 2019; Lyons et al., 2006; Perry, 2000, 2012; Van de Walle & Lahat, 2017). In contrast, others have suggested that the differences in employees’ values across sectors or the effect of human resource management practices on employees from the different sectors are not so significant (Blom et al., 2020; Lyons et al., 2006). Furthermore, meta-analyses of the differences between public sector employees and non-public sector employees conclude that although some differences exist, it is hard to make a general statement about them (Baarspul & Wilderom, 2011; Baldwin, 1990).

In a UK study, Green (2004) noted more intensification in work between 1992 and 2001, expressed in working at higher speed and under tension; the intensification was greater in the public sector than in the private one. The New Public Management and the Post-New Management reforms created a complicated work environment with conflicting demands and trade-offs. For example, employees are asked to cut expenses and provide better services at the same time (Brunetto et al., 2018; Coffey et al., 2009; Du Gay, 2011; Lahat, 2018; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011). Others have noted greater stress among public sector employees (Gardner & Oswald, 2001 in Coffey et al., 2009, p. 433). For example, studies of well-being among health professionals have found nurses and physicians in the private sector have higher well-being than those in the public sector (Brunetto et al., 2011, 2018; Heponiemi et al., 2010).

Given the lack of unanimity in the findings, we formulated our second question as:

Q2: Are there differences between public sector employees and non-public sector employees in emotional well-being?

We wanted to further explore possible explanations by looking at various factors in the work environment that affect well-being.

Factors in the Work Environment that Affect Workers’ Well-being

Structural conditions at work. First and foremost, people need to assure their basic needs. Structural conditions include factors such as work hours and pay, mostly reflected in employee contracts. Different conditions reflect different levels of job security. For example, a worker without a contract will feel less secure, and this might

harm his or her well-being. Often (but not always), having no contact or a short-term contract is reflected in lower pay and inferior social conditions at work. This puts pressure on workers; some may not be able to work enough hours or earn enough money to maintain a suitable standard of living. Studies have established the relevance of these factors to well-being (Boxall & Macky, 2014; Coffey et al., 2009; Golden et al., 2013; Green, 2004). For example, Coffey et al. (2009) found differences in well-being between social service workers in the UK with salaries and those paid weekly, with the former enjoying higher rates of well-being (p. 432). Given these findings, we posited that:

H(1). Public sector employees with more stability at work will tend to have a higher level of emotional well-being than those with less stability.

Another aspect of structural conditions is whether or not an employee has a managerial role. On the one hand, a managerial role may include more work and stress because of increased responsibilities, interactions with other workers, and conflicts that might hinder well-being. On the other hand, the ability to influence organizational policies may give an individual a sense of responsibility, achievement, and satisfaction, contributing to greater well-being. While the demands associated with managerial positions may be perceived as a challenge, the context may play a role in intensifying or mitigating them (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). A lack of organizational or personal resources to meet these demands could lead to greater strain, harming a manager's emotional well-being and level of work engagement (Borst et al., 2019). In this context, Bright (2005) found that managers have a higher level of public service motivation than non-managerial workers, while De Moortel et al. (2014) noted that, in general, managers report higher levels of well-being than their employees. Based on De Moortel et al.'s (2014) findings, we posited that:

H(2). Public sector managers will tend to have a higher level of emotional well-being than public sector non-managerial employees.

The environment and social relationships in the workplace. These factors include subjective and objective aspects of employees' social relationships, as well as their involvement, discretion, and sense of having a meaningful position in the workplace. We focused on the following.

Level of discretion. Discretion reflects the amount of freedom employees have in various aspects of their work. Having the ability to decide creates a feeling of empowerment, self-worth, power, and control. The freedom to choose in general and more specifically to influence uses of time affects well-being (e.g., Diener et al., 2010), as well as job satisfaction (Hackman & Oldham, 1974). Golden et al. (2013) found the ability to make various decisions, for example, to decide when to start and end the workday, has a more positive effect on employees' well-being than income or work hours. These findings are more significant among hourly workers. Similarly, Green

(2004) reported that more discretion improves a person's satisfaction from work. In addition, Brunetto et al. (2018) established that more discretionary power among nurses in Italy, Australia, and the UK in both the public and private sectors contributes to their well-being. Other studies have noted the importance of discretion and autonomy for employees' well-being (Blom et al., 2020; Borst et al., 2019). Therefore, we hypothesized that:

H(3). Public sector employees who have more discretion over their workday will tend to have a higher level of emotional well-being than those with less discretion.

Level of involvement and participation in decision-making. One of the main understandings in human resource management is that the participation of workers in decision-making and sharing information with workers can benefit an organization (Baptiste, 2008); but it can benefit the employees as well. Employees who are heard and given the opportunity to be a part of decision-making processes will be more involved and committed to their work. Furthermore, they will feel more worthwhile, not just a small, unimportant part of the organization. These feelings can contribute to higher level of well-being at work. For example, Boxall and Macky (2014) established a connection between greater involvement, better work-life balance, and greater satisfaction. A study of workers in the UK found participation in decision making reduces work strain (Green, 2004, p. 620). Ogbonnaya and Valizade (2015) found that among workers in Ireland, participation in decision making contributes to job satisfaction, increases organizational commitment, and reduces strain, thus improving workers' well-being. Based on studies supporting a positive connection between involvement and well-being (Boxall & Macky, 2014; Green, 2004; Mostafa et al., 2015; Ogbonnaya & Valizade, 2015), we hypothesized that:

H(4). Public sector employees who are more involved in decision making in their work will tend to have a higher level of emotional well-being than those who are less involved.

Social relationships in the workplace. One of the life circumstances that influences our well-being is our relationships with others. Strong relationships with family members, friends, and co-workers have a positive effect on well-being (Diener & Seligman, 2002; Siedlecki et al., 2014). A social relationship is a support system, a place of comfort where we can share and emotionally vent. This support leads to more resiliency (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013). In the workplace, good social relationships reinforce trust, provide the basis for better teamwork, and lead to an atmosphere that promotes employees' well-being (Baptiste, 2008; Brunetto et al., 2013, 2018; Coffey et al., 2009). For example, Sloan (2017) documented the importance of supportive relationships, especially for women, on their commitment to state employment. In the work design literature, Grant (2007) indicated the importance of interactions with the beneficiaries of the work to employee motivation. Coffey et al. (2009) established that the social workers' relationships with their co-workers, as well their connections with the

service users, affect their job satisfaction. While some social relationships with some users of public services, such as prisoners, might be challenging, based on Coffey et al. (2009), we hypothesized that:

H(5). Public sector employees who have more social interactions will tend to have a higher level of emotional well-being than those with fewer social interactions.

Work-life balance. Today, both parents commonly participate in the workforce, so the ability to fulfill responsibilities both at work and at home is important (Den Dulk & Groeneveld, 2013; Feeney & Stritch, 2019). Feeling guilt or stress about not meeting the needs in one or both areas can create frustration and conflict and hinder well-being. Therefore, the ability to balance work and family commitments, or to create a “work-life balance,” may be a factor in well-being (Caillier, 2013; Maxwell & McDougall, 2004; Sirgy & Lee, 2018). Clark (2000) defines work-life balance as “satisfaction and good functioning at work and at home, with a minimum of role conflict” (p. 751). While other researchers have noted the effect of family-friendly policies on the perceptions of a work-life balance and the organizational commitment of public sector employees (Caillier, 2013; Den Dulk & Groeneveld 2013; Feeney & Stritch, 2019; Ko, 2019), we were interested in the effect of these perceptions on well-being. In this regard, Greenhaus et al. (2003) found that those who spend more time with their family than at work have a better quality of life than those who spend a balanced amount of time between work and family. Those who spend more time at work have the lowest quality of life (p. 526). In Romania, Pop (2014) established that a balance between work and family improves job satisfaction, as well as general satisfaction with life (p. 45). Therefore, we posited that:

H(6). Public sector employees who have a better work-life balance will tend to have a higher level of emotional well-being than those with a poor work-life balance.

Data and Method

The research presented in this article used data from the sixth wave of the European Social Survey (ESS) from 2012. The ESS is a biennial cross-national survey established in 2001. It is led by academics and social research professionals and deals with subjects including but not limited to social trust, politics, subjective well-being, gender, household, socio demographics, and human values. The ESS implements rigorous methodologies, is based on a strict random probability sampling of all persons aged 15 and up and has a response rate of at least 70%. It is based on a face-to-face interview in the native language of the interviewee. The sixth round included 29 countries and the core module of questions, as well as several new questions. This survey is financed by the European Commission’s 7th Framework Program, the European Science Foundation and national funding bodies in each country (ESS, 2012a, 2019).

In our study, we used data from seven countries: Belgium, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Spain, the Netherlands, and Italy. In total, our sample consisted of 13,762 individuals. We chose those seven countries because they have different kinds of administrative cultures.

To identify differences in well-being between public sector employees and non-public sector employees, we used a question asking interviewees about their work's organizational type (F32). This question has been used in other studies to delineate public sector employees from non-public sector employees (Van de Walle & Lahat, 2017). Those who answered categories 1 to 3 (central or local government and other public or state-owned enterprises) were defined as public sector employees, and those who placed themselves in categories 4 to 6 (a private firm, self-employed and other) were considered non-public sector employees. This division yielded an effective sample of 12,431 observations: 3,424 public sector employees and 9,007 non-public sector employees.

Table 2 presents the various characteristics of the sample. While, in general, the countries resemble one another, some exceptions are worth mentioning. In six out of seven countries (Germany is the exception), there are more women than men respondents. In Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, the educational level is higher than in the other countries. The income level is lower in Italy, France, and Spain. In most countries, the percentage of public sector employees is around 27% to 29%, except in the Netherlands where it is 33.7% and Spain where it is 17.5%. Germany has the highest percentage of employees with unlimited contracts (79.3%), and Spain has the highest percentage with limited contracts (26.2%). The UK has the most employees with no contract (18.2% vs. 8.5% on average). There are more managers in the Netherlands and fewer managers in Spain. Across countries, the average age is 49.5 ($SD = 18.6$).

Dependent Variable: Emotional Well-being

As mentioned, many studies measure subjective well-being using one or two questions. We used a more nuanced index of well-being that included both the known evaluative items that measure subjective well-being (satisfied and happy) and six items that estimate emotional well-being based on positive and negative feelings (ESS, 2012b, ESS, 2015). The estimated factor scores of the items are the following:

| | | |
|------------------------|---|-------|
| Evaluative well-being: | How satisfied are you with life as a whole? | 0.678 |
| | How happy are you? | 0.721 |
| Emotional well-being: | Feel calm and peaceful | 0.627 |
| | Enjoy life | 0.679 |
| | Am happy | 0.722 |
| | Feel sad | 0.714 |
| | Feel depressed | 0.708 |
| | Anxious | 0.646 |

Table 2. Main Characteristics of the Seven Countries and the Total Sample.

| | Belgium | Germany | France | UK | Italy | Netherlands | Spain | Total sample |
|---------------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|
| Gender (%) | | | | | | | | |
| Men | 48.7% | 50.4% | 44.8% | 42.6% | 47.8% | 46.4% | 48.3% | 47.1% |
| Women | 51.3% | 49.6% | 55.2% | 57.4% | 52.2% | 53.6% | 51.7% | 52.9% |
| Age (Mean, SD) | 47.3 (19.1) | 48.7 (18.6) | 51.8 (18.5) | 51.8 (19.1) | 47.1 (18.3) | 51.2 (18.0) | 47.6 (18.0) | 49.5 (18.6) |
| Education (Mean, SD) | 13.0 (3.9) | 13.8 (3.4) | 12.4 (4.0) | 13.3 (3.6) | 12.6 (5.2) | 13.6 (4.3) | 12.5 (6.0) | 13.1 (18.6) |
| Income (Mean, SD) | 5.7 (2.5) | 5.5 (2.8) | 4.6 (2.7) | 5.1 (3.0) | 4.4 (2.7) | 5.9 (2.8) | 4.6 (2.9) | 5.2 (18.6) |
| Non-public employees (%) | 71.8% | 71.7% | 73.8% | 70.4% | 73.1% | 66.3% | 82.5% | 72.5% |
| Public employees (%) | 28.2% | 28.3% | 26.2% | 29.6% | 26.9% | 33.7% | 17.5% | 27.5% |
| Unlimited contract I (%) | 77.7% | 79.3% | 77.0% | 70.1% | 67.4% | 76.3% | 65.4% | 74.5% |
| Limited contract (%) | 16.5% | 16.0% | 16.6% | 11.7% | 23.0% | 15.9% | 26.2% | 17.0% |
| No contract (%) | 5.9% | 4.7% | 6.4% | 18.2% | 9.6% | 7.7% | 8.4% | 8.5% |
| Non-manager (%) | 64.3% | 61.3% | 64.6% | 61.2% | 65.2% | 58.4% | 71.0% | 63.2% |
| Manager (%) | 35.7% | 38.7% | 35.4% | 38.8% | 34.8% | 41.6% | 29.0% | 36.8% |
| N | 1869 | 2958 | 1968 | 2286 | 947 | 1845 | 1889 | 13762 |

Note. Analysis of the authors based on the European Social Survey, round 6, 2012.

We used factor analysis on these items; the resulting Eigenvalue was 3.785, and the factor loading of each variable was higher than 0.62. Cronbach's alpha was .780. We constructed a single scale based on the eight items using the SPSS function, "factor analysis: factor score," and used the regression method in a way that built a new variable. This method is widely used (Estabrook & Neale, 2013).

Independent Variables

Based on the literature, we examined two kinds of independent variables. The first was the *structural conditions at work*; for this, we had two variables. The first was the type of work contract an employee had (F23). The possibilities were: unlimited duration, limited duration, or no contract at all. We used this as a continuous variable reversed. The second variable was managerial role, based on the question: "In your main job, do/did you have any responsibility for supervising¹ the work of other employees?" (F25) (dummy variable, manager = 0 or not manager = 1).

The second kind of independent variable was *the environment and social relationships in the workplace*; this included the following four variables:

- 1) *Level of discretion*: We used the following statement to explore the level of discretion respondents had over their day: "How much does the management at your work allow you to decide how your own daily work is/was organized?" (F27). Responses were on an 11-point scale, ranging from 0 = "I have no influence" to 10 = "I have complete control."
- 2) *Level of involvement and participation in decision-making*: To explore the level of involvement, we used the following question, "How much does the management at your work allow you to influence policy decisions about the activities of the organization?" (F28). Responses were on an 11-point scale, ranging from 0 = "I have no influence" to 10 = "I have complete control."
- 3) *Social relationships in the workplace*. To explore the effect of the level of social interaction with work colleagues and friends in general on well-being, we used the question: "How often do you meet socially with friends, relatives or work colleagues?" (C2). The answers included a range of 7 categories: 1 = never, 2 = less than once a month, 3 = once a month, 4 = several times a month, 5 = once a week, 6 = several times a week and 7 = every day.
- 4) *Work-life balance*: To explore work-life balance, we used a question asking how satisfied respondents were with the balance of the time they spent on their paid work and the time spent on other aspects of their lives (F35C). The answers were on a scale from 0 = extremely dissatisfied to 10 = extremely satisfied.

Control Variables

Some studies use job satisfaction as a measurement of well-being (e.g., Van der Voet & Van de Walle, 2018). Others explore a causal connection between well-being and

job satisfaction. We focused on emotional well-being as our dependent variable and controlled for job satisfaction. Job satisfaction was measured using the survey question “All things considered, how satisfied are you with your present job?” (F35B). The answers ranged from 0 = extremely dissatisfied to 10 = extremely satisfied.

Social-demographic characteristics. Researchers have investigated the role of age, gender, income, and education in well-being (Diener et al., 2009; Gowdy, 2005; Keyes et al., 2002; Pinquart & Sörensen, 2001). More specifically, at work, women report more strain than men, and employees in their prime working years report being under greater strain than younger or older employees (Green, 2004). We controlled for socio-demographic variables, such as gender (dummy variable), education (years), age (years) and socio-economic level (F41) based on ten income categories (1 = lowest decile to 10 = highest decile).

Data Analysis

The statistical methods used to examine our hypotheses and questions included the following. We used factor analysis to structure the dependent variable and an independent sample *t*-test to explore the differences between the public sector employees' and the non-public sector employees' well-being. We used ordinary least squares (OLS) regression to explore the effect of the various independent variables on respondents' well-being in the general sample and in each of the countries.

As stated, our data came from the ESS, an international survey. This survey's unique data set allowed us to explore more complex measurements of public sector employees' well-being in a comparative perspective. However, it might be subject to common method bias (CMB), also called common source bias (CSB). This bias can be created when both dependent and independent variables are based on the same survey, as the correlation could be inflated by the measurement tool (George & Pandey, 2017; Podsakoff et al., 2012). Several points are worth mentioning here. First, the survey is known for its rigorous methodological procedures. Second, our dependent variable was based on an 8-item index, and the independent variables were known from previous studies, as explained in the literature section. Third, we implemented Harman's single factor score, and the total variance for one factor was 11.7% (George & Pandey, 2017). Fourth, we detected variance inflation factor (VIF) values and tolerance values that were both acceptable and reflect that there is no multicollinearity problem.² However, it should be considered a possibility and, as such, may represent a limitation of the study.

Findings

Our aim was to investigate the factors affecting public sector employees' emotional well-being. Our first step was to explore the differences between public sector employees and non-public sector employees across the seven countries. As Figure 1 illustrates, public sector employees in six of the countries (Italy is the exception) have

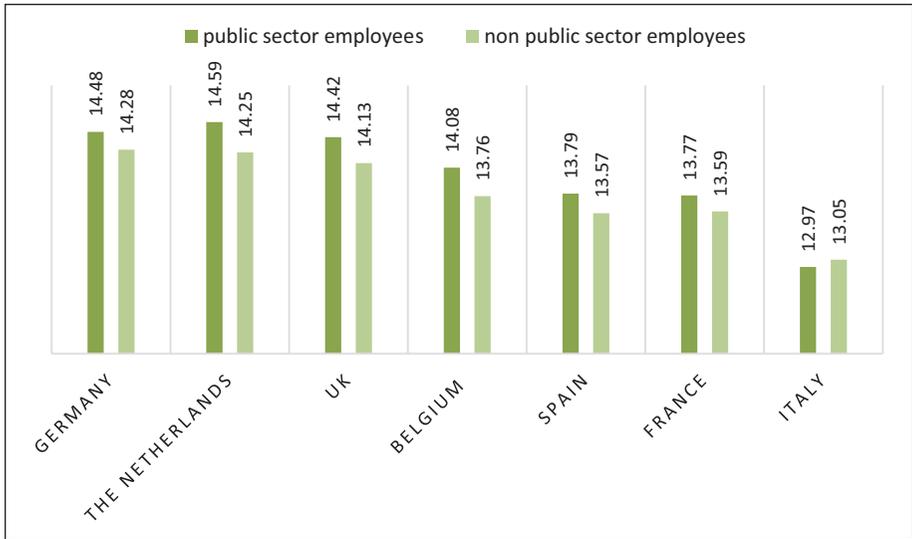


Figure 1. Emotional well-being of public employees versus non-public employees in seven countries.

Note. Analysis of the authors based on the European Social Survey, round 6, 2012.

higher levels of well-being than non-public sector employees. T-tests exploring the differences between the sectors revealed that in the Netherlands, the UK, and Germany, the differences are significant at $p < .05$. In Belgium, France, Italy, and Spain, the differences between sectors are not significant. In general, the level of well-being for both public sector and non-public sector employees is fairly comparable to their countries' ranking on the scale of well-being. The Netherlands, Belgium, UK, and Germany have higher levels of well-being; France, Spain, and Italy have lower levels (Helliwell et al., 2015).

In the second step, we performed OLS regression on the total sample to explore the relevance of belonging to the different countries (Q1) and sectors (Q2) as factors explaining emotional well-being. The model presented in Table 3 is significant ($F=100.65$, $df=18$, $p < .001$) and explains 15.1% of the variance in the dependent variable emotional well-being. The result suggests that belonging to a specific country affects an employee's well-being. In all countries, except the UK, the emotional well-being is lower than in Germany, the comparison country. Furthermore, comparing the beta values shows that belonging to the country (except for the UK) contributes more to the explanation of employees' well-being than belonging to the public sector ($b=0.112$, $\beta=0.017$, $p < .1$).

However, our aim was to explore more specifically the emotional well-being of the *public sector employees* across countries. Therefore, we performed OLS regression in each of the seven countries. All the models in Table 4 are significant at $p < .05$. It is interesting to see that while in most countries, there is not much divergence between

Table 3. Metric (B) and Standardized Regression Coefficients (β) to Predict Employees' Well-being in all Seven Countries.

| Ind-var | | |
|--|---------|----------------------|
| Contract | b | 0.254*** (0.055) |
| | β | .044 |
| Managerial role | b | 0.024 (0.061) |
| | β | .004 |
| Discretion on work day | b | 0.059*** (0.012) |
| | β | .052 |
| Involvement in decisions making | b | 0.014 (0.010) |
| | β | .015 |
| Social interaction | b | 0.262*** (0.020) |
| | β | .125 |
| Work-Life Balance | b | 0.193*** (0.015) |
| | β | .140 |
| Job satisfaction | b | 0.210*** (0.016) |
| | β | .139 |
| Gender¹ | b | -0.748*** (0.056) |
| | β | -.125 |
| Age | b | -.015*** (.002) |
| | β | -.061 |
| Education | b | -0.001 (0.008) |
| | β | -.001 |
| Income | b | 0.110*** (0.012) |
| | β | .097 |
| Public sector² | b | 0.112* (0.063) |
| | β | .017 |
| Belgium³ | b | -0.503** (0.154) |
| | β | -.031 |
| The Netherlands | b | -0.235* (0.123) |
| | β | -.019 |

(continued)

Table 3. (continued)

| Ind-var | | |
|----------------|---------|----------------------|
| UK | b | 0.108 (0.085) |
| | β | .014 |
| France | b | -0.674*** (0.079) |
| | β | -.092 |
| Italy | b | -1.249*** (.103) |
| | β | -.129 |
| Spain | b | -0.614*** (0.096) |
| | β | -.067 |
| Constant | b | 9.467*** (0.257) |
| | β | - |
| R ² | | 0.151 |
| F | | 100.657 |
| N | | 10,221 |

Note. $p < .1^*$, $p < .05^{**}$, $p < .001^{***}$.

¹Men = 0/ Women = 1.

²Non-public sector employees = 0; Public sector employee = 1.

³The comparison group regarding the countries was Germany.

public sector employees and non-public sector employees in the variables affecting emotional well-being, in some there is more divergence (e.g., the Netherlands). These findings support the relatively lower effect of belonging to the public sector, as reflected in the total sample (see Table 3).

Exploring the hypotheses revealed the following, also shown in Table 4. Our first hypothesis suggested that public sector employees with more stability at work will have a higher level of emotional well-being (*H1*) than those with less stability. Having an unlimited contract reflects more stability at work and better social conditions and, therefore, will have a positive effect on well-being. In six of the seven countries, the type of contract does not affect emotional well-being. The exception is Germany ($b=0.613$, $p < .05$). Germany has the highest percentage of workers with unlimited contracts and is known for its more formal working relationships based on law and rooted in a corporatist tradition (Buschoff & Schmidt, 2009; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011).

The second hypothesis suggested that those holding a managerial role will have a higher level of emotional well-being than employees with no managerial role. As can be seen in Table 4 having a managerial role positively affects emotional well-being, but only in Germany ($b=-0.820$, $p < .001$). This finding might be related to the possibility that managerial role encompasses both positive and negative effects on

Table 4. Metric (B) and Standardized Regression Coefficients (β) to Predict Employees' Well-being.

| Ind-var | Belgium | | The Netherlands | | Germany | | UK | | France | | Italy | | Spain | | |
|--|---------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| | Public | Non | Public | Non | Public | Non | Public | Non | Public | Non | Public | Non | Public | Non | |
| Contract | b | -0.280 (0.463) | 0.589 (0.429) | 0.193 (0.377) | 0.148 (0.247) | 0.613** (0.230) | 0.551*** (0.116) | -0.252 (0.178) | 0.075 (0.128) | -0.115 (0.256) | 0.125 (0.166) | 0.103 (0.566) | 0.169 (0.192) | 0.479 (0.420) | 0.304 (0.199) |
| Managerial role | β | -0.053 | 0.086 | 0.034 | 0.030 | 0.097 | 0.097 | -0.054 | 0.17 | -0.16 | 0.19 | 0.11 | 0.032 | 0.060 | 0.050 |
| | b | 0.107 (0.584) | -0.148 (0.427) | 0.110 (0.299) | 0.060 (0.306) | -0.820** (0.191) | 0.282** (0.121) | 0.175 (0.220) | 0.267 (0.181) | 0.100 (0.228) | 0.320* (0.167) | -0.129 (0.348) | -1.057*** (2.60) | 0.456 (0.336) | 0.293 (0.243) |
| Discretion on work day | β | 0.18 | -0.024 | 0.024 | 0.11 | -0.150 | 0.050 | 0.033 | 0.045 | 0.16 | 0.049 | -0.020 | -0.160 | 0.074 | 0.041 |
| | b | 0.086 (0.126) | -0.034 (0.077) | 0.228** (0.075) | -0.039 (0.062) | 0.193** (0.047) | 0.085*** (0.022) | 0.003 (0.049) | 0.000 (0.039) | 0.154** (0.054) | 0.095** (0.031) | 0.156 (0.120) | -0.004 (0.054) | -0.052 (0.090) | -0.044 (0.046) |
| Involvement in decisions making | β | 0.068 | -0.033 | 0.209 | -0.039 | 0.144 | 0.090 | 0.002 | 0.000 | 0.124 | 0.089 | 0.085 | -0.004 | -0.033 | -0.038 |
| | b | -0.017 (0.092) | -0.016 (0.074) | 0.006 (0.063) | 0.014 (0.052) | -0.012 (0.031) | 0.012 (0.019) | 0.074 (0.048) | 0.012 (0.033) | 0.486*** (0.050) | -0.059** (0.025) | 0.011 (0.086) | 0.015 (0.056) | -0.016 (0.063) | 0.035 (0.044) |
| Social interaction | β | -0.19 | -0.17 | 0.007 | 0.16 | -0.13 | 0.15 | 0.063 | 0.12 | 0.393 | -0.065 | 0.007 | 0.013 | -0.014 | 0.032 |
| | b | 0.031 (0.197) | 0.113 (0.140) | -0.055 (0.132) | 0.452*** (0.112) | 0.245** (0.072) | 0.324*** (0.042) | 0.252*** (0.067) | 0.102* (0.053) | 0.074 (0.081) | 0.430*** (0.125) | 0.265** (0.084) | 0.167** (0.084) | 0.353** (0.115) | 0.236** (0.081) |
| Work-life balance | β | 0.14 | 0.050 | -0.027 | 0.199 | 0.113 | 0.161 | 0.144 | 0.056 | 0.034 | 0.197 | 0.116 | 0.072 | 0.156 | 0.096 |
| | b | 0.261* (0.144) | 0.278** (0.110) | -0.053 (0.090) | 0.145* (0.082) | 0.271*** (0.043) | 0.143*** (0.027) | 0.048 (0.053) | 0.312*** (0.046) | 0.190** (0.063) | 0.218*** (0.040) | -0.029 (0.112) | 0.114 (0.070) | 0.535*** (0.088) | 0.242*** (0.055) |
| Job satisfaction | β | 0.184 | 0.170 | -0.040 | 0.095 | 0.231 | 0.121 | 0.039 | 0.217 | 0.125 | 0.150 | -0.017 | 0.071 | 0.342 | 0.166 |
| | b | 0.378** (0.177) | 0.393** (0.125) | 0.166 (0.120) | 0.277** (0.090) | 0.112** (0.049) | 0.234*** (0.031) | 0.330*** (0.062) | 0.084* (0.049) | 0.180** (0.071) | 0.178*** (0.046) | 0.441*** (0.093) | 0.476*** (0.066) | 0.115* (0.081) | 0.115* (0.065) |
| | β | 0.223 | 0.225 | 0.095 | 0.176 | 0.084 | 0.178 | 0.232 | 0.057 | 0.109 | 0.109 | 0.291 | 0.324 | 0.047 | 0.070 |

(continued)

Table 4. (continued)

| Ind-var | Belgium | | The Netherlands | | Germany | | UK | | France | | Italy | | Spain | |
|------------------|---------------------|---------------------|----------------------|---------------------|---------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|---------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| | Public | Non | Public | Non | Public | Non | Public | Non | Public | Non | Public | Non | Public | Non |
| Gender | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| b | -0.974** (0.489) | -0.798** (0.368) | -0.915** (0.295) | -0.588** (0.286) | -0.295* (0.177) | -0.777*** (0.110) | -0.361* (0.212) | -0.840*** (0.168) | -0.724** (0.226) | -0.905*** (0.147) | -0.664* (0.346) | -0.299 (0.236) | -1.109** (0.323) | -0.779*** (0.218) |
| β | -1.173 (0.23) | -1.132 (0.016) | -2.01 (0.012) | -1.102 (0.012) | -0.055 (0.008) | -1.139 (0.005) | -0.065 (0.009) | -1.41 (0.007) | -1.115 (0.011) | -1.149 (0.007) | -1.04 (0.019) | -0.045 (0.011) | -1.181 (0.015) | -1.114 (0.011) |
| Age | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| b | 0.019 (0.071) | -0.010 (0.058) | -0.024** (0.041) | 0.005 (0.041) | -0.010 (0.027) | -0.005 (0.020) | -0.022** (0.026) | -0.013* (0.028) | -0.029** (0.030) | -0.020** (0.024) | -0.025 (0.036) | -0.039*** (0.029) | -0.032*** (0.027) | -0.054*** (0.025) |
| β | 0.071 (0.071) | -0.039 (0.058) | -1.136 (0.041) | 0.022 (0.041) | -0.049 (0.027) | -0.021 (0.020) | -0.092 (0.026) | -0.053 (0.028) | -1.101 (0.030) | -0.077 (0.024) | -0.073 (0.036) | -1.138 (0.029) | -1.105 (0.027) | -1.167 (0.025) |
| Education | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| b | 0.041 (0.071) | 0.074 (0.058) | -0.075* (0.041) | -0.008 (0.041) | -0.078** (0.027) | 0.042** (0.020) | -0.040 (0.026) | -0.042 (0.028) | 0.044 (0.030) | -0.012 (0.024) | -0.118** (0.036) | -0.006 (0.029) | 0.011 (0.027) | 0.025 (0.025) |
| β | 0.053 (0.116) | 0.083 (0.092) | -1.123 (0.066) | -0.10 (0.059) | -0.099 (0.037) | 0.045 (0.023) | -0.062 (0.048) | -0.045 (0.035) | 0.056 (0.045) | -0.13 (0.031) | -1.180 (0.072) | -0.008 (0.041) | 0.022 (0.065) | 0.036 (0.043) |
| Income | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| b | 0.076 (0.116) | 0.204** (0.092) | 0.101 (0.066) | 0.232*** (0.059) | 0.149*** (0.037) | 0.089*** (0.023) | 0.161** (0.048) | 0.151*** (0.035) | -0.108** (0.045) | 0.194*** (0.031) | -0.070 (0.072) | -0.060 (0.041) | 0.307*** (0.065) | 0.176*** (0.043) |
| β | 0.061 (2.648) | 0.145 (1.946) | -1.00 (1.797) | 0.201 (1.432) | 0.140 (0.881) | 0.080 (0.532) | 0.140 (0.968) | 0.134 (0.723) | -0.090 (1.251) | 0.165 (0.737) | -0.055 (2.055) | -0.055 (0.864) | 0.255 (1.748) | 0.143 (0.987) |
| constant | 8.156** (2.648) | 5.833** (1.946) | 14.013*** (1.797) | 7.285*** (1.432) | 8.993*** (0.881) | 7.238*** (0.532) | 11.503*** (0.968) | 11.368*** (0.723) | 8.972*** (1.251) | 8.254*** (0.737) | 11.281*** (2.055) | 10.261*** (0.864) | 6.456*** (1.748) | 10.590*** (0.987) |
| β | 0.193 (2.401) | 0.176 (4.424) | 0.131 (3.068) | 0.143 (5.611) | 0.216 (19.159) | 0.177 (42.442) | 0.139 (9.194) | 0.111 (13.166) | 0.303 (22.962) | 0.156 (26.217) | 0.181 (7.071) | 0.189 (15.147) | 0.268 (10.421) | 0.154 (14.707) |
| R ² | 0.193 | 0.176 | 0.131 | 0.143 | 0.216 | 0.177 | 0.139 | 0.111 | 0.303 | 0.156 | 0.181 | 0.189 | 0.268 | 0.154 |
| F | 2.401 | 4.424 | 3.068 | 5.611 | 19.159 | 42.442 | 9.194 | 13.166 | 22.962 | 26.217 | 7.071 | 15.147 | 10.421 | 14.707 |
| N ⁱ | 122 | 240 | 236 | 381 | 777 | 2,178 | 637 | 1,171 | 594 | 1,568 | 364 | 727 | 326 | 901 |

Note. $p < .1^*$, $p < .05^{**}$, $p < .001^{***}$. All of the models were significant at $p < .05$.

Analysis of the authors based on the European Social Survey, round 6, 2012.

ⁱThe difference in the N in comparison to Table 2 is due to applying weights on the sample (ESS, 2014).

well-being as we discussed in the literature review. Therefore, both hypothesis *H1* and *H2* are supported in the context of Germany, a finding that may be related to its legalist *Rechtsstaat* tradition.

The three next hypotheses explored the environment and social relationships in the workplace. Hypothesis 3 suggested public sector employees who have more discretion over their workday will have a higher level of emotional well-being than those with less discretion. In three out of the seven countries (see Table 4), specifically the Netherlands, Germany, and France, there is a positive connection between discretion and emotional well-being, supporting hypothesis *H3*. The fourth hypothesis argued that public sector employees who are more involved in decision making at work will have a higher level of emotional well-being than those who are less involved. The involvement in decision making within the organization is significant only among the public sector employees in France ($b=0.486, p < .001$). The fifth hypothesis was that public sector employees who have more social interactions will have a higher level of emotional well-being than those with fewer interactions. In Germany, UK, Italy, and Spain, having more social interactions positively affects the emotional well-being of public sector employees, supporting hypothesis *H5*. The sixth hypothesis was that public sector employees who have a better work-life balance will have a higher level of emotional well-being than those with a less balanced life. In four countries (see Table 4), namely Belgium, Germany, France, and Spain, having a better work-life balance positively affects emotional well-being, supporting hypothesis *H6*.

An interesting finding is a lower level of emotional well-being among women in all countries and all sectors (except non-public sector employees in Italy). These findings correspond with studies suggesting that the well-being of women is lower than that of men (Tesch-Römer et al., 2008).

Discussion

This is the first attempt, to the best of our knowledge, to investigate public sector employees' well-being from a comparative perspective. Therefore, we implemented an exploratory perspective that included the effect of the country and the sector on public sector employees' well-being. We added these factors to the more explored features of the work environment and their effect on well-being. In what follows, we first make four observations and then elaborate on their theoretical and practical implications.

Public-sector Versus Non-public Sector. The findings lend some support to the idea that the public sector is a good working environment. Overall, we found a higher level of emotional well-being in public sector employees than in non-public sector employees. However, the differences between sectors were not salient in all the countries and were not the most important factor in employees' well-being. The relative higher well-being among public sector employees may reflect their unique public sector motivation (Borst et al., 2019; Bullock et al., 2015; Perry, 2000). Furthermore, some practices that support emotional well-being, such as more work-life balance programs, may be more

developed in public sector organizations (Den Dulk & Groeneveld, 2013). Another possible explanation points to the economic crises and austerity measures that swept Europe after 2008. The crises may have affected the non-public sector employees more than public sector ones, as the latter have more stability in their work. The lower level of well-being among public sector employees in Italy may reflect a lower level of public trust in the civil service and the political system (Ongaro et al., 2016; Van de Walle et al., 2008).

Soft versus hard features of the work environment. In line with previous findings, after controlling for the individual level, we found that the soft elements in the work environment are important to well-being. Having discretion over the work day, a good work-life balance, and social interactions are more important factors in emotional well-being (e.g., Baptiste, 2008; Borst et al., 2019; Brunetto et al., 2013; Coffey et al., 2009; Den Dulk & Groeneveld, 2013; Sloan, 2017) than hard features, such as the type of contract or managerial position. An important finding is the diversity across countries. Certain features are important in some countries but not others. This finding has important implications for human resource policies in the public sector; decision-makers could focus on promoting policies relevant to their own country and not simply adopting the current HRM best practice used across sectors or countries.

Culture matters. The administrative culture (Hammerschmid et al., 2016; Peters, 2009) can influence how various elements in the work environment affect public sector employees' emotional well-being. For example, in countries where social and family relationships are more important, such as Spain, these social relationships serve as anchors and affect public sector employees' well-being. In other countries, they are less important. Meanwhile, such characteristics as law and hierarchy orientations found in administrative cultures are reflected in the importance of contracts and the managerial role in Germany (Hammerschmid & Oprisor, 2016; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011). Involvement in policy making is important in France and is one of the well-known characteristics of the French civil service (Rouban, 2007). Generally speaking, there are more differences between the continental European public administration style (e.g., France, Italy, Germany) and the Anglo-Saxon style (the United Kingdom). It is harder to detect a clear pattern based on the categorization of the organic (Germany, Belgium) and Napoleonic countries (France, Italy, Spain) within the continental European group.

The context matters, but not just the context. The emotional well-being of employees corresponds with the general well-being in their societies and therefore is anchored in a specific context. For example, changes in general trust in society and its government institutions correspond with changes in trust in public sector employees and might affect their work and their well-being (e.g., Ashleigh et al., 2012; Bouckaert, 2012; Helliwell & Wang, 2010). The public mood, especially in times of crisis, can affect well-being. Future studies could not just use a comparative perspective but also investigate emotional well-being at different points in time to further explore this finding.

Our study has several limitations. Although we utilized a unique comparative perspective, we drew on data from only one point in time, and these data cannot capture trends in the public sector. A longer time span might provide more information on the changing nature of employees' well-being. Furthermore, the comparative aspect of our study is challenging and has limitations because of the need to grasp the nuances of the countries. Finally, our differentiation of the public and non-public sectors based on government ownership might be a limitation, mainly because of the involvement of other sectors in supplying public services (e.g., non-governmental or nonprofit organizations).

Nevertheless, the nature of the data gave us a unique opportunity to examine public sector employees' well-being in a comparative context. The study makes three major contributions to the literature. First, it deals with emotional well-being among public sector employees, a topic infrequently discussed in the literature. Public employees' well-being is even more interesting because of the administrative reforms that have changed their work surroundings in the last four decades (Osborne, 2010; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011). Future studies could take advantage of the index of emotional well-being offered here and go on to explore trends of change in well-being, thereby strengthening the external validity of the findings of the current study and confirming the ability to generalize them to other populations, settings, and periods (Pedersen & Stritch, 2018; Walker et al., 2019).

Second, the study explores rival explanations of the importance of various factors, not just at the level of the work environment, but also at sector and country levels. While most studies focus on the exploration of the work environment in a specific country, our findings reveal that a theory of public employees' well-being should be multi-level. Probing the effect of the different levels could yield research hypotheses that strengthen the validity of the findings presented here (Rainey & Bozeman, 2000).

Third, the study takes a comparative look at public sector employees' well-being across seven countries. The comparative aspect of public administration is important and needs further development (Kuhlmann, 2019; Van de Walle & Brans, 2018). Comparative findings contribute to our theoretical ability to distinguish between factors that can be stretched beyond the country context (e.g., gender) and those that are affected by the specific context (e.g., contracts). An interesting issue arises from the exploratory power of the administrative culture typology. While it undoubtedly sheds light on the differences between countries, a better ability to distinguish between ideal types could improve inter-country comparisons (Kuhlmann, 2019).

The study has practical implications as well. For example, its findings could help managers identify the factors that improve emotional well-being. Specifically, it calls managers' attention to the soft features of the work environment. Furthermore, to improve public employees' well-being, managers should be more aware of the interchange between their country's cultural preferences and human resource strategies and not implement currently fashionable solutions that do not correspond to their specific context.

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Notes

1. ‘Supervising’: intended in the sense of both monitoring and being responsible for the work of others” (European Social Survey [2012b]).
2. The highest VIF value obtained from the regression was 2.18 (Kock, 2015), and the lowest tolerance value was 0.45.

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