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INTEGRATING RELATIONAL WELL-BEING INTO POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY APPROACHES TO WORKPLACE CONFLICT

Ntombifuthi Centurion Zwane[*]
[1]Rhodes University, Drostdy Road, Makhanda 6139, South Africa

[*]Correspondence E-Mail: centurion.zwane@gmail.com
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ABSTRACT

The South African public sector is largely grounded in Ubuntu-informed communal values and practices. However, workplace wellness programmes, despite being recognised for enhancing employee well-being and managing workplace conflict, continue to rely predominantly on individualistic Positive Psychology approaches that overlook relational interdependence, shared meaning, and the collective social processes through which conflict is shaped. This study explored how integrating Positive Psychology and Relational Well-Being can strengthen workplace wellness programmes for conflict management in the South African public sector from a social-psychological perspective that foregrounds interpersonal and group-level processes. Although Positive Psychology and Relational Well-Being are often positioned as incompatible, they are complementary theoretical and practical approaches. In a public-sector context shaped by Ubuntu-informed relational norms, their integration enables conflict to be understood as a social-psychological process grounded in interdependence, shared meaning-making, and collective regulation of well-being rather than individual deficit. A systematic literature review synthesising theoretical and empirical social-psychological and organisational research on workplace wellness, relational well-being, and conflict in public-sector contexts was conducted. Findings indicate that while South African public sector wellness programmes are partially informed by Positive Psychology, they show limited alignment with relational well-being approaches, resulting in insufficient attention to interpersonal and group-level sources of conflict. Public sector institutions should adopt integrated wellness frameworks that combine Positive Psychology and Relational Well-Being to promote healthier workplace relationships, reduce conflict, and enhance employee well-being. The study contributes to Social Psychology by recontextualising and extending an established Integrated Well-Being Framework to the domain of conflict management in the South African public sector, demonstrating how relational and culturally grounded processes shape workplace conflict beyond individualistic wellness models.

Keywords*: Positive Psychology, Public Sector Wellness, Relational Well-Being, Social Psychology, Workplace Conflict*

INTRODUCTION

Workplace relations in the South African public sector are historically and culturally shaped by Ubuntu-oriented relational practices, which emphasise interdependence, mutual care, collective responsibility, and shared meaning-making in organisational life (Chetty & Price, 2024; Nzimakwe, 2014). These values are reflected in everyday workplace norms that prioritise relational harmony, respect, and communal well-being over purely individual achievement.

However, despite this deeply relational orientation, formal workplace wellness and conflict management programmes in the public sector remain largely grounded in individualised, decontextualised psychological models, with limited attention to relational, cultural, and collective dimensions of well-being. This misalignment creates a structural tension between how work relationships are lived and valued in practice and how conflict and well-being are formally conceptualised and managed within public sector institutions.

As a consequence of this misalignment, workplace wellness programmes in the South African public sector face significant challenges in effectively addressing workplace conflict, particularly within hierarchical organisational structures characterised by employee distrust and insufficient supervisor support (Bolton et al., 2021; Haricharan, 2023; Kirkwood, 2022). Unresolved conflicts, absenteeism, and strained workplace relationships persist in sectors such as education, healthcare, and law enforcement, despite the presence of formal wellness initiatives (Song & Baicker, 2019). Moreover, the stigma surrounding wellness programmes often discourages employees from engaging with available resources, further intensifying workplace tensions and undermining organisational effectiveness (Makola & Tabane, 2022). These patterns raise critical concerns about the capacity of existing wellness programmes to respond meaningfully to the relational nature of workplace conflict in the public sector.

Existing workplace wellness programmes in South African public sector institutions are predominantly informed by Positive Psychology, with interventions that are largely preventive or reactive in nature. These programmes typically respond to conflict only once it has escalated into disciplinary action, absenteeism, or mental health crises (DPSA, 2023; Leake et al., 2025; Song & Baicker, 2019). While such programmes employ valuable techniques, such as stress management, resilience training, and psychological support, to enhance individual well-being (Hollaar et al., 2025), they implicitly frame conflict as an individual-level problem requiring individual coping or adjustment. As a result, the relational conditions through which conflict is produced, sustained, or transformed in everyday workplace interactions remain largely unaddressed. This individualised orientation limits the capacity of Positive Psychology–based wellness programmes to respond meaningfully to the relational realities of public sector workplaces.

Importantly, this limitation does not reflect a weakness of Positive Psychology per se, but rather the consequences of its narrow application within organisational settings. Classical Positive Psychology frameworks prioritise individual strengths, resilience, and subjective well-being as pathways to thriving at work (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). While these interventions have demonstrated benefits for morale, engagement, and stress reduction, they offer limited explanatory power for understanding how conflict emerges from relational breakdowns, misrecognition, power asymmetries, and the absence of psychological safety (McCarthy et al., 2020). As Wachtel (2014) argues, conflict cannot be adequately understood or resolved without attending to the recursive social and systemic processes through which individuals mutually shape one another's behaviour. From a Social Psychology perspective, the

over-reliance on individualised well-being models therefore represents a theoretical gap in how workplace conflict is conceptualised and addressed.

In contrast, Relational Well-Being, grounded in Relational Social Constructionism, conceptualises well-being and conflict as outcomes of ongoing social interaction, shared meaning-making, and trust-building within relational systems. From this perspective, workplace conflict is not simply an expression of individual distress or poor coping, but an emergent relational phenomenon shaped by organisational culture, communication patterns, and power relations. However, when applied in isolation, relational approaches may under-theorise individual psychological resources such as agency, resilience, and emotional regulation that enable employees to participate constructively in relational repair. Despite their conceptual complementarity, Positive Psychology and Relational Well-Being are often positioned as theoretically incompatible or applied in parallel, rather than integrated into a coherent social-psychological framework. This fragmentation is particularly evident in South African public sector wellness programmes, where relational approaches remain underutilised despite their alignment with Ubuntu-informed organisational values.

This study addresses a theoretical and practical gap by advancing Social Psychology through the theoretical integration and recontextualisation of Positive Psychology and Relational Well-Being within a culturally grounded analytical framework for understanding and managing workplace conflict. Drawing on established conflict management theories, including the Interest-based negotiation approach (Fleischer et al., 2023), cooperative models of conflict handling (Thomas, 2008), and restorative practices that prioritise relational repair and collective accountability (Conflict, 2024; Wilson et al., 2020), the study reconceptualises workplace conflict as a social-psychological process rather than an individual deficit. By analytically integrating individual psychological resources (e.g., emotional regulation, resilience, and meaning) with relational processes (e.g., trust, dialogue, and mutual recognition), the study extends existing theoretical work by demonstrating how conflict in the South African public sector is shaped through interdependence, shared meaning-making, and collective well-being.

Building on this theoretical integration, the study examines how an adapted and recontextualised Integrated Well-Being Framework, originally developed to understand academic staff well-being (Zwane, 2025), can be applied to conflict management within hierarchical public sector environments. Rather than treating conflict as an individual-level dysfunction, the study adopts a social-psychological lens that foregrounds the interpersonal, relational, and organisational processes through which conflict is produced, sustained, and resolved. In doing so, it critically analyses how existing public sector wellness programmes conceptualise conflict and well-being, and how these conceptualisations shape the effectiveness of current conflict management practices.

Specifically, the study assesses the extent to which Positive Psychology principles are currently incorporated into South African public sector wellness programmes and identifies the theoretical and practical limitations of predominantly individualised well-being interventions. It

further examines how the absence of an explicit Relational Well-Being orientation constrains these programmes' capacity to address relational breakdowns, power asymmetries, and collective meaning-making processes that underpin workplace conflict (Damaschin, 2023; Silima et al., 2024). On this basis, the study articulates an integrated analytical approach that brings together individual psychological resources and relational mechanisms as complementary components of conflict management in public sector organisations.

Guided by this focus, the study addresses the following research questions: How do existing workplace wellness programmes in the South African public sector conceptualise and manage workplace conflict? To what extent do these programmes draw on Positive Psychology principles, and what limitations arise from an individualised approach to well-being? How can the integration of Positive Psychology and Relational Well-Being strengthen conflict resolution, employee well-being, and collaborative workplace functioning in the South African public sector? Finally, how can an integrated Positive Psychology–Relational Well-Being approach be theoretically articulated as a socially embedded lens that advances Social Psychological understanding of workplace conflict in context?

Together, these arguments culminate in a recontextualised application of an existing Integrated Well-Being Framework, demonstrating its analytical value for understanding workplace conflict in the South African public sector as an emergent relational process shaped by interdependence, shared meaning-making, and collective well-being.

RESEARCH METHOD

The purpose of this study is to investigate how Relational Social Constructionism and Positive Psychology might be incorporated into workplace wellness initiatives for efficient dispute resolution in the South African public sector. To guarantee openness, reproducibility, and precision in the selection, assessment, and synthesis of pertinent research, a systematic literature review design was employed. Data was collected through a systematic search of academic literature, government reports, and policy documents, focusing on workplace wellness, conflict management, Positive Psychology, and Relational Social Constructionism. Document analysis was employed to examine and synthesise findings from the selected academic and governmental literature. Thematic analysis was used to identify commonalities and differences across studies and to synthesise findings related to the impact of wellness programs on conflict management. Quantitative analysis was used to identify relationships between the implementation of wellness programs and improved conflict resolution outcomes.

The study was approved by Rhodes University due to its non-human data collection method. The sources were publicly available academic literature and South African government department websites. Ethical considerations included transparency, citation of sources, and accurate representation of findings. The study followed PRISMA guidelines for systematic reviews, including clear inclusion and exclusion criteria, multiple databases, and involving peer-

reviewed, reputable sources. The systematic search strategy involved searching multiple databases and government websites for relevant articles and documents. The PRISMA flowchart illustrates the systematic process for selecting studies, which involved database searches, screening for relevance, applying inclusion/exclusion criteria, and full-text review.

The PRISMA flowchart illustrates the systematic process followed to select studies for this review. The estimated records found during the initial search included approximately 1,670 records identified across all databases. After removing duplicates, 1,248 records were screened for relevance. Following the application of inclusion and exclusion criteria, 380 records were considered relevant. Finally, after a full-text review, 138 articles were deemed eligible for inclusion in the study.
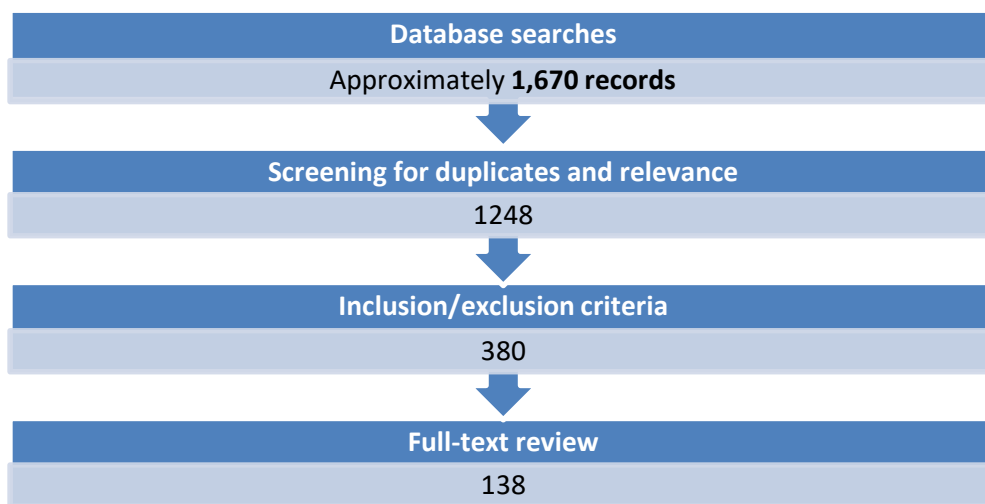
Database searches
Approximately **1,670 records**

Screening for duplicates and relevance
1248

Inclusion/exclusion criteria
380

Full-text review
138

Figure 1 Prisma Flowchart
Source: Authors' own compilation following PRISMA guidelines, 2025

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Conceptualisation of the Literature Review

This literature review examines key theoretical and empirical debates central to understanding how an integrated Positive Psychology and Relational Well-Being framework can enhance workplace wellness programmes for effective conflict management in the South African public sector. The review is conceptually structured around the following key themes.

Workplace Wellness Programmes in the South African Public Sector

Employee Wellness Programmes (EWPs) in the South African public sector are formally designed to address occupational stress, burnout, and employee well-being in support of organisational productivity (DPSA, 2023). In practice, however, these programmes remain largely individualised, prioritising mental and physical health interventions such as counselling and referral-based support. While valuable for addressing acute distress, this orientation reflects a narrow conception of well-being that marginalises relational, collective, and organisational

dimensions of workplace experience.

Evidence indicates that EWPs are further constrained by low participation, persistent stigma, and limited long-term impact (Mattke et al., 2013). Their predominantly reactive design means that mobilising support only after stress or conflict has escalated, which results in conflict management often being treated procedurally rather than relationally, overlooking power asymmetries and communication breakdowns. Relational well-being is consequently under-institutionalised within key policies, including the Wellness Management Policy. Although the Department of Public Service and Administration's Wellness Management Policy outlines principles such as confidentiality, professional standards, and voluntary participation, it lacks explicit institutional mechanisms for fostering relational well-being (e.g., collective support structures or relational conflict management), suggesting that relational well-being remains under-institutionalised within key wellness policy frameworks (DPSA, 2024). From a social-psychological perspective, this configuration individualises distress while neglecting the relational and organisational conditions through which conflict is produced and sustained, limiting the effectiveness of EWPs as mechanisms for conflict management.

Positive Psychology in Workplace Wellness Programmes

Positive Psychology foregrounds human strengths, flourishing, and optimal functioning rather than deficit-oriented models of mental health (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Within workplace wellness programmes, Positive Psychology Interventions (PPIs) have been widely adopted to enhance job satisfaction, emotional well-being, resilience, and stress management, thereby indirectly supporting conflict management and employee engagement. Systematic reviews indicate that PPIs contribute positively to workplace outcomes by fostering psychological resources that enable individuals to cope more effectively with interpersonal stressors and organisational demands (Khair, 2023; Raina, 2024; Saswat, 2025).

However, despite these contributions, Positive Psychology as applied within South African public sector wellness programmes remains predominantly individualistic in orientation, privileging intra-personal resilience, self-regulation, and coping skills. While such interventions may strengthen employees' internal capacities, they tend to conceptualise conflict as a problem of individual stress, emotional regulation, or personal deficit rather than as a socially embedded phenomenon emerging from ongoing interactional patterns, power relations, and shared organisational meanings. This individual-centred framing reflects broader Western psychological assumptions about agency and well-being that may be misaligned with relationally oriented organisational cultures, particularly within the South African public sector.

Empirical studies demonstrate that Positive Psychology-based wellness initiatives in South Africa are frequently reactive, offering support after conflict has escalated into disciplinary action, burnout, or psychological distress (Abraham et al., 2025; DPSA, 2023). Although Positive Psychology theoretically supports proactive cultivation of positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (PERMA) (Seligman, 2011), these relational components are often underdeveloped in practice. As a result, Positive Psychology is

operationalised in ways that individualise responsibility for conflict management, thereby obscuring the relational and systemic conditions that give rise to workplace tensions.

From a Social Psychology perspective, this represents a critical limitation. Conflict is not solely an outcome of individual emotional deficits but is co-produced through social interaction, organisational norms, and collective sense-making processes. When Positive Psychology is applied without attention to relational interdependence, it risks reinforcing a narrow understanding of well-being that underestimates the social constitution of workplace conflict. This study, therefore, argues that Positive Psychology, while necessary, is theoretically insufficient on its own for addressing conflict in relationally grounded public-sector workplaces and requires integration with relational frameworks that foreground interpersonal dynamics and collective well-being.

Relational Well-Being in Organisational Contexts

Relational well-being refers to the quality of social connections characterised by trust, mutual recognition, belonging, and meaningful interpersonal engagement within organisational contexts (Gergen, 2009). Rooted in Relational Social Constructionism, this perspective emphasises that well-being is not an individual possession but an emergent property of social relationships, communicative practices, and shared meaning-making processes (McNamee et al., 2001). Relational well-being is therefore foundational to psychological safety, collaboration, and effective conflict resolution in organisations (Dutton & Ragins, 2017).

In the South African public sector, relational well-being resonates strongly with Ubuntu-informed organisational values, which emphasise interdependence, reciprocity, collective responsibility, and the belief that individual flourishing is inseparable from the well-being of others. Everyday workplace practices often reflect communal logics captured in expressions such as izandla ziyagezana ("hands wash each other"), underscoring the centrality of relationality in both work and social life. Despite this, formal wellness policies and programmes largely fail to institutionalise relational well-being principles, instead prioritising individual counselling, stress management, and medicalised support services (DPSA, 2022, 2023, 2024).

This omission has significant consequences for conflict management. Research indicates that conflicts in the public sector frequently arise from relational breakdowns, hierarchical power asymmetries, communication failures, and a lack of participatory decision-making. Individual-focused wellness interventions are ill-equipped to address these collective and interactional sources of conflict. As a result, disputes are often managed procedurally rather than relationally, allowing underlying tensions to persist and re-emerge.

While relational well-being frameworks offer a powerful lens for understanding conflict as a socially constructed and relational process, they are seldom operationalised within public sector wellness programmes. Moreover, when applied in isolation, relational approaches may underemphasise individual psychological resources such as resilience, emotional regulation, and personal agency, which remain important for navigating workplace stress. Consequently, Positive Psychology and Relational Well-Being are frequently positioned as competing or incompatible

paradigms, rather than as complementary perspectives.

This study challenges that separation by arguing that relational well-being is not an optional enhancement but a theoretical necessity in organisational contexts grounded in communal values. From a Social Psychology standpoint, integrating relational well-being with Positive Psychology enables a more comprehensive understanding of conflict as an emergent relational phenomenon shaped by interaction patterns, shared meanings, and collective regulation of well-being. Such integration allows workplace wellness programmes to move beyond individualised models of coping toward socially embedded strategies for conflict prevention, resolution, and organisational sustainability.

Conflict Management in the Public Sector Workplace

Conflict is an inevitable aspect of workplace life, particularly in the South African public sector, where competing interests, bureaucratic rigidity, and organisational politics frequently generate tensions (Jehn & Bendersky, 2003). Traditional employee wellness programs often rely on reactive interventions such as mediation, disciplinary measures, and grievance procedures, which only address disputes after they escalate (Chuang et al., 2020). While these approaches may resolve immediate incidents, they fail to target the relational dynamics and systemic conditions that give rise to conflict.

A relational approach to conflict management explicitly addresses the "how" by integrating strategies that strengthen interpersonal connections, enhance communication, and cultivate mutual understanding. For example, wellness programs can implement structured dialogue sessions where employees share perspectives on work processes, uncovering latent tensions before they escalate. Facilitated team reflection exercises can identify patterns of miscommunication and hierarchical friction, while relational coaching can help leaders model respectful conflict engagement and reinforce collaborative norms (Rehner, 2005).

Furthermore, embedding Positive Psychology principles such as fostering gratitude, recognising strengths, and promoting prosocial behaviours provides concrete tools for shaping interactions. For instance, regular recognition of colleagues' contributions can pre-empt resentment, while strength-based peer mentoring encourages cooperative problem-solving. By combining relational and positive-psychology strategies, public sector organisations can transform conflict from a disruptive force into an opportunity for learning, innovation, and cohesion. Implementing these proactive measures not only reduces disputes but also fosters a culture of trust, shared responsibility, and relational well-being, which is essential for sustainable workplace wellness (Carmeli et al., 2015).

Integrating Positive Psychology and Relational Well-Being into wellness programmes in the South African public sector

Public sector workplace conflict is not an episodic disruption but a structural and relational condition, intensified by bureaucratic rigidity, heterogeneous workforce backgrounds, and competing institutional mandates (Jehn & Bendersky, 2003). Conflict research and theory have historically emphasized conflict management strategies in terms of individual or team

effectiveness and productivity, often neglecting broader relational and systemic outcomes such as job satisfaction, organisational commitment, turnover intentions, and employee well-being (De Dreu & Beersma, 2005). Such approaches tend to suppress conflict without transforming the relational conditions through which it is reproduced.

This study argues that the integration of Positive Psychology and Relational Well-Being offers a proactive and sustainable analytical approach to conflict management, precisely because it intervenes prior to escalation. Positive Psychology contributes by strengthening employees' psychological resources, such as resilience, emotional regulation, and self-efficacy, thereby enabling individuals to engage workplace stressors and disagreements constructively rather than defensively (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). This shifts conflict management away from damage control toward the cultivation of relationally supportive capacities.

Relational well-being complements traditional approaches by highlighting the interactional dynamics through which conflict emerges, emphasising trust, mutual recognition, and open communication (Tingvold & Munkejord, 2021). Frequent, trustworthy communication and shared goals foster coordination and reshape conflict management beyond individual behaviour to include relational processes (Akhavan et al., 2025; Tingvold & Munkejord, 2021). Conflict is thus viewed as relational strain, addressable through dialogue, inclusion, and shared meaning-making.

A common critique of psychologically informed approaches is that they risk obscuring structural inequalities and institutional dysfunctions within public sector organisations. However, this critique relies on a false dichotomy between structural reform and relational intervention. This study contends that relational and psychological approaches do not replace systemic change; rather, they illuminate how policies, hierarchies, and power relations are enacted and experienced in everyday organisational interactions (Avey et al., 2011). In this sense, integration supports a shift from punitive conflict resolution toward relational governance grounded in strengthened human capacities and healthier workplace relationships.

Within the South African public sector, employee wellness programmes constitute a key institutional site through which this integrated orientation can be operationalised. Rather than functioning as peripheral support services, wellness programmes can be reoriented to embed Positive Psychology practices (e.g., resilience training, strengths-based coaching, emotional regulation) alongside relational practices such as facilitated dialogue, peer support, and collective reflection. In a context shaped by historical inequality, resource constraints, and service-delivery pressures, such integration enables wellness programmes to move beyond individualised stress management toward relational capacity-building, positioning conflict management as an ongoing, preventative, and context-sensitive organisational practice.

Theoretical Frameworks Guiding the Study

This section examines the key theoretical perspectives that inform the study's integrative and recontextualised analytical approach, highlighting their relevance for understanding workplace wellness and conflict management in the South African public sector.

Positive Psychology

Positive Psychology conceptualises well-being through frameworks such as Seligman's PERMA model, Psychological Capital (PsyCap), and Appreciative Inquiry. PERMA's dimensions, positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment- offer pathways for enhancing employee functioning in conflict contexts, while PsyCap strengthens psychological resources such as hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism (Luthans et al., 2006; Seligman, 2011). Appreciative Inquiry further contributes by promoting constructive dialogue grounded in shared successes, fostering non-adversarial engagement during conflict (Cooperrider, 2013). However, when applied in isolation, these frameworks tend to privilege intra-personal adaptation, positioning conflict primarily as a matter of individual coping. While valuable for strengthening personal resilience, such approaches are limited in addressing conflict as a relationally and structurally embedded phenomenon, necessitating integration with relational frameworks that foreground interaction, power, and shared meaning.

Conflict Management

Conflict management frameworks such as the Thomas–Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument, Restorative Justice, and the Interest-Based Relational Approach offer tools for navigating workplace disputes by emphasising adaptive styles, dialogue, and interest-based negotiation (Thomas, 2008). While effective for managing disputes, these models often remain reactive or procedural when implemented independently. Their effectiveness is enhanced when embedded within an integrated relational–psychological framework that prioritises preventive relational capacity-building and emotional awareness as core components of workplace wellness.

Integrative Synthesis

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives inform the analytical integration through which the adapted Integrated Well-Being Framework (Zwane, 2025) is recontextualised in the present study. This synthesis supports an understanding of workplace conflict as an emergent relational process shaped by psychological resources, interactional norms, and organisational context. Through this integrative lens, workplace wellness programmes in the South African public sector can be analysed not merely as support mechanisms, but as relational infrastructures for conflict prevention, relational repair, and sustainable organisational well-being.

Integrated Well-Being Framework for Conflict Management

This study adopts and analytically extends the Integrated Well-Being Framework proposed by Zwane (2025), applying it to conflict management within public sector organisations. While the original framework was developed to understand academic staff well-being, its multi-level logic provides a robust lens for examining how individual, relational, and structural factors interact to shape conflict dynamics in hierarchical workplaces. In this study, the framework is not reproduced descriptively but is repositioned as an explanatory and intervention-oriented model for workplace conflict.

Inner Layer: Individual Strengths and Psychological Resources (Positive Psychology Lens)

At the core of the framework are individual psychological resources that influence how employees perceive, experience, and respond to workplace conflict. Drawing on Positive Psychology Interventions (PPIs), this layer foregrounds resilience, emotional regulation, self-efficacy, and meaning-making as critical capacities for constructive conflict engagement (Zwane, 2025).

In public sector contexts, conflict often escalates not only due to structural constraints but also because employees lack psychological resources to manage stress, ambiguity, and emotional strain. PPIs such as mindfulness, strengths-based reflection, and resilience training enhance individual coping and reduce reactive conflict behaviours. However, as demonstrated in Zwane (2025), individual-level interventions are insufficient when implemented in isolation, particularly within rigid bureaucratic systems. This study therefore treats PPIs as necessary but not sufficient conditions for sustainable conflict management.

Relational Layer: Social Interaction, Power, and Meaning-Making (Relational Social Constructionist Lens)

Extending beyond the individual, the second layer emphasises relational processes through which conflict is constructed, interpreted, and either intensified or transformed. Relational Social Constructionism (RSC) positions conflict as a relational phenomenon shaped by communication patterns, power relations, and shared meaning-making rather than solely by individual deficits (Gergen, 2009).

In hierarchical public sector organisations, unresolved conflict is often rooted in relational breakdowns, including low psychological safety, poor communication, and perceived injustices. As Zwane (2025) argues, relational well-being functions as a critical job resource that buffers stress and fosters trust and cooperation. This study extends that insight by demonstrating how relational interventions such as peer dialogue spaces, collaborative problem-solving, and inclusive decision-making operate as conflict-preventive mechanisms, rather than merely wellness initiatives.

Importantly, this layer addresses a key limitation of strengths-based approaches: their tendency to individualise responsibility for well-being while overlooking relational and power asymmetries. Integrating RSC ensures that conflict management strategies attend to both interpersonal dynamics and the social conditions under which conflict emerges

Structural and Systemic Layer: Institutional Conditions and Organisational Justice

The third layer situates conflict within broader institutional and structural conditions, including workload distribution, leadership practices, policy clarity, and organisational justice. Consistent with Zwane (2025), this study recognises that conflict is frequently a symptom of systemic strain rather than individual or relational failure.

Empirical evidence indicates that unfair workloads, opaque decision-making, and rigid hierarchies exacerbate workplace tension and undermine relational trust, as perceived procedural unfairness and lack of transparency reduce employees' willingness to engage

constructively while high demands without adequate resources lead to strain and burnout (De Clercq & Pereira, 2023; Hung et al., 2025).

By incorporating this layer, the framework enables an analysis of conflict that moves beyond surface-level interpersonal disputes to address their structural origins, an aspect often neglected in conventional conflict management models.

Outer Layer: Integrated, Multi-Method and Preventative Conflict Management

The outermost layer reflects institutional commitment to sustained conflict prevention through integrated, evidence-based approaches. Building on Zwane (2025), this study emphasises the need for multi-method strategies that combine psychological interventions, relational practices, and policy-level reforms. Continuous monitoring, participatory evaluation, and alignment between wellness initiatives and organisational policies are essential for preventing conflict escalation and promoting relational accountability.

In contrast to reactive, grievance-driven approaches common in the public sector, this framework supports preventative conflict management, positioning well-being as an institutional responsibility rather than an individual burden. The integration of PPIs, RSC, and structural reform thus offers a coherent, context-sensitive approach to managing conflict in complex, hierarchical organisations.

Strengths and Limitations of the Framework

The integrated well-being framework offers a strong analytical lens for examining workplace wellness and conflict management in the South African public sector by linking psychological, relational, and organisational dimensions of well-being. Its key strength lies in moving beyond individualised models to conceptualise conflict as a relationally and contextually produced process, making it particularly suited to hierarchical and resource-constrained public sector environments.

The framework is especially valuable in repositioning employee wellness programmes as preventative relational infrastructures rather than reactive support services. By integrating Positive Psychology with relational practices, it enables analysis of how emotional regulation, trust, and communicative capacity can be strengthened to support constructive conflict engagement before disputes escalate.

However, the framework's integrative nature introduces practical and analytical constraints. Implementation may be limited by institutional capacity, leadership resistance, and policy rigidity, while relational and contextual dimensions of well-being are less readily measurable than individual psychological indicators. Moreover, the framework does not resolve structural inequalities or organisational dysfunctions; rather, it illuminates how these conditions are enacted through everyday interactions. Its contribution, therefore, lies in strengthening relational and psychological capacity within existing constraints, not in substituting for structural reform.
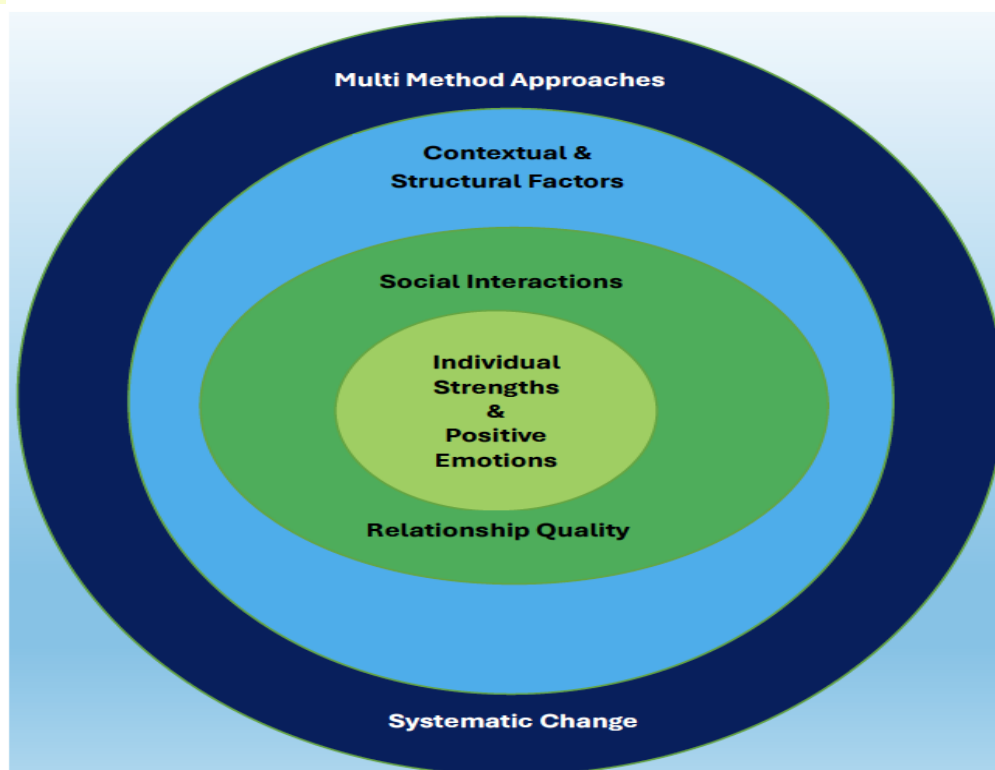
Figure 1 An Integrated Well-Being Framework for Conflict Management in the Public Sector
Source: Adapted from Zwane, 2025

The framework is adapted from An integrated framework for academic staff well-being: Positive and relational lenses (Zwane, 2025), originally developed to conceptualise academic staff well-being. In the current study, the framework is analytically extended to examine conflict management within public sector organisations through integrated positive psychological, relational, and structural lenses.

Strengths and Limitations of the Framework

Table 1 below shows a clear trend in holistic approaches to wellness, which is prevalent across most of the workplace wellness programs listed. Many programs, such as the Employee Health and Wellness Programme (EHWP), the Employee Health and Wellness Strategic Framework for the Public Service, and the Metropolitan Health Employee Wellness Programme (EWP), adopt an approach which addresses physical, mental, and social health. This reflects a growing recognition of the interconnectedness of these dimensions in promoting overall well-being. The trend shows a shift away from isolated interventions to programs that address the whole person and the broader workplace environment.

Table 1 Employee Wellness Programs at South African Universities: Approaches and Strategies

Programme Name	Description	Approach	Alignment
Western Cape on Wellness (WoW!) Healthy Lifestyle Initiative	Promotes physical activity, healthy eating, and weight management to prevent non-communicable diseases.	Preventative	Positive Psychology
Wellness Management Policy for the Public Service	Framework to meet public servants' wellness needs, promoting physical and psychosocial well-being.	Holistic	Positive Psychology
Employee Health and Wellness Programme (EHWP)	Assists in identifying and resolving work-related and personal health issues, preventing future problems.	Curative & Preventative	Positive Psychology
Health Promotion Programme - Dept. of Basic Education	Promotes healthy school environments for learners and educators, addressing key health and social barriers.	Preventative & Supportive	Positive Psychology
Higher Health	Supports student health and well-being in higher education, addressing HIV/AIDS, mental health, and gender-based violence.	Holistic & Supportive	Positive Psychology
GEMS Wellness Programme	Offers health risk assessments and wellness services for government employees.	Preventative & Supportive	Positive Psychology
Metropolitan Health Employee Wellness Programme	Supports employees and families in managing work, mental health, and life challenges.	Holistic & Supportive	Positive Psychology
Employee Health and Wellness Strategic Framework	Comprehensive framework for health, productivity, and occupational wellness in the public service.	Holistic & Preventative	Positive Psychology
Employee Assistance and Wellness Programme - Dept. of Energy	Focus on mental health, substance abuse prevention, and family support.	Preventative & Psychosocial Support	Positive Psychology
Workplace Wellness Program - Dept. of Trade & Industry	Supports physical, mental, and social health, including counseling, health screenings, and fitness.	Holistic	Positive Psychology
Health and Wellness Program - Dept. of Justice	Provides health screenings and stress management workshops.	Preventative & Curative	Positive Psychology
Employee Wellness Program - Dept. of Human Settlements	Addresses emotional and psychological well-being, focusing on stress management and substance abuse.	Psychosocial Support	Positive Psychology
Environmental Wellness Program - Dept. of Environmental Affairs	Promotes environmental health and sustainable practices, connecting employees to nature.	Holistic	Relational Social Construction

Source: Authors' own data, 2025

Another pattern is the increasing emphasis on preventative wellness measures, such as health screenings, stress management workshops, and lifestyle change initiatives. Programs like

the Western on Wellness (WoW!), Healthy Lifestyle Initiative, and the Government Employees Medical Scheme (GEMS) Wellness Programme prioritise the prevention of health issues before they escalate. This trend signals an awareness of the cost-effectiveness and long-term benefits of preventing illness and promoting well-being early. Furthermore, psychosocial support is integrated into many wellness programs, such as the Employee Assistance and Wellness Programme (EAWP) and the Employee Wellness Program – Department of Human Settlements, indicating a growing recognition of the importance of addressing mental health and emotional well-being in the workplace. The EWPs analysed in the study demonstrate a preventative approach, in contrast to the reactive emphasis found in literature as well as public sector policies. Additionally, they exhibit a lack of personalisation, a limited focus on relationship dynamics, insufficient integration with organisational culture, and weak sustainability and continuity.

Synthesis of Findings

Employee Wellness Programmes (EWPs) in the South African public sector function as primary institutional mechanisms through which workplace conflict is implicitly managed, predominantly via individualised well-being interventions. As reflected in Table 1, programmes such as the Employee Health and Wellness Programme (EHWP), Employee Assistance and Wellness Programme (EAWP), and Metropolitan Health Employee Wellness Programme focus on counselling, stress management, and lifestyle change initiatives. While these approaches align with Positive Psychology's emphasis on individual strengths and emotional regulation, they largely conceptualise conflict as an outcome of personal distress rather than as a relational and organisational process.

From a conflict management perspective, this orientation contributes to employees' capacity to cope with stressors and regulate emotional responses, thereby reducing the likelihood of escalation in interpersonal disputes. However, the dominant emphasis across these programmes remains individualised, positioning conflict primarily as a consequence of personal stress or inadequate coping rather than as a relationally produced organisational phenomenon.

Only limited evidence of an explicit relational well-being orientation was identified. A notable exception is the Department of Environmental Affairs' Environmental Wellness Programme, which extends well-being beyond individual health to encompass relational and contextual dimensions through collective environmental practices. This programme demonstrates the feasibility of integrating relational processes such as shared responsibility, collective meaning-making, and interconnectedness into wellness initiatives, thereby transitioning from reactive support to relational capacity-building.

Similarly, selected initiatives within the Department of Trade and Industry and the National Department of Basic Education emphasise teamwork, community, and trust, suggesting latent alignment with relational well-being principles. However, these elements are not systematically integrated into conflict management strategies, limiting their potential impact.

Taken together, these findings indicate that while South African public sector EWPs are increasingly promoting individual well-being, they remain theoretically underdeveloped in addressing the relational dynamics through which workplace conflict emerges. Integrating relational well-being principles into existing preventative strategies would enable EWPs to function not only as mechanisms for individual support, but as organisational resources for strengthening relationships, improving communication, and managing conflict as a socially embedded process.

Theoretical Implications

The theoretical background reveals that relational well-being and positive psychology are typically studied in parallel, with limited exploration of their complementary aspects. Existing research focuses on each approach independently rather than examining how they can be integrated to enhance workplace wellness. This disparity emphasises the necessity of a more comprehensive theoretical framework that unites various viewpoints. It illustrates how their combined use might enhance dispute resolution in the South African public sector and fortify Employee Wellness Programs (EWPs).

A fresh viewpoint on well-being that acknowledges both individual and group experiences is provided by the incorporation of Relational Social Constructionism and Positive Psychology into workplace wellness initiatives. This method improves comprehension of conflict resolution and cultural change by moving the emphasis from personal strengths to a social and relationship dimension. It also challenges conventional models that place a higher priority on inclusivity, respect, and reciprocal recognition by highlighting the significance of shared meaning and group well-being. The combination of these two frameworks offers a chance to create new theoretical models that highlight relational elements like respect and cooperative communication.

Practical Implications

Organisations should implement holistic wellness initiatives that promote mental, physical, and interpersonal well-being by addressing both individual and relational elements. Integrating Positive Psychology and Relational Social Constructionism can help in conflict prevention and resolution. Cultivating a supportive organisational culture through mutual recognition, respect, and inclusive practices can reduce conflict. Leaders trained in Positive Psychology can create spaces where employees feel valued and motivated, improving their well-being and reducing conflicts. Wellness initiatives should be customised to fit the unique requirements of various staff members, ensuring they are inclusive and pertinent and promoting a feeling of community and purpose.

Limitations & Future Research Directions

Current wellness programmes often rely on a one-size-fits-all model, which may not be suitable for diverse employees. Positive Psychology focuses on strengths and flourishing, but may overlook social dynamics and relational factors. Integrating Relational Social Constructionism

may face challenges in hierarchical or traditional organisational cultures. Measuring the effectiveness of integrated wellness programmes is challenging due to the complex nature of well-being and context-dependent factors. Cultural sensitivity is another limitation, as the relational aspects of well-being may be context-dependent. Future research should explore the long-term effects of integrated wellness programmes, particularly in conflict management and employee well-being over time. Research should also explore the role of leadership in facilitating the integration of Positive Psychology and Relational Social Constructionism. A combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches is needed to measure the impact of integrated wellness programmes.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Employee Wellness Programs (EWPs) in the South African public sector predominantly address workplace conflict through a Positive Psychology lens, emphasising individual counselling, stress management, resilience, and preventative health practices, thereby partially meeting conflict-management objectives but remaining limited in scope. While these approaches support personal coping and emotional regulation, the findings demonstrate that their largely individualised orientation constrains their effectiveness in addressing relational sources of workplace conflict, such as miscommunication, weakened social cohesion, and fragmented organisational cultures. The analysis further establishes that the limited integration of relational well-being represents a critical gap in current EWP designs, with the Environmental Wellness Program of the Department of Environmental Affairs illustrating the feasibility and added value of relationally grounded interventions. Drawing on these insights, the study concludes that integrating Positive Psychology with Relational Well-Being offers a more comprehensive and sustainable approach to conflict management by simultaneously strengthening individual capacities and relational processes such as trust, mutual recognition, shared meaning, and collaborative communication. Accordingly, the recontextualised integrated framework advances Social Psychology scholarship by moving beyond individualised wellness models toward a relationally embedded understanding of workplace well-being, analytically extending a theoretically grounded and practically relevant model for enhancing employee well-being, conflict resolution, and organisational sustainability in the South African public sector.

ETHICAL STATEMENT AND DISCLOSURE

I declare that generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools, specifically ChatGPT (OpenAI), were used to support aspects of the writing process for this report. AI assistance was limited to writing refinement and editing for clarity, coherence, and conciseness. All substantive ideas, interpretations, data analysis, and theoretical arguments presented in this report originate from my own academic work, reflections, and engagement with the study context. AI tools were not used to generate or fabricate data, analyse data autonomously, conduct literature searches, or

replace my critical reasoning. All content in this work was produced by the author. AI tools were only used to assist with editing and formatting, and the author have reviewed and verified all content to ensure accuracy, originality, and alignment with the study aims and ethical standards.. This declaration is made in accordance with institutional guidelines on the responsible use of AI in academic writing.

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