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THRIVING ON THE FRONTLINES: UNVEILING THE POST-COVID REALITIES OF SOUTH AFRICA'S PRIVATE SECTOR PARAMEDICS

Abstract:

This phenomenological study delves into the unique lived realities of private-sector paramedics thriving in a post-COVID work context in South Africa. As the world grapples with the aftermath of the pandemic, paramedics stand at the forefront, navigating the evolving landscape of healthcare delivery. This research is a unique opportunity to explore the lived experiences of these professionals through their first-person accounts, offering a nuanced understanding of their perceptions and encounters.

The study focuses on capturing the essence of the paramedics' experiences by examining both the content and the way these experiences were lived. A non-probability purposive sample of 15 private sector paramedics was selected for in-depth interviews using semi-structured, open-ended questions. This approach allowed for rich, detailed discussions and the opportunity for participants to elaborate on their experiences.

Data were analysed using MAXQDA, with thematic analysis employed to identify recurring patterns, emergent themes, and unique perspectives. The findings reveal that private sector paramedics experienced a range of meaningful connections that support their ability to thrive in high-pressure environments. Relationships with family and friends, as well as with colleagues and management, offered vital emotional stability, resilience, and a sense of camaraderie. Furthermore, broader organisational connections, both internal and external, fostered a sense of inclusion and collective support.

The study concludes that, despite the challenges, private-sector paramedics thrive due to comprehensive support mechanisms and targeted interventions. These findings underscore the importance of such holistic support systems in promoting the well-being of healthcare professionals in the wake of global health crises. The practical implications of these findings are significant, as they can guide the development of future support systems for healthcare professionals.

Keywords:

Thriving, Private Sector Paramedics, Post-COVID work context, Phenomenology, Healthcare, Employee Well-being

JEL Classification: Y90, Y90, I19

1. Introduction

Front-line healthcare workers, including paramedical staff, played a pivotal role in managing the COVID-19 crisis. The pandemic underscored the immense challenges these professionals faced, ranging from overwhelming patient volumes and chronic fatigue to psychological distress and the persistent risk of infection. Despite these adverse conditions, healthcare workers demonstrated exceptional resilience and commitment to patient care (Greenberg *et al.*, 2020:1-2; World Health Organisation, 2021:1-3). Their experiences not only highlighted systemic weaknesses in healthcare infrastructures but also reinforced the urgent need for sustained support (Shaukat, Ali & Razzak, 2020:7).

The demands of working during and after the COVID-19 pandemic had profound effects on the physical and emotional well-being of paramedics. Alongside their responsibility to provide high-quality care to patients, paramedics were also compelled to manage their own health and safety, often under challenging and unpredictable conditions (World Health Organisation, 2021:2). This dual burden impacted their capacity to thrive professionally (Billings *et al.*, 2021:1).

Thriving is an essential psychological driver that supports individuals in performing effectively at work and reaching their full potential, benefiting both themselves and their organisations (Goh *et al.*, 2022:197). It is defined as “the psychological state in which individuals experience both a sense of vitality (i.e., the positive feeling of having energy available) and a sense of learning (i.e., the sense that one is acquiring, and can apply, knowledge and skills) at work” (Spreitzer *et al.*, 2005:538). While closely related to concepts such as resilience, flourishing, subjective well-being, work engagement, and self-actualisation, thriving at work remains a distinct construct, as outlined by Spreitzer.

2. Thriving at work

The socially embedded model of thriving at work (SEMT; Spreitzer *et al.*, 2005: 540-541) identifies three agentic behaviours that contribute to thriving in the workplace: task focus, exploration, and heedful relating. Task focus involves dedicating attention and effort to job tasks and responsibilities, fostering a sense of accomplishment and mastery. Exploration encompasses behaviours such as experimentation, innovation, and risk-taking, which promote growth and adaptability. Heedful relating refers to attentively supporting colleagues and engaging thoughtfully with the social and relational environment, enhancing collaboration and learning. Consequently, thriving encompasses both the emotional and cognitive dimensions of psychological experience, integrating hedonic and eudaimonic perspectives on psychological functioning. The hedonic approach (focusing on pleasure and happiness) and the eudaimonic approach (focusing on meaning and self-realisation) to create a balanced experience (Schaffner, 2023:1).

Individual thriving refers to a dynamic psychological state that varies both within individuals over time (intra-individual variation) and between individuals (inter-individual differences in average levels of thriving) (Goh *et al.*, 2022:200). Individual differences play a critical role in fostering thriving at work by shaping how individuals express beneficial behaviours and access personal and social resources. Individuals who are emotionally stable and reliable tend to thrive more effectively, as they are better equipped to build and maintain constructive personal

and relational resources (Liu *et al.*, 2021:1,14). Furthermore, proactive individuals who embrace change and actively seek growth opportunities are more likely to experience thriving at work due to their engagement in self-initiated development, resilience and adaptability (Jiang, 2017:85; Spreitzer *et al.*, 2012:155).

Collective thriving refers to differences in the levels of thriving observed between groups, teams, or departments within an organisation, reflecting how shared experiences and dynamics shape well-being at these levels (Goh *et al.*, 2022:206). Workplace relationships are fundamental to employee thriving, as both vitality and learning are deeply embedded within social systems and forms through interpersonal interactions (Xu & Wang, 2020:274). Through vitality and learning, thriving enables employees to assess whether they are progressing and developing within their work environment. Supporting this view, research has demonstrated that thriving contributes positively to work engagement, job satisfaction, commitment, innovation, task performance, and well-being (Kleine *et al.*, 2019:973). Employees are more likely to thrive in environments characterized by civility, compassion, and fairness, where they receive support from both colleagues and managers (Shahid & Muchiri, 2020:494; Xu & Wang, 2020:274). Aligned with these findings, research indicates that a group's positive affective tone can foster team coordination, cooperation, goal commitment, satisfaction, and helping behaviours (Jiang *et al.*, 2023:339-341; Kleine *et al.*, 2019:973). Collectively, these factors contribute to stronger team cohesion. For organisations to achieve sustainable progress, it is essential for managers to cultivate and sustain a workforce that is not only thriving but also energised to grow and develop continuously (Spreitzer *et al.*, 2012:155).

Thriving in the organisational context includes practices, policies and leadership involvement. Organisational practices and policies play a critical role in fostering employee thriving by reinforcing norms and workplace climates conducive to growth and well-being. For instance, human resource practices such as high-performance work systems are often perceived as supportive when they provide access to opportunities, information, and decision-making (Goh *et al.*, 2019:208). Under such conditions, employees are more likely to experience a sense of certainty, organisational commitment, career resilience, self-efficacy, empowerment, enhanced organisation-based self-esteem, and psychological safety (Goh *et al.*, 2019:200; Kim & Beehr, 2020:100; Yang *et al.*, 2021:1911). Furthermore, HR practices that focus on developing employees' knowledge, skills, and abilities are particularly valued and have been shown to promote thriving. (Taneva & Arnold, 2018:189). Receiving support from leaders enables individuals to thrive by fostering feelings of self-assurance, pride, determination, mutual respect and inner strength (Goh *et al.*, 2022:207; Kabat-Farr & Cortina, 2017:74). Research indicates that supportive leadership contributes to the development of psychologically safe and empowering work environments, which in turn promote initiative-taking, proactivity, and the growth of psychological capital (Shahid & Muchiri, 2019:494; Yang *et al.*, 2021:1918-1919).

3. Methodology

The research design adopted a post-positivist and interpretivist research paradigm, focusing on gaining insight into participants' subjective experiences within their post-COVID work environments. Rather than relying on quantitative measurements, the research emphasised the meanings participants attributed to their experiences to better understand their perceptions of the phenomenon under investigation (Nieuwenhuis & Jacobs, 2025:102-103).

A purposive non-probability sampling strategy was employed to initially select fifteen (15) participants working as paramedics in the private sector. This approach involved identifying individuals who met specific criteria deemed relevant for addressing the research questions (Moser & Korstjens, 2017:10). It is also increasingly acknowledged that a sample of 10 to 20 well-informed participants is generally sufficient for capturing and interpreting lived experiences, guided by the principle of data saturation (Sebele-Mpofu, 2020:13-14).

Data were collected through one-on-one, semi-structured interviews, employing an approach that was attentive to both verbal and non-verbal cues during the interaction. The interview protocol was guided by open-ended questions, providing flexibility for follow-up questions, probing, and clarifying comments to elicit deeper insights (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019: 2-3). Data saturation was achieved with thirteen (13) participants, indicating that no new themes emerged beyond this point.

Institutional ethical clearance for the study was granted (FRECMS-20102021-092). Prior to each interview, participants provided voluntary written informed consent, which included approval for audio recording and secure, password-protected storage of their contributions. All recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and fidelity to the participants' shared voice. Identifying information was removed to maintain anonymity.

In qualitative research, data analysis involves the systematic organisation and examination of verbatim interview transcripts to identify recurring patterns, thematic categories, and insights relevant to the research objectives (Im *et al.*, 2023:101-103).

Guided by the principles of quality data, direct transcripts were used as the basis for coding. Themes and sub-themes were generated through multiple rounds of coding to ensure depth and consistency (Terry *et al.*, 2017:17-37). MAXQDA, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software, was employed to facilitate systematic organisation and interpretation of the data. Identified themes rooted in a qualitative narrative were supplemented with illustrative verbatim quotations from participants.

4. Results and discussions

4.1 Relational dynamics in supporting paramedics' workplace thriving

Thriving in the workplace is often rooted in meaningful connections. As an overarching theme, the bonds that extend outward in widening circles of engagement were noted and illustrated in Figure 1 below. Relationships with family and friends provide crucial emotional stability, anchoring the resilience of paramedics. Positive interactions foster camaraderie and a shared sense of purpose within their immediate departments. Moreover, connections across the larger organisation, both internally and externally, cultivate a sense of inclusion and support. These dynamics nurture a feeling of belonging and emphasise the importance of relational engagement in enhancing the well-being of paramedics as they navigate their daily

challenges. Each of these sub-themes is illuminated by supporting verbatim quotes.



Figure 1: Thriving through expanding circles of connection

4.2 Theme 1: Support through personal relationships

Paramedics highlighted how shift work disrupted family roles, intimacy, and home life rhythms, with added concerns about family safety and job risks (Lawn *et al.* 2020:7). However, participants reported receiving financial support from family and friends, particularly during periods of reduced working hours in the post-COVID context. Participant 3 explained, *“Support from my family and then colleagues ... sometimes you would work less hours ... so when you have support from your family, and friends and colleagues, it makes things go away.”* The economic repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic have placed significant strain on the healthcare sector, impacting paramedics not only professionally but also in their personal lives.

Support from friends and family is crucial for paramedics during challenging times, offering emotional relief and aiding in the processing of traumatic experiences (Kshtriya *et al.*, 2020:2260). Participant 12 highlighted this, stating, *“Yeah, family. I get much support because we've worked with a lot of patients that were COVID-positive, and they supported us... they helped about with emotional support.”* Such support plays a vital role in safeguarding paramedics' well-being by alleviating anxiety and enhancing resilience, particularly in the face of challenges such as irregular working hours and operational uncertainty.

4.3 Theme 2: Support networks amongst colleagues

Positive co-worker relationships are essential for cultivating a supportive and effective working environment (Mind Tools 2025:1). Participant 10 noted, *“... you really need to trust... there is a lot of trust that we have and has built over the years... we are supportive. We help the other one...”* This highlights how interpersonal trust and mutual support among colleagues serve as critical enablers of cohesion and psychological resilience in high-pressure settings.

Humour is a coping mechanism in high-stress professions like paramedics. Paramedics often used "gallows humour" or "dark humour" to ease emotional distress, release tension, and strengthen camaraderie. Participant 4 reflected on this, stating, *"Yeah, we call it the dark sense of humour. And like I said, my family support me a lot emotionally during this time, and my work colleagues."* While it may seem counterintuitive, humour can be an effective coping strategy for dealing with the challenges of paramedic work (Sahin & Gok 2020:71). Humour fosters bonding, promotes shared understanding, and helps paramedics manage the emotional demands of their profession.

4.4 Theme 3: Support networks within the team

Paramedics sustained high levels of teamwork, trust, and mutual support among colleagues in the post-COVID-19 work milieu. Strong interpersonal bonds enhance teamwork by fostering trust, mutual support and improving performance during emergency situations (Myhr *et al.*, 2024:8). Cohesive teams are also more capable of managing occupational stressors, which contributes to greater job satisfaction and mental well-being (Kshtriya *et al.*, 2020:2260). As Participant 8 explained, *"Because everybody has their own, you know, role to play in this... you're only as strong as your weakest link so that it'll be a team."* Participant 5 affirmed, *"I would say our team... we work quite well together, we look after each other... that's really your family."* A supportive work environment remained essential, as teamwork and communication are critical for the delivery of timely, high-quality care. Trust and mutual support within teams foster opportunities for shared learning and help build camaraderie, which collectively enhances team cohesion.

Paramedic work often involves emotionally demanding situations. In this context, positive relationships within teams and with managerial staff serve as an essential support system. Such relationships facilitate the sharing of experiences, the discussion of complex cases, and access to emotional support (Kleine *et al.*, 2019:973; Lawn *et al.*, 2020:8). This network of support contributes to the prevention of burnout, promotes mental well-being, and enhances a sense of professional empowerment. Participant 13 highlighted this: *"The manager, [...] is so supportive. So, I can say much but in whatever you do need to talk with him. Whatever that bothers you, he says, he's there to listen and he does sort everything out."* This reflection underscores the value of supportive leadership and collegial support in sustaining paramedics' emotional resilience and professional performance in high-pressure environments.

A culture of continuous learning enables paramedics to adapt to challenges and enhance their skills and competencies (Grenier *et al.*, 2021:4-5). Participant 3 noted that frequent meetings ensure that staff remain informed and up to date on matters relevant to their roles. These meetings encompassed knowledge sharing, mentorship, and ongoing training, further supporting their professional growth. Such practices not only reinforce individual growth but also cultivate a responsive and skilled workforce capable of meeting the evolving demands of emergency care.

4.5 Theme 4: Support networks within the organisation

Conflict is an inevitable part of daily interactions and naturally arises within high-stress environments such as the paramedic workplace. Despite this, paramedics demonstrated the ability to effectively manage and resolve conflicts while preserving supportive and collaborative working relationships (Parvaresh-Masoud *et al.*, 2021:6). Still, paramedics

effectively resolved disagreements while fostering supportive relationships. Participant 3 emphasises that it is a natural part of workplace interactions and says, *“We like one big happy family... we had our fights, we have our disagreements, but when it hits the fan, ja, we all stand together and support each other.”*

Conflict resolution is essential in paramedicine, where swift decision-making impacts patient care. Effective communication, active listening, and teamwork aid in resolving disagreements efficiently (Bijani *et al.*, 2021:5-9). Admittedly, paramedics prioritised resolving conflicts promptly to maintain cohesion. Post-COVID, paramedics continued to receive updated protective gear, diagnostic tools, and medical supplies, including PPE and advanced equipment. Participant 4 noted, *“I can’t really think of any actions. The only actions that they really helped us with are our PPE that we got for handling the COVID cases.”*

Paramedics sometimes encounter significant challenges and elevated workloads as part of their daily professional responsibilities. Offering counselling and mental health support to paramedics post-COVID was essential (Henke, 2022:1213). The emotional demands of their work, intensified by the pandemic, significantly impacted their well-being (Phung *et al.*, 2022:1). Counselling support at this time acknowledged the implications of the great workloads and the consequential implications. Having access to these services helped manage anxiety, depression, and trauma, offering a safe space for support. As Participant 1 stated, *“Well, there’s counselling... a counsellor will be made available for you.”*

Access to mental health resources by paramedic staff strengthened resilience and fostered a culture that valued well-being (Clompus & Albarran, 2016:1), while also prioritising physical health. Participant 6 noted, *“The support from the company... it’s always there... we’ve got that bigger area of support if you really need to.”* This support enhanced job satisfaction, improved staff retention, and contributed to the quality of care experienced by participants. These positive outcomes can be sustained through key enablers, including supportive leadership, a positive workplace climate, and access to relevant knowledge and resources (Zeng *et al.*, 2020:7-8).

4.6 Theme 5: Support networks through external stakeholders

A positive relationship between paramedics and patients is essential for compassionate care (Mangan *et al.*, 2022:1113). A smiling patient often reflects a successful interaction, as empathy and genuine concern foster meaningful connections. Participant 1 highlighted this by stating, *“To be able to see people smile again, you know, and not just to see that.”*

Paramedics communicated using plain language and involved patients in decision-making whenever possible (Mangan *et al.*, 2022:1121-1122). When patients felt informed and involved, this contributed towards a positive experience. This was evident when Participant 10 shared, *“The lady was 23 weeks pregnant. She was complaining about abdominal pains... just the mere fact that we could be there for them, and to calm them down, and to get them to the hospital that’s [inaudible] yeah...”* Providing reassurance and creating a sense of safety helped alleviate patients’ anxiety and fear, often resulting in gratitude and smiles.

Medics upheld respect and dignity, considering cultural differences and personal preferences and personal preferences to ensure patients felt valued and respected (Abelsson & Lindwall,

2017:268). Professionalism fosters trust and confidence in patients, enhancing their perception of being cared for (Venesoja *et al.*, 2020:1). Effective pain management and comfort measures reflect a clear commitment to patient well-being (Carvalho *et al.*, 2018:969-970). Prompt and empathetic responses to pain frequently lead to patient relief and expressions of gratitude.

5. Conclusion

The study concludes that, despite the challenges inherent in their high-pressure work environment, private-sector paramedics were able to thrive due to comprehensive support mechanisms arising from both internal and external relational contexts, as well as targeted interventions. Participants reported experiencing meaningful social relationships through connections with family, friends, colleagues, and management. These relationships provided essential emotional support, resilience, and a sense of camaraderie. In addition, broader organisational connections fostered inclusion and collective support. These findings highlight the critical role of holistic support systems in promoting the well-being of healthcare workers. The practical implications are significant, offering guidance for the development of future support strategies aimed at enhancing the resilience and mental health of healthcare professionals.

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Declaration:

The data presented in this work were extracted from a published dissertation by the co-author, Ms. P.S. Thekiso. As a result, some similarities with the original dissertation may be observed.