

## Beyond the Nordic Happiness Paradox: Theorizing Silent Unhappiness in High-Trust Work Cultures

**Arzu Atan**

Altinbas Cyprus University, Nicosia

### Abstract

Nordic countries consistently top global happiness rankings yet report widespread workplace distress, a paradox that remains underexplored in organizational research. Drawing on the If Nordic Health Report 2024 (N = 4,013), this study introduces the concept of silent unhappiness: a chronic, affect-laden, and under-voiced form of distress embedded in organizational and cultural norms.

Findings indicate that 88% of employees experience negative stress, with prolonged symptoms such as sleep problems (65%), anxiety (53%), and impaired work ability (51%), while only 21% report adequate employer support. Thematic interpretation reveals five interrelated dimensions: normalized endurance of chronic stress, employer support deficits, help-seeking silence, stratified vulnerabilities among women, younger employees, and public-sector workers, and national variations in stressors.

The study integrates organizational silence theory with affective and temporal perspectives to theorize how distress accumulates and circulates beneath everyday discourse, stabilizing routines while eroding well-being.

By reframing Nordic exceptionalism, the paper exposes the cultural and structural mechanisms that sustain hidden distress. Implications emphasize promoting psychological safety, accessible voice and aid channels, and equity-focused interventions for vulnerable groups.

Overall, this research contributes to the emerging agenda of sustainable working life by revealing how emotional silence operates as both a coping strategy and a constraint within high-trust societies.

### Keywords

Organizational silence, silent unhappiness, psychological safety, employee well-being, working life, temporal embeddedness.

