

From Sports to Oral Health to the Maasai People in Africa – An Autoethnographic Account on Motivation and Happiness

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To cite this article: Manuel Au-Yong-Oliveira, Cabral, C. T., Magano, J. 2025. From sports to oral health to the Maasai people in Africa – An autoethnographic account on motivation and happiness, *European Review of Business Economics* V(1): 97-112.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26619/ERBE-2025.5.1.6>.

ABSTRACT

This research aims to demonstrate the importance of motivation in order to be happy. The research question is: How are motivation and happiness linked? Our study considers several related aspects – from sports to oral health to the Maasai people in Africa. Motivation involves several factors, such as energy, direction, focus and [the right, sustainable] values (being true to oneself). The discussion herein offers a novel perspective on happiness and being happy. This is a qualitative study that includes a literature review and an autoethnographic narrative, a relatively new approach to scientific research. We conclude that autonomy and freedom are essential to one's happiness, as is being true to oneself – being motivated by one's intrinsic motivation (in-ternal satisfaction) rather than by extrinsic motivation (external fame and rewards).

Keywords: Motivation; Energy; Direction; Focus; Values; True to oneself; Happiness; Autonomy; Freedom.

JEL Codes: —.

I. Introduction

Research about motivation began in the 1930s, and since then, attempts have been made to understand why individuals are driven by goals (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Motivation allows individuals to focus on a particular objective that they have defined for themselves. Motivation is not only about what drives human behaviour, but also about increasing work efficiency (Nieżurawska, 2023). Based on the assumption that the higher the level of motivation, the more likely it is that the defined objective

will be accomplished and that completing those goals is necessary for an individual to be successful in life, it can be inferred that an individual with greater motivation tends to be more successful in life, as previous literature states (Cox, 2012).

Additionally, Jain et al. (2019) state that happiness is people's main objective. A successful individual tends to feel well in general, to have a sense of joy and to have positive feelings, in other words, to be happy. Therefore, the present study suggests that individuals with a higher level of motivation may be happier. Research into happiness is a field that draws on knowledge from diverse disciplines, from psychology to economics and sociology (Jain et al., 2019). Although there are studies in the scientific literature that approach this concept in different ways, few use ethnography to examine it. This study aims to explore the link between motivation and happiness. To achieve this research objective, this study involves a literature review, followed by an autoethnographic narrative.

II. Literature Review

A. Conceptualising happiness

Regarding the concept of happiness, Malcik and Miklosikova (2019) state that it is a subjective experience and that most people experience happiness when they have healthy relationships with others, engage in worthwhile work or hobbies, spend time in nature, are in good health, or successfully resolve a difficult issue. According to the same author, happiness has both emotional and cognitive components and is closely related to each person's unique values scale, goals and objectives.

In the literature, the conceptualisation of happiness is focused mainly on hedonic aspects of well-being—intended to maximise pleasure and positive emotions (Fisher, 2010). However, a more comprehensive, eudaimonic approach focuses on meaning, self-realisation, and the fulfilment of human potential (Ryan & Deci, 2001). This distinction is crucial; Ryff's (1989) model and Seligman's (2011) PERMA model are both aligned with this eudaimonic perspective. Concerning the conceptualisation and measurement of happiness, Ryff (1989) presents a seminal six-dimensional model of psychological well-being, namely, self-acceptance, environmental mastery, autonomy, positive relations with others, personal growth, and purpose in life.

Later, Seligman (2002) described the authentic happiness model, which identifies three living styles that, taken together, constitute an overall happy life: a pleasant life, an engaged life and a meaningful life. More recently, the same author (Seligman, 2011) proposed a more evolved model known as PERMA, which is based on five pillars of human flourishing: Positive Emotions, Engagement, Positive Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment. This model provides a robust framework for understanding the building blocks of a happy and fulfilling life, with a clear emphasis on factors beyond mere pleasure.

B. The economics of happiness

While happiness has long fallen under the domain of psychology, a growing field of study known as “happiness economics” has emerged to examine its relationship with economic factors. This interdisciplinary field, drawing on knowledge from economics, sociology, and psychology, challenges the traditional economic assumption that higher income directly translates to greater well-being (Jain et al., 2019).

Research in this area has revealed the Easterlin Paradox, which observes that, at a point in time within a country, richer people tend to be happier than poorer people. However, over the long term, rising average incomes do not lead to increased average happiness (Jain et al., 2019). This suggests that after basic needs are met, relative income and non-monetary factors become far more critical determinants of happiness.

Key findings in happiness economics indicate that factors such as unemployment have a severely detrimental effect on well-being, extending beyond the loss of income, to impact self-esteem and social status. Furthermore, factors like income inequality, the quality of social connections, health, and personal freedom (autonomy) are consistently identified as powerful predictors of a population's happiness (Jain et al., 2019). This broader perspective underscores that happiness is not merely an individual pursuit but is deeply embedded in the social and economic fabric of society. The desire for autonomy and freedom, identified by our study as crucial, has been a driving force behind social and political movements, reflecting its fundamental economic and social value.

C. Motivation

According to Weiner (2000), motivation can be conceptualised as a desire to achieve an objective or a drive to conduct a specific behaviour. Motivation aims to explain why people decide to do something, what they decide to do after this willingness, and for how long they are willing (Bernard et al., 2005). Achievement motivation is a person's tendency to achieve special goals.

What then does the so desired motivation (or drive) consist of? Motivation involves energy, direction, focus and values (namely [hopefully] virtuous values, for a sustainable world).

Junça-Silva and Menino (2022, p.1) refer that, as regards the rather complex concept of motivation, the freedom to act independently is very important: “Self-determination theory suggests that motivation is multidimensional; as such, there are various dimensions ranging from autonomous (i.e., intrinsic) to more controlled forms (extrinsic) of motivation. While intrinsic motivation appears to be positively related to an individual's optimal functioning (e.g., happiness and performance), extrinsic motivation appears to be less beneficial. Furthermore, motivation is strongly determined by the context (e.g., job characteristics, such as autonomy). Although the relationship between job characteristics and workers' motivation has been demonstrated, how it impacts performance and happiness is still to be unpacked”.

Hence, the research question for this study is: how are motivation and happiness linked?

According to the above-mentioned recent research by Junça-Silva and Menino (2022), being true to oneself, intrinsically, rather than searching for external fame or rewards, has a paramount effect on one's motivation: "The results support our hypotheses by demonstrating that all job motivating characteristics (autonomy, feedback, variety, meaning, and task identity) predicted healthcare workers' happiness by enhancing their intrinsic motivation and leading to better adaptive performances. The results are not significant for extrinsic motivation; that is, the serial mediating path was not significant when extrinsic motivation was analysed" (Junça-Silva & Menino, 2022, p.1).

The key takeaway from Junça-Silva and Menino (2022) is that managers need to work towards creating freer and more autonomous job designs for workers to be more motivated, successful, and hence happier — truer to themselves — without forgetting to provide constant managerial support (feedback): "focus on work design, in a way to promote certain job motivating characteristics (e.g., autonomy), to improve healthcare workers' motivation, which leads to a better performance and, consequently, they are happier. The study highlights that when healthcare workers have a job that provides them autonomy and regular feedback, with meaningful and varied tasks to which they feel a sense of identification, they tend to feel intrinsically motivated in their work, promoting higher adaptability to daily challenges, and, as a result, leaves them happier" (Junça-Silva & Menino, 2022, p.1).

D. Motivation, oral hygiene and health

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2017), poor oral hygiene affects about 3.5 billion people, leading to oral diseases that cause discomfort, pain or irreversible damage throughout life. Oral health is a major global public health problem affecting both adults and children. In recent decades, following various preventive actions and programmes, an improvement in oral hygiene has been recorded, albeit slight. Educating and promoting good oral hygiene consists of teaching, understanding and applying the practices to be adopted through various methods and tools, whether playful or pedagogical (Hoben et al., 2017; Mattos-Silveira et al., 2017).

An individual's motivation involves emotional, biological and social phenomena. It is a force that directs the person towards a goal or behaviour. For this to occur in oral health motivation, it is necessary for the oral professional to safely transmit this motivation to the patient, through oral information and the aid of images. To encourage the patient to control plaque in the oral cavity, it is essential to have a mirror in the dental office and all necessary oral hygiene aids, such as toothbrushes, brushes or dental floss.

Ideally, these oral hygiene habits should be learned in childhood, but when a problem arises (dental caries or periodontal disease), it will lead to a change in the patient's attitude and behaviour. The dentist will have the opportunity to transmit information, raise awareness and encourage the patient to change their habits and to correctly clean the oral biofilm by means of adequate hygiene measures (Hotwani et al., 2020). This process of motivating patients is supported by research in other health domains. For instance, Girelli et al. (2016) demonstrated that when individuals feel supported to be

independent (e.g., by a healthcare professional), they are more likely to develop autonomous motivation, which in turn leads to the intentional adoption of healthy behaviours. This underscores the importance of the dentist's role not as a commander, but as an autonomy-supportive guide.

It is very important that dentists educate and motivate their patients to maintain good oral hygiene, using methods that facilitate learning and captivate patients, with the aim of improving consultations, reducing the risk and prevalence of oral diseases. Nowadays, technologies are increasingly used to improve motivation in oral health, and there is a very extensive panoply of apps that serve to motivate, educate, and promote good oral health practices (Aiuto et al., 2022).

Daily oral hygiene is the key behaviour to adopt for good oral health. Brushing your teeth and cleaning the interproximal spaces, as well as regular cleaning of the entire oral cavity, including gums, mucous membranes and tongue, helps reduce and eliminate plaque, a triggering factor for various oral pathologies and bad breath. This habit is the main tool for preventing dental caries and periodontal disease, as it eliminates plaque through the mechanical action and the fluoride in the toothpaste protects the enamel (Morais et al., 2020).

Thus, to establish good oral hygiene habits and ensure their effectiveness, several parameters must be considered, such as the frequency, timing and method of brushing the gums, teeth and tongue, as well as the type of toothpaste. In addition, there are aids such as dental floss, toothbrushes, mouthwashes or plaque removers that are important for maintaining good oral health (Poklepovic et al., 2013; Sälzer et al., 2020).

According to the WHO (2020), tooth brushing should be carried out as soon as the first tooth comes through, regardless of age, at least twice a day, ideally once after breakfast and once before bedtime (morning and evening) and for at least 2 minutes. On the other hand, flossing is indicated once a day, before going to bed, if there are points of contact between the teeth, and is generally advised from between 8-10 years old. Dental appointments should be carried out from when the first tooth comes through, every 6 months or annually (Sälzer et al., 2020).

III. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design, utilising data in the form of words and images to explore the nuanced relationship between motivation and happiness. The primary methodological approach is autoethnography, supplemented by a narrative literature review. Autoethnography was selected because it allows an extensive, personal examination of how motivation operates in diverse, real-world contexts—from sports to professional life to oral health—and how it subjectively contributes to happiness (Ellis et al., 2011). This method is particularly suited to exploring complex, subjective phenomena that are deeply embedded in personal and cultural experience.

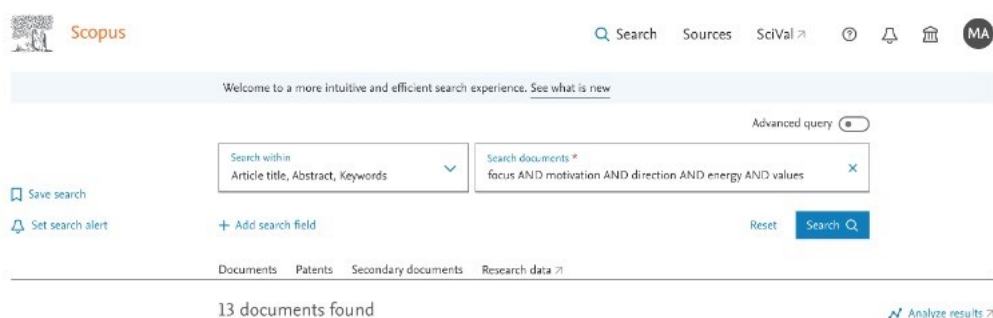
Autoethnography is defined as a form of autobiographical writing that integrates personal experience (auto-) with cultural analysis (-ethno-) to produce an interpretive account (-graphy) (Ellis et al., 2011). The subject of this analysis is the human being and their behaviour, especially regarding culture—the learned norms, beliefs, and traditions

common to distinct groups. While culture varies across geography and other factors like religion, it remains relatively stable within specific groups, making it a viable unit of analysis. In this study, we reflect upon our experiences within the cultures of competitive sports, academic research, healthcare (dentistry), and our encounter with the Maasai people.

A. Research strategy

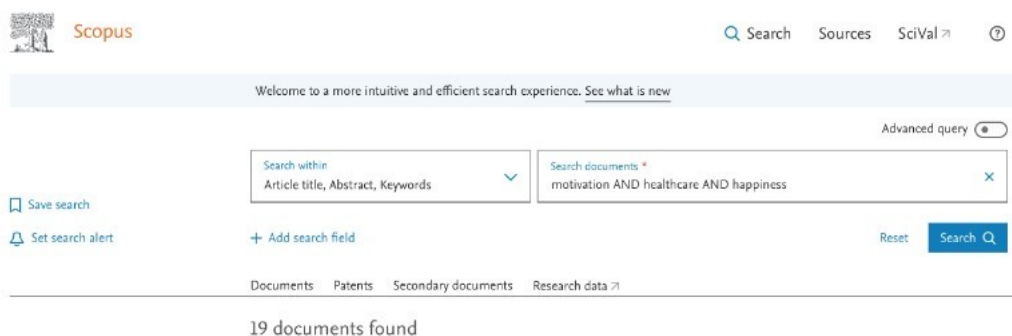
A search on Scopus, on 11-08-2023, with the terms focus AND motivation AND direction AND energy AND values revealed the following (13 documents), as visible in Figure 1.

Figure 1
A search on Scopus, on 11-08-2023, with the terms focus AND motivation AND direction AND energy AND values revealed 13 documents



A second search on Scopus, on 12-08-2023, with the terms motivation AND healthcare AND happiness revealed 19 documents (Figure 2). This process ensured a focused retrieval of literature directly relevant to the conceptual framework of motivation (energy, direction, focus and values) and its application in a key domain (healthcare).

Figure 2
A search on Scopus, on 12-08-2023, with the terms motivation AND healthcare AND happiness revealed 19 documents



The primary data for this study were generated through reflexive practice, where the authors documented and critically analysed their personal experiences. This involved (i) recalling and narrating key life events related to motivation and its outcomes, (ii)

analysing past research projects (e.g., on golfers) through an autoethnographic lens, and (iii) reflecting on professional practice in dentistry and patient motivation. Documenting and interpreting the cross-cultural encounter with the Maasai people through field notes and photographs taken during a family trip to Tanzania in August 2023.

B. Research strategy

For the literature review component of this study, specific eligibility criteria were applied to determine which sources to include in the narrative synthesis. The inclusion criteria encompassed peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and book chapters published in either English or Portuguese. The central requirement for inclusion was that the literature directly addressed the core concepts being researched, namely motivation, happiness, self-determination theory, oral health motivation, or cross-cultural perspectives on well-being. Furthermore, sources were included if they provided theoretical or empirical insights that could meaningfully contextualise or illuminate the autoethnographic narratives presented in this paper. Conversely, the exclusion criteria were clearly defined. Review articles were excluded to prioritise original research and foundational theoretical works, although some key reviews were consulted for general background understanding. Any publications not available in English or Portuguese were also excluded, as were works that lacked a clear and direct focus on the central psychological or behavioural constructs being explored.

C. Study selection and data collection

The study selection process for the literature review was conducted by a single reviewer. The titles and abstracts of the 32 documents identified through the Scopus searches were screened against the eligibility criteria. Full-text articles were retrieved for all documents that appeared relevant. The final selection of literature was iterative, with additional seminal works (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryff, 1989; Seligman, 2002) being added based on their foundational importance to the topic, as known to the authors.

For the autoethnographic data, collection was intrinsic to the authors' lived experiences. Data points included personal memories, professional reflections, documented interviews from past research (Mansfield & Oliveira, 1994, 1995), and contemporary field notes and visual data (photographs) from the visit to the Maasai community. Informed consent was obtained from the Maasai people for the use of photographs and the publication of observations.

D. Risk of bias in included studies

Given the autoethnographic nature of this study, the primary consideration regarding bias pertains to the inherent subjectivity of self-reporting and personal reflection. This subjective lens is a fundamental characteristic of the methodological approach rather than a flaw to be removed. To enhance the analytical rigour and mitigate the risk of

presenting merely anecdotal accounts, several strategies were employed. These included the triangulation of perspectives from the two authors, who possess distinct professional backgrounds in academia and dentistry, thereby providing multiple viewpoints on the core themes.

Furthermore, the personal narratives were consistently grounded in and questioned in view of established psychological theories and empirical findings from the literature. A practice of critical self-reflexivity was also maintained, wherein the authors actively acknowledged their own positions and assumptions and reflected on how their backgrounds might shape their interpretations. Regarding the external literature included in the narrative synthesis, a formal assessment of the risk of bias for individual studies was not conducted, as the purpose was not to conduct a systematic review, but to create a contextual framework for the autoethnographic analysis.

E. Synthesis of evidence studies

Due to the methodological heterogeneity between the autoethnographic data and the included literature, a quantitative meta-analysis was not appropriate. Instead, a thematic synthesis was conducted. The findings from the literature review and the autoethnographic narratives were integrated and analysed to identify overarching themes and patterns related to the research question. Key themes that emerged and are discussed in the Results and Discussion section include: the components of motivation (energy, direction, focus and being true to oneself), the primacy of intrinsic motivation for happiness, and the role of autonomy and culture in fostering motivated behaviour.

IV. Results and Discussion

The inclusion of this autoethnographic study into the link between motivation and happiness yielded rich, personal data from the authors' experiences in diverse fields. The analysis of these narratives, when synthesised with the literature review, reveals three central themes: 1) what constitutes the dimensions of motivation; 2) the primacy of intrinsic motivation and autonomy for happiness; and 3) the universality of this connection across cultures and contexts.

A. The anatomy of motivation: Energy, direction, focus and authenticity

Our journey began with a need to define motivation beyond a simple cliché. For the lead author, motivation was a latent force until a personal crisis—the collapse of his family's business—provided a crucial jolt. This experience revealed that motivation is not a single entity but a composite of essential dimensions. It begins with energy—a heightened level of vitality that distinguishes a motivated state. However, energy alone is diffuse and ineffective; it requires direction, the channelling of that energy toward a specific,

worthwhile goal. In the lead author's case, this direction shifted from a pre-ordained corporate path to the ambitious goal of becoming a professional golfer.

This pursuit introduced a third, critical component: focus. This is the sustained attention and perseverance required to maintain one's direction. The lead author's dedicated practice and systematic research, interviewing over a hundred golfers to understand the drivers of their success, exemplify this focused application of energy. This personal definition—encompassing energy, direction, and focus—resonates with the literature, which describes motivation as the drive behind behaviour and the persistence one is willing to invest (Bernard et al., 2005; Weiner, 2000).

The final, foundational dimension of motivation was crystallised by our cross-cultural encounter. The Maasai people demonstrated a profound form of motivation rooted not in external achievement, but in cultural integrity. Their choice to maintain their traditions, while selectively engaging with the modern world (as seen in their school teaching English and Mathematics, Figure 3), revealed that ultimate motivation requires being true to oneself. This aligns with the finding that intrinsic motivation, which stems from authentic values, is far more powerful and sustainable than extrinsic drives (Junça-Silva & Menino, 2022).

Figure 3
At the Maasai school for young children in Ngorongoro, Tanzania, they teach English, Swahili and Mathematics, showing a selective engagement with the modern world.



B. The Universality of the Motivation-Happiness Link: From Golf to Oral Health

The connection between this multifaceted motivation and happiness proved to be universal, manifesting consistently across vastly different domains. In the world of competitive golf, the lead author's research revealed that the key differentiator between good golfers and great ones was not just talent, but motivation. The highly motivated golfers were more successful in their pursuits and, consequently, reported being happier. This was true even for the lead author himself; the journey of striving to become a “world beater” was described as “fantastic”, despite not achieving the ultimate goal. The process, driven by intrinsic passion, was itself a source of happiness.

This pattern was precisely mirrored in the second author's field of dentistry. Here, the “success” of a healthy patient is overwhelmingly dependent on the patient's motivated behaviour outside the clinic. Periodontal disease, a major global health issue, is preventable through consistent oral hygiene. The dentist's role is to educate and motivate, but the final outcome—whether a patient avoids the pain and tooth loss associated with Periodontitis—rests on their daily, motivated routines. A motivated patient, who follows the instructions for brushing and flossing, achieves better oral health, which contributes directly to their overall well-being and happiness. This echoes the finding that in healthcare contexts, intrinsic motivation is a critical mediator for well-being (Junça-Silva & Menino, 2022).

C. Autonomy and being true to oneself: The bridge to happiness

The critical element that bridges motivation and happiness across all these contexts is autonomy—the freedom to choose one's path and act in accordance with one's values. The lead author found happiness not in the predetermined role of a business manager, but in the autonomous pursuit of golf and academia. The dental patient finds agency and well-being in taking autonomous control of their health.

This theme finds its most powerful illustration in the Maasai. Their evident contentment, despite a lifestyle with limited material possessions, is a testament to a life lived with profound autonomy and authenticity. They build their own waterproof huts (Figure 4), maintain their communal security (Figure 5), and celebrate their culture through dance (Figure 6). They have chosen a direction that preserves their identity, they focus their collective energy on maintaining their community, and in doing so, remain true to themselves. Their happiness is a product of this authentic, intrinsically motivated way of life.

Figure 4

The entrance to a Maasai village in Ngorongoro, Tanzania. They close the gate at night due to wild animals, a simple yet profound act of communal responsibility.



Figure 5

The Maasai dwellings / huts are built by the women. They are waterproof and keep the rain out, demonstrating skill and self-reliance.



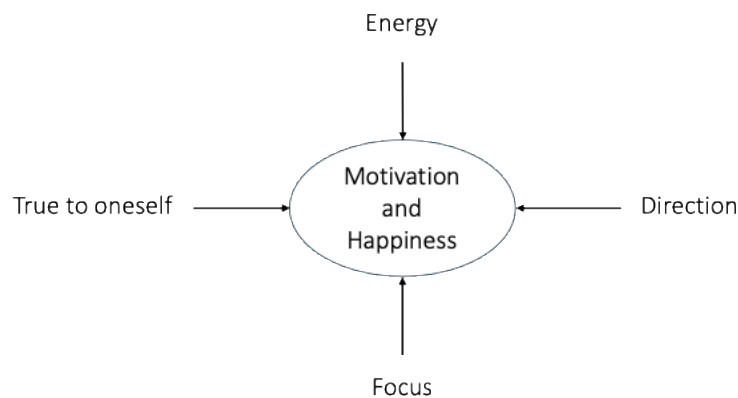
Figure 6
The Maasai people danced for us, sharing their culture with pride and joy.



D. An integrated model

Synthesising these findings, we propose a conceptual model (Figure 7) for the motivation-happiness link. Motivation, when composed of Energy, Direction, Focus and being True to Oneself, creates the conditions for happiness. This occurs when one's chosen path provides a sense of Autonomy and is driven by Intrinsic motivation. This model holds true across the diverse contexts explored in this study: the pursuit of excellence in sports, the maintenance of personal health, and the preservation of cultural identity.

Figure 7
A depiction of what motivation and happiness entails.



According to Figure 7, if one chooses one's path in life wisely, one will feel energised, with a direction, and focused; additionally, if one is true to oneself, one may be happy. Our autoethnographic journey—from the golf courses of Wales to dental clinics in Portugal and the savannah of Tanzania—converges on this central point.

V. Conclusion

This autoethnographic study set out to explore the intricate link between motivation and happiness, moving beyond abstract theory to ground this connection in the rich soil of lived experience. Our journey—spanning the fairways of competitive golf, the meticulous care of dental practice, and the enduring culture of the Maasai people—has yielded a consistent and powerful finding: motivation and happiness are not merely correlated; they are dynamically intertwined through the active exercise of autonomy and authenticity.

We have proposed and illustrated a model where authentic motivation is a compound of energy, direction, focus, and, fundamentally, being true to oneself. This model holds profound implications. It suggests that the pursuit of happiness is not a passive state of being, but an active process of doing and choosing. It is the energy we invest in a path we have freely chosen (direction), the focus we maintain despite obstacles, and the integrity of aligning our actions with our core values. The words of Nietzsche, cited in our discussion, are echoed empirically in our findings: true freedom and fulfilment arise from claiming autonomy over one's time and purpose.

The evidence from our diverse case studies is compelling. The golfer finds joy in the struggle for mastery, the patient finds well-being in the empowered management of their health, and the Maasai community exhibits contentment through a steadfast commitment to its cultural identity. In each instance, happiness is a downstream effect of living a motivated life that is self-determined and intrinsically valued. This powerfully reinforces the theoretical stance of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and contemporary research (Junça-Silva & Menino, 2022), demonstrating that environments—whether in workplaces, clinics, or societies—that foster autonomy and intrinsic motivation are essential for a human being to flourish.

Ultimately, this research reframes the quest for happiness. It is less about finding joy and more about building a life that generates it through purposeful, authentic, and motivated action. Our autoethnographic account concludes that to be happy, one must first be courageously and truly motivated—to know oneself, to choose one's path wisely, and to walk it with energy, focus, and unwavering integrity.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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