

The quality of life of community health agents: an integrative review

*La calidad de vida de los agentes de salud comunitarios: una
revisión integrativa*

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ABSTRACT:

This study aimed to make associations among problems in the work process and their effects on quality of life domains of community health agents, in order to present a history of the scientific literature on the subject. This is an integrative literature review, which enabled a synthesis of data and information based on the guiding question: what is the relationship between work and quality of life of community health workers? The descriptors “agente comunitário de saúde” (“community health agent”) and “saúde do trabalhador” (“occupational health”) or “qualidade de vida” (“quality of life”) were used in the search for titles, abstracts, and subjects in the following informational resources: Virtual Health Library (BVS), encompassing Latin American and Caribbean Health Sciences Literature (LILACS), PubMed portal (MEDLINE), Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO), and Google Scholar. The bibliographic survey resulted in a final sample of 32 articles published between 2015-2021. The problems pointed out in the articles were categorized into five types: working conditions, devaluation, living in the community, professional identity, and solvability and, later, associated with the psychological, physical and social domains. It was possible to demonstrate that the psychological domain is the most affected compared to all the categorized problems, as well as the working conditions were the main focus of study of the articles published in the period.

Keywords: Community health agent; Occupational health; Quality of life at work; Review.

RESUMEN:

Este estudio tuvo como objetivo hacer una asociación entre los problemas en el proceso de trabajo y la participación en los dominios de calidad de vida de

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los Agentes Comunitarios de Salud, con el fin de exponer una historia de la literatura científica sobre el tema. Se trata de una revisión integrativa de la literatura, que permitió una síntesis de datos e informaciones a partir de la pregunta orientadora: ¿cuál es la relación entre el trabajo y la calidad de vida de los trabajadores comunitarios de la salud? Los descriptores “agentes comunitarios de saúde” (“agente de salud comunitario”) y “saúde do trabalhador” (“salud del trabajador”) o “qualidade de vida” (“calidad de vida”) fueron utilizados en la búsqueda de títulos, resúmenes y temas en los siguientes recursos informativos: Biblioteca Virtual en Salud (BVS), englobando Literatura Latinoamericana. American and Caribbean Health Sciences (LILACS), portal PubMed (MEDLINE), biblioteca digital Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO) y Google Scholar. El relevamiento bibliográfico resultó en la muestra final de 32 artículos publicados entre 2015-2021. Los problemas señalados en los artículos fueron categorizados en cinco: condiciones de trabajo, desvalorización, convivencia, identidad profesional y solvencia y, posteriormente, asociados a los dominios psicológico, físico y social. Fue posible demostrar que el dominio psicológico es el más afectado frente a todos los problemas categorizados, así como las condiciones de trabajo fueron el principal foco de estudio de los artículos publicados en el período.

Palabras clave: Agente de Salud Comunitaria; Salud del trabajador; Calidad de vida en el Trabajo; Revisión.

INTRODUCTION

Community health agents (CHA) are essential professionals for the consolidation of Brazil’s Unified Health System (SUS). Their work process, although different, when compared to that of other professionals in the Family Health Strategy team (ESF), also impacts all the assisted community. In addition, their actions are closely associated with the intersectorality and other services related to primary health care, making the solvability to be tied with the group action of managers, SUS workers and the community itself, thus aiming an improvement of health conditioning factors¹.

Like any other worker, community health agents have been subject to the precariousness of work and social conditions derived from a neoliberal conjunction since its conception in the 1990s². This precariousness interferes in the satisfaction of workers, exposing a set of favorable and unfavorable feelings related to the way they see their work. There is a significant distinction

between those feelings regarding performance and differing from objective rationale and behavioral intentions (pleasure or pain), directly interfering in the quality of life of workers³.

The Quality of Life at Work (QLW) may be conceived based on the concern with the wellness of workers and the organizational efficiency, in addition to the participation in decisions and problems at work⁴. Having said that, it should be noted the importance of discussions about the creation of strategies that enhance the QLW to provide wellness, pleasure, and motivation to promote engagement in work activities⁵. Due to the extent of the concept, various areas of knowledge foster research that analyses how the quality of life is constituted for a specific group, in addition to intervening in their conditions to prevent or solve the problems which cause distress⁵.

Thus, this study aimed to make associations among work-related problems and their effects on quality of life domains of community health agents in order to expose a background of the scientific literature on the subject.

1 Development

1.1 Methods

This is an integrative review of literature, which is a method able to summarize the results in a comprehensive and ordered way, with the possibility of simultaneous inclusion of studies with diversified methodologies, thus providing a synthesis of the knowledge production on the subject in its entirety⁶.

The study was structured based on six methodological stages: a) formulation of the research problem or question; b) establishment of the criteria used for data collection in literature; c) definition of information to be extracted from the material collected; d) evaluation and categorization of the selected studies; e) analysis and interpretation of data obtained in the search; f)

presentation of the knowledge synthesis proposed with an integrative review^{7,8}.

The guiding question “What is the relationship between work and quality of life of community health agents?” used the PECO strategy (acronym for population, exposure, comparator and outcome)^{9,10}. Based on that, it was possible to establish the governing aspects of the research: a) population: community health agents; b) exposure: problems related to work; c) comparator: not applicable to this study; d) outcome: impact on the health and quality of life.

During the search stage the following descriptors were used in Portuguese: “agentes comunitários de saúde” (“community health agents”) *and* “saúde do trabalhador” (“occupational health”) *or* “qualidade de vida” (“quality of life”), in titles, abstracts and subjects as in Table 1. Data were collected by using the following computational resources: Virtual Health Library (BVS), encompassing the Latin American and Caribbean Health Sciences Literature (LILACS) and the PubMed portal (MEDLINE), the Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO) and Google Scholar. The following aspects were criteria for inclusion: to be an original article, to have the full text available, to have been published in the period from 2015 to March 2021; not to have language restrictions. Literature review studies, and academic thesis and dissertations were excluded from the analysis.

Table 1 – Search strategy of the integrative review

BVS	tw:((tw:(agentes comunitários de saúde)) AND (tw:(qualidade de vida))) AND (fulltext:(“1”) AND db:(“LILACS” OR “MEDLINE”) AND la:(“pt”)) AND (year_cluster:[2015 TO 2021])
	tw:((tw:(agentes comunitários de saúde)) AND (tw:(saúde do trabalhador))) AND (fulltext:(“1”) AND db:(“LILACS” OR “MEDLINE”) AND la:(“pt”)) AND (year cluster:[2015 TO 2021])
Google Scholar	“agentes comunitários de saúde” and “saúde do trabalhador” year cluster 2015-2021 in PT
	“agentes comunitários de saúde” and “qualidade de vida” year cluster 2015-2021 in PT
SciELO	agentes comunitários de saúde AND saúde do trabalhador
	agentes comunitários de saúde AND qualidade de vida

Source: elaborated by the authors.

The analysis of pre-selected studies, described in Table 1, was carried out by a researcher with experience in the production of integrative reviews. The process was accompanied by a review researcher so that, in case of non-agreement (situation not evidenced) at any stage, a third researcher would be consulted, thus avoiding bias in the selection of studies.

Titles and abstracts were initially analyzed based on the pre-established criteria for the scanning stage, based on the compatibility of subject proposed in the research and collection of both data and information directly from the community health agents. Thus, only studies in which the number of participants had been informed were included. Afterwards, a full reading of the articles considered as an eligibility criterium the need of discussions about the working conditions, health and/or quality of life, in order to answer the guiding question of this integrative review. The studies collected were imported to the

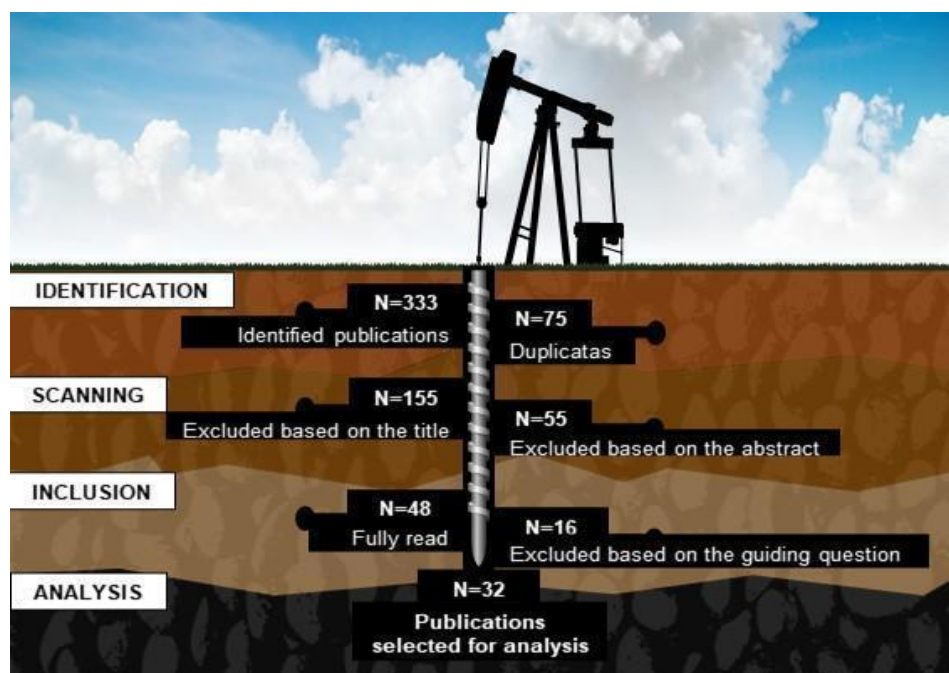
reference management software Zotero (version 5.0.93).

The data extraction stage was organized by a predetermined tool conceived by the researchers on Google Forms, automatically registered on an electronic spreadsheet. The tool is composed by questions that allow the identification of the authors, year of publication, state (location), study design, number of participants, problems regarding work process, and impacts on health and/or quality of life. The synthesis of this integrative review was described based on the cluster of the problems found set in categories. In addition, the impact on health/quality of life was arranged by domains (psychological, physical, and social)^{3,5}, aiming at a better organization and discussion of data. A graphic on the relationship between problems and impacts on health/quality of life was generated on the IRAMUTEQ software, through analysis of similitude.

1.2 Results and Analysis

In total, 333 studies were identified, of which 75 were excluded because they were duplicates. The scanning stage resulted in the exclusion of 155 articles after the reading of their titles and 55 articles after the reading of their abstracts. The analysis of titles and title-abstracts enabled the full reading of 48 research papers, which, due to eligibility criteria, excluded another 16 studies as shown in Picture 1.

Picture 1 – Flowchart of results of the integrative review



Source: elaborated by the authors.

The bibliographic search resulted in a final sample of 32 articles, presented in Table 2. The characterization of the review studies regarding the data found will be discussed in the results, as well as the categorization of the work-related problems and the presentation of impact domains on health and quality of life.

Table 2 – Details of the selected publications

Author and year	Journal	State	Method	N	Categories indicated in the work process	Domains of impairment of quality of life
Alcântara and Assunção (2016) ¹¹	Revista Brasileira de Saúde Ocupacional	MG	Quant.	19	Working conditions;	Psychological ;
Almeida,	Revista da	SP	Quant.	13	Working	Psychological

Baptista and Silva (2016) ¹²	Escola de Enfermagem USP			7	conditions;	; Physical;
Almeida <i>et al.</i> (2018) ¹³	Revista Brasileira de Medicina do Trabalho	SP	Quant.	13 7	Working conditions;	Psychological ; Physical; Social;
Almeida, Baptista and Silva (2016) ¹⁴	Revista de Enfermagem UERJ	SP	Quant.	13 7	Working conditions;	Physical;
Bezerra and Lucca (2017) ¹⁵	Revista Baiana de Saúde Pública	PI	Qualit./ Quant.	16 8	Professional identity; Working conditions; Solvability; Living in the community;	Psychological ;
Broch <i>et al.</i> (2020) ¹⁶	Revista da Escola de Enfermagem USP	RS	Qualit.	25	Working conditions;	Psychological ; Social;
Chuengue and Franco (2019) ¹⁷	Physis: Revista de Saúde Coletiva	RJ	Qualit.	9	Working conditions; Living in the community; Professional identity;	Social;
Cipriano and Ferreira (2011) ¹⁸	Revista da Sociedade Brasileira de Fonoaudiologia	SP	Quant.	28	Working conditions; Living in the community;	Psychological ; Physical;
Fernandes <i>et al.</i> (2018) ¹⁹	Cogitare Enfermagem	MG	Quant.	21 2	Lack of appreciation ; Working conditions; Living in the community;	Psychological ; Physical; Social;

Flumian and Fioroni (2017) ²⁰	Tempus, Actas de Saúde Coletiva	SP	Qualit.	8	Lack of appreciation ; Living in the community; Working conditions;	Psychological ; Physical; Social;
Garcia <i>et al.</i> (2019) ²¹	Revista Cuidado é Fundamental	ES	Quant.	291	Lack of appreciation ; Working conditions;	Psychological ;
Guañes-Lorenzi and Pinheiro (2016) ²²	Ciência & Saúde Coletiva	SP	Qualit.	28	Lack of appreciation ; Working conditions;	Psychological ;
Krug <i>et al.</i> (2017) ²³	Trabalho, Educação e Saúde	RS	Qualit./Quant.	251	Professional identity; Working conditions; Solvability;	Psychological ; Physical;
Lopes <i>et al.</i> (2018) ²⁴	Texto Contexto Enfermagem	RS	Qualit.	14	Devaluation ; Working conditions; Solvability;	Psychological ; Physical;
Malcher <i>et al.</i> (2019) ²⁵	Revista Brasileira de Medicina de Família e Comunidade	PA	Quant.	56	Working conditions;	Physical;
Moura <i>et al.</i> (2020) ²⁶	Trabalho, Educação e Saúde	MG	Quant.	400	Working conditions; Professional identity; Lack of appreciation ; Living in the community;	Psychological ;

Neto <i>et al.</i> (2018) ²⁷	Saúde em Revista	CE	Qualit.	5	Working conditions; Solvability; Lack of appreciation ;	Psychological ;
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Table 2 – Details of the selected publications
(continued)

Nisihara <i>et al.</i> (2018) ²⁸	Revista Brasileira de Medicina do Trabalho	PR	Quant.	98	Lack of appreciation; Working conditions;	Psychological; Physical; Social;
Oliveira, Leite and Sampaio (2019) ²⁹	Revista Multidisciplinar e de Psicologia	BA	Quant.	71	Lack of appreciation; Working conditions; Professional identity; Living in the community ;	Psychological; Physical;
Paula <i>et al.</i> (2015) ³⁰	Saúde e Sociedade	MG	Quant.	47	Lack of appreciation; Working conditions; Living in the community ;	Psychological; Physical;
Penna, Meneghini and Queiróz (2016) ³¹	Revista Brasileira de Saúde Ocupacional	PR	Quant.	73	Professional identity; Working conditions; Living in the community ;	Psychological; Physical; Social;
Pinheiro	Revista	RN	Qualit	20	Working	Psychologic

<i>et al.</i> (2019) ³²	Brasileira de Medicina do Trabalho		.		conditions; Solvability; Living in the community ; Lack of appreciatio n;	al; Physical;
Rezende <i>et al.</i> (2021) ³³	Revista Eletrônica de Enfermagem	GO	Quant.	80	Professiona l identity; Lack of appreciatio n; Working conditions;	Physical;
Riquinho <i>et al.</i> (2018) ³⁴	Trabalho, Educação e Saúde	RS	Qualit .	25	Working conditions; Solvability; Lack of appreciatio n;	Psychologic al; Physical; Social;
Rodrigue s and Lima (2019) ³⁵	Revista Brasileira de Geografia Médica e da Saúde	MG	Qualit .	6	Professiona l identity; Working conditions; Solvability;	Psychologic al; Physical;
Rogério <i>et al.</i> (2015) ³⁶	Cadernos de Saúde Pública	AM ES MG BA	Quant.	32 1	Lack of appreciatio n; Working conditions; Professiona l identity;	Physical;
Santos, Hoppe and Krug (2018) ³⁷	Physis: Revista de Saúde Coletiva	RS	Qualit / Quant.	25 1	Lack of appreciatio n; Living in the community ; Professiona l identity; Working	Psychologic al; Physical;

					conditions;	
Santos <i>et al.</i> (2016) ³⁸	Acta Paulista de Enfermagem	Northeast	Quant.	156	Working conditions; Living in the community ;	Psychological; Physical;
Souza <i>et al.</i> (2016) ³⁹	Revista de Enfermagem do Centro-Oeste Mineiro	MG	Quant.	56	Working conditions;	Physical;
Souza and Oliveira (2019) ⁴⁰	Revista Espaço para a Saúde	RS	Qualit / Quant.	62	Lack of appreciation; Solvability; Working conditions;	Psychological; Physical; Social;
Souza and Oliveira (2019) ⁴¹	Revista Espaço para a Saúde	RS	Qualit .	62	Lack of appreciation; Professional identity; Working conditions; Solvability;	Psychological;
Souza and Oliveira (2020) ⁴²	Revista Espaço para a Saúde	RS	Qualit .	62	Lack of appreciation; Solvability; Working conditions;	Psychological;

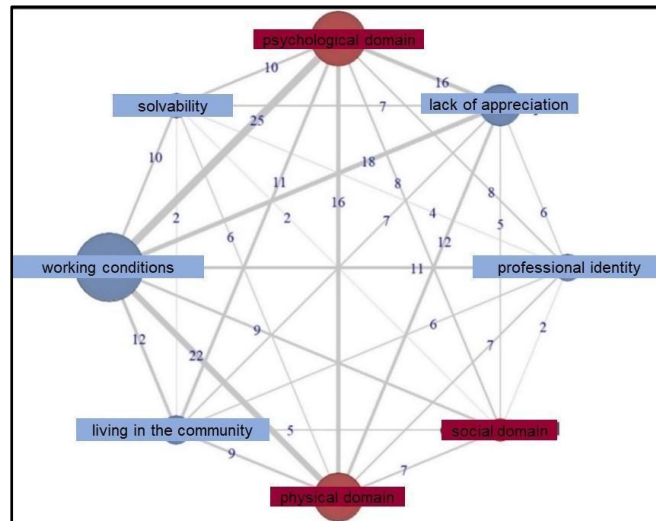
Source: elaborated by the authors.

Table 2 shows the publications of 28 main authors distributed into 20 national journals. The journals which published the most about the topic, with three publications each, were: Revista Brasileira de Medicina do Trabalho^{13,28,32}; Revista Trabalho, Educação e Saúde^{23,26,34} and Revista Espaço para a Saúde⁴⁰⁻⁴². Altogether thirteen states and one region were the study field in at least one published article. The states with more research in their

municipalities were Rio Grande do Sul (RS)^{16,23,24,34,37,40-42}, Minas Gerais (MG)^{11,19,26,30,35,36,39} and São Paulo (SP)^{12-14,18,20,22}. The research mainly used the quantitative methodology^{11-14,18,19,21,25,26,28-31,33,36,38,39}, followed by qualitative^{16,17,20,22,24,27,32,34,35,41,42} and, last of all, both qualitative and quantitative^{15,23,37,40} methodologies to analyze data and information collected from community health agents.

The problems described in the articles were categorized into five groups: working conditions; lack of appreciation; living in the community; professional identity, and solvability. Picture 2 shows the associations among categories and the quality of life domains. The number on the line represents the quantity of articles in which there was a combination between the topics, and the vertex size indicates how often the content was approached in the studies. It is important to emphasize that the representation shown in the picture is not a proposition of causal connection, which is impossible due to the methodological heterogeneity of the studies. The idea is to create a synthesis of literature published about community health agents, identifying the main factors that may cause an impact on the quality of life in the physical, social, and psychological domains.

Picture 2 – Octagon of associations between working problems and quality of life domains (IRAMUTEQ)



Source: elaborated by the authors.

The main category described is the one related to working conditions, identified in all studies (n=32) and strongly associated with the following quality of life domains: psychological (n=25)^{11,13-16,18-22,24,26-32,34,35,37,38,40-42}, physical (n=22)^{12-14,18-20,23-25,28-38,40} and social (n=9)^{13,16,17,19,20,28,31,34,40}. Such finding suggests a concern with the health and quality of life of community health agents, scientifically proving that work is an impacting factor in the wellness of those involved, in addition to the compatibility in the findings in different regions of the country^{2,43-45}.

Lack of appreciation was the second most described category, mainly associated with psychological (n=16)^{19-22,24,26-30,32,34,37,38,40-42}, physical (n=12)^{19,20,24,28-30,32-34,36,37,40} and social^{19,20,28,34,40} domains. Such factor may be considered as a trigger for individual confrontation strategies, since the appreciation of work is related to users (when respect is present, and they do not handle physical or verbal aggressions), to teams (when they work together and are able to recognize the role of each one), and also to managers (when they offer appropriate material, financial incentives, listening space and permanent education)^{1-3,46}.

Living in the community also was a present characteristic in the literature, combined with psychological (n=11)^{15,18-20,26,29-32,37,38}, physical (n=9)^{15,18-20,29-32,38}, and social (n=5)^{13,17,19,20,31} impacts. The situation is decisive to produce negative effects in the quality of life of workers, considering the difficulty to disconnect from work and stop performing, for example, bureaucratic activities after their working hours⁴⁶. In addition, the fact of working and living in the same community context expresses some kind of “freedom” to continuous access to the public health system by users, who often do not respect the limits of day and time⁴⁷⁻⁴⁹, or even by the agents themselves in an attempt to “solve” or handle people’s suffering⁵⁰.

Professional identity is an issue that is present in the studies and is under psychological (n=8)^{15,23,26,29,31,35,37,41}, physical (n=7)^{23,29,31,33,35-37}, and social (n=2)^{17,31} domains. It causes distress due to the non-understanding of responsibilities of community health agents, which usually results in the so-called “superhero culture” and misrepresents their competencies when performing tasks that are out of their sphere of competence^{1,2,49,50}. For that matter, mental health care is essential for a better relationship with several spaces of identity construction, which could result in self-awareness and best judgement regarding the society and work⁵⁰⁻⁵³.

Difficulties to solve the demands of users represent a problem associated with psychological factors in the articles (n=10)^{15,23,24,27,32,34,35,40-42}, in addition to physical (n=6)^{23,24,32,34,35,40} and social ones (n=2)^{34,40}, since they constitute a potential risk of psychological distress related to the frustration feeling due to the lack of solvability¹. For community health agents, personal satisfaction is subject to the possibility of helping the other. Consequently, when that does not happen, even if due to limitations beyond their reach, the fear of losing confidence is predominant^{5,54}. Such situation constitutes a source of excessive concern, causing work-related stress and compromising the satisfaction of the worker^{3,50,52,55-59}.

CONCLUSION

Based on this research, it was possible to synthesize the results of 32 studies published from 2015 to 2021, and propose associations between everyday problems in the work process of community health agents and the domains of quality of life. It was possible to demonstrate that the psychological domain is the most affected by the problems described in the articles and the working conditions were the focus of the studies published in the period. The heterogeneity of the applied methodologies was a limiting factor for the determination of scientifically plausible conclusions, considering the impossibility of establishing a causal relationship among the problems faced by the workers and the consequences exposed by the studied domains. However, this review is expected to raise a discussion in the academic environment, encouraging the application of scientific methods able to explore and prove the appointed relationships.

It is expected that such systematization may also be used to demonstrate the need to strengthen public health policies for these workers, raise awareness both in managers and users regarding the importance of community health agents' work, and encourage scholars to produce further research, thus contributing to an improvement in their working conditions.

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