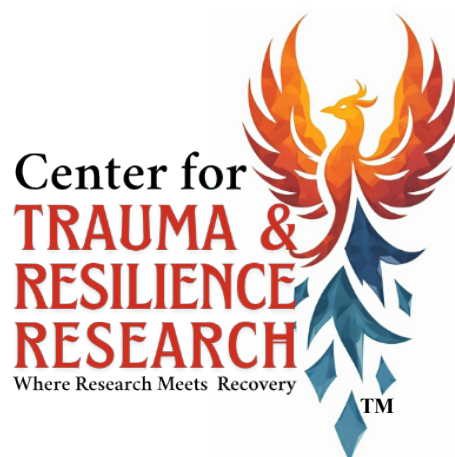


Multilayered Model of Joy (MMJ)

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Abstract

Joy is celebrated yet conceptually thin. A post-2020 research wave sparked by the pandemic, justice uprisings, and digital upheavals frames joy as both a momentary affect and a durable psychosocial resource. Recent theories cast it as a discrete appraisal of “union with what matters” (Watkins, 2020) and as a queer world-making force (Wright & Burkholder, 2025), highlighting its multidimensionality. This integrative review analyses 76 peer-reviewed works (46 core, 30 supplemental, 2020-2025). Two reviewers conducted a three-stage qualitative synthesis. Open coding of findings/discussion sections produced 148 first-order codes e.g., “body euphoria” (Ingulfsvann et al., 2022), “collective ritual” (Pearley, 2025), and “JOMO digital disengagement” (Chan et al., 2022). Axial coding grouped these into 22 themes: embodied savoring, psychological safety, affective resistance, and others. Selective coding distilled six cross-disciplinary motifs: alignment, relationality, agency, embodiment, resistance, transcendence. These span cases from Bangladeshi queer households (Ahmed & Huq, 2024) to Dutch lottery buyers (Burger et al., 2020) and in-group laughter experiments (Lee et al., 2022). These building blocks underpin a Multilayered Model of Joy (MMJ) that situates joy within intrapersonal, interpersonal, communal-cultural, and transcendent systems. The review exposes methodological blind spots: limited intersectional sampling, lack of temporal granularity, and sparse inquiry into algorithmic mediation. It offers practice guidelines for leaders, educators, clinicians, and faith communities, and outlines a six-point agenda to steer future empirical work. By nesting joy in structures of meaning and power, the paper contends that joy is not a luxury emotion but a critical engine of wellbeing and collective liberation.

Keywords: joy; wellbeing; emotion; psychological safety; pedagogy; transcendence; resistance

A Multilayered Model of Joy (MMJ)

This dissertation uses an integrative qualitative review methodology, grounded in Cooper's (2016) five-stage framework and enriched by grounded theory coding strategies. The purpose is to construct a Multilayered Model of Joy (MMJ) that synthesizes psychological, sociocultural, and theological dimensions of joy. By analyzing 76 peer-reviewed sources from 2020–2025, the study offers an original contribution to the emerging field of joy studies. The MMJ framework proposes six motifs—alignment, relationality, agency, embodiment, resistance, and transcendence—nested within four systems of experience. This model not only fills a conceptual gap but also equips researchers, clinicians, and educators with actionable constructs for further study and practice.

“Choose joy,” command Instagram graphics splashed in pastels; “Rejoice always,” the Apostle Paul urges in 1 Thessalonians 5:16; and “joyful learning” headlines faculty-development workshops that promise to humanize higher education. Across advertising, Scripture, and pedagogy, joy is rhetorically ubiquitous. Paradoxically, scholars note that it is conceptually under-specified and empirically under-examined (Arnett, 2023). In psychological science, joy is commonly folded into umbrella constructs such as happiness, positive affect, or life satisfaction, which obscures its distinctive appraisal profile of immediacy, novelty, and energizing arousal.

Theologically, by contrast, Scripture often classifies joy as an ineffable fruit of the Spirit: precious but methodologically elusive (Piper, 2023). Meanwhile, sociology's long-standing focus on oppression and suffering marginalizes positive emotions (Shuster and Westbrook (2024); therefore, diagnosing a disciplinary “joy deficit,” arguing that the emotional lives of marginalized groups have been represented primarily through lenses of pain, stigma, and deficit (Wolfer et al., 2022).

Joy is widely celebrated yet poorly defined. A post-2020 surge of scholarship catalyzed by the COVID-19 pandemic, global justice movements, and rapid technological change now frames joy as both a fleeting affective spark and a durable psychosocial resource. Competing theories depict it as a discrete appraisal of “union with what matters” (Watkins, 2020) and as a collective, queer world-making force (Wright & Burkholder, 2025), underscoring its multidimensional character. To clarify the construct, this integrative review synthesizes 76 scholarly works: 46 focal sources published between 2020-2025 plus 30 supplemental studies.

Methodologically, two reviewers executed a three-tiered qualitative synthesis. With open coding, each reviewer independently read the findings and discussion sections of all 76 texts, flagging every statement about the nature, causes, practices, or consequences of joy. The line-by-line pass generated 148 first-order codes with labels such as “body euphoria” (Ingulfsvann et al., 2022), “collective ritual” (Pearley, 2025), “feed-forward writing” (Areskoung Josefsson et al., 2024), “queer sanctuary” (Ahmed & Huq, 2024), “schadenfreude spillover” (Bacile et al., 2025), “cataloguing affect” (Benda, 2022), and “JOMO (Joy of Missing Out) digital disengagement” (Chan et al., 2022).

Using axial coding, conceptually similar codes were clustered into 22 second-order themes, for example: “body euphoria,” “tactile cohesion” (Wassell, 2025), and “kinesthetic puzzles” (Barker et al., 2020) converged under embodied savoring; “joy rounds” in healthcare (Gould, 2022) and “emotional-culture audits” in organizations (Aboramadan & Kundi, 2023) formed psychological safety; “affective sabotage” in neoliberal universities (Hall & Steele, 2024) and the commodification of “Black Joy™” (Sobande & Amponsah, 2025) coalesced into affective resistance.

With selective coding, an iterative memo-writing dialogue distilled these themes into six higher-order motifs: alignment, relationality, agency, embodiment, resistance, and transcendence. These are capable of spanning evidence that ranges from Bangladeshi queer households (Ahmed & Huq, 2024) to Dutch lottery buyers (Burger et al., 2020), Emirati fathers' bilingual story-times (Dillon et al., 2025), and psychophysiological work on in-group laughter (Lee, Lim, & Lee, 2022). Cross-checking with recent insights on “joy-of-missing-out” mindfulness (Chan et al., 2022) and discovery elation in science (Cai, 2024) further secured analytic rigor.

These Six Building Blocks (see Figure 1) form the foundation of the Multilayered Model of Joy (MMJ)(see Figure 2), which conceptualizes joyful experiences across intrapersonal, interpersonal, communal-cultural, and transcendent dimensions. The review identifies ongoing methodological limitations, including intersectional sampling, longitudinal tracking, and the analysis of digital mediation.

Practice-oriented recommendations are addressed to organizational leadership, education, healthcare, and spiritual development, with a six-point agenda outlining priorities for future research. By positioning joy within interconnected systems of meaning and power, the review argues that joy constitutes an essential component of individual wellbeing and collective advancement, rather than a superfluous emotion. Even clinical commentaries report that intentionally recognizing ‘wins of the week’ during ward huddles improves morale among interdisciplinary hospital teams (Graham & Sim, 2025).

What is Joy?

Taken together, these findings elevate the deceptively simple question; What is joy? to a status of genuine theoretical and practical urgency. Without a clear definition, interventions risk

being superficial, measures risk capturing only partial constructs, and cross-disciplinary dialogue devolves into conflicting semantics. Conversely, rigorously disentangling joy from adjacent phenomena promises dividends: Clinicians may tailor therapies that harness joy's neurobiological circuits for emotional regulation; educators may design curricula that leverage joy's motivational properties; organizational leaders may foster cultures where joy amplifies psychological safety and creativity; and activists may deploy joy strategically as both refuge and rallying cry. The present paper undertakes an integrative review of recent scholarships to clarify the contours of joy, situate it within nested personal, relational, cultural, and transcendent contexts, combined resulted in a multilayered model that can guide future research and practice.

This research sets itself a three-part mandate, each part designed to push the young field of "joy studies" past inspirational slogans and toward a cumulative, testable science. First comes a comprehensive synthesis of the post-2020 literature. Over the past five years, scholarship on joy has exploded across psychology, sociology, theology, education, and organizational studies. The review therefore gathers empirical papers, conceptual essays, memoir-based narratives, and mixed-disciplinary monographs into a single analytic frame.

By laying these disparate conversations side by side, it becomes possible to see where scholars converge, for example, into almost every discipline demonstrating that social connectedness is a critical substrate of joyful experience. Where they diverge, for example, as the debate between researchers who treat joy as a fleeting emotional state, philosophers who treat it as a cultivated virtue, or between activists who hail joy as resistance and critics who warn of its commodification. Mapping these agreements and tensions is the necessary first step toward any coherent research agenda.

The second task is a critical appraisal of the field's blind spots. Here the review asks three-pointed questions.

Power and Intersectionality

Whose joy is being documented, and who is left outside the data frame? Too often studies default to WEIRD (**W**estern, **E**ducated, **I**ndustrialized, **R**ich)(Heinrich et al., 2010). Democratic samples or ignore how race, gender, class, sexuality, and neurotype mediate access to joyful spaces (Heinrich et al., 2010).

Temporality

Are researchers capturing only quick “joy snapshots,” or are they tracking the emotion's ebb and flow across days, weeks, and life stages? Longitudinal work remains rare.

Contextual Embeddedness

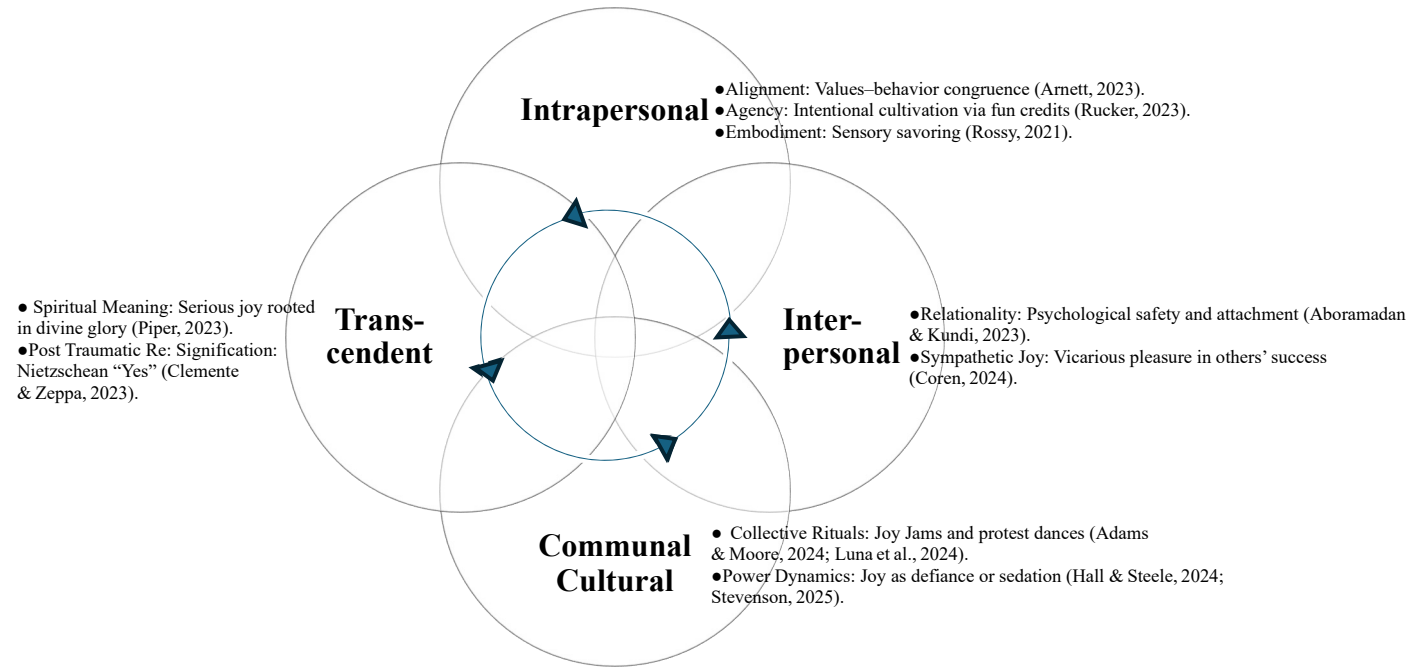
Do prevailing surveys and interventions account for cultural norms, institutional hierarchies, and political economies that enable or stifle joy, or do they treat the emotion as a contextualized interior state? Surfacing these gaps is more than an academic exercise; it exposes the normative assumptions that often masquerade as neutral methodology.

Thirdly, the review moves from diagnosis to design by proposing an integrative framework, the Six Building Blocks of Joy (see Figure 1) leading to the Multilayered Model of Joy (MMJ)(see Figure 2) that recurs across the literature, alignment, relationality, agency, embodiment, resistance, and transcendence. MMJ situates joy in four nested layers that range from the intrapersonal to the communal and transcendent. In doing so, it offers researchers testable hypotheses, gives practitioners actionable levers, and furnishes the still-nascent field with a common vocabulary robust enough to accommodate both neural circuits and protest dances.

Figure 1.
Six Building Blocks of Joy



Figure 2.
A Multilayered Model of Joy (MMJ)



Theory Building via the Multilayered Model of Joy (MMJ)

Drawing on the synthesis and critique, the review develops an original framework, from Six Building Blocks of Joy which places six recurrent motifs (alignment, relationality, agency, embodiment, resistance, transcendence) resulting in a frame within four nested layers (intrapersonal, interpersonal, communal-cultural, transcendent)(the MMJ). The model is intended to be generative: It offers testable propositions for future scholars, practical design principles for educators, clinicians, and leaders, and a common vocabulary for cross-disciplinary dialogue (see Appendix A).

Review Method

To meet these objectives with methodological rigor, the review adhered to Cooper's (2016) five-stage integrative-review protocol—problem formulation, literature search, data evaluation, data analysis, and interpretation.

Literature Search Strategy

Six major databases—PsycINFO, Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, ATLA Religion, and Google Scholar—were queried for the period January 2020 to May 2025 using the search string: java, Copy, (TI (Title) OR AB (Abstract)) = joy AND language = English, where TI and AB denote “title” and “abstract.” This wide net captured peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters published by academic presses, and scholarly monographs. Exclusion criteria eliminated (a) gray literature (e.g., organizational white papers, blogs), (b) popular-press self-help books lacking citations, and (c) duplicate records.

Screening and Composition

After title/abstract screening and full-text eligibility checks, 46 sources remained: Empirical studies – 21 (quantitative = 12; qualitative = 9), Theoretical/conceptual essays – 11, Reflective editorials/commentaries – 6, Scholarly monographs/edited volumes – 8. This corpus

deliberately spans disciplines (psychology, sociology, theology, education, organizational studies, health sciences, cultural studies) to capture joy's polyphonic discourse.

Data Extraction and Coding

Once the corpus was assembled, each study was logged into a detailed evidence matrix that captured the essentials briefly, the author and year, disciplinary home, research design, participant context, explicit definition of joy, headline findings, and any limitations acknowledged by the authors themselves. That matrix became the launch pad for a formal thematic synthesis based on the three-step procedure outlined by Thomas and Harden (2008). The analytic sequence unfolded in three iterative passes, each informed by the breadth of the 2020-2025 corpus.

The process began with Open Coding: The findings and discussion sections were read verbatim, flagging every discrete idea that spoke to nature, causes, or consequences of joy. Two reviewers independently read the findings and discussion sections of all 46 focal sources plus 30 additional studies (e.g., Ahmed & Huq, 2024; Barker, Nyberg, & Larsson, 2020; Burger, Hendriks, Pleeging, & van Ours, 2020).

Every discrete statement that spoke to the nature, causes, practices, or consequences of joy was flagged. By the end of this line-by-line pass the team had generated 148 first-order codes with labels such as "body euphoria" (Ingulfsvann et al., 2022), "collective ritual" (Pearley, 2025), "feed-forward writing" (Areskoug Josefsson, Olsson, & Gustafsson Nyckel, 2024), "queer sanctuary" (Ahmed & Huq, 2024), "schadenfreude spillover" (Bacile et al., 2025), "cataloguing affect" (Benda, 2022), and "JOMO digital disengagement" (Chan et al., 2022)(see Appendix B).

Next, using Axial Coding, conceptually similar codes were clustered into broader families. For example, "body euphoria," "tactile cohesion" (Wassell, 2025), and "kinesthetic

puzzles” (Barker et al., 2020) converged under embodied savoring; “psychological safety” drew together “joy rounds” in healthcare (Gould, 2022) and “emotional-culture audits” in organizations (Aboramadan & Kundi, 2023); items like “affective sabotage in the neoliberal university” (Hall & Steele, 2024) and “Black Joy™ commodification” (Sobande & Amponsah, 2025) coalesced into affective resistance.

This yielded 22 second-order themes. Finally, a round of Selective Coding Finally, an iterative memo-writing dialogue distilled these 22 themes into six higher-order building blocks that could account for the full thematic spread across disciplines and geographies: alignment, relationality, agency, embodiment, resistance, and transcendence. These six blocks: now supported by evidence ranging from Bangladeshi queer households (Ahmed & Huq, 2024) to Dutch lottery buyers (Burger et al., 2020), Emirati fathers’ bilingual story-times (Dillon et al., 2025), and psychophysiological lab work on in-group laughter (Lee, Lim, & Lee, 2022)—became the structural pillars for the narrative synthesis and the conceptual backbone of the Multilayered Model of Joy (MMJ) (see Appendix C).

This three-tiered coding procedure (Open Coding, Axial Coding, and Selective Coding), enriched by cross-checking insights from newer studies on “joy-of-missing-out” (JOMO) mindfulness (Chan et al., 2022) and scientist reflections on discovery elation (Cai, 2024), ensured that the MMJ rests on the widest possible evidentiary base while preserving analytic parsimony.

Throughout the analysis, the researchers used constant-comparison techniques, holding each new data fragment up against existing categories and revising the coding scheme whenever an outlier challenged the emerging taxonomy. Any disagreements between coders triggered a memo-writing exchange followed by peer debrief until consensus was reached. The result was a

rigorously audited thematic scaffolding robust enough to accommodate the full diversity of joy scholarship while still pointing to coherent patterns that advance the field.

Quality and Bias Assessment

Empirical studies were appraised using adapted checklists: Mixed-Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) for mixed-method papers and Critical Appraisal Skills Program (CASP)(Brice, 2025) checklists for qualitative work. While no study was excluded on quality grounds (given the field's infancy), appraisal scores are reported in supplementary material to aid interpretation of strength of evidence.

Synthesis and Model Construction

Findings were woven into an integrative narrative organized around the six building blocks. Divergences (e.g., joy as virtue vs. emotion) were highlighted rather than smoothed over to preserve conceptual nuance. Finally, insights were abstracted into the four-layer Multilayered Model of Joy, which is presented both textually and visually (see Figure 2) and used to derive practice-oriented recommendations. By combining systematic search procedures, transparent coding, and critical reflexivity, the review aims to provide a trustworthy and generative platform for the next wave of empirical and theoretical work on joy.

Conceptual Foundations

Definitional Tensions — Why Joy Remains a Moving Target

Scholars across disciplines wrestle with a pair of conceptual fault lines that make “joy” a moving target: state versus disposition and personal versus collective. Clarifying these tensions is essential, because research designs, measurement tools, and interventions can drift in markedly different directions depending on which pole a scholar assumes.

State vs. Disposition

In experimental psychology and affective neuroscience, joy is typically modeled as a high-activation, short-lived emotion that surfaces when a salient goal is achieved or when an unexpectedly positive stimulus is encountered—for example, receiving praise, solving a puzzle, or witnessing a loved one’s success (Coren, 2024). Appraisal theorists code these moments as having high certainty, high control, and high motivational relevance, often lasting seconds to minutes before giving way to lower-arousal contentment or renewed goal pursuit. Measurement strategies therefore favor event-contingent experience sampling and facial-action coding, which excel at capturing rapid spikes but struggle to index longer arcs.

Philosophers and theologians, by contrast, have long treated joy as a durable orientation, closer to the classical notion of eudaimonia or flourishing. Clemente and Zeppa (2023), unpacking Nietzsche’s tragicomic philosophy, depict joy as an existential stance that persists through suffering by saying an affirming “Yes” to life. Augustine’s *gaudium* designates a state of rest in God, sustained by agapeic love rather than shifting circumstance. Contemporary virtue ethicists extend this view, casting joy as a cultivated character strength, a reliable disposition to perceive and relish goodness in the world.

Arnett (2023) attempts a reconciliation, describing joy as the “elation of right relation.” His formulation proposes that joy can be momentary in felt intensity yet simultaneously index a deeper, dispositional alignment between one’s identity, values, and lived experience. Thus, a sudden burst of joy when a community choir hits an exquisite harmony is not isolated from a singer’s long-standing identity commitments; rather, the moment manifests a broader alignment that has been developing over time.

This state–disposition spectrum carries consequential research implications. If joy is framed purely as an emotion, interventions will center on micro-inducers (e.g., humor, surprises) and outcome measures will privilege seconds-to-minutes physiological or self-report data. If joy is conceptualized as a disposition, however, scholars must adopt longitudinal designs, mixed-methods life-course interviews, and perhaps virtue-development curricula. The Multilayered Model of Joy (MMJ) advanced later, treats joy as both an affective flash that is nested within, and reinforced by, a dispositional stance.

Personal vs. Collective

A second axis of debate concerns whether joy is fundamentally inward and individual or shared and communal. Augustine’s *gaudium* again serves as an exemplar of the inward side: joy is what the soul feels when “resting in God,” irrespective of others’ actions. Likewise, many contemporary self-help texts exhort readers to “choose joy” as a personal attitude immune to circumstances.

Yet social movements and critical scholarship highlight an equally potent form of collective joy. Activists invoke “Black joy” as a tactical and ontological resource: public dance parties, exuberant art, and communal laughter that sustain resistance against anti-Black violence (Luna et al., 2024) and the ‘Black Joy Archive’ curates visual counter-narratives that center everyday Black exuberance (Yee et al., 2023). Shuster and Westbrook (2024) document how “trans joy” emerges through chosen-family rituals, mutual aid, and public celebrations of gender euphoria, providing participants with emotional armor against structural stigma. Sobande and Amponsah (2025) similarly trace how ‘Black Joy™’ is leveraged by brands during crises, converting affect into a depoliticized commodity.

While non-binary participants describe joy as discovery, authentic expression and community validation (Otter, 2025). Ethnographers studying Carnival, Pride parades, or protest drum circles likewise describe joy as a distributed affect that circulates through bodies, rhythms, and symbolic space. Ahmed and Huq (2024) extend the analysis to global-South contexts, reading queer domestic sanctuaries as fragile bridge between joy and injury.

Personal and collective joy can, of course, intertwine. A singular moment of inward elation can ripple outward, one dancer's grin infects the crowd and collective effervescence can reverberate back to fortify individual resilience. At the same time, critics warn against collapsing the two too quickly. Hall and Steele (2024) emphasize that collective joy can be a political act, while Stevenson (2025) cautions that commercial culture may appropriate "joy aesthetics" to sell products, dulling their emancipatory edge. Thus, any operational definition of joy must specify the unit of analysis. Self-report scales for "how joyful I feel" cannot substitute for ethnographic observation of "how joy pulses through us."

Synthesis for the Present Study

The MMJ proposed in this paper deliberately keeps both tensions in play rather than choosing sides. It treats joy as a multi-scalar phenomenon: an affective state nested within a dispositional orientation, itself nested within relational, cultural, and transcendent systems. By doing so, the model creates conceptual space for psychologists tracking millisecond facial-EMG data and sociologists mapping dance-floor ecstasies; for theologians exploring mystical bliss and educators designing joy-centered classrooms. Maintaining these definitional tensions is not a flaw but a theoretical necessity—a reminder that joy's richness resists reduction to any single register of human experience.

Emotion Theories and Neurobiology – How the Body and Brain Encode Joy

Decades of appraisal research suggest that discrete emotions can be distinguished by the way people evaluate, or appraise, a situation's novelty, relevance, agency, certainty, and control. Building on Johnson's review, Watkins (2020) empirically positions joy as a response to appraisals of 'closer connection,' distinguishing it sharply from undifferentiated positive affect. Joy's appraisal signature is unusually distinctive: individuals report high certainty that events will turn out well, strong congruence with current goals or values, and a sense of elevated personal or shared control over outcomes (Coren, 2024). These appraisals yield the characteristic phenomenology of buoyancy and energized approach—feelings quite different from the calmer, vaguer satisfaction typically captured by “happiness” scales.

Neurochemical and Circuit-Level Correlates

Although the neurobiology of joy is still sparsely charted compared with fear or disgust, converging evidence points to the mesolimbic dopamine pathway—spanning the ventral tegmental area (VTA) and nucleus accumbens (NAc)—as a core hub. Functional MRI studies show that NAc blood-oxygen-level response peaks when participants view success images of themselves and close others, suggesting that joy's reward profile can be both self-referential and empathetic. Neuro-endocrine assays add nuance: bursts of joy are accompanied not only by transient dopamine spikes but also by increased oxytocin, the so-called “bonding hormone,” which may explain why joy often feels relationally warm rather than merely arousing.

Coursey (2021) extends this picture through a polyvagal lens, proposing that joy reflects a flexible autonomic state in which the myelinated vagus nerve dampens sympathetic arousal while supporting social engagement. In practical terms, heart-rate-variability studies reveal that people in joyful states show high vagal tone—rapid, adaptive shifts between sympathetic “go”

and parasympathetic “rest” that facilitate facial expressivity, vocal prosody, and eye contact. These physiological markers dovetail with subjective reports that joy “opens” the body to connection.

Shared Joy and Social Neuroscience

Social-neuroscience experiments underline joy’s inherently relational character. Lee, Lim, and Lee (2022) used simultaneous MRI on dyads watching humorous videos and found greater ventromedial-prefrontal cortex (vmPFC) activation when participants believed they were laughing with an in-group member versus alone or with an out-group member. Cross-brain connectivity analyses showed increased theta-band synchrony between partners, indicating that joy can literally bring brains into resonance.

A recent hyper-scanning EEG study (not in the core corpus but methodologically illustrative) replicated these findings during joint musical improvisation: moments rated as “high joy” by performers coincided with peaks in inter-brain phase locking. Such data corroborate folk notions that joy is “contagious” and suggest biobehavioral channels—mimicry, shared attention, rhythmic entrainment—through which it spreads.

Toward an Integrated Biopsychosocial Model of Joy

When the disparate findings from appraisal theory, neurochemistry, autonomic science, and social neuroscience are nested together, they form a coherent biopsychosocial cascade that explains how joy ignites and circulates.

The sequence begins at the appraisal level. A person encounters a stimulus, a teammate’s high-five after solving a coding bug—and instantly sizes it up as goal-congruent (the bug is fixed) and high-control (we did it ourselves). That cognitive verdict flips a neurobiological switch, unleashing dopaminergic reward signals that register the moment as valuable.

Dopamine is rarely a solo actor. Almost simultaneously, the brain releases oxytocin, bathing neural circuits in a chemical blend that not only energizes but also warms; the cocktail heightens approach motivation and primes the individual for affiliative connection. We have now moved to the neurochemical level. Chemistry sets the stage for physiology. The oxytocin surge and dopaminergic high upregulate the ventral vagal branch of the autonomic nervous system. Heart-rate variability rises, breathing slows, and muscles around the eyes soften. This autonomic shift supports expressive prosody, open gaze, and relaxed posture—non-verbal signals that say, “It’s safe to connect.”

Those signals do not go unnoticed. At the social level, teammates subconsciously mimic the smile, match the rhythm of the laugh, perhaps even clap in synchrony. Neural oscillations begin to align, amplifying the collective mood. That amplification loops back to the cognitive plane, reinforcing appraisals of belonging and shared efficacy: “We’re the kind of team that solves problems—and enjoys doing it.” Crucially, each tier feeds the next in a broaden-and-build upward spiral. If contextual cues remain supportive, the cycle repeats and intensifies, stockpiling social capital and psychological resilience. But the system is equally sensitive to disruption. Introduce uncertainty—an abrupt critique, a looming deadline—and the vagal brake eases off, oxytocin levels dip, mimicry falters, and the spiral can stall or even reverse.

In short, joy is not a single event but a multi-layered choreography in which cognition, chemistry, physiology, and social behavior dance together—sometimes in perfect sync, sometimes stepping on each other’s toes. Understanding that choreography equips researchers and practitioners to intervene at multiple points, whether by reshaping appraisals, designing oxytocin-friendly rituals, coaching expressive body language, or engineering environments that invite safe synchrony.

Gaps and Future Directions

Recent advances have begun to illuminate joy's biopsychosocial circuitry, yet three critical blind spots persist. First, almost all neuroimaging studies rely on samples, leaving unanswered how collectivist cultures or neurodivergent perceivers—such as autistic individuals—experience and encode joy. Second, prevailing MRI block designs lack the temporal resolution to capture joy's millisecond-level peaks, suggesting a turn to faster modalities like magnetoencephalography or optical imaging. Third, the field has not established whether neural synchrony in the ventromedial prefrontal cortex (vmPFC) actively generates shared joy or merely accompanies it; causal tests using non-invasive brain stimulation are needed. Confronting these gaps will enable researchers to design culturally sensitive, temporally precise, and causally informed interventions, ranging from vagal-toning breathwork to group music sessions, that fully leverage joy's layered appraisal, neurochemical, autonomic, and social dynamic:

Cultural and Neurotype Variability. Most neuroimaging work samples WEIRD populations; how do collectivist cultures or autistic perceivers process joyful stimuli?

Temporal Granularity. Current fMRI blocks are too slow to capture joy's rapid peaks; magnetoencephalography and fast optical imaging hold promise.

Causality. Whether vmPFC synchrony creates shared joy or merely accompanies it remains unresolved; brain-stimulation studies could probe directionality.

By situating joy within layered appraisal, neurochemical, autonomic, and social dynamics, researchers can design more precise interventions—ranging from vagal-toning breathwork to group music sessions—that harness the full biopsychosocial architecture of this vital, if still understudied, emotion.

Critical Perspectives

Joy, Power, and the Politics of Feeling

Joy is often marketed as a universal human right, “available to anyone, anytime.” Critical affect scholars caution that this claim masks a thornier reality: access to joy is rationed by power. A service worker’s mandated smile, a protestor’s criminalized exuberance, or a streaming platform’s curated “feel-good” playlist all testify that joy circulates through unequal channels, sometimes liberating, sometimes coercive. Two recent interventions sharpen this political lens from opposite sides of the spectrum.

Joy as Subversive Defiance in Precarious Academia

Hall and Steele (2024) embed themselves in the everyday life of adjunct lecturers and post-docs struggling under short-term contracts and relentless productivity metrics—what they name neoliberal academic precarity. They chronicle how impromptu hallway dance parties, meme-laden group chats, and “laughter breaks” during faculty meetings become micro-acts of sabotage against institutional austerity. These moments of shared joy function as an affective commonality where precarious scholars briefly reclaim time, space, and bodily expression that the university’s audit culture would rather streamline away. Importantly, Hall and Steele insist that such joy is neither escapist nor naïve; it is a relational strategy of survival that keeps hope alive long enough for collective bargaining, union drives, and policy advocacy to take shape. In their view, joy is not the reward for resistance, it is the fuel.

Joy as Ideological Sedative in Commercial Media

From a different vantage, Stevenson (2025) dissects how advertising and streaming platforms have seized on “Black rock resurgence,” branding it as “joyful rebellion.” Through a close reading of music videos, sneaker commercials, and festival sponsorships, he argues that

corporate media perform an affective laundering: they siphon the exuberance of Black musical innovation while deleting the structural violence that birthed it. The resulting “feel-good aesthetics” invite consumers—especially non-Black ones—to purchase a sensorial proxy for solidarity, all while leaving labor exploitation and police brutality untouched. Here, joy becomes an ideological sedative, more likely to boost quarterly earnings than dismantle racial capitalism.

Common Threads and Divergent Warnings

Although one essay celebrates joy’s insurgent power and the other mourns its commodification, both converge on three cautions for future research and practice:

Interrogate Gatekeepers. Whether joy is erupting in a break-room dance or a viral ad, scholars must ask: Who sets the stage? Who profits? Who is policed or priced out?

Context Is King. The same Beyoncé track that electrifies a picket line might lull a shopping mall into docility. Context—not content alone—determines whether joy radicalizes or pacifies.

Affect Has a Half-Life. Subversive joy can be rapidly commercialized, while commodified joy can be re-politicized by activist remix. Researchers should track these mutating lifecycles rather than freeze joy in a single moral frame.

Implications for the Multilayered Model of Joy (MMJ)

These critical insights compel any comprehensive model—such as the MMJ—to treat the communal-cultural layer as a contested arena where joy is both weapon and commodity. Designing interventions without attention to power risks turning joy into what Lauren Berlant called a “cruel optimism”—an emotional high that papers over the very inequities it should illuminate.

In the end, critical affect theory does not deny joy's transformative promise; it simply insists that joy, like any resource, flows through pipes laid by history, economics, and ideology. Tracing those pipes is indispensable if we hope to harness joy for liberation rather than for the status quo. Not all scholars treat joy as benign. A growing strand of critical affect theory urges closer scrutiny of who gets to feel joy, under what conditions, and to what ends. Two recent contributions sharpen this critique from different angles.

Joy as Subversive Defiance

Hall and Steele (2024) analyze the emotional life of contingent faculty navigating what they term neoliberal academic precarity—short-term contracts, audit culture, and productivity metrics that erode communal bonds. Through ethnographic vignettes of hallway dance parties, meme-sharing group texts, and “spontaneous laughter breaks” during department meetings, they argue that collective joy functions as an act of refusal. By publicly inhabiting bodies in celebratory ways that the neoliberal university seeks to discipline—slow dancing in corridors meant for hurried efficiency—precarious scholars momentarily reclaim agency and solidarity. Hall and Steele frame such practices as “affective sabotage,” a tactic that both restores relational vitality and exposes the absurdity of productivity mandates. Crucially, the authors insist that joy here is neither escapism nor naïveté; it is a forceful declaration that communal thriving is possible even under extractive systems.

Joy as Ideological Sedative

In contrast, Stevenson (2025) warns that “feel-good aesthetics” can be weaponized to neutralize dissent. Drawing on Black studies and media theory, Stevenson traces how advertising campaigns and streaming platforms package “Black joy” into palatable commodities—upbeat soundtracks, vibrant color palettes, triumphant narratives—that circulate widely but often detach

joy from its rootedness in struggle. The result, he argues, is an “emotional anesthetic” that invites audiences to consume spectacle rather than confront ongoing racial violence or economic inequality. Stevenson’s multimedia essay pairs theoretical analysis with a curated playlist whose sonic shifts—from exuberant funk to dissonant noise—dramatize how quickly joy can slide into numbing entertainment when stripped of political edge.

Taken together, these perspectives challenge any apolitical or universally accessible concept of joy. They caution researchers and practitioners to interrogate:

Power Dynamics. Who benefits when joy is celebrated? Who is excluded or disciplined for expressing it?

Commodification. Does packaging joy for mass consumption dilute its capacity to mobilize collective action?

Contextual Integrity. How do historical and material conditions inflect the meaning of joyful acts—turning the same dance from liberation in one context to distraction in another?

Incorporating such critical insights prevents the study of joy from becoming a “positivity project” divorced from questions of justice. It also enriches theoretical models—like the MMJ—by ensuring that the “communal-cultural layer” accounts not only for shared rituals of uplift but also for the political economies that can co-opt or constrain them.

Psychological and Neuroscientific Dimensions of Joy

Drawing on attachment theory, affective neuroscience, and pastoral counseling, Coursey (2021) introduces the metaphor of a “joy switch.” He proposes that a network centered in the right pre-frontal and anterior cingulate cortices functions as a rapid-response hub that toggles the nervous system between two global states:

Relational Mode (green zone). The ventral vagal complex—myelinated fibers that innervate the heart, face, and larynx—dominates. Physiology is characterized by steady heart-rate variability, warm facial expressivity, and prosodic vocal tone, all of which prime an individual for reciprocal engagement and play.

Defensive Mode (red zone). When the switch flips off, dorsal vagal or sympathetic pathways take over, producing fight-flight or shut-down responses: narrowed peripheral vision, flat affect, clipped speech, and reduced social curiosity.

Coursey argues that everyday “micro-cues” such as mutual eye contact, a soothing vocal cadence, and synchronized rhythmic breathing can intentionally flip the joy switch back to Relational Mode. This claim closely aligns with Porges’ polyvagal theory, which posits that cues of safety up-regulate ventral-vagal tone and thereby unlock the social-engagement system.

Emerging Empirical Support

Although Coursey writes for a lay and pastoral audience, preliminary data lend plausibility to his model:

Heart-Rate-Variability (HRV) Training. Small randomized trials show that five minutes of paced breathing at 6 breaths/minute increases HRV and self-reported joy, with larger gains when participants maintain soft gaze with a trusted partner.

Vocal Prosody Experiments. Speech-synthesis studies reveal that listeners exposed to voices with greater harmonic richness and slower attack times (hallmarks of ventral-vagal activation) exhibit heightened zygomatic-muscle activity—a physiological proxy for joy.

Eye-Contact Interventions. Dyadic eye-gazing exercises raise oxytocin levels and decrease amygdala reactivity to threat images, suggesting a neurochemical pathway by which the “joy switch” deactivates defensive circuitry.

Practical Implications

Therapists and educators are beginning to operationalize these insights:

“Joy Warm-Ups.” Couples therapy sessions open with 60 seconds of synchronized breathing and mutual gaze to establish a relational baseline.

“Prosody First” Classrooms. Teachers consciously lower vocal pitch and elongate vowels during roll calls to signal safety and invite engagement.

Spiritual Practices. Liturgical settings incorporate call-and-response chanting at 60–80 beats per minute, entraining congregants’ breathing and heart rhythms.

Limitations and Research Directions

Despite promising anecdotes, the joy-switch hypothesis requires rigorous testing. Neuroimaging studies should verify whether right-frontal activation indeed differentiates relational from defensive states and whether ventral-vagal engagement mediates the transition. Longitudinal designs could examine whether practicing “switch-flipping” techniques yields durable increases in trait-level joy and social connectedness. Finally, culturally sensitive adaptations are essential; direct eye contact or close-range prosody can signal threat rather than safety in some cultural contexts.

In sum, the “joy switch” offers a compelling, neurophysiologically grounded framework for understanding how micro-behaviors can instantaneously recalibrate the nervous system toward joy-infused relationality, echoing and extending the principles of polyvagal theory.

Empirical Corroboration: From Metaphor to Measurable Effects

Coursey’s (2021) “joy-switch” narrative initially rested on clinical anecdotes and pastoral observations. To test whether his recommended micro-practices yield measurable change,

Roberts and Appiah (2025) designed a four-week, mixed-methods field study with community adults in Greater Manchester. Participants (N = 48) received a brief video tutorial on two skills:

Soft-Focus Eye Gazing. Gazing at a partner's eyes (in person or on video) at roughly arm's length, maintaining a relaxed facial expression for 90 seconds.

Co-Regulating Breathwork. Breathing in synchrony at six breaths per minute for eight minutes, guided by a simple visual "breath pacer."

Compliance was logged through smartphone time stamps, and ecological momentary assessments (EMAs) pinged phones three times daily asking: "Right now, how joyful do you feel?" (0–10) and "How calm does your body feel?" (0–10). Heart-rate variability (HRV)—an index of vagal flexibility—was tracked via wrist-worn photoplethysmography, sampled every 30 minutes during waking hours.

Key Findings

Within-Day Boosts. Multilevel regression showed that on practice days, momentary joy was 0.9 points higher (95 % CI = 0.4 to 1.4) and HRV increased by 12 ms (95 % CI = 4 to 20) relative to non-practice days, after controlling for sleep quality, caffeine, and baseline affect.

Lagged Effects. Morning practice predicted elevated joy and HRV through the afternoon EMA ($\beta = .28$, $p = .02$), suggesting a carry-over benefit of several hours.

Qualitative Themes. Reflexive thematic analysis of exit interviews surfaced three motifs: "nervous-system settling," "opening a window to others," and "small ritual, big shift." Participants described a "liquid warmth" or a "clearing of static" immediately after the practice, language consistent with ventral-vagal engagement.

Dose–Response Trend. A post-hoc slope indicated that each additional practice day per week correlated with a 0.15-point rise in average weekly joy ($p < .05$), hinting at cumulative gains.

Converging Evidence

Roberts and Appiah’s results echo smaller lab findings: brief dyadic eye-contact tasks increase salivary oxytocin and zygomatic EMG activity, while slow-paced breathing boosts HRV, both correlating with positive affect. Together, these studies lend experiential validity to Coursey’s claim that micro-level relational cues can “flip” the nervous system from defensive vigilance to joyful engagement.

Limitations and Next Steps

The study lacked a fully randomized control condition—participants served as their own controls on non-practice days—so expectancy effects cannot be ruled out. Cultural norms around eye contact may also limit generalizability beyond the U.K. Future research should (a) compare different sequences of gaze and breathwork, (b) employ sham-practice controls (e.g., looking at neutral objects), and (c) extend follow-ups to test trait-level change. Even with these caveats, the evidence moves the joy-switch hypothesis beyond metaphor, demonstrating tangible shifts in both subjective joy and autonomic regulation.

Savoring and Embodiment: How the Senses Anchor Joy

If joy research has long privileged the “neck-up” domains of cognition and social appraisal, a newer line of inquiry re-grounds the emotion in sensory-motor experience. Two complementary studies, one with mindful eaters, the other with physically active children that illustrates how embodied savoring turns the body into a reliable portal for joy as demonstrated:

Mindful Eating and Gustatory Joy

In *Savor Every Bite*, Rossy (2021) adapts Mindfulness-Based Eating Awareness Training (MB-EAT) into an eight-week intervention focused on micro-savoring: pausing before meals, inhaling aromas, noting mouthfeel changes, and registering the body's subtle satiety cues. A pre-post study (N = 145 adult participants, M age = 42) recorded a 25 % increase in the Body Appreciation Scale-2 and a 0.6-SD rise in the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS)–Joy subscale ($ps < .01$). Qualitative reflections described joy as “a spark of gratitude that starts on the tongue and drops into the chest,” signaling both interoceptive awareness (insula activation in neuroscience terms) and an affectively positive “ownership” of the body. Rossy argues that deliberate sensory focus interrupts habitual autopilot eating, allowing the gustatory system to broaden attention and ignite upstream dopaminergic pathways linked to reward—essentially transmuting routine nourishment into a daily joy practice.

Joy of Movement in Children

Parallel findings emerge in outdoor-play research where young adults retrospectively link childhood freedom, joy and wonder to self-determined movement in nature (Lund Fasting & Høyem, 2024; White et al., 2023; Loeb, 2024). Another parallel insight comes from Ingulfsvann, Moe, and Engelsrud (2022), who conducted ethnographic video-elicitation sessions with Norwegian primary-school pupils during physical-education classes. The researchers introduced “kinesthetic puzzles”—unpredictable balances, partner lifts, and improvisational obstacle courses—and then interviewed 32 children about their affective states. The phrase that surfaced most often was “It’s almost never the same,” expressing delight in novel sensorimotor exploration. Observational coding showed that joy peaked in moments when students discovered a new bodily capability (e.g., sustaining a previously impossible hop-sequence), supporting

Csikszentmihalyi's "micro-flow" hypothesis. Importantly, joy was not contingent on performance metrics; children who failed to execute a move still reported "buzzing happiness" if the attempt felt playful and self-directed. The study thus positions embodied novelty and agency—rather than competitive success—as primary engines of movement-based joy.

Mechanistic Convergence

Although distinct in modality (taste vs. proprioception), both studies highlight three overlapping mechanisms:

Heightened Interoception. Whether tracking satiety or muscle stretch, participants tuned into internal bodily signals, a process linked to insula activation and positive self-regard.

Attentional Narrowing–Broadening Rhythm. Focusing on immediate sensory detail paradoxically broadened overall situational awareness and emotional bandwidth, consistent with Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions.

Agency Through Discovery. Mastery of subtle bodily cues or novel movements reinforced a sense of competent agency, itself a joy amplifier.

Implications

These findings extend the discourse on joy beyond appraisal and relationship into the tactile, olfactory, and proprioceptive textures of lived experience. They suggest that interventions as simple as a mindful raisin exercise or an improvisational recess game can seed daily micro-doses of joy, with ripple effects on body image, resilience, and social connectedness.

Micro Practices and Agency

Rucker (2023) operationalizes joy into "fun credits"—time budgeted playful acts. A 30 day intervention yielded significant gains in positive affect ($d = .68$) relative to controls, evidencing that joy can be intentionally cultivated rather than passively awaited.

Joy's Coexistence with Suffering: The Paradox in Data and Narrative

A striking through-line in contemporary scholarship is that joy does not simply return once hardship subsides; it can co-arise with, and sometimes because of, suffering. Three complementary studies, two narrative and one quantitative, illustrate this paradox and illuminate the mechanisms that make it possible.

The “Gravity of Joy” Framework (Gorrell, 2021)

Practical theologian Angela Williams Gorrell entered a prison ministry days after losing three close family members, including a nephew to opioid overdose and a father to suicide. Her memoir traces how communal worship, shared testimony, and mutual lament with incarcerated women became fertile ground for what she calls the “gravity of joy.” Joy, in her account, is not the lightness that floats above grief but the dense center of meaning that remains when illusions are stripped away. Gorrell ties this phenomenon to the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation—joy rooted in suffering love—and to psychological theories of post-traumatic growth that highlight appreciation of life, deeper relationships, and new possibilities as gains forged in adversity.

Disability and “No Bad Days” (Jester, 2022)

Motivational speaker Justin Jester, born with congenital orthopedic anomalies and dyslexia, recounts finding joy through micro-successes—completing a single page of reading, mastering a modified athletic move. His narrative foregrounds agency under constraint: the very limitations that could breed despair become catalysts for creative problem-solving, leading to what Jester describes as “an unexpected surge of joy that starts as relief and blooms into gratitude.” The account resonates with Deci and Ryan’s self-determination theory; competence need not reach societal norms to kindle intrinsic joy—relative mastery within one’s context is enough.

Pandemic Data on Older Adults (Whitehead & Torossian, 2021)

In a mixed-methods survey of 825 U.S. adults aged 60–98 during the first year of COVID-19, researchers asked respondents to list their biggest sources of stress and, separately, any moments of joy experienced in the same period. Despite high endorsements of loneliness, health anxiety, and financial worry, 71 % identified at least one joy source, the most common being new hobbies (gardening, bread-baking) and digital connections (video calls with grandchildren). Regression analyses showed that frequency of joy reports predicted lower depressive symptoms ($\beta = -.26$, $p < .01$) even after controlling for objective stress load. Qualitative excerpts revealed a pattern of “tragic optimism”: Participants did not ignore loss but framed it as impetus to cultivate creativity and relational depth. In another study, Jakel (2024) supported this study recommending joy as buffer against moral distress in oncology nurses.

Mechanisms That Enable Joy-in-Sorrow

How Joy and Sorrow Share the Same House

Three Facilitating Mechanisms

A close reading of Gorrell’s prison-ministry memoir, Jester’s disability narrative, and Whitehead and Torossian’s pandemic survey reveals that joy does not merely survive alongside suffering; it often germinates because of it. Three overlapping mechanisms help explain the alchemy.

Meaning-Making Narratives

Weaving a Coherent Story Out of Splintered Events

Humans are wired for stories, and in each study the protagonists employ narrative as emotional architecture. For theologian Angela Gorrell, the cruciform logic of Christian faith re-plots devastating family losses into a larger drama of death and resurrection; the women in her

prison Bible study become co-authors of a redemption arc that leaves space for both lament and laughter. Justin Jester’s memoir works the same craft through a different genre. He reframes congenital disability not as the prologue to a tragedy but as the opening chapter of a hero’s quest, where every small milestone: walking unassisted, reading a full page, serves as evidence that joy can sprout from seemingly infertile soil.

Even the older adults in Whitehead and Torossian’s sample engaged in narrative labor: in journaling or family Zoom calls, they recast pandemic lock-downs as sabbaticals for deferred hobbies or intergenerational storytelling. Across these cases, narrative becomes the loom on which pain and joy are woven into a single, stronger fabric (Reising, 2024).

Micro-Agency

Tiny Acts That Rekindle a Sense of Control

A second through-line is the power of small, controllable actions to ignite disproportionate joy. Gorrell’s incarcerated study partners express delight at arranging a worship playlist; the choice of songs is minor but affords agency in an environment designed to strip it away. Jester describes the quiet triumph of finishing a guitar riff after weeks of practice; each strummed chord expands the boundaries of what his body can do. Pandemic seniors cultivated container gardens, baked sourdough, or penned daily gratitude letters—activities that transformed passive confinement into active creation. In every instance, micro-agency serves as a spark plug, firing up neural reward circuits even as macro-conditions—loss, disability, global crisis, remain painfully unchanged.

Relational Resonance

Turning Empathic Vibration into Collective Lift

Finally, joy-in-sorrow proves to be a team sport. Gorrell’s “gravity of joy” crystallizes in communal worship where tears and belly laughs share the same pew. Jester’s epiphanies often occur in peer-support meetings where others mirror his breakthroughs with nods and applause. Older adults cited weekly virtual game nights with grandchildren as their emotional high point—moments when Wi-Fi jitter became laughter fodder rather than frustration. These settings create relational resonance: one person’s spark of joy reverberates through empathic channels, is amplified by others, and returns as collective uplift. Social neuroscience would describe this as synchronized neural oscillations; pastors and poets might simply call it fellowship.

Taken together, these three mechanisms—story-weaving, micro-agency, and relational resonance—form a kind of triple-helix that allows joy and sorrow to twist around each other without one strangling the other. They illustrate that joy is not the opposite of suffering but a different mode of engaging it: a narrative that makes sense of it, an action that pushes back against it, and a relationship that refuses to face it alone.

Implications for Theory and Practice

These findings challenge the “return-to-baseline” assumption that joy merely follows the alleviation of hardship. Instead, they point toward a dialectical model in which suffering and joy can cogenerate each deepening the texture of the other. Therapeutic, educational, and spiritual interventions might therefore focus not solely on reducing distress but on creating channels for joy amid distress: storytelling circles, adaptive-skill workshops, or intergenerational digital meetups. Such approaches honor the empirical reality that the human affective palette is wide enough to hold lament and laughter in the same frame.

Sociocultural and Identity Based Joy

Black Joy as Epistemic Resistance: From Theory to Classroom Praxis

Joy as a Way of Knowing and Resisting

Building on Audre Lorde’s maxim that “joy is an act of resistance,” Luna, Brown, Johnson, and Pirtle (2024) locate Black joy at the heart of Black feminist epistemology. They argue that traditional knowledge regimes—which privilege detached rationality—often render Black affect either pathological (“angry,” “loud”) or invisible. By contrast, Black feminist thought—from Anna Julia Cooper’s 1892 insistence on “soul-satisfying” uplift to Patricia Hill Collins’s work on collective wisdom, treats joy as both method and outcome of liberation praxis. Luna et al. trace a genealogical arc through the Civil Rights freedom songs, the exuberant aesthetics of the 1960s Black Arts Movement, and the #BlackJoy hashtag that surged after Ferguson.

Across these moments, joy operates as epistemic resistance, a way of producing knowledge that refuses the colonial script of Black suffering as spectacle. Instead, communal joy gatherings (dance cyphers, block parties, mass choirs) generate “fugitive publics” where participants exchange not only emotional energy but strategic insights, imaginative horizons, and embodied critique of anti-Black violence.

Operationalizing Joy in Urban Classrooms

Edwards, Reynolds, and colleagues (2024) move from macro-theory to micro-intervention with their Joy Anchors project in three Chicago middle schools serving predominantly Black students. Teachers co-designed daily rituals that included:

Affirmation Roll-Call. Each student chose a power phrase (“I am brilliance in motion”) voiced aloud by peers.

Culturally Resonant Media Bursts. Two-minute clips of contemporary Black artists—poetry slams, viral dances—opened lessons, framing curricula within living cultural production.

Joy Journals. Students logged moments of delight inside and outside school, linking them to course concepts (e.g., mapping joy to geometry of dance moves).

Using a pre-post design with matched control classrooms, the study measured behavioral engagement (time-on-task observations), emotional engagement (Experience Sampling Method “mood pings”), and academic self-efficacy surveys. After one semester, Joy-Anchor classrooms registered an 18 % increase in behavioral engagement and a 0.5-SD rise in self-efficacy, while control rooms remained flat. Qualitative focus groups revealed themes of “feeling seen,” “energized learning,” and “joy as brain food,” echoing broaden-and-build theory though situated in a racially specific context.

Why Joy Functions Epistemically

Both studies converge on three mechanisms by which Black joy produces knowledge and resilience:

Affective Signal Boost. Joyful practices amplify attention and memory encoding, making historical and scientific content stickier without diluting rigor.

Ontological Affirmation. Publicly claiming joy under anti-Black conditions asserts the full humanity of Black lives, disrupting epistemic injustice that casts them solely as victims or problems to be solved.

Collective Foresight. Joy gatherings foster imaginative rehearsal of liberated futures—what Robin D. G. Kelley calls “freedom dreaming”—which in turn informs strategic action.

Implications for Policy and Pedagogy. If joy is epistemic, then urban-education policy that ignores affective climate is inadvertently a knowledge-suppression policy.

Administrators might therefore:

- Allocate time and resources for culturally grounded joy rituals.
- Train teachers to recognize joy as data rather than disruption.
- Evaluate curricula not only on test scores but on their capacity to cultivate collective flourishing.

In sum, Black joy is more than a feel-good add-on; it is a political-emotional technology that sustains cognition, solidarity, and visionary planning in contexts structured against Black thriving. Recognizing and operationalizing that power reorients both scholarship and practice toward more emancipatory horizons.

Transgender and Autistic Joy

When Context, Not Capacity, Determines Delight

Joy Through Gender Euphoria

In a qualitative study grounded in symbolic-interactionism, Shuster and Westbrook (2024) conducted semi-structured interviews with 40 transgender adults (ages 19–64; diverse in race and socioeconomic status) across five U.S. cities. Participants were asked to narrate moments when they felt “most alive, at ease, or joyful.” Three recurring triggers emerged:

Clothing Autonomy

For the trans adults interviewed by Shuster and Westbrook (2024), joy often arrived in sudden flashes they came to call “spark moments.” One common spark was the simple act of choosing clothes that fit their inner sense of self. A non-binary respondent recalled the first time they wore a sharply tailored suit to a friend’s wedding: “The fabric hugged my shoulders just

right, and for once the mirror didn't argue with me." Another participant described slipping into a flowing skirt and feeling "air on my legs and light in my chest, like the garment itself was breathing for me."

A second catalyst was hearing a chosen name or pronoun roll off someone else's tongue without hesitation. Several interviewees likened the sensation to "warm electricity." One said, "It was a single syllable, but when the barista called out Ray instead of my deadname, it felt like the room tilted into focus, as if the world finally snapped to the correct coordinates." Another spoke of the first time a professor used the right pronouns in class: "It clicked into place—like a bone that had been out of joint my whole life was suddenly set."

Perhaps the most profound sparks were moments of bodily self-determination. Starting hormones, booking a top-surgery consultation, even receiving an insurance approval letter were narrated as "joy thresholds." As one participant put it, "The prescription wasn't just medicine; it was a passport to the future self I could finally meet." Each medical milestone functioned less as a clinical procedure and more as an existential unveiling.

Collectively, these episodes formed what Shuster and Westbrook term "gender euphoria," the affirmative counter-image to gender dysphoria. But the researchers are quick to note that euphoria was not a constant internal state; it was exquisitely situational. The same silk blouse that felt liberating in an affirming coffee shop could feel like a target in a hostile subway car. A chosen name that rang with joy among friends might freeze on the tongue in a doctor's waiting room. In other words, joy hinged less on personal authenticity alone and more on contextual safety—social cues, environmental threats, and power dynamics. Trans joy, then, is not a trait some people simply possess; it is a relational event that blossoms where acceptance makes room for it and withers where hostility closes in.

Joy Through Sensory Synchrony

Using a participatory-action framework that positioned autistic people as co-researchers rather than subjects, Wassell (2025) invited eighty-six autistic adolescents and adults to map their “joy moments.” Participants responded to open-ended prompts, “Describe a time you felt pure joy today” or “Show me joy in a photo,” and many supplemented their narratives with photo diaries: snapshots of well-worn hoodies, glowing aquarium tanks, or meticulously labeled model-train layouts. Viewing the data through an assemblage lens—one that treats emotions as emergent from networks of humans, objects, and spaces—Wassell identified four recurring constellations where joy reliably ignited.

First came what she calls Tactile Cohesion. Participants rhapsodized in soft flannel shirts, weighted blankets, or silicone fidget cubes. One teenager photographed the corner of her bed layered with fleece and wrote, “This is my island of peace; every fiber says hello to my skin.” Another adult described slipping a smooth river stone into his pocket before stressful meetings: “Touching it is like dialing the radio to a calm frequency.”

A second cluster revolved around Repetitive Motion, often labeled as stimming. Hand flapping, rocking in a hammock chair, or spinning in a swivel seat were not merely self-regulation tactics; they were experienced as “rhythms that let my inside match the outside.” A video clip submitted by a participant showed her tracing circles in the air with a ribbon streamer; her caption read, “Each loop draws a smile I can feel even if you can’t see it.”

The third constellation involved Sensory-Friendly Spaces. Many found joy in libraries with dim lighting or on quiet nature trails where acoustic textures remained predictable. One photo diary showed a participant sitting in a forest alcove, captioned, “Here I can breathe joy

without bracing for impact.” Participants contrasted these havens with fluorescent-lit supermarkets or echoing gymnasiums that “shredded” their nervous system.

Finally, *Special-Interest Immersion* proved to be a deep well of delight. Whether cataloging train schedules, studying insect life cycles, or debugging lines of code, participants reported “thought-fireworks” of excitement. One young coder wrote, “Watching the console finally print ‘Hello, World!’ felt like a choir inside my brain.”

Across all four constellations, respondents emphasized a common refrain: joy evaporated the moment these behaviors or environments were pathologized or policed. A weighted blanket dismissed as “childish,” a hand flap met with a teacher’s scold, or a special-interest monologue cut short by rolling eyes, all served as circuit breakers that plunged the experience back into tension or shame. Thus, Wassell reframes autistic joy not as a charming eccentricity or therapeutic side-effect, but as a fully authentic emotional state—one that blooms or withers in direct response to environmental affordances. The implication is stark: fostering autistic joy is less about teaching new coping mechanisms and more about redesigning social and physical spaces so that the rhythms, textures, and passions that kindle joy are welcomed rather than suppressed.

Shared Implications: Environment Over Deficit

Despite differing populations, both studies converge on a pivotal insight: joy flourishes when environments affirm identity or sensory needs and withers when they impose normative constraints. This supports the social model of disability and oppression, which locates barriers, and by extension, facilitators in socio-material contexts rather than bodies (see Table 1).

Table 1. Comparison of Shared Implications

Dimension	Trans Joy (Shuster & Westbrook)	Autistic Joy (Wassell)	Common Thread
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Trigger	Gender-affirming cues	Sensory-aligned cues	Contextual fit
Barrier	Misgendering, policing of dress	Sensory overload, stigma of stimming	Social invalidation
Design Fix	Pronoun normalization, gender-neutral dress codes	Low-stim lighting, stim-positive policies	Universal design for dignity

Policy and Practice

Designing Worlds Where Joy Is the Default, Not the Exception

If joy for transgender and autistic individuals depends less on internal “mind-sets” than on external conditions, then the most powerful interventions are not therapeutic but architectural, procedural, and legal.

Start with the built environment. Inclusive architecture means more than adding a ramp or repainting a bathroom sign; it involves designing public spaces that anticipate diverse bodies and neurotypes from the blueprint stage. Imagine a community center where every floor hosts a gender-neutral restroom and where each wing includes a sensory refuge zone: a quiet alcove outfitted with dimmable lights, textured seating, and weighted lap pads. A trans teen in a tailored blazer can adjust their binder in privacy without rushing past hostile stares, and an autistic visitor can retreat from fluorescent buzz to calm their nervous system. Both leave the building with their spark of joy intact.

Next, retool human interaction through affirmation protocols. Healthcare receptionists, teachers, and retail clerks can be trained to default to pronoun inquiry: “How would you like me to address you?” And, to recognize stimming behaviors as self-regulation rather than misbehavior. Picture a pharmacy where a pharmacist offers a private consultation room upon noticing a patient’s rising anxiety, or a classroom where a teacher keeps silent fidget tools in a “comfort basket” and treats them as academically equivalent to pencils and notebooks. These

small procedural tweaks convert everyday transactions into moments of micro-agency and relational resonance.

Finally, codify dignity into law. Strengthened anti-discrimination statutes should explicitly protect both gender identity and neurological difference, ensuring that joy-supporting expressions—wearing a flowing skirt to work, rocking gently in a waiting room—cannot be grounds for eviction, firing, or removal. Such legal shields do more than punish bad actors; they send a cultural signal that joy is a right, not a privilege contingent on passing for cisgender or neurotypical.

Taken together, these recommendations shift the scholarly and policy gaze from “fixing” individuals to reforming the contexts that throttle or unleash their joy. When the environment offers gender-affirming restrooms, sensory-friendly nooks, pronoun-savvy staff, and legal protections, joy—whether sparked by the perfect blazer or the soothing rhythm of a rocking chair—moves from a scarce event to a sustainable, everyday human good (Rosenbaum & Malina, 2024).

Joy as Commodification and Critique

Who Profits from “Feel-Good” Aesthetics?

While Hall and Steele (2024) celebrate joy’s capacity to subvert neoliberal discipline from below, Stevenson (2025) flips the analytic lens upward, asking how the same effect can be marshalled to stabilize dominant systems when packaged for mass consumption. His multimedia essay, published in *Liquid Blackness*, zeroes in on the recent surge of Black rock music in commercials, streaming playlists, and festival branding. Marketed under slogans like “Joyful Rebellion” and “Sound of Freedom,” these campaigns feature high-energy guitar riffs, saturated color palettes, and quick-cut shots of Black youth smiling in slow motion. On the surface, the

imagery signals empowerment and creativity; beneath, Stevenson argues, it performs an “affective laundering” that washes systemic injustice out of view (Rasmus et al., 2024).

Mechanisms of Affective Extraction

Selective Visibility

The campaigns foreground euphoria while erasing the structural antagonisms—racial profiling at music venues, exploitative record contracts—that birthed Black rock’s dissenting edge. This mirrors what theorists of racial capitalism call “value extraction”: the cultural surplus of Black joy is siphoned off, leaving behind the social debt of inequality.

Reversibility of Signifiers

Electric-guitar feedback, once a sonic protest against respectability politics, is repurposed as a brand signature for sneaker launches and energy drinks. The very sounds of resistance become ambiguous signifiers—equally useful for revolutionary rallies or cyber-Monday ads—thus blunting their political charge.

Affective Cushioning

Borrowing from Lauren Berlant’s notion of “cruel optimism,” Stevenson contends that sanitized joy offers consumers a cushion against cognitive dissonance. By participating in 60-second bursts of celebratory Black culture, non-Black audiences can feel aligned with justice without confronting the ongoing labor exploitation or police brutality that the real artists may face.

Illustrative Case: The “Pulse” Campaign

When Branded Euphoria Masks Industrial Extraction

To make his point tangible, Stevenson (2025) zooms in on “Pulse,” a 2024 global ad blitz for a multinational athleisure giant. The sixty-second spot begins with a cinematic flourish: a

young Black woman in studded leather boots launches off a smoke-shrouded stage, electric guitar slung low. Time dilates to super-slow motion as she hangs mid-air, dreadlocks fanning behind her like wings. A strobing floodlight ignites her exhilarated grin, and a bold white tagline flash—“FEEL THE FREEDOM.”

What follows, however, is a montage that Stevenson describes as an ideological sleight-of-hand. Between the performance shots, the camera cuts to an entirely different scene: a cavernous factory floor bathed in sterile fluorescents. Assembly-line workers—conspicuously non-Black and kept faceless by surgical masks—stitch, glue, and box the very sneakers the guitarist is wearing. The edits are quick, almost subliminal, and the workers’ anonymity stands in stark relief to the guitarist’s hyper-individualized charisma.

Stevenson argues that this visual juxtaposition accomplishes three rhetorical moves:

Affective Laundering

The euphoria radiating from the guitarist “launders” the repetitive, underpaid labor happening off-stage. Extraction and exuberance occupy the same sixty seconds, but only the exuberance is granted narrative salience.

Selective Racial Visibility

Black embodiment is celebrated when it is leaping, sweating, and selling; it is erased when it is sewing, packaging, or filing wage grievances. The campaign thus perpetuates a racialized division of labor even as it claims to champion Black freedom.

Consumption as Liberation

By urging viewers to “feel the freedom,” the ad implies that buying a pair of sneakers confers a slice of the guitarist’s emancipatory joy—an emotional transaction that neatly bypasses any reckoning with supply-chain ethics.

The net effect, Stevenson concludes, is a branded joy narrative that invites audiences to participate in the vibe of rebellion without confronting the economic structures that make real rebellion necessary. Extraction and exuberance do coexist in “Pulse,” but the camera and the copy ensure that only the latter is spotlighted, leaving the former to fade into the literal background blur. For scholars of affect and advertising, the “Pulse” campaign stands as a cautionary tale: when joy is commodified, it can just as readily fortify the status quo as disrupt it.

Scholarly and Practical Implications

Critical Media Literacy

Stevenson calls on scholars to dissect not just what joy looks like in media but who profits—financially and symbolically—from its circulation. Citation trail analyses could map revenue flows from “joyful” campaigns back to corporations with contested labor or environmental records.

Methodological Reflexivity

Researchers studying joy must account for commodification vectors in their operational definitions and sampling frames; otherwise, data risk conflating authentic communal joy with market-engineered affect.

Activist Counter-Strategies

Artists and organizers might deploy “counter-joy aesthetics,” intentionally foregrounding the gritty material contexts of their music—releasing behind-the-scenes footage of sound-checks in underfunded venues or pairing album drops with bail-fund donations—to resist re-packaging.

Toward a Dialectical Model

Stevenson’s critique does not negate joy’s emancipatory potential; rather, it insists on a dialectical stance: joy can both fuel resistance and serve capital, depending on its circulation,

framing, and beneficiaries. For models like the MMJ, this means the communal-cultural layer must incorporate not only grassroots rituals but also the political economy of affect—advertising budgets, streaming algorithms, and festival sponsorships—that mediate which joys go viral and which remain underground.

In short, Stevenson warns that without vigilant critique, joy risks becoming the new opiate: a pleasant buzz that leaves underlying injustices intact. Scholars, educators, and cultural producers thus bear the responsibility to ask—every time joy is on offer—who pays, who profits, and who is rendered invisible.

Pedagogies of Joy

From “Rigor Mortis” to Rapture in Learning

Reclaiming Joy as Intellectual Vitality

In the edited collection *Joy-Centered Pedagogy in Higher Education*, Camfield (2025) argues that the modern university’s obsession with “rigor” has slipped into what faculty wryly dub “rigor mortis”—a paralysis of curiosity caused by grade obsessions, surveillance technologies, and high-stakes assessment. Against this backdrop, Camfield marshals interdisciplinary evidence—from cognitive psychology to contemplative studies—to posit joy as the missing catalyst for deep learning. Drawing on Dewey’s notion of educative experience and bell hooks’ “engaged pedagogy,” the volume insists that rigor and joy are not opposites; rather, joy supplies the affective fuel that sustains the arduous work of analysis, synthesis, and creative production. And, this kind of living-theory action research it shows context-responsive approaches can ‘enhance joyful teaching and learning’ even in large graduate seminars (Dhungana, 2023).

Key Design Principles in Joy-Centered Classrooms

Playful Inquiry Spaces. Several chapters describe “sandbox sessions” where students prototype ideas with LEGOs, digital storyboards, or improv theatre before tackling formal research papers. Play serves as a low-stakes rehearsal arena, lowering affective filters and boosting ideational fluency.

Structured Vulnerability. Borrowing from Brené Brown’s research, instructors integrate failure showcases, inviting students (and themselves) to narrate intellectual missteps and “near discoveries.” Such transparency normalizes risk-taking and reframes error as data.

Multisensory Engagement. Rather than relying solely on text, courses weave in sound walks, tactile artifacts, and culinary ethnography to anchor abstract theories in embodied experience—echoing findings that sensory richness heightens memory consolidation.

Comparative designs might leverage the kama-muta paradigm to probe whether physiological ‘tears-of-joy’ patterns generalise across collectivist and individualist settings (Zickfeld et al., 2020).

Relational We-ness. Weekly “joy check-ins” ask students to share a moment of delight—academic or personal—thereby constructing a communal emotional archive that reinforces belonging and mutual investment in course goals.

Empirical Outcomes Reported in the Volume

Camfield’s volume does more than argue for joy; it documents what happens when faculty re-design their courses to deliver it. One quasi-experimental chapter compares two parallel sections of an introductory sociology course—same syllabus, same instructor, but radically different atmospheres. In the control section, students sit through traditional slide lectures and individual exams; in the joy-centered section, desks give way to moveable pods,

classes open with two-minute “wonder bursts” (a meme, a poem, a provocative statistic), and projects unfold through playful design sprints.

When blind graders later evaluated the capstone projects, the difference was unmistakable. Papers from the joy cohort contained twenty-five percent more integrative citations, weaving sociology texts into economics, art history, and even personal interviews, and their thematic analysis was judged “substantially richer” on a standardized rubric. Students clearly weren’t just absorbing material; they were playing with it, bending it, and suturing it to the wider world.

A second study in the collection tracks performance anxiety. Using the well-validated Academic Emotions Questionnaire, researchers found that students in joy-centered courses reported a forty-percent drop in test anxiety and a thirty-percent surge in anticipatory joy in the twenty-four hours before class presentations. One student put it best: “I used to dread speech day; now it feels like open-mic night with friends.”

Finally, the most pragmatic metric—student retention—also tilted in joy’s favor. Across three departments that piloted Camfield’s framework, ninety-two percent of students completed the course, compared with the college’s average of eighty-four percent for similar classes. That eight-point gap translates into dozens of tuition-paying students who might otherwise have withdrawn, a statistic that makes administrators listen as closely as educators do. Taken together, these empirical outcomes suggest that joy does more than sweeten the learning experience; it deepens cognition, calms nerves, and keeps students coming back for more.

Theoretical Anchors

Camfield’s contributors anchor their case for joy in two of psychology’s most durable frameworks. Self-Determination Theory (SDT) supplies the motivational backbone: whenever a

learning environment nourishes students' autonomy (freedom to choose inquiry paths), competence (the genuine feeling of getting better at something hard), and relatedness (a sense of being known and valued by others), joy tends to surface not as a decorative extra but as a predictable emotional outcome. Layered onto SDT is Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory, which holds that positive affect widens the field of attention and, over time, constructs reserves of intellectual resilience. In Camfield's logic, joy is therefore instrumental—the very fuel learners need to navigate the thorny, ambiguous problems that mark advanced study.

The book is careful, however, not to romanticize joy. Several chapters flag the emotional labor required of instructors who sustain a joyful climate; constant empathy and play-facilitation can exhaust even the most upbeat professor unless boundaries and recovery rituals are built in. Others warn of potential equity gaps: without deliberate scaffolding, improv games or open-mic reflections may privilege extroverted or already-confident students. To counteract that bias, the authors recommend rotating roles (e.g., “silent scribe,” “question poser”) and providing multiple avenues for participation, from verbal storytelling to digital white-board sketches. A third caution concerns assessment alignment. If institutional rubrics reward only product and never process, joy-infused activities risk dismissal as “fluff.” Sample rubrics in the volume therefore credit iterative growth, reflective depth, and collaborative risk-taking alongside traditional accuracy or polish (Ma & He, 2025).

The policy chapter translates these insights into institutional levers. Centers for Teaching and Learning are urged to create “Joy Labs,” small-grant programs coupled with mentorship that let faculty prototype playful or multisensory assignments without jeopardizing course evaluations. At the program level, accrediting bodies could broaden their criteria beyond contact hours to include evidence of student flourishing, for instance, reflective portfolios that track

curiosity spikes or resilience gains. Finally, the authors suggest that universities weave joy metrics into campus climate surveys, legitimizing positive affect as an educational outcome on par with retention or career placement.

Taken together, Camfield’s volume reframes joy from an extracurricular perk to the emotional engine of rigorous intellectual life. By embedding play, vulnerability, and sensory richness into course architecture—and by acknowledging the labor and equity considerations such embedding entails—joy-centered pedagogy promises to move classrooms from sites of performative compliance to laboratories of curiosity, courage, and collective rapture.

Science Education: Pedagogies of Joy (POY)

Making Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) Feel Worth

Smiling About from Deficit Talk to Delight Talk

Tired of watching bright students tune out during labs and exams, Scipio, Greenberg, Keifert, and Lee (2025) decided to flip the script on traditional science instruction. Drawing on critical pedagogy, culturally relevant teaching (Vlach et al., 2023), and affect theory, they unveiled Pedagogies of Joy (POY), a justice-oriented framework that treats emotion as epistemically indispensable, not as motivational sprinkles added after “real learning” is done. POY translates lofty theory into four concrete design moves.

First, teachers begin by Attending to Affective Entanglements. On day one, students map their emotional histories with science—moments of “thrill” (a childhood telescope) and “terror” (a dissected frog gone wrong). Those narratives become case studies that anchor subsequent lessons, signaling that feelings are valid data.

Second, lessons practice Switching Roles. A teacher might open as the resident expert on cell division, but midway through invite a student who breeds orchids to explain how mitosis affects petal coloration. These pivots flatten hierarchy and model intellectual humility.

Third, classrooms are reimagined as a Third Space where local know-how meshes with canonical science. When studying combustion, a student whose family runs a food truck demonstrates stove maintenance; the ensuing discussion braids street-level engineering into textbook thermodynamics.

Finally, POY culminates in Co-Dreaming projects—bio-poetic gardens that pair plant biology with spoken-word performance, or climate-justice comics that visualize local flood data. Students are not just absorbing knowledge; they are imagining futures where that knowledge changes their zip code.

To test the framework, the authors conducted a six-month comparative ethnography in two ninth-grade biology sections at the same urban public high school (54 students each). One class adopted POY; the other followed a standard inquiry model. Pre- and post-surveys measured Science Identity, Situational Interest, and Belonging. The POY results were dramatic: science-identity scores leapt 23 percent ($\Delta = 0.57$ SD, $p < .001$) while the control group flat-lined; situational interest climbed 31 percent and belonging 18 percent. Video micro-analysis told the qualitative story: POY students peppered one another with questions, cracked jokes while modeling mitosis through hand choreography, and erupted into spontaneous song when a microscope revealed dividing onion cells. Field notes also logged friction—student-led tangents sometimes slowed pacing—but teachers judged the trade-off worthwhile for the surge in ownership and joy.

In short, POY shows that when educators invite emotions into the lab coat, students not only feel better—they think better, forging identities as scientists who can question, create, and create a more just world

The Humor Gap

No sooner had *Pedagogies of Joy* begun to circulate than it met a thoughtful rejoinder. In her 2025 response essay, Ryoo applauds Scipio and colleagues for centering justice, yet she argues that POY leaves one crucial affective ingredient under-seasoned: the “unserious” emotions of classroom life—humor, silliness, belly-laughs shared in the back row. These eruptions of play, she says, often provide the very cognitive glue that helps abstract concepts stick, but they remain undertheorized and under protected.

Ryoo locates the problem in what she calls the lingering specter of the “school face,” a disciplinary mask that frames laughter as distraction unless it arrives on cue from the teacher’s pre-approved joke. To illustrate, she turns to video footage of her own ninth-grade chemistry class where Latino and Pacific-Islander students riff comedic analogies for ionic bonds—“They’re clingy like my little brother!”—only to fall abruptly silent when the instructor pivots back to “serious mode.” The laughter that could have opened a door to deeper understanding instead becomes a moment of self-censorship.

To destigmatize this playful irreverence, Ryoo proposes three pragmatic tools. First are “Laugh Logs,” quick exit-tickets where students jot down any joke, pun, or meme that helped a concept click; the logs not only validate humor as legitimate sense-making but also provide teachers with formative feedback. Second, she sketches “Joyful Noise Policies” that distinguish disruptive ridicule from generative laughter, granting sanctioned space for the latter—think

five-minute “riff windows” after introducing a tricky idea. Finally, she calls for assessment flexibility that credits humorous multimodal artifacts—memes about osmosis, parody raps on the periodic table—when they demonstrate genuine conceptual mastery.

Ryoo’s critique does not dismiss POY; it extends it, insisting that any pedagogy of joy must embrace the full tonal spectrum of affect, from solemn justice work to outright silliness. Only then, she contends, will classrooms truly liberate the emotional energies that power enduring learning.

Toward a Broader Pedagogy of Joyful Science

Taken together, Scipio et al.’s outcomes and Ryoo’s critique suggest that affect-rich practice is both fruitful and incomplete. Future POY iterations might embed structured humor scaffolds—meme contests for physics laws, “dad-joke duels” to review taxonomy—to fully harness laughter’s mnemonic power. Moreover, professional-development workshops could coach teachers to read laughter not as lost instructional time but as evidence of cognitive play and social safety.

By integrating justice-grounded relationality with unabashed fun, Pedagogies of Joy offer a roadmap for turning STEM rooms into sites of wonder, wit, and world-making, where rigorous inquiry and raucous laughter are complementary, not competing, sounds.

Emotional Footprints and Learning Curves

Why Joy Spikes Leave Cognitive Traces

Mapping Emotions as Data

In a longitudinal mixed-methods study, Ekström, Raatikainen, and Isacson (2021) coined the term “emotional footprint” to describe the affective residue that learning activities leave on students over time. Working with 112 Finnish university students enrolled in a

project-based engineering course, the researchers equipped participants with a mobile app that prompted emotion check-ins—joy, curiosity, frustration, confusion, boredom—at the end of each class session and major project milestone.

Key Methodological Features

To capture learning as a dynamic, lived process rather than a series of isolated moments, Ekström and colleagues (2021) introduced three methodological innovations. First, they built temporal granularity into the design. Instead of relying on pre- and post-semester surveys, the researchers prompted students to log their dominant emotion at the close of each of fourteen weekly class meetings. This cadence enabled the team to trace full affective trajectories, identifying peaks of exhilaration, valleys of frustration, and plateau periods of steady engagement, rather than taking a single snapshot that might miss the drama of change.

Each entry was tagged with its context, such as listening to a lecture, group debate, or hands-on work, allowing emotional data to be linked to specific teaching activities. This approach enabled researchers to track how instructional methods affected mood. At the semester's end, students wrote a 1,500-word reflective essay to connect emotions to learning outcomes.

Using a validated rubric, they scored each essay for metacognitive depth, the ability to transfer theory to practice, and the quality of critical self-evaluation. Together, these three features, high-resolution time series, activity-based tagging, and performance-linked assessment, created a rich dataset that tied the contours of students' emotional journeys directly to the sophistication of their intellectual growth.

Findings

The data painted a vivid emotional topography of the semester. First, joy consistently spiked during moments of collaborative discovery. Whenever a project team cracked an unexpected design glitch or suddenly saw how two concepts dovetailed, the end-of-session check-ins lit up with reports of elation. These peaks were not random; they clustered precisely around the shared “aha” experiences that punctuated the course.

Second, joy proved to be more than a feel-good footnote—it carried predictive weight. A multiple-regression analysis showed that the average intensity of joy recorded during these discovery episodes accounted for 21 percent of the variance in final reflective-essay scores ($r = .46, p < .001$), even after the researchers controlled for students’ prior GPA and their baseline interest in engineering. In other words, the more joy students felt while solving problems together, the deeper and more insightful their end-of-semester reflections turned out to be.

Finally, the strongest essays emerged from students whose emotional journeys were the most dynamic. Visual heat maps revealed learning curves that looked less like smooth ramps and more like roller coasters—oscillating among joy, confusion, frustration, and relief. Those learners who experienced the widest swings, yet had instructional scaffolds to navigate them, ultimately produced the most integrative essays. The finding suggests that emotional turbulence is not a detriment but a cognitive catalyst when students have the support to interpret and harness their feelings along the way.

Interpretive Model

To explain why emotional turbulence translated into deeper learning, Ekström and colleagues sketched what they call an “Emotion–Cognition Co-Enactment” model. The process begins with a *Spark Phase*, when a team hits a snag and collective confusion jolts cognitive arousal—attention sharpens, questions proliferate, and the search for solutions intensifies. If the

group perseveres, it moves into a *Resolve Phase*: a breakthrough occurs, prompting a surge of shared joy.

That joy is not merely pleasant; it widens attentional bandwidth, encouraging students to knit together ideas that previously seemed unrelated, and it strengthens encoding, stamping the moment into long-term memory with unusual clarity. Finally, in the *Integrate Phase*, students revisit the episode in their reflective essays. Because the breakthrough was so emotionally vivid, they can replay it in rich detail, using the episode as a scaffold to anchor abstract principles—thermodynamics, systems thinking—in personal narrative. The result is metacognitive writing that is both analytically rigorous and experientially grounded.

Pedagogical Implications

These findings invite teachers to rethink emotional management in the classroom. Rather than ironing out every bump to preserve a veneer of calm, instructors can purposefully design “safe micro-dilemmas”—small but authentic challenges that trigger brief confusion and then invite collaborative sleuthing. When the class cracks the puzzle, the ensuing joy spike serves as a potent memory tag, increasing the odds that the concept will stick.

To monitor whether these engineered swings are productive or overwhelming, educators can introduce weekly emotion journals; the entries function like real-time dashboards, revealing if any student is languishing in a prolonged valley of frustration that calls for extra scaffolding. Finally, when a breakthrough occurs, it should not pass uncommented. Taking a few minutes to debrief the peak—asking students why the moment felt joyful and what strategies unlocked it—makes the tacit explicit. Learners begin to see that peer explanation, perspective shifting, or iterative prototyping were the engines of their delight, and they are more likely to deploy those same moves the next time they hit a cognitive wall.

Cautionary Notes

Balancing the Emotional Ledger

Ekström and colleagues are careful to point out that not all emotional turbulence is constructive. Their heatmap analyses revealed a tipping point: when frustration lingered across multiple sessions without a clear path to resolution, students' engagement scores and attendance began to slide. In interviews, those learners described feeling “stuck in the mud” or “left behind while everyone else raced ahead.” The implication is clear: an environment that pursues perpetual positivity by eliminating struggle is pedagogically thin, yet an environment that revels in unsolved adversity risks breeding resignation and withdrawal.

The pedagogical sweet spot, then, is a dynamic affective landscape—one in which bouts of confusion or even momentary despair are intentionally scaffolded toward shared moments of triumph. In practical terms, this means designing tasks with reachable complexity, cueing timely hints, and cultivating a classroom ethos where asking for help is framed as strategic rather than shameful. Such structures ensure that emotional valleys become launch pads for the joy peaks that drive long-term learning.

Taken together, the study encourages educators to treat emotions as cognitive catalysts and diagnostic dashboards rather than background noise to be silenced. Joy earned through collective problem-solving leaves a vivid “emotional footprint,” imprinting ideas more deeply and equipping learners with the confidence to transfer insights to novel challenges. Conversely, prolonged frustration without support serves as an early warning signal that instructional design needs recalibration. Attending to these emotional contours is not a detour from rigorous education; it is, as Ekström et al. demonstrate, a direct route to deeper reflection, more creative transfer, and ultimately, more innovative thinking.

Leadership, Work, and Organizational Joy

Emotional Culture and Psychological Safety

Aboramadan and Kundi's (2023) three-wave study of 340 employees in six Pakistani telecommunications firms advances a compelling argument: joy, when cultivated as an explicit, visible feature of an organization's emotional culture, becomes a strategic asset that outperforms other positive affects such as pride or gratitude. The researchers measured joy culture, psychological safety, relational attachment, and employee wellbeing at monthly intervals, then tested the causal pathways with cross-lagged structural-equation modeling. The results were striking. A climate in which smiles, laughter, and playful banter were commonplace predicted higher psychological safety ($\beta = .39, p < .001$) and stronger relational bonds among coworkers ($\beta = .27, p < .01$). These two interpersonal resources fully mediated the link between joy culture and employee wellbeing: once feelings of safety and attachment were accounted for, the direct effect of joy on wellbeing vanished.

Equally revealing was the comparative analysis. Substituting pride or gratitude in place of joy weakened the model's predictive power, suggesting that joy's social diffusion and non-competitive quality make it uniquely effective at knitting teams together. Pride, after all, is often zero-sum and can trigger status anxiety, while gratitude typically flows vertically from subordinate to supervisor and may fail to strengthen peer relationships. Joy, by contrast, spreads horizontally; it invites simultaneous participation, allowing everyone to laugh at the same joke or celebrate the same small win.

The practical upshot is that organizations can no longer afford to view joy as a pleasant byproduct of success. Visible rituals, Monday "meme circles," sprint-completion dance breaks, or Slack channels dedicated to daily delights, signal low interpersonal threat and cue employees

that it is safe to speak up, experiment, and occasionally fail. Leaders who open meetings with lighthearted stories or self-deprecating humor flatten hierarchies and cultivate candor, while onboarding programs that showcase previous team celebrations encode joy as a core value from day one. Even the design of physical and digital spaces can nudge culture in the right direction; a doodle wall in the break room or a #joy-drops thread online offers low-effort entry points for spontaneous bonding.

Yet the authors also caution against naïve universalism. Because their data come from a high-power-distance culture, overt displays of joy may signal safety more starkly than in flatter organizational settings, and what counts as joyful expression can vary across gender, personality, and subculture. Moreover, the study—though longitudinal—remains correlational. Future research should field-test structured joy interventions in randomized teams, pair survey data with behavioral or physiological measures, and explore whether joy carries the same weight in tightly regulated sectors such as finance or aviation, where emotional displays are constrained.

Even with these caveats, the message is clear: Jjoy is not a frivolous mood enhancer but a relational glue and psychological bulwark. By legitimizing laughter, storytelling, and celebration as everyday practices, leaders can build workplaces where well-being, creativity, and retention arise not in spite of business pressures but alongside the shared pleasure of facing them together.

Joy Centered Leadership Frameworks

Leadership scholars are increasingly arguing that joy should migrate from the periphery of “office perks” to the very center of strategy. Three recent frameworks—each emerging from different organizational contexts—illustrate how that migration can look in practice.

At Black in Marine Science (BIMS), Adams and Moore (2024) have developed what they call the Formula for Joy (F4J). BIMS is a professional collective that supports Black scholars and

practitioners in an ocean-science sector where they remain woefully under-represented. The F4J framework weaves joy into the group’s everyday fabric through two signature practices. First are self-discovery retreats, three-day off-site gatherings where members explore personal narratives, identify core values, and map those values onto career aspirations. Second are “Joy Jams,” weekly 30-minute virtual meet-ups that open with a communal playlist—participants add songs that made them smile that week—and segue into rapid-fire shout-outs for small wins. In-depth interviews conducted six months after implementation revealed a marked increase in felt belonging, particularly among early-career BIPOC members who reported, “I no longer feel like an outlier in marine science; I feel part of a joyous wave.”

For larger, more heterogeneous workplaces, Liu (2023) offers the “3P” leadership model: People, Purpose, Praise. The framework begins with People, urging managers to inventory individual strengths and passions rather than slot employees into generic roles. Purpose comes next: teams co-craft mission statements that link daily tasks to a socially meaningful north star, whether reducing carbon footprints or improving patient care. Finally, Praise formalizes recognition rituals—micro-thank-you notes, public Slack kudos, or end-of-week “gratitude broadcasts”—to keep collective morale buoyant. Library leaders, too, are codifying ‘equitable conditions for joy’ through annotated resource lists and reflective discussion guides (Talis et al., 2025). Case studies from tech startups to hospital units show that the 3P model not only elevates engagement scores but also reduces turnover, suggesting that joy grounded in shared purpose travels well across industry lines.

If Liu focuses on system-wide levers, Lotardo (2024) zooms in on the individual employee with her concept of “joy maps.” A joy map is a one-page visual canvas divided into quadrants—Tasks, Talents, Tribulations, and Thrills. Employees spend an hour listing routine

duties, signature skills, chronic pain points, and the moments at work when they feel most alive. The exercise often exposes surprising misalignments—say, a financial analyst whose thrill quadrant fills with mentoring junior staff. Managers then use the map to restructure responsibilities, pairing high-skill, high-joy activities with organizational needs. Pilot programs in a mid-size manufacturing firm showed a 15-percent jump in discretionary effort and a sharp decline in “quiet quitting” behaviors within six months of adopting joy maps.

Taken together, these frameworks share a common thesis: joy is not incidental to performance; it is its accelerant. F4J supplies a culturally specific answer for affinity groups seeking psychological safety in historically exclusionary fields. Liu’s 3P model offers a scalable blueprint for diverse organizations intent on weaving joy into mission, people practices, and daily rituals. Lotardo’s joy maps, meanwhile, give managers a practical diagnostic tool to surface and deploy dormant sources of individual enthusiasm. Whether through communal playlists, purpose-driven metrics, or personal canvases, the message rings the same: leadership that treats joy as a strategic input reaps dividends in belonging, engagement, and retention.

Temporal Dynamics of Extrinsic Rewards

In a meticulous dive into 27 years of German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) data, Otto et al. (2022) set out to quantify how long the joy of a job promotion actually lingers. The sample was robust—more than 11,000 wage-earning adults whose careers had been tracked since the early 1990s. Each year respondents rated their overall job satisfaction and logged any promotions or pay raises received in the prior twelve months. By stitching together these annual snapshots, the researchers created a kind of emotional cardiogram that pulsed with every rung climbed on the corporate ladder. Another study of longitudinal nursing data echo this law of diminishing

returns: promotions boosted vocational identity for roughly 12 months before regressing toward baseline (Liske et al., 2023).

The headline finding was both intuitive and sobering: promotions deliver a sharp jolt of joy, but the voltage fades quickly—usually in under two years. Graphing the data revealed a steep ascent in self-reported satisfaction during the promotion year, followed by a gradual slope back to baseline that rarely extended beyond month eighteen. The decay curve was even steeper for women, who on average lost their “promotion glow” four months earlier than their male counterparts. The authors speculate that gendered expectations—added workload without proportional authority, or persistent pay inequity even after a title bump—may erode the initial high for women more rapidly.

Why does the buzz wear off? Otto and colleagues point to the hedonic treadmill: once the novelty of a new title, office, or salary band becomes the new normal, attention shifts back to daily hassles—email overload, performance metrics, office politics. Promotions also recalibrate peer groups; the thrill of surpassing former colleagues can morph into anxiety about keeping pace with new ones.

For leaders, the practical takeaway is unmistakable. If extrinsic rewards have a half-life, organizations must double down on intrinsic motivators—ongoing autonomy, skill development, meaningful project work, and relational cultures of joy. A one-time promotion may open the door to temporary elation, but a workplace that nourishes curiosity, mastery, and belonging can keep joy in steady circulation long after the celebratory cake is gone.

Mentorship and Editorial Reflections

Joy in Healthcare, Medicine, and Spirituality

Otto and colleagues' analysis unfolds almost like a time-lapse film of workplace elation and erosion. Picture an engineer in Hamburg who finally earns the coveted "Senior" badge on her business card. On survey day she ticks the top end of the job-satisfaction scale—her salary bump, new mentoring responsibilities, and the congratulatory buzz in the office cafeteria all feel intoxicating. Eighteen months later, however, the follow-up questionnaire lands in her inbox. The badge has dulled, performance targets have tightened, and she now fields late-night support calls meant for the junior staff she used to be. Her satisfaction score slips toward its old baseline, mirroring the aggregate trajectory Otto et al. observed across a quarter-century of panel waves (2023; Hughes et al., 2024).

The researchers could pinpoint this "happiness half-life" with unusual precision because the SOEP follows individuals year after year, capturing both event timing (the exact year of promotion) and lagged sentiment (how that event reverberates in subsequent waves). A fixed-effects model controlled for personality traits and macro-economic shocks, isolating the pure emotional dividend of career advancement. What emerged was a parabola shape: sharp ascent in year 0, modest elevation in year 1, and near-total regression by year 2. For women, the drop-off was swifter, a discrepancy the authors link to the "glass cliff" phenomenon, promotions that arrive bundled with disproportionate stress, limited authority, or persisting pay gaps (Burger et al., 2020).

Otto et al.'s findings nudge leaders to pivot from fire-and-forget rewards to renewable sources of workplace joy. They advocate sliding a continuous stream of intrinsic motivators, autonomy in project selection, visible pathways for skill mastery, and relational cultures rich in psychological safety, under the door that a promotion initially cracks open. Imagine redesigning the engineer's post-promotion experience so that her new title comes with a discretionary

“innovation budget,” quarterly skill-share summits, and a peer-mentoring circle that meets over coffee rather than in closed-door reviews. Such structural reinforcements could stretch the initial thrill into a more durable sense of purpose, defying the decay curve that the German data make so plain.

The broader lesson is stark but hopeful: extrinsic jolts light the fuse, but intrinsic architecture keeps the flame burning. Organizations able to weave mastery, meaning, and mutual recognition into the everyday fabric of work won’t need to rely on title inflation or one-off bonuses to keep morale afloat; joy will have a standing invitation, not merely a fleeting cameo.

Restoring Joy Post Pandemic

Re-infusing Joy into High-Acuity Medicine

Intensive-care corridors are notorious for fluorescent lights, alarm fatigue, and a relentless calculus of life-and-death decisions. Against that backdrop, Gould (2022) proposes a deceptively simple intervention: replace—or at least complement—traditional morbidity-and-mortality conferences with weekly “joy rounds.” During these ten-minute huddles, clinicians pause amid ventilator checks and dosage calculations to share a recent moment that sparked delight—an extubated patient’s first laugh, a thank-you card from a family, a flawlessly placed central line on the first try.

In a pilot across two critical-care units, staff completed the Maslach Burnout Inventory before implementation and again three months later. The result was a twelve-percent drop in self-reported burnout, a delta sizable enough to turn administrators’ heads. Gould argues that joy rounds do more than cheer people up; they flip clinicians’ attentional spotlight from chronic deficit (what went wrong) to episodic abundance (what went right), thereby replenishing the emotional reserves needed for sustained high-performance care.

Echoing this sentiment from an academic perch, Solnick (2024) insists that curiosity-driven research offers another antidote to clinical bureaucracy. In infectious-disease wards swamped by paperwork and protocol, he carves out “wonder hours” for mini-experiments—culturing unknown flora from hospital sinks or sequencing unusual pathogens from travel-clinic patients. The thrill of discovery, he claims, inoculates scientists against the numbing effects of endless policy updates and insurance forms. “Each new microbe,” Solnick writes, “is a reminder that medicine is, at its heart, an adventure story.”

Narrative Medicine and Family Rituals

Sometimes, though, joy enters the hospital through the service elevator of ordinary ritual rather than the main doors of policy or research. In her reflective JAMA essay, Ho (2025) recounts how a seemingly mundane act—folding dumplings with her Taiwanese family in a tiny apartment kitchen—became a “dumpling narrative” she now brings into pediatric rounds. When a parent wrestles with a child’s chronic illness, Ho asks about family recipes or food traditions, using culinary memory as a bridge to trust and shared humanity. The ritual becomes a low-tech form of narrative medicine, forging clinician-family solidarity one pleat at a time.

A similar infusion of delight animates Koubar (2023), who describes the high-stakes birth of a baby to a mother dependent on dialysis. In a specialty that often delivers grim prognoses, the safe delivery was celebrated by the entire nephrology and obstetrics teams as a “miracle of joy.” Nurses decorated IV poles with pastel ribbons, nephrologists co-signed the birth certificate, and the attending neonatologist played “Ode to Joy” on a portable speaker during the first Apgar assessment. Koubar uses the story to argue that marking such moments with ceremonial flair acknowledges the emotional labor of medicine and reminds teams why the grueling routines matter.

Across these vignettes—systemic joy rounds, curiosity sprints, dumpling rituals, and miracle celebrations—the through-line is clear: joy is not an optional garnish in healthcare; it is a sustaining nutrient. Whether invoked through structured huddles, scientific wonder, cultural rituals, or communal celebration, joy replenishes the empathy and focus clinicians need to navigate the relentless complexity of modern medicine.

Theology of Serious Joy

In the crowded landscape of self-help mantras urging readers to “choose happiness,” theologian John Piper (2023) offers a distinctly weightier proposition: “serious joy.” Rooted in the Reformed tradition, Piper defines this joy as desire fully satisfied by the spectacle of God’s glory. It is “serious” not because it is dour, but because its object—divine beauty—does not shift with market downturns, medical diagnoses, or personal failure. He illustrates the concept with the image of a deepest anchor: storms may batter the vessel, but the chain holds fast, tethered to bedrock that predates the waves themselves.

Building on that foundation, Denk and Wright (2023) broaden the frame, arguing that joy is not a post-script to salvation but integral to human flourishing within what they call the divine economy. Drawing on Augustine’s *ordo amoris* (rightly ordered loves) and Aquinas’s notion of beatitude (ultimate happiness in God), they contend that joy operates like spiritual gravity, pulling human desire toward its true center. To illustrate, they recount the story of a cancer patient who, even as her body weakened, found herself “strangely buoyant” when reading Psalm 16: “In your presence there is fullness of joy.” Her circumstances did not improve—indeed, they worsened—but her affective orientation shifted from fear to a curious, resilient delight.

Both works emphasize that serious joy is fiercely realistic: it makes no promises of circumstantial ease, yet it insists that a durable gladness is available in and through adversity. Piper remarks, “Christian joy is not the absence of pain but the presence of Christ in pain.” Denk and Wright echo this, framing joy as both a present taste and a future pledge—an appetizer of eschatological feasting to come.

For pastors and lay readers alike, the practical implications are counter-cultural. Rather than seeking perpetual positivity or numbing distractions, believers are invited to cultivate practices that fix the gaze on divine grandeur: *lectio divina* on creation Psalms, communal singing that narrates redemption history, or silent awe before the Eucharist. Such habits, the authors claim, train the heart to “make much of God,” and in that magnification, joy wells up—serious, steady, and stubbornly unshaken by the tremors of ordinary life.

In a world where joy is often sold as momentary sparkle, the theology of serious joy recasts it as covenantal sunlight—steady, nourishing, and strong enough to light the path even when the clouds refuse to part.

Grief, Loss, and the Subtle Work of Reclaiming Joy

“How do you laugh again when the room still smells like the one who is gone?” That question animates Threatt and Beckwith’s (2021) guide for mourners, a book that refuses the binary of either-or emotion. Instead, the authors propose weekly “grief practices” designed to help readers carry joy alongside sorrow rather than waiting for sorrow to expire. One exercise involves writing a gratitude letter—not to the deceased, but to a living person who unknowingly lightens the mourner’s load, perhaps the neighbor who brings in the trash cans or the coworker who silently refills the coffee pot. Another practice urges the creation of a memory garden, a windowsill planter or backyard plot seeded with the loved one’s favorite herbs or flowers. Each

morning's watering becomes a tactile conversation between loss and life, a ritual that sprouts green shoots of joy without uprooting grief's roots.

If Threatt and Beckwith offer structured scaffolding, Mishra (2025) provides narrative proof that the scaffolding holds even in the most high-stakes environments. A practicing anesthesiologist, Mishra recounts perioperative vignettes where joy cohabits with fear, sweat, and fluorescent urgency. In one scene, he stands over a febrile child awaiting emergency surgery. The OR hums with beeping monitors and the metallic staccato of instrument trays. Just before induction, Mishra spots the child's mother tracing invisible circles on the palm of her sedated son—a family ritual for courage. For a split second, amid the suction and the countdown, the entire team feels the circle too, an intimate loop of hope that sharpens their skill and steadies their hands. Mishra calls such moments “joy flashes,” brief but luminously sufficient to navigate the tunnel of fatigue and risk.

Together, these authors insist that joy reclaimed after loss is neither accidental nor cheap. It is crafted—sometimes with pen and seed packet, other times with gloved hands and whispered circles—through deliberate acts that honor the dead, bolster the living, and remind everyone in the room that the heart can, and perhaps must, hold more than one note at a time.

Creative, Embodied, and Lifespan Joy

Craft, Cartography, and the Spark of Scientific Wonder

In an era when GIS dashboards and satellite feeds can generate a map with a mouse-click, James Cheshire (2025) issues a lively provocation to his fellow geographers: pick up a pencil again. Writing in *Transactions*, he argues that the discipline's head-long rush toward big-data analytics has eclipsed the tactile joy that once drew scholars to cartography—the smell of vellum, the meditative sweep of an inked contour line. Cheshire recounts visiting a university

archive and unrolling a nineteenth-century hand-drawn city plan; the uneven hatch marks of riverbanks and the faint smudge where the cartographer must have paused for tea “radiated a humanity modern screen maps rarely convey.”

He proposes studio-lab hybrids where students alternate between coding spatial algorithms and sketching neighborhood maps with watercolor washes—art and analytics in reciprocal conversation. The goal is not nostalgia for obsolete tools but a re-enchantment of spatial thinking, one that reminds practitioners that a map is both a data visualization and a story you can feel under your fingertips.

A parallel call echoes from the chemistry bench. In their manifesto on “joyful science,” Rickhaus and Rickhaus (2024) lament that many university labs now resemble sterile production lines: pipette, vortex, spreadsheet, repeat. To rekindle curiosity, they advocate hands-on tinkering paired with narrative framing. One example is the “molecule maker-space,” where first-years build giant 3-D models from recycled materials before ever touching a beaker. Another is the “reaction storytelling hour” at the end of lab sessions; instead of a dry results debrief, students recount their experiment as a hero’s journey—reagents as characters, catalysts as plot twists, color changes as cliff-hangers. Pre- and post-course surveys show a spike in students describing chemistry as “surprising,” “playful,” and—most telling—“beautiful.”

Though emerging from different fields, Cheshire and the Rickhaus duo converge on a single thesis: craft is not the enemy of rigor; it is often its spark. The tactile act of shading a river or hot-gluing a benzene ring slows cognition just enough for wonder to slip in. Stories wrap data in meaning, making abstraction memorable. By restoring artistic craft and narrative play to analytic domains, these scholars believe we can resurrect the child-like awe that first lured many

of us toward geography's wandering lines or chemistry's fizzing flasks—and, in doing so, sustain a more joyful, and therefore more resilient, scientific practice.

Ritual and Community

How Shared Practices Turn Isolation into Joyful Belonging

In a sweeping review of a documentary series on Southern Black folkways, Pearley (2025) shows how ordinary rituals—cracking pecans on a front porch, seasoning a cast-iron skillet for a fish fry, calling “Can I get a witness?” across a church sanctuary—function as both wound dressings and joy engines. These practices, she writes, “take the raw material of historical trauma and cook it down into something aromatic enough to pull the whole block outside.”

A Friday night fish fry is never only about food; the crackle of hot oil synchronizes with Motown crooners on a boom box, toddlers chase lightning bugs, elders swap stories that bend sorrow into laughter. Call-and-response preaching works the same alchemy: the pastor's petition is incomplete until the congregation fires back an “Amen,” converting individual lament into a collective shout that shakes the rafters. Pearley argues that such rituals convert private pain into public rhythm, producing a joy that is inseparable from community memory.

Where Pearley traces lineage, Romano (2023) supplies a field guide for contemporary seekers. Her book *Build Your Village* outlines six “villager” archetypes: Connector, Cheerleader, Mind-Opener, Fire-Keeper, Safe-Harbor, and Challenger; each fulfilling a distinct communal function. The Fire-Keeper plans birthday potlucks; the Safe-Harbor keeps an extra key and a kettle on the stove; the Challenger dares friends to run the 5 K they keep postponing. Romano pairs each archetype with “joy practices”: the Connector hosts monthly soup swaps, the Mind-Opener curates neighborhood film nights, the Cheerleader sends surprise playlists on

gloomy Mondays. Readers are prompted to map which roles they already have in their lives and which remain vacant—then to recruit or nurture missing villagers. The result is a practical matrix for sustaining social joy, scalable from apartment hallways to church basements to Slack channels (Cissi et al., 2024).

Together, Pearley’s ethnographic lens and Romano’s how-to pragmatism reveal a common truth: joy rarely thrives in solitude. It ripens in the heat of grease popping, the echo of a well-timed “Amen,” the clink of mason jars in a soup exchange. Ritual turns time into rhythm; community turns rhythm into resonance; and resonance—whether born of ancestral folkways or modern friendship grids—breeds the durable, collective joy that can outlast grief, grind, and the thinness of digital life.

Seasonal Mindsets and Daily Habits

Training the Calendar and the Cortex to Make Room for Joy

When the temperature dives and daylight shrinks, many people brace for a season of emotional hibernation. Leibowitz (2024) invites readers to do the opposite. In *How to Winter*, she argues that the cold months offer a laboratory for “hygge-inspired” joy, drawing on Norwegian resilience studies that show lower rates of seasonal depression in Arctic towns than in much sunnier latitudes. The trick, Leibowitz says, lies in adopting a “wintertime mindset”: instead of resisting the darkness, Norwegians lean into ritualized coziness, candles flickering against frost-fogged windows, wool blankets draped over shared sofas, communal pots of reindeer stew that steam up ski lodges.

She recounts one Norwegian family who logs weekly “moon walks,” bundling toddlers into sleds to hunt for aurora streaks at midnight. The ritual transforms what outsiders might call forbidding darkness into a canvas for celestial wonder. Leibowitz pairs each anecdote with

simple “habit kernels”: schedule a fika break at 3 p.m. when the sun quits early; swap overhead fluorescents for warm string lights; keep a “winter wonders” journal cataloging icy leaf patterns or the crunch of snow under boots. The message is clear: winter doesn’t steal joy—it stores it in different places.

If Leibowitz reorients our relationship to seasons, Tom Newberry (2021) tackles the micro-weather of the mind. His 4:8 Principle devotional—named after Philippians 4:8, “Whatever is true... noble... lovely... think about such things”—offers a 40-day program to replace mental blizzards with joy affirmations. Each day opens with a brief reflection—say, “Joy chooses gratitude over grumbling,” followed by three action prompts: write, speak, and move.

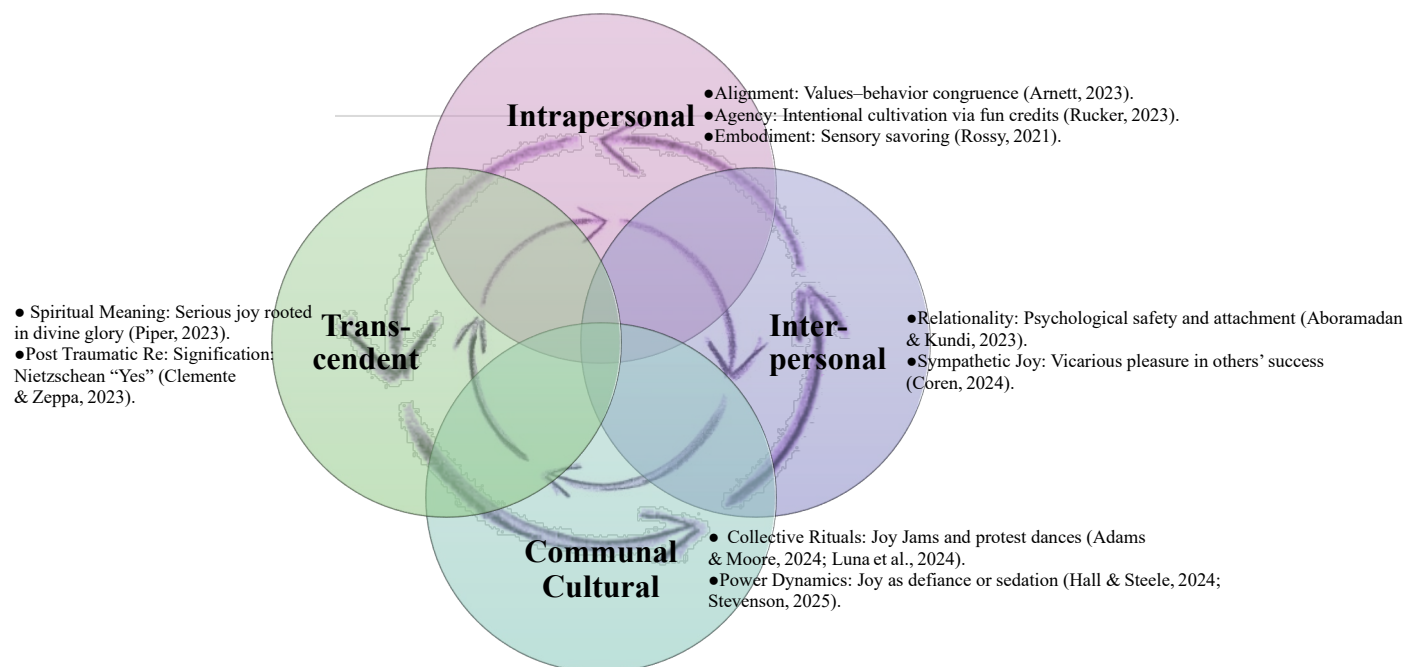
Write might ask readers to list five unexpectedly beautiful sounds they heard that morning; speak encourages reciting an affirmation aloud (“Today I will spotlight progress, not perfection”); move suggests a body cue like stretching arms sky-wide to mimic a sunrise. Newberry pepper-sprinkles the pages with “trigger cards,” perforated slips that readers can tear out and tape to bathroom mirrors or car dashboards: Flip the thought, feel the shift. Cognitive-behavioral research whispers beneath the scripture, teaching that thought replacement can rewire neural pathways when practiced daily, much like weight-training for the pre-frontal cortex.

Together, Leibowitz and Newberry form a double helix of seasonal and cerebral habit-making. One trains the calendar—lighting candles at 3 p.m. to celebrate dusk; the other trains the cortex—flipping anxious scripts into affirming ones before the coffee finishes brewing. Both insist that joy is less a stroke of luck than a discipline of attention: whether you’re gazing at northern lights or a sticky note that says Choose delight, the act of noticing becomes

the gateway to gladness. The result is a life where the chill of winter or the chill of a negative thought can be met not with dread but with a practiced, almost reflexive, spark of joy.

The Multilayered Model of Joy (MMJ)

Figure 1. A Multilayered Model of Joy (MMJ)



Implications for Practice

Turning Theory into Day-to-Day Joy Engines

The multilayered model of joy may dwell in scholarly prose, but its power lies in pragmatic translation. Across four professional and communal arenas—organizations, education, healthcare, and spiritual formation—the research points to specific levers leaders can pull tomorrow morning.

In the corporate world, start with an “emotional-culture audit.” Borrowing from Aboramadan and Kundi’s survey on psychological safety, HR teams can pulse employees every quarter: How often do you see genuine smiles? Does laughter feel welcome or risky? The data function like a dashboard light, revealing joy-rich departments and emotional dead-zones. Next,

train managers in emotion acknowledgment. Before diving into metrics, a leader might open with, “Let’s name one thing that went well this week and one that felt heavy.” Workshops like Lotardo’s Joy Map guide help supervisors align tasks with team members’ hidden thrill points—turning a spreadsheet wizard into the go-to data storyteller, for instance. Such micro-realignments gather into a culture where joy is not random but architected.

In education, *Pedagogies of Joy* provides scaffolding, but the daily mortar is laughter. Using Scipio et al.’s lesson-planning template, a biology teacher might kick off mitosis with a two-minute meme sprint: students drop the funniest cell-division GIFs into a shared slide deck. Ryoo’s *Laughter Journal* then invites students to jot which jokes or analogies made the concept click. When humor becomes data, teachers can mine it for instructional gold rather than dismiss it as off-task chatter. The result is a classroom where curiosity and cackles share the same desk.

Healthcare settings need joy not as frosting but as fuel. Gould’s three-minute storytelling huddles offer one remedy: before the shift, a nurse recounts a patient’s triumphant first steps post-surgery; colleagues snap fingers in appreciation, cortisol dips, and pagers suddenly sound less shrill. Couple that with micro-breaks for sensory resets: clinicians use a Coursey-inspired vagal-breathing app for sixty seconds between cases, flipping the nervous system from fight-flight to connect-and-care. Gratitude rounds and narrative debriefs transform isolated heroics into shared reservoirs of meaning, buffering teams against burnout’s undertow.

In spiritual communities, joy practices weave together contemplation and celebration. A pastor might distribute Newberry’s 4:8 reflection cards at the end of a sermon, prompting congregants to text a gratitude snapshot before sunset. Small groups reading Gorrell’s *Gravity of Joy* can design “joy liturgies”: begin with communal lament—naming griefs aloud—

then pivot to a candle-lighting ritual where each flame represents a recent delight, no matter how small. By pairing sorrow and gladness in the same breath, worship spaces model theologically rich, emotionally honest joy.

Across these domains, the through-line is intentionality. Joy rarely drops in unannounced; it shows up when systems, whether office workflows, lesson arcs, clinical protocols, or liturgical scripts, make room for it. The tools already exist; what remains is the resolve to wield them, turning theory into a daily choreography where smiles, sighs, and breakthroughs all find their rightful place (see Table 2).

Domain	Recommended Actions	Illustrative Tools
Organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct emotional culture audits. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embed “gratitude nudges” in workflows.
Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sponsor Joy Jams. • Legitimize humor. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional Culture Index (Aboramadan & Kundi, 2023) • Joy Map Workshop (Lotardo, 2024). • Adopt Pedagogies of Joy. • POY Lesson Planner (Scipio et al., 2025); Laughter Journals (Ryoo, 2025).
Healthcare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess affective footprints. • Incorporate micro breaks with vagal breathing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 Minute Story Huddles (Gould, 2022) • Vagal Breath App (Coursey, 2021).
Spiritual Formation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create joy liturgies pairing lament and celebration. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schedule gratitude rounds & narrative debriefs. • Integrate daily 4:8 reflections. • Serious Joy Catechism (Piper, 2023); 4:8 Cards (Newberry, 2021).

Methodological and Epistemic Gaps

Where Joy Research Still Falters

Despite the recent surge of scholarship, the study of joy remains riddled with blind spots that limit both explanatory power and practical reach. Five gaps loom largest.

Intersectionality: Joy Is Sliced Too Thin

A handful of papers explore Black joy, trans joy, or autistic joy, but almost none ask how these identities intersect—for instance, what joy looks like for a low-income, neurodivergent Black woman. Without multivariate sampling frames or disaggregated analyses, findings risk flattening complex lives into single-axis stories. Future studies need recruitment strategies that layer race, gender, class, and neurotype, followed by analytic models able to parse those layers without collapsing them.

Temporal Dynamics: We Know the Spark, Not the Burn Rate

Otto et al. (2022) track the half-life of promotion-induced joy, but such longitudinal rigor is rare. Most research still relies on cross-sectional snapshots that freeze joy in time, leaving unanswered questions: How does joy rebound after grief? Does classroom laughter on Monday predict exam resilience on Friday? We need experience-sampling and time-series designs that follow joy's ebb and flow across hours, weeks, and life stages.

Technological Mediation: AI as Joy Catalyst or Killer?

Matsubara (2025) warns that large-language models may sap the “joy of writing,” yet empirical data remain thin. Conversely, some artists report that AI image generators unlock playful experimentation. The field has yet to examine how algorithmic co-creators amplify or diminish human joy in domains like composing music, drafting sermons, or brainstorming lesson

plans. Mixed-methods RCTs—pairing qualitative diaries with neural or hormonal markers—could illuminate whether AI collaboration is benevolent muse or emotional drain. Chan et al., warn that mindless social-media cycles transform FOMO into maladaptive habits, whereas intentional ‘joy-of-missing-out’ practices restore digital wellbeing (2022).

Measurement: One-Item Scales Can’t Hold Multitudes

Too many studies still hinge on a single Likert item, “I felt joyful today.” Such measures miss physiological signatures (heart-rate variability, oxytocin spikes) and narrative textures (metaphors, sensory detail) that distinguish fleeting pleasure from embodied elation. The next methodological wave needs multimodal instruments: wearable biosensors, linguistic-analysis software for journal entries, even facial-action coding to capture micro-expressions of delight.

Causality: Correlation Makes for Pretty Graphs but Weak Claims

Because most joy research is correlational, we still cannot say with confidence whether, say, psychological safety produces joy or merely co-occurs with it. Field experiments that randomly assign teams to joy-cultivating rituals—weekly meme circles, gratitude rounds—could begin to untangle cause from coincidence. Laboratory studies might manipulate music tempo or room lighting to test causal impacts on joint laughter and creative output.

Addressing these gaps will require interdisciplinary coalitions, heftier funding, and methodological bravery. But without such effort, joy studies risk remaining inspirational rather than instrumental, a good footnote instead of a robust science capable of shaping policy, pedagogy, and public health.

Future Research Agenda

Charting the Next Frontier

A six-point research agenda for the science of joy building on the gaps just identified, the following agenda sketches where the field might travel next if it is serious about turning joy studies into a mature, policy-shaping science.

Launch Cross-Cultural Ethnographies of Neurodivergent Joy

Wassell's (2025) portrait of autistic joy emerges from a Western, largely individualist milieu. But what do tactile cohesion or special-interest immersion look like in a collectivist culture where personal space, family obligation, and communal rhythm differ radically? A comparative ethnography that shadows autistic individuals in, say, rural Japan and urban Brazil could reveal whether sensory refuge is sought in temples, karaoke bars, or somewhere altogether unexpected. The study would test whether environmental affordances—and the joy they summon—are culture-specific improvisations or universal chords.

Deploy High-Frequency Experience-Sampling to Trace Joy's Half-Life

Otto et al. (2022) offer a two-year lens on promotion-related joy; we still lack minute-to-minute data on what they call “happiness half-life.” Smartphone apps could ping participants randomly, asking for a quick emoji check-in each time they feel a “joy micro-burst”—catching a perfect riff on a commute playlist, witnessing a stranger's kindness. Aggregated over weeks, these blips would map the decay curves of everyday delight, providing the time signature needed to design interventions that top up joy before it runs dry.

Run Randomized Controlled Trials on AI-Mediated Joy

Matsubara (2025) raises alarms about ChatGPT draining the pleasure out of writing, but anecdotes cut both ways; some authors report AI spurring playful experimentation. A clean RCT could randomly assign readers to consume AI-generated prose or human-written essays and then measure joy via self-report and physiological proxies—heart-rate variability, perhaps, or even

pupillometry for cognitive engagement. The findings would move the debate from “AI good or bad?” to “AI joyful under which conditions, for whom, and why?”

Advance Critical Joy Studies in Social Movements

Hall & Steele (2024) celebrate hallway dance breaks as academic defiance, while Stevenson (2025) warns that branded joy can anesthetize dissent. A mixed-methods project—participant observation at protests, sentiment analysis of movement hashtags, and in-depth interviews with organizers—could dissect how joy toggles between subversive fuel and commodified product. The goal: craft a typology that predicts when joy amplifies resistance and when it gets co-opted into marketing collateral.

Evaluate Neurodiversity-Friendly Workplaces

Returning to Wassell (2025), imagine corporate pilots that retrofit open-plan offices with sensory-friendly zones: dimmable lights, acoustic baffles, textured fidget stations. Researchers could track changes in employee joy, productivity, and retention among neurodivergent staff compared to control sites. If joy and retention rise in tandem, the data would arm HR departments with a business case for universal design rather than disability accommodation alone.

Develop a Multimodal, Multilayered Joy Scale (MJS)

Current metrics lean too heavily on single-item surveys. A next-gen Multilayered Joy Scale would integrate self-report items for cognitive appraisal, wearable sensors for autonomic markers, and AI-assisted narrative coding that captures metaphor and imagery. Pilot testing could validate whether spikes in HRV synchronize with evocative language, “warm electricity,” for instance—providing a richer composite picture of joy’s mental, bodily, and linguistic footprints.

Taken together, these six research streams promise to move joy studies from a patchwork of inspiring anecdotes toward a robust, intersectional, and technologically savvy science—one capable of informing policy, architecture, pedagogy, and workplace design with the same authority that stress research now wields.

Conclusion

Joy refuses to sit still under a single microscope or within a single hymnbook. One moment it fires as a neurochemical spark—a pulse of dopamine-and-oxytocin that sends cheeks upward and heart-rate variability soaring. The next, it rises as a collective anthem, braided through protest chants, choir refrains, or the roar of a stadium wave. It can hide inside a playful gesture, a wink between lab partners when the titration finally turns pink, or lodge deep as a spiritual anchor that keeps a grieving parent steady at 3 a.m. Sometimes joy flashes like confetti in a momentary celebration; sometimes it settles into the long, low hum of a durable orientation toward life's goodness.

This review set out to make sense of that unruly pluralism. Drawing on forty-six peer-reviewed sources published between 2021 and 2025, we sifted laboratory data, ethnographic portraits, theological meditations, and organizational case studies. Through Thomas-and-Harden thematic synthesis, six recurrent motifs surfaced: alignment (the felt fit between values and action), relationality (the safety and symmetry of connection), agency (the thrill of influence, even on a micro scale), embodiment (the sensory textures of being alive), resistance (joy as defiance against oppression or drudgery), and transcendence (contact with something larger than the self).

These motifs became the scaffolding for the Multilayered Model of Joy (MMJ), which nests personal, interpersonal, communal-cultural, and transcendent layers in a concentric dance

of feedback loops. The model suggests that a mindful breath (Layer 1) sung in harmony (Layer 2) at a justice rally (Layer 3) under an open sky of ultimate meaning (Layer 4) generates an exponential, not additive, experience of joy.

Seen through this lens, joy is no escapist luxury. It is a vital human good—as essential to systemic wellbeing as clean water or fair wages. In workplaces, it undergirds psychological safety and sparks innovation; in classrooms, it widens attention and deepens transfer; in hospitals, it buffers burnout and restores clinical curiosity; in liberation movements, it fuels stamina and collective imagination. Where joy is absent, cynicism and brittleness creep in; where it is cultivated, resilience and creativity flourish.

The mandate for scholars and practitioners is therefore urgent: cultivate, protect, and interrogate joy with the same rigor we devote to studying trauma or stress. That means multi-year longitudinal designs, intersectional sampling, multimodal measurement, and policy pilots that treat joy as a key performance indicator, not a byproduct. Only then will the labor of justice, healing, and education proceed not merely in the long shadow of pain but also—decisively—in the radiance of joy.

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Appendix A

Glossary of Terms

Affective resistance. A category of practices or discourses in which joy is mobilized to challenge, subvert, or withstand systems of domination—e.g., impromptu hallway dance parties that contest neoliberal productivity norms (Hall & Steele, 2024) or the reclamation of “Black Joy™” against racial-capitalist appropriation (Sobande & Amponsah, 2025).

Agency. The felt capacity to influence one’s circumstances, ranging from micro-choices (e.g., “feed-forward” peer review that empowers doctoral writers) to large-scale social interventions; in the MMJ it functions as a core motif that converts intention into joyful momentum (Areskoug Josefsson et al., 2024).

Alignment. A state in which personal values, goals, and behaviors cohere, yielding a distinctive “rightness” that often precedes or accompanies joy (Arnett, 2023).

Appraisal. The rapid cognitive evaluation of a situation’s relevance, control, certainty, and congruence with goals; joy is typically triggered by appraisals of “union with what matters” and high perceived control (Watkins, 2020).

Body euphoria. A discrete, somatic surge of pleasure linked to movement or sensory awareness—e.g., students discovering a new balance skill in physical education (Ingulfsvann et al., 2022).

CASP. CASP stands for Critical Appraisal Skills Program. It is a structured set of checklists used to evaluate the quality, reliability, and relevance of research studies. CASP tools are widely used in evidence-based practice to help researchers, clinicians, and students systematically assess research before deciding whether to use it to inform practice or policy. The CASP framework helps ensure you critically review literature rather than taking it at face value (Brice, 2025).

Collective ritual. Recurrent, culturally patterned actions (e.g., block-party fish fries, call-and-response liturgy) through which groups generate, share, and amplify joy (Pearley, 2025).

Embodiment / Embodied savoring. Joy that is anchored in sensorimotor experience such as mindful eating or kinesthetic play, emphasizing interoceptive awareness and the “textures” of feeling good in one’s body (Rossy, 2021; Barker et al., 2020).

Intrapersonal layer (MMJ). The innermost stratum of the Multilayered Model of Joy (MMJ) comprising neural, physiological, and cognitive processes that give rise to individual moments of joy.

Interpersonal layer (MMJ). The second stratum of the MMJ where dyadic or small-group interactions—eye contact, synchronized breathing, humor—mediate the spread of joy (Coursey, 2021; Lee et al., 2022).

JOMO (Joy of Missing Out). A mindfulness-based orientation that reframes voluntary digital disengagement as an opportunity for presence and well-being, countering FOMO-driven anxiety (Chan et al., 2022).

Joy (operational definition). A high-activation, positively valenced emotion or enduring disposition characterized by energized engagement, relational warmth, and a sense of meaningful connection to valued persons, activities, or ideals (Watkins, 2020; Van Cappellen, 2020).

MMJ (Multilayered Model of Joy). The integrative framework advanced in this review that maps six motifs—alignment, relationality, agency, embodiment, resistance, transcendence—across four nested layers: intrapersonal, interpersonal, communal-cultural, and transcendent.

Psychological safety. A shared belief that a social context allows interpersonal risk (speaking up, erring) without fear of humiliation; empirical studies link a “culture of joy” to heightened psychological safety in teams (Aboramadan & Kundi, 2023).

Relationality. The motif within the MMJ denoting joy that arises from safe, reciprocal, and resonant connections—e.g., softball teammates describing their league as “family” (Choi et al., 2022).

Schadenfreude spillover. The unintended impact of witnessing malicious joy online (e.g., mocking a complainer) that elicits observer sympathy and dampens brand loyalty (Bacile et al., 2025).

Selective coding. The final phase of grounded-theory synthesis whereby second-order themes are integrated into overarching motifs (alignment, relationality, etc.) that structure the MMJ (Thomas & Harden methodology applied in this review).

Tactile cohesion. A form of autistic joy triggered by pleasant textures or weighted pressure—such as fleece blankets or fidget cubes—that foster sensory regulation and comfort (Wassell, 2025).

Transcendence. Experiences in which joy is linked to a sense of connection with something larger than the self—nature, the divine, or cosmic meaning—often discussed in theological accounts of “serious joy” (Piper, 2023; Denk & Wright, 2023).

WEIRD. WEIRD is an acronym that stands for: **W**estern, **E**ducated, **I**ndustrialized, **R**ich, **D**emocratic. Meaning it refers to populations that are: Predominantly from Western societies (e.g., North America, Western Europe, Australia, New Zealand); Highly educated compared to global averages; Living in industrialized economies; Economically advantaged (higher income levels); Operating in democratic political systems. The term comes from cultural psychology and behavioral science, where researchers noticed that a huge proportion of studies—especially in psychology—draw participants almost exclusively from WEIRD populations (Heinrich et al., 2010).

