



Agape in the Workplace. A Survey Among Medium and Large Dutch Companies

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Abstract

The concepts of love and business do not seem to match very well, despite attempts to operationalize love as agape or neighborly love. In line with the emerging literature, this contribution uses a profane and analytical approach to agape as an ‘Agenda for Growth and Affirmation of People and the Environment’. Within this agenda we define agape as ‘the commitment to the well-being and flourishing of others’ and operationalized it to measure the concept in a substantial sample of 420 medium-sized and large companies in The Netherlands. At the core of the research lies the question whether and to what extent companies, represented by senior managers and members of the works council, are committed to the well-being of their employees. This article analyses the concept of agape and its application in a business context and presents the results of a survey. The results show that, on average, respondents report that their organization is committed to employees’ well-being in line with the organization’s values. Though not the aim of agape, since organizations that apply the concept reap tangible business benefits from it, the concept becomes suitable to a wider range of businesses.

Keywords Agape · Levinas · Business · Survey · Netherlands

Introduction

The Empire State Building and agape

Entering the Empire State Building one usually does not think of agape or love for others. Yet it is precisely agape that was quintessential in creating this one-hundred-and two-story building – the world’s tallest building at the time. In an era where construction workers were treated as mere economic means to generate as much profit for the companies they worked for, Starrett Brothers Inc. put the interests of employees

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center stage. Obviously, one can argue that by doing this, the company acted merely out of self-interest. By paying its workers twice the amount of money compared to the competition, providing decent meals, and taking adequate safety precautions, the company was able to complete the whole process of tearing down the old Waldorf Astoria, getting rid of the debris, and building the colossus from start to finish within 13 months – an achievement unheard of (Bodanis 2019). Starrett was a grumpy man, he hardly ever smiled and was not known for his friendliness or good humor. But he respected his workers and made sure their needs were taken care of – not just for the sake of the company interests, but to care for and respect his workers whom he depended on.¹

The example demonstrates the meaning and relevance of agape in business. It refers to the well-being and flourishing of others for the sake of the other – and not (just) to further one's own interests. Even though caring for the needs of others (Ignatieff 1984) is rather common in our daily lives, including in our working lives, the term 'agape' or its equivalent of 'neighborly love' is not commonly used in a business environment. Agape and business seem to belong to different worlds (Tasselli 2018).

Agape as a New Concept in Management

The concept of agape originated in ancient Greece as one of the four forms of love. It is part of a long tradition to love one's neighbor as oneself (Kaptein 2021). With a few exceptions (Argandoña 2011; Autry 1991; Barsade and O'Neill 2014; Melé 2012; Roberts 2005; Sanders 2007; Sisodia et al. 2014; Van Dierendonck and Patterson 2015) agape does not play a major role in the management literature – not to mention the practice of business. As Argandoña (2011) explains, through its focus on economic value creation and the contractual nature of business relations, companies believe they have no need for the concept of agape. Seeing business as the development, execution and realization of economic activities aimed at maximizing the interests of the owners of the company, the focus often lies (mainly if not solely) on the creation of economic value and profits (Friedman 1970). To achieve this aim, the company is seen as a mere nexus of contracts. As a result, Argandoña continues, businesses miss an opportunity to manage, work, and live differently – allowing business leaders, managers, employees, and other stakeholders 'to exercise [their] humanity' (Argandoña 2011).

Agape takes the notion of a business organization beyond a collection of contracts (Argandoña 2011; Melé 2012). As such, an organization can be viewed as a 'community of persons' (Albert and Perouma 2017; Melé 2012) aimed at achieving a set of common objectives. It promotes well-being and flourishing resulting from work and the organization of work (Fontrodona and Sison 2015). Consequently, agape can potentially make our organizations more resilient and cohesive (Cullen et al. 2003; Victor and Cullen 1988), because it reinforces social bonds between employees who are recognized and enabled to express themselves as persons. An agapeic climate may have a positive effect on the individual's commitment to a group or an organization (Cullen et al. 2003), while also contributing to the emergence of trust throughout the organization (Melé 2012). This benefits both the

¹ In a previous article we described the Starrett case in more detail. See Hummels et al. 2021.

individual and the organization (Cullen et al. 2003; Karakas and Sarigollu 2012; Mercier and Deslandes 2019).² We thus need additional understanding of agape in the business context.

Agape and Related Concepts

Despite the newness of the concept in a business and management environment, few leaders want to be seen as ignorant or dismissive towards the well-being and flourishing of employees, customers, society, or the environment. This fellow feeling, however, is often conveyed through other concepts, like compassion, empathy, or benevolence. We briefly describe the meaning of these concepts, after which we position agape as a distinct concept in “A Levinasian Approach to Agape” section.

A. Compassion

Compassion refers to the perception of the suffering of another person and taking adequate measures to address the suffering. We are sometimes affected by other people’s suffering due to humanitarian crises, but also because of personal grief. The trigger is concrete, tangible suffering by others (Nussbaum 1996; Solomon 1998; Lama 2002; Miller et al. 2012; Worline and Dutton 2017). In organizations too, suffering is an inevitable part of life (Lilius et al., 2008). Compassion shows itself as a multidimensional process with three elements (Kanov et al. 2004; Dutton, et al. 2006; Lilius et al. 2008). First, there is the noticing of the suffering of someone else. Second, there is sympathy for the other person feeling pain. Finally, compassion is characterized by an action that has the intention to alleviate suffering. This action can take many forms, ranging from emotional support to material benefits, such as offering care leave (Dutton, et al. 2006).

2 Empathy

Maibom (2009) describes empathy as an ability to empathize with that other person as a result of an event. This event can be joyous, like someone announcing the birth of her first-born child, or sad, like someone grieving about the death of a beloved one. Perceiving human needs appeals to our empathic capacity (cf. Batson et al. 2007; Gault and Sabini 2000; Lazarus 1991). The Flemish philosopher Ignaas Devisch (2017) also points to the capacity to put yourself in someone else’s shoes and to see the world through her or his eyes. We cannot know, however, Devisch continues, whether we are correct in assuming what the other person really sees, feels, thinks, or experiences. We have no access to the immediate experiences of others.³

3 Benevolence

² A detailed discussion about the selflessness of agape exceeds the purpose of this paper. Even though no extensive research has been conducted in determining the economic, social, personal, cultural, and environmental added value of agape, we hypothesise that agape may result in what we call ‘*a selflessness paradox*’. By fully committing to the well-being of others in the sense expressed in this paper, it is likely that a company will benefit. Paul Starrett provides one good example of this paradox.

³ This specific aspect of empathy is in line with one of the core elements of agape. However, agape goes further as we demonstrate in “A Levinasian Approach to Agape” section.

Finally, agape has some affinity with charity or philanthropy, and benevolence. Where the first two reference the active promotion of someone else's well-being, benevolence refers to the intentions of the actor (Frankena 1987; Kekes 1987; Livnat 2004). Sometimes both meanings coincide, and benevolence is seen as a disposition or character trait expressed in corresponding actions to promote the well-being of others (Mercier and Deslandes 2020). Benevolence is an ethical value or virtue, which applies to human relations and expresses good will towards others. However, a person can have a benevolent intention to do good to others, without being successful in the end.

Agape, as conceived in this paper, distinguishes itself from the above-mentioned concepts, without making these irrelevant. On the contrary. Agape is simply different as it focuses on (developing) the structure, decision making, and the culture of organizations. Unlike compassion, it does not take human suffering as its starting point but has a broader orientation to human well-being (Miller et al. 2012:621). Also, compassion can be felt for others without having any relationship with them, like when we are confronted with human catastrophes on social media. The same often counts for empathy. We can imagine how others feel, without necessarily knowing the other person well. Take the case of a distant colleague losing a close relative. We often put ourselves in the shoes of other, without knowing how the colleague really feels. In the next section, we draw upon the work of Emmanuel Levinas to make the point that we never know the other person. She or he is radically 'other' than I am. Finally, benevolence mainly focuses on intent. I can be benevolent towards others, without necessarily furthering their well-being and flourishing (Frankena 1987; Kekes 1987; Livnat 2004).

Agape and Well-being

Philosophically speaking, this paper is part of a wider field of research on well-being in the workplace and on meaningful work. Agape is closely linked to the concept of well-being, be it more to objective theories of well-being than to subjective ones. In ancient history well-being was associated with a balanced, moderate, and sensible life dedicated to the Gods, other human beings, and nature. Eudaimonia was the result of such a virtuous life. Over time, scholars have made a distinction between 'subjective' theories – also referred to as 'desire theories (Lauinger 2021) – and 'objective list' theories of well-being (Parfit 1984; Griffin 1986; Railton 1986; Heathwood 2014; Bradley 2014; Crisp 2017; Lauinger 2021). At the core of these different lines of scholarly thought lies an argument about what should constitute the hallmark of foundation of well-being. Is it a conception of the true meaning and value of life in terms of essential goods, including but not limited to friendship, health, wealth, social relations, education, safety, security, shelter, food, and so forth? Or should the foundation of well-being simply rest on personal desires – no matter what the consequences will be for the individual and her or his access to goods that are seen as valuable in the community of which the individual is a member? In addition, there is a wealth of research studying the concept of well-being in an organizational setting (Lee et al. 2021; Sumner 1996; Warr 1999, 2007; Anttonen and Räsänen 2009; Schulte and Vainio 2010; Fox et al. 2022). As such, this article aims to contribute to the understanding and promotion of agape in the context of business as part of the wider field of studies in well-being at work. In line with the distinction between subjective and objective definitions of well-being, these studies focus both on objective characteristics of the organization, its structuring and decision-making and on the individual well-being as perceived by the employee herself or himself.

Following the recent literature on agape in organizations (Hummels and Conen 2021; Hummels et al. 2021; Hummels and Nullens 2022), we will base our approach on the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas (1969). A Levinasian approach starts with the needs of others (Ignatieff 1984) as perceived by the needy person herself or himself. We use this concept in an empirical study of Dutch medium-sized and large for-profit companies. Our aim with this article is twofold. First, we have tested the relevance of the concept of agape in research of mainstream businesses and we demonstrate that agape can be meaningful. Based on a universe of nearly 3,500 Dutch companies with at least 100 employees, we studied the extent to which they were committed to the well-being and flourishing of the workforce. Second, our research aimed to reveal the way in which businesses apply the concept in their daily business operations. The study was conducted in the Fall of 2020 and, as a result, addresses the relevance of agape for business during the Covid-19 pandemic.

A Levinasian Approach to Agape

The love for others is part of the religious and cultural traditions of peoples across the globe (Kaptein 2021; Melé 2012; Templeton 1999). Agape is one of the four loves in ancient Greece next to eros, philia and storge (Lewis 1960). Traditionally, agape is expressed in the rule to treat others as you would like to be treated by others (Wattles 1996) and displays a strong sense of the infinite value of all people and the natural environment. It represents a “sense of a common bond with humanity” (Xi et al. 2017). The foundation for agape can be found in the presupposition of sameness of human being and the resulting idea that because I know myself and my needs, I also know others and their needs.

Emmanuel Levinas, a French national of Lithuanian descent, takes a different approach. Levinas’ philosophy is strongly influenced by World War II. Being an officer in the French army he was captured in June 1940 and detained in German camps as a prisoner of war until his release in 1945 (Jacques 2017). Being Jewish, most of his Lithuanian family did not survive the atrocities of the German concentration camps. It led to a philosophy that fundamentally opposes dehumanization by seeing each human being as an authentic person. The ‘face of the other’ establishes the foundation of Levinas’ profoundly humane philosophy. This face, just by being present, appeals to us to respect it as ‘other’ and refrain from committing any violence towards it (Levinas 1969, 2016). The face represents someone who is radically different than I am and calls on me, allowing me to take responsibility towards her or him. We have no way, however, of knowing the other, as we make the world our own through observing, acting, and giving meaning. In the words of Levinas (1969), we ‘totalize’ the world by appropriating it through our senses. Totalization is not an act of our will. My totalizing is inevitable, I cannot avoid it, and nothing falls outside of its grasp. The other, therefore, *may appear to be the same as her or his fellow human beings* and we view them as ‘employees’, as ‘stakeholders’, as ‘women’ or ‘men’, as ‘British’, ‘Chinese’, ‘Moroccan’ or ‘Māori’. Classifying others simply means that we fail to acknowledge an individual’s singularity and situatedness. Nevertheless, there is and will always be a fundamental asymmetry and the otherness of others remains radical (Blok 2017; Kaulingfreks and Ten Bos 2007). There is no way to ultimately fathom another person. As authentic persons, others escape my attempt to ‘totalization’, no matter how I empathize with them and try to put myself in their position. It is only through the other appealing and speaking to me that a relationship becomes possible. What is left for me is the ability to respond to the appeal by taking my responsibility *as I see it* towards her or his well-being and flourishing.

Levinas writes about responsibility and responsiveness rather than about agape (Hummels and Nullens 2022). Nevertheless, his philosophy expresses strong support for a commitment to the well-being and flourishing of others – whether the appeal comes to me as myself – being an individual person – or to me as manager, employee, supplier, neighbor, financier, or other stakeholders. This commitment calls for respect for the other as an authentic person and responds to her or his needs, values, ambitions, and ideas. In other words, each employee is seen as unique and not as a representative of a class or a species. In the context of a business organization, an agapeic turn towards well-being (Hummels and Nullens 2022) acknowledges each employee as truly human. It empowers the employee to give meaning to her or his work, personal development, interaction with others and flourishing in line with the individual's self-perceived needs, values, interests, ambitions, and ideas (Jahoda 1982; WRR 2020). As such, in this paper agape is more closely linked to an 'objective list' theory of well-being and less so to an individual desire-based approach to well-being and flourishing.

Within the context of business an individual's well-being and flourishing depends to a large extent on her or his membership of a team and a larger organization. Contributing to the collective outputs and outcomes of the organization gives meaning to work and life. As a result, we perceive agape as conceptually related to organizational structures, culture and decision-making that provide the context for an employee's well-being and flourishing. It leads to the question whether and to what extent a company creates structures, a culture, and decision-making processes in which employees can express and develop themselves freely. In other words, human well-being and flourishing depends heavily on dimensions that are related to the employee's job and her or his relations with others in the context of an organizations. Hummels and Conen (2022) integrated both dimensions in 'a web of well-being' (Fig. 1). As a result, agape as we understand it (Hummels and Nullens 2022), goes beyond benevolence (André and Pache 2016; Karakas and Sarigollu 2012; Mercier and Deslandes 2019) or servant leadership (Van Dierendonck and Patterson 2015). The core of agape as an organizational challenge resides in the creation of an environment or context in which an employee is treated as a dignified and autonomous human being. The next section illuminates which dimensions give rise to such an environment, what these dimensions constitute, and how they relate to the operationalization of agape.

Operationalising Agape

To construct a survey that allowed us to assess the well-being and flourishing of employees in the context of business, agape needed to be operationalised. The six dimensions of the web explained in this section relate to the ability of individuals to express and develop themselves as employees and as humans, while being part of a goal-driven organization.⁴ These dimensions stands in a long tradition of studies that aim to clarify the meaning of well-being in processes of organising (Rice et al. 1991, Spagnoli et al. 2012, De Neve 2018). What agape adds to the existing literature is that it stresses the importance employees as unique human beings and not as human resources (primarily) aimed at furthering the objectives of the organisation, as is expressed in the HR-literature (Storey 1987; Willmott

⁴ As a result, this article uses articles, books and reports addressing the well-being of employees in The Netherlands, in addition to the international literature.

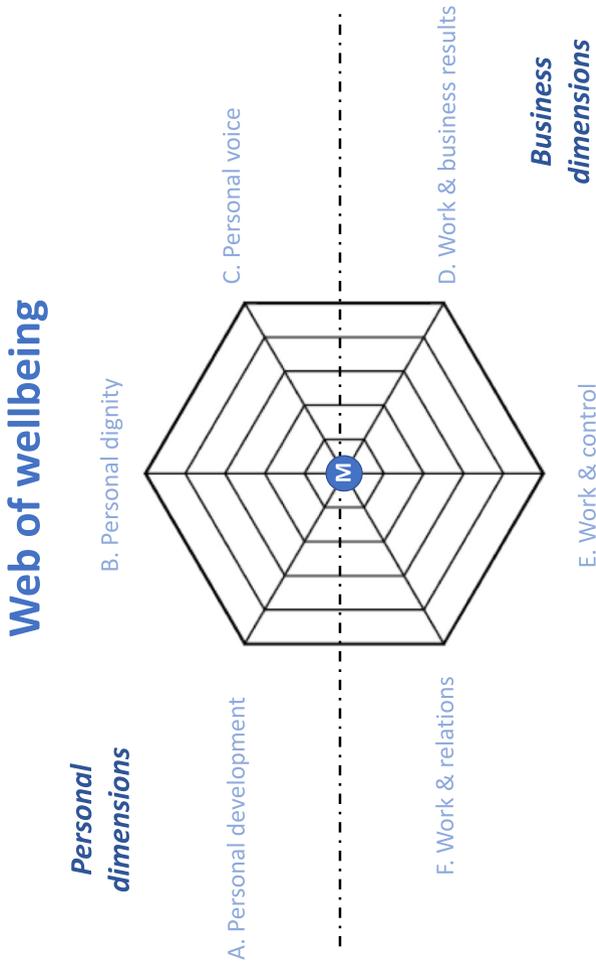


Fig. 1 Web of well-being

1993; Guest 1999; De Botton's 2009; Keenoy 1990, 1997). Second, we see well-being in the first place as an organisational challenge. How can a company, a government organisation or an NGO design its processes and practices in ways that personal development, dignity, voice, working relations, workers' control and output orientation can be structured in an objective, rather than a subjective way. Third, by bringing these dimensions together, the web provides a kaleidoscopic and dynamic view on well-being in the organisation.

1. Personal development

Personal development, personal growth, employability, life-long learning, or job crafting are just some of the terms that refer to the ability of employees to flourish, both in their work and as a person (Anitha 2014; Cantarelli et al. 2016; Clarke 2008; Davoine et al. 2008; SER 2021; Smith et al. 2008; Van Aerden et al. 2014). The future of work is rapidly evolving due to societal and technological changes. As a result, individuals want but also have to adapt to achieve personal and organizational objectives (SER 2021; Smith 2010a, b; Smulders and Schouteten 2009). Previous research indicates that the vast majority of Dutch employees emphasizes the importance of personal development (Conen and De Beer 2019, 2020). Too often, however, there is no match between the needs and interests as perceived by the employees themselves and the opportunities provided by the companies (Clarke 2008; Conen and De Beer 2019). Of Dutch employees, 64 percent report their knowledge and skills to match their work tasks while 40 percent is in need of courses or training to further develop themselves (Van Dam et al. 2021). Supporting the educational and developmental needs of employees is considered to be central to the promotion of well-being (Karakas and Sarigollu 2012).

An important precondition for personal development is the sense of job security. Employees that are less secure about keeping their job have a higher chance to become incapable to work (Van Egmond et al. 2019). More in particular, during the Covid-19 pandemic, the broadly supported initiative 'Wiezetjijop#1' – called upon company management to prioritize employees' need for psychological safety (Edmondson 2019) and for job guarantees as much as possible – provided a context in which employees committed to their work and invested in their personal development within the company (Hummels and Conen 2021). Job (in)security has consequences for the workplace, but also for the personal lives of employees. Lower job security is linked to worse mental and physical health outcomes, as well as lower productivity and commitment (Hosseini et al. 2020). Also, employees' personal lives are affected: less secure workers more often postpone big life decisions such as buying a house, getting married and having children (Lozza et al. 2013). Of all Dutch employees, 18 percent worry about keeping their job (Van Dam et al. 2021). Finally, research suggests a correlation between job insecurity two organizational dimensions of the web. First, researchers found that job insecurity leads to a reduction of an employee's engagement with colleagues and managers at work (Dekker and Schaufeli 1995; Abay Getahun Asfaw & Chang 2019). Second, Greenhalgh and Rosenblatt (1984) suggest that job insecurity negatively impacts organizational effectiveness. This negative impact is particularly found in case of organizational injustice (Wang et al. 2015).

2. Personal dignity

“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.”

Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights underlines the innate worth and dignity of human persons (Kolnai 1976; Kleinig and Evans 2013; Pirson 2017; Schachter 1983). Within the context of business this calls for the recognition of the intrinsic worth of employees, irrespective of their instrumental value for achieving the company's objectives. Even though dignity is often associated with acknowledging, allocating and respecting human rights (Buchanan 2010; Kent 2010; Schachter 1983), it goes beyond the concept of rights. It calls for respect for each and every individual as a person. As a result, it addresses the question whether employees can be themselves and be free from discrimination on grounds that (ought to) have no relationship with the content of their work.⁵

3. Personal voice

Of Dutch employees, 85 percent reports that supervisors are concerned with their well-being and flourishing and listen to what employees say (Van Dam et al. 2021). Levinasian agape calls for the enabling of employees to voice their values, needs, ideas, concerns, and interests – and be heard (cf. Edmonson, 2019). It requires companies to promote direct participation and employee involvement (Bryson et al. 2006; Cludts 1999; Kaler 1999; Marchington and Wilkinson 2000). More important, however, is that employees are listened to and their messages taken into account. Agape calls for 'managerial responsiveness' and offering employees a space to share their concerns, ideas and interests. In addition, it requires organizational leaders to be able and willing to timely and adequately provide answers (Bryson 2004). Failing to do so impairs not only employee support but also the adoption and efficacy of organizational policies. (Grawitch et al. 2007).

4. Work and relations

Work is more than individually doing your job. Employees want to feel connected as part of a team or an organization (Warr 1987, 2007). The importance of personal contact in the workplace has become very clear during the Covid-19 pandemic: as soon as it was possible, employees that had been working from home went back to their workplace to meet their colleagues again. While some research shows employees liked having fewer informal talks with their colleagues, most reported missing workplace social interaction when working from home (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development 2020; Lal et al. 2021; Parry et al. 2022). Human beings have an inherent need to belong and to experience social contact (Deci and Ryan 2000). The workplace offers many possibilities to interact and form social relations. For many employees, the small talk at the coffee machine is one of the aspects of work that are liked best. Social support from colleagues is considered an important resource that can buffer more negative aspects of work (Bakker and Demerouti 2007). It is thus important for a work environment that is concerned with employee well-being to offer employees the possibilities for personal contact. Even though work relations are a value in themselves, the attention given to employee well-being has also been related to increased commitment (Cullen 2003). Additionally, employees with little social support from their colleagues are likely to develop a limited capacity to work (Van Egmond et al. 2019).

⁵ As we already indicated, what does or does not have to do with the content of one's job in the context of the organization is studied within a national context. For our study, we do not claim that the demands and expectations will (have to) be the same everywhere across the world – despite the reference we make to the UDHR. In The Netherlands this reference makes sense.

5. Work and control

Autonomy is considered one of the three basic human needs which are essential to ensure that employees are motivated to carry out their work (Deci and Ryan 2000). Zooming in on the situation in The Netherlands, 58.5 percent of Dutch employees regularly experience working autonomously (Van Dam et al. 2021). The ability of employees to influence their workprocesses and the outputs of their work is relevant for both the individual and the team or organization. At the core of this relationship lies the balance between demands and control (Karasek 1979) A lack of autonomy resulting in an imbalance between job demands and the resources to fulfill the demands – often contributes to burn-out (Bakker et al. 2003; Schaufeli et al. 2009; Schaufeli and Taris 2013; Van den Broeck et al. 2011; Xanthopoulou et al. 2007a, b). The capacity to control one’s work and the freedom to influence the pace, the time and order of the tasks, provide important buffers against burn-out – and positively influence job satisfaction (Bakker and Demerouti 2007; Benz and Frey 2008; Cantarelli et al. 2016; Fernández-Macías et al. 2014; Lu et al. 2019; Olsen et al. 2010; Schaufeli and Taris 2013).

6. Work and business results

In her thought-provoking book, *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt (1958) made a distinction between labor, work, and action. Work, as the creation of artifacts and a world of objects, allows workers to express their creativity, skills, knowledge, and experience, and contribute to the creation of social and organizational value. It facilitates ‘the exercise of practical reason’ (Nussbaum 1999). Work, therefore, is meaningful because it enables employees to contribute to personal and collective objectives in the production of products and services.⁶ As a result, the contribution of employees to the creation of collective value is an important aspect of the well-being and flourishing of employees. Several meta-studies demonstrate the correlation between job satisfaction and job performance, including outputs and outcomes (Judge et al. 2001; Katebi et al. 2021). Also, studies show a positive relationship between job satisfaction on one hand and productivity and profits on the other (Brown and Lam 2008; Harter et al. 2002). As such, the design of individual and group tasks and work processes ought to reflect the importance of meaningful work for employees, teams, and the organization. (cf. Parker 2014).

In line with our perspective on agape as well-being that emerges from objective list theories, the web can be used as a heuristic device. All dimensions are important in assessing and developing an organization’s ‘well-being and flourishing profile’. The web enables the organization to score the dimensions – using surveys among board executives, senior and middle managers, and employees – and to plot its current profiles. The variation between the stakeholder profiles – and between the organizational profile and those of other, comparable organizations – provides senior management with an overview of potential gaps in the organizational structures, culture, and decision-making processes aimed at creating well-being. The assessment could then result in a program to improve those dimensions of

⁶ Graeber (2018) argued that many employees, because they have (well-paid) “bullshit jobs”, fail to contribute to the creation of collective social value. More recently, his findings are debunked to a large extent in a study by Soffia et al. (2021). The authors find that whether or not work is perceived as having social value is mainly influenced by collaborative social relationships at work.

the web of well-being that fall short of company policy, or of the expectations of specific groups of internal or external stakeholders.

Having provided an overview of the dimensions of agape, in the next section we will describe our empirical research in 2020. We describe how we measured and operationalized the concept of agape. We show how Dutch companies rate how they score on agape, what their reasons are for devoting attention to agape and possible barriers. Furthermore, we examine whether certain companies are more likely to report a high agape score. Finally, we highlight to what extent companies benefit from devoting attention to agape by studying whether a higher agape score is related to several organizational outcomes.

Measuring Agape

Data Collection

We collected data using an online survey in Fall 2020. In September 2020 we ordered an extract from the Dutch chamber of commerce with the contact details of Dutch companies in the commercial sector with at least 100 employees. We received a file with 3,500 companies, which therefore comprises the universe of relevant companies. We sent a letter to all companies out of this universe to invite them to participate in our study. Actually, each company received two letters: one addressed to the managing director, and one to the chairperson of the works council. The letters described the aim of the study and contained a link to the online survey. In addition, we issued two reminders by email to the company's general email account to ask their representatives to participate in the study. The emails also included a link to the survey. Before participating in the survey, respondents provided their informed consent. The ethical committee of the Faculty of Humanities at Utrecht University approved the study (reference number: 6173233–06–02–2020).

Out of the 3,500 invited companies, 3,473 fitted our selection criteria of employing 100 employees or more and to be in business. Out of the 3,473 companies, 589 of them participated in our study, resulting in a response rate of 16.7 percent. Although other studies sampling companies frequently report higher response rates, few include *all* companies that fit selection criteria. Research also shows that the higher someone's position within a company, the less likely they are to participate in surveys (Anseel et al. 2010). Additionally, we did not use any techniques, such as personal relations, that may increase response rates, but rather relied on 'cold acquisition' (Cycyota and Harrison 2006). Considering this result, our response rate can be viewed as good. To examine whether certain companies were less likely to participate in the survey, we compared the characteristics of our sample of 589 participating companies with the 3,473 that were invited. We found no differences concerning sector, size, region, and foundation dates in the probability to join in the study. The results of this analysis can be found in the appendix.

Some companies were represented by both someone representing higher management levels and a representative of the works council. As a result, we received 737 individual responses. Of this group, 337 questionnaires were filled out by respondents representing management (senior management and HR managers), 278 responses came from the works council. For the remaining 122 it was unclear what the function of the individual respondent was. Not all participants filled out the questionnaire completely. In the analyses, we only use the completed forms, which resulted in 513 respondents from 420 companies.

Table 1 Items used to measure the agape total score. Each respondent rated whether their company offered their employees a work environment in which...

Item	Factor loading
Employees can develop and educate themselves	0.610
Employees are considerate of each other	0.699
Employees' needs and interests are taken into consideration	0.735
The content of employees' job is challenging	0.581
Contact between employees is stimulated	0.646
There is job security	0.463
Employees have autonomy in deciding how to do their job	0.467

$N=513$. We used oblique rotation with oblimin criterion

The survey methodology has the advantage of enabling researcher to obtain a view about a relevant issue among a large sample of companies. At the same time, having each company represented by a maximum of two respondents – be it with clearly different responsibilities – has implications for the interpretation of the finding. We were not able to survey a large sample of employees in each company but had to rely on the representative of the works council. Given the position of the works council, we cannot exclude their bias towards the views of management due to regular contacts with management. However, works councils in The Netherlands are often supported and endorsed by trade unions, leading to a somewhat critical view of managements views of employee needs.

Measurement

To measure agape, we developed a scale of seven items which we consider to be an adequate proxy of the dimensions of the web of well-being as outlined in “Operationalising Agape” section. The items are⁷:

- Employees can educate and develop themselves as they see fit (personal development),
- Employees are considerate of each other (personal dignity, work & relations)
- Employees' needs and interests are taken into consideration (all dimensions of the web)
- The content of the work is challenging (personal development, work & results, work & control)
- Contact between employees is encouraged (work & relations)
- The business offers its employees job security (personal development, work & business results, work & relations)
- Employees can decide how to organize their own work (work & control)

Respondents were asked to rate whether their company offers employees a work environment that is characterized by the dimensions of agape. Each

⁷ This survey was conducted while the development of the web of well-being was still in process. It resulted in one omission in the survey. The sixth dimension – on work and business results – was left out of the survey as this dimension was added later to the web. The omission does not disqualify the general findings of this research.

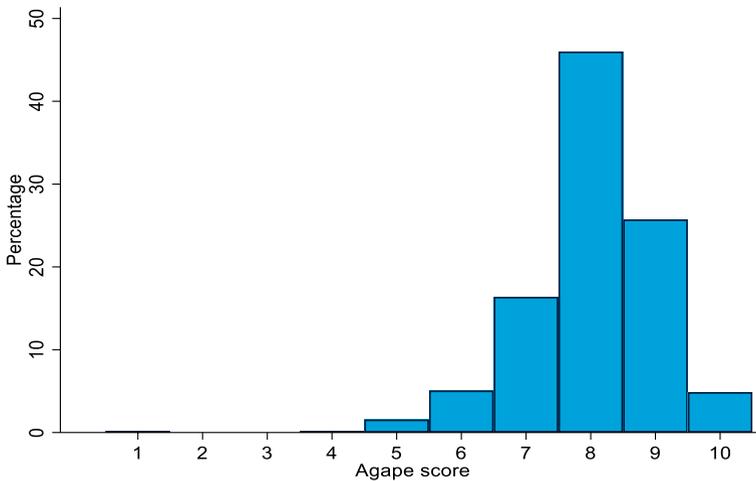


Fig. 2 Distribution of agape score ($N=513$)

respondent scored the items on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = fully disagree to 5 = fully agree. We conducted an exploratory factor analysis to examine whether the seven items really reflect one concept. This is indeed the case ($\chi^2(21) = 962.73$, $p < 0.001$). As a result, we were able to calculate a total agape score for each respondent. To do so, we took the factor loadings for the specific items into account (see Table 1). Some items have a higher factor loading. This means that these items contribute more to the overall agape score. The agape scale had good internal reliability, demonstrated by the Cronbach's alpha of 0.79. We finally transferred the original 5-point scale to a 10-point scale to ease interpretation. Using the factor scores rather than averaging the unweighted items preserves the fact that some agape dimensions appear more important than others, which is commonly done in the social sciences (see for example Carr et al. 2017 or Chinchilla and Garcia 2017). Since this study is the first to explore agape, the extent to which the different dimensions are internally consistent is important. This will provide a more transparent measure of agape (Preacher and MacCallum 2003). To see whether using factor scores affected our results we ran robustness checks where we averaged the agape items to create a score. This did not influence the results.

Figure 2 shows the distribution of agape scores over the participating companies. On average, the agape score is 8.03 ($SD = 1.01$). This shows that according to management and representatives of the works council, Dutch companies are committed to agape. We caution the reader that the scores are self-referential in the sense that they report the assessment by the respondents of the policies, practices and activities of their own companies – and sometimes of themselves. This is also reflected in the finding that, on average, management ($M = 8.29$, $SD = 0.88$) scores higher than representatives of the works council ($M = 7.75$, $SD = 1.08$), and that this difference is statistically significant ($t(511) = 6.22$, $p < 0.001$).

Table 2 Reasons to devote attention to agape

Reason	Percentage
More committed employees	90.9%
Increases employees' satisfaction	74.5%
Matches the values of our organization	52.7%
Contributes to our profits	25.0%
Stimulates innovation	17.0%
Good for reputation	12.8%
Works council requested this	2.1%
Shareholders requested this	0.0%

Respondents could supply a maximum of 3 answers

Table 3 Barriers to devoting attention to agape

Reason	Percentage
Management has different priorities	51.7%
Lack of insight in needs employees	38.3%
Existing procedures and rules	25.2%
Costs	23.9%
Works council has different priorities	14.4%
Focus on profit	14.4%
Company size	11.7%

Respondents could supply a maximum of 3 answers

Reasons to Devote Attention to Agape

We asked respondents what their organization's main reasons are to devote attention to the well-being of employees. The scores are shown in Table 2. Inter alia, these reasons include the increase of employee satisfaction and of employee commitment. Few companies invest in agape because their works council or shareholders asked them to.

In addition, we analyzed whether a higher score on agape coincided with specific reasons to promote employee well-being more often. For most reasons, we do not find a difference. However, companies that score higher on agape more often mention that they do so because it matches the values of their organization. Additionally, these companies are less likely to mention that they devote attention to agape because it benefits their organization's reputation, or that increased employee well-being leads to higher profits. This concurs with the view that agape is valued for the sake of employee flourishing and not primarily as instrumental to boost the corporation's turnover and profits.

Barriers to Agape

Next to reasons for devoting attention to agape, we also asked companies about barriers to promote well-being of their employees. As Table 3 shows, the two main barriers are different priorities among management, and a lack of insight in what employees want.

Companies that score low on agape more often mention that costs (27% vs 13% of organizations scoring high, $t(181)=1.95$, $p=0.03$), different management priorities (60%

vs 31% of organizations scoring high, $t(181)=3.48$, $p<0.01$) and a lack of insight into employee' needs (43% vs 31% of organizations scoring high, $t(181)=1.47$, $p=0.07$) reduce efforts to devote attention to agape. Companies that score high on agape also mention these barriers. They somehow found ways to overcome these apparently surmountable barriers and actively promote agape.

Agape: Which Companies are more Prone to it?

To assess whether certain companies are more likely to devote attention to agape, we analyzed whether certain characteristics are related to the agape score. We distinguished between three types of characteristics.

a) Culture

The organizational culture relates to the way in which the work environment supports employee well-being (Aldana et al. 2012). Management support and culture of health have been shown to be important indicators of this (Kent et al. 2016; McLellan et al. 2017). A culture of health refers to the work environment enabling a specific job to support the health and well-being of employees (Aldana et al. 2012). Additionally, the works council is important in this respect. A good relationship between the works council and management makes it easier to translate the needs and interests of employees into organizational policy (Walters et al. 2013). Organizational characteristics that are relevant in this respect are the extent to which the company feels responsible for the well-being of employees, the culture of health and well-being, the relationship between the works council and management and the extent to which the works council prioritizes employee well-being.

b) Workforce

Literature has shown that companies are less likely to invest in employees with lower education levels, older employees, and employees with flexible contracts (Lössbroek et al. 2019; Van der Put et al. 2020). This partly results from stereotypes but is also related to companies not being aware of the needs of different groups of employees (Fleischmann and Koster 2018). Consequently, in our analysis we included gender differences (the percentage of female employees), age (percentage of employees over 50 years old), education (percentage of employees with higher education), and flexibility (percentage of employees with a fixed contract).

iii) Structure

Often, it is assumed that family businesses pay more attention to the well-being of employees compared to firms that are not family-owned (Gomez-Mejia et al. 2011). Also, the number of hierarchical levels may play a role: the more levels, the more difficult it will be for senior management to have insight into the needs and interests of employees. The same may be true for the size of the company in terms of employee count. Smaller firms have the advantage that management and employees know each other well and allow management to have a superior insight into the needs and well-being of employees. On the other hand, these companies tend to have less resources to promote employee flourishing or offer extensive opportunities for formal worker representation (Goetzel and Ozminkowski

Table 4 Unstandardized coefficients (B) and standard errors (SE) from OLS regression predicting agape ($N=513$)

	B	SE
<i>Culture</i>		
Company responsibility for well-being	0.27***	0.03
Culture of health	0.16***	0.03
Relationship works council and management	0.09***	0.02
Well-being priority works council	-0.01	0.04
<i>Workforce</i>		
Female employees (%)	0.01	0.02
Employees older than 50 years (%)	-0.08***	0.02
Higher educated employees (%)	0.04**	0.01
Employees with permanent contract (%)	0.09***	0.02
<i>Structure</i>		
Number of employees (ref. = 100–250 employees)		
250–499 employees	-0.09	0.08
500–1000 employees	-0.01	0.10
More than 1000 employees	0.08	0.10
Number of hierarchical levels (ref. = one)		
Two	-0.53*	0.27
Three	-0.54*	0.25
Four	-0.57*	0.25
Five	-0.73**	0.26
Six or more	-0.75**	0.27
Foundation year	0.00	0.00
At least one foreign office	-0.08	0.07
Family firm	0.01	0.07
Sector (ref. = Agriculture, forestry and fishing)		
Manufacturing	-0.36	0.29
Construction	-0.06	0.30
Trade, transport & hospitality	-0.27	0.28
ICT	-0.47	0.33
Financial services	-0.27	0.30
Real estate	0.83	0.74
Business services	-0.11	0.29
Culture, sports and recreation	-0.34	0.39
Other services	0.15	0.44
Constant	3.22	2.81

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

For the workforce, we see that the agape score is higher when there are fewer employees older than 50 years old ($\beta = -0.08$, $p < 0.001$), more employees receiving higher education ($\beta = 0.04$, $p = 0.005$) and more employees having fixed contracts ($\beta = 0.09$, $p < 0.001$)

2008; McLellan et al. 2017). Our analysis includes the number of employees, the hierarchical levels, the year in which the company was founded, the international operations of the company, the sector, and a controlling stake in the company by the (founding) family.

We conducted a multiple ordinary least squares regression which included all these characteristics simultaneously. The results are shown in Table 4. As can be seen from the table, agape scores are mainly related to culture dimensions and workforce dimensions. We find that agape scores are significantly higher when companies feel responsible for the well-being of their employees ($\beta=0.27, p<0.001$). In addition, we witness a positive correlation between (a high score on) culture of health and (a high score on) agape ($\beta=0.16, p<0.001$). The same holds true for the relation between the works council and management: the higher respondents' rate this relation, the more attention goes to agape ($\beta=0.09, p<0.001$).

When it comes to the structure of an organization, the data only show a negative correlation between the number of hierarchical levels and the agape score. The more hierarchical levels, the lower the agape score. None of the other structural factors is related to agape.

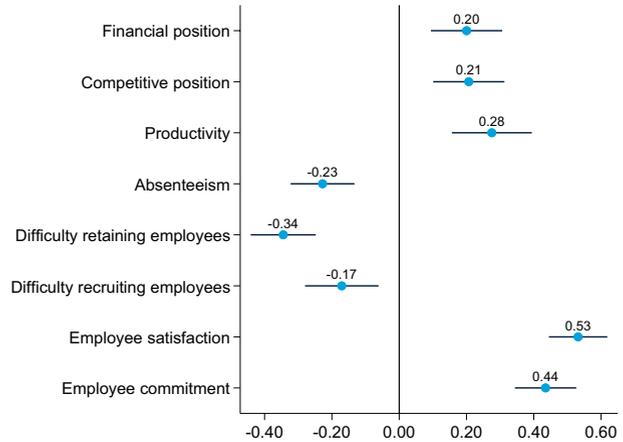
Benefits of Agape

Even though the participating companies in our study reported to mainly promote agape in line with their values – instead of expecting pecuniary benefits from investments in employee well-being – they may benefit from these investments. In this section, we examine the relation between agape and positive organizational outcomes that were found in theoretically and empirically relevant research (Karakas and Sarigollu 2012; Mercier and Deslandes 2019). After all, companies need profits to secure their long-term health (Mercier and Deslandes 2020). In addition to the financial performance of companies, their competitive position and employee productivity are key to their success. These outcomes are at the core of the business case and important to guarantee the survival of the company (Begall et al. 2020). Previous research has shown that organizations paying attention to employee well-being do better financially (Fabius and Phares 2021). By promoting employee well-being, they positively affect the attitudes and behaviors of employees (Kurtessis et al. 2017) contributing to their continuity – even though this may not be the purpose of endorsing agape. The relationship between employer and employee is one of social exchange (Cropanzano and Mitchell 2005). If the employer shows concern for employee well-being, employees reciprocate the company's efforts by helping it to do well (Gouldner 1960). As a result, we asked respondents to rate their business' financial and competitive position on a 5-point Likert scale ranging, from 1 'Very bad' to 5 'Very good'.⁸

Other important outcomes to organizations are absenteeism, turnover, and recruitment of employees. Participants rated employee absenteeism, the ease with which they recruit employees and their ability to retain employees on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 'Never' to 5 'Always'. Each of these outcomes is costly to employers (Mitchell et al 2016; Parks and Steelman 2008). Absenteeism disrupts work processes and heightens the workload of other employees (Ybema et al. 2010), while employee turnover requires additional investments in finding, selecting and training new hires (Mitchell et al. 2016). Employee well-being

⁸ Please note that the results are self-reported. We did not have a possibility to verify the results and compare the findings with objective data about a company's financial success and competitive position.

Fig. 3 Relation agape with several organizational outcomes. Coefficients have been standardized



can contribute to employee retention, while it positively impacts worker recruitment (Parks and Steelman 2008). This is especially the case when labor is scarce. Additionally, for younger employees, a positive work environment and attention to well-being is sometimes more important in deciding to accept a job than pay (Catano and Hines 2016).

Finally, we examined two outcomes that are more of a social nature. We asked participants to rate their company scores regarding employee satisfaction and commitment on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ‘Very bad’ to 5 ‘Very good’. Attitudes pertaining to the moral behavior of the organization, such as attention to employee well-being, are expected to have strong effects on people’s affective reactions to the organization. Sincere interest for employees will result in sincere concern for the organization (Begall et al. 2020; Cullen et al. 2003). It may be unsurprising that increased commitment and satisfaction have been found to positively influence almost any other behavior that is beneficial to the company (Cropanzano and Mitchell 2005; Riketta 2008).

For each of these outcomes, we conducted a multiple ordinary least squares regression analysis in which we are mainly interested in the relationship between agape score and the outcomes. As there are many other features of organizations that may explain these outcomes, we added control variables for the number of hierarchical levels, the number of employees, the percentages of employees that are female, older than 50 years old and higher educated, whether the business has at least a foreign office, whether they are a family business, the sector in which the business operates and the role of the respondent. The results have been standardized, to allow the comparison between the different outcomes. The results are shown in Fig. 3.

Figure 3 plots the regression coefficients of agape on each of the organizational outcomes. These coefficients represent the effect increasing agape with one unit has on the outcomes. The 95% confidence intervals are also represented. As can be seen from the figure, none of these confidence intervals pass the zero-line, indicating that agape is significantly related to all organizational outcomes.

Agape positively relates to “hard” outcomes like financial position ($\beta=0.20$, $p<0.001$), competitive position ($\beta=0.20$, $p<0.001$) and productivity ($\beta=0.28$, $p<0.001$) as well as HR outcomes such as absenteeism ($\beta=-0.23$, $p<0.001$), difficulty in retaining employees ($\beta=-0.34$, $p<0.001$) and difficulty in recruiting employees ($\beta=-0.17$, $p=0.004$). Even though these last coefficients are negative, the results are positive for companies: if there is

more attention to agape, companies experience less absenteeism, less difficulty in retaining and less difficulty in recruiting employees.

Finally, we also see that agape relates to “softer” outcomes, like satisfaction ($\beta=0.53$, $p<0.001$) and commitment ($\beta=0.44$, $p<0.001$). As can be seen from the figure, effects for these outcomes appear largest.

Discussion

The aim of this paper was to introduce the concept of agape and describe whether and to what extent agape is embedded in Dutch companies. To date, the concept of agape is not commonly used in a business context, even though organizations increasingly recognize the importance of caring for their employees. Historically speaking, the concept of agape is one of the four types of love in ancient Greece. The core meaning of agape can be found in all major traditions and religions in the world – now and in the past. The paper positions agape in the wider field of well-being in organizations studies. The additional value of agape lies in its focus on the importance to address the needs of others by allowing them to voice their own needs and interests. As such, agape calls for a bottom-up approach to well-being as distinguished from an often top-down approach in which management believes it knows what well-being means to employees. However, agape, as noted in “[A Levinasian Approach to Agape](#)” section, is not a subjective approach to well-being. What it calls for is the creation of a context in which employees can influence their personal development, their workplace, the organization of their work, the relations with colleagues and managers, and the outcomes of their work.

When drawing on the work and the spirit of Levinas, we focus on respecting the other as a human being and not merely as a ‘human resource’. Agape calls for structured and systematic processes of organizing in which others can express themselves, including their needs and interests. In other words, agape is not dependent on my intentions to do well to others as I interpret their needs and interests, but on the creation of organizational structures, decision-making processes and a culture that allow the other to express herself or himself. These dimensions are reflected in the criteria that we used to design this survey, including the ability of employees to educate and develop themselves as they see fit, the company taking into consideration the employees’ needs, or creating a context in which employees can decide how to organize their own work.

To understand whether and to what extent Dutch companies with 100 employees or more applied the concept of agape in their business context, we conducted this survey. This paper shows the results and provides insight into the conditions that influence companies’ attention to employee well-being flourishes and the effects on critical elements of their business operations.

The first contribution of our study is the operationalization of agape to be applied in a business context. We argued that there are six dimensions which relate to the ability of humans to express and develop themselves as employees and humans while being part of a goal-drive organization. We created a measure of agape based on seven indicators which reflect these dimensions. Using an exploratory factor analysis, we demonstrated that these indicators indeed measure one construct which reflects agape.⁹

⁹ As indicated earlier, we were not able to fully integrate the sixth dimension on work and business results – providing insight into the relationship of an individual’s contribution to the collective results of the organization.

Our survey among representatives of management and the works councils of Dutch companies showed that on average, Dutch organizations are committed to the well-being and flourishing of employees. Reportedly, their main reason to do so is because it is in line with the values of the organization. Potential benefits do not appear to play a major role in the decision to pay attention to agape. This concurs with the view that agape is valued for the sake of employee flourishing and not primarily as instrumental to boost the corporation's turnover and profits.

We studied whether certain companies are more prone to devote attention to agape and put it into practice than others by looking at characteristics of their culture, workforce, and organizational structure. One of the main findings is that organizational structure does not appear to play a role, apart from the number of hierarchical levels. The longer the chain between the shop floor and upper management, the less attention there is for employee well-being. In these organizations, it may be more difficult for senior management to have insight into the needs and interests of employees. The composition of the workforce also appears to play a role: there is less attention for agape in companies with a larger share of older, female, and lower educated employees. This matches earlier literature that shows that organizations tend to underinvest in these employees (Lössbroek et al. 2019; Van der Put et al. 2021). The organizational culture appeared to play the largest role. Agape scores are significantly higher in companies that feel responsible for the well-being of their employees, and which are characterized by a culture of health (Aldana et al. 2012).¹⁰ An expedient relationship between the works council and management results, in addition, to higher attention to agape, as it may be easier to translate the needs and interests of employees into policies. These findings show that actions speak louder than words and signal that potentially all organizations can devote attention to agape by anchoring the devotion to well-being into the organizational culture. Though it is not easy to change the organizational culture in one day, structural factors do not appear to be a hindrance.

Even though the motivation for agape often lies in a genuine concern for the well-being and flourishing of their employees, our study shows that companies do reap economic, financial, and operational benefits from their attention to agape. They score higher on financial and competitive position, employee productivity, satisfaction, and commitment, and lower on absenteeism and the difficulty to recruit and retain employees. Investing in agape reflects a reciprocal social exchange between employer and employee (Cropanzano and Mitchell 2005): if employers do good for the employee, the employees do good for the employer.

Limitations, direction for future research, and conclusion

We want to note several limitations of our study. Firstly, the response rate by managers and representatives of the works council may have been influenced by a self-selection bias. We cannot exclude the possibility of those companies responding to our call to participate in the survey, that were already geared towards agape and the well-being of workers. This may have influenced the scores – potentially resulting in higher scores. However, it cannot

¹⁰ Organisations with a culture of health are supportive of the health and well-being of employees and have integrated this into the way in which work is done. For example, such organisations frequently communicate about work-life balance and mental health, managers set a good example by not planning any meetings during lunch, and health-promoting activities are offered, such as sport classes.

be excluded either that the relatively high scores may be beneficial in creating a positive halo-effect. By demonstrating that a representative sample of medium-sized and large companies values the importance of agape, it may result in a more positive review of the survey results by companies that did not participate. This hypothesis could be tested in further research.

Secondly, the findings of our research rely on self-assessment of executives, managers, and representatives of the works council. For example, we asked them whether they devoted attention to agape because this is aligned with the organizational values. In this sense, they rated their own policies and practices, and in a way themselves. We can expect that the works council may be a bit more nuanced in this respect, which is indeed reflected in their overall lower score of agape. Future studies may benefit from also surveying employees and lower-level managers to get a more nuanced view of agape within organizations.

Thirdly, when highlighting the relation between characteristics of agape and potential benefits of its application, we note that these findings rely on cross-sectional data. We only had one set of measurements available from one point in time. It is a needed first step in showing that agape can be applied in a business context, and that it is operationalizable. Future studies on agape should be conducted to demonstrate a more longitudinal perspective. Though not the aim of agape, a longitudinal study will reflect on the potential benefits of agape over time. It helps business executives to promote agape more vigorously and convincingly, knowing that there need not be a discrepancy between caring for people and long-term profits.

Fourthly, our study takes place in a specific context and time: the Dutch business landscape in 2020. In other words, the survey took place during the COVID-19 pandemic. In some organizations, there may have been more attention for the well-being of employees as working from home was a new experience for many. In other companies, the pandemic and the consecutive lockdowns may have negatively impacted employees' well-being in the struggle for survival. It highlights the importance to carry out comparable studies in other countries and contexts to improve our understanding of the relationship between agape and the context of business in more generic terms.

Despite these limitations, we believe the strengths of our study are worth mentioning. We are among the first to have operationalized and measured the concept of agape in a business context. Our sample of 420 organizations is large enough to draw conclusions from and does not differ from the larger sample from which it was drawn. We see our study as a needed first step on which other studies can further build to gain more insights into agape within an organizational context.

In this paper we have shown that the concept of agape can be operationalized and applied to a business context. The largescale study which we conducted showed that Dutch companies, on average and reported by a manager and/or a member of the works council, are committed to employees' well-being in line with the values of their organizations. Though not the aim of agape, since organizations that apply the concept reap tangible business benefits from it, the concept becomes suitable to a wider range of businesses. To further promote the concept of agape, this study calls for quantitative and qualitative longitudinal research into the ways in which employees recognize and experience the personal and business dimensions of agape in the daily practice of their (Dutch) companies.

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Data Availability Data on which this article is based can be obtained from the authors upon request.

Declarations

Ethics Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. The ethical committee of the Faculty of Humanities at Utrecht University approved the study (reference number: 6173233–06-02–2020).

Consent to Participate Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Competing Interests No competing interests are at stake and there is no conflict of interest with other people or organizations that inappropriately influenced or biased the paper or could do so in the future.

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