



# Work & Organizational Psychology Research in Services for Individuals with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities: A Humanitarian Perspective



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## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to highlight the contributions of work and organizational psychology to the study of the quality of life of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. To this end, some examples of research projects are described. These research efforts connect organizational processes to aspects of quality of life such as social inclusion and self-determination.

**Keywords:** Quality of life; Work and organizational psychology; Humanitarian

## Opinion

Work & organizational psychology research in services for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Work and organizational psychology scholars aim to study the behavior of organizations and their members and staff. Some of the most commonly addressed topics are leadership and power, communication, decision-making, motivation, organizational justice, trust, satisfaction, wellbeing, performance, participation, conflict, culture, climate, and organizational change. In addition, dimensions of the external environment have been taken into account, such as its complexity, its stability, and the availability of resources [1]. In many cases, there has been an emphasis on adapting the organization to its environment. The organization, however, can also be considered an active change agent of its environment. An example is the study of service climate [2], where good service quality practices are expected to produce a positive image of quality among external users and society as a whole. However, the potential impact of the behavior of organizations and their members and staff goes even further, and an increasing number of researchers and practitioners are interested in a humanitarian approach to work and organizational psychology. In this regard, the Global Organization for Humanitarian Work Psychology was created in order to promote a scientific discipline oriented, among other goals, to the improvement of social justice, people's self-determination, respect for diversity, and

the empowerment of vulnerable and/or marginalized groups who find it difficult to participate fully in society. From this perspective, one group that deserves attention consists of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (PIDD). In 2015, the United Nations Committee on Human Rights identified a number of problems related to the situation of PIDD (<http://goo.gl/2HIY3W>), including the lack of inclusion of this group in their local communities due to excessive institutionalization and a low level of employment compared to other groups.

In this context, research in work and organizational psychology has investigated the processes that lead to improvements in the quality of life of PIDD, emphasizing social inclusion and self-determination. One line of research has to do with incorporating this group into the labor market and achieving more inclusive organizations in our society. For example, Nelissen et al. [3] studied 84 work teams in which people with disabilities (in some cases, with intellectual disabilities) collaborated. They observed that workers with a pro-social motivation displayed more inclusive behaviors, especially when the team had a high inclusion climate. Other authors have focused exclusively on organizations for PIDD (e.g. sheltered workshop, educational services). One issue of particular relevance is the interaction between the staff, on the one hand, and the families of the PIDD, on the other. Research seems to support the existence

of significant discrepancies between the two groups. For instance, evidence indicates that the staff is more committed to the self-determination of PIDD than family members are [4]. In promoting positive attitudes toward self-determination in families and encouraging self-determination behaviors at home, organizations for PIDD would play a significant role. Martínez-Tur et al. [5] confirmed this idea in their study. They observed that communication openness about self-determination (family members perceive that they can discuss self-determination with the staff) improves the attitudes of family members and increases the self-determination behaviors of PIDD at home. Another relevant research line involves the exploration of internal organizational processes that lead to an improvement in the quality of life of PIDD [6]. In this research, a distinction is made between two dimensions of service quality directed to PIDD: functional service quality (degree to which the central or core service, technical or professional, is efficiently provided by the staff) and relational service quality (emotional and relational bonds between the staff and PIDD that go beyond the main service and include aspects such as empathy or authenticity in the relationship). In a sample of 724 team members and 1137 family members of 89 organizations for PIDD, the study confirms that team members who are treated well by the organization, its managers, and their colleagues are motivated to provide better service quality directed to PIDD. This quality service, in turn, improves the quality of life of PIDD.

These are examples from work and organizational psychology oriented toward investigating the organizational processes that stimulate the quality of life of PIDD. Of course, in organizations for PIDD, different programs and projects are developed to improve the quality of life of PIDD. However, beyond these

projects, there is an organizational life that has a significant impact on PIDD. An illustrative case is the workers' treatment by the organization and its managers, which has a significant effect on service quality directed to PIDD and their quality of life. There are other initiatives to continue the research efforts. An area of special interest is the investigation of organizational interventions (e.g., stimulation of collaboration among the staff, family members, and PIDD), with "pre" and "post" measures, which make it possible to build bridges between science and practice. There is, therefore, a promising horizon for advancing knowledge and providing evidence leading to a better and more inclusive life of PIDD.

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