



## Humanitarian work psychology: The contributions of organizational psychology to poverty reduction

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### ABSTRACT

Achieving the MDG goal of reducing world poverty by 50% by 2015 requires the cooperative effort of many disciplines. To date the discipline of organizational psychology has not played as significant a role as it might in this endeavor. With the recent establishment of the Global Task Force for Humanitarian Work Psychology, this discipline signaled its commitment to the global effort. Organizational psychology offers to bring its expertise to poverty reduction: its ability to assess needs and capacity, develop partnerships with stakeholders, bring about and manage change, and systematically review, evaluate, monitor and revise high level mandates, policy development, program implementation and consultation on personnel issues. Its successes as practitioners-scientists in private enterprise will enhance its credibility for success in the public sphere. The article reviews the research and practice of some of the organizational psychologists presently engaged in poverty reduction and how humanitarian work psychology might enhance the efforts of anti-poverty organizations.

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## 1. Introduction

Poverty reduction has traditionally been the purview of economics, and the field of organizational psychology has not figured prominently in addressing this crucial global issue. This article introduces Humanitarian Work Psychology as a specialized focus within organizational psychology that can contribute to poverty eradication efforts, and in so doing, marks a new departure for psychology. It is the authors' belief that not only *can* organizational psychologists be instrumental in dealing with the challenge of poverty reduction, we have a social obligation to do so.

In this article, we first set the scene by defining a role for organizational psychology in humanitarian development work and poverty reduction, and presenting a brief introduction to organizational psychology and its concerns. We then focus on

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the specific role Humanitarian Work Psychology can play in international development projects and poverty reduction. We will describe the various ways in which our discipline can, and should, be applied to the development arena, provide some illustrations of the recent Humanitarian Work Psychology efforts of organizational psychologists, and indicate the importance of encouraging a new generation of Humanitarian Work Psychologists to attend to this vital issue. The establishment of a Global Task Force for Humanitarian Work Psychology is a key step in organizing our work moving forward.

### 1.1. Background

The level of world poverty is severe and becoming worse with the downturn in the world economy. The statistics are overwhelming and disheartening. Over two billion people live on less than two dollars a day, between 26,000 and 30,000 children die each day as a result of poverty, and over one-quarter of all children in low-income countries are estimated to be underweight or stunted, with most living in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa (Shah, 2009). The poorest 40% of the world's population account for only 5% of global income. The world is well aware of the extent of the plight of poverty and what it will take to reduce it. The first UN Millennium Development Goal (MDG-1) is to reduce extreme poverty and hunger by 50% by 2015 (United Nations, 2008). At current trends this goal is unlikely to be achieved.

Kemal Dervis, the then administrator of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) recently stated that “The effects of the current financial crisis could reduce demand for developing countries’ exports, as well as the availability of credit and foreign direct investment to finance projects” (Dervis, 2008, p. 1). The economic future of the world looks bleak but even worse for those already suffering from the effects of poverty. Their chances for opportunities to rise above poverty seem more remote than ever.

While we recognize that human welfare and economic growth are in no way synonymous, properly managed economic growth can contribute much to poverty reduction. Expanding economic opportunities for the poor is an important way to ensure that the benefits of economic growth are felt by the poor themselves. It is also the case, but rarely acknowledged, that psychological factors are important in determining the manner in which successful economic change and opportunities are conceived, designed, promoted, instituted and evaluated (MacLachlan, Carr, & McAuliffe, 2010). Much of the work against poverty takes place in organizations. However, to date, organizational psychology has been largely missing from the battle to eradicate poverty.

### 1.2. Organizational psychology: a missing link

The development literature contains many examples of good ideas that do not translate well from one context (usually Western, often institutional) to another in a poorer, socially and culturally different region. For example, despite the overall success of micro-credit, the primarily female beneficiaries can face difficulties in achieving work-life balance (Downs, 2007). This is a very personal problem that is difficult to address by macro-level policy or intervention, but that can be helped by micro-level understanding of the psychology of work-life balance (Kossek & Lambert, 2005).

Poverty-reduction efforts which involve providing aid confront additional psychological complications. Often, the recipients of this aid may have a different interpretation of the motives and intentions held by those who attempt to bring about economic opportunities. This can result in limiting the effectiveness of the intended change, and causing frustration and burnout among those who intended to make a positive contribution. It is too often overlooked that the recipients and the donor benefactors act from differing psychological perspectives based on different experiences, education and world views (Carr, McAuliffe, & MacLachlan, 1998). For example, performance management systems that promote self-promotion and individual achievement might clash with traditional systems that stress humility and social achievement, creating strain for workers and moderating performance outcomes (MacLachlan & Carr, 2005).

The science of organizational psychology has available much research and theory to elucidate workplace psychological mediators of socio-cultural, socio-economic and socio-political differences (Easterly, 2006). As Easterly suggests, grand plans like the Millennium Development Goals can backfire unless translated into workable everyday targets for managers and workers in organizations charged with building capacity and providing poverty-reduction services (Locke & Latham, 2002). It has been suggested (Sachs, 2005) that the United Nations’ goals generally can be translated into smaller-scale interventions that are specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and timely (or, “S.m.a.r.t”). Organizations are logical venues for smart goal-setting processes (Carr & Bandawe, 2008) to increase work motivation (Locke & Latham, 2002). Therefore, in creating opportunities to reduce poverty and enhance well-being, organizational psychology should be a part of the process of developing, instituting and coordinating strategies and actions of both benefactors and recipients. The dissension that sometimes occurs between donors and recipients is also often found *within* organizations of donors and groups of recipients. And, once again, the science of psychology should be applied to successful strategies and activities within these organizations and groups.

## 2. The field of organizational psychology

The discipline of organizational psychology deals with the research and practice of developing effective organizations of all kinds. This branch of psychology, closely aligned to social psychology, was first conceived by Hugo Munsterberg in 1913 with the publication of “Psychology and Industrial Efficiency” (Munsterberg, 1913). Munsterberg recognized that

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