WORK TEAMS IN ORGANIZATIONS. RECENT RESEARCH CONTRIBUTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE[1,2]

Virginia Orengo, José M. Peiró[3] and Ana Zornoza
IDOCAL Instituto de Psicología de los RRHH, DO y CVL. University of Valencia

This article presents a brief introduction to the recent research on work teams in organizations carried out in Spain. It also mentions the main topics of this research and raises relevant issues about their implications for professional practice. Based on the scientist-practitioner model and profiting from the literature on evidence-based practice, we briefly analyze the relationships between research and professional practice in Psychology. Finally, we present the papers published in this special section devoted to work teams in organizations.
Key words: *work teams; evidence-based practice, Spain.*

El presente trabajo ofrece una breve introducción a la investigación científica en España sobre los Equipos de trabajo, presenta las principales temáticas de esa investigación y plantea sus implicaciones para la práctica profesional. Partiendo de una visión de la actuación del psicólogo centrada en el modelo científico-profesional e inspirada en una práctica basada en la evidencia empírica obtenida por la investigación analiza las relaciones entre investigación y práctica profesional y presenta los trabajos que se incluyen en esta sección monográfica.
Palabras clave: *Equipos de trabajo; práctica basada en la evidencia, España.*

This monographic series follows the tradition of the journal *Papeles del Psicólogo* that periodically offers updates on recent developments in the research of the Psychology of Work and Organizations. We understand that this practice is of special interest given that *"Papeles"* reaches all registered psychologists whatever their field of professional practice and in doing so, a part is played in disseminating the research results in this field of Psychology to a large number of professional psychologists and areas of intervention.

Scientific research in Spanish Psychology has experienced strong growth and a great improvement in quality over the last few decades. This can be easily verified if the evolution of any of the indicators to the relative use of scientific production and quality are analyzed. Moreover, the number of articles and other publications in the English language has increased, both in Spanish scientific journals and in those published internationally. This is logical, taking into account the international sphere of scientific production. Research findings

must be communicated to the research community, especially those who are also carrying out research on the same topic (*front research*), as this is how an investigation contributes to the advancement of knowledge. Moreover, research must be relevant and beneficial to society and the results must be transferred and exploited in a manner convenient for social benefit. This means that the contribution of the research and its results are reported to professionals who can implement them in their professional practice making it more efficient and valuable at the same time as those research results are being evaluated. This is one of the reasons that it makes good sense to incentivize publications and monographic sections such as the one that we are presenting here.

With much strength and conviction, there is increasing insistence that the profession of psychologist and the value and quality of the psychologist's contributions and services is founded on scientific knowledge and empirical evidence rigorously obtained through research. Our Psychology Faculties teach Psychology and prepare professionals inspired by the scientific-professional model. In addition, more and more value is placed on evidence-based practice. Thus, the quality and rigor of services given by psychologists is promoted. An approach based on empirical evidence does not imply that only that evidence is a valid and reliable source of knowledge that inspires professional practice. As Briner, Denyer and Rousseau (2009) have very correctly pointed out, there are various sources that should enlighten professional decisions of competence and quality. Together with contrasted knowledge and empirical evidence resulting from research, there are other relevant and valid sources such as the experience acquired by the professional and his/her criteria, preferences, values etc. of the relevant stakeholders involved in the intervention, and the knowledge of the context, the organizational actors and the specific circumstances. Hence, empirical evidence cannot be applied in a mechanical and automatic fashion; it is integrated in the decision-making process that frequently is a part of professional practice. For this reason, "evidence-based practice" is essential in professional actions, but it also involves researchers who have to broach their studies in a way that is relevant and complies with this important function.

Between the research results and their utility in professional practice, a space for fundamental action is opened and frequently unattended in our country. We are referring to the "development" of technologies,

methodologies, and performance programs based on the scientific knowledge achieved (see Quijano 2006). Development Research and all the other activities necessary in order to attain a good product or service require a series of competencies that are found between research and professional practice. Professional training in these competencies (see a description in the Europsy model; e.g., Peiró and Lunt, 2002) is more and more necessary, both for researchers and professionals. For this, it is necessary to have a closer relationship between the knowledge generators, the developers of technology and intervention programs, and the professionals who adapt these social technologies making them useful and effective in the specific context of the intervention.

Work teams are the fundamental unit in organizations. More and more frequently, work is organized and carried out in teams and that means that the configuration of those teams is very diverse and the phenomena and processes that characterizes them are complex and highly interrelated. In these conditions, decisions regarding the design, composition or management of these teams are not simple or straightforward and the "recipes" or indications based on the supposed *one best way* are far from being efficient. It is necessary to turn to research on these phenomena and go about clarifying the multiple contingencies, the relationship between variables and the dynamics of these phenomena if we wish to achieve a more adequate knowledge about them. Moreover, because of their own nature, we are dealing with phenomena that are produced at different levels and that are influenced between levels in diverse ways.

In our country, this area of research has enjoyed a strong development and is well consolidated. In fact, diverse reviews on the different contributions made by the research groups active in this field have been carried out. In the last few years, Gil, Alcover and Peiró (2005) have edited a monographic series in the *Journal of Managerial Psychology* on this topic. On their part, Gil, Rico, and Manzanares (2008) offer a review focused on the question of team efficacy and recently Rico, Alcover, and Tabernero (2010) have analyzed the effectiveness of work teams, paying special attention to the contributions of the last decade. In all these reviews, it is brought to light that research on work teams, in multiple dimensions, is receiving contributions from Spanish research groups.

The present monographic series represents an of course incomplete, due to space limitations, but nevertheless representative sample of the contributions that have been

carried out. The diversity of themes and their scientific and practical interest are ample and we trust that readers will find it interesting.

The reader can find a *first group of papers* whose contributions highlight the role played by work teams in today´s organizations. In general, these contributions are oriented toward the analysis of contextual and/or design-related aspects of work teams.

The first paper presents the contribution by *Alcover, Rico and Gil,* from the Universities Rey Juan Carlos, Autonomous and Complutense in Madrid. These authors highlight the potentialities that work teams have in the current organizational scene, characterized by high doses of complexity, uncertainty and constant changes. Thus, from a systemic and relational perspective, on the one hand, the implications that the use of teams as an organizational strategy has on professional practice are analyzed: changes in human resources management (training and enabling policies), interdependencies and coordination management in the current multi-team systems. On the other hand, the authors reflect on the demands that these teams must face and that are derived from the high organizational flexibility (changes in composition, implications on learning and the effects of the use of distributed teams).

In this same line, *Navarro, Quijano, Berger y Meneses*, from the University of Barcelona, offer a systematic view of the main elements to be taken into account when designing and/or intervening in work teams. With this aim, from a socio-technical approach, they propose a model in which team effectiveness depends on the adjustment between task demands and the degree of maturity achieved by the team (potency, identification, leadership, and level of group development). Moreover, this paper presents a group of valuable techniques for the organizational professional, for both assessment and intervention, through either actions that are oriented toward task design or through intervention on the processes, depending on the type of team involved.

The work by *Osca, Bardera, García-Salmones and Uríen* from the UNED and the European university of Madrid, offers a review regarding some of the key elements for team efficacy following an Input-Process-Output model. On the one hand, a synthesis is presented of main results on the influence that the tasks, the design and some group processes have on some team outcomes. On the other hand, comparative results with respect to processes and results are shown from a transcultural perspective.

On the other hand, *the second group of papers* presents contributions centered on the analysis of a specific topic relevant to the functioning of work teams. The contribution by *Gil, Alcover, Rico and Sánchez-Manzanares* from the universities Complutense, Rey Juan Carlos, Autonomous and Carlos III in Madrid, presents a current and comprehensive vision on the role of *leadership* in work teams. Thus, from the research field, new models of leadership are being developed to respond to the current demands of teams in organizations (complexity, flexibility, change, demographic and cultural diversity, temporality, virtual teams, etc.). The authors present the relevant construct and offer the empirical evidence regarding the role of authentic, transcultural, complex, team, shared and/or distant leadership, the latter developed especially in virtual work contexts. The functionality of one leadership model or another depends on the specific context and, in any case, effective leadership requires training in a group of competencies based on the use of diverse techniques.

The work by *Vicente González-Roma* (IDOCAL, Universitat de Valéncia) offers a novel and integrative vision of *work team and organizational climate*. Thus, a new conceptualization of work unit climate is proposed based on the pattern composed by the members´ perceptions of said unit. This way, climate is configured and can adopt varied, complex and realistic forms, which are more adequately understood from within-unit dispersion dimensions (degree of uniformity and strength and homogeneity). This new conceptualization of climate as a configural property offers opportunities not only for research (the study of climate configurations of work teams, their antecedents and consequents) but also for professional practice and intervention in this area, as it has important consequences on diverse personal and organizational outcomes.

Rico, Sánchez-Manzanares, Gil, Alcover and Tabernero, Rico, from the Universities *Complutense,* Rey Juan Carlos, Autonomous and Carlos III of Madrid and the University of Córdoba, contribute a thought-provoking paper to the present monographic series on *implicit and explicit coordination* as key mechanisms for the management of interdependence in current work teams. Thus, empirical evidence regarding the main antecedents and the concurrent processes that can modulate team efficacy is shown.

The last paper in this section is that by *Benítez, Medina and Munduate*, from the University of Sevilla. In it, an

exhaustive review of recent research on the conceptualization of conflict and its management in work teams is offered. With this aim, the most relevant contributions by diverse research groups active in the study of this topic are analyzed. Thus, conflict is conceptualized; its antecedents, modulating variables and main consequences both for individuals and organizations are reviewed. Moreover, research in real contexts has made important contributions to professional practice. The training of experts and improved use and management of conflictive situations have become essential in organizations.

We end the monographic series with a paper that addresses a special type of team, virtual teams, which have been developed from the possibilities offered by Information and Communication Technologies and the new demands and requirements of current organizations. In this paper, *Orengo, Zornoza and Peiró* from the University of Valencia (IDOCAL) offer a systematic view of the functioning of these virtual teams. To do this, they review the results relative to the main interaction processes and/or emergent states developed by these teams. It is shown that the interaction between the user and technology in virtual contexts requires the development of adaptation processes and learning which are qualitatively different to those developed in teams that communicate in a conventional manner, that is, face to face. Thus, the way in which they relate to each other and manage discrepancies, the interaction styles, the way of influencing and structuring the task, as well as the development of trust and potency are distinctive while relevant in these teams. For this reason, from a positive orientation and directed toward professional practice, several actions are proposed for the management of virtual teams in organizations, paying special attention to their training.

We understand that the works included in this issue broaden and develop the comprehension of work team functioning in organizations, making the main results obtained in the recent research conducted in Spain available to psychology professionals. It is worth pointing out a series of aspects common to all these works, which will be briefly enumerated next.

First, in all of them, strong transformations in the work environments of these teams are shown (inside and outside the organizations in which they are integrated). The work activity itself and the organizations are experiencing major transformations and this grants an essential role to teams as an organizational form. Hence, we find new work scenarios, new demands and new team modalities.

Second, the composition, forms, processes and other aspects relevant to teams are displaying a great diversity of forms, many of which are novel, in an innovation process with strong dynamism and in many cases, with successful, valuable and useful discoveries in the new situation.

Third, the studies included in this issue pay special attention to the research conducted in our country and cultural context, although they also show their articulation with the traditions and approaches that today are in the front line of investigation (*front research)* on the international scene in the topic of work teams in organizations.

Fourth, in the research presented here, an explanatory approach predominates, oriented toward the development and testing of theoretical models, more than to the design of instruments and intervention strategies. Research on teams continues to analyze the contributing factors to the success and efficacy of these, with a view to designing the interventions based on the knowledge of these factors. These interventions, following the *scientist-practitioner* model require evidence-based knowledge that will make it possible to transfer the results of the investigation to the "reality" of the organizations. A competent professional intervention must be based on results and methodologies obtained through research, as has already been pointed out.

To sum up, work teams are presented as privileged spheres for research and provide great opportunities and demands for the intervention of work and organizational psychologists. In fact, research on work teams in organizations has been a promoter of research on groups and work teams in Social Psychology and in Sociology in the last decades.

In addition, along with these achievements, it is worth mentioning the challenges raised in this field. One of these is the transference of the research findings, through the development of the corresponding technology, and the methodologies, instruments and intervention strategies for their use in organizations. In our cultural environment (as opposed to what happens in the US) there are scarcely any products or interventions whose utility and reliability have been assessed and verified. In this regard, we consider it necessary to continue advancing in this direction. Although collaboration strategies and

agreements between Universities and Companies are increasingly more frequent, I+D (investigation and development) requires even more effort and investment and research teams will have to work to facilitate the transference of their results to professional practice. The new generations of psychologists trained in the EEES will develop design competencies which will allow them to conduct micro-designs tailored to the necessities of the client, or the adaptation of *prêt a porter* designs for each client. Today´s universities have posed the challenge of being energizers of the socioeconomic development of their environment, searching for different strategies for the transference and assessment of research results also applicable to social technologies.

In short, this monographic series brings to light the contribution of Psychology to the study of work teams in today´s organizations. The research conducted in universities offers valuable contributions to professional practice, strengthening the link between this investigation and practice. We understand that these contributions go beyond the limits of the field of intervention of Work and Organizational Psychologists and that a lot of the knowledge and methodologies can be useful, with more or less adaptation, in other areas of the professional practice of psychologists.

Before concluding, we would like to thank the authors for their participation and contributions, and the editor of the journal, Professor Serafín Lemos, for the opportunity and support in carrying it out. We believe that reading it will be useful and interesting to both the scientific community and psychology professionals.

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