

THE ECOLOGICAL MODEL OF JUSTICE FOR MENTAL HEALTH IN THE WORKPLACE: A HOLISTIC, STRUCTURAL, FAIR, AND DIGNIFIED APPROACH

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Abstract

This article formulates an Ecological Justice Model for mental health at work based on materials presented during a university community service webinar with partner organizations on 3 July 2026. The conceptual study uses a narrative synthesis of literature on workplace mental health, psychosocial risks, organizational justice, and relevant policy. The model maps problems across five levels: symptoms, immediate causes, organizational practices, structural roots, and philosophical assumptions. Each level is linked to corresponding intervention strategies. It assigns responsibilities to individuals, organizations, government, and society, guided by justice, human dignity, participation, transparency, sustainability, and the common good. The synthesis indicates that individual support should be connected with changes in job design, organizational governance, and worker protection. The model offers a framework for mapping risks and coordinating action across stakeholders. Because the community service activity collected no pre- and post-event evaluation data, the model's effectiveness cannot yet be established empirically and requires further testing.

Keywords: ecological model; mental health at work; organizational justice; psychosocial risks; workplace dignity

INTRODUCTION

Mental health in the workplace is no longer adequately understood as an individual worker issue. The World Health Organization (WHO) (2022) emphasizes that work can be a protective factor for mental health, but certain work conditions and organizations can also cause or exacerbate mental health problems. The WHO has even issued guidelines covering organizational interventions, manager and worker training, individual interventions, return-to-work support, and access to employment. Meanwhile, the International Labour Organization (ILO) and WHO have jointly prioritized the prevention of psychological risks in the workplace, the protection and promotion of mental health, and support for workers with mental health conditions as three key action agendas in the world of work (ILO & WHO, 2022).

The problem is that mental health practices in organizations easily shift to an individual-centered approach. For example, workers are asked to increase resilience, attend counseling, manage stress, or engage in relaxation, while workload, unfairness, leadership, job security, interpersonal relationships, and job design are not always addressed. Yet, a meta-review of mental health studies shows that work factors associated with mental health problems include unbalanced job design, job insecurity, and a lack of recognition and appreciation in the workplace (Harvey et al., 2017). The ILO also identifies workload and pace, low control, organizational culture, career development, job security, interpersonal relationships, and work-home conflict as sources of psychological risks at work (ILO, 2022).

Based on these issues, a community service activity through a collaborative webinar between the Psychology Study Program and partners developed the concept of an ecological justice model for mental health in the workplace. This model positions mental health as an ecological and ethical phenomenon, as it is shaped by the interconnectedness of various system levels and by the values that determine what constitutes good, fair, humane, and decent work. This paper aims to reformulate this model academically and establish a dialogue with the literature on occupational health and organizational psychology.

LITERATURE REVIEW

From the perspective of workplace mental health equity, the issue is even broader. Systematic reviews of mental health have shown that procedural and relational justice are associated with mental health, even after accounting for

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the demand-control-support model and effort-reward imbalance (Ndjaboué et al., 2012). Thus, the question of mental health is not only how can workers become more resilient in the face of stress, but also whether the work system distributes burdens and benefits fairly, treats people with dignity, and provides adequate space for worker participation.

The literature used in developing the model includes organizational justice, job demands and resources, resource preservation, workplace dignity, and psychological safety. The framework helps explain why individual support needs to be accompanied by changes in working conditions and organizational governance (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Edmondson, 1999; Hobfoll, 1989; Lucas, 2015; Ndjaboué et al., 2012).

METHOD

This article conceptualizes community service activities, using the main material derived from the presentation "The Ecological Justice Model for Mental Health in the Workplace: A Holistic, Structural, Fair, and Dignified Approach" used in the Psychology Study Program Collaboration Webinar with Partners. The material contains five main components of mental health in the workplace: problem mapping, division of responsibilities, solution mapping based on problem level, system integration and interconnectedness, and guiding principles.

Academic development was conducted through a narrative synthesis of literature on occupational mental health, work-related psychological risks, the Job Demands–Resources model, demand-control, effort-reward imbalance, organizational justice, psychological safety, self-determination, conservation of resources, dignity at work, decent work, and risk management. Key policy sources included the Indonesian Manpower Law, WHO, ILO, ISO 45003, and the sustainable development framework. Because the activity was not designed as evaluative research and did not collect pre-test/post-test data, this article does not claim any improvement in participants' mental health as a direct result of the webinar.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Mental Health as a Positive Condition and Work Capacity

In the developed model, mentally healthy workers are not defined solely as those without mental disorders. Indicators used include emotional stability and the ability to manage stress, positive work relationships, motivation and engagement in work, the ability to focus and make decisions, adapt to change, and the ability to maintain a work-life balance. This formulation aligns with the WHO's view that mental health is a state of well-being that enables individuals to cope with work pressures, realize their abilities, learn and work effectively, and contribute to the organization.

Therefore, the goal of intervention is not simply to reduce symptoms, but rather to create conditions that enable workers to function healthily and productively. The Job Demands–Resources model explains that high job demands can drain energy, while job resources can protect well-being and foster work engagement (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Meanwhile, the conservation of resources perspective also places the loss or threat of loss of resources at the heart of the stress process (Hobfoll, 1989). Both support the idea that mental health should be viewed as the result of a balance between demands and resources, not solely an individual's coping capacity.

Mapping Problems from Symptoms to Philosophical Roots

The Ecology of Justice Model maps the problem into five levels. The first level is the visible symptoms in the form of stress, depression, burnout, conflict, fatigue, decreased productivity, physical and psychosomatic disorders. The second level is the direct causes, including excessive workload, unrealistic targets, work conflict, uncertainty, and inadequate support. The third level is the organizational causes, including unhealthy organizational culture, unsupportive leadership, unfair reward systems, non-transparent work structures, and inhumane job designs. The fourth level is the structural roots, namely economic and social injustice, weak or unenforced regulations, discrimination, exploitation, and a political-economic system that is insensitive to worker health. The fifth level is the philosophical roots: views on humans, work, productivity, values, and the purpose of life. At this level, the question is no longer simply how to reduce stress, but whether humans are viewed as dignified subjects or mere tools of production.

This multilevel mapping prevents reductionist fallacies. If burnout arises from chronic workload and unfair reward systems, individual counseling may be helpful, but it is not sufficient. Karasek (1979) points to the importance of the relationship between job demands and decision-making space, while Siegrist (1996) emphasizes the tension that arises when high effort is not matched by adequate rewards. Therefore, interventions must be directed at the causal level, not just the symptoms.

The Ecological Model of Justice and the Four Enabling Environments

The model places mental health at the center and links it to four key elements: a dignified work environment, structural justice, personal growth and meaningful work, and social support and solidarity. These four elements are not mutually exclusive. A dignified work environment requires a just structure; personal growth requires a supportive and resourceful organization; and social support will be difficult to sustain if the work system creates insecurity and injustice.

The first dimension, a dignified work environment, demands relationships that respect workers as human beings. Research on workplace dignity shows that dignity in the workplace is related to recognition through respectful interactions, recognition of competence and contributions, and organizational practices that do not demean workers (Lucas, 2015). The second dimension, structural justice, requires fair rules and policies, protection of rights, and oversight mechanisms. ISO 45003 (2021) places psychosocial risk management as part of an occupational health and safety management system.

The third dimension, personal growth and work meaning, emphasizes that work should provide space for competence, autonomy, relationships, learning, and contribution. Self-Determination Theory suggests that fulfilling basic psychological needs such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness not only stimulates motivation but also contributes to workers' psychological well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Meanwhile, the fourth dimension, social support and solidarity, emphasizes interpersonal relationships that are safe, supportive, and free from violence or harassment. Psychological safety, for example, allows team members to take interpersonal risks, learn, and raise concerns without fear of embarrassment (Edmondson, 1999).

Responsibilities of Individuals, Organizations, Governments, and Society

This model does not absolve each worker of their personal responsibility for maintaining mental health. Instead, it places each worker in a proportional relationship with others who share the same responsibility. The view that each individual is responsible for self-awareness, managing emotions and stress, developing competence and resilience, building healthy relationships, and seeking help when needed is perfectly valid. However, this individual responsibility should not be used to shift organizational responsibility for risky working conditions.

Organizations or companies are responsible for creating a fair and safe work culture, providing supportive leadership, managing workloads, preventing discrimination and violence, providing access to mental health services, and maintaining work-life balance. Evidence from organizational interventions suggests that changes in working conditions can have health benefits, although the quality and effects of studies vary (Westgaard & Winkel, 2011). The WHO also emphasizes that organizational interventions are a crucial part of the response to workplace mental health (WHO, 2022).

In addition to companies, the government also has a particular responsibility in creating a legal framework, standards, supervision, and public services that protect workers. The ILO places decent work within conditions of freedom, justice, security, and human dignity, with four strategic objectives: rights at work, employment opportunities, social protection, and social dialogue (ILO, 1999). In Indonesia, the occupational safety framework has a legal basis through Law No. 1 of 1970 concerning Occupational Safety, while Ministerial Regulation No. 5 of 2018 regulates occupational health and safety (K3) in the work environment. Developing occupational mental health can expand K3 practices to be more sensitive to psychosocial risks.

Communities and workers' organizations also have a role to play through social solidarity, stigma reduction, public oversight, education, and strengthening workers' voices, particularly in trade unions. This multistakeholder approach aligns with the WHO–ILO policy brief, which positions governments, employers, workers and their organizations, and civil society actors as part of the changing environment (ILO & WHO, 2022).

Mapping Solutions Based on Problem Level

The model links each level of the problem with appropriate strategies. At the symptom level, interventions focus on psychological recovery and support, such as counseling, mindfulness, relaxation, and employee assistance programs. At the direct cause level, the focus shifts to improving processes and relationships through workload management, conflict resolution, and anti-bullying procedures. At the organizational level, interventions include leadership changes, a culture of fairness and inclusion, and a fair reward system.

At the structural level, strategies are directed at reforming public policy, labor regulations, supervision, enforcing workers' rights, and social protection. At the philosophical level, a paradigm shift is needed through ethical and humanitarian education, strengthening human rights values, and focusing on the *bonum commune*. This distinction

is important because appropriate interventions at one level may not necessarily resolve problems at another. Evidence from organizational interventions also suggests that approaches that modify multiple working conditions simultaneously tend to be more promising than changes that target only one dimension (Westgaard & Winkel, 2011).

System Integration and Principles of Justice

This proposed model views the work system as a layered system where individuals, in this case workers, are located within teams or work groups, then work teams are located within organizations, then organizations are located within public policy structures, while the public policy structure is entirely influenced by the socio-political-economic-cultural system and existing philosophies or values. This relationship is essentially two-way. Changes at the top level can open or limit options at the bottom level, while experiences and practices at the bottom level can drive changes at the top level (Simatupang et al., 2026).

The six guiding principles offered in this model are seen as normative foundations for building and maintaining workers' mental health. The first principle is justice, meaning that those who establish policies and implement practices related to workers' mental health must pay attention to distributive, procedural, and interactional justice. The second principle is human dignity, meaning that humans (read: workers) are the goal. This means that workers must be treated as human beings who work and not simply as means of production. The third principle is participation, meaning that workers need to be involved in policy design and evaluation. The fourth principle is transparency, meaning that decisions and information affecting workers' mental health must be communicated honestly and openly and can be accounted for. The fifth principle is sustainability, meaning that workers' health must be placed in a substantive and long-term perspective. This means that the way work is currently organized must not undermine workers' ability to remain healthy and function well in the future. The sixth principle is *bonum commune*, meaning that the common good must be placed as the highest goal of policies and actions.

The principle of fairness has empirical support from research on organizational justice, which demonstrates the relationship between procedural and relational justice and mental health (Ndjaboué et al., 2012). The principle of participation is also consistent with the concept of social dialogue within the framework of decent work (ILO, 1999). Meanwhile, sustainability and decent work align with Sustainable Development Goal 8 (SDG 8), which places productive, inclusive, and decent work as a key component of sustainable development (ILO, 2023). Preventing violence and harassment is also a crucial component of worker health protection, as affirmed by ILO Convention No. 190 (ILO, 2019). The integration and interconnectedness of systems in building worker mental health can be seen in the following figure:



Figure 1. System integration and interconnectedness. Source: author (2026).

Implications of the Model for Collaboration between Industry, Government, and Society

The ecological justice model is a collaboration between industry, government, and society that takes place through a preventive and systemic approach. Industry is not only a user of labor but also a public health actor that influences the well-being and mental health of workers and their families. Therefore, industry has a responsibility to create a healthy, safe, fair, and sustainable work environment and practices. On the other hand, the government plays a role not only as a regulator that acts after problems arise, but also as an actor that creates a policy ecosystem that encourages the emergence of healthy work practices as a standard, measurable, and controlled. The government also plays a role in ensuring that these standards are consistently implemented through supervision, guidance, and worker protection mechanisms.

Meanwhile, society plays a role as part of the social ecosystem that helps shape, monitor, and strengthen healthy work practices. Communities, including workers' families, professional organizations, educational institutions, communities, and civil society organizations, can play a role in raising awareness about the importance of worker health, providing social support, voicing workers' interests and rights, and encouraging industry and government accountability. Thus, worker mental health is not seen solely as an individual issue or a company's responsibility, but as a shared responsibility that requires the involvement of the entire social ecosystem.

Collaboration between industry, government, and society can be realized through psychosocial risk mapping, development of mental health indicators in K3, manager training, safe complaint mechanisms specifically related to witness and victim protection, referral services, work culture audits, and regular dialogue with workers. Meanwhile, at the implementation level, organizations can use five diagnostic questions regarding worker mental health as follows: (1) what symptoms appear; (2) what direct work factors trigger them; (3) what organizational practices maintain them; (4) what policy structures or inequalities allow the problem to occur; and (5) what values underlie the way the organization views people and work? These five questions help prevent organizations from stopping at individual wellness programs when the root of the problem lies in the design of work or organizational systems.

This framework is also consistent with ISO 45003, which encourages organizations to manage industrial and organizational psychology risks as part of their OH&S management system and to undertake continuous improvement (ISO, 2021). Thus, mental health is not positioned as an additional program outside of organizational management, but rather as part of healthy, safe, fair, and dignified work governance.

CONCLUSION

The Ecology of Justice Model for Workplace Mental Health offers a conceptual framework that integrates psychological, organizational, structural, and ethical perspectives. This model starts from the premise that workers' mental health cannot be sustainably maintained if interventions are directed solely at the individual. Symptoms must be interpreted alongside their immediate causes, organizational practices, structural conditions, and philosophical values that shape the workplace.

The model's key contributions lie in its integration of five levels of problems, the division of responsibilities between individuals, organizations, governments, and communities, the mapping of interventions by level, and six normative principles: justice, human dignity, participation, transparency, sustainability, and bonum commune. In the context of industry-government collaboration, this model can be used as a framework for discussion, initial diagnosis, and the design of occupational mental health policies.

This model is conceptual and based on community service activities, so it does not yet provide empirical evidence of its effectiveness. Therefore, further research is needed to develop operational indicators for each dimension, examine relationships between levels, and evaluate the effectiveness of the model's implementation in organizations with varying characteristics. This way, workplace mental health can move beyond individual treatment programs to a shared agenda for building a healthy, equitable, productive, sustainable, and dignified work environment.

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