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# Psychological well-being, perceived organizational support and job satisfaction amongst Chilean prison employees<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This research aims to identify the relationship between Job Satisfaction, Psychological Well-being and Perceived Organizational Support amongst prison officials. 190 employees working in state facilities and privately-run prisons were evaluated using the S10/12 Job Satisfaction Form<sup>1</sup>, the Psychological Well-being Scale<sup>2</sup> and the Scale of Perceived Organizational Support<sup>3</sup>. Main results depict a positive and significant connection between job satisfaction, psychological well-being and perceived organizational support, in such a way that those employees satisfied with their jobs tend to feel better psychologically and perceive support from their organizations. Furthermore, there were no significant differences found between officials in different facilities, concerning the study variables. Regarding socio-demographic figures, the study showed certain differences between genders as far as job satisfaction and psychological well-being are concerned, whereas there were no differences found between employees in different units.

**Key words:** job satisfaction, prison, Chile, applied psychology, public authorities, men, women, working conditions.

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The prison service in Chile has endured a critical period which has lasted years, due to a lack of infrastructure, growth in prison population, inadequate penalties concerning crime and a shortage of public employees within the prison management system (*Gendarmería*). This situation has affected Chile in a negative way as far as penal and Human Rights issues are concerned, taking into account Chile has one of the highest rates of confined population per capita in Latin America and has the second largest prison population per capita after the U.S.<sup>4</sup> According to data from the last 10 years, prison population grew from 34.000 to 53.000 interns, while overcrowding reached 300% in some facilities<sup>5</sup>.

These figures are shocking, taking into account that there are 56.000 people deprived of freedom in a

country in which penal facilities have a total capacity for 31.000 interns. 23 out of the 101 Prison Facilities of the country host twice the intern population which they were originally built to hold<sup>5</sup>. In addition to this, there is a real shortage of employees within the prison system, for the 2.500 existing officials are not enough to address the real needs of prison population. Therefore, staff must attend a much higher number of interns than the number in International Regulations, which state that there must be an official every 5 inmates.

In order to put an end to this situation, different governments have devised several strategies, although results have been insufficient. One of these strategies was the Prison Infrastructure Privatization Programme, implemented in 2001 during ex-president

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<sup>1</sup> Included within the investigation program "Quality of Life and Healthy Environment" (DPI, Talca University, 2007) Psychology Department, Talca University. E-mail: anijimenez@utalca.cl

Ricardo Lago's term of office. This programme aimed to reduce overcrowding and improve life conditions amongst interns. Up until today, 14 semi-private facilities should have been built according to the programme, but only 6 have been completed (4).

Regarding the situation, the current administration has decided, investing a 460 million dollar budget, to confront the problem from three different angles. This investment will grant the construction of new facilities, therefore increasing by 235,000 square meters the total surface of penal infrastructures and generating space for 2000 more interns. In addition to this, a penal reform to promote sentences different from imprisonment (such as an electronic bracelet with GPS which makes it possible to keep interns under surveillance out of penal facilities) is being developed. Alternatively, a plan with eleven measures to improve living conditions amongst interns has been submitted. The plan includes, among other measures, improving intern's diet, repairing sanitation systems, acquiring new bunk beds and reducing confinement periods<sup>5</sup>.

Nevertheless, increasing the capacity of facilities does not solve the shortage of prison employees in the *Gendarmería* (prison services), so the government has decided to implement Law 20.426, which doubles the number of positions within the prison services. By means of this new regulation, prison staff will grow from 2500 members to 5000, granting a better coverage of intern's needs all through the country and reducing the current work overload amongst officials, which is the main cause of the high stress levels and low quality of life amongst prison workers. Taking into account the situation formerly described, it is of great interest to inquire into the situation and experiences of prison employees, who have been facing the problems in the Chilean penal system for many years.

This investigation is of real importance due to the fact that the majority of research concerning prison issues is focused on interns, not on officials. Research carried out with prison employees and the variables formerly formulated (satisfaction, well-being and organizational support) is almost nonexistent in Chile. The conditions in which officials must carry out their job must be taken into consideration: (a) overcrowding in prison facilities due to the increasing number of people being imprisoned every day, demanding an additional effort coming from officials in order to attend more interns with the same number of employees; (b) a shortage of material means to support and facilitate employee's intervention in intern rehabilitation, vital for later reintegration of inmates in society; (c) a lack of intern participation

in rehabilitation activities, mainly due to their low expectations at the prospect of being newly accepted by society and regarding future opportunities; (d) a low possibility of real intern rehabilitation due to the issues formerly described, making rehabilitation seem utopian for the general population and therefore generating a feeling of frustration and inability amongst prison workers, whose only task appears to be that of protecting and guarding inmates; (e) bad hygiene and infrastructure conditions in which prison employees must carry out their job, conditions which are inadequate for any human being and, without any doubt, put both inmates' and workers' lives at risk.

As far as differences in this research between traditional and semi-private systems are concerned, the former displays problems related to the lack of space to hold interns, as well as inadequate environmental conditions regarding hygiene, illumination and insulation. The current amount of inmates goes beyond the figures set up by international regulations (by approximately 900 interns). In semi-private prisons management responsibilities are shared by a public-private board, which confers custody and management responsibilities to the public sector, and sets up the private sector as the provider of basic and supplementary services. These facilities hold better infrastructure and equipment conditions, as well as adequate hygiene, green areas, parking and cleaning standards. The private sector provides food services for interns and workers, as well as laundry and health services for inmates.

The importance of such differences has caused research to be carried out concerning different psychological and social variables which may have a positive or negative influence in staff members in these contexts. Investigation through these variables in the penal system is of great interest, mainly due to its' particular features. Prison facilities have custody and surveillance of people deprived of freedom as its main function, and therefore carry out a service within certain security issues. This greatly differs from the general conception of an organization, in which the former operates and sets its aims in order to remain within a specific market. This context variation brings up the idea that prison workers hold a special perception concerning their job, not uniquely related to their inherent features, but also to the conditions in which they must carry out their job and the general opinion towards the institution they work for.

There has been a special interest in job satisfaction as a psychological variable. It is commonly described as a positive or enjoyable emotional condition as a result of the subjective perception of an individual

job experience<sup>6</sup>. It is studied in order to establish its connection to other variables, and with the aim of finding its influence over commitment, absenteeism, staff turns, performance, working engagement, etc. Job satisfaction has been also described as an attitude variable, taking into account the important role attitudes play in perception and behaviour<sup>7</sup>. In a working context, the positive or negative attitude assumed by an employee towards the job to be carried out will generate certain conduct patterns which might have an influence on the adequate or inadequate performance of the former, as well as on the way of perceiving and judging working conditions.

Psychological well-being has been consistently related to job satisfaction. Several authors have depicted it as a subjective component of job satisfaction, and have therefore used satisfaction scales many times in order to assess it<sup>8,9</sup>. During the last ten years, several research studies have been carried out concerning psychological well-being, broadening the conceptual map regarding this variable. It is described as an affective condition of an individual within a working context, regarding both the level of activity and the degree of enjoyment experienced<sup>10</sup>.

Studying this variable has its basis on research carried out concerning emotions and affections, in such a way that psychological well-being in a working context becomes a subject of great interest, for not only is it led by temporary emotions and affections that have an influence on employee behaviour (its effect drives behaviour), but it also originates rather stable postures<sup>11</sup> towards a job. Taking this into account, it becomes relevant to take a closer look at working environments, due to the fact that the running of events and experiences which stem from them affect employee's feelings, thoughts and behaviour in their workplace.

In this particular study, psychological well-being will be analysed through Peter Warr's Vitamin Model, according to which well-being would be described in three scales or dimensions. The first scale would range from satisfied to dissatisfied, measured by means of specific questionnaire forms for job, general or multidimensional satisfaction. The second scale covers the range between anxiety and comfort, by means of measuring both general and job-specific anxiety. Finally, the third scale reports the appearance or absence of depressant conditions amongst employees.

According to this model, mentally healthy individuals tend to display emotions from the positive range of each scale (satisfaction, comfort, enthusiasm) but this does not mean that they do not occasionally experience certain emotions from the negative ranges (dissatisfaction, anxiety, depression). Time is used

as the variable to tell mentally healthy individuals from those who are not. The longer emotions from the negative ranges last, the weaker the individual's mental health is.

Perceived organizational support is another variable, related to satisfaction and well-being, which has raised great interest among analysts. It is described as the global perception amongst employees towards the way in which the organization they work for values their contribution and looks after their well-being. This perception has certain importance, for it increases employee attachment to the organization, strengthens reward expectations in return for working harder, and leads to the conception that organizational profits and losses are those of the employee too, who will, as a consequence, attach more value to the organization and adopt its regulations and principles<sup>12</sup>.

Consequently, employee's perceptions and appraisals are of real importance, for they convey their level of motivation and commitment, as well as their general attitude towards the job to be carried out and concerning their organization. Research regarding organizational support has focused on considering it a precedent, due to the fact that depending on the level of support provided to individuals, their well-being levels within their organization will increase<sup>12,13</sup>, and therefore, this perception of well-being will lead to higher job satisfaction levels.

This research study has its basis on data collected from 190 prison employees working in two Prison Facilities from the VI and VII Region. The main difference between both facilities is that one of them runs under the semi-private prison infrastructure program (*Programa de Concesiones de Infraestructura Penitenciaria*), whereas the other is still operated in the traditional way. It is due to this fact that the study is of great interest, for it makes it possible to describe the conditions in which employees must carry out their job while taking into consideration the existing differences between both prison facilities. Finally, and in addition to this, the study provides a vision on the connection between job satisfaction, psychological well-being and perceived organizational support amongst prison employees.

## METHOD

### Participants

190 employees working in prison facilities in the VI and VII Region, from units I, II and III of the

Chilean Prison Services (Gendarmería) participated voluntarily and with informed consent in the study. Out of a universe (sample space?) consisting of 422 prison officials, a sample representing 45% of the total population was taken. 90 employees were selected from traditional facilities (62.5% out of a total number of 144 participants) and 100 from semi-private facilities (35.97% out of 278). 80% of participants are men (n=152) and 20% women (n=38). Their ages range from 18 to 54, divided into groups of ages 18 to 25 (21.57%), 26 to 34 (52.63%), 35 to 42 (19.47%) and 43 or older (6.38%). 25% of the sample has been working for the prison services between 1 and 5 years, 37% has done so during 6 to 10 years, 18% during 11 to 15 years and the final 20% has been working for more than 16 years for the institution.

### Devices

Three different scales were used: i) Perceived Organizational Support Scale (extracted, translated and adapted from the Survey of Perceived Organizational Support). Consisting of 16 items, out of which 10 are featured in an affirmative way and 6 in a negative one, each participant must answer according to a 7 point Likert scale. ii) Psychological Well-Being was assessed through three scales. To determine values in the first scale (Enjoyment) the S10/12 Satisfaction Form was used, consisting of 12 items divided into three different factors (satisfaction towards supervision, satisfaction towards the physical environment, satisfaction towards allowances). Participants answered according to a 7 point Likert scale. The second scale, Anxiety-Comfort, and the third one, Depression-Enthusiasm, were assessed according to the Spanish adaptation from the scales developed by Warr, which convey emotions through adjectives. Once again, the form consisted of 12 items with a 7 point Likert scale.

### Procedure

In order to report facilities on the aims of the research study and to obtain permission for the implementation of the research devices, it was necessary to contact the Regional Technical Responsible for each prison facility. Participation in the study was completely voluntary, and participants' identity remained anonymous. Each official managed the three questionnaires personally and gave them back during the same day. Data drawn from each form were transferred and analysed through SPSS 15.0 Statistic Software, which made it possible to

carry out descriptive, correlation and comparison data analysis.

Firstly, the Kolmogorov – Smirnov test was run for the three scales being analysed. It was concluded after the test that the data obtained from the Job Satisfaction Scale (K-S = 0.954;  $p > 0.05$ ), the Psychological Well-Being Scale (K-S = 0.800;  $p > 0.05$ ) and the Perceived Organizational Support Scale (K-S = 0.810;  $p > 0.05$ ) was normal and, as far as statistics are concerned, significant and a 95% confidence level.

### RESULTS

By means of the Pearson correlation, the connection between Job Satisfaction, Psychological Well-Being and Perceived Organizational Support was determined. The results obtained determined a close, positive and significant connection between Job Satisfaction (JB) and Psychological Well-Being (PW) (0.920;  $p < 0.01$ ); a moderate, positive and significant correlation between Job Satisfaction and Perceived Organizational Support (POS) (0.679;  $p < 0.01$ ) and an also moderate, positive and significant correlation between Psychological Well-Being and Perceived Organizational Support (0.693;  $p < 0.01$ ).

As far as the comparative analysis of both facilities is concerned, regarding the study variables, several significant differences can be found between them, as featured in Figure 2. According to it, result indicate that, regarding Job Satisfaction, officials from the traditional facility reach an average of 4.42, while employees in semi-private institutions display a result of 4.36. The averages obtained point out that officials are neither satisfied nor dissatisfied in general, being impossible to detect significant differences ( $t = 0.263$ ;  $p = 0.793$ ) between both facilities regarding this variable.

Regarding Psychological Well-Being, averages range from 4.45 for officials in traditional facilities to 4.40 for employees in semi-private institutions. No significant differences were found for the sample used in the study ( $t = 0.347$ ;  $p = 0.729$ ). Finally, as far as Perceived Organizational support is concerned, significant differences were detected ( $t = 2.434$ ;  $p = 0.016$ ) between employees in one facility or the other. There was a stronger perception of support amongst employees in the traditional facility, reaching a moderate value of perceived organizational support (average = 68.22).

In addition to this, differences regarding socio-demographic variables were found. Out of the total employee sample (n=190), significant differences

		General index JS	General index PW	General index POS
General index JS	Pearson correlation	1	,920**	,679**
	Sig. (bilateral)		,000	,000
	N	190	190	190
General index PW	Pearson correlation	,920**	1	,693**
	Sig. (bilateral)	,000		,000
	N	190	190	190
General index POS	Pearson correlation	,679**	,693**	1
	Sig. (bilateral)	,000	,000	
	N	190	190	190

\*\*Correlation becomes significant at level 0.01 (bilateral)

Table 1. Connection between Job Satisfaction, Psychological Well-Being and Perceived Organizational Support.

		Levene's test for variance equality		T-test for average equality		
		F	Sig.	t	gl	Sig. (bilateral)
General index JS	Considering equal variances	,355	,552	,263	188	,793
	Considering different variances			,263	187,208	,793
General index PW	Considering equal variances	1,271	,261	,347	188	,729
	Considering different variances			,350	187,967	,727
General index POS	Considering equal variances	2,577	,110	2,417	188	,017
	Considering different variances			2,434	187,838	,016

Table 2. Independent Sample Test.

		Levene's test for variance equality		T-test for average equality		
		F	Sig.	t	gl	Sig. (bilateral)
General index JS	Considering equal variances	,002	,964	-2,124	188	,035
	Considering different variances			-2,105	56,324	,040
General index PW	Considering equal variances	1,726	,191	-2,467	188	,015
	Considering different variances			-2,835	69,655	,006
General index POS	Considering equal variances	2,619	,107	-1,767	188	,079
	Considering different variances			-2,074	72,283	,042

Table 3. Independent Sample Test.

were detected concerning Job Satisfaction ( $t=2.105$ ;  $p=0.040$ ) and Psychological Well-Being ( $t=2.835$ ;  $p=0.006$ ) amongst men and women, who feature higher averages than the former. As far as Perceived Organizational support was concerned, no significant differences were detected as it can be seen in figure 3.

Concerning age, there are no differences to be mentioned with reference to job satisfaction. Officials whose ages range between 43 to 50 feature the highest average (average = 5.21), indicating a small degree of satisfaction, while the lowest average was registered amongst officials of age 51 and older (average = 3.28), with a small degree of dissatisfaction. Regarding Perceived Organizational Support, no differences were detected between employees with ages ranging from 18 to 50, who perceive a moderate support coming from the organizations they work for (averages range from 64 to 67). Nevertheless, prison workers 51 and older feature the lowest average (average = 47.67), and therefore these employees consider the support they receive to be low. Finally, in relation to Psychological Well-Being, the only differences found appear amongst officials 51 and older, who, once again, reach the lowest average (average = 3,25). These results are featured in the following figure.

Age		General index JS	General index PW	General index POS
18 to 25	Average	4,46	4,24	67,20
	N	41	41	41
	Stand. dev.	1,269	,906	16,056
26 to 34	Average	4,37	4,21	64,25
	N	100	100	100
	Stand. dev.	1,416	1,091	18,797
35 to 42	Average	4,27	3,94	64,32
	N	37	37	37
	Stand. dev.	1,563	1,306	22,300
43 to 50	Average	5,21	4,84	67,78
	N	9	9	9
	Stand. dev.	1,216	1,067	13,645
51 and older	Average	3,28	3,25	47,67
	N	3	3	3
	Stand. dev.	,555	,273	12,897
Total	Average	4,39	4,18	64,81
	N	190	190	190
	Stand. dev.	1,406	1,104	18,723

Figure 4. Average comparison between age ranges, extracted from the Total Sample.

In conclusion, having analysed a total sample of prison employees from both a traditional and a semi-private facility, no significant differences can be found amongst guards and administrative staff regarding Job Satisfaction ( $t=-0.644$ ;  $p=0.520$ ), Psychological Well-Being ( $t=-0.820$ ;  $p=0.413$ ) and Perceived Organizational Support ( $t=-0.845$ ;  $p=0.399$ ).

## CONSIDERATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This research study was aimed at identifying the connection between Job Satisfaction, Psychological Well-Being and Perceived Organizational Support amongst prison employees. A close connection between job satisfaction and psychological well-being has been detected, by means of which individuals who feel satisfied with their job tend to feel good psychologically. This behaviour can be clearly noticed in the research results, due to the fact that whenever differences were found in the sample regarding job satisfaction, they were also found concerning psychological well-being. The absence of differences was subject to the same correlation, making it possible to conclude that the influence between both variables is strong and mutual. These results were expected, mainly due to the close connection featured in literature concerning these two variables. Satisfaction is commonly considered to be a cognitive component of satisfaction, and literature also points out that emotions or the individual mood related to working experiences have an influence on perception when assessing the different aspects of the job in question. It is necessary to take into account that, when using the job satisfaction scale in the psychological well-being form, a satisfaction scale was used, in such a manner that this behaviour between variables was predictable.

Concerning perceived organizational support, analysis portrays a moderate, positive and significant connection between the former and both job satisfaction and psychological well-being. As a consequence of this, it can be expected that those who receive support coming from their organizations will feel satisfied and psychologically well. Nevertheless, this variable seemed to behave in a more independent way, because even when satisfaction and psychological well-being levels became higher, perceived organizational support levels did not. This does not mean organizational support does not have an influence on satisfaction and well-being, because analysis show that satisfaction and well-being levels tend to decrease in lack of organizational support.

These results do not match the results obtained in some research studies which assert that the higher perceived organizational support is, the stronger the propensity to show a more positive mood and to assess the job in a positive way is <sup>12</sup>.

The second hypothesis, in relation to the significant differences noticed between traditional and semi-private facilities as far as the study variables are concerned, proved to be partially correct. Results show there are no significant differences between the two facilities regarding job satisfaction and psychological well-being amongst employees, but there are certain disparities when taking perceived organizational support into consideration. Employees from traditional prison facilities feature a better perception, and the reason for this might be found in their relationship with their superiors in rank. Concerning this, officials from the traditional facility mention their personal relationship with their superiors, the proximity and frequency of their supervision, and the way in which superior assess their work and support them as the main causes of job satisfaction. Contrary to this, officials from the semi-private facility mention support from their superiors and equity in the way they are treated by their organization as the main causes for dissatisfaction in their workplace.

In accordance to these precedents, research studies point out that support received from superiors or direct supervisors is interpreted as the perception of support employees might receive from their organizations, for superiors in rank are seen as organization representatives. They hold the responsibility of evaluating and leading their subordinates' performance, and therefore employees perceive negative or positive guidance as an indicator of organizational support <sup>3</sup>. Consequently, dissatisfaction amongst officials in the semi-private facility towards support received from their superiors' turns, indeed, into a low organizational support perception.

Regarding differences as far as age, gender and working unit are concerned in relation to the research study variables, significant disparities can be found concerning job satisfaction and psychological well-being. Women assess their job in a more favourable way and feel better psychologically. Nevertheless, both men and women feature the same level of perceived organizational support.

These findings match the different studies carried out regarding differences between men and women in relation to job satisfaction. Whenever a job is considered to be difficult to get for women, they tend

to assess it in a more positive way when they achieve a position (6). It is also considered that women tend to have lower expectations towards a job than men, making it easier for them to make achieve them. Finally, it can be considered that women tend to face a job through will, while men tend to conceive it as an obligation <sup>15, 16</sup>.

Such differences, taken into account in a more specific way in relation to prison facilities, can have its cause in the disparities regarding the jobs which men and women carry out. The latter usually hold positions related to management tasks, working as administrative assistants, participating in the field of prison control and statistics, carrying out hearing updates and, in semi-private facilities, being responsible of breastfeeding units and women interns. Consequently, women do not have as much contact with prison population as male officials do, and therefore they do not have to undergo as many difficult situations, which without any doubt generates a more positive perception towards the job and enables women to display a higher level of psychological well-being.

Concerning the lack of differences between men and women in relation to perceived organizational support, its cause might be found in the little participation of prison employees in decision making. This is mainly due to the fixed hierarchy of the prison services, which operate in such a way that decisions are made by those in the highest strata and officials are merely informed when arrangements have already been made. Within a prison facility, the authority to make any pertinent arrangement relies upon the unit responsible. Nevertheless, these must follow orders from the regional director, which must take orders from a national authority. Taking this into account, officials, no matter what stratum they hold a position in, must display respect and obedience towards their superiors in any situation, even in those in which they might be involved. In case of disobedience, it is considered to be a serious offence against the institution and a lack of commitment towards it.

As far as age is concerned and regarding traditional prison facilities, it can seem that the older the officials are, the lower job satisfaction levels become. These results match the conclusions reached by De Diego Vallejo and collaborators, who point out that linearity between job satisfaction and age is interrupted at the age of 50, when levels of dissatisfaction tend to be registered <sup>6</sup>. Concerning these prison employees, dissatisfaction may have its cause in weariness due to several years of service, in addition to the inadequate working conditions which also explain the lower

psychological well-being and perceived organizational support levels.

In semi-private facilities, the opposite phenomenon can be observed, for the older prison employees are, the higher job satisfaction, psychological well-being and perceived organizational support levels become. This data is similar to Clark, Oswald and Warr's remark on the rise of job satisfaction levels amongst employees about to retire<sup>15</sup>. Concerning this, it must be taken into account that the oldest officials have been carrying out their job in traditional facilities for many years, having to endure their difficult prison conditions, and therefore their perception towards their job improves as they are given the opportunity to work in a semi-private facility with better infrastructure, security and hygiene conditions.

With reference to the working unit, it can be widely pointed out that both guards and professionals in management tasks have the same perception towards their job. They do not feel satisfied nor dissatisfied, both feature similar psychological well-being levels and both display a moderate perceived organizational support level. These results were not expected. It was presumed that guards would feature lower satisfaction and well-being levels, for they are the ones who coexist with the interns, are responsible of solving any conflict amongst them and consequently are subject to their complaints, insults and aggressions. On the opposite, professionals hold, in a way, a "more privileged position" because they do not stay in permanent contact with prison population, and have adequate working spaces. This cannot be compared to spending all day inside the prison facility, and therefore it seemed professionals would feature higher satisfaction and well-being levels. Nevertheless, both groups are affected in a similar way by the penal environment in which they carry out their jobs.

In conclusion, it is important to point out that it would be of great interest to carry out research into finding out why the better infrastructure, hygiene and environment conditions in semi-private facilities do not generate higher satisfaction and well-being levels amongst employees. It is not appropriate to extend these conclusions for the number of participants in this study is not enough to become a representative sample, and can therefore be considered as a limitation to theorising the conclusions obtained. In addition to this, low participation amongst women did not enable a balance in the number of men and women polled for the study, and this might affect results. Finally, the lack of previous studies involving prison employees and with the same variables as study guidelines, becomes

a difficulty when comparing the study to consistent results from previous research.

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