

Spirituality as a Path of Adjustment to Misfortune In the Workplace : Implications for the Organizational Inclusion of Workers with Disabilities*

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Abstract

The way workers with disabilities react to social support at work raises questions for management researchers, as it reveals a sharp divide — sometimes positive, sometimes negative. This ambivalence has direct managerial consequences: the very inclusion measures, accommodation policies and supportive supervisory behaviors that organizations deploy to support workers with disabilities can, paradoxically, be experienced as stigmatizing and undermine job attitudes, organizational citizenship and team cohesion. Disability studies offer a useful framework by linking this reaction to whether or not individuals have mourned the advantages their disability has taken from them. They use the concept of 'adjustment to misfortune' to describe the broadening of the individual's scope of values, from the value of possessions to the value of being alive. Some authors identify spirituality as one of the antecedents of this adjustment. By spirituality, they mean an attitude of openness to transcendence and, consequently, attentiveness to the world and to others. This paper seeks to better understand how spirituality can be a source of adjustment to misfortune and of a positive response to social support in organizational settings. It draws on a comprehensive analysis of life narratives published by five persons with disabilities. It then derives implications for organizational behavior, supervisory practices, HR accommodation policies and the training of managers and co-workers in inclusive workplaces.

Keywords: Workplace disability, organizational behavior, workplace inclusion, disability management, social support at work, supervisory practices, disability studies, grief, identity, spiritual transformation, spirituality, adjustment to misfortune, life narratives.

Introduction

The inclusion of workers with disabilities is a strategic concern for contemporary organizations. Beyond legal compliance, firms increasingly invest in accommodation policies, inclusive leadership programs, diversity training and supportive HR practices (Beatty et al., 2019; Zhu et al., 2025). Yet a recurring puzzle confronts managers: the very social support that organizations design to facilitate inclusion is sometimes received positively by workers with disabilities and sometimes triggers withdrawal, help-avoidance, or even open resistance (Baldrige & Veiga, 2006; Kulkarni, 2013). This ambivalence has tangible organizational consequences — on job attitudes, on the citizenship behaviors workers display toward colleagues and the firm, on team cohesion, and ultimately on the performance of inclusion programs themselves.

The management literature analyzes the emotional dimension of the contribution of persons with disabilities to their work team. It also examines the effect of social support on the organizational behavior of workers with disabilities. The ambivalence of persons with disabilities toward inclusion measures shows that the feeling of

stigmatization is not a univocal variable. It stems from the way colleagues accept them and the organization regards them, but also from the way they perceive themselves and integrate their disability into their identity, to the point of making it the criterion of their sense of career success.

This ambivalence is intriguing. This paper seeks to explain it, and to draw the consequences for the way organizations design and deliver social support at work. It adopts the perspective of workers with disabilities and focuses on their representations in order to better understand their accepting or rejecting response to the social support they receive from supervisors, colleagues and HR functions. It draws on disability studies, and in particular on the concept of adjustment to misfortune coined by Dembo et al. (1956) to describe the grieving process through which persons with disabilities mourn the advantages their condition deprives them of.

This process rests on a broadening of the individual's scope of values, from the value of possessions to the characteristics of the person themselves, beginning with the value of being alive. One can understand that a person who has not adjusted to their misfortune experiences any social support as a wound, as it reminds them of the loss of a socially valued object; conversely, the person who has adjusted welcomes social support without fearing that it will tarnish the image they have formed of themselves. In an organizational context, this means that two workers receiving the very same accommodation, the very same encouragement from their manager, or the very same offer of help from a colleague may interpret it in radically opposite ways — a fact that the design of inclusion policies cannot afford to ignore.

Among the antecedents of adjustment to misfortune is the spirituality of the person with a disability — more precisely, their spiritual transformation (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996, 2004). By spirituality, we mean the attitude of openness to transcendence and attentiveness to existential questions (Linley & Joseph, 2004). This paper seeks to better understand how spirituality can be a source of adjustment to misfortune — in other words, why adopting an attitude of openness to transcendence and attentiveness to existential questions leads to a broadening of one's scope of values, and what this means for managers, supervisors and HR practitioners involved in the daily inclusion of workers with disabilities.

Adjustment to Misfortune: The Contribution of Disability Studies

Before deriving organizational implications, we need to clarify the underlying psychosocial process. The disability studies initiated by Dembo et al. (1956) speak of adjustment to misfortune to designate the grieving process through which persons with disabilities mourn the advantages their condition deprives them of. They define misfortune as any loss of a valued good causing significant and prolonged suffering that affects a large part of the person's life space.

According to Dembo et al. (1956), the individual adjusts to misfortune by broadening their scope of values and coming to recognize, in particular, the value of being alive. They realize that the lost object or attribute was merely one of their possessions (possession value) and not an inherent characteristic of their person (asset or intrinsic value), and they learn to judge the value of objects and attributes independently of the value others assign to them. They have thus relativized the lost object or attribute and confined the effects of their misfortune to a particular aspect of their life, rather than to life itself.

Wright (1960, 1983) extends this work. She specifies that broadening the scope of values consists in recognizing values that are independent of the disability. Wright emphasizes the role of the social environment and the attitudes of others. She speaks of coping and succumbing. For her, the adoption of a coping framework — rather than succumbing — is an essential trigger for the broadening of the scope of values. From a managerial perspective, this is a key point: the workplace itself is part of the "social environment" Wright refers to, and supervisors, colleagues and HR practitioners are powerful contributors — for better or worse — to the coping vs. succumbing trajectory of workers with disabilities.

Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996, 2004) proposed the Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG) model, whose five dimensions (relating to others, new possibilities, personal strength, spiritual change, appreciation of life) overlap with the concept of broadening of the scope of values. Linley and Joseph (2004) conducted a meta-analysis and identified the most significant antecedents of reconstruction and growth in traumatic contexts. They notably retain spirituality, which they define, in a classical manner, as openness to transcendence and engagement with existential questions.

In persons with disabilities, this spiritual change can constitute a central driver of the grieving process: by shifting the locus of personal value from lost physical capacities toward inner resources and transcendent connections, spirituality makes possible the broadening of the scope of values that Dembo et al. (1956), Wright (1960, 1983) and disability studies analyze as the essence of adjustment to misfortune. For organizational behavior research,

this matters because it identifies an antecedent that operates upstream of the workplace variables (perceived organizational support, leader-member exchange, co-worker support) usually studied — and that conditions how those workplace variables are received.

Methodology: A Comprehensive Analysis of Life Narratives

Our experience of collecting life narratives from persons with disabilities has shown us that the likelihood of finding a respondent able to provide a rich narrative for our research is small: most of the time, they have not yet completed their grieving and do not wish to speak about it, and when they have, they cannot necessarily put their inner transformation — their spirituality and scope of values — into words. This is a classic difficulty of sensitive research in management and organizational settings: when data pertain to the intimate, to identity, or to issues that are barely speakable, traditional access strategies (questionnaires, semi-structured interviews on the workplace) reach their limits (Condomines & Hennequin, 2013; Hennequin & Condomines, 2022; Jacquinet et al., 2021). The researcher must adapt the instrument to the level of reflexivity the respondent has actually reached. We therefore adopted the methodological approach of using life narratives published in book form, based on two considerations: the quality of the data collected and their availability, and on a third one — methodological responsibility toward respondents who would be exposed to harm if asked to verbalize what they cannot yet put into words.

Since the aim is to trace a life trajectory, the life narrative method is particularly well suited (Bertaux, 1997): by recounting their memories, the person reveals their representation of events and discloses the meaning they give to their life experience. The fact that the narrative has been published provides a degree of narrative completeness (the process has been matured, structured, reviewed, and edited so as to appear complete and intelligible to the reader). Published autobiographies have the additional advantage of combining two strategies that have proved effective in sensitive organizational research: temporal decantation (the author has put distance between the lived experience and its narration) and selection of reflexive respondents (publishing a memoir is itself evidence of a sustained work of self-elaboration).

From a corpus of nineteen titles available in French bookshops (the authors being French-speaking, titles are given in the original French), five were selected because they jointly present an adjustment to misfortune, a broadening of the scope of values, and a spiritual transformation:

- Philippe Aubert (PA) — *Rage d'exister* (2018)
- Louis Bouffard (LB) — *Un cœur joyeux* (2024)
- Louise Dierckx (LD) — *L'amour coûte que coûte* (2024)
- Jean-Baptiste Hibon (JBH) — *Une sacrée erreur* (2015)
- Charlotte de Vilморin (CV) — *Ceci est mon corps* (2024)

We conducted a deductive coding process based on the growth factors identified in the Post-Traumatic Growth literature, namely: 1) the distress experienced in the face of the traumatic shock, 2) personality traits, notably optimism and resilience, 3) deliberate reflection on the traumatic event, 4) spirituality, understood in its two dimensions of openness to transcendence and engagement with existential questions, 5) the broadening of the scope of values, and 6) social support received, as perceived before and after the broadening of the scope of values, with explicit attention to social support received in occupational and professional contexts (supervisors, colleagues, training, accommodations).

Spirituality as a Source of Adjustment to Misfortune

Suffering and Strength in the Face of Adversity

Our five authors suffer deeply from their disability, particularly during phases of deterioration. They experience anger, and some evoke suicidal thoughts. This anger and this suffering stem, according to their testimony, from the denial of their disability. They nevertheless find within themselves the strength to resist and testify to a certain optimism, or at least to remarkable resilience. In organizational terms, this initial phase corresponds to a period during which the worker with a disability is least able to receive social support at work in a constructive way: any well-meaning intervention from a manager risks being interpreted as a reminder of loss.

A few verbatim excerpts illustrate this tension:

"My determination, my desire to communicate, and my joy of living have always been contagious enough to mobilize those around me." (PA)

"Anger was rumbling in my heart like an immense wave that would soon overwhelm me." (LD)

Existential Questioning and Openness to Transcendence

All of them reflect on their situation and ask themselves existential questions. This reflexivity constitutes a pivotal moment in the adjustment process. Two verbatim excerpts illustrate this:

"Suffering is a path of humility. The more humble one is, the more stripped bare, the simpler things become. The only real question about suffering is how to live with it. What do I do with it?" (LD)

"Disability distills life, letting the present drip drop by drop. Becoming aware of my disability thus becomes my identity springboard." (JBH)

Petitionary prayer, the imploring of a miracle, abandonment to God, the discovery of one's gifts, and the prayer of thanksgiving are the forms that existential questioning takes for these people who are sensitive to transcendence. They find in this spirituality answers to their questions and experience new values: the happiness of life and love for others comes to replace the aspiration to social achievement comparable to that of non-disabled people. This last point has direct organizational implications: the criteria by which workers with disabilities evaluate their own career success — and therefore their job satisfaction, their commitment, and the recognition they expect from the firm — may differ markedly from those embedded in standard performance management systems.

The Broadening of the Scope of Values

The analysis of this abundant material helps us understand that the broadening of the scope of values and spiritual change are experienced by our five authors as two facets of the same reality: that of adjustment to misfortune. Dembo et al. (1956) would say that asset values come to replace comparative values. We note that the asset values found in our five narratives can be summed up as life and love.

"I knew that [the illness] was going to devour everything in me except my heart, that I would progressively lose my physical capacities but not the capacity to love and be loved." (LD)

"Forgiveness gradually transfigures into Thanks for the marvel that I am. This life becomes for me a reason for eternal praise!" (JBH)

"I suddenly discovered that the Lord was offering me a path of happiness far greater than anything I could have imagined." (CV)

The analyst can thus consider the propensity toward spirituality as an antecedent of the grieving process, alongside the other variables identified by disability studies. The analyst will readily understand that persons with a strong propensity toward spirituality, at least within the Christian cultural sphere, are more easily drawn to these values: their existential questioning brings them back to the author of life whom their religion presents as a God of love.

Social Support at Work and Adjustment to Misfortune: Toward a Differentiated Managerial Approach

The social psychology of disability helps explain why being offered social support can be perceived as stigmatization: being attributed a particular characteristic (namely a disability) that is dissonant with the self-image the person with a disability seeks to project rekindles the regrets of the person struck by misfortune, as long as they have not yet mourned the advantages they have lost. In the workplace, this dynamic plays out concretely whenever a supervisor proposes an accommodation, a colleague offers help, or HR convenes a return-to-work interview after a medical event.

Conversely, when, at the conclusion of the adjustment to misfortune, the person with a disability has unified their social identity (the characteristics others attribute to them) and their narrative identity (the story they tell of their life), the social support they receive no longer reminds them of their disability. Such a worker is then able to ask for accommodations without feeling diminished, to engage in organizational citizenship behaviors, and to contribute to team cohesion in ways that the management literature has begun to document (Jacquinot & Pellissier-Tanon, 2014, 2018b).

This reversal is striking in the verbatim excerpts:

"How can one establish a healthy and balanced relationship with a helper as long as one has not accepted one's own disability, overcome the injustice it represents, and stopped wanting to make others pay for it?" (PA)

"Mary, Moses, and all the others are my legs, my hands. They are the faces of my hope." (LB)

"My life is made of recognizing my poverty and simply accepting that I need the help of others, whoever they may be, to go further." (JBH)

Any social support that is too insistent before the completion of this adjustment risks producing adverse effects by underscoring the gravity of the physical or psychological loss. Three organizational mechanisms make this risk concrete in the workplace. First, supervisory behavior: well-intentioned but undifferentiated managerial support — repeated check-ins, public praise of "resilience", visible reassignments — can be experienced as a continual reminder of difference. Second, HR accommodation policies: standardized accommodation procedures that require the worker to formally request help expose those who have not adjusted to a costly disclosure (Baldrige & Veiga, 2006; Zhu et al., 2025), explaining accommodation request withholding. Third, co-worker support: colleagues' help-offers, when not calibrated, may be received either as recognition or as a marker of pity. The worker with a disability who has adjusted to misfortune welcomes social support positively, unlike one who has not yet reached the end of the grieving process. This points to the importance of a differentiated form of support, gradually adapted to the stage the person has reached in the adjustment process.

Baldrige and Veiga (2006) confirm that the anticipation of negative social consequences (loss of status, stigmatization) constitutes the main barrier to help-seeking — what is at stake is trust in the supervisor and colleagues. Kulkarni (2013) shows that the quality of pre-existing relationships determines the propensity to seek help: when the employee maintains relationships of trust with their colleagues or supervisor, they dare to express their needs; otherwise, they conceal their difficulties. More recent work on inclusive leadership (Zhu et al., 2025) extends this finding to the role of leader behaviors in reducing accommodation request withholding. Together, these results converge on a managerial implication: the effectiveness of inclusion policies depends less on the volume of support delivered than on its calibration to the worker's adjustment trajectory and on the relational quality through which it is offered.

Conclusion and Managerial Implications

This ongoing research explores largely uncharted territory at the intersection of disability studies, positive psychology, and management science. Three contributions deserve to be highlighted.

Treating adjustment to misfortune as a moderating variable makes it possible to understand the apparently paradoxical effects of social support on emotional state, team cohesion, and work performance. The ambivalence of workers with disabilities toward inclusion measures is not irrational: it is the manifestation of an ongoing grieving process. For organizational behavior research, this suggests that the standard linear models linking perceived organizational support, leader-member exchange and co-worker support to job attitudes and citizenship behaviors should be enriched with a moderator capturing the worker's adjustment status.

On a theoretical level, spirituality — understood as the attitude of openness to transcendence and attentiveness to existential questions — emerges as a significant antecedent of the broadening of the scope of values, and therefore of adjustment to misfortune. This hypothesis, solidly supported by the verbatim excerpts analyzed, calls for broader empirical research integrating other spiritual traditions and other cultural contexts.

On a managerial level, the present analysis yields four concrete implications for organizations seeking to strengthen the inclusion of workers with disabilities.

First, supervisory practice. Supporters should not impose their help but simply make known that they are available to the person with a disability, should they feel the need for assistance. In practice, help can only be provided gradually, in step with the adjustment process. This approach has the advantage of not placing visible emphasis on workers with disabilities and of avoiding positive stigmatization, which can be just as counterproductive as negative stigmatization. Concretely, supervisors should be trained to favor availability over initiative and to read signals of readiness rather than apply a uniform support template.

Second, HR accommodation policies. The design of accommodation procedures should reduce the disclosure cost for workers who have not yet completed their adjustment — for example, by offering opt-in standing arrangements rather than event-triggered formal requests, and by routing accommodation discussions through trusted relational channels rather than purely administrative ones.

Third, training and team-level interventions. Co-workers and line managers benefit from training that explicitly addresses the dynamics of stigmatization, the diversity of adjustment trajectories, and the difference between empathic availability and intrusive helping. Such training should be paired with interventions that build the relational trust on which help-seeking depends (Baldridge & Veiga, 2006; Kulkarni, 2013).

Fourth, organizational culture and leadership. Inclusive leadership (Zhu et al., 2025) can foster an organizational climate in which existential questions and the broadening of the scope of values are not pushed out of the workplace as private matters, but recognized as legitimate dimensions of working life. This does not mean instrumentalizing spirituality; it means refraining from cultures of performance hubris that marginalize anyone whose value system has shifted away from comparative achievement.

Finally, this reflection invites us to reconsider the very definition of spirituality in organizational contexts. Spirituality can be understood as a sense of one's smallness in the face of the greatness of transcendence, expressed in acts of humility (Kelemen et al., 2023) and reverence (Woodruff, 2001), and standing in opposition to hubris — the assertion of omnipotence or the claim to unlimited autonomy — in order to better recognize the vulnerability of human beings and their interdependence. This conceptual framework opens new perspectives for the study of inclusive leadership and organizational commitment, and connects the present analysis to ongoing debates on humble leadership and on the moral foundations of managerial practice.

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