

# Comparing the ICF and PIE (Person-in-Environment) Classifications

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**Abstract** An overview of the Person-in-Environment (PIE) system commonly used in the field of social work is provided and compared to the ICF framework and classification system. Current ICF implementation in social work programs is described including initial findings from a literature review exploring the status of ICF in social work in the United States. Recommendations for increasing ICF familiarity and usage among social workers is discussed.

## Introduction

Despite demonstrated usefulness of the ICF in several other professional disciplines in the United States (such as Occupational Therapy, Physical Therapy, and Speech-Language Pathology), social work professional associations have not integrated ICF into their scope of practice. This is a major contributing factor to why the majority of social workers remain unaware of the ICF system.

However, it is imperative that social workers become familiar with the ICF framework and classification (1) since federal social assistance programs like Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid have started to consider the utility of the ICF and (2) other U.S. based clinical professional associations have already incorporated the ICF into their respective education training programs and clinical practice.

A main barrier to ICF implementation is likely an alternative system known as the PIE, Person-in-Environment, System created in the early 1990s.\* This system has been prompted by the National Association of Social Workers.

## Overview of the PIE System

In congruence with the social work philosophy of person-in-environment the PIE system allows social workers to classify and code problems in social functioning.

PIE was developed for social workers to use independently or to complement information from alternative diagnostic systems including the *International Classification of Diseases (ICD)* and *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)*.

PIE is considered a "holistic" system that "gives primacy to the ability of the clients to function in their social roles." Mental health problems, physical health problems and community-based problems are assessed in terms of how they affect client social functioning. Therefore, adequate social functioning is the primary goal of social work interventions derived from the PIE assessment.

## Details of the PIE System

PIE system uses a four factor structure

**I: Social Role and Relationship Functioning** (type, severity, duration, coping ability and strengths)

**II: Environmental Problems** (severity, duration, resources or strengths)

**III: Mental Health Problems and Strengths** (describes client's mental health problems using DSM-IV-TR)

**IV: Physical Health Problems and Strengths** (describes physical health problems using ICD-10-CM)

*Severity Index* 1-5 scale, 5=most severe

*Duration Index* 1-5 scale, 5=shortest duration

*Coping Index* 1-6 scale, 5=poorest coping and 6=being unable to judge at this time

*Strength Index* 1=notable strengths and 2=possible strengths

## Relevance and Conclusions

Since social workers practice in various settings with other clinicians and on inter-disciplinary teams, the use of a common language and system would be beneficial for data sharing and collaboration. The ICF provides a universal mechanism to collect and communicate health information across professional disciplines. The PIE is useful to social workers primarily.

Overall, the ICF provides a useful framework, terminology, and classification to facilitate enhanced training of social workers about the full range of functioning and the interactive elements between functioning areas (health, mental health, psychological, social, etc.).

ICF embraces the well-known practice-guiding principle of the social work profession known as "person in environment" in its classification and in fact, expands upon this commonly used social work approach.

It is interesting to note that in the PIE 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, reference is made to using the ICF, which complements the ICF.

## Comparison of ICF and PIE

Both ICF and PIE frameworks highlight the importance of understanding an individual within his/her environment.

Both are biopsychosocial systems; but, the ICF classification itself is more comprehensive in nature than PIE. The PIE is used for adult clients whereas ICF is intended across the life span.

While the PIE system emphasizes social work's expertise in terms of social functioning, social workers address a broader range of functioning areas and thus, the PIE system minimizes social workers' roles.

The PIE system includes a mechanism to help social workers write and record comprehensive assessments and treatment plans. This is one significant advantage over the ICF since social work assessments based on ICF are lacking.

## Recommendations

The ICF must be promoted through social work professional associations such as the National Association of Social Workers and the Council on Social Work Education as well as international social work groups including International Federation of Social Workers and International Association of Schools of Social Work.

Both publication and presentations on ICF in social work must be encouraged.

## References

Karls, J. M. & O'Keefe, M. (Eds.). (2008). Person-in-Environment (PIE) system: The PIE classification system for social functioning problems (2nd Edition). Washington, DC: NASW Press.

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