

COMMENTARY

## Making it happen: Keeping precarious workers' experiences central during COVID-19

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This commentary highlights industrial-organizational (I-O) psychology's responsibility in supporting precarious workers by conducting workercentric research that draws on their unique experiences during COVID-19 and by identifying opportunities where research can drive meaningful change and improvement in this population's lives. We expand on the focal article's (Rudolph et al., 2021) call for more research on precarious work by offering concrete guidelines and specific resources to help researchers connect with this population, conduct workercentric research, and help drive government policy. We ground our guidelines by focusing on gig workers (e.g., Doordash, Instacart workers) but offer general suggestions for those researching other precarious workers and beyond.

### Precarious workers need our help now

As the pandemic unfolded, what first came to our mind as researchers? Many of us thought to capitalize on unique research opportunities. In contrast, COVID-19 brought fear, turmoil, and danger to precarious workers. Studies are already emerging showing those most affected by the pandemic are marginalized, low-income workers (Kantamneni, 2020). This is problematic because the groups that are more affected by COVID-19 differ considerably from those that I-O psychologists primary sample: white collar, managerial workers, or undergraduate students (Bergman & Jean, 2016). This pandemic makes it more urgent to mitigate the disconnect of current I-O research to these workers and highlights the underrepresentation of precarious workers in our research. We must ask ourselves as I-O psychologists: Are we really equipped to research, understand, and help those completing precarious work?

This calls for a workercentric approach. Following, we first overview workercentric research and then provide three concrete principles that are directed at helping precarious workers. In sum, we must (a) look beyond I-O psychology for input, (b) begin with a workercentric goal in mind, and (c) close the feedback loop with worker communities. These principles ensure precarious workers are given an accurate voice and that we advocate for results and policy that translate into workable, meaningful, and specific solutions.

### The importance of worker-centric research during COVID-19

First, we suggest that researchers adopt a workercentric paradigm when investigating precarious work during COVID-19. Workercentric research is best here because data and research questions must be driven by the human experience of completing precarious work during a pandemic if we wish to truly capture and understand the unique circumstances surrounding COVID-19. Workercentric research is best understood as

psychology of the self, working . . . psychology that preserves the integrity of the person . . . psychology that derives its problems and projects from the human experience of working . . . a research agenda out of the personal and subjective, out of questions about the personal experience of work, the personal meaning of work. (Weiss & Rupp, 2011, p. 81)

There are several good reasons that I-O psychologists should conduct more workercentric research but even more reason when considering precarious work. First, I-O research is problem driven, but our problems overwhelmingly originate from and feature the organization's perspective. Topics such as selection, training, diversity, and well-being are often driven by the interests and goals of a company. In contrast, an analogue is difficult to draw for precarious work due to the loose nature of the worker–organization relationship. For example, Doordash does not seek to select for and develop the most effective and efficient delivery drivers because the work is voluntary and independent. Rather, Doordash relies on the workers' unique motivations, personalities, skills, and so forth to complete the work however *they feel* is best. Working an atypical, unstructured schedule with unreliable income, while in personal protective equipment (PPE) and attempting to maintain physical distance, is stressful and unpleasant. Understanding why workers continue to do so can only start with the worker. The best science here will rely on an inductive, grounded understanding of these workers' experiences and how to effectively improve them. I-O psychology will benefit from allowing “messy detail” in such exploratory and primarily qualitative work (Christensen & Carlile, 2009, p. 241), even if this is at odds with our tendencies toward rigorous measurement and quantitative methods.

Second, COVID-19 is a global event that is different from anything we have experienced. Change is expected to follow any radical deviation from typical processes, operations, and systems that are disrupted by this virus, as questions arise around what (and why) certain structures are more necessary or obsolete in hindsight. But, change will always be unique to whom and what is affected; as noted earlier, those most affected by the current pandemic, and other historical pandemics, are marginalized, low-income workers (Kantamneni, 2020). However, the level of abstraction at which I-O psychology conceptualizes and measures psychological phenomena misses idiosyncrasies of pandemic. For example, suppose a project is concerned about safety hazards in gig work. After Instacart provided PPE, workers shared pictures online showing that the PPE was low quality or reported that they received no PPE kits at all. If researchers used Zohar and Luria's (2005) safety climate measure, broader aspects of this issue would be missed or misrepresented. In the sample item, “Management emphasizes safety procedures when we are working under pressure,” the phrase “working under pressure” captures the experience of working in the pandemic but does not provide adequate detail on what pressures workers are facing. This limits our ability to understand the unknown barriers (e.g., receiving poor quality PPE, working increased hours to maintain a livelihood) to building a strong safety climate during the pandemic. The same issue is likely to arise with many other measures because idiosyncratic COVID-19 issues are glossed over, no matter how psychometrically sound the scale. So, when studies begin emerging on COVID-19, will we be able to parse out and identify what was unique and different from the circumstances of the pandemic? Or are we going to see these unique concerns relegated to a dedicated background section on the pandemic? Workercentric research complements current measures by uncovering and magnifying the important factors affecting workers' experiences during COVID-19. As a first step to conducting research that is truly grounded and useful during and following the pandemic, we must first open our eyes and broaden our information sources.

**Recommendation 1:** Widen our lens beyond I-O psychology and traditional outlets.

As researchers, (1a) reading the news with an eye toward workers' experiences is an easy and good start for building a workercentric perspective. Headlines like “Target's gig workers will strike to protest switch to algorithmic pay model” (Gurley, 2020) and “Gig workers are doing essential jobs, but tech companies still insist they're not employees” (Rosenberg, 2020) should guide our

**Table 1.** Suggested Sources for Gig Work Literature Reviews

Field/discipline	Sample outlets
Human factors, human-computer interaction, and information systems	<i>Computers in Human Behavior; New Technology, Work and Employment</i> ; The Association for Computing Machinery's conferences on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI) and Computer-Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing (CSCW); The Association for Information Systems' conferences (e.g., Americas Conference on Information Systems (AMCIS))
Sociology, socioeconomics, and economics	<i>Research in the Sociology of Work</i> book series; <i>Journal of Sociology; New Technology, Work and Employment; Work, Employment, and Society</i> ; Society for the Advancement of Socioeconomics (SASE) conference; National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) working papers
Law, labor, and employment relations	<i>Comparative Labor Law &amp; Policy Journal; The Economic and Labour Relations Review; Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research</i> ; Cornell's DigitalCommons@ILR white papers and Cornell's journal <i>ILR Review</i> ; International Labor Organization (ILO) issue briefs, working papers, and reports

*Note.* As with any other domain, we encourage researchers to review work using alternative or related terms (e.g., platform, sharing, or on-demand economy, crowdwork) and to carefully evaluate source quality (e.g., methodological concerns, potential bias). Of special note in gig economy research, recent discussions have called into question the correspondence of company-sponsored research with nonsponsored research, as well as with workers' lived experiences (Scheiber, 2020), so considering data collection or acquisition methods may be especially important here.

attention and research. News moves faster than peer review, allowing us to better represent workers' experiences during the pandemic when developing research questions.

Regarding peer reviewed sources, though, research on gig work is still largely published in other disciplines, so (1b) literature reviews need to be intentionally multidisciplinary (specific fields offered in Table 1). In particular, we will need to stretch into the legal domain to (1c) understand the implications of the central legal issue underlying gig work, employment classification, and its recent developments in relation to gig work. In brief, U.S. gig workers are legally classified as independent contractors. This work arrangement is legally defined by its lack of managerial direction, material provisions, and long-term work contracts. Contractors also generally lack federal employment protections, such as those covered by the Fair Labor Standards Act, as well as employee benefits, like paid sick leave (e.g., Tran & Sokas, 2017).

Companies are careful to not violate these classification guidelines, meaning this issue has implications for what recommendations are legally possible (e.g., companies may be reluctant to provide in-depth safety training during the pandemic). Beyond this foundational understanding, we must be up to date with attempts to reform this classification system and extend protections (e.g., sick leave and healthcare) to gig workers. We recommend first reading about California's prominent Assembly Bill 5 (AB-5). Though AB-5 is still being contested, the final outcome likely has considerable consequences for gig workers' well-being as well as implications for what constitutes an appropriate goal in this work context. In sum, legal issues govern the working lives of many precarious work populations, such as the health and safety recommendations for health care workers or local ordinances affecting frontline workers, so we must be aware and consider them when advancing meaningful workercentric considerations and solutions.

**Recommendation 2:** Begin with a worker-centric end goal in mind.

Start with (2a) identifying what outcomes we can deliver to benefit workers most. What sort of evidence-based policies can we provide a testing ground for? What are gig workers' primary concerns about working during a pandemic, and what can be done to resolve those? In order to "enhance human well-being and performance in organizational and work settings," per the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP)'s mission (SIOP 2020) we need

to align our research projects with these outcomes foremost and consider how our findings can be further delivered to organizations and workers directly.

In further working toward this end goal, advocacy should fall under our job description and as one of our responsibilities. We can discuss the benefits our research holds for this population but recognize that change for workers does not come from research alone; it is enacted by organizations and legislation. For I-O psychologists with the opportunity, (2b) we suggest intentionally thinking about ways to improve the daily experiences of workers or including frontline workers as relevant stakeholders in discussions and projects. I-O psychologists could also initiate or support efforts to evaluate and improve the effectiveness of PPE distribution, or help design new systems for workers to directly and quickly give feedback about their needs and concerns. However, the reality is there are limited resources and several legal boundaries around implementing change for gig workers through organizations. Therefore, we also call for (2c) I-O psychologists to be actively involved in government and policy making. Attending sessions like Advocacy Bootcamp, at the annual SIOP conference (2019), or Advocacy 101 (from the 2020 conference) is a good starting place to learn how to get involved. Individuals can also advocate by communicating with policy makers, identifying members of congress, and using social media among other forms of correspondence to deliver and circulate messages (Lewis-Burke Associates LLC, 2020). Last, to ensure that information is received by those populations we seek to benefit, we need to take a deliberate and tailored approach to communication and dissemination in public communities.

**Recommendation 3:** Close the research–community feedback loop.

We first recommend increased communication with public communities and worker populations. Dissemination and implementation science offers valuable guidance on how to translate research into meaningful practice (Dugan & Punnett, 2017), but we emphasize the importance of intentional communication tailored toward the target audience: workers themselves. The rapidly evolving nature of COVID-19 and the precarious conditions faced by gig workers, health care workers, and many others on the frontline further suggest the urgency of communicating our findings to workers as soon as possible.

Contacting this population also presents unique barriers as “traditional” options like organization-based recruitment are limited (Scheiber, 2020). Nontraditional outlets such as social media groups, online forums, or other popular press sources should be used more purposefully for recruitment and to share research findings and practical implications.

Information released via these outlets is also most influential when conversational terms rather than professional jargon are used. Restricting our boundaries to academic journals and other non-public channels unintentionally limits the scope and influence of our work. To benefit workers and improve their livelihood, an effective system supporting a cycle of feedback and communication must be established.

From our experiences, we suggest using forums on platforms like Facebook and Reddit for sharing research and recruiting participants, as these are popular among gig workers (Gray *et al.*, 2016). Keep in mind initial contacts may be difficult: These workers have seemingly low trust in researchers. We learned about workers experiencing or uncovering deceptive research efforts, perhaps even from the companies for which they work (e.g., experimental manipulations of Uber’s fee structures for drivers; Rosenblat, 2018a), justifying their reluctance to participate. Further, gig workers’ schedules do not typically fit a standard 9 to 5 and also vary considerably by day or week, and these are compounded by high turnover that makes ongoing contact difficult (Rosenblat, 2018b). Importantly, these marginalized populations may not have much time and energy to participate in research on top of work and family needs, and even more so in the middle of a pandemic, providing another reason to close the loop and offer something valuable back to workers. One good option here is to translate our research into a short, digestible summary or infographic to share with workers on ways to improve their day-to-day experiences and encourage workers to share the summary widely with others.

## Conclusion

Workercentric research and outreach represent a promising solution in understanding and improving the lives of those engaged in precarious work, especially during COVID-19. When we turn our attention to these workers and their lived experiences, we can study the truly pressing issues, implement effective solutions, and drive meaningful change.

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