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Partnering Against Poverty: Fighting POSH Bias Through Increased Interdisciplinary Research and Practice

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Industrial-organizational (I-O) psychology is indeed moving forward in its involvement in humanitarian concerns (Berry et al., 2011), but as Gloss, Carr, Reichman, Abdul-Nasiru, and Oestereich (2017) point out, I-O psychologists tend to focus less on those of low income and the informal economy and more on working professionals in the formal economy (POSH). We propose (a) additional reasons for why the POSH bias may undermine science, (b) more solutions to benefit the impoverished, and (c) a broader conceptualization of humanitarian work psychology (HWP).

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The POSH Bias Is Undermining Science in Many Ways. But Why?

Gloss et al. (2017) rightfully argue that the POSH bias undermines science. To say that the goals, needs, and stressors are dramatically different for the impoverished relative to the experience of populations traditionally studied by I-O psychologists, and to suggest that poverty might, in fact, serve as a moderator, offers a starting point for understanding how science may be undermined by the POSH bias. This article does not, however, go far enough with such arguments.

At a broad level, many of us were taught that science is objective, publicly accessible, and verifiable. The POSH bias violates all three of those characteristics. Objectivity is lost when we allow ourselves to be immersed in a single worldview and fail to consider the needs and experiences of others. That which is ignored—whether through active omission or a selective focus on other populations—remains hidden from public view. Additionally, anything that is not studied cannot be verified; studies that exist only in file drawers (or worse, in the heads of researchers who are not sure how to obtain a suitable sample) are impossible to replicate. These statements are true of any bias brought to the research enterprise by a researcher, so upon first glance, the POSH bias appears no worse than any other bias we might point out. However, in our opinion, the specific neglect of those living and working in poverty creates added barriers to providing a broad-based, generalizable science of work. Because of this, we encourage readers to consider three factors that underlie science as it is practiced: publication, funding, and data collection.

Over the past several years, issues related to the publication process have gained increased salience in I-O psychology, with a particular emphasis being put on the topic at the 2015 Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP) annual conference by then-President Jose Cortina. Where many commentators have focused on methodological and design issues (e.g., HARKing and p-hacking), we would suggest that the issues specific to research on impoverished samples are the (perceived) audience for such studies and the rate at which research may be cited. As one indicator of journal prestige is its impact factor, which broadly reflects the number of times articles published in that journal are cited by other researchers, researchers could see publication of work in an area with a smaller audience to be a detriment to career goals. Specifically, in a field that has long been dominated by corporate/managerial concerns and whose focus tends toward the more developed First World nations, research about impoverished workers may realistically be expected to be cited at a lower rate. Lower anticipated citations lead to lower motivation to publish papers on the part of editors, whose page space may be better utilized with papers that will generate larger citation numbers and grow the journal's impact factor. Although understandable from a

practical perspective, this mindset creates a structural barrier to building a science that accurately describes work for *all people*, including the 5.74 billion who, per Gloss et al. (2017), "live in countries where, on average, over one-third of workers lives on less than $2 per day" (p. 342).

Issues of funding are also critical to consider, because just as editors are motivated to publish papers that maximize the prestige of their journals, so too are researchers motivated to pursue projects for which funding is accessible. Editors and researchers are still human: they engage in those behaviors that lead most predictably to the rewards that they value. There is lamentably little funding for poverty-related studies in I-O, potentially because the studies may not be perceived as having as big of an impact on the field or society (this despite the sheer number of people, both domestic and international, who live in poverty). In fact, it was not until 2015 that SIOP funded its first humanitarian work psychology project (Saxena et al., 2015). Based on this anecdotal evidence, we can see the POSH bias implicitly prepares the entire field of I-O to pursue only the types of questions we already investigate as we continue to reward only the kinds of research we already conduct.

Finally, anyone who has conducted applied research is well aware of the challenges inherent in identifying and obtaining a sufficient sample. How can researchers—university-employed researchers with advanced degrees who have been immersed in a very specific culture (academia) for an extended period of time—find ways to connect with those living in poverty or in low-income communities? It is abundantly clear that low-income citizens are not the typical focus of a lab, nor are they reachable via Psychology 101 pools or Mechanical Turk audiences. If we cannot reach out, connect with, and learn from individuals living in poverty, we will fail to grow the science of I-O psychology. We must consider new and alternative methods of data collection, including the use of less advanced technologies (e.g., short message service [SMS] messaging), more face-to-face trust building, and years of community engagement and support to reach the populations outside of the POSH crowd. Helping to identify pursuits and forge such connections, from both a research and a practice standpoint, is a goal of the Global Organisation for Humanitarian Work Psychology (GOHWP).

Solutions to Benefit the Impoverished

One way to benefit those living in poverty and extend science, as suggested by Gloss et al. (2017), is to enlist I-O psychologists in the delivery and design of information and communication technology (ICT) interventions for career development purposes. The authors also mention that I-O psychologists should work together to improve the science for those living in poverty.

We agree with Gloss et al. about the importance of career development and education for those residing in low income nations. However, we disagree on the primary choice of delivery for career development. Although ICT interventions may be helpful to use in combination with other methods such as face-to-face (Sitzmann, Kraiger, Stewart, & Wisher, 2006), we do not think that ICTs *alone* are a best first approach for developing impoverished individuals for careers, whether it be entrepreneurship, entering the workforce, or career progression. We perceive traditional classroom training as being *most* familiar to everyone regardless of income status, and would allow participants to attend to the material at hand rather than concerns about technological access and knowledge. In fact, Chilukuri et al. (2015) conducted a study examining the use of ICTs among low-income pregnant and postpartum women, and found that disparities in Internet use and SMS messaging still exist. Women with limited proficiency in English are less likely to use the Internet overall or use email compared to women with satisfactory English language proficiency.

Further, we suggest that it may be useful to see how other disciplines outside of psychology have identified solutions to the complex issues within their purview rather than starting from scratch. For example, access to cellular technology is quite common in developing nations, and many scholars have suggested using text-based messaging for behavioral change in areas such as text-based cognitive behavioral therapy delivered via text message (Whittaker et al., 2012) and financial planning (e.g., Govindarajan, 2012). These simple text messages currently are used to remind people to see a doctor during seasons of illness or to provide access to banking services for people who typically would have no way to access financial institutions. By modifying the applications slightly, researchers could conduct research through short surveys or even daily diary entries to gain insight about the attitudes and behaviors of people living in developing countries. In addition, those in nontraditional or impoverished settings could access job tips or short text-based lessons and performance modules to enhance their career development and meet specific goals. These tips and lessons could then provide a framework for in-person classes, allowing participants to remain motivated when away from the course and on track to make progress both in the courses and in their personal and professional lives.

Finally, we partially disagree with the authors, in that we believe that not only do I-O psychologists need to work together, but we also need to collaborate more with other disciplines and diverse organizations if poverty is ever going to be eradicated. For instance, we could work with for-profit companies that are putting a great deal of resources toward humanitarian causes (e.g., Facebook's internet.org initiative to give everyone in the world access to the internet), as well as nonprofit organizations or aid and

development/NGOs (e.g., Save the Children, Peace Corps, Red Cross International). Furthermore, we believe that broadening the entire scope of HWP will allow a much greater focus on the value that I-O psychologists can bring to poverty eradication.

Humanitarian Work Psychology Should Have a Broader Conceptualization

Gloss et al. (2017) describe humanitarian concerns as a subset of humanist concerns. They go on to broadly characterize the field of I-O psychology to include engagement in humanitarian efforts, discussing some ways in which I-O psychology has assisted in addressing humanist concerns—for instance, SIOP's consultative partnership with the United Nations or GOHWP work in connecting I-O psychologists with a humanitarian perspective toward research and practice. Yet, the article fails to fully address the absolute necessity for HWP researchers and practitioners to engage in fields seemingly far removed from the boundaries of I-O psychology.

We further their argument for a broadened perspective of I-O psychology that maximizes impact and minimizes harm by proposing that we must critically consider the scope of HWP study and practice in order to leverage I-O psychology expertise and contribute to the greater good. As Gloss et al. (2017) explain, poverty is a multifaceted issue caused by a number of intersecting and overlapping forces. No profession is unilaterally sufficient to address such a complex issue. Fortunately, a broad range of fields including, anthropology (Frerer & Vu, 2007), public health, behavioral economics (Bertrand, Mullainathan, & Shafir, 2004), and even policy administration and agricultural research (Houssain, Lewis, Bose, & Chowdhury, 2003), have already made significant headway in the research and practice of eradicating poverty. Comparatively, traditional I-O psychology as a whole has lacked a strong interdisciplinary focus and, as such, has often left individuals interested in HWP ill-prepared to make connections outside of their personal areas of interest. We must remember that the burgeoning area of HWP is actually a step into a larger field of expertise in which other professions have built decades of practice and policy, and we should recognize that, in the case of I-O psychology, the unique expertise we possess provides a necessary but insufficient skillset.

One tangible way to accomplish such partnerships is to identify organizations already doing reputable work within the humanitarian aid and development landscape. Whether this means you reach out to your organization's engagement director to discuss the positive impacts of corporate social responsibility, volunteer your expertise through online resources such as Taproot (https://taprootfoundation.org/), or find an organization with a cause or humanist focus and craft a position within that organization, HWP must work harder to permeate the fields already doing work that could be

improved with our specific set of skills. In addition, HWP research and practice should embrace additional nontraditional contexts and employees, such as the military, nonprofit employees, and volunteers in order to obtain a full picture of engagement in aid and development work.

Finally, prominent journals within I-O psychology must begin to publish more research within a multidisciplinary HWP realm, either through special issues or calls, or in the midst of normal publication cycles, in order to allow peer-reviewed empirical articles to be accepted as a viable publication option for graduate students and early-career or tenure-track academics. In addition, there must be some kind of accessible dissemination tool to allow I-O psychologists to apply these findings in their work on the ground with aid and development professionals, not only to employ best practices but also to provide credibility to the processes and procedures being implemented.

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