

COMMENTARY

Getting in the game: I-O psychologists as debunkers and testers of business practice

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We thank the focal article authors for bringing the topic of Lean management to the field of industrial and organizational (I-O) psychology. Much like a number of other major areas of business practice, Lean has yet to be studied by I-O psychologists despite its prevalent use in the business world. The lack of research into Lean management practices and its impact on employees exemplifies the challenges that face the science and practice of I-O psychology. Recent calls to expand the focus (Ones, Kaiser, Chamorro-Premuzic, & Svensson, 2017) and methodological tools (Cucina & McDaniel, 2016; Spector, 2017) of I-O psychology highlight the increasing narrowness of our research and practice. These calls echo the concerns of earlier researchers (Gasser, Butler, Waddilove, & Tan, 2004; Ryan, 2003) about I-O psychology's trajectory. In this response, the authors would like to offer a new framework to expand the research focus of I-O psychology that would include a greater role of I-O in analyzing business practices such as Lean management.

We see a potentially important role of I-O psychologists as “debunkers” and testers of business practice, echoing Gasser et al. (2004), using our methodological and statistical competence to help businesses toward research supported practices. In such a role we build from major elements of our current field identity rather than lose that identity attempting to mirror other fields (Ryan & Ford, 2010). We cannot be these “debunkers” however, if we only test theories from our own field and not the practices actually being used in organizations. The claims of a purveyor of a “fad” practice are easier to swallow when there is no existing research against that claim. This commentary will begin by outlining the concerns with I-O psychology's increasingly narrow focus and then suggest how the field could increase its real-world impact by examining vigorously and empirically business practice “fads” like Lean.

A common theme emerges across the criticisms of I-O psychology's narrowing focus of research and limited applicability to practice has been one of identity (Lefkowitz, 2010; Ryan, 2003) and the lack of innovation and discovery of new concepts (Ones et al., 2017; Spector, 2017). However, we would argue that this narrowness of focus has highlighted the significant need to examine the identity of I-O psychology. In order to expand the identity of I-O psychology and to address the calls for innovation to reinvigorate the field, I-O psychologists must look to how we define ourselves. If we do not make such an examination, we may cling to outdated meanings, drift away from our mission, or even lose our bearing entirely engaging in hyperadaptation and becoming just a mirror image of external stakeholder values (Hatch & Schultz, 2002; Ryan & Ford, 2010). It is better to reflect and choose an appropriate role rather than have a different role forced upon the field or drift into irrelevancy to the larger business community.

A common definition of I-O psychology is the application of psychological principles to the workplace or “deriving principles of individual, group and organizational behavior and applying this knowledge to the solution of problems at work” (APA, 2019), or “the application of

psychological principles to understanding people in this important context, the workplace” (Bauer, Truxillo, & Erdogan, 2015). Each of these definitions describes I-O psychology as the application of psychology to business problems and describes the interaction between I-O and applied work as taking the science from our journals and applying that knowledge to the world of work. As Lefkowitz (2013) noted, who and what we choose to study defines our science and practice. However, by asking us to consider Lean management as a potential area of research and practice, Balzer et al. (2019) have asked I-O psychologists to challenge how we conceptualize innovation and knowledge creation. If we do not study a phenomenon, we have nothing to apply, and if we are not part of the conversation on a phenomenon, we have no audience for what we know.

Talking to versus talking with

As Onez et al. (2017) noted, I-O psychologists are currently locked out of conversation in science and practice to a focus on I-O theory above all else. Their call has not been the first to note that the field of I-O psychology is potentially marginalizing itself. There have been efforts to increase the presence of I-O psychology by the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP) and academic journals. The authors of this response reviewed the mission statements of two research publication types that try to bridge the gap between science and practice. The first is the practice forum articles in the *Industrial Organizational Psychology: Perspectives on Science and Practice*, which looks to publish “effective practice of industrial-organizational (I-O) psychology through the publication of original manuscripts focusing on I-O practice issues” (2019). The second is The Bridge, a column in *The Industrial Organizational Psychologist* that attempts to “facilitate additional learning and knowledge transfer in order to encourage sound, evidence-based practice” (Edwards et al., 2017). The focus in both cases appears to be on I-O psychology communicating with the outside world to create greater acceptance of I-O practice. This suggests more of a one-way communication. I-O studies the topics it already studies and then sends that work to the public at large to create practice based on those studies.

These ostensibly more practice-focused research outlets are focused on producing work where I-O psychologists promote their work to organizations. This does not directly focus on the needs of organizations or what organizations want examined. It does not take into account the significant contexts organizations exist in, with business practices like Lean potentially major moderators of basic research results. Is effective leadership different in Lean compared to non-Lean settings? How important is culture and identification in Lean? These are topics that could easily enough be studied by I-O psychologists, but because Lean is not in the current I-O research areas, this is unlikely to happen. If the primary focus of even I-O practitioner outlets is one-way communication (researchers to practice), business practice topics outside current I-O research interests like Lean management have an extremely high hurdle to cross. If practitioner outlets instead focus on work that deals with what business currently see as problems, engaging in two-way communication with businesses, then we should see more of these real-world business practices examined and the development of more research-based recommendations or warnings for use available.

We would propose that I-O psychology researchers and practitioners follow the advice of Gasser et al. (2004): we should reframe our role as I-O psychologists as being “debunkers” of bad science within organizations and testers of current business practices. We include the idea of “testers” here to acknowledge that some of these practices might actually work (in whole or in part), and the research of I-O psychologists can help to make those determinations (Gasser, Walsh, & Butler, 2008). New concepts always have the potential to be “fads,” but those that evidence and rigorous research support become part of established research knowledge and practice.

Although Dunnette (1966) and Abrahamson (1996) cautioned against following fads for the sake of fads, the unintended consequence of this caution is a fear of discovery. Close readings of these works actually do warn about the dangers of being too insular in our research and falling out of step with practice. Worth noting is Dunnette (1966). In his article, he was most focused on fads in academic research, such as researchers sticking with pet theories and favorite research methods without regard to what might actually be most appropriate. Dunnette (1966) decries research being done only in labs or research that is only theoretical models, missing that crucial examination in real-world organizations. Science that is just for scientists is often not good science or functionally useful science.

Abrahamson (1996) points out downsides to management fashions with certain techniques and terminologies going in and out of fashion and different groups trying to stay ahead of the curve and providing that dominant fashion. Whereas Abrahamson (1996) sees the downsides that can come from fashions, he warns that business schools or scholarly societies that fall behind in the fashion of the current time are more likely to be perceived as peripheral to the business community and underserving of support. Ignoring the fashion does not help your cause or influence; it just makes you look out of touch and irrelevant. Abrahamson (1996) in fact argues that researchers need to intervene in the fashion process to help make sure the current fashion is the most useful it can be and is focused on the collective learning of stakeholders. For I-O psychologists, ignoring fashions and fads is counterproductive to the influence we want to have on good, evidence-based business practice.

I-O psychologists must engage with fads and bring an evidence-based approach to study their effectiveness. By envisioning I-O psychology as the application of our subfield's theories to the workplace, we lock ourselves out of meaningful conversations on topics that impact organizations such as Lean management. Lean management is a field that has existed for over 30 years, and although it may have begun as a fad, it is now an established business practice. By avoiding the study of fads, our field must now catch up to the conversations that businesses are already having about Lean management.

Important to note is that I-O psychology does not need to become a cheerleader for Lean or accept its assumptions without question. Doing so does not help business practice and would be a potentially harmful hyperadaptation for our field (Hatch & Schultz, 2002; Ryan & Ford, 2010). The potential role for I-O psychologists is to test Lean. Does Lean accomplish what it is supposed to do? How do individual-level factors, such as personality, job attitudes, and motivation, impact Lean? How does existing I-O research on leadership and teamwork apply to and explain Lean success or failure? These are questions we could answer and would be of great benefit to organizations that want to practice Lean. Such examinations would be of great benefit for several other current business practices that go underexamined, such as Six Sigma, unlimited vacation, agile methodology, and the gig economy.

By expanding our approach to workplace issues beyond the application of I-O theory to the workplace to include testing existing workplace practices for efficacy, we invite ourselves into conversation with practitioners and scholars from multiple disciplines. I-O psychologists should have something to say about any business practice that impacts employees, whether or not it is a part of the traditional scope of our field. A more expansive view of the role of our field will help us to enter into those conversations.

Our field's hesitancy to address workplace concerns and address fads that enter the world of work has limited the general public's view of I-O psychology (Nolan, Islam, & Quartarone, 2014). Gasser et al. (2004) asked I-O psychologists to be debunkers. We would argue we need to debunk what does not actually work but also act as testers to help determine what in fact does. We would reiterate this call and ask that our journals take a more expansive view of what is within the scope of I-O psychology so that I-O practitioners who face concepts like Lean management have a research base upon which to build their practice. Our field defines itself by who and what we study. Let us innovate by expanding that definition.

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