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Let's Reduce the Human Footprint Before Building Human Capabilities

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The case for making human capabilities the business of I-O psychology is at first glance persuasive. It is indisputable that I-O psychology and its associated fields still suffer from a strong bias favoring POSH (Professionals, Official work in formal economy, Safe from discrimination, and High-income countries) and WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) societies. Gloss, Carr, Reichman, Abdul-Nasiru, and Oestereich (2017) also provide ample evidence of human development indices being low among countries that are underrepresented or unrepresented in industrial and organizational (I-O) psychology studies. Moreover, it

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cannot be denied that many of the evidence-based recommendations that we now make with confidence will not hold water in these poverty-stricken areas of the world. However, when one juxtaposes the case for building human capabilities with the extant approaches of restoring equity in society, one is confronted with the grim possibility that the idea of human capabilities may not only fail to make significant positive differences in the lives of poor people in the world, but may also worsen the quality of life of everyone on this earth. In this short essay, I discuss two major problems with the human capabilities approach and propose a modification to the approach that can potentially help solve the problem of poverty.

The Problem of Moral Superiority

Gloss et al. (2017) state that “the most compelling reason why I-O psychology should work to better understand poverty is the moral imperative to end it.” There is certainly a moral reason to work toward ending poverty, but is it truly our primary reason? That is the question that we should ask ourselves before we go out on our mission to end poverty in the world. History is replete with examples of missionaries, conquerors, colonialists, and corporations whose overt goal was to save poor people or enhance their quality of life, but they only furthered their own interests and plundered the regions on which they set foot. Even scientific researchers from WEIRD countries have caused immense atrocities in the name of saving people from misery. For example, in the Tuskegee (1932–1972) and Guatemala (1946–1948) syphilis experiments, US scientists infected thousands of unsuspecting poor people with syphilis and made them suffer until their deaths, all in the guise of serving humanity (Reverby, 2011).

The point is not that we as I-O psychologists are devoid of true altruistic motivations, but that we need to acknowledge that *we* are the first and primary beneficiaries of our research and practice endeavors. However altruistic the topic of our research may be, we benefit the most out of it through grants, recognition, tenure, and more. Similarly, when we study poverty, or make a call for studying it, we may be serving our intellectual curiosity or trying to create our own niche as researchers in the increasingly competitive world of I-O psychology.

One may ask, what’s wrong with emphasizing moral motives, when we know that human beings have multiple motives for prosocial behavior (Bolle, Breitmoser, Heimele, & Vogel, 2012)? The fundamental problem with the moral motive is that it primarily serves—and sometimes only serves—the people holding those motives. As demonstrated by Tappin and McKay (in press) and other researchers, we have a tendency to believe that we are more moral, principled, and fair than the average person. However, this

moral superiority is largely a self-enhancement bias that helps with our own subjective well-being.

Worse, the emphasis on the morality of our actions is likely to result in *moral self-licensing*, where our moral self-image increases the likelihood that we make immoral choices (Merritt, Effron, & Monin, 2010). In fact, there is research to suggest that ethics researchers steal more books than other researchers. Schwitzgebel (2009) has found that some of the advanced ethics books, which are likely to be borrowed only by professors and doctoral students conducting research on ethics, are twice as likely to go missing from libraries than comparable nonethics books. Similarly, business ethics researchers have identified the phenomenon of *ethical fading*, where self-deception about our moral motives allows us to behave in self-interested ways while we continue to believe and proclaim to uphold moral principles (Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004).

The Problem of Finite Resources

According to Sen (2001), human capability refers to the effective freedom of individuals to choose the kind of life that they have reason to value. This is often regarded as the most attractive aspect of the capabilities approach, because, unlike other ethical theories, it accommodates people's varying preferences regarding a good way of life. Building human capabilities then not only means that people be given the freedom to choose (e.g., through enhancement of political freedoms, transparency guarantees, and protective security) but also that they have access to the economic facilities and social opportunities that they value. Unfortunately, all the economic facilities and social opportunities that people enjoy around the world have an environmental cost that is not easily restored.

Technology and capitalism have enhanced the quality of life of hundreds of millions of people around the globe, but they have also directly or indirectly contributed to the devastation of our planet. Scientists estimate that because of us humans, plants and animal species are now going extinct at rates 1,000 to 10,000 times faster than the natural rate (Chivian & Bernstein, 2008). Although deforestation rates have been brought down to some extent, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (2010), we are still losing over 13 million hectares of forests each year. That is equivalent to the land area of states such as Alabama and Arkansas. While we cut forests to create places to grow food and live, we are also starting to experience severe scarcity of water in many parts of the world. According to the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI, n.d.), if the current trend continues, in 2050 52% of the global population, 49% of the global grain production, and 45% of total GDP will be at risk due to water scarcity caused by population and economic growth.

The point is not that we have a moral responsibility to stop this devastation. The point is rather very pragmatic and self-protective. Specifically, if we do not do anything about our depleting resources, our very survival will be at stake. Our quality of life associated with economic facilities and social opportunities is intricately linked to the diversity and expanse of flora and fauna on our earth. Compared to the 1.6 billion world population in 1900, we now are already over 7.2 billion in size and are estimated to cross 9.6 billion by 2050 (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2013). Our population is already putting a severe strain on our natural resources. Thus, with business as usual, we are essentially in a losing race, because the resources that we need for a good quality of life (such as clear water and air, quality food and housing, etc.) are finite, and we are growing at a pace that our resources cannot match.

Using Global Footprint data, Chant (2012) estimated that if the entire world population lived like the Americans in the present, we would need the equivalent of 4.1 earths. So while it is laudable to aim to eliminate poverty from this world by improving the human capabilities and quality of life of the poor, the somber reality is that it is just not possible, not even theoretically. That is for the simple reason that we do not have easy access to the extra number of earth-like planets from where we can get the needed resources.

Reducing the Human Footprint

It is a sad reality that nearly half of the world population lives in poverty today. However, it is also true that even if we succeeded in developing the capabilities of this population, we would not be able to provide them with the resources to meet their aspirations. The solution then is certainly not to neglect the issue of poverty. That would be a heartless thing to do. Instead, we need to strive to reduce our human footprint and modify the capability approach in a way that helps us achieve a smaller but happier human footprint on our planet.

The capability approach talks about making interventions to correct inequities in society in a way that is not supremacist. The capability approach is also an improvement on traditional communist approaches that forcibly redistributed resources among the privileged and underprivileged of the world. Unfortunately, history shows that these approaches do not work without getting repressive. The greatness of the capability approach is that it recognizes both the need for interventions and the need for being sensitive to the sentiments of the disadvantaged. It also recognizes that human capabilities come not just from individual factors but also contextual factors. The focus then becomes figuring out areas and methods of interventions that can potentially maximize human capabilities without becoming a source of cultural imposition. However, the capability approach suffers from

the weaknesses of ignoring the dangers of moral fading and the reality of the finiteness of earth's resources. Thus, it assumes that development of human capabilities will always fix inequities in society. This is possible only when the resources needed in the development of human capabilities are infinite or at least large enough that they do not constrain the development process. However, as discussed earlier, there just are not enough natural resources on our planet to end global poverty by raising the standard of living of everyone on this planet.

The strain on the planet is illustrated well with how certain technological advances that were aimed to reduce global inequities have inadvertently created more disparities. Diamandis and Kotler (2012) and many other scholars have argued that technological advances and their dropping costs have led to increase in the quality of life of the poor. There is no denial that technological advances and their reduced costs have made many things accessible to people from poorer countries. However, these trends have also led to the earth being converted into a "junkyard planet" (Minter, 2013). Because the poorer nations have become the primary dumping grounds of the high-consumption, throwaway, Western societies, it has also aggravated inequities in the world.

The point is that if we are really serious about eliminating poverty, then we have to think beyond humanitarian concerns. We have to first focus on reducing our own ecological footprint. At an individual level, we have to reduce our purchasing and consumption habits. Instead of going for the latest gadgets or the newest clothes, we would need to learn to reuse our purchases for as many times and for as long as possible. Only after having reused our stuff should we focus on recycling them. The field of I-O psychology could also help individuals, teams, and organizations make choices and institute practices that reduce our overall ecological footprint. This could manifest in terms of reducing plastic and paper waste at work, but could also take the form of workplace practices that reduce driving frequencies and/or driving distances to work. At a more macro level, I-O psychology could also help realign organizations and their business models in the direction of environmental sustainability. This might manifest in the form of traditional energy companies going in the direction of renewable energies. This might take the shape of an automobile company not only investing in electric technologies but also shifting its focus from individual transport to public transport. I-O psychologists around the world, but especially in countries with high population density, may help in the formulation of health programs and policies that encourage employees to adopt children or restrict their number of biological children.

The possibilities are truly endless. However, we cannot avoid making sincere efforts to reduce our human footprint, because nature has its own

way of restoring balance through natural disasters (e.g., famines, floods, cyclones, and other natural disasters) that eliminate large sections of the population, thereby reducing the resource burden on the planet. Unfortunately, nature's way of restoring balance in the environment is often a very violent process that causes immense suffering in the world before any equilibrium is achieved.

Thus, we need to take concrete steps to voluntarily reduce the human footprint on our planet so that we are a lesser load on its resources. This may be the most sensible approach to eliminate poverty, because then the development of human capabilities among all sections of the population will not put a strain on the limited resources of the Earth.

The issue then is not so much about whether we should focus on improving the capabilities of people in poverty but rather what should come before that. Working on enhancing capabilities when we know that we risk running into a global disaster is like placing the cart before the horse. It might give us the satisfaction that we are doing our bit, but it just will not work in the long run. It might also not work in the short term, because even the relatively privileged class is starting to see the effects of resource crunch and is consequently erecting barriers that would separate its members from the underprivileged.

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