Recognizing the Need for a Humanistic Movement Within Industrial–Organizational Psychology

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I do not take issue with the King and Cortina (2010) article on the need for expanded legal workplace protections or the need for increased research attention on the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) employees. I commend them for recognizing the importance of the ''social imperative,'' hence bringing the idea of values explicitly into the discussion about workplace issues. I believe that industrial–organizational (I–O) psychologists have spent a disproportionately large amount of effort pursuing questions deemed important by for-profit organizations and considerably less time researching questions motivated primarily by humanistic concerns such as social justice and personal welfare (see Lefkowitz, 2003 for an excellent discussion of this). As Lefkowitz mentions, research related to corporate profitability is socially useful in that profitability provides incomes for employees; however, researchers should not be constrained by issues directly related to profitability. In this commentary, I use Arthur Kornhauser as a role model of a famous applied researcher who was motivated primarily by humanistic concerns and provide some suggestions and strategies for researchers who are interested in topics not directly related to corporate profitability, such as the research advocated by King and Cortina.

Motivations for Conducting Research

King and Cortina's article provides some interesting material for reflecting on the motivations that guide individual researchers to pursue particular research topics. In the last section of their article, they cite the APA standards of ethics to suggest that psychologists have an ethical obligation to prevent discrimination in the workplace. Likewise, the SIOP mission statement urges us ''to enhance human well-being'' in addition to enhancing performance. Presumably, these two sets of guidelines would compel I–O psychologists to speak out against discriminatory practices in organizations with which they consult. What these guidelines cannot do, however, is compel individual researchers to conduct research programs that are motivated by social justice concerns and worker well-being. If they are employed in the applied field, individual researchers choose their research programs consistent with their sponsoring organizations. If they are in academia, they have more latitude in choosing their research agendas. However, even in academia, researchers who pursue research agendas indifferent or even contrary to economic development goals may find difficulty getting jobs. There are many more job ads targeting I–O academics

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interested in motivation or personnel selection than job ads targeting those interested in understanding the discrimination of LGBT employees or helping the poor unemployed gain job skills.

There are many barriers to conducting research motivated primarily by social justice concerns. Given that I–O psychologists generally study people working within organizations, organizations are often indifferent and occasionally dismissive to this type of research. Organizations' reluctance to support certain research efforts is understandable; when organizations cooperate with researchers they are allowing access to their employees (and generally compensating their employees for participating in the research) as well as lending organizational approval to the researchers' efforts. When I was in graduate school, I was part of one of the first research groups investigating the effects of sexual harassment on employees. Organizations were extremely reluctant to let us come in to conduct studies that might reveal that their employees had experienced sexual harassment. The only organizations we could get into were the university (a much more open type of organization than most) and a company that was being investigated for sexual harassment, which thought that allowing us in could help them in the eventual legal proceedings. I–O psychologists should be interested in all kinds of phenomena in the workplace, regardless of organizational support or despite its opposition. Topics such as employer tactics against union organizing and discrimination against LGBT employees might not endear ourselves to upperlevel managers to whom we often need to gain access. If we wait for managerial approval for studying particular research topics, the portfolio of topics studied by I–O psychologists would have only a few dependent variables: productivity and turnover being the two primary ones.

Role Model for Researchers Interested in Social Justice Issues

Arthur Kornhauser was a second-generation I–O psychologist who received an MA from the first program in applied psychology, Carnegie Tech, and then continued at University of Chicago for his doctorate. As an applied psychologist, he conducted research that primarily benefited organizations, developing some of the first guidelines on how to validate tests used for employee selection. Most of his career, however, was devoted to pursuing questions that were focused on worker well-being, concerning himself primarily with helping workers organize in labor unions as well as understanding the negative effects that assembly line work had on the mental health of workers (see Zickar, 2003 for a summary of Kornhauser's career). During his career, Kornhauser considered broader issues of social science and society, studying the pressures put on scientists to study topics palatable to their employers and the negative long-term effects this had on society.

Kornhauser and other applied researchers were supported by the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI), which was founded officially in 1937 by a group of activist psychologists who wanted to apply research to important social issues of the day: helping unemployed workers, fighting fascism, and maintaining peace (see Stagner, 1986). In the early days, industrial psychologists such as Kornhauser and Ross Stagner played key roles in SPSSI; in recent years there seems to be virtually no activity with I–O psychologists and this organization. Recent focuses of SPSSI conferences include global disparities and social justice (see www.spssi.org); SPSSI's focus on diversity, however, would provide some opportunities for I–O psychologists to contribute. I–O psychologists who are interested in pursuing research related to social justice issues have little support beyond informal networks and occasional sessions at the annual SIOP conference.

The Way Forward

King and Cortina present one option for those researchers motivated by social justice, highlighting how social justice

imperatives are tied together with organizational imperatives. This is a politically astute strategy that will help researchers pursue research on socially relevant causes with the help of organizations. Researchers guided by social justice issues should be willing to make compelling cases to link their goals to organizationally relevant outcomes *when possible.* Tying LGBT-friendly practices to retention of key talent is an argument that has been successful in making large organizations more open to different types of lifestyles.

However, as Kornhauser and others have shown, those interested in social justice issues should also be willing to proceed without organizational support. Researchers pursuing questions contrary to organizational imperatives will need to be more creative in capturing data from employees given that typical avenues of data collection may be out of the question. Kornhauser met with researcher participants in their own homes to discuss the negative effects that work had on them. Researchers might need to solicit respondents outside of their workplace, perhaps using community surveys, Internet data collections targeting specific groups, and snowballing techniques that have participants identifying other likely respondents. In addition, researchers might consider starting off using qualitative research techniques in the beginning stages of research given that journals that publish qualitative research often focus on the depth of description more than issues related to experimental design. Researchers interested in studying ''difficult-to-study'' populations can turn to other disciplines that have more of a history of studying hard-to-reach populations for ideas about creative data collection methods (e.g., sociology, Sudman & Kalton, 1986; education, Christensen, Nielsen, Rogers, & Volkov, 2005). The field, however, should be more receptive to scientific research that lacks a clear organizational imperative, while always trying to find common ground with organizational imperatives when possible.

In addition, there should be a special responsibility of I–O psychologists who are employed in academia to pursue difficult research questions that might not fit with the business agenda. As Kornhauser (1957) stated, ''The university is uniquely the institution to undertake research of concern to residual groups of unorganized citizens and consumers'' (p. 211). Researchers who are interested in pursuing humanistic ideas should band together at the SIOP conference and have their own sessions and social networks. As the field continues to grow in numbers, I dream of a field that continues to grow in different directions as well. I would love to see a humanistic wing of SIOP that uses scientific methods to pursue topics such as helping poor people enter the workforce, organizing unorganized workers, and reducing prejudice against marginalized groups of employees such as LGBT employees in addition to the obese and disabled. The King and Cortina article provides an excellent first step. I hope other researchers follow their lead and are willing to tackle socially important problems in the workplace!

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