

Transformative Service Research as an Exemplar for Humanitarian I-O Psychology

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The focal article (Gloss, Carr, Reichman, Abdul-Nasiru, & Oesterich, 2017) highlights the neglect of individual and societal well-being concerns in I-O psychology theory and practice. A similar concern is currently being articulated within the interdisciplinary field of services (i.e., service management, services marketing, and service science) with the identification of critical underrepresented issues including economic disparities in healthcare, food deserts in poor urban locations, racial-ethnic discrimination in retail, discriminatory practices in lending, lack of access to basic quality-of-life services among poor “base of the pyramid” populations, and the underemphasis of employee and consumer health in service design and delivery (e.g., Fisk et al., 2016; Rosenbaum et al., 2011). Originating in a call for improving consumer well-being through academic research (Mick, 2006), transformative service research (TSR) is now recognized as a key research priority in services (Ostrom, Parasuraman, Bowen, Patricio, & Voss, 2015). Indicators of the scholarly interest in this topic include but are not limited to the following: (a) a seminal article in this research stream (Anderson et al., 2013) has been cited an average of 40 times *each year* since its publication, (b) multiple special issues have appeared in service-related journals (*Journal of Business Research* and *Journal of Service Research*), and (c) special conferences have been organized to examine transformative issues. It can be argued that a humanitarian or POSH agenda in I-O psychology can be informed by TSR while deriving its sustenance from our time tested scientist–practitioner traditions. Some of the key lessons that can be learned from the current trajectory of TSR evolution are discussed in this article.

Obtaining Legitimacy From Mainstream Scientists and Practitioners

TSR attained legitimacy within mainstream service research as a result of two separate studies published 5 years apart (Ostrom et al., 2010, 2015). The first of these studies utilized surveys and interviews with 200 academics and 95 practitioners to identify transformative service as a priority but

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underresearched area (Ostrom et al., 2010); whereas the second included roundtable discussions and interviews with 200 academics and practitioners to identify priorities, followed by a survey of 330 service researchers to rank and rate these priorities on importance, knowledge level, and research gap (Ostrom et al., 2015). Participants in the second study identified “improving well-being through transformative service” as the second in importance out of a list of 12 priorities, thereby highlighting its importance a topic of study. Although services is a relatively smaller field than I-O psychology in terms of membership, it is characterized by heterogeneity in the form of disciplinary backgrounds (marketing, management, operations, and information systems), theoretical preferences, and geographic dispersion (e.g., the US vs. Nordic schools of service management). Thus, establishing research priorities for the field is, in itself, not an easy task. A similar effort within I-O psychology can help identify the need, parameters, and organizing framework for POSH under the sponsorship of Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP) or a flagship journal (see Cascio & Aguinis, 2008). Similarly, practitioner sessions in SIOP meetings could be utilized as forums for discussions and debates with respect to the application of I-O tools and principles to further the humanitarian agenda.

Developing and Aligning a Common Lexicon

Researchers pursuing TSR scholarship, though varying in their specific topics and samples of interest, focus on the overarching outcome of “well-being,” thus subscribing to the broad definition of TSR as “research that focuses on creating ‘uplifting changes aimed at improving the lives of individuals (both consumers and employees), families, communities, society, and the ecosystem more broadly’” (Anderson & Ostrom, 2015, p. 243). Moreover, within the broader field of marketing, an important theoretical perspective—service dominant logic (SDL)—defines “value” as a “benefit, an increase in the well-being of a particular actor” (Lusch & Vargo, 2014, p. 57). Thus, the desired outcome of TSR is embedded within customer-driven value-creation, which is arguably the key priority for the marketing discipline. Other examples of alignment between TSR scholarship and the marketing discipline include shared assumptions regarding services, such as the co-creation of value by customers and providers, and the involvement of service ecosystems composed of all the relevant actors in the creation of value. Thus, the concepts and models that develop within TSR are not viewed as alien to the mainstream services literature. This provides TSR with research credibility in the eyes of institutional actors such as scholars, department chairs, and tenure committees. One of the greatest threats to the emergence of a humanitarian I-O is that it might be dismissed as a fringe movement, as opposed to being a significant part of the field. The constant interplay

between “mainstream” and POSH I-O scholars and practitioners to shape a common lexicon is likely to create the legitimacy required for the pursuit of this priority and advance the field.

Creating a Community of Practice

At the early stages of the development of a research priority, it is useful to form a community of practice where participants might “think together” (Pyrko, Dorfler, & Eden, 2016). These communities might evolve from formal collaborations on multiauthor integrative papers, special issues in journals, tracks in international conferences, and thematic conferences, as well as informal face-to-face and virtual interactions. Within the field of services, scholars conduct workshops (e.g., “Let’s Talk About Service” or LTAS) for PhD candidates and junior faculty to seed and nurture future research and collaborations; and specialized symposia are utilized to link researchers from emerging economies with established scholars (e.g., the Service Education Research and Innovation–Initiative). Relationships formed and fostered during these interactions are likely to help support scholars as they embark upon projects that are—at least at the beginning—viewed as outside the mainstream. A common interest in humanitarian aspirations could, likewise, bring together scientist–practitioners, and assist in the further development of a humanitarian I-O psychology agenda.

Although the above three recommendations can be considered lessons learned from an allied field, it is important to note the key reason TSR was specifically picked as an exemplar for the development of a humanitarian I-O psychology. Both fields share a common goal—well-being—and acting together can further their mutual causes. For example, recent work in positive organizational behavior (e.g., Good et al., 2016; Paterson, Luthans, & Jueng, 2014) could inform TSR theory, particularly the definition and measurement of well-being, and occupational health psychology literature (e.g., conservation of resource theory; Hobfoll, 2002) can be useful for a better understanding of the mechanisms involved in the creation of stress and its negative health outcomes among customers and employees. Similarly, concepts of transformative value, ecosystems, and user influences on institutions (e.g., Blocker & Barrios, 2015) can enhance current research on human capabilities.

Clearly, the well-being of poor, diverse, vulnerable, and underrepresented populations should concern all of us within I-O science and practice. However, attending to these concerns will require a systematic approach consisting of creating a common lexicon, integrating humanitarian concerns with “mainstream” I-O scholarship, and building a thriving community of practice. In these, and in shared concerns, TSR is likely to serve as a capable partner.

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Humanistic I-O Psychology: The Value of a Focus on Women

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The focal article by Gloss, Carr, Reichman, Abdul-Nasiru, and Oesterich (2017) makes a very convincing case that industrial-organizational (I-O)

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