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View From the Trenches: Practitioners' Perspectives on Key Issues and Opportunities in Low-Wage and Frontline Jobs

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Bergman and Jean (2016) rightly argue that published research in industrial–organizational (I-O) psychology often underrepresents low-wage and frontline employees in favor of professional workers and management. One possible consequence of this bias is that I-O research may unintentionally marginalize workplace phenomena that impact employees professionally

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and personally. One example offered by Bergman and Jean is economic tenousness, a work–life stressor that is more likely to be experienced by low-income and frontline employees. The recent growth in the proportion of individuals employed in low-wage jobs (Albelda & Carr, 2012) reinforces the need to explore the impact of the publication rift between the science and practice of I-O psychology.

As I-O practitioners who frequently work with low-wage and frontline employees (service, sales, support, and field services), we agree that the focal article identifies some important factors to consider in this underexamined research area. However, on the basis of our experience, we believe there are additional considerations worth highlighting. The goal of this commentary is to stimulate new research and dialogue by (a) expanding on the concepts described by the original authors and (b) discussing additional I-O research-related concerns and constructs that affect frontline workers.

Unique (and Understudied) Stressors

Compared with individuals working in professional or white-collar jobs, individuals in frontline or low-wage jobs may be more susceptible to certain stressors or to experiencing entirely unique stressors. We have identified three stressors from our experience with low-wage/frontline jobs that stand-out: constant performance monitoring, outsider mistreatment, and exposure to environmental/physical stressors. First, constant monitoring (typically in the form of electronic performance monitoring; EPM) can create stress for frontline workers (e.g., Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2003). Any frontline employee who uses a computer (e.g., bank teller or contact center representative) to complete work could be monitored electronically, with employers typically looking to collect objective data to evaluate performance and compliance. For example, in contact centers, employees must complete multiple tasks and process complex information at a frenetic pace while every activity is being monitored for efficiency and accuracy (Holland & Lambert, 2013). Aiello and Kolb (1995) found a link between EPM and stress, with higher levels of EPM related to greater perceived stress at work. Interestingly, research on EPM in the I-O literature seems to have spiked in the mid-1990s and has since dwindled (perhaps in recognition that EPM—Big Brother—is just a fact of organizational life for some occupations), even as the use of technology in the workplace has increased. Clearly, there is a disconnect between the realities of organizational life and the published I-O literature: the stressor continues to be present (and may even be increasing), but the research is no longer examining its impact on workplace behavior and outcomes.

The second stressor concerns frontline workers who spend the majority of time interacting directly with customers and clients. Frontline employees frequently express misgivings about dealing with customers who di-

rect their anger at these employees. Mistreatment from these “organizational outsiders” is very common and can operate as a major source of stress for frontline workers. For example, the following critical incident, provided by a supervisor in an Australian contact center, illustrates the impact of outsider-driven stress can have on employees:

One of my agents took a call from a highly agitated customer. The agent attempted to handle the call by following stated procedures, but the call escalated quickly and the customer became verbally abusive before abruptly hanging up on the agent. The agent threw the headset and started swearing on the production floor about having to constantly deal with these types of customers.

The body of work on outsider mistreatment is growing, with these behaviors being linked with a host of negative individual and organizational outcomes (e.g., burnout and reduced service performance; Sliter, Jex, Wolford, & McInnerney, 2010). However, far less is known about the causes/antecedents of mistreatment by customers and clients, and the existing research typically “blames” the customer for this mistreatment, a perspective that may marginalize the interplay between customers and employees (for a notable exception, see [Sliter & Jones, in press](#)). I-O researchers have largely ignored the antecedents of these behaviors, as well as preventative measures that frontline workers could employ to avoid instigating or escalating mistreatment. Given the sheer frequency of this mistreatment, our clients often ask, “What can our workers do to prevent or reduce rudeness from customers?” We are not able to find the answer to this question in I-O research, though it seems that exploring the factors that may empower frontline employees to reduce exposure to this mistreatment is a worthy research stream.

The third, and final, type of stressor is physical and ergonomic stressors. Examples include extremes of temperature, noise, standing or walking frequently, sitting for extended periods of time, repetitive motions, and speaking for several hours per day—in other words, requirements of many frontline customer service roles. Although early psychological studies factored in these physical stressors (the original Job Descriptive Index measured job satisfaction with items such as “hot,” “on your feet,” and “tiresome”; Smith, Kendall, & Hulin, 1969), these factors—and their relationship with psychological outcomes—are still critical considerations for the study of frontline employees but have been neglected in recent years. In our experience, these physical stressors often interact with the lack of autonomy in these jobs in a manner that exacerbates their negative effects. Whereas a professional worker or manager could stand up, stretch his/her legs, use the bathroom, and get a drink of water whenever he/she chooses, frontline workers often do not have that kind of discretion. Rather, a frontline worker might have to request permission to do any of these things, could be face disciplinary action for leaving his/her work area too often or in some cases, and/or might be

penalized financially for doing so (e.g., some companies consider the number of minutes an employee actually worked during a scheduled shift when calculating financial incentives). Indeed, EPM might prevent an employee from leaving their work zone altogether outside of designated times. Frontline jobs' stressors frequently take a significant emotional, mental, and physical toll on employees, leading to frustration, boredom, and psychological and physiological strain (Bakker et al., 2003; Sprigg, Stride, Wall, Holman, & Smith, 2007; Zapf, Vogt, Seifert, Mertini, & Isic, 1999).

When one considers the lack of research into the stressors outlined above, specifically from a frontline employee perspective, it becomes clear that we, as I-O psychologists, have neglected to investigate key areas of concern for both employees and organizations. Increasing research focused on these type of employees and stressors would be a strong step toward helping us understand a large segment of the workforce that both consumers and organizations rely on. In turn, this understanding would inform research-to-practice efforts aimed at improving the experience and retention of low-wage and frontline employees.

Employee Turnover

Although employee turnover occurs in all occupations, the average rate of attrition is usually highest in frontline jobs. According to one national survey (Equifax, 2015), professional-type industries, such as financial services (29.0% annual attrition) and healthcare/education (30.4% annual attrition), have notably lower turnover than frontline-driven industries such as retail (55.7%) and business services (59.6%). In our experience with customer-contact employers, it is common for us to observe turnover rates of 100% or more per year, meaning that organizations may have to replace the equivalent of their entire frontline workforce every 12 months.

This high turnover presents a unique, but often overlooked, challenge to employees. An investigation of the effects of turnover on the "stayers" (those who do not turn over) is a neglected issue but an issue that comes up frequently in our experience. With turnover being so high on the front line, we often find that these "stayers" report feeling overworked (to make up for the lost employees or to compensate for unskilled replacement employees), undercompensated (taking on responsibilities—like training new employees—that they are not compensated for), and cynical (unable, and increasingly unwilling, to form personal relationships with new colleagues who may leave) and having the desire to leave, themselves. In addition, the role of the "leaver" may extend beyond just a missed performance target. A "leaver" might have been responsible for social cohesion within a group during his or her employment or on the opposite end of the spectrum might even have been a troublemaker, meaning that his/her departure may result in

a significant change in social dynamics among “stayers.” Higher turnover in frontline jobs means that there are more opportunities for “leavers” to impact the experiences of “stayers.” Generally, the impact of turnover on “stayers” is an issue that I-O psychologists have failed to consider, and we believe this is partially a result of a focus on jobs with lower turnover, such as those noted by Bergman and Jean.

In some cases, the “stayers” may also exacerbate problems in frontline jobs. Virtually no I-O research of which we are aware explores the performance and sociocultural implications of companies who retain weak or marginal performers, an issue we call the “dark side of retention.” It is common for attrition to be classified into “positive” and “negative” categories. Positive attrition occurs when an underperforming or unreliable employee leaves a company; negative attrition represents a situation in which a good performer and reliable employee departs. The same concept can be applied to retention as well. For example, companies that experience high attrition are frequently more likely to retain marginal employees at a much higher rate than companies with lower attrition. What I-O research fails to explore, in large part, is the impact of retaining fringe employees on morale, *esprit de corps*, and productivity.

Finally, related to high turnover, one issue that we have experienced on the front line is “job jumpers,” or “professional trainees.” In contact center occupations, specifically, it is not uncommon for training periods to span 2 to 4 months, when employees are undergoing training and then a supervised period where performance is not truly evaluated. After this training period, such employees might simply jump to another, similar job, avoiding reliance on commissions and rather subsisting on the flat rates and lower pressure experienced during training. Job-hopping is becoming a more popularized topic of late, particularly in media outlets, which discuss job-hopping as the new normal for Millennials joining the workforce. The research in this area is lagging, however, and we know little about what might predict these hopping behaviors. This gap in the research represents an opportunity for researchers who are seeking to understand job-hopping in white-collar jobs as well. Although job-hopping is more frequent in frontline service jobs, it is also becoming increasingly common in white-collar jobs; therefore, a deeper understanding as to why this happens and how to prevent it could be beneficial across industries.

Mental and Physical Health

One often overlooked issue in I-O psychology is the well-being concerns that might be common for employees who work in low-income and/or frontline jobs. Building on the concept of economic tenuousness (Bergman & Jean), frontline and low-wage workers are more at risk for negative health

outcomes, such as diabetes, asthma, and obesity, and are significantly less likely to engage in healthy behaviors, such as physical activity and healthy eating (BMS, 2012). In addition, low-income and frontline workers are more likely to share socioeconomic risk factors for mental health disorders, such as depression, anxiety, and substance abuse issues (e.g., Lorant et al., 2007). In addition, well-being related issues extend to the family of low-income/frontline employees, as well, where these workers are more likely to have their jobs affect how they address issues related to child and elder care.

Such issues have huge implications for both employees and organizations. First of all, the well-being issues of such workers often carry over into the workplace. On one hand, as Bergman and Jean note, such workers are more likely to engage in presenteeism when sick, putting other employees at risk of illness. On the other hand, workers are more likely to *need* to take time off to address concerns related to the well-being of the self and their family, resulting in spillover. For instance, when a worker is suffering from depression, this can vicariously impact coworkers, supervisors, and even customers. With low-wage workers significantly more likely to experience such negative well-being issues, I-O psychologists need to investigate well-being in more detail.

An interesting phenomenon of note within the I-O literature is that physical and mental health are most often treated as outcomes within the workplace. For instance, we treat mental symptoms of burnout and depression as outcomes of workplace stressors, such as workload, lack of control, and interpersonal conflict. However, it is more likely that such constructs represent the unique interplay between psychological factors, socioeconomic variables (that we rarely model), and work-related variables. Indeed, conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll & Shirom, 2001) would support the idea of a negative resource spiral, where resource loss begets more resource loss. That is, employees who are experiencing physical or mental distress or strain at home are less likely to have the resources (physical/mental) needed to succeed at work. These negative experiences at work, in turn, affect a person's ability to function at home.

Relatedly, when negative physical and mental well-being issues arise in the workplace, supervisors and managers are typically not trained to handle such issues. In our experience, supervisors rarely trust frontline employees who call in sick or need to come in late as a result of elder or child care. Rather, the go-to responses are to (a) chastise employees or (b) avoid discussing the employee's performance. Often, in lieu of discussions, supervisors document employee absenteeism and terminate the employee after enough evidence has accumulated; this issue also contributes to voluntary attrition because some employees will leave a company before being terminated due to excessive absenteeism. Alternately, if an employee is experiencing mental distress at work (e.g., struggling with anxiety or depression),

supervisors do not know how to handle the situation or may fear legal repercussions for actions they may take. The rare manager will refer the employee to employee assistance programs (if available; in frontline work, employees often don't have access to such programs). More often (again, in our experience), employees struggling with health or mental issues are ostracized, and managers ignore their issues or even try to push the struggling employee out of the workplace. Such behaviors and treatment underscore the greater need for understanding, training, and mental health support systems to be put in place within all organizations or at a minimum for I-O researchers to identify more effective employee coping processes. Ultimately, we need more research to (a) determine how the health and mental well-being of low-wage/frontline employees impacts the climate of the work environment, (b) test interventions for building trust among managers/workers (in regard to wellness) and for training managers in how to handle delicate situations involving employee well-being, and (c) further understand the unique experiences of at-risk employees in low-wage and frontline positions.

Summary and Conclusions

Ultimately, the focus in I-O psychology on white-collar and managerial samples has influenced the constructs that we study and the ways in which we conceptualize workplace experiences and behaviors. Subsequently, we may have unintentionally missed many important workplace phenomenon, including both those that are unique to low-wage/frontline workers and those that impact all types of employees. To facilitate research in this area, we provided—based on extensive experience working with frontline employing organizations—several areas in which our knowledge base could be expanded. From better understanding of stressors and the impact of high turnover to better understanding of the interplay between employee well-being at home and work, we hope that this brief commentary will stimulate research on these neglected issues in I-O psychology.

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We Found Them! The Practitioner Role in Expanding the Generalizability of Findings in I-O Psychology

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The purpose of our commentary is to expand the conversation started by the focal article (Bergman & Jean, 2016) by providing a practitioner perspective, especially focusing on practitioners who work in a government or military context. We believe this perspective is valuable because (a) inter-

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The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of U.S. Customs and Border Protection or the U.S. federal government.

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