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## News Flash! Work Psychology Discovers Workers!

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Bergman and Jean (2016) have contributed an important essay to the continuing self-reflection and maturation of the field of industrial–organizational (I-O) psychology—or as it is known in much of the world outside the United States, work psychology.<sup>1</sup> They clearly and adequately document that the field has relatively neglected to study the world of (largely lower-level) workers who are not managers, executives, professionals, or students and that this has affected adversely the validity of our science and the relevance of our professional practice in a number of not-so-intuitively obvious ways. But as critical as those observations are, I believe the most important aspect of their piece has to do with the inferences they offer as to *why* our published literature is so skewed. They suggest six potential, not mutually exclusive, explanations, including the possibility of personal biases among I-O psychologists.

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<sup>1</sup> Much of that reflection has appeared in the pages of this journal during the few years since its inception.

However, before focusing on those explanations, it should be informative to place the Bergman/Jean thesis in context. There is a growing, recent body of critical evidence and/or commentary concerning this and similar issues—although less consideration generally has been given to their likely causes.

### Other Exemplars of Skew

- Consonant with Bergman and Jean's observations are those of Ruggs et al. (2013), who demonstrated the relative lack of published research in I-O psychology concerning seven marginalized or stigmatized groups (e.g., ethnic minorities other than Blacks; those who are heavy; religious minorities), thus failing to advance the cause of workplace rights for all. They attribute the reasons for this mostly to methodological difficulties in studying such groups or to simple neglect ("we have gone fishing"). Lefkowitz (2013b), in the belief that the issue extends beyond stigmatized groups, used an attenuated version of their methodology and demonstrated a similar sparsity of studies of organizations other than business corporations (e.g., nonprofits, NGOs, education, health), the nontraditional or "contingent" workforce, the unemployed, labor unions, and home workers. He surmised that "it is likely that the[se] are not random or 'chance' omissions—that they reflect some underlying dynamic" (Lefkowitz, 2013b, p. 49).
- Weiss and Rupp (2011, p. 86) noted that work psychology is dominated by an organization-centric perspective that has led us to a failure to appreciate the individual and his/her experiences at work and to our "studying how people can meet or hurt the collective interests of the institutions for whom they work"—but not vice versa. They view (incorrectly, in my opinion) the lack of an individualistic perspective as a scientific problem; in fact, they state that any suggestion that the problem might be "political instead of conceptual" would be merely a distraction. By political they seem to mean value-laden or ideological, in the course of rejecting a "handmaidens of management" characterization. Lefkowitz (2011), however, pointed out that "it is anything but a distraction . . . because the espoused descriptive person-centric view is not readily separable from a normative- or morally-driven empathic and humanistic approach to individual workers and their circumstances" (p. 113).
- Greenberg (2009) observed that, although we have produced a great deal of knowledge about the antecedents and effects of organizational justice, I-O psychologists have attempted few beneficial interventions to improve organizations in that regard. He offers a number of possible explanations, from the relatively benign (an overemphasis on theory; interventions are difficult to do) to the more tendentious (advancing social values or doing good is viewed by I-O psychologists as unscientific; cf. Lefkowitz, 2008). It

has also been pointed out that because I-O psychology focuses primarily on *perceived* justice and *procedural* justice, this allows us to ignore (evade?) the inevitably moral issues associated with *distributive justice*—for example, the need “to articulate a *normative* view of what distributions are right, fair, or just to use as evaluative standards” (Lefkowitz, 2009, p. 223).

- Scherbaum, Goldstein, Yusko, Ryan, and Hanges (2012) decried the fact that despite the enormous importance attached to the notion of *intelligence* in I-O psychology, in comparison with the contributions of other fields, “we have done relatively little in recent times about studying the nature of the intelligence construct and its measurement” (p. 128). Instead, the overwhelming bulk of our research comprises a surface level concern for predicting performance outcomes and examining racial subgroup score differences. They attribute this largely to the success we have achieved in psychometric prediction of performance and an accompanying “misplaced belief that the major questions have all been answered” (p. 135). Lefkowitz (2012b) observed that even if that were so those reasons “cry out for explanations of their own. . . . Why are we sanguine about mere predictive efficiency (even though it is far from perfect)?” (p. 17). He argued that the same criticisms could be made regarding the way in which I-O psychology fails to adequately study quite a number of other relevant psychological constructs. It is likely that there is an underlying answer having to do with the “pervasive values system in I-O psychology concerning the nature and primacy of professional practice” (Lefkowitz, 2012b, p. 17) to the extent of even affecting the nature of scientific enquiry.

### Explanation

Other examples could be drawn, but I believe that those four, along with that of Bergman and Jean (as well as another similar critique to be noted later), form a sufficient context in which to draw the inferences about which I am concerned. The five essays are all constructively critical of the field and aimed at advancing our professional growth. I believe that the criticisms proffered by the five sets of authors can be condensed into three points (with apologies to the authors for the inevitable damage wrought by drastically summarizing): (a) Research and practice in I-O psychology is nonrepresentative because of the limited categories of people and organizations we study and the larger number that we do not study (Bergman & Jean; Ruggs et al., 2013); (b) similarly, we seem to have rather restricted notions of the constructs we study, limited scientific curiosity about them and/or limited applications—especially with respect to enhancing worker well-being (Greenberg, 2009; Scherbaum et al., 2012); (c) the general orientation of the field emphasizes a focus and concern for the organization, with accompanying diminution of focus on individual employees (Bergman & Jean; Weiss & Rupp, 2011).

Most of the authors advance tentative or speculative reasons for these characterizations, and I believe it will be helpful and informative to review them briefly—that is, to get a sense of how these accomplished I-O professionals have answered the following implicit question about I-O psychology:

***Why Do We Do the Things We Do and Not Do the Things That We Don't?***

- A. *Why do we underrepresent the study of wage earners* (Bergman & Jean)?
1. Managers, executives, and students are easier to access than lower-level or contingent workers.
  2. Labor unions are generally uncooperative.
  3. It is more difficult procedurally to study lower-level workers.
  4. Organizational gatekeepers are more interested in studies emphasizing their own organizational level.
  5. I-O psychologists are less knowledgeable and comfortable about the world and experiences of lower-level wage earners.
- B. *Why have we not sought to better understand discrimination against marginalized employees* (Ruggs et al., 2013)?
1. This type of research is difficult to do.
  2. The populations of interest are often hard to identify.
  3. The populations are viewed as not worthy of concern.
  4. Journal editors are biased against studies of these groups.
  5. Research might tread on uncertain legal territory.
- C. *Why do we not have a more person-centric orientation to work psychology* (Weiss & Rupp, 2011)?

The conceptual framework of I-O psychology is an organization-centric perspective, with issues determined by organizational needs, but no explicit consideration is offered by the authors regarding why that is so.

- D. *In light of all we know about organizational justice, why are there so few organizational interventions designed to promote it* (Greenberg, 2009)?
1. Managers are largely unaware of problems of injustice.
  2. Humanistic concerns (such as organizational justice) are viewed by I-O psychologists as “unscientific.”
  3. I-O psychology has become more theoretically oriented and anti-applications.
  4. Organizational justice interventions are hard to do.
- E. *Why has I-O psychology largely ceased to contribute to the scientific study of the construct of intelligence and its measurement* (Scherbaum et al., 2012)?
1. I-O psychology has adapted a limited psychometric approach.

2. Our ability to predict performance has been successful, and we already know what we need to know, so why go further?
3. A preoccupation with legal issues has contributed to both maintaining the status quo and promoting a noncooperative antagonism of those concerned with equal employment opportunity *versus* those concerned with scientific rigor.

These five expositions, and others that could be included, call attention to skews—that is, biases—that are putatively endemic to the field of I-O psychology. We should appreciate how potentially serious that is. If it were applied to an individual, “The claim that a social scientist is ‘biased’ is rarely a neutral observation. In our culture, it can be a scathing criticism, a devastating attack on the target’s credibility, integrity, and honor” (MacCoun, 1998, p. 260). Using a traditional temperature metaphor (Gladwin & Figner, 2014), the various reasons or cognitive processes offered by the authors as explaining the biases range from examples of “cold processes” (neutral, unmotivated), such as ignorance or difficulties in implementation, and “hot processes” (affective, motivated), such as certain people/topics are not worthy of our concern, whereas managers are more important. The majority of tentative explanations seem to be of the former type, and I suspect that might also be true for the many other putative explanations that could be advanced for the several other characterizations or “skews” that might be enumerated. But how useful and parsimonious is it to generate a multitude of separate, idiosyncratic, mostly neutral, and extrinsic explanations for critical characterizations of the field? After all, I-O psychology is a coherent entity—that is, a recognized occupation with the status of a profession based on identifiable bodies of knowledge with associated instrumental applications and structured educational paths of entry. Perhaps there is a corresponding coherent underlying dynamic that can explain much of these varied forms of bias.

As has been noted previously, “There are three elements to any profession: its theoretical and/or scientific base; its technical expertise, as reflected by its instrumental applications; and its moral or values perspective” (Lefkowitz, 2005, p. 19). It is the third dimension that is problematic. “We view ourselves as being entirely objective and scientific in our professional activities, guided by dispassionate theories and empirical ‘facts’ determined entirely by objective methods—all without the intrusion of personal or social values. We maintain that our field is entirely scientific and ‘value free’” (Lefkowitz, 2008, p. 443). Because of that erroneous belief, we have largely ignored the implicit value system that in fact dominates I-O psychology and affects almost all that we do: the economic and business values of an

idealized free-market capitalism, as endorsed by the organizations we serve.<sup>2</sup> I have asserted this view previously, including pointing out what I believe to be some serious adverse consequences, and suggested that what is missing from our values set and needs to be integrated is a revival of the traditional humanistic aspect of psychology (cf. Lefkowitz, 1990, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2010, 2012a, 2013a, 2016). That absence is precisely what underlies and accounts for the maladies decried in the five critical commentaries reviewed above.

Before concluding, I believe another critical exposition in a similar vein to those discussed above is worthy of mention and also illustrates the tendentious argument I am advancing. Byrne et al. (2014) were concerned about how the education and training of I-O psychologists could be improved. Their concerns are directed at professional practice and the employability of I-O graduates in the light of “increasing competition from other disciplines” (p. 2), and they focus entirely on the knowledge/competency areas that might enhance that marketability and our distinctiveness. In response, Lefkowitz (2014, p. 42) pointed out that “not considered in their deliberations are the societal norms and values, beliefs, goals, and expectations that form a vital moral component of any profession. The education and training of I-O psychologists includes being normatively socialized by means of informal and hidden curricula (Hafferty, 1998).” The failure to explicitly articulate a humanistic, moral vision has allowed a more implicit, uniformly economic value system to provide such socialization. These issues should be considered explicitly in our graduate training.

### Conclusion

Almost all of the suggested solutions to the problems raised in the six critiques noted above are methodological or instrumental and extrinsic in nature. For example, even Bergman and Jean offer only increasing replication with worker samples, using different sampling strategies, and increasing the use of qualitative studies. The “societal norms and values, beliefs, goals, and expectations” of the profession are given short shrift by all of these authors. I-O psychology should explicitly articulate a normative value statement that represents our meta-objectives concerning what it is that we aim to accomplish as a profession, encompassing our science, our professional practice, and our societal values. Following is a statement that seems responsive to the dynamic putatively underlying the six constructive, critical commentaries discussed above—as well as to our ethical commitment to use our

<sup>2</sup> Of course not all I-O psychologists are unaware of this matter. Many of us are perfectly aware of and sanguine about furthering business values; in fact, we share these values with our clients and/or employers, and that is why, many believe, we have been so successful as a profession. Evidence suggests that the field has been marked “by a very conservative economic outlook” (Darley, 1968, p. 2) from its inception.

knowledge “to improve the condition of individuals, organizations and society” (American Psychological Association, 2002, p. 1062):

*Along with improving the effective functioning of organizations, a fundamental objective of research and practice in industrial–organizational psychology should be to assure that organizations are safe, just, healthy, challenging, and fulfilling places in which to work. There is no inherent conflict between those objectives and improving organizational effectiveness. In fact, the two are often related and interdependent. However, when it is anticipated that actions undertaken to improve organizational effectiveness will adversely impact the well-being of employees or other organizational stakeholders, the appropriate role of the I-O psychologist is to challenge the morality, wisdom, and necessity of those actions and, if necessary, to attenuate their adverse consequences to the extent feasible.*

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## Where in the World Are the Workers? Cultural Underrepresentation in I-O Research

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Few would dispute that the nature of work, and the workers who perform it, has evolved considerably in the 70 years since the founding of the So-

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