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# Industrial–Organizational Psychologists Moving to Business Schools: Potholes in the Road to Migration?

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Aguinis, Bradley, and Brodersen (2014) certainly offer provocative and thought-provoking conclusions and suggestions, including many observations in line with those of Porter (2008). Their evidence, and our own first-hand experiences in

management and psychology departments, respectively, are compelling that there is a trend for industrial–organizational (I–O) PhDs to be migrating to business schools. We both graduated from a psychology department, and only one person who graduated from our program around the time we did is now working in a psychology department. In this short response to the focal article, we look beyond these trends and explore what all this means for students, faculty, and most importantly, the field of I–O psychology.

### **Implications for Graduate Students**

Student applicants for I–O psychology programs come overwhelmingly from undergraduate psychology programs. These psychology undergraduates typically do not consider business schools to be potential graduate school options, and most psychology faculty do not steer them toward business schools. This trend is likely to continue, so that there should continue to be a sufficient inflow of students into I–O psychology PhD programs. At the other end of the process, the outflow of graduates, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2014) reports that I–O psychologist is the fastest growing occupation in the United States. This means that there should be plenty of job opportunities for I–O psychology PhDs as well. If undergraduate psychology majors are armed with such market information (admittedly a dubious assumption), they have every reason to continue to apply to and enter PhD programs in I–O psychology.

But where do these graduates go? Many I–O psychology PhD graduates are placed in industry, in government, and in consulting jobs; a much smaller proportion take academic jobs. Of the few opting for academics, an increasingly larger proportion is placed in business schools, as highlighted by the focal article. This raises concerns about continued staffing of I–O psychology departments. We address this issue below. But, for now, we think that I–O psychology

programs will continue both to attract students and to place PhDs in good jobs. Thus, it is not the survival of I–O psychology programs per se that is in jeopardy. Rather, the issue is more concerned with the pool from which I–O psychology programs can hire new faculty members.

### **Implications for Faculty**

Programs in business schools hire both management and I–O psychology PhDs; psychology departments hire I–O psychology PhDs almost exclusively. This suggests that business schools have a better selection ratio than do psychology departments (although that ratio actually depends on both the number of applicants and the number of job openings). In addition, as Aguinis et al. note, the pay scale in business schools is much higher than in psychology departments. With perhaps better selection ratios and better compensation systems, then, business schools should be better able to attract, motivate, and retain the best PhDs. Does this mean that the quality of the faculty in business schools will improve over time while simultaneously the quality of the I–O faculty in psychology departments deteriorates? This is a disturbing thought, and we hope it does not come to pass.

Addressing the compensation differential is likely to remain difficult, given the budgets and pay equity issues within social sciences units of universities. But the reluctance of psychology departments to hire business school PhDs merits consideration. Are psychology departments reluctant because they consider psychology PhDs to be better trained than management PhDs? Is it because they think management PhDs could not teach psychology courses such as introduction to psychology, social psychology, and psychometrics? Is there any validity in these assumptions? We think these questions deserve serious contemplation if psychology departments are to maintain a high-caliber I–O psychology faculty.

An issue not addressed directly in the focal article is the type or level of university, and more precisely the type of department

or program in psychology. In the very top psychology departments, the teaching load is low, and therefore I–O psychology faculty can concentrate on only I–O psychology (mostly graduate) courses. At a level below the very top schools, I–O psychology faculties are often required to teach other psychology courses as well (including introductory psychology as perhaps the stereotypical example). Usually, they can also teach social psychology, statistics, research methods, and psychometrics, for example. These courses can, of course, also be taught by many highly skilled psychologists from other domains (e.g., social psychologists, quantitative psychologists, and experimental psychologists).

The availability of alternative faculty is compounded by an arithmetical issue. Assuming five to six I–O faculty members with teaching loads of three to four courses per year yields 15–24 courses per year. However, a psychology department is unlikely to offer more than a dozen or so I–O psychology courses in a year. In other words, psychology departments have both fewer I–O psychology courses to offer than faculty to teach these courses, and more faculty members from other domains who can teach the needed courses. As a result, I–O faculty members teach in other domains (social psychology, psychometrics, etc.), courses that a typical business school graduate has neither the interest nor the training to teach. The pay differences highlighted in the focal article exacerbate this problem. Thus, an influx of business school graduates into psychology departments, and the consequent selection ratio, is unlikely to improve. Many issues raised in the focal article will probably continue to ring true in the foreseeable future.

### Implications for the Field

One of the most troubling implications of Aguinis et al. is that the field (including the content of influential I–O psychology journals) would move away from an emphasis on empirical verification to an emphasis on

theory, following trends observable in business schools. We have at least two concerns about this possibility. One, we already have many good theories that have not been tested adequately. Without empirical verification, these theories cannot advance. Those of us who believe in the scientific method must demand rigorous empirical tests of these theories. Already, many of us have discussed the reluctance of journals to publish replications. Without strong replications, we face the potential of a profusion of chance results masquerading as facts. If lack of replication is exacerbated by the lack of *any* empirical verification whatsoever, we will be left with a field that must renounce any pretension of being a science.

Another problem with the emphasis on theory at the expense of empirical verification is the effect on theory itself. Scientific theory must be falsifiable, but if this caveat is removed (by default; if fewer empirical studies are published, concern about empirical falsifiability would lessen), theory becomes increasingly closer to philosophy and further away from science. A cursory glance at many of the articles in the *Academy of Management Review*, for instance, reveals many “theories” that do not meet the falsifiability criterion. Such “theories” may have value, but they are not science and do not advance science. If I–O psychology follows the presumed trend in management, we could be confronted with a proliferation of such pseudotheories.

As an unsettling affirmation of predictions in the focal article, we note that our experience with journal reviewers and editors indicates that an emphasis on theory, even in empirical work, is indeed increasing. This often takes the form of requirements to justify a study with a single overarching theory. Serious problems can arise from such a requirement (e.g., see Schaubroeck, 2012). Surely we must entertain the possibility that emphasis on theory-based, and therefore deductive, research has been overdone. As an analogy, if an astronomer were to discover a new solar system by accident, and not because of some strong theoretical

mandate to search in a certain place, it would be unwise for a journal to refuse to publish the finding simply because it was not directed by a theory. Inductive research that is not necessarily theory based can also be informative. Hambrick (2007) offered similar pleas to management scholars. Surely I–O scholars can refrain from going down this path.

None of this is meant to imply that we should abandon theory. On the contrary, it is meant to emphasize that, as a field, we must maintain a reasonable balance between theory, empirical verification, and knowledge generation. Furthermore, in the development of theory, we must keep the scientific mandates of falsifiability and parsimony in mind. If business schools have become the setting for a majority of academic I–O psychologists, it is particularly incumbent on those of us in business schools to guard against the erosion of the scientific method in our literature and to convince our colleagues in management and other departments that theory without empirical verification is essentially an empty prize.

Although we agree with Aguinis et al. regarding the danger of a slide in favor of theory over empirical verification, we hope that their article serves as a timely warning to all of us. If editors, reviewers, and authors work together, we can preserve I–O psychology as a science. If we do not, the marginalization of the discipline already evident in some psychology departments will just deepen, and it will be our own fault. But there is still time for a course correction.

## Conclusion

It is possible that many of the Aguinis et al. predictions will come true. In looking at the SIOP list of programs in psychology departments over a couple of decades, we have not noticed a decline in numbers. In thinking of I–O programs that have disappeared and those that have been newly created, we see a possible pattern. I–O psychology programs at Ohio State University, University of Michigan, and New York University have fallen by the wayside, while new programs

have sprung up at University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Roosevelt University, and University of Central Florida. Does this indicate that more prestigious universities are losing I–O psychology PhD programs and less prestigious ones are taking up the mantle? If so, what are the ramifications? Only time will tell. I–O psychology does have a history of high quality programs existing at both flagship universities of a state and other universities as well, and so perhaps we will continue to have a mix of good I–O programs at both more and less prestigious universities.

There may be increasing migration of I–O PhDs to business schools (of course, if migration is already high, we may hit a ceiling soon!). Still, I–O psychology programs are likely to survive, perhaps with a focus on practice and consulting, as the focal article suggests. We think it is unlikely that PhD programs in I–O psychology will dwindle, given our observations that new ones are being born and that the occupation is so fast growing. History suggests there will not be a move toward more PsyD programs, however. We could only find three current PsyD programs in I–O psychology listed on the SIOP website, and each of those programs also lists a PhD program. Somewhat nontraditional, sometimes free-standing schools of psychology once offered more PsyDs, but they appear to be switching to the PhD. We know of two more traditional universities that once had PsyD programs in I–O psychology—George Mason and Central Michigan—but both of these long ago switched to PhDs. The PsyD in I–O psychology may not be dead, but it appears to be on life support.

If I–O programs become more applied, this may not necessarily be a dire consequence. But if, in the process, we lose our grip on the scientific method, we will indeed be doomed. We call upon all scientists in the field to militate against this possibility to the fullest. I–O psychology in practice has usually emphasized the use of at least simple scientific principles or methods, for example, in survey research principles when surveying employees,

learning and evaluation principles when training them, or validation principles when selecting them. We think this will continue, and this means scientific methods are likely to continue to be taught and advocated by I–O faculty in psychology departments. We can prevent the demise of I–O psychology as a science. We just must have the determination to do so.

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