

COMMENTARY

Servants of power redux

Michael J. Zickar*

Bowling Green State University

*Corresponding author. Email: mzickar@bgsu.edu

Mumby's (2019) focal article provides an alternative perspective to industrial and organizational (I-O) psychologists, claiming that we often unconsciously adopt many of the assumptions shared by elites in our current socio-political-economic system. He is correct in that as a discipline we tend to be beholden to management interests, we are generally resistant to critical approaches, and many of us rely whole-heartedly on the neoliberal assumptions of market capitalism. In this commentary, I describe in brief detail a previous similar effort to label I-O psychologists as *servants of power*, as well as detail some counterexamples of progressive I-O psychologists who addressed issues in common (at least in spirit) with Mumby's critique, and then finally I lay out some suggestions for I-O psychologists who wish to build a more progressive I-O psychology—one that addresses several of his critiques.

Loren Baritz and servants of power

In 1960, historian Loren Baritz published a scathing popular history text, *Servants of Power: A History of the Use of Social Science in America*, that detailed abuses that social scientists used to thwart labor unions during the heyday of the labor-management wars of the 1930s and 1940s. Baritz argued that industrial psychologists used personality tests to help managers screen out applicants likely to join labor unions, directly flaunting the 1935 National Labor Relations Act, which was designed to protect employees' right to unionize (see Zickar, 2001). Baritz also claimed psychologists worked with management to promote conformity and used attitudinal measures and projective testing to help sway employee opinions to fit managerial ideals. Essentially, Baritz documented Mumby's (2019) evidence-less assertion of I-O psychologists' collaboration with managers, nearly 60 years earlier. Although this book has been cited more than 1,000 times, most of the citations are from critical management studies; the book should be required reading for all aspiring doctoral students in I-O psychology.

Arthur Kornhauser, Donald G. Paterson, and Patricia Cain Smith

Several prominent early I-O psychologists refused to ally themselves fully with management, thus defying the thesis espoused by Baritz and Mumby. Their careers are worthy of study as they show that one can challenge the status quo and still be quite successful. Arthur Kornhauser was a second-generation (a student of pioneer I-O psychologist Walter Van Dyke Bingham) industrial psychologist who worked with labor unions throughout his career (receiving funding from the United Auto Workers for his most ambitious empirical work) and made sure to advocate for an applied psychology that stood with employees in their occasional conflicts with management. He argued that most industrial psychologists worked with management to promote their interests: "I know of no instance in which a study undertaken to improve employee morale has discovered

that the company needs a stronger, more vigorous labor union to represent its employees” (Kornhauser, 1957, p. 159). Kornhauser was unabashedly pro-union throughout his career and was successful in the field, elected three times to the presidency of the American Association of Applied Psychology, a precursor to today’s Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP).

Donald G. Paterson was a long-time University of Minnesota I-O psychologist who held strong progressive views (he was very active in the Americans for Civil Liberties Union, as was Kornhauser, and fought the Senator McCarthy investigations into left-wing activists in the university system). Paterson was an early personnel selection researcher, helping develop an empirical approach to selection by helping debunk some of the lay selection approaches that were popular in the business community (e.g., Katherine Blackford’s approach claimed blondes were more effective than brunettes). One difference compared to today’s selection researchers, however, is that Paterson believed that just as it was important for industrial psychologists to help companies select the best employees, he also believed that industrial psychologists should work with individuals to help select the best occupations for their career and life satisfaction. The latter field is one that current day I-O psychologists label *occupational or vocational interests*, a domain of study has been largely ceded to counseling psychologists (see Erdheim, Zickar, & Yankelevich, 2007). This migration of vocational interest research from industrial psychology to counseling psychology is one that is consistent with Mumby’s (2019) argument that I-O psychology is largely concerned with managerial interests. Since vocational interests focus on employee interests, as opposed to managerial interests, it is not surprising that that field of study was shed from the mainstream of I-O psychology. This divorce of vocational interests from I-O psychology is surprising, given that it fits into the broad purview that most people assume of the scientific study of human behavior in the workplace.

Patricia Cain Smith was a latter generation I-O psychologist. She received her PhD from Cornell University in 1942, spent the first part of her career in applied practice with Aetna Life and Affiliated Companies as well as Kurt Salmon Consulting, and then transitioned back to academia working at Cornell and then Bowling Green State University. Pat was raised in poverty during the Great Depression—an experience that shaped her worldview and led her to be a compassionate I-O psychologist. Her life’s passion was studying job satisfaction, and she developed the Job Descriptive Index (JDI), a simple index that could reliably measure job attitudes. She purposely used simple language in the index so that workers with low levels of literacy would be able to complete the instrument. She was interested in job satisfaction as an end in itself and viewed I-O psychologists’ role partially in working to maximize worker satisfaction. Correspondingly, she worked on measures of job stress and boredom, adding these variables as important measures that I-O psychologists should consider, not just productivity (see Balzer, Locke, & Zedeck, 2008, for a nice summary of Smith’s life and work).

What can we do as a field?

Kornhauser, Paterson, and Smith are important historical figures that need to be remembered and celebrated. Fortunately, their progressive spirits continue in our field. Although I-O psychology as a whole still tends to side with managerial interests, our field does have some significant pro-worker initiatives that bear mentioning. The growing occupational health psychology (OHP) area focuses on improving the lives of individual workers by making their workplaces healthier, both physically and mentally. I share two concerns about OHP. First, we must be proactive in making sure that OHP remains a vibrant place within I-O psychology programs, making sure to not cede the domain to other fields (as in vocational interests). Second, we need to avoid the temptation to feel like we need to justify OHP research by always linking OHP variables to metrics that employers care about (e.g., productivity, absence rates). Nord (1977) made a similar argument about job satisfaction, stating that job satisfaction was a worthy topic by itself, regardless of whether it was

linked to productivity or not. In other words, job satisfaction is a meaningful dependent variable by itself—an idea with which Patricia Cain Smith would also agree. Of course, it is important to find linkages between OHP outcomes and managerial prerogatives when they exist, but improving the health of individual employees is an important outcome to those individual employees themselves, regardless of whether managers care or not.

The humanitarian work psychology movement also uses I-O psychology to solve global crises related to poverty (e.g., Berry et al., 2011). Humanitarian work psychologists have tackled some of the important funding problems that have led a large percentage of our field to devote their daily lives to management prerogatives: funding. It makes sense that most I-O psychology-focused consulting companies work on problems that are mostly of interest to management because they are the ones providing the funding for these projects. The goals of humanitarian work psychologists necessitate that they seek funding from governments and nongovernment organizations focused on fighting poverty. This search for additional funding sources will be an important step in weaning ourselves away from dependency of management.

Kornhauser highlighted the importance of university-based social scientists to tackle the research work that might get ignored by corporate-funded social scientists: “An important part of the role of university social scientists is to serve as problem-solvers for *society* [italics in the original], to push unsponsored research in the interests of the public” (1957, p. 211). His analysis may seem a bit outdated in these times where the corporate influence has pervaded universities and external funding is increasingly becoming an important index of research productivity. Kornhauser’s general point still remains, though, in that academics should work hard to tackle research topics that private organizations might not support.

I have read a very large number of personal statements from aspiring doctoral students in I-O psychology. A vast majority of those statements espouse humanistic ideals of making the workplace better for employees. Very few espouse statements like, “I want to use psychology to help *Fortune* 500 companies increase their market share.” Once these aspiring idealistic students graduate, however, a large percentage of students take jobs where they must demonstrate return on investment using organizationally valued metrics. I do not begrudge these I-O psychologists their work, nor their success. As a field, however, we should heed many of Mumby’s (2019) suggestions and critiques. Some of them are quite similar to ones made earlier by Baritz and others. As I-O psychologists, we should be open to research on improving the functioning of labor unions in the 21st century, helping less skilled employees find meaningful work, eliminating bias toward marginalized groups in the workplace, and using our leadership skills programs to develop better leaders in nonprofit organizations. Some SIOP members do work in these areas (shout outs to Lois Tetrick, Steven Mellor, and Lori Foster Thompson, among many others), but our field and society would be better off if the amount of work was larger in these areas. For our field to thrive intellectually, we should as a field tolerate, encourage, cultivate, and celebrate more diverse perspectives, whether the diversity is in topic areas, methodologies, epistemological beliefs, or political and economic beliefs.

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