
Psychology Departments Versus Business Schools: Tempest in a Teapot?

JOEL LEFKOWITZ
Baruch College, CUNY

Aguinis, Bradley, and Brodersen (2014) present quantitative data (“Study 1”) that lead them to conclude that “I–O psychology has moved to business schools”

(p. 285). They then present a qualitative survey of 171 influential members of the field (“Study 2”) who were asked their perspectives on those findings in order “to stimulate follow-up research and ... action plans, regarding the future of I–O psychology as a field” (p. 284). They end with 10 predictions regarding the future of the field based on their conclusion from Study 1.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Joel Lefkowitz. E-mail: Joel.Lefkowitz@Baruch.cuny.edu

Address: Box B8-215, Bernard M. Baruch College, CUNY, 55 Lexington Ave. New York, NY 10010

However, before considering such reflections and reactions two questions ought to be answered. First, have the authors identified and defined unambiguously the nature of the phenomenon at issue? Second, is the quantitative evidence they present adequate to justify the conclusion(s) reached? Without satisfactory answers to these two questions the obtained qualitative responses might simply reflect invalid priming (Lombardi, Higgins, & Bargh, 1987; Murphy & Zajonc, 1993) and/or mere projections (in the psychoanalytic sense). If so, any proposed “action plans regarding the future” of the field could be misdirected. After discussing each of these questions I will try to put the authors’ concerns and respondents’ reactions into the broader context of unfortunately longstanding anxieties among industrial–organizational (I–O) psychologists regarding our professional identity, status, prestige, and success.

What Is the Phenomenon at Issue?

The authors seem to recognize implicitly some ambiguity regarding the phenomenon about which they write. For example, at various times it is characterized as: “I–O psychology has moved to business schools” (p. 285); “the migration of I–O psychologists to business schools” (p. 291); and “More precisely, I–O psychologists who produce research accepted for publication ... and who are also considered to be of sufficient scholarly stature to serve on the editorial boards of these journals, seem to be those targeted, and successfully recruited, by business schools” (p. 289). It is important to note that the last formulation is a much more circumscribed issue of considerably lesser magnitude or generality—to such an extent that *it is really a different issue*. (That is not, however, to denigrate its potential importance.) I will return to this shortly.

There seem to me to be at least five different empirical processes, corresponding to five different versions of the phenomenon that appears to be under consideration. A meta-issue also implicated may be

one of “levels” (of measurement and of theory—i.e., the target phenomenon to be explained). What is it that has purportedly been changing: The decisions of certain elite I–O psychologists or most I–O psychologists?; the composition of departments of psychology or the nature of the profession as a whole? “When levels of theory, measurement and statistical analysis are not identical, the obtained results may reflect the level of measurement or statistical analysis rather than the level of theory. Moreover, the obtained results may seriously misrepresent the relationships a researcher would have found if he or she had analyzed the data at the same level as the theory” (Klein & Kozlowski, 2000, pp. 198–199). As shown later, the authors have employed a level of data measurement and analysis that does not correspond to the macro-level issue they seem to be posing.

The five possibilities that could be at issue are presented as hypotheses. They are not mutually exclusive; indeed, some are interdependent:

Hypothesis 1: Department Transfers:

Individual I–O psychology university faculty have been “migrating” or “moving” at a substantial rate from departments of psychology to business schools; and/or

Hypothesis 2: Differential Acquisition

Rates: *Increasingly more new I–O psychology graduates have accepted faculty positions in business schools than in psychology departments; and/or*

Hypothesis 3: Differential Rates of

Attrition: *Proportionately more I–O psychology faculty in psychology departments have been retiring [and not been replaced] than among those in business schools; and/or*

Hypothesis 4: Differential Institutional

Growth: *The size and/or number of business schools have been increasing at a faster rate than have departments of psychology (or I–O programs in*

departments of psychology), yielding proportionately more faculty job openings; and/or

Hypothesis 5: Career Modeling: *Compared with I–O psychology graduates, there has been a disproportionate increase in the number of business school graduates in I–O-related disciplines (e.g., OB, OD, OT, Mgt. Sci., Org. Sci.) who are then hired by business schools.*

We can speculate about these potential scenarios (especially those of us who are academics), but the authors have not specified which one(s) they believe have been operative and about which they are concerned. They also have not presented evidence that confirms convincingly any of them—much less justifies a differential diagnosis by disconfirming some. For those interested in the issue, this should be the first research priority, as their implications vary enormously.

The fact that faculty salaries are higher in business schools than in departments of psychology (Aguinis et al., 2014, Figure 3, p. 289) would be expected to support the processes as noted in Hypotheses 1, 2, and 5. Hypothesis 5 might also reflect that psychology departments generally hire only professors whose doctorates are in psychology. The fact that the membership of the Society for Industrial–Organizational Psychology (SIOP), the number of attendees at the annual SIOP conference, and the number of doctoral programs in I–O psychology are all increasing (Aguinis et al., 2014, Figure 4, p. 290) would seem to argue *against* Hypotheses 2, 3, 5 and perhaps 1 as well—suggesting that the issue has been overblown. Hypothesis 4 suggests that a relative increase in I–O business affiliation could happen with no diminution or “migration” at all of psych department faculty. The data relevant to Hypothesis 4 are probably available. Although the authors report that the number of doctoral programs in psychology has been increasing (cf. figure 4c), the corresponding data

regarding business school-based programs is not presented.

The primary empirical data presented by the authors are the percentage of authorships and editorial board positions at two premier journals (*Journal of Applied Psychology* and *Personnel Psychology*) held by psychology department faculty versus business school faculty. Those measures are of very little evidentiary value regarding these hypotheses. As noted above, they seem to speak to an entirely different hypothetical issue; let’s call it

Hypothesis 6: *whether I–O faculty in business schools are more scholarly and productive than those in psychology departments.*

However, consideration of the empirical measures used takes us to the second question I posed.

Is There Sufficient Evidence of an Issue?

In my opinion, there are a number of methodological questions that need to be resolved before useful “follow-up research” can be undertaken. Several of these pertain to the adequacy of the measures and methods used by Aguinis et al. as indicators of the phenomenon they purport to have demonstrated (i.e., that “I–O psychology has moved to business schools”).

1. *Generalizability to the Population of Relevant Journals.* Even if one accepted that number of authorships and editorial board memberships are potentially valid indicators of the target phenomena (i.e., Hypotheses 1–5), the enumeration was limited to just two journals, *Journal of Applied Psychology (JAP)* and *Personnel Psychology (PP)*. However, it has been noted that there are “23 journals that ... are common outlets for research by I–O psychologists” (Zickar & Highhouse, 2001). Although it is true that *JAP* and *PP* are the top two

- in ratings and rankings of prestige and importance, it remains to be shown that the relative distribution of business school versus psychology department faculty authorships and editorial board positions for those two may be generalized to the relevant population of journals. It may be that their high prestige in fact contributes to their not being representative. (More important, as noted in the preceding section of this commentary, even if shown to be representative the data would be directly pertinent to the more circumscribed Hypothesis 6, not necessarily to Hypotheses 1–5.)
2. *Generalizability to the Population of Academic I–O Psychologists.* The primary empirical measures used, the relative percentages of psych versus B-school faculty authorships and editorial board positions over time, are interpreted by the authors as indicating “the move of I–O psychologists from psychology to business” (Aguinis et al., p. 286–287). But there seems to be a disconnect between the measures/sample employed and the population of interest. It remains to be demonstrated that the proportions of the two groups on those two measures—even if obtained from all 23 relevant journals—are equivalent (within the bounds of sampling error) to the proportions of all I–O psychologists in psych departments and in B-schools.
 3. *Possible Bias in the Measure of Authors.* The procedures used could have contributed to bias in three ways. First, Aguinis et al. do not seem to have accounted for possible joint faculty appointments in both psychology and business (often only one affiliation is listed on a publication). More importantly, the authors indicate that “when the same individual authored more than one article, we counted each instance separately” (p. 286). Given the likely skewed distribution of publication frequency among academics (with relatively few researchers accounting for a disproportionately large number of publications), the operational measure used was not a count of “authors” but of *authorships*, and so it is not indicative of the number of individuals in each of the two academic groups. Third, not accounting for the fact that many articles have multiple authors of varying numbers also may obscure the actual productivity of individuals. (A single article coauthored by two psych department faculty and a comparable single article coauthored by four business school faculty would lead to a conclusion that business faculty are twice as productive as psych faculty.)
 4. *A Possible Illusory Relationship.* The authors contrast the declining *JAP* and *PP* editorial board and authorship participation of those who are psych-affiliated in the face of increasing participation by the business-affiliated (Aguinis et al., 2014, figures 1 and 2). But the declines in psych participation for three of the four indicators (*JAP* and *PP* board members, and *JAP* authorship) begins decades before there is any appreciable increase in the participation of those who are business affiliated, and they are continuous. The psych-affiliated declines in the three indexes noted begin in 1917, 1970–1975, and 1930 respectively. Editorial board membership by the business-affiliated is no higher than 20% (*JAP*) and 10% (*PP*) as late as 1980–1985. Business school authorship of *JAP* articles is not appreciably greater than 0% through the mid-1960s. It seems likely that the two trends reflect different, perhaps even independent, processes (at least up until relatively recently), with the inception and rapid growth of organizational behavior (OB) programs in B-schools during the 1960s as one of the antecedents (Pugh,

1966, 1969). It is highly unlikely that I–O psychologists were “migrating” to business schools in appreciable numbers before then.

5. *Incomplete Data*. The authors discuss the substantial faculty salary differential between departments of psychology and business schools as a likely influence on “the move of psychologists from psychology to business” (p. 286–287). Yet, salary data are presented for only the past decade not the entire span of time considered. On the other hand, it should be acknowledged that the most dramatic shifts in the four data trends—increasing rates of participation by the business-affiliated, decreasing by the psych-affiliated—started only in the mid-1990s (re-editorial board participation) and mid-2000s (regarding authorship) so that the salary differential is a likely factor during recent years.

Conclusions That Can Be Drawn From Study 1

Based on the foregoing analyses, I believe the following conclusions are warranted:

1. It is not clear what the authors mean by “I–O psychology has moved to business schools.” There are at least five different, albeit related, interpretations.
2. The authors’ assertion that “Our manuscript offers an assessment of the extent” of that movement (Aguinis et al., p. 285) is not justified based on the data presented in study 1. And that is true whether one specifies the target phenomenon as Hypotheses 1, 2, 3, 4, or 5.
3. As the authors point out, the number of psychology departments offering doctoral degrees in I–O has been expanding for approximately 25 years—with an accelerated growth of programs since 2005 (cf., figure

4c). In addition, it should be noted that I–O psychology is projected to be the fastest-growing occupation in the United States, 2012–2022, with a projected growth rate of 53% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014).

4. There has been a steady decline for almost 100 years in the proportion of psychology department I–O faculty serving as editors of *JAP*, and a more recent decline regarding editorships of *PP* since about 1990. There has been an even more precipitous decline in *JAP* and *PP* editorial positions held by I–O practitioners beginning around 1990 and 1975, respectively; and a concomitant rise in the proportions of business school affiliated editors also beginning at approximately the same times. Consequently, we can conclude [only] that for the past 15 years or so the *gatekeeping* function for scholarly publication in the two most prestigious I–O journals has been represented mostly by I–O faculty in business schools.
5. The longitudinal data necessary to address the issue of whether “I–O psychologists are moving to business schools” (Aguinis et al., p. 289) were not considered. They are (a) the annual number of graduates from psychology-based doctoral programs and business-based I–O-related programs; and (b) the annual number of faculty acquisitions, transfers and retirements for those two areas; as well as the nature of the degrees held by those faculties (i.e., psych or bus).¹

Study 2

SIOP Fellows and past presidents were asked “about [their] views on the migration of I–O psychologists to business schools,”

1. The authors’ Study 2 surveyed 290 SIOP Fellows and past presidents whose affiliation was known, but that information was not provided.

whether this is “good, bad, or inconsequential,” and their “prediction about the future of I–O psychology if this trend continues to accelerate” (p. 291). Others will comment, I’m sure, on the substance of the replies solicited; I would like to contribute just one brief observation. If there continues to be no aggregate diminution of our “home” in psychology departments (number of I–O programs actually has been growing), and the profession continues to grow as projected by the USDOL, *the wider dissemination of I–O psychologists and what we have to offer to other venues (e.g., business schools; schools of public administration, health care administration, labor relations, etc.) is almost inevitable and should be viewed as a positive source of pride—assuming that we believe that what we have to offer is of value.*

Therefore, the predominantly negative and worried tone of the reactions received in study 2 from the SIOP Fellows and presidents seems striking. As noted by the authors, “those in business schools and psychology departments often referred to mainly negative consequences [re research] that occur due to the migration”; and both “those with a business school and psychology affiliation mainly commented on negative consequences for psychology departments” (p. 293). Indeed, 62% of all the responses summarized by the authors regarding “consequences of the move” were negative—68% among those with psych department or business affiliations (i.e., not counting those with a practice affiliation; based on comments contained in table 2a–c).

There is no reason to suggest that the replies reported in Study 2 are anything but genuine and seriously considered reflections of concern (or, less frequently, lack of concern) about the issue posed. Nevertheless, it should be kept in mind that based on the absence of appropriate evidence from study 1, the issue and questions posed, for the time being at least, are hypothetical. But at least 59% of influential I–O psychologists (the overall response rate in study 2) readily accepted the “migration” as a fact on which

to comment and approximately two-thirds of the comments were negative.

Some Perhaps-Relevant Context

Critical self-reflection is a potentially good and valuable process for a profession—when done constructively and positively. For example, “We foresee a future marketplace that requires even more of I–O Psychologists than ever before, and therefore our focus has been on how we adopt a forward-thinking proactive approach to anticipate these needs” (Byrne et al., 2014, p. 13).

But there seems to be a long-term ongoing thread of self-doubt, worry, and perceived crisis among many I–O psychologists in our reflections on the status of the field, so that the predominantly negative tone uncovered in study 2 is not entirely surprising. Some have pointed to an “identity crisis” (Gasser, Butler, Waddilove, & Tan, 2004; Ryan, 2003; Ryan & Ford, 2010), including “concerns about the visibility of the field” (Ryan, 2003, p. 21), and “increasing competition from other disciplines” (Byrne et al., 2014, p. 2; also, Steiner & Yancey, 2013). I have called attention previously to “industrial–organizational psychology’s recurring identity crises” (Lefkowitz, 2010): threats to our status as a science in the 1940s and 1950s; challenges from the newly articulated field of OB in the 1960s and the values-based process consultation model of organizational development (OD) in the 1970s; incursions into our corporate turf by clinical psychologists in the 1980s; and marketplace pressures from business school graduates during the 1990s to the current time. In fact, apropos of the issue raised currently by Aguinis et al., Highhouse and Zickar (1997) observed almost 20 years ago “that I/O psychologists seem to be identifying less with psychology” (p. 1), and the eulogy offered by a former president of SIOP that “*It is reasonably clear that the locus of psychology applied to organizational problems has passed from the psychology department, probably never to return*”—was

propounded 43 years ago! (J. P. Campbell, in Lawler et al., 1971, p. 10; cited in Highhouse & Zickar, 1997, emphasis added). I–O psychology could almost lay claim to being the Mark Twain of social science, based on the repeatedly exaggerated claims of our demise—except for the fact that they have all been self-assessments.

Our putative migration or expulsion from psychology departments seems to have been (mis)perceived for more than a generation despite the continued expansion of I–O psychology's representation in such departments and the extraordinarily positive occupational outlook for the profession. So, perhaps it's time to cease externalizing an existential dread and begin seriously attending to the societal and moral values issues intrinsic to the field that may be the underlying root causes (cf. Lefkowitz, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2010, 2011, 2014).

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