

Brain Drain, Invader, Virus, Traveler: On the Evolution of Industrial–Organizational Psychology

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Aguinis, Bradley, and Brodersen (2014) write of the apparent migration of industrial–organizational (I–O) psychologists to business schools and raise questions about the value and consequences of such migration. As a scholar in a school of business I found this article to be provocative, stimulating, and even surprising (my own eye opener). For example, it caused me to consider the important, and often under-evaluated, distinctions between disciplines and departmental loci, fundamental differences (and similarities) between psychology and business, and the growth, decline, and general evolution of disciplines.

Although I have spent more than 40 years as a faculty member in the Wisconsin School of Business, I see myself as similar in many ways to scholars in I–O psychology departments. I have published in psychology journals such as *Psychological Bulletin*, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Personnel Psychology*, and *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*; have served for many years on the editorial review board of the *Journal of Applied Psychology*; and have presented at Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP) and Association for Psychological Science (APS) meetings. I have regularly taught courses and seminars on I–O psychology and related organizational behavior (OB) topics for decades.

An overriding question pursued me as I read this material: What is really the subject of concern: I–O psychology as a discipline or I–O psychology departments? Brain drain, as Aguinis et al. present it, is not from I–O psychology to other disciplines but just (perhaps) from one department to others. Which, if either, is more important?

The desire to remain in psychology departments rather than schools of business might reasonably be based on concerns that movement to business schools somehow sacrifices theory to practice or somehow restricts psychologists' ability to fully interact with other I–O psychology scholars. Neither seems to be the case. On the first concern, it is rather startling to see moves to business schools voiced as having a negative impact on journals in that they "are more likely to focus less on applied research and put too much emphasis on furthering new theory." Although I–O psychologists are by nature somewhat applied, that is (of course) also the case for scholars in business schools. Further, it is no longer the case that scholars must walk down the hall to interact with coauthors and other scholars. With the Internet, the many new interactive technologies, and other facilitating mechanisms, worldwide collaboration is becoming the norm.

Consider the following:

1. The material presented by Aguinis et al. seems to suggest entirely rational behavior from the perspective of I–O psychology, if not from that of I–O psychology departments. That is, the authors appear to argue that the locus of I–O psychology is migrating

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- to business schools (and perhaps elsewhere). Why would such a migration *not* be expected to occur?
2. It is evolutionarily rational for any organism (such as I–O psychology as a discipline) to move to more hospitable environments. Even as reflected in the Aguinis et al. article, there are more resources (financial and nonfinancial—such as more funding and relief time for research) in business schools (and perhaps elsewhere) than in psychology departments. Why would an organism resist movement to new and nurturing ecosystems?
 3. The data suggest that I–O psychologists don't feel respected in psychology departments, that they are seen as second-class citizens. Conversely, scholars from "basic" disciplines such as psychology (including I–O), sociology, anthropology, and economics are respected and welcomed in business schools.
 4. I–O psychologists in business schools can continue to do research in their primary areas of interest, as well as to publish in their primary journals. Publication in journals of "core disciplines" is generally respected and highly valued in research-oriented schools of business.
 5. Whatever its validity, the disparaging claim that "most of modern psychology is based on the lies of college sophomores" can be rebuffed by greater access to "real world" samples and enhanced ability (as voiced by a study 2 respondent) to learn about the pulse of business.
 6. As demand for I–O psychologists increases, their job market improves. If they are lured in part by higher salaries in business schools, there is a compelling argument for higher salaries in I–O departments. Because respondents voiced concerns about the heavy dissertation loads in I–O departments, movement of PhD

students to other departments could be helpful.

From the perspective of the field of I–O psychology, this is simply brain migration, or even brain growth. If I–O is viewed as an organism, any such migration reflects its seeking of a hospitable, nurturing environment. Again, rather than focus on reasons for and consequences of any supposed brain drain, it might be useful to ask those who stayed why and how they resisted such drain. How did they avoid Charybdis when so sensuously lured by the siren calls of business schools?

On a related point, although I'm sure that Aguinis et al. are sincere in seeking to advance a "balanced discussion" of this issue, two related characteristics of their methodology render such balance difficult: use of the "brain drain" metaphor and the framing of study 2—the qualitative study—in terms of migration. "Brain drain" has a markedly negative connotation. Further, the qualitative study question asks about "your views on the migration of I–O psychologists to business schools. ... From your perspective, is this good, bad or inconsequential for the future of I–O psychology research and practice? What is your prediction about the future of I–O psychology if this trend continues to accelerate?" Note that this presents migration and its acceleration as facts. It also initially focuses on evaluation rather than description. This is all potentially biasing.

Consider how responses may have differed if the study 2 question had been framed (consistent with data presented by Aguinis et al.) as, "These are exciting and important times in I–O psychology. The field is expanding: The number of SIOP members has grown more than 50% since 1990 as has the number of attendees at SIOP conferences. The number of programs offering PhD and PsyD degrees in I–O psychology has expanded over time, almost doubling in just the last decade. I–O psychology journals are attracting a broader and more heterogeneous audience, drawing participation and manuscripts from

scholars in business schools and elsewhere. At the same time, the number of publication outlets and job opportunities available to I–O scholars is expanding. The policy implications of I–O psychology research are increasingly highlighted in outlets such as the *Economist* and in columns such as those by David Brooks in the *New York Times*. What do you see as consequences and implications of such trends?”

I will not comment on the predictions offered by Aguinis et al. because they are necessarily speculative. However, I will note that they are sometimes based on a variety of unanswered questions and unfounded assertions. For example, is the UT-Dallas survey either representative or meaningful? The fact that the survey did not consider publications in top I–O psychology journals says, in my view, much more about the survey than about what is valued in business schools. Further, is it true that there is less participation in SIOP on the part of those who move to business schools? Aguinis et al. seem to imply elsewhere that management scholars are actually becoming more heavily involved in I–O psychology journals and professional associations.

In addition, the fact that business schools are attracting scholars not just from I–O

psychology but also from other disciplines such as sociology, economics, and anthropology suggests that a broader focus may be appropriate. What are the natures of the diasporas of such disciplines?

Finally, alternates to the brain drain metaphor merit exploration. 2016 will celebrate the 30th anniversary of Gareth Morgan’s *Images of Organization*. A special issue of *Human Relations* will be devoted to the topic. Metaphors beyond that of a brain drain could be fruitfully explored. For example, what if I–O psychology were viewed as an invader of other disciplines or as a virus or as a family of travelers seeking new homes?

In summary, I appreciated the Aguinis et al. article and the opportunity for this response. The article raises intriguing questions and opens the opportunities for a variety of potentially valuable dialogs and explorations.

References

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