Sustainability and Industrial, Work, and Organizational Psychology: Globalization, Contribution, and Psychological Sustainability

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Given the growth in interest globally toward issues of environmental sustainability, the article by Ones and Dilchert (2012) presents both a refreshing but notably challenging perspective for industrial, work, and organizational (IWO) psychologists. From the outset, we should acknowledge that it could hardly be justifiably claimed that our discipline has earned a reputation for being at the vanguard of the management sciences in championing issues of sustainability, ecological impact, or even

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wider social fairness concerns (Campbell & Campbell, 2005; see also table 1 in the focal article). This noted, the focal article raises a whole raft of issues, challenges, and imperatives for our discipline. The case put forward for these by Ones and Dilchert is done so with eloquence and relentless vigor. Indeed, few readers would *disagree* with any of its major precepts, arguments, or suggestions for future points of focus needed within IWO psychology. This reminds us of the maxim that the true test of a new policy being advocated by any political party is whether its diametric opposite makes any common sense whatsoever. If not, it runs the risk of being tautological and self-evident (e.g., lower crime rates, better economy, etc.).

From our perspective, then, it is not *whether* we wish as a discipline to have some kind of meaningful impact upon environmental sustainability, but *how* we go about trying to achieve this at the most senior levels both nationally and internationally. The more puzzling and even troublesome issues are, first, why our discipline has been rather slow out of the starting blocks to embrace such wider social concerns as they relate to organizational performance measures and impacts, and second, how we can best engage in pursuing sustainability outcomes in general. In this commentary, we will offer some perspective on both points but organize these around three key challenges for IWO psychology (see also the SIOP Professional Practice volume by Jackson, Ones & Dilchert, 2012). These challenges, we argue, will also provide us with an opportunity to narrow the so-called science–practice divide in our discipline (Anderson, Herriot, & Hodgkinson, 2001).

Challenge 1: Deal With Sustainability Management as a Global Phenomena

The first challenge that is unavoidable is that any kind of sustainability, by its very nature, needs to be conceived of and dealt with as a global phenomenon.

Environmental sustainability, as defined by Ones and Dilchert, is quintessentially an international, cross-national, and cross-cultural issue that demands globalized perspectives and frameworks within IWO psychology. Sustainability can only be addressed sensibly and effectively if we accept this point of departure and we follow in the footsteps of some of the more visionary politicians in this regard. Of course, although international political forums have existed for some years now, IWO psychology will be a rather latecomer to these established networks and channels of influence. We may therefore not be seen as relevant to these ongoing issues by other parties already established within these networks and channels of influence. How can we best force an IWO psychology perspective onto these agendas is the immediate question. Although other stakeholders may not recognize our expertise, our sense is that we clearly do have contributions to make. One advantage we have is that the globalization of the IWO psychology contacts, professional bodies, and linkages between national bodies stands out as a strength we should continue to use. One example is the tripartite linkage between SIOP, IAAP, and EAWOP led so well over recent years, and there are many other examples of how our discipline has become inexorably more globalized (e.g., international consultancies, international research collaborations). This necessarily implies that the conditions for influencing sustainability management in different countries will also differ and that we need to be sensitive to these cultural differences and nuances. But the bigger agenda is undoubtedly transnational in orientation, and we will need to embrace this if we are to have any meaningful impacts.

Challenge 2: Widen Our Levels of Analysis and Foci

The second challenge stems from this point: Our level of analysis needs to move upward toward the level of globalized impacts, multinational corporations, and international forums and professional bodies. This

will not sit easily with our traditional foci on individual- and team-level performance within single organizations. Indeed, our more micro-analytical historical focus may even be seen as a disadvantage compared with other social science disciplines that have adopted more meso- and macro-analytical concerns, agenda, and paradigms (e.g., industrial economics, corporate governance, or even social policy studies). This is certainly not to say that IWO psychology cannot have sustainability impacts but simply to acknowledge that our expertise and more microanalytical foci upon individuals and teams within organizations may not necessarily position us well to be seen by others outside of our discipline as being able to contribute to such issues. We may well be forced to refocus the level of our theoretical and empirical concern, to recalibrate the bandwidth of our outcome measures, and to actively engage in these more general debates.

How might we best achieve this? In addition to the suggestions put forward in the focal paper, fortunately we have several other inherent strengths in IWO psychology that could stand us in good stead to address these challenges. The most prominent are the scientist–practitioner model and recent debates over bidirectional transfers between the research and practice wings of our discipline. Core to the curriculum and dominant paradigm in several countries, the scientist–practitioner model continually reminds us that our practice needs to be based upon pragmatic evidence (e.g., Briner & Rousseau, 2011; Dunnette, 1990). This sets us apart from some other disciplines in the social and management sciences (Anderson, 2007). To demonstrate impact and to validate the outcomes of our work is therefore nothing new whatsoever for IWO psychologists; indeed, our very training emphasizes these imperatives. So, although we have perhaps not been used to addressing outcomes directly related to sustainability, we have been routinely engaged in evidence-based practice and post hoc validation of our interventions, practices, and methods. Demonstrating the

positive outcomes of such interventions for sustainability will in fact be even more critical in the present economic downturn being suffered in many countries where we may be competing against other concerns seen to be more immediately pressing by organizational decision makers (Russo & Fouts, 1997). And there is a final point here: IWO psychology has considerable and long-established expertise in change management, organization development interventions, and the like. This again places us at an advantage to be able to contribute to the sustainability debate, which is in essence about change management.

Previously, one of us (Anderson, 2007) argued that there are seven major strategic routes through which IWO psychology can try to gain senior-level influence: government commissions and working parties; boards of directors and industry commissions; research councils; conferences, Continuing Professional Development (CPD) events, and keynote addresses; research consortia funded by organizations; editorial board memberships, especially practitioner involvement; and consultancy-funded strategic research initiatives. These hold true equally for environmental sustainability as they do for our influence over other outcomes (profitability, performance, social responsibility, etc.). Yet, in the United States and in several countries within the E.U., we have not really maximized these important channels of strategic influence, and we have lagged behind other disciplines in our efforts to get involved in senior-level policy making forums. Our research, although worthy and based upon robust theoretical and methodological precepts, has gone rather unnoticed at these levels, it could be argued. Akin to the philosophical conundrum of whether a falling tree makes any noise, if there is nobody there to hear it, we wonder whether IWO psychology has been conscientiously felling away at trees but has been too inwardly-focused in not pushing our involvement externally along these strategic avenues, particularly in relation to wider concerns of environmental sustainability.

Challenge 3: Prioritize Psychological Sustainability Over Environmental Sustainability Initially

One final point can be made in response to the focal article. This challenge may be somewhat more controversial, but we suspect that we might be best counseled to pursue first the goal that can best be termed *psychological sustainability* in the workplace, then to subsequently move toward wider environmental sustainability. Here, we refer to the many initiatives recently toward positive psychology that have gained traction in many countries, are directly reliant upon our expertise and research findings, and can be demonstrated to have performance-related benefits for organizations. A psychologically sustainable workplace would be based upon principles of nonharm to employees, managed stress and burnout effects, positive engagement, and longer term mental health benefits for all employees regardless of their position or role, to mention but a few facets. The most recent EAWOP conference held in Maastricht, The Netherlands, in May, 2011 had the strapline ''Decent Work'' derived from an initiative from the International Labour Office. As IWO psychologists we are well-aware that there is some way to go before we can even claim to have influenced organizations to move inexorably toward psychologically sustainable workplaces let alone lay claim to being actively influencing environmental sustainability. As a vital stepping stone on the way toward environmental sustainability, it could be a less ambitious but more attainable shorter term goal for IWO psychologists to pursue psychological sustainability initially, in our view.

In conclusion, the case put forward by Ones and Dilchert for IWO psychology to self-examine our own professional capabilities to contribute toward both environmental and psychological sustainability in the workplace is compelling to the point of being axiomatic. This raises (at least) three strategic challenges for our discipline. Although to date we may not have been

at the forefront of disciplines clamoring to influence this debate either at a within-country or cross-country level, a strong case can undoubtedly be made that if we do turn our attentions to these vitally important issues then we could be well placed to make a real difference. Core aspects of our professional training, methodological expertise, and ingrained proclivity toward evidence-based practice are the key competitive disciplinary advantages that we may have at our disposal. The authors of the focal article provide us with a visionary perspective; it is up to researchers and practitioners alike in IWO psychology internationally to respond positively to this vision and to take on board the challenges of emerging as leaders in both environmental and psychological sustainability in globalized workplaces of the future.

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