

COMMENTARY

## We can be more, but first, who are we?

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### Abstract

This commentary argues that industrial-organizational psychology can be a conduit for greater good by focusing on the United Nations sustainable development goal number 8 which calls for decent work for all. However, before industrial-organizational (I-O) psychology can truly be used for the greater good it must reckon with our identity crisis: who does I-O psychology serve, the worker or organization? We argue that under a capitalistic model, there is no clear path to working with organizations to provide decent work and economic growth simultaneously. Thus, it is critical that the I-O psychology field clarifies its purpose and identity.

**Keywords:** psychology; work; ethics; organization; identity

*“Let us, as psychologists in general, and as IO psychologists in particular, contemplate with deep consideration for the human condition and be inspired towards caritas — loving kindness. Let us also be dynamic thinkers and creators. But lastly, let us be alive with courage and boldness, let us labour relentlessly, and struggle ceaselessly, to serve humankind both as scientists and as professionals.”*

—Strümpfer, 2007

Mullins and Olson-Buchanan (2023) argue that industrial and organizational (I-O) psychology has “the foundation, skills, and moral imperative to be an agent of change” (p. 26). Specifically, if I-O uses the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) framework (United Nations, 2022) to target efforts, it can be a global voice for workers and organizations. We concur that I-O psychologists have a moral imperative and that the SDGs are a valuable framework for the field. Where we diverge from Olson-Buchanan and Mullins is in the field’s capability to take on the responsibility of being a voice for workers and organizations alike. For over a century, I-O psychology has agonized over its identity (Ryan & Ford, 2010; Watkins, 2001). Namely, I-O psychology struggles to define and substantiate its primary purpose, values, and target audience (Lefkowitz, 1990, 2010). To expound, we pose a time-worn question: *Can I-O simultaneously serve workers and organizations?*

I-O psychology has been criticized for embodying the “traditional economic free-enterprise, shareholder-value-above-all-else agenda” (Lefkowitz, 2008, p. 441; Strümpfer, 2007). Given I-O psychology’s origins, the critique is neither surprising nor unfair. Early proponents of I-O (e.g., Hugo Munsterberg) applied psychology to businesses as a service (Lefkowitz, 2016). The U.S. Department of Defense was the first to use testing for personnel selection (Terman, 1918), legitimizing the field. Personnel selection is grounded in scientific management (Derksen, 2014; Taylor, 1919), which emphasizes the mechanistic side of production and overlooks the humanity

of workers (e.g., Strümpfer, 2007). That I-Os are servants of organizational interests is considered “benign neglect” on the part of the profession (Lefkowitz, 2021 p.14). As such, we are skeptical that I-O can *sincerely* serve the greater good without reflection on its origins and identity.

This commentary is a plea for action; our intent is not to expand on the body of work analyzing I-O’s identity (e.g., Baritz, 1960; Ryan & Ford, 2010; Watkins, 2001). I-O has an identity crisis, that is established. Also, this commentary is not meant to diminish work done to prioritize worker welfare. For instance, numerous psychologists are ushering a movement—humanitarian work psychology—that merges I-O with an effort to enhance human welfare (e.g., Carr et al., 2012; Gloss & Foster, 2013; McWha-Hermann et al., 2015; Weiss & Rupp, 2011). Collaborations across various practitioners, organizations, and governments have also contributed to this movement (MacLachlan, 2014; McVeigh & MacLachlan, 2022). We are grateful for those leading the way. Nonetheless, the ethical dilemma, which is as old as the field itself (Roback, 1917), still pervades (Reichman & Berry, 2012). The goal of this commentary is to stimulate thoughtful debate and bold action.

### A brief review of I-O’s ethical dilemma

Under a capitalistic model, the goals of workers and organizations are at odds (Li & Toppinen, 2011) and characterized in economic literature as a principal–agent problem (Sappington, 1991). The principal (i.e., an organization and its shareholders) must monitor and motivate the agents (i.e., workers) to act in its interest. With greater bargaining power, the principal drafts the employment contract, detailing the rights to the surplus of returns from the agents’ work. Regardless of how much is earned from the agents’ labor, the agent only receives a fixed amount (e.g., hourly pay salary). The principal also has control over the methods in which profits are obtained. We acknowledge that there is staggering complexity to the agent–principal problem in the context of organizational psychology. However, we opted to strip the complexities and focus on the fundamental underpinnings for parsimony and lucidity.

I-O psychologists struggle with the field’s acceptance of corporate values because organizations are beholden to create value for the shareholders, not the workers (Lefkowitz, 2008, 2019). Organizations often bully unions and ignore worker and societal welfare (Lefkowitz, 2008, 2019). Meta (formerly Facebook), for example, outsources traumatizing “content moderator” jobs to workers in the Philippines (Bishop, 2018; Block & Riesewieck, 2018). Content moderators spend their entire workday viewing and removing unsanctioned content (e.g., terrorist videos, political propaganda) with negative, long-term health consequences. As another example, big oil companies such as Shell and BP intentionally deceive society about how they damage the environment in pursuit of profit (Mann, 2021).

With the prevalence of organization corruption and the agent–principal problem, why do we insist worker–organization goal conflicts are aberrations to be ignored? Lefkowitz (2019) argues that we maintain a collective state of “deliberate ignorance.” In other words, we assume the complementarity of worker and corporate goals as normative because it enables us to justify the system and eschew moral responsibility. As Olson-Buchanan and Mullins (p. 9) put it, “we can do more . . . we can be more.” Although we agree we can do more, we believe it is time to lift the veil of obliviousness and ask ourselves: Whom do we serve?

### Action to reveal and reinforce I-O values

We do not claim to have any solution to addressing our ethical dilemma, nor do we absolve ourselves of the ostensible ignorance and neglect. However, we do know that if we fail to act, I-O psychology will not evolve, falling short of the vision laid out in the focal article. At its core, I-O psychology *is* psychology (Strümpfer, 2007), and therefore it should stand to reason that human

beings ought to be our highest priority, not organizations. We suggest potential actions to put the field on a path to revisit its identity.

As a starting point, we need to assign responsibility. I-O psychologists have been grappling with our identity for its entirety but have yet to take bold action. The inaction likely occurs partly because of the diffusion of responsibility. Therefore, authoritative associations in I-O (e.g., Society for Industrial-Organizational Psychology) ought to take it upon themselves to act on behalf of the field. Fortunately, the Alliance for Organizational Psychology (AOP), a coalition of professional associations in work and organizational psychology, has already begun work, creating a Declaration of Identity (AOP, n.d.). However, the agent–principal problem is still entrenched, thus, further work is needed. Another option is to form a temporary coalition or council of I-O psychologists from around the globe to tackle the colossal task of rearticulating our identity to represent our contemporary values and inform future direction of the field.

As Olson-Buchanan and Mullins propose, we should prioritize common moral frameworks that include human rights and international applicability. The UN SDGs are an essential framework to communicate the value of our work. We must also renew our educational curriculum to include moral obligations, ensuring that our ethical guidelines incorporate universal principles of ethics and morals, especially if we strive to apply our science globally (e.g., Universal Declaration of Ethical Principles for Psychologists; Leach & Leong, 2010).

## Conclusion

We stand by Olson-Buchanan and Mullins when they argue that I-O psychologists are responsible for contributing to societal well-being and to advocate for decent work for all (i.e., SDG 8). Indeed, I-O psychologists already strive for decent work, advocating for worker well-being (e.g., Zickar, 2003) and battling incivility in the workplace (e.g., Cortina et al., 2001). However, I-O still prioritizes corporate interests, which begets the question if we can truly strive for decent work for all.

That said, we recognize that change is afoot. An active movement focusing on humanitarian work is also underway, making significant progress (e.g., MacLachlan, 2014; McVeigh & MacLachlan, 2022). Moreover, nontypical corporate models, including those espousing stakeholder capitalism, such as social enterprises, or environmental, social, and governance (ESG) aligned businesses, are emerging (Hart et al., in press). There is reason for optimism about emergent models that seek to redress or reimagine the principal–agent problem. For instance, it is typical for startups to reward their workers with stock options. Nonetheless, for now, traditional models where the interests of workers conflict with those of shareholders remain.

It is high time for I-O psychology to express commitment to the worker. With the rapid sunset of the fourth industrial revolution, the value of human workers is once again being challenged; we must express our commitment to worker welfare with action. For decades, the I-O field has acknowledged but not effectively addressed the worker–organization conflict of interest. Before I-O psychology can champion decent work righteously, it needs to evolve. As a psychological field, I-O is obliged to ensure the workplace is dedicated to worker welfare and well-being and not to the competing interests of capitalistic organizations.

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