COMMENTARY

Humanitarianism and the UN sustainable developmental goals are insufficient: The case for a humanistic industrial-organizational psychology

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These comments are meant to enhance the prosocial aims advanced by Mullins and Olson-Buchanan (2023) "for I-O psychologists to effect meaningful societal change" (ms. p. 1). Those aims can be enhanced by expanding the perspective of humanitarian work psychology (HWP) and organizations targeted and by emphasizing individual and organizational perspectives—along with the global SDGs.[1]

Their proposal consists of two synergistic components: HWP as an emergent "new area of research and practice" (ms. p. 13) in I-O psychology and the UN SDGs as the "breadth of vision that encompasses so much of what *global society* needs" (ms. p. 15, emphasis added), and that may provide the guiding framework for implementing the HWP enterprise. Each component is discussed separately, with an emphasis on why each is inadequate for achieving a morally grounded I-O psychology that can maximize its contribution to human flourishing wherever we work. I conclude with the case for a normative values model of *humanistic I-O psychology*.

Conceptual limitations of HWP

The nidus of the good is outside I-O psychology

There seem to be two versions of HWP (Lefkowitz, 2012, 2013, 2015): (a) using our competencies (e.g., employee selection, performance management, and leadership development) to benefit humanitarian organizations, underserved populations, or other entities (e.g., NGOs) in which we have not heretofore had much presence, including individual work *pro bono*; this has been referred to as "practicing I-O psychology in new venues"; (b) assisting the prosocial or philanthropic contributions of nonhumanitarian organizations, such as facilitating the effective implementation and administration of CSR programs conducted by the for-profit corporations with which we generally work.

That is wonderful work (cf. Carr et al., 2012; Olson-Buchanan et al., 2013; Tippins et al., 2023). However, in all cases, our contribution is indirect. We facilitate the good works of others. The title of the SIOP-sponsored book in this area is "Using I-O Psychology for the Greater Good: *Helping Those Who Help Others*." The essential goodness of the contribution resides primarily with the targeted enterprise, not I-O. What about the organizations in which we work ordinarily? It is most

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[1]My criticisms of HWP and the SDGs are not meant to denigrate their aims in any way. But their limitations require supplementation by a broader perspective for developing a normative (i.e., morally based) model of I-O psychology.

unlikely that any Amazon warehouse, Silicon Valley tech company, or Twitter will become an essentially humanitarian enterprise.

Moreover, because HWP is conceived of as merely "a new area of research and practice," it does not require much change in the education and training of I-O psychologists. "No substantive changes would be needed from current educational practice in traditional work psychology; we need merely advocate that students should apply their knowledge and skills to a wider domain of clients and employers than has traditionally been the case" (Lefkowitz, 2012, p. 108).

The focus tends to exigencies and those in precarious circumstances, not the everyday

A Google search on *humanitarianism* yields examples such as: "the act of providing material assistance to people in need" and "addressing the needs of people affected by conflict, natural disaster, epidemic and famine." This is, of course, laudable. But I suggest that a focus on disaster and precarity does not provide the best moral foundation for representing all of I-O psychology, *qua* profession.

Operational limitations of the sustainable development goals

The SDGs focus our attention on (only) macrolevel outcomes

The *Sustainable Development Report 2022* (United Nations, 2022) presents a horrifying picture of current global threats to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development from inadequate food supply and nutrition, health, education, the environment, as well as peace and security. They are global problems needing global solutions by national and international organizations. And they are, accordingly, expressed at macro levels, for example, SDG #1: "End poverty in all its forms, everywhere" and SDG #8: "Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all."

There is no question that these are crises worthy of our attention and that of any organizations that might contribute to their amelioration. But they don't fit as guides for "what I-O can be." Mullins and Olson-Buchanan point out examples of what "has not been working" (ms. p. 19): "The great resignation, the increased shift to remote work, the continued rise of the gig economy . . . work–life balance and self-care." Although some of these issues (and others) are manifested at the macro (national and transnational) level, that is not where I-O psychology and I-O psychologists ordinarily encounter them and are likely to make a contribution. Our research and practice overwhelmingly occur at intraorganizational levels so that is where guiding moral values need to be articulated.

The SDGs are time-bound (hence context-specific) and complicated

The UN's Millennium project (initiated 2002) culminated in development of the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) with a 10-year time frame to ameliorate worldwide poverty, hunger, and disease. In 2015, they were judged to have resulted in "remarkable gains, [yet] . . . inequalities persist, and . . . progress has been uneven" (UN, 2015, p.3). They were supplanted by the much more ambitious 2030 agenda of the 17 SDGs, with approximately 400 more operational objectives.

Such a global scheme has much value (e.g., focusing resource allocation, enabling cross-national comparisons, and tracking progress). But serving as the normative guide for I-O psychology is not among them. Are we to change our moral model every 10 or 15 years when a new international committee (having nothing to do with I-O psychology) prioritizes a new set of global goals based on current world circumstances?

What is needed is a coherent and realistic moral perspective or values model for our profession that is not time-sensitive or context-dependent (cf. Lefkowitz, 2006).

Humanistic I-O psychology

One advantage of the perspective proposed here is that it has a venerable history in moral thought, encompassing philosophical humanism (cf. Edwords, 2008), humanistic psychology (cf. Kimble, 1984; Maslow, 1962, 1987), what it means to be a *profession(al)* (Kimball, 1992), how that should extend to a consideration of societal issues by I-O psychology (Kornhauser, 1947; Roback, 1917), as well as even shaping the nature of business management (McGregor, 1960; Pirson, 2017). Being part of such a tradition provides a long-term consistent moral vision for a more humanistic I-O.

Following is a brief summary of a "vision of I-O psychology that attempts to go beyond the limited letter of our de facto values to include a better representation of its spirit" (Lefkowitz, 2023, p. 360). In contrast to HWP, which is thought to be [merely] a "new area of research and practice" (Mullins & Olson-Buchanan, ms. p. 13), humanistic I-O psychology represents an explicit values orientation for the profession as a whole. It has the following four interrelated components.

An expanded scientist–practitioner–humanist (SPH) values model for I-O psychology

Why are there no emergent subfields of *humanitarian clinical psychology*, *humanitarian medicine*, *humanitarian social work,* or *humanitarian educator*? Because psychotherapy, medicine, social welfare, and teaching are intrinsically caring professions; the characterization would be redundant. That is not the case for I-O psychology because the values model that guides the field, the scientist–practitioner (S–P) model, is incomplete and biased (Lefkowitz, 1990, 2005, 2008).

Professions have three aspects: their substantive and theoretical knowledge base (sometimes scientific), the technological applications of such (their professional practice), and the moral or values perspective that guides it—for example, caring and beneficent, or profit driven. I-O has always emphasized the scientific ("Is the assessment valid?") and professional practice ("Is it cost effective?"). Rarely have we asked normative questions such as "Is it the right thing to do?" That is why the S–P model is incomplete. Moreover, the model is biased insofar as—rather than being caring in nature, or even "value free" as many of us proudly proclaim—the practitioner portion is suffused by an economic/managerialist value system that largely determines what we do, how we do it, and how we evaluate what we've done.

An avowedly normative (moral and ethical) perspective

Prior generations of I-O psychologists were indoctrinated with the view that we must be rigorous scientists in order to refute the image of I-O as a mere "servant of power" (e.g., Baritz, 1960). This meant the disavowal of all (subjective and putatively unscientific) values. Consequently, topics like fairness, ethics, and morality were barely mentioned in our texts, classrooms, internship placements, or informal discussions with professors and mentors. This position was maintained ironically (or disingenuously) while we were simultaneously immersed and socialized in an economic, capitalist, free-market *value system* emphasizing productivity, efficiency, and short-term profitability for shareholders.

Arguably, the neoliberal world of work has become even more onerous than Mullins and Olson-Buchanan's indication of what's "not been working" (cf. Mumby, 2019). Yet, our disavowal of (social) values has precluded us from taking any normative stances at all, such as advancing "a notion of what organizations *should* be like with respect to their employees" (Lefkowitz, 2012,

p. 110, emphasis in the original), promoting the importance of "meaningful work," a "living wage," or even an unconditional "basic income" (Hüffmeier & Zacher, 2021). A portion of "the conundrum of I-O psychology" is that too often "we help even those organizations who do not deserve it" (Lefkowitz, 2019, p. 476).

A renewed concern for the individual employee

There were major scientific advances in I-O psychology beginning in the 1960s, emphasizing organizational theory, organizational behavior, and the organizational level of analysis— culminating in a formal name change from *industrial psychology* to *industrial and organizational psychology*. Accentuating I-O's managerialist bias, an unanticipated and adverse consequence of such over the past few decades has been our neglect of individual workers in the face of massive and repetitive layoffs, their objectification as just another resource to be exploited, ubiquitous surveillance, wage stagnation despite rising productivity and profits, etc..

Weiss and Rupp (2011) decry the absence of a "person-centric" approach in I-O and call for a "full and focused appreciation for the individual at work" (p. 83). Although their concern is methodological—for the field's research orientation—that "is not really separable from a normative- or morally-driven empathic and humanistic approach to individual workers" (Lefkowitz, 2011, p. 113). It would be inconsistent and difficult to adopt such a person-centric research perspective in organizations without also *advocating* for employees, which our profession views as unscientific, so we don't do it.

Concern for both scientific-technical competence as well as societal consequences of our work

This is where the UN SDGs may make a substantial contribution to the humanistic orientation advocated here, expanding the criteria of effectiveness by which we judge our own work. It is not an unreasonable "stretch" insofar as "any aspect of the professional practice of I-O psychology can be viewed from a perspective beyond that of the organization in which it is taking place" (Lefkowitz, 2023, p. 405). And that orientation is aligned with the current zeitgeist in psychology overall: "Public psychology: cultivating engaged science" (Eaton et al., 2021).

Summary and conclusion: it's a values issue

"The difference between contemporary work psychology and a putatively *humanistic* work psychology is one of values orientation" (Lefkowitz, 2012, p. 108). And we rarely acknowledge that our personal and professional values influence the propriety of what we do and don't do as I-O psychologists. That is unfortunate because:

> At the individual level, it is one's personal values that shape one's moral sensitivities and ethical behavior. It is a *profession's* values that determine its goals and self-construed duties, responsibilities, and ethical standards, its response to sociopolitical events that affect it (e.g., civil rights legislation and rampant downsizing), and the choices made by its members concerning where they work, what they study, and the criteria by which they evaluate that work. (Lefkowitz, 2008, p. 440)

Some years ago, a question was posed, "The values of I-O psychology: Who are we?" (Lefkowitz, 2005). What was meant, of course, was the normative query who *should* we be? The brief aspirational values statement below is a proposed answer in keeping with the humanistic perspective championed here.

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Along with improving the effective functioning of organizations, a fundamental objective of research and practice in industrial-organizational psychology should be to assure that organizations are safe, just, healthy, challenging, and fulfilling places in which to work. There is no inherent conflict between those objectives and improving organizational effectiveness. In fact, the two are often related and interdependent. However, when it is anticipated that actions undertaken to improve organizational effectiveness will adversely impact the well-being of employees or other organizational stakeholders, the appropriate role of the I-O psychologist is to challenge the morality, wisdom, and necessity of those actions and, if necessary, to attenuate their adverse consequences to the extent feasible (Lefkowitz, 2023, p. 418).

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