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“Selling” I-O psychology to non-I-O psychologists: A perspective on small, medium, and large changes

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Introduction

As Kath et al.'s (2021) focal article suggests, industrial and organizational (I-O) psychology remains an unknown area of study to many. Even within the field of psychology, many are unaware of I-O psychology and what I-O psychologists contribute to theory and practice (Salter et al., 2018). Informal discussions among directors of I-O psychology graduate programs indicate that many of our students do not hear about I-O psychology until later in their college career, and some discover the field only after they graduate. This lack of clarity has implications for recruitment and education related to I-O psychology, as well as how I-O psychology contributes to education across domains in general.

The lack of representation of I-O psychology in introductory courses and textbooks has been a long-standing issue. As early as 1984, Carlson and Miller found that of the 31 textbooks examined, only 25% mentioned I-O psychology; on average, fewer than three pages were devoted to the field. Raley et al.'s (2003) survey of 60 textbooks found that 68% of the texts they examined mentioned I-O psychology; however, the average length of the discussion was limited to fewer than five pages.

Furthermore, approximately 50% of those books did not include I-O psychology in the glossary, suggesting that this problem of neglecting I-O psychology continues to persist in contemporary textbooks (Giumetti et al., 2014).

In response to the limited dissemination, the leadership of the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP) has raised the issue of how we can best inform students about the field at an early stage. Two specific committees have been tasked with this work. First, Bridge Builders (BB), a subcommittee of the Education and Training committee, was enacted in 2013 with the purpose of spreading awareness and understanding of I-O psychology to different audiences via presentations to groups that included introductory psychology students at the high school level, college students at all levels, business professionals in organizations, individuals in civic and community organizations, first grade classes, and others. Second, Get I-O Psychology into Introductory Psychology Textbooks (GIT) was started in 2018 and focuses specifically on improving the representation of I-O psychology in introductory psychology textbooks.

Both committees have developed content that would allow teachers at all levels to include I-O psychology into their courses, and GIT SIOP has developed a chapter that provides content for introductory psychology textbooks and/or teachers who would like to incorporate I-O psychology into their classes. In addition, the link to the chapter has been included in blogs about teaching I-O psychology and in Psyc Learning Curve, an American Psychological Association (APA) website that provides content to educators. The BB committee has developed two different PowerPoint presentations: one designed to reflect the book chapter and one that focuses more on I-O psychology as a career. The purpose of the chapter and PowerPoint presentations is to provide materials to educators as well as SIOP members who would like to teach or present materials about I-O psychology. The goal is to provide ready-made materials for those seeking to add I-O psychology in textbooks and introduce new audiences to I-O psychology.

However, as noted by the focal article, there is one area that has not yet been realized through the efforts of these committees. As suggested by the authors, I-O psychology research and its implications may be an “entry point” for getting I-O psychology into the classroom. The purpose of this commentary is to discuss how the small and simple changes that are suggested by the focal article may serve as an approach for including I-O psychology in the classroom.

I-O psychology for the non-I-O psychologist

It is important as I-O psychologists that we incorporate our practices into teaching, but it is equally critical that I-O psychology be incorporated into introductory psychology classes. Doing so allows for I-O psychology to be represented early to a student. This provides an awareness of I-O psychology as a discipline and also provides students with knowledge of how psychological concepts translate into the world of work (e.g., Muchinsky, 2006).

More often than not, psychology graduates are confounded with the question, “What can you do with a bachelor’s degree in psychology?” (Landrum, 2018) and are typically left wondering how their degree translates into a career. Indeed, the APA reported in 2015 that only 64% of the 1.3 million individuals in the workforce with a bachelor’s degree in psychology felt that their job related to their degree (Lin et al., 2018). If a brief presentation on I-O psychology, such as one designed by the BB subcommittee, were to be incorporated in introductory psychology courses, perhaps this would increase. The focal article aptly notes that “as I-O psychologists, how often do we get together and bemoan the fact that not enough people know about our great field? What’s our biggest platform for reaching large numbers of people young enough to be open to learning about our field? You guessed it: It’s our undergraduate classes” (Kath et al., 2021).

Moreover, it benefits students to be introduced to I-O psychology concepts as they relate to the concepts that are discussed in introductory psychology. For example, when discussing concepts like motivation and emotion, I-O psychology topics, such as emotional labor among service workers and how to best lead and motivate employees to engage in their work may prove to be useful examples to students with their current and future employment experiences. Likewise, it would be useful when discussing the history of psychology to understand the history of psychology at work and the contributions that I-O psychologists have made in organizations, such as Hugo Munsterberg, a pupil of Wilhelm Wundt (Hale, 1980).

It is worth considering then why I-O psychology has not been widely incorporated in introductory psychology courses. One possible explanation may be the fact that I-O psychology is a relatively young discipline within psychology, especially when compared with other disciplines in the field (e.g., cognitive or clinical psychology). That said, I-O psychology is a growing discipline, and its graduates have a higher than average job outlook according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2020). If the case for I-O psychology not being taught in introductory psychology courses is its lack of familiarity to those teaching, then it is the responsibility of I-O psychologists to spread the purpose of the field, link it to psychological concepts, and tout the available resources. Further, it “requires really getting to know your course” and applying small, medium, and large changes, as suggested in the focal article (Kath et al., 2021).

By small and simple changes

One of the key contributions of the focal article was that it provided instructors (I-O and non-I-O psychology alike) with small and simple changes to incorporate into existing curricula. For instance, to improve inclusivity, having students provide brief autobiographies asks little of the instructors in terms of preparation and grading. Yet, this small change provides the opportunity to know students better (small inclusivity change) and gives information on how to incorporate relevant activities or examples into course content (medium training and development change), ensuring that students can

connect to the material more effectively. Further, this small change establishes the opportunity to discuss I-O psychology topics in relation to their own experiences—perhaps by discussing the selection processes that they have experienced in their jobs (e.g., personality tests, situational judgement tests) or the overlap between work and family life and how each may have been influenced by their education or their jobs (e.g., work–life balance and work–life conflict, telework and flexible schedules in work and education). As demonstrated, the changes that are suggested in the focal article provide relatively easy pathways by which I-O psychology topics can be incorporated and made salient to students.

Furthermore, the broad applicability of I-O psychology provides opportunities for some existing curricula to be restructured into I-O psychology-specific sections. Although more of a medium or large change to curricula, this shift retains previously prepared materials with minor adaptations, all while incorporating specific evidence-based best practices from I-O psychology to strengthen students' knowledge, skills, and abilities. For instance, including psychometrics content can incorporate content from clinical and counseling psychology. Specifically, discussing reliability and validity may be more effective with examples of valid depression and anxiety measures from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) compared with popular press surveys from less scientific, online sources (e.g., blogs, BuzzFeed). This also provides distinct opportunities to explore the meaning and importance of psychometric principles in a way that is more memorable and relevant to students than covering topics from a more theoretical perspective.

Primarily through small and simple changes, such as those suggested by Kath et al. (2021), I-O psychology can be more easily incorporated into existing psychology curricula and provide the opportunity to improve retention of course content and increase the quality of the educational experience for instructors and students alike.

By medium and large changes

In addition to smaller scale actions, broader actions can be undertaken to affect longer term effects. The broader changes are well-suited to organized groups, such as BB, GIT, the visibility committee, and others within SIOP because sharing labor with multiple people allows for persistent momentum over time and facilitates a potential pipeline of new colleagues joining the effort as others move on, or, in the case of some committees, group composition shifts through a formal succession plan. Examples of larger scale changes, some of which have been previously pursued, include changing psychology textbooks and supporting materials, increasing the coverage of I-O psychology on advanced placement tests, having I-O psychologists be a consistent presence in psychology teaching organizations, and increasing the use of social networks to seed I-O psychology visibility opportunities.

Get I-O Psychology into Introductory Psychology Textbooks, and others before it, have focused on addressing the lack of coverage of I-O content in undergraduate

psychology textbooks and supporting materials. If most introductory psychology textbooks do not include a full or partial chapter on I-O psychology, greater awareness and effort is required for the instructor to include significant coverage of it in their course. That is, the instructor would need to identify the gap in the text, determine whether the need should be addressed, and then, if so, find or create I-O teaching material to meet that need. To date, GIT efforts have focused on lowering those barriers by making chapters and shorter readings freely available for use and adaptation. Future efforts may focus on marketing free and ready-to-use teaching materials to instructors, including graduate students who are teaching introductory psychology courses and discussion sections.

Secondary school students have even less exposure to I-O psychology, but some take Advanced Placement (AP) Psychology courses and the AP Psychology exam. Industrial and organizational psychology content can theoretically appear on the exam, but our research has indicated that any inclusions are infrequent; this lack is unsurprising, given the meager coverage of I-O psychology in introductory psychology texts. Curricular inclusion of I-O content in either AP Psychology courses (administered by the College Board) or high school classes (overseen by disparate school districts across the country) would likely require considerable intervention. However, if I-O psychology content was included in the AP exam, it is likely that textbook authors and instructors would seek to include I-O psychology content in their classes.

Additionally, advocates for increasing awareness of I-O psychology and incorporating it in high school or college courses make social networks fruitful, encouraging crosstalk among psychology subfields and making the inclusion of I-O normative. Social media and networks can be used to find opportunities to join conversations and communities such as those focused on AP Psychology, test prep, and teaching of psychology. Teaching materials and other resources can be made available and marketed online in addition to efforts that target publications. Instructors can offer to trade guest lectures with other psychology or business school professors, including virtual lectures, thereby benefiting both instructors' courses with a new perspective. Instructors can also offer guest lectures to local high school teachers in conjunction with STEM or career day. Success stories of instructors who used open access teaching materials to bring I-O psychology into their course could be used to promote such resources. Our networks may also be used to highlight I-O subjects that are topical, thereby taking advantage of current events and headlines with clear links to I-O topics such as leadership, teamwork, and diversity and inclusion.

Conclusion

The purpose of this commentary was to discuss both the "entry point" for a greater I-O presence in the classroom originating within I-O psychology research as well as the many efforts that are in progress at SIOP and among teachers of psychology that are designed to enhance the chances that students hear about I-O psychology. It is likely that the committees mentioned here will take up the charge from the focal article

to encourage even the small and simple changes that may, over time, make the larger changes possible. Thus, the focal article provided insights and opportunities that we hope leaders of these committees will embrace.

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