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Workers in Poverty: An Insight Into Informal Workers Around the World

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Gloss, Carr, Reichman, Abdul-Nasiru, and Oestereich (2017) present compelling arguments on a moral/humanistic need for I-O psychologists to consider workers that are living and working in deep poverty. Their case nicely shifts focus to large percentages of global workers who heretofore have only been represented minimally in the scholarly discourse in our field. I would like to accomplish two goals in this commentary. First, I would like to present a brief historical perspective on why industrial and organizational (I-O) psychology's focus has been on POSH workers. Second, I will provide conceptual extensions to Gloss et al.'s (2017) focal article by presenting some insights into the world of informal workers.

A Historical Perspective on Our POSH Leanings

The state of research in I-O psychology on "POSH" workers is not accidental. It goes back to the earliest era in the history of our field, which needs to be understood within the socio-political context of the time. Consider for instance, the history of I-O psychology. The roots of I-O psychology (at least in the United States, where arguably many of the classic and influential developments of our field have taken place) go back to the Industrial Revolution when there was a large-scale shift away from the agrarian economy to industrial labor at the turn of the last century. A POSH worker is grounded in the formal economy, the seeds for which were sown in the late 1800s and early 1900s as a consequence of the massive push on the improvement of worker efficiency and the development of paradigms that focused on management of labor and enhancing industrial efficiency (for instance, see Münsterberg, 1913, and Taylor, 1911). Much of this early focus on selection and efficiency was solidified during World War I (Koppes, 2007). In fact, the formalization of the economy (versus informal economic systems) is intricately tied to the development of our field—a link that has not yet been fully explored. Indeed, the formalized system of the assembly line industrial workers as well as the "efficient" automatization of bricklayers set the stage for the classic time and motion studies (Gilbreth, 1908) and for Taylor's scientific approach to management (Taylor, 1911), which are in a sense the fore parents to much of I-O psychology research, practice, and, whether intentionally or unintentionally, our philosophy.

Elsewhere in other parts of the world, regions that may not have been direct participants in the Industrial Revolution had their own social and political struggles. Many parts of the non-European world were under the rule of various European colonial

powers. This includes many nations in Asia, Africa, and South and Central America. It is well-known that many colonial powers heavily taxed native workers who were involved in indigenous trade and occupations within an informal, albeit traditional and longstanding, network of work. For instance in India, large numbers of un-POSH workers who lived and worked in traditional occupational categories, such as highly skilled occupations of textile and handloom weaving, were heavily taxed and actively discouraged from work by the British East India Company (Parthasarathi, 1998; Robins, 2002). I am not suggesting that this is a reason for our POSH leanings. Instead, a full appreciation of these historical events may provide insight into the nature of the setbacks the world of work has faced, and consequently the science of the work, and the lopsided nature of WEIRD-centric (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic; Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010) I-O research on which Gloss et al. (2017) base their premise.

Incorporating the Un-POSH in Our Research

To extend Gloss et al.'s (2017) plea, I add that only a deliberate effort on the part of I-O psychologists will lead to research that focuses squarely on workers who live outside the formal, professional space that typically makes up participants in our research. Perhaps in the absence, or rather the limited presence, of a stepping stone, research exploring workers outside the typical formal realm seems too far beyond the territory of traditional I-O psychology. I contend that in order to follow through with Gloss et al.'s (2017) suggestions and include the un-POSH in mainstream I-O psychology literature, the first steps may involve conducting research that is deeply informed and enriched by other scholarly disciplines. This may include (but is certainly not limited to) anthropology, economics, and sociology.

A critical step in this direction is an exploration of worker experiences in the informal sector. Much has been written about aspects pertaining to wage disparity, poor working conditions, worker's rights, and other difficult and often hazardous work circumstances in the informal work sector (ILO, 2013). I would like to briefly draw attention to another aspect of informal work that is important to consider on a global scale within the context of this dialogue: groups of informal workers who are highly skilled and frequently engaged in highly evolved trades and occupational categories, but, due to complex socioeconomic and political systems, work informally. Although negative features of the informal economy (such as lack of income security for instance) may pervade their work lives, their work output in and of itself is often an exemplar of craftsmanship and may demonstrate acts of skill that are highly specialized. Examples of this include Persian rug makers in Iran, handloom weavers in India, artists in the Chinese silk and bronze industry, traditional hat and knit Chulo makers in Peru, Native American craftspeople, and so on. The experiences of these cottage industry workers are not only distinct from the work experiences of the mainstream WEIRD worker (Henrich et al., 2010), but also from those employed in the unskilled labor market within the informal work sector (such as manual laborers). Often, this work is deeply

entrenched in local cultural customs and is integral to aspects of cultural experiences that may fall beyond the realm of the WEIRD (Henrich et al., 2010). Recently, Weiss and Rupp (2011) made a call for a person-centric agenda in work psychology. Such a psychology of working is incomplete without representation of workers of all types, from all walks of life, across all industries, and from as varied socioeconomic and cultural conditions as possible. A brief relay into these oft-ignored workers and the diversity of this type of work highlights the potentially rich and meaningful information that we may be missing out on. Finally, to reiterate, deliberate, effortful actions may lead to a positive impact in I-O practice and contribution to science in terms of exploring neglected groups of workers who are living and working in the deepest trenches of poverty.

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