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News from the SIOP-United Nations team: Exploring work experiences of informal workers and promoting decent work for all

Mahima Saxena

University of Nebraska at Omaha, msaxena@unomaha.edu

English Sall

North Carolina State University at Raleigh

John C. Scott

APTMetrics

Deborah E. Rupp

Purdue University

Lise Saari

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New York University



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Authors

Mahima Saxena, English Sall, John C. Scott, Deborah E. Rupp, Lise Saari, Lori Foster Thompson, Mathian Osicki, and Drew Mallory

The background of the cover is a photograph of a large steel arch bridge spanning a body of water. In the foreground, the red and black tip of a kayak is visible, pointing towards the bridge. The sky is clear and blue, and a cityscape is visible in the distance across the water.

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News From the SIOP-United Nations Team: Exploring Work Experiences of Informal Workers and Promoting Decent Work for All

SIOP Representatives to the United Nations:

Mahima Saxena (Guest Lead Author), Illinois Institute of Technology

English Sall, North Carolina State University

John C. Scott, APTMetrics

Deborah E. Rupp, Purdue University

Lise Saari, New York University

Lori Foster Thompson, North Carolina State University

Mathian Osicki, IBM

Drew Mallory, Purdue University

For the first time, the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP) has funded a humanitarian work psychology research project under the SIOP Foundation's Grants and Awards program this year. The project is led by Mahima Saxena from the Illinois Institute of Technology and John Scott from APTMetrics, and is titled, "I-O Psychology and ILO: Exploring Work Experiences of Informal Workers and Promoting Decent Work for All."

This is an exciting time for us for many reasons! First, this funding will allow us to pursue research focused squarely within industrial and organizational psychology (I-O) theory and methods while asking questions and seeking answers that are in line with the United Nations (UN) and International Labor Organization's (ILO) global development agenda, specifically as they relate to the world of work. Second, it shows SIOP's continued commitment to developing links with the UN and the ILO to leverage skills and competencies that are possessed by its members in order to drive positive social change for the global working poor. Third, by asking questions

rooted in I-O science and methods, we hope to provide empirical answers to questions that are fundamental to improving psychological experiences for the poorest workers around the world.

SIOP has made significant efforts to align itself with the UN. As part of this initiative, SIOP was awarded nongovernmental organization (NGO) special consultative status with the United Nations' Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) to create policy recommendations for international economic and social issues and "drive positive societal change on a global basis" through advocacy, research, and policy development (United Nations, 2010; Scott, 2014). The creation of the Global Organization of Humanitarian Work Psychology is in similar spirit of enhancing human welfare and international development by using work psychology (Carr, 2007). Similarly, we are witnessing increased presence of our field in the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the forthcoming Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and activities within the UN Global Compact. This project is in the same spirit and hopes to contribute towards aforesaid initiatives.

Motivation for Current Project

Informal Economy

Work and employment outside government taxation, regulation, and observation is known as the informal or undeclared economy (World Bank, 2002). Hart (2008, p.145–146) noted that it is “a set of economic activities that take place outside the framework of bureaucratic public and private sector establishments and do not comply with government regulations.” According to the World Bank, over half of the world’s population lives and works within the informal employment sector (World Bank, 2002). Informal work is a pervasive and persistent feature all over the world and is known to be associated with a variety of negative features: poor and unsafe working conditions, low levels of choice for workers, low or irregular income, absence of social and medical benefits, compulsory overtime, extra shifts, inequitable pay, ill-health, and high rates of poverty (ILO, 2014; World Bank, 2002). The disorganized nature of work may lead to lack of protection for those operating in this economy, oftentimes further exacerbated by poor infrastructure, exposure to crime and violence, physical and psychological exploitation, and unfair treatment. Although the largest proportions of informal workers tend to work as laborers in agriculture, nonagricultural work that includes exceptional forms of craftsmanship such as in weaving, pottery, goldsmithery, as well as manufacturing and construction are other examples of work conducted in this sector.

Women are more likely to be self-employed in the informal economic sector. Charmes (2012) found that women outnumber men in sub-Saharan Africa in the informal sector by 51.1%; 64.2% of the workforce in MENA (Middle East and North Africa) countries and 88.6% in sub-Saharan South Africa are composed of female workers.

Not surprisingly, most research and applied work in this area has been conducted by economists and labor statisticians. Yet, empirical research exploring these issues within the context of I-O psychology is fairly limited. Despite the centrality of *work* within various international mandates, there is no research that falls squarely within the theoretical purview and empirical methods of industrial and organizational psychology. Indeed, we were surprised by how scantily this discourse is inhabited by scholarly work conducted by I-O psychologists.

Our Research Questions and Anticipated Outcomes

Various aspects of this project are salient to understanding and improving the conditions of work in the informal economy and deserve special attention. The main aspect is the unique juxtaposition of highly skilled work within the context of the disorganized sector in informal economies. This influenced the questions we are asking. Mahima and John are curious about the very nature of such work and will examine it *as such* in its natural social–ecological context.

It is important to understand the nature of work and working in the informal economy in order to promote decent work and well-being. Because the nature of work is fundamentally different in the occupations and contexts highlighted above, we will explore the subjective experience of working in the informal sector (Weiss & Rupp, 2012). Next we will evaluate the meaning of work, hindrances, and evaluations of subjective well-being as they relate to work and overall health for workers in the informal economy. The project will make use of a mixed-method approach to data collection, employing a combination of qualitative and quantitative techniques. With regard to the latter, we are excited that this study will utilize the ecological momentary assessment (EMA), also known as experience sampling method (ESM), to get at the immediate felt experience of informal workers as their reality unfolds in real time, within their natural context. This will ensure that data collection is free from retrospective biases and the nature of participants' experiences is captured as it occurs!

And Finally....

This study will mark a key entry for our field into a domain so far dominated by economists, yet ripe for us to provide important contributions to SIOP's UN initiatives and the subdisciplines of humanitarian work psychology. In the time to come, we hope that our empirically driven scholarly pursuits will lead to practical outcomes that can feed into broader policy statements governing decent work mandates.

Our hope and distal goal is that practitioners who are involved in the promotion of social justice and decent work at organizations such as the UN and ILO will benefit from this project. Findings will provide suggestions for targeted interventions grounded in scientific research for international toolkits and highlight the role of I-O psychology in global social welfare and policy issues. By contributing to the UN's mandate for improving work and the employment context and by enhancing our understanding of work experiences across heretofore unexplored domains, this study hopes to contribute to both academic as well as practitioner-oriented I-O psychology. The recent devastating earthquakes in South Asia have presented multiple challenges, but we are hopeful that the project and the situation there will soon be on the road to recovery.

This is an important milestone! Watch this space in the months to come for more on this!

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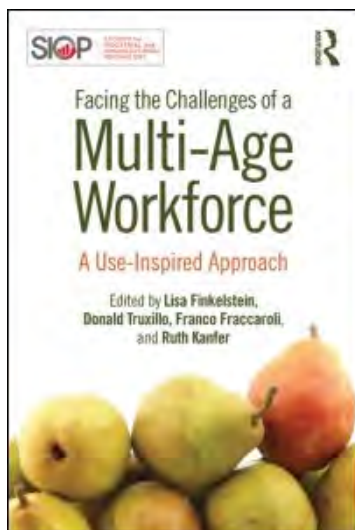
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