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# Voice of a “Seasoned” OB Professor

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# Voice of a "Seasoned" OB Professor

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I will be making some highly personalized comments on the Aguinis et al. article* concerning rigor vs. relevance, renaming/rebranding I-O psychology, and I-O psychology vs. business school OB. Before commenting, however, I feel compelled to briefly frame my remarks from the perspective of my 50-year academic career. For example, I think it is important to note that I go back to the early 1960s at the University of Iowa, College of Business. I was studying for my Ph.D. in the just emerging field of management and organizations (nothing was offered called organizational behavior or strategic management). However, and very unusual for the times for management majors, I also took a minor in the psychology department concentrating on social and I-O psychology. Also, after receiving my Ph.D. in 1965, for my two-year military obligation, after infantry officer training I was assigned to West Point and taught cadets the required psychology course and military leadership. This background had a formative and lasting impact on my thinking about OB and I-O psychology.

* Herman Aguinis, Ravi S. Ramani, P. Knight Campbell, Paloma Bernal-Turnes, Josiah M. Drewry, Brett T. Edgerton, "Most Frequently Cited Sources, Articles, and Authors in Industrial-Organizational Psychology Textbooks: Implications for the Science–Practice Divide, Scholarly Impact, and the Future of the Field", *Industrial and Organizational Psychology* 10:4 (December 2017), pp. 507-557. https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2017.69

After discharge from the Army in 1967, I took a faculty position at the University of Nebraska, Department of Management. I taught their first organizational behavior course and wrote one of the first OB texts (McGraw-Hill, 1973, now in its 13th edition). In my teaching, research and text, I definitely drew from my psychology education and teaching. However, unlike others in the early days of OB who almost all came out of psychology departments, from the beginning I made a deliberate effort to integrate and balance both my business school management and psychology backgrounds.

Finally, I think I should note that I have been very active in the Academy of Management over the years (Fellow in 1981 and President in 1985), but have only attended SIOP a couple of times. I have been an editor of three management journals, including one given attention in the focal article—the widely recognized translation (from I-O and OB theory/research to professional management practice) journal *Organizational Dynamics.* The reason for providing this brief background is so at least my comments have a hopefully somewhat credible, experienced or "seasoned", grounding in which to take some of my shots at targets raised (and not raised) in the focal article.

## Need for Rigor (Evidence-Based, Sound Research) AND Relevance (Significant Impact on Desired Outcomes)

In no particular order, I would like to comment first on the focal article's discussion of the role of rigor versus relevance in I-O psychology. This has been an ongoing concern and debate not only in I-O psychology, but also all management fields, especially OB. Although I believe we have finally reached the point where we can all agree both rigor and relevance are deemed important. Yet, as pointed out in the focal article, we still seem to be at a loggerhead as to their relative importance. Research-oriented academics still call for relatively more weight and concern should be devoted to rigor and practitioners to relevance.

I would like to suggest an obvious way out of this stale-mate is for I-O academics to make a concerted effort to give more attention to relevance and practitioners give more attention to rigor. However, this is too simple and a copout. It does not offer a new, value-added, suggestion. Thus, because of the built-in bias of academics pushing for more rigor and practitioners for more relevance, I propose the I-O field place a moratorium on the never-ending rigor **versus** relevance debate. The recent push by those calling for evidence-based management for the terminology of labeling academics “Scientific-Practitioners“ and practitioners “Practitioner-Scientists” can help change the perception and mindset to recognize that both rigor and relevance are important. The ordering of this terminology also recognizes the relative importance of rigor to academics and relevance to practitioners. However, I would like to suggest we need to take the change in terminology a step further. Specifically, I would suggest, in order to get out of the rut of the rigor vs. relevance, win-lose mindset, we replace the term rigor with “evidence-based, sound research” and relevance with “significant impact on desired outcomes”. Instead of I-O being characterized by rigor **AND** relevance or “Scientific-Practitioners” (both improvements), the proposed new mantra for I-O psychology becomes: “Evidence based on sound research with significant impact on important individual, group/team, organizational and community outcomes.” The challenge will be for I-O and OB to join forces, collaborate in a win-win strategy to operationalize and make such a description become a reality and thus take a step forward to solve the rigor vs. relevance seemingly never-ending controversy.

## Renaming/ Rebranding I-O Psychology

Even though past straw votes in the profession have been somewhat favorable to retaining the term “Industrial” in order to help support I-O psychology’s relevancy, and perhaps gain more equivalency with organizational behavior with regard to business organizations, I think the time has now come to reset the field by dropping the outdated term “Industrial” from I-O. In the 1960’s when I started out in the academic field of management and organizations, the subfield of industrial management decided to become more up-to-date with a name and brand change to operations management, which is now again evolving into supply-chain management. Closer to home, for the same reasons, personnel administration changed its name and brand to human resource management and human relations became organizational behavior. These name changes of course were all accompanied by evolving content changes to keep up with the changing environmental and stakeholder demands and challenges. I would suggest that the term "Industrial", most often associated with manufacturing, has also become outdated for I-O psychology. To modernize, become rejuvenated, and contribute to discriminant validity in relation to OB, the I-O psych field may need to be renamed and rebranded.

So, what should the name be? The renaming/rebranding is already occurring to a degree with the seeming increasing use of the shortened term "organizational psychology" in lieu of "industrial-organizational psychology." I would argue, along with I would guess most in the field, that "psychology" must remain in the title to differentiate from organizational behavior and maintain a distinct identity associated with psychology departments. I would also argue that less, but now a majority of I-O psychologists, at least in an ideal world with an acceptable alternative, would agree to abandon the outdated term "industrial" which is too associated with dying manufacturing.

There is a need to not only modernize, but also for a brand which provides an expanded perception of all types of organizational applications, not just manufacturing. However, it is not an ideal world because, in addition to breaking with tradition and resistance to change, there would be a major pragmatic problem in dropping "industrial." This is because of the central role it plays in the acronym for the identity of those in the field (I-O), their professional society of SIOP, and even the title of this journal. Besides just dropping it, and in time getting over the change (although SOP may not be an attractive alternative), another possibility may be to substitute "Individual" for "Industrial." This change would give more emphasis to the micro (psychological) level but still maintain the whole range of analysis, including groups/teams, represented in the remaining "Organizational" term in I-O. Simply substituting "individual" for "industrial" would keep the identity critical I-O and SIOP acronyms intact. The change in this journal's title would seem to have minimal, if any, impact. There certainly may be better alternatives, but I do think the time has come for more serious discussion concerning completely renaming/rebranding the field. A new, agreed upon name, or even if it is just "Organizational Psychology" and SOP (Society of Organizational Psychology) may be able to jump start the field and help solve many of the issues raised in the focal article.

## I-O Psychology vs. Organizational Behavior

The focal article devoted considerable attention to the relationship between I-O and OB. Although the purists will not necessarily agree, at least in recent times to this "seasoned" OB professor, the major difference between the two has almost become that I-O is in psychology departments in liberal arts colleges and is associated with SIOP (Society of Industrial and Organizational Psychology) and OB is in management departments in business colleges and is associated with the AOM (Academy of Management, in the largest OB Division and/or Human Resources and Research Methods Divisions). The various stats revealed in the focal article indicate that the majority (57%) of the leading authors in I-O are currently affiliated with business schools, even though the majority (54%) of them received their doctoral degrees in I-O Psychology. Although most of the leading authors are still members of SIOP (N=134) over AOM (N=108), the gap between presenting papers at SIOP rather than AOM is closing. As the focal article reveals, overall, these and other leading indicators reveal that I-O psych seems to be losing ground to OB in terms of input into the identity and knowledge base of the field, now and in the foreseeable future.

The data indicates OB scholars are increasingly being organically produced in business schools' PhD programs. This was not the case with the first generation of OB professors in business schools who largely came from psychology programs. Widely recognized OB pioneers such as Lyman Porter, Bernie Bass, Fred Fiedler and Ed Locke come quickly to mind. At the risk of overgeneralizing and realizing not everyone will agree, I would say that although those who primarily identify with the I-O field rightly claim these same scholars as their founding fathers. The same is true of others who came a bit later, e.g., Gary Latham, Herman Aguinis, Wayne Cascio and Bruce Avolio. They also came out of psychology PhD programs, spent their careers in business schools, and both I-O and OB ( also HR) claim them as their own.

In other words, at least early on, and this may be a stretch, those identified with OB from business schools accepted and identified I-O scholars as one of their own in the OB field, but not necessarily vice-versa. This at least could be partially explained by the topics involved, i.e., those in OB with a macro orientation (e.g., strategy and power in organizations) would not be identified with I-O. However, more subtly, it may be that again, at least early on, the I-O psychologists, rightly or wrongly, in general did not respect the type, nor frankly the rigor/sophistication, of the methods and analysis being taught and in the research being done by business school OB-types. Importantly, this perception of I-O's relative status and relationship to OB changed when, as the focal article chronicles, OB as associated with business schools began to gain on and then overtake I-O associated with psychology departments. This gain in business school OB relative to I-O psychology was evidenced in terms of numbers in PhD education, membership and presenting papers in the Academy of Management over SIOP, and, especially, various measures of research impact, as for example the highly cited authors and sources associated with business schools rather than psychology departments reported in the focal article.

To quote from the focal article supported by citations, how did this "crisis of identity" of I-O associated with psychology departments relative to OB associated with business schools and "questions about the future of I-O as an independent field housed in psychology departments" come about? Obviously, there is no generally agreed upon answer. However, I think that an answer, if not the answer, may be that the research methods and analysis being taught OB PhD students and research being conducted by OB professors in business schools was closing the gap with that being done by counterparts in psychology departments. Besides I-O trained psychologists increasingly found in B-Schools teaching and doing OB research, a major impetus for closing the gap was that OB programs and scholars, to prove themselves and gain the respect of their I-O colleagues, became very defensive. This resulted in increasingly sophisticated OB methods and analysis that often seemed to this "seasoned" OB professor ( with an undergrad major in math) to become ends in themselves. Theory-building and application in OB too often seemed marginalized and pushed aside. Yet, the top management journals (e.g., *Academy of Management Journal*, *Academy of Management Review*, *Journal of Management* and *Administrative Science Quarterly*) demanded considerable theory and thus OB scholars increasingly turned to I-O journals such as *Journal of Applied Psychology* and *Personnel Psychology*. Business school OBer's publishing in I-O journals of course tended to further merge OB with I-O and helps explain the focal article's finding of the majority of highly cited authors coming from OB in B-Schools. However, this shift to I-O journals sometimes had some negative side-effects in management departments without many OB professors. They universally recognized traditional top-tiers AMJ, AMR, JOM and ASQ for selection, merit pay and promotion/tenure, but not necessarily the top-tier I-O journals their OB faculty published in because they were psychology, not business/management.

With more and more I-O psychology trained PhD's taking first jobs in OB in B-Schools and I-O professors moving over to OB jobs in business schools, bringing their methods and analysis with them, helps explain the rising level of research sophistication in OB. However, yet to be addressed is why the migration from I-O in psychology departments to OB in business schools? The "elephant in the room" explanation, contributing to the cynical I-O accusation of "selling out" by going to business schools, is the substantial faculty salary differential between most psychology departments and management departments. In addition to higher salary, however, there are other reasons for coming to business schools. These include the opportunities for more interaction in the class room and outreach/real-world research, service and consulting with the business community and its stakeholders. Still another reason some I-O psychologists migrated to B-Schools was due to the internal politics of some psychology departments which favored clinical and/or experimental and did not give proper respect to I-O.

The influx of I-O trained psychologists into B-School management departments' OB programs was at first welcomed by most of us because of their research prowess, but over time that has seemed to dissipate. There are a number of possible reasons for the cooling effect of I-O being welcomed into B-Schools. First, as explained above, the gap between I-O and OB in terms of sophisticated methods and analysis training and resulting research publications is closing. Second, relative to more traditional micro-oriented OB, the increasing importance of macro-oriented strategy courses and research in management departments in general and in particular both OB (e.g., more began to identify as macro OBer's associated with strategy as opposed to micro OBer's associated with I-O) and HR (e.g., Strategic HR). This new and growing strategic orientation in management departments was more in line with the rest of the business school (e.g., finance) and the vision and priorities of college of business leadership, especially both the non-OB deans and management department heads. That is, "What do these psychology-oriented OB guys know about business?"

Finally, and of course open to debate and vehemently denied by our non-OB colleagues, because of the more and better research being done in OB (as indicated, largely driven by I-O), for renewed emphasis on business in general and a newly emerging macro strategy emphasis in particular, the I-O trained, micro-oriented input into business schools cooled. In fact, in some cases it was completely shut down by requiring a PhD from an accredited business school for all management faculty openings ( including OB) and discounting I-O oriented journal publications for tenure, promotion and merit pay. This all suggests that I-O psychology will probably continue to lose ground on all dimensions relative to business school OB.

## Concluding Remarks

To thrive and grow, the I-O field will have to meet the difficult challenges raised by the focal article and the above comments. However, micro OB in general also has some similar emerging challenges to face. Although beyond the scope of this Comment piece to address, I feel that both the I-O and OB fields, in general, can learn some important lessons from what the focal article has uncovered and what is further aired here. First, I feel it is very important that both I-O and OB should take a positive approach and embrace and build off each other and not get into a zero sum game of us versus them. I-O and OB can work together to solve mutual challenges and differentiate according to their respective strengths leading to win-win rather than win-lose. For example, I suggest that both I-O and OB give relatively more attention to the common "O" in I-O and OB in order to meet the growing importance of the macro-oriented strategy and organizational cultural concerns. In terms of their respective strengths, I-O can take advantage of their use of highly controlled lab facilities and subjects (generally not available in business schools) to do important experimental research in biometrics, neuroscience, stress, emotions and development.

The same is true for the "psychology" perspective and training in I-O and the "B" in OB. Both should not throw out our traditional micro "babies" (i.e., motivation, personality, attitudes, positive psychological resources, self-evaluations, research methods, etc.) with the "bathwater." Both must do a better job of selling the importance of understanding and the application of these micro-oriented constructs/variables are to effective individuals, teams, organizations and communities. This value of a micro perspective and action is especially needed to counteract or supplement the movement toward macro-oriented, strategic initiatives in both academic and application pursuits in management and business. In other words, both I-O and micro-oriented OB have to make a renewed, evidence-based effort to convince our outside academic colleagues and real-world constituents of the importance of people (human resources) as individuals and teams in organizations. However, both must also continue to expand into new domains and market demands. Some examples that come quickly to mind would be behavioral health and well-being, EAP's (Employee Assistance Programs), ethics, and even leadership. Some personal examples would be that I am currently taking my work on positive psychological capital (PsyCap) to the Harvard Medical School on helping the concussed and oncology patients better cope with anxiety and depression, all the U.S. uniformed services combat PTSD, NASA prepare for the Manned Mission to Mars, and help fight the Opioid Epidemic that is beginning to plague the workplace. Just a couple of years ago I would have never thought of doing this type of work.

In closing, the focal article has provided a very timely, evidenced-based assessment of I-O psychology that has served its major purpose of generating self-examining discussion and controversy. Hopefully, this Comment piece has contributed to this purpose from a historical perspective of someone who has attempted to navigate the journey through the last 50 years of I-O psychology and Organizational Behavior. This "seasoned" professor is very positive and excited about where both I-O psychology and OB are and is anxious to join forces in the journey ahead.