

The Marginalized Workforce: How I-O Psychology Can Make a Difference

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Many individuals, including immigrants, young employees, and contingent workers, often experience some form of exclusion from the organizations and the societies in which they work. These workers have also largely escaped the notice of industrial-organizational (I-O) psychologists. For example, of the 83 articles appearing in a leading journal in our field in 2007, only three studied employees who were not white collar. We are not doing enough currently to understand the work lives of marginalized workers, to integrate these individuals into our research and theory, or to reach them in practice. In this article, we hope to begin a dialogue within our discipline about how we may better appreciate the experiences of these workers, assist them with the challenges they face, and integrate attention to their work lives into what we do as I-O psychologists.

Background

At the 2007 SIOP conference in New York City, the second author chaired a panel discussion entitled “Working on the Edge: I-O Psychology and Marginalized Workers.” Panelists Josep M. Blanch (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona), **Dov Eden** (Tel Aviv University), and **Ellen E. Kossek** (Michigan State University) described ways in which our discipline has failed to tackle the problems faced by the many workers who are at the fringe of our organizations and societies (for related work by these authors, see, e.g., Blanch, 2006; Kossek, 2000; Kossek, Meece, Barratt, & Prince, 2005). As a follow-up to this session, we organized a roundtable discussion for the 2008 SIOP conference (with the same title as this article). We were fortunate to be joined by about 30 attendees who shared their expertise and passion in brainstorming about this topic. We wish to gratefully acknowledge their contributions to this article, which summarizes the discussion at that session, drawn from notes and audio recordings. This for us is the natural next step in raising awareness of marginalized workers and their experiences. We first discuss the nature of marginalization and then move on to explore what the role of I-O psychology should be in studying and working with these populations. We conclude with suggestions for moving forward.

What Does it Mean to Be Marginalized?

Marginalization defined. Marginalization typically involves some degree of exclusion from access to power and/or resources. In being at the periphery—at the margins—of society, those who are marginalized do not get to

enjoy the full or typical benefits that those who are closer to the center tend to receive. Merriam-Webster's online dictionary defines *to marginalize* as "to relegate to an unimportant or powerless position within a society or group" (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/marginalization>).

We acknowledge that the marginalized workforce is broad and very diverse. Other similar terms, such as "disadvantaged" and "underprivileged," have also been used to describe overlapping groups of employees. Research on organizational inclusion and diversity (e.g., Holvino, Ferdman, & Merrill-Sands, 2004; Konrad, Prasad, & Pringle, 2006) is also relevant, as some groups have historically struggled for inclusion. Some of the groups identified during the roundtable session as being especially likely to be marginalized include:

- The working poor
- Immigrant workers, both legal and undocumented; migrant workers
- Young workers, including school leavers and victims of child labor
- Chronically unemployed individuals
- Victims of human trafficking
- Any group that has minority or lower social status in the society, including, for example, ethnic minorities, older workers, workers with disabilities, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender/transsexual (LGBT) employees

Some jobs, such as custodians and funeral directors, are also marginalized, as has been illustrated by recent research on dirty work (e.g., Bergman & Chalkley, 2007). Of course, a job need not be dirty to be marginalized; one attendee pointed out that graduate assistants experience exclusion from the organization in many ways (e.g., lack of access to resources, limited benefits). Some employees are on the fringe based on the contingent or nonstandard nature of their work arrangement (e.g., temporary/contract, seasonal, and intermittent work; Ashford, George, & Blatt, 2007; Connelly & Gallagher, 2004). Based on this standard, for example, many adjunct faculty could be considered marginalized workers (American Association of University Professors, 2006; Maynard & Joseph, 2008). In general, marginalized jobs are likely to be held by individuals who belong to groups also prone to marginalization.

Challenges faced. Employees who are marginalized may well share common struggles, but because of their diversity, each group or job is likely to encounter a unique set of challenges. For example, all may face injustice, stigma, or discrimination. In contrast, language barriers are common among immigrant and migrant workers but will not be an issue for native speakers who are marginalized in other ways. Nevertheless, in our session, we identified the following challenges that marginalized workers may face:

- Language barriers
- Cultural differences, which may spark or aggravate intergroup conflict between marginalized workers and nonmarginalized workers due to lack of understanding, suspicion, or stereotypical beliefs

- Low motivation and self-efficacy: Past difficulties in finding and keeping work may result in risk aversion, whereby workers shy away from changing jobs or careers for fear of becoming unemployed
- Difficulty in accessing organizational resources
- Difficulty in identifying and taking advantage of developmental opportunities (e.g., mentorship, training)
- Work–family conflict may be more prevalent among those that need to work multiple jobs to make ends meet

This list, while not comprehensive, illustrates not only that there are many potential challenges for marginalized workers but also that most of these generally fall within the domain of I-O psychology.

What is the Role of I-O Psychology?

Arnett (2008) has recently argued that psychological research is dominated by American samples and thus our science and theory poorly represents the diversity of the human population. A similar claim could be made with regard to the science and practice of I-O psychology *vis-à-vis* marginalized workers. What is preventing us from better understanding workers who fall outside the mainstream, and what are our obligations to these populations? Here is another way of phrasing the question: What would we like SIOP as an organization to look like in 10 years, and what new issues should we be discussing, researching, and tackling in practice?

We believe that our field needs to engage in more research focused on the groups described above. Our theoretical models also need to be more representative and inclusive of marginalized workers. For example, most models of work–family balance currently are more applicable to middle-to-upper-class individuals who hold stable professional and managerial jobs. In expanding I-O psychology to better consider marginalized workers, we will face several challenges:

- Financial support for research projects may be harder to obtain, relative to research on topics that may be “hot” or of widespread interest to the business community. Alternatively, we may discover that grants are indeed available but from foundations different from those with which I-O psychologists are most familiar.
- Accessing populations is a challenge for various reasons. Marginalized workers may be harder to track down given the nature of the work they do and where they do it (e.g., migrant agricultural workers versus office workers). Some marginalized workers may not wish to participate out of suspicion or fear.
- Between the difficulties associated with studying these populations and the lack of current data and theory, quality scholarship may not always meet the standards and expectations of journal reviewers and editors in terms of sample size, methodological control, and measurement.

Exploratory research, as well as work that bridges our field with other relevant fields (e.g., sociology, political science, and economics) may be quite appropriate at this stage of our understanding, but our justifications for these approaches will need to be exceedingly clear.

- There are potential ethical issues with studying some of these groups. For example, institutional review boards (IRBs) may require documentation that participants have received payment for participation in research, but undocumented workers are not likely to be comfortable with signing their name to a receipt. In addition, we need to ensure that we ourselves are not exploiting marginalized workers in trying to better understand their issues.

With challenges, however, come opportunities. For example, although it may seem safer for a junior faculty member to study a more firmly established topic, there are many unexplored niches where researchers can establish expertise and gain recognition. Interdisciplinary work can be energizing and transformative. And researchers may be able to approach difficult-to-access employees by teaming up with community organizations and initiatives, a potential win-win situation whereby we can reciprocate by providing research support to evaluate the success of outreach programs. Ultimately, if I-O psychology is truly to be a psychology of work and workers, rather than only a psychology of management, we need to attend to this issue.

Advocacy

What can I-O psychologists do to help marginalized workers meet the challenges they face, and where do we begin? Here were some suggestions from the session:

- Raise public awareness that, in fact, groups of workers are being marginalized. With our focus on data-driven decision making, our field may be uniquely positioned to do this.
- Begin working more closely with global organizations such as the UN to help workers worldwide (e.g., Berry, Reichman, & Schein, 2008).
- Take advantage of the need for organizations to project corporate social responsibility as a way to initiate change. At the same time, it will be helpful to find ways to connect business needs and interests with the needs and talents of marginalized workers.
- Locate opportunities to promote inclusion through our applied work. This could include, for example, (a) assisting with social and organizational assimilation and conflict prevention/resolution, (b) promoting coaching, mentorship, career development, and job initiatives, (c) finding ways to increase acceptance of these groups within the organization, and (d) identifying factors that reduce the real or perceived risk in hiring workers from traditionally marginalized groups.
- Work together within SIOP. Several committees with overlapping inter-

ests may wish to explore the issue of marginalization (e.g., the Committee on Ethnic and Minority Affairs [CEMA]). Dedicated time at the SIOP conference (e.g., as a Saturday theme track) would also go a long way toward raising consciousness among ourselves.

Getting Involved

We hope that the summary presented here will help stimulate dialogue about these important issues. If you are interested in getting involved, we invite you to join the newly created Marginalized Workers Google Group (<http://groups.google.com/group/marginalized-workers>). This group serves as a discussion forum, repository for useful files and Internet links, and place to connect with other professionals who are interested in this topic.

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