Benefits and Challenges of
Industrial-Organizational Psychology
Faculty Members With Nontraditional Backgrounds
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Faculty of industrial and organizational psychology graduate programs tend to come from a wide variety of backgrounds. Many I-O psychology faculty members received their degrees before I-O PhD programs were widely available. In fact, many I-O PhD programs did not start until the 1980s. And, even today many new faculty members are drawn to I-O psychology, even though they may not have traditional I-O backgrounds. Many of my colleagues, collaborators, and mentors have been individuals with other than traditional I-O backgrounds, individuals for whom I have the deepest respect both professionally and personally. Thus, I wish to focus this column on both the benefits and challenges of being a member of an I-O graduate program with a nontraditional background in the hope of providing guidance to readers of TIP whose research interests are within the domain of I-O psychology, even though their degrees may not be. I hope this column will also be helpful when giving advice to graduate students and colleagues with nontraditional backgrounds who are interested in becoming a faculty member in an I-O graduate program. Thus, I asked Charlie Samuelson from Texas A&M University, Linda Shanock from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Roya Ayman from Illinois Institute of Technology, Mikki Hebl from Rice University, and Kevin Williams from the University at Albany, SUNY, all successful faculty members in I-O PhD programs who have diverse backgrounds, why they chose to apply for a faculty position in I-O psychology, the challenges and benefits of having a nontraditional I-O background, and any advice for others who wish to become a faculty member in an I-O psychology graduate program.

1. Why did you choose to apply for a faculty position in I-O psychology?

CS: I always had a keen interest in organizational psychology. My undergraduate program did not offer courses in I-O psychology, so I read on my own. Oddly enough, one of the first books that I stumbled across was Katz & Kahn’s (1978) classic, Social Psychology of Organizations. This exposure was serendipitous because the recommendation (comp book copy) originated from a business colleague (working as psychology editor at Wiley) of my father. Reading this book confirmed my hunch that social psychology
and organizational behavior were closely linked. I was actually planning to apply to I-O graduate programs when I was a senior, but faculty mentors advised graduate training in social psychology, primarily for greater breadth in theory and methods. When I applied for academic jobs, I thought my research interests in conflict, negotiation, and cooperation in social dilemmas would be as relevant to I-O as to a social psychology program.

**LS:** Working as a faculty member in I-O seemed like a good fit for me based on my interests. Although I got a degree in another area of psychology, my advisor and I conducted research on organizational topics throughout my time in graduate school.

**RA:** I always had an interest in applying social psychological principles and theories to the work place. The university from where I received my master’s and PhD degrees did not have an I-O program. My research area was leadership, so I took human resources courses from the business school to help expand my knowledge and prepare me for an academic position. Also, I conduct mostly field research. At the time, my choices for academic positions were I-O programs or business schools, and I preferred to work within a psychology department. So, an I-O program was the best fit.

**MH:** I tried to be as open-minded and flexible in my job search as possible. As such, I applied to traditional social psychology programs, I-O programs, and business schools. When applying, I felt like I could have been happy in a variety of different academic settings, not just one; so I tried to capitalize on that by applying widely. When all was said and done, I was so excited to join the I-O program at Rice University—the P–O fit felt great!

**KW:** In graduate school, my research interests centered around I-O topics. In fact, most of my publications were in I-O journals. I worked closely with three professors—one social psychologist and two I-O psychologists (from the business school at the University of South Carolina). They (Angelo DeNisi, Tom Cafferty, and Bruce Meglino) had just published a major theoretical piece on cognitive approaches to performance appraisal, and I got involved in their research testing portions of their model. They were very influential in shaping my career.

2. Do you think you faced challenges not faced by colleagues with a traditional I-O degree? If so, what is the biggest challenge (or top two) and how have you overcome the challenge?

**CS:** One professional challenge was how to establish yourself as a scholar in two distinct areas of psychology simultaneously. My research interests were situated at the intersection of both fields, so I had the practical problems of choosing where to publish papers and which conferences to attend. Somewhat by default (i.e., refusing to make a decision!), I ended up “punting” by publishing research and attending professional meetings in both I-O and social. Happily, with the research trends in group research over the last 20 years, I am very much at home in organizational psychology.
LS: To some extent, yes. I think the biggest challenge is a lack of familiarity with traditionally “I” topics. My graduate training exposed me many “O” topics but without the coursework in personnel psychology specifically, I felt somewhat at a loss with regard to topics like selection, training, and so forth. I am still working to overcome this challenge, although I’ve realized that nobody expects me to be a specialist in those areas. I think reading materials like the handbook of I-O psychology and the encyclopedia of I-O psychology, as well as journal articles and exposure to research talks in the area (as well as teaching undergrad I-O psychology), has helped.

RA: As I conduct mostly field research, I needed to establish relationships with companies. This took time but my colleagues in the I-O program respected this need. In addition, the only challenge I may have experienced that other colleagues from traditional I-O programs did not was having someone to talk with in the early years at SIOP. But, I had wonderful colleagues who were inclusive. I think being a woman may have originally been more challenging than not being from an I-O program. The SIOP meetings of the 80s were primarily attended by my male colleagues.

MH: Of course. I didn’t know some of the key people and major issues. Example: I only knew that the PAQ was a gender scale by Helmreich. So, the learning curve was steep at first even though many aspects of my original specialty and that of I-O are very similar. My challenges were certainly eased by the fact that many I-O psychologists have social roots (i.e., the department chair who hired me—thanks Bob Dipboye!) and most of my I-O colleagues were very welcoming (i.e., I have such a nice and appreciative memory of my first SIOP, where Bob Pritchard welcomed me and immediately suggested I meet and introduced me to Michael West, with whom I began collaborating; and Dave Woehr, who jogged with me and encouraged me in the field).

KW: I never felt I faced major challenges or obstacles. The main challenge was learning I-O topics/areas that I had not been exposed to in graduate school. My coursework in I-O was limited, so I had to read a lot on my own.

3. What do you think is the greatest benefit of your background in terms of being an I-O faculty member?

CS: My background in a nontraditional field adds valuable breadth to our I-O graduate program. Historically, I-O psychology has, at times, been parochial in its perspective on various long-standing research problems (e.g., job satisfaction, leadership). My background in social psychology has provided an alternative vantage point for “seeing” the organizational behavior field. This different view has informed both my own research, teaching graduate seminars, and supervising students in research.

LS: By far, it is the research experience that I had during graduate school that was directly relevant to I-O psychology, especially regarding job attitudes and motivation.

RA: I actually think that my social psychology training provided me with a strong theoretical foundation that has assisted me in understanding organization-
al issues more effectively. I have to say that I was trained as an applied social psychologist. So, this was not too far from I-O. It just gave me a broader perspective.

MH: I think the methodology I apply is greatly strengthened by the social training that I had. I constantly think about the balance between internal and external validity, and try to use tight experimental methodology within a field setting.

KW: My major training in social psychology was in social cognition. I think this background gave me a broader perspective on the motivational and cognitive processes that underline behavior in organizations.

4. Any advice for others who do not have a traditional I-O degree but wish to be a faculty member in an I-O PhD or master’s program?

CS: I encourage others with nontraditional degrees that they can make valuable contributions to I-O psychology. There is a long intellectual history of important theoretical and practical contributions from such individuals (e.g., Lewin, Fiedler, Hackman, et al.). I recommend that students take as much coursework as possible in organizational studies (broadly defined). Breadth of training is an asset in a multidisciplinary field like I-O.

LS: If you have a chance while still in graduate school, take I-O courses. Also, consider exploring an I-O topic in your research to get some experience and familiarity with the literature. Also, attend the annual SIOP conference so you can learn more about I-O and meet I-O psychologists.

RA: Social psychology is a very close allied field to I-O. As a matter of fact, I-O is a multidisciplinary domain. Some researchers come at it from a personality and selection perspective, others from developmental and career development perspective, and some have educational backgrounds and approach it from measurement and/or training and development perspective. At this time, very strong I-O programs exist; this is very different from a couple of decades ago. So, I would say that individuals with interest in joining an I-O program need to demonstrate their interest with research and experience in the working environment. Taking classes in I-O and business helps; also, working with organizations provides the practical experience. Ultimately, one’s research and knowledge of the literature and issues from both theory and practice are critical to becoming a good I-O faculty member.

MH: To some extent, it is not that difficult if we remember that we are all psychologists first and our subspecialties second. As such, different approaches and diversity in training can strengthen our field as long as we are strongly guided by the basics of good training in psychology—having solid theory and good research questions, appreciating and recognizing past research and theories, and using good methodology and appropriate statistics.

KW: Read widely and ground your research to organizational contexts. Join SIOP and attend their workshops.

Reference