In the last column on the international practice of I-O psychology, we discussed industrial-organizational psychology within the context of India and Indian organizations. As we begin to focus on South Africa, we notice interesting parallels (and differences) in how industrial-organizational psychology has evolved and continues to grow among political, economic, and cultural changes. Read on to explore the fascinating world of industrial-organizational psychology in South Africa!

Showcasing I-O Psychology in South Africa

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Introduction

The South African story captivated the interest of the world as it played out on the international stage. Historically, the country was infamous for the legislated system of apartheid, which created a racially and socially fractured nation and an economically unequal and divided society. From the ashes of this inhumane system, inspirational leaders like Nelson Mandela emerged to spread hope and the promise of freedom for all South Africans. Now a democratic country, South Africa is a flagship for economic growth and development in Africa. This created new opportunities for doing business and drives the relevance and growth of the science and practice of the profession of I-O psychology in the country. This article will showcase recent developments and advances shaping the South African I-O psychology landscape that are paving the way for its continuing evolution in Africa’s flagship economy.
South Africa: Ahead of the Pack in Sub-Saharan Africa

Africa is recognized as the most promising growth region in the global economy (Annunziata, Johnson, & Kramer, 2013). Contributing 22.3% to Sub-Saharan Africa’s (SSA) GDP growth in the 2000–2013 period, South Africa is one of three countries (with Nigeria and Angola) responsible for over 60% of the expansion of GDP in SSA since the year 2000. Ranked 53rd of 148 countries, South Africa is the SSA region’s leader on the World Economic Forum’s Global Competitiveness Index (GCI) based on the state of its institutions, infrastructure, labor market efficiency, health, education, technology, and innovation (Annunziata et al., 2013). Therefore, it provides a favorable business climate and attracts many international organizations to the SSA region.

The relative strength of the South African economy provides I-O psychologists with a vibrant and developing context to practice and research their profession and find innovative ways to manage unique challenges presented by broader social, economic, political, and legal realities. Alongside its First World infrastructure, progressive Constitution, and Bill of Rights and new-age labor legislation, South Africa hosts a Third World society that continues to struggle with issues of poverty, inadequate access to education, unemployment and underemployment, and the HIV and AIDS crisis. I-O psychologists are confronted with diverse issues ranging from using science to develop culturally fair assessment instruments, which minimize bias and adverse impact, to leveraging their practical skills to facilitate transformation in organizations by helping employees from different social, economic, and cultural backgrounds to work together productively and harmoniously. Their ultimate goal is to aid organizations straddling South Africa’s dual First and Third World economies to effectively traverse the juxtapositions and maximize their effectiveness by managing the talents and nurturing the potential of the diverse workforce.

Overseeing the Practice of I-O Psychology: The Health Professions Council of South Africa

The Health Professions Council of South Africa’s (HPCSA, www.hpcsa.co.za) Professional Board for Psychology (PBP) regulates the practice of I-O psychology under the auspices of the Health Professions Act, No. 56 of 1974. One of the PBP’s objectives in 2014 was to update and draft regulations for the development, control, and classification of psychological tests in South Africa. To this end, it commissioned the Psychometrics Committee to create an integrated and efficient psychological test review, classification, and certification system. With permission from the European Federation of Psychologists’ Associations (EFPA), the PBP intends to use and adapt aspects of the EFPA’s international guidelines for test evaluation and classification for the South African context (PsychologyNews, September, 2014). This symbolizes its commitment to applying international best practices to local initiatives. To foster collaboration, the PBP has invited the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology of South Africa (SIOPSA) and other
stakeholders to attend a meeting of the Psychometrics Committee with test publishers and developers in March 2015. The aim is to solicit contributions from interested parties regarding the way forward for re-imagining the system for reviewing and classifying psychological tests in South Africa.

**Necessity, Moral Prerogative, Best Practice: The Impetus for a Scientific, Evidence-Based Approach**

The emphasis on advancing regulations governing the use of psychological tests in the South African context has special significance for I-O psychologists in light of the Employment Equity Act, No. 55 of 1998 (amended by the Employment Equity Amendment, Act No. 47 of 2013), which stipulates in Chapter 2, Section 8 that:

Psychological testing and other similar assessments of an employee are prohibited unless the test or assessment being used:

(a) has been scientifically shown to be valid and reliable;
(b) can be applied fairly to all employees; and
(c) is not biased against any employee or group
(d) has been certified by the Health Professions Council of South Africa established by section 2 of the Health Professions Act, 1974 (Act No. 56 of 1974), or any other body which may be authorised by law to certify those tests or assessments.

This progressive legislation replaced the apartheid system’s social and labor laws that unfairly discriminated against people on the basis of race. Psychology’s role in the service of the apartheid regime was not merely that of capitulation. It was also rather instrumental in crafting the system and providing scientific legitimacy to justify racial oppression in all facets of society, including the workplace. One of its misguided side-effects was the deprivation of opportunities to people of color (collectively referred to as “Black” South Africans) to compete for employment in select categories of work reserved exclusively for “White” South Africans (Cooper, Nicholas, Seedat, & Statman, 1990). Thus, when the new employment legislation was introduced to lead organizations away from exclusionary and discriminative practices to a scenario where decisions in the workplace were based on individuals’ capabilities to fulfil the inherent requirements of jobs, I-O psychologists were confronted with the challenging task of overcoming what Owen (1998) recognized as a widespread distrust associated with using psychological instruments in the workplace because of the perception that they unfairly screened out suitable “Black” candidates.

In order to realize Nelson Mandela’s vision that “Never and never again shall it be that this beautiful land will again experience the oppression of one by another,” I-O psychologists embarked on a campaign of scientific research for benchmarking and validating the use of psychological tests for the purpose of making talent decisions fairly, based on objective and inherent requirements of jobs, and in a way that minimized bias and adverse impact. Groups such as
People Assessment in Industry (PAI)—now a special interest group of SIOPSA—and SIOPSA itself actively advocated for influencing policy and guiding the scientific and ethical use of psychological assessments to address the injustices of the past and ensure that all people were given an equal opportunity to be successful in the workplace regardless of their race, gender, color, creed, or sexual orientation.

This research campaign was approached in two primary ways and is ongoing: (a) to adapt and validate tests developed in other parts of the world for use in South Africa; and (b) to develop new tests customized for South Africa’s unique societal composition (Paterson & Uys, 2005). The first approach was adopted by some test publishers. Using tests that had already been validated as effective predictors of on-the-job success internationally, organizations like SHL (now CEB) developed South African norms (Foxcroft, 2004) and engaged in validation research to demonstrate their predictive validity in South Africa. This was critical for proving their scientific rigor and utility and for addressing the scepticism that abounded about the historical unfairness associated with using psychological tests. The second approach, involving the development of new psychometric and psychological tests, is a long-term endeavor. A current noteworthy project is to develop a South African Personality Inventory (SAPI), which aims to fairly and equally measure personality constructs among South Africans from all ethnic, cultural, language, and racial groups (Hill, et al., 2013). The SAPI is in the early stages of development, and initial findings indicate that an indigenous South African personality instrument is imminent. Strides have been made to establish its construct validity and, with recommendations for further research to investigate its predictive validity in organizations (Hill et al., 2013), it is hoped that the SAPI will be a ground-breaking instrument that will facilitate the fair, bias-free, and culturally sensitive assessment of personality in the South African workplace in the near future.

Although scientific research on psychological assessment accounted for a significant proportion of the scholarly publications (27.19%) featured in the South African Journal of Industrial Psychology (SAJIP) between 2004 and 2013, this was surpassed by research published on organizational psychology (42.11%) about issues such as leadership behavior, organizational development, and employee engagement (Coetzee & Van Zyl, 2014; Schreuder & Coetzee, 2010). In combination, research on psychological assessment, organizational psychology and employee well-being (including issues such as job stress, burnout, and work–family balance) accounted for over 84% of the scientific publications in the SAJIP in the last decade. This highlights the trend that research in South Africa has typically focused on traditional domains of I-O psychology practice (Coetzee & Van Zyl, 2014). Although some emerging practice domains such as neuropsychology as it impacts optimal workplace performance, coaching psychology, and consumer psychology require more attention (Coetzee & Van Zyl, 2014), the tremendous contribution of scientific endeavors in South Africa to the fair, ethical, and meaningful practice of evidence-based I-O psychology cannot be overstated.
The Practice of I-O Psychology in South Africa: Recent Milestones

Professional membership organizations such as SIOPSA and special interest groups of practitioners such as the Assessment Centre Study Group (ACSG, www.acsg.co.za) have guided the practice of I-O psychology in South Africa, actively bridging the scientist–practitioner divide. Through annual conferences and special events, they showcase the latest research while focusing firmly on the practical utility and implementation of scientific advancements for addressing critical organizational issues in the real world.

The Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology of South Africa (SIOPSA)

SIOPSA (www.siopsa.org.za) represents a membership base of over 400 I-O psychologists, 100 associate members, and more than 120 student members pursuing registration as I-O psychologists. As part of its 2020 vision, SIOPSA intends to focus on four main strategic imperatives:

• To establish the benefits of I-O psychology as a profession and SIOPSA as the leading professional society on “people matters” in the workplace;
• To create a professional society with which all current and future I-O psychologists in our country want to be associated;
• To establish SIOPSA as a self-regulatory body for I-O psychologists in South Africa; and
• To run as an effective business with services to its members and other stakeholders.

A recent noteworthy contribution to advancing the practice of I-O psychology in South Africa was made in 2014 by the Interest Group of Coaching and Consulting Psychology (IGCCP) —a special interest group of SIOPSA—when it released its draft Code of Practice for Registered Psychology Practitioners in Coaching. The purpose of the code is to define the scope of practice for psychologists and related professionals in the coaching domain to protect consumers of this service and maintain the integrity of the specialized interventions that registered psychologists and associated registered professionals are empowered to provide. In its annual tradition, SIOPSA will host its 17th yearly conference from July 27–29, 2015. The theme is “Breaking through Tradition: I-O Psychology for the 21st Century.”

The Assessment Centre Study Group (ACSG)

The ACSG was formed in the 1980s and serves as an acknowledgement and a constant reminder that any one type of psychometric, psychological, or behavioral assessment in isolation is not sufficient to effectively predict future job performance. Advocating the utility of multimethod approaches for assessing the competence of leaders and managers, the ACSG has been active in promoting the assessment (or development) center method as the most optimal and credible way for predicting effectiveness at senior levels of organizations. The theme of the ACSG’s 35th annual conference from March 23–27, 2015 is “Bridging the Gap: Assessment Centres in Emerging Markets.” A highlight at the 2015 conference will be the endorsement of the 5th edition of the Guidelines for Assessment...
and Development Centres in South Africa, which are aligned with the 6th edition of the International Guidelines and Ethical Considerations for Assessment Centre Operations endorsed at the 38th International Congress on Assessment Center Methods in Alexandria, Virginia, USA in October 2014.

Conclusion

Thus, I-O psychology is carving a unique identity as a profession in South Africa. While responding to distinctly South African and African challenges in the workplace, I-O psychologists have contributed to their discipline through scientific research. With an evidence-based orientation and a firm commitment to ensuring best practices in the application of psychology to the world of work, they craft solutions that measurably improve workplace performance. At the same time, they remain open to adopting new developments in the international arena to enhance their effectiveness. Far from being complacent in the light of the progress they have already made in advancing the science and practice of their discipline, South African I-O psychologists and the professional and regulatory bodies that represent and support them are constantly looking for ways to improve and remain relevant. Drawing on the famous words of Nelson Mandela, “The time is always right to do right,” the profession of I-O psychology in South Africa has cemented its commitment to making a positive difference in the lives of those it serves by providing scientifically based, valid, meaningful, and relevant solutions to organizations and the individuals within them to support their continued growth and development. Thus, South Africa serves as an example to countries across the world to practice a meaningful and relevant brand of I-O psychology rooted in science.

WE NEED YOU AND YOUR INPUT! We are calling upon you, the global I-O community, to reach out and submit topic ideas for future columns. Give us your insights from lessons learned in your practice. We are always looking for contributors, and we will be on the lookout!

To provide any feedback or insights on the International Practice Forum, please send an email to the following address: lynda.zugec@theworkforceconsultants.com

References


