#thispsychmajor

For those of you with excellent memories, you’ll recall I mentioned in the last column I would discuss the Sustainable Development Goals in this issue’s column, as they were recently installed in September, 2015. However, being the savvy TIP reader you are, you’ll also recognize that a wonderful feature article was published last edition, not only explaining the SDGs but also identifying some key ways that I-O psychologists can get involved in the accomplishment of these goals (Foster et al., 2015). As such, it seems a bit redundant to talk about the SDGs in this column, and so we will move to another topic, with the potential for revisiting the SDGs in a future installation after some results and reports have been generated.

Perhaps some of you have seen the media coverage of Jeb Bush’s recent remarks about psychology majors and their destiny as fast food employees (e.g. Strauss, 2015). Being engaged in the field as we are, psychologists responded voraciously, taking to Twitter using the hashtag #thispsychmajor to express their disagreement with the comment and to provide plenty of examples of what psychology majors are doing in their careers.

Now, I must say that although I disagree with the way the comment was made, I think I understand a bit of the sentiment behind the statement. In context, the statement was encouraging university systems to focus more on training work in the trades, such as electrical or plumbing careers, and less on the liberal arts approach that has become expected at the higher education level. Yet, as much as I agree that societally we need to encourage more training in trades and trade schools, the comment also hit a nerve with me. Sometimes, it is tough to be a psychologist, especially practicing a type of psychology that is a small, fairly unfamiliar form of psychology. I mean, how many times do I have to answer the question “Oh! So, you help if someone goes postal at work?” Let’s not even mention trying to explain that I’m particularly interested in an even smaller subset of I-O psychology called humanitarian work psychology and what that means!

So, what is the enterprising humanitarian work psychologist to do? If I-O psychology in general is facing an uphill battle
trying to prove our relevance in a world that clearly needs our expertise, how does HWP gain the traction to show corporations, nonprofits, volunteer organizations, and aid and development entities that our expertise is of value?

One of the most exciting things to happen recently is the creation of the Social and Behavioral Sciences Team in 2014 (SBST; Social and Behavioral Sciences Team, n.d.). This team consists of a variety of social and behavioral scientists (including SIOP and GOHWP’s own Lori Foster), representing fields such as economics, psychology, and political science, among others. This team recently released an annual report detailing the projects and policies that have been implemented, improved, or adapted over the previous year (Social and Behavioral Sciences Team, n.d.). In addition, the SBST wrote an executive order that was signed into law by President Obama in September 2015 that highlights the need for the social and behavioral sciences to be taken into consideration at the federal level in order to improve the quality of life for all Americans (The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 2015). This order was a pivotal step toward the perception of legitimacy of the social or behavioral science profession.

However, being validated at a federal level requires us to continue in our own professional improvement. To move beyond being seen as more serious than just another “soft science,” we must work hard to push an impeccable product, including rigorous research and appropriate application of said research. At SIOP 2015, past-president Jose Cortina continued to urge reform of research practices and has been particularly focused on the examination of our statistical practices such as null hypothesis significance or effect size testing protocol (e.g. Cortina & Landis, 2011). Other research has suggested the need for increased rigor based on the continued growth of “big data,” what such data will mean to our profession (King, Tonidandel, Cortina, & King, 2015), and called for consistent, meticulous, and practical application in all data reporting (Aguinis et al., 2010).

As recently as August 2015, the scientific community has seen psychological study in particular come under scrutiny about the replicability of our studies (Open Science Collaboration, 2015). The discerning reader will note that the authors did mention the natural drawbacks of scientific study and the need for replication; however, should a reader take note of simply the title or abstract of such studies, it would only lend credence to the uphill battle that the social sciences face when trying to prove our scientific merit. These headlines often receive a 60-second mention during an evening news broadcast, which only serves to solidify public opinion about the unreliability or irrelevance of psychological study. This is why it is important that we not only conduct impeccable research but also strive to provide access to research and associated conclusions to both mainstream and corporate audiences in a way that is digestible and relevant to the public at large.

There are certainly a great many researchers with projects underway that deserve mention due to their importance to advancing the field of I-O, particularly from...
an HWP perspective. This is not an exhaustive list by any means; rather, it is an overview of a couple of projects that will serve to highlight the way that research is being conducted, not only with rigor but also with an eye toward the ease of application of results to many people and the attractiveness of such practical studies.

The first project is a new project entitled “Project GLOW” (Global Living Organizational Wage). As the name suggests, GLOW is an empirically based project whereby the researchers seek to investigate the individual, organizational, and community issues (and opportunities) surrounding living wages globally, and translate those results into evidence-informed education, policy, and advocacy surrounding wage policy and sustainable livelihood (Stuart Carr, personal communication, January 30, 2016). This project, in its infancy, will engage a variety of university-based hubs globally to begin addressing an issue central to many of the SDGs—specifically, those related to poverty reduction, decent work, ending inequality, and partnerships for development and success. The project encourages each hub to engage in stringent and culturally competent research and will provide opportunities for teaching, service, and evidence-informed advocacy for members of GOHWP. This promising new study is an exciting prospect of the way that institutions and researchers can work together toward the completion of the SDGs.

Another similar project is called “Project FAIR.” FAIR seeks to study the implications of pay differentials between national and international aid sector employees (Project FAIR, n.d). As previous research has indicated, host country and expatriate workers, often skilled professionals both, are frequently paid on very different remuneration scales, a pecuniary structure that can be experienced as unfair and unjust, and thereby create unnecessary and unwelcome strains on teamwork and effectiveness and capacity building (McWha & MacLachlan, 2011). FAIR seeks to address these issues with rigorous evidence on what works and when from an organizational remuneration and aid worker standpoint. As the name suggests, Project FAIR seeks to develop an evidence-informed set of policy options for managing aid work more fairly and sustainably, while also meeting the SDG targets for decent work, inequality reduction, partnership, and poverty eradication.

These types of large-scale research projects are imperative for a variety of reasons. First, the relevance to the SDGs is unmistakable and something that is so important in terms of global recognition. The more avenues HWP can use to gain public awareness, the more our work is seen as valuable and important. In addition, these projects capitalize on the networks available for collaborative study. As I-O and HWP continue to move into the future, we will not remain untouched by the globalization of organizational life. Therefore, it is clear that our research must also reflect a global perspective as much as possible. Finally, these projects emphasize the need for rigor or in our scientific study, particularly study that will influence policy changes at both local and global levels. Although the research I’ve highlighted is critically important, the application of
such study is also crucial. There are a great many I-O-HWP folks out there using their knowledge, skills, and abilities in unique ways that impact the greater good. I’m going to highlight a couple of the ways people have leveraged their interests to carve out a niche for themselves that includes both I-O and humanitarian interests.

One application is the work of the Volunteer Program Assessment (Olien, Dunn, Lopina, & Rogelberg, 2014; VPA; Volunteer Program Assessment, n.d.). This program, created at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, works with nonprofit organizations to improve the management of volunteer resources. VPA, now hosted at five additional university partners, allows nonprofits access to sophisticated empirically based measures and approaches in order to provide systematic improvement that may normally be unaffordable or inaccessible to such organizations.

Another example is how an individual can uniquely adapt to use an I-O background in an aid and development organization. Kristen Kirkland began her I-O career working for large financial institutions in a pretty traditional, typical I-O role. However, she also spent her free time volunteering with Every Mother Counts (EMC; Every Mother Counts, n.d.), a nonprofit working to improve maternal health care and childbirth for women both domestically and globally. Eventually that volunteer role turned into a job, allowing Kristen to work as both an HR director as well as the running program director. Not only has Kristen used her expertise in I-O to lead in the management of employees, but she has also adapted those skills to coordinate fundraising in the form of sponsored running events. Her unique approach to I-O psychology continues to provide a clear indication that it is possible to combine both traditional I-O work with a bit of a nontraditional setting, as HWP seeks to do so frequently.

Other initiatives continue to exist that allow an interested party to explore what it might mean to use one’s psychology skills in a unique setting. For example, Psychology Day at the United Nations is a day devoted to highlighting the usefulness of psychology in addressing a host of global issues (Psychology Day at the UN, n.d.). This year’s Psychology Day will feature discussions about using psychology to address global migration and the influx of the vulnerable population of immigrants who are required to exhibit a great deal of resilience.

As I said, these examples are a scant few of the creative and exemplary projects and tasks being completed by the professionals I am honored to call colleagues. These are great—but we aren’t there yet. My charge is this: We humanitarian work psychologists (and I-O psychologists at large) must continue to work toward greater public understanding of the relevance and importance of our work. We have to continue to hold ourselves to the standard of producing the highest caliber of research. We must engage in collaborative, global projects that speak not only to a select group of people but to large populations and at a policy level. We need to seek creative and meaningful outlets to use our expertise in a way that improves the world for future generations. I am excited and encouraged by the emails
I receive, both from people doing new and creative work and those seeking to get involved. It is my greatest hope that HWP will work itself out of existence—understanding that contributing to the greater good in our organizations and in our aid and development is something that all of I-O will be known for without specification. #thispsychmajor does believe it is a great time to be a psychologist!

As always, for more information or to get involved with these or other available projects—or if you have projects you’d like GOHWP to consider featuring, feel free to visit GOHWP.org, or email me at chair@gohwp.org!

References


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